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The Athletic / 'We've got something going here': Blue Jackets believe pending UFAs want to stay

By Aaron Portzline – February 19, 2026

COLUMBUS, Ohio — As of earlier this week, the Columbus Blue Jackets and their four pending unrestricted free agents — forwards Charlie Coyle, Boone Jenner and Mason Marchment, and defenseman Erik Gudbranson — had not engaged in serious negotiations regarding contract extensions.

That's coming, general manager Don Waddell said. But he's spent the first two weeks of the NHL's Olympic break talking with the players and their respective agents to see how they feel about extending their stay with the Blue Jackets.

"If guys want to stay here, I'll find a way to keep them here," Waddell said. "I've said that before, and I have a very good history of that."

So what has he found?

"Everybody wants to stay here," Waddell said. "We've got something going here."

That wasn't so much a question about Jenner or Gudbranson, two stout veterans who have ingrained themselves in both the organization and the community.

But Coyle, who was acquired in an offseason trade with the Colorado Avalanche, and Marchment, who joined the Blue Jackets in a mid-December trade with the Seattle Kraken, are just getting familiar with Columbus.

It's likely, too, that Coyle and Marchment are Waddell's two biggest priorities, perhaps the two biggest dilemmas — trade them or keep them? — if either should reach the March 6 trade deadline without an extension.

Of course, the Blue Jackets would want them for their playoff push. But the trade market for each player would be enticing enough that Waddell would have to listen, especially if the Jackets stumble out of the break in their five games before the deadline.

For now, the plan is to sign them and keep them, Waddell has said. But there would be no reason to talk term or dollars if Coyle and Marchment didn't want to stay with the Blue Jackets and in Columbus.

"You want to go where your family is comfortable and you can win, where you like the group," Coyle told The Athletic this month. "This fits all of that, especially the way we've been playing (leading up to the Olympic break).

"There are not many negatives to playing here. It's hard to think of one, actually. We've really enjoyed our time here."

For Coyle, the family fit is crucial, and that's been a smashing success, he said. But he's also smart enough to know that the clock is ticking on his career.

Coyle turns 34 on March 2, and while he's never missed the playoffs — his string of 13 straight seasons in the postseason is the longest active streak in the NHL — he's never won the Stanley Cup.

In 2019, while playing for his hometown Boston Bruins, he came one game away, losing Game 7 of the Stanley Cup Final to the St. Louis Blues.

“I want to win,” Coyle said. “That’s the main thing. You never know how much time you’ve got left in this league. You want to make sure you do what you can and put yourself in a good situation.”

The Blue Jackets’ history, of course, is not the best argument here. Coyle has played 126 playoff games in his career. The Blue Jackets franchise has played in 41 playoff games in its first 24 seasons, only once making it past the first round.

But the here and now has been promising.

The Blue Jackets went on an 11-1-0 run, including seven straight regulation wins, before the Olympic break, pulling them to within four points of both the second wild-card spot (currently held by Boston) and third place (currently the New York Islanders) in the Metropolitan Division.

A big part of that surge has been the arrival of coach Rick Bowness, who has the Blue Jackets more dialed-in defensively, more aggressive all over the ice and, suddenly, playing with a ton of confidence.

But the midseason acquisition of Marchment has been huge, too.

He’s played on the Blue Jackets’ top line with center Adam Fantilli and right winger Kirill Marchenko, and since his acquisition, only Coyle (10) and Marchenko (nine) have more goals than Marchment (eight).

Marchment was traded from Dallas to Seattle last June. He won’t say much publicly, but it’s clear his time with the Kraken didn’t go well. He was traded to Columbus on Dec. 20, his third move — with his wife and now 5-month-old son — in seven months.

“It’s fun when you’re playing team hockey and everyone is buying in,” Marchment said. “I feel like we’ve got that here.

“It’s been a long year for me and my family, moving around, a lot of obstacles. But when I came here it was an easy fit. I’m having fun, enjoying myself and finding the love of the game, just working hard. That’s what it’s all about.”

Waddell wanted Marchment for his energetic, agitating style of play. The Blue Jackets were guilty early in the season of wading into games and letting other clubs dictate the pace of play, but that’s been less of an issue since Marchment’s arrival.

He’s one of the players Waddell has cited when voicing his belief that the Blue Jackets, with their size and depth, could be a challenging opponent in a seven-game series.

But that’s too far in the future for now. The Blue Jackets have five games to play between now and the trade deadline, beginning with a Feb. 26 matchup in Boston.

They also have some contracts to negotiate. It should be an interesting few weeks in Columbus.

The Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets return to practice focused on playoff chase

By Brian Hedger – February 19, 2026

Break time is over for the Blue Jackets.

After getting two weeks off during the NHL's pause for the Milano Cortina 2026 Winter Olympics, the Blue Jackets returned from their midseason respite to start an in-season training camp with a spirited practice Feb. 18 at the Ice Haus.

Now, they'll get a week of work before jumping back into a playoff race that left off with them four points out of a postseason spot. They had climbed back into things with a seven-game winning streak and an 11-1-0 stretch.

First up are games Feb. 26 at the Boston Bruins and Feb. 28 against the New York Islanders, who hold the playoff spots within closest reach for the Blue Jackets (29-20-7).

After that, it's 17 games in March followed by seven games over 14 days in April. Throw in some difficult decisions about pending free agents before the March 6 trade deadline and there should be quite a finish in store for Columbus.

"We want to do it, and myself – being part of a couple playoff runs here – I know what it's like, and it's been way too long without playoff hockey here," Blue Jackets captain Boone Jenner said. "We want this group here to taste that, so right now it's about the process of putting in the work to get to that point."

Jenner, 32, is one of Columbus' pending free agents. Erik Gudbranson, a defenseman, is another, along with forwards Charlie Coyle, Mason Marchment and Danton Heinen. Defenseman Brendan Smith, who is recovering from knee surgery, is also without a contract beyond this season.

It would be surprising if Blue Jackets president/general manager Don Waddell breaks up the veteran core of a team that dragged its way back into the playoff conversation in the Eastern Conference, but the Jackets' five games before the deadline could prompt a shakeup if they don't go well.

That's why the plan is to treat the next week like a midseason training camp and come out of the break focused.

"Columbus was only two points out of the playoffs last year, right?" Coyle said. "So, we have to make sure we're ready right out of the gate. We have to be the most prepared team and make sure we're totally focused and ready to go, because it's going to be a sprint and every game matters, especially for us."

The Jackets' first skate back was designed to get their legs, lungs and pulses racing. Skating without defenseman Zach Werenski (Olympics), goalie Elvis Merzlikins (Olympics), right wing Kirill Marchenko (lower-body injury) and center Sean Monahan (illness), the Blue Jackets went through up-tempo drills for an hour.

After another skate Feb. 19 in which Monahan returned, the team will take Feb. 20 off before turning up the heat even more Feb. 21-22 while new coach Rick Bowness installs more of his own systems and defensive structure. Bowness, who replaced Dean Evason as coach Jan. 12, spent much of his break near

Fort Lauderdale, Florida, reviewing the 11 games he's coached. Despite the Jackets winning 10 of them, there are issues to address.

"We're still not where I want us to be," Bowness said. "It's nice that we're winning, but there are still things that I see that we're inconsistent at. ... But that's human nature. You don't flip a switch and make those changes. It takes time and patience, and we don't have a lot of either right now."

Neither Bowness nor Waddell has committed to Bowness staying beyond this season, so there's a sense of urgency attached to each game. That's on top of the built-in motivation for most players on the roster after coming up just shy of the playoffs.

The Jackets' winning streak going into this break was similar to their six-game streak at the end of last season, but this time they can still secure a playoff spot.

"We've got tons of time to ramp it up and get back to where we were," Marchment said. "The first two or three games, it's always about who's more dialed in that decides who wins. We just have to get ourselves ready."

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets' GM Don Waddell Previews 2026 NHL Trade Deadline

By Mark Scheig - February 20, 2026

The Columbus Blue Jackets are now less than a week away from returning to action in the regular season. They will face the Boston Bruins in a big game in the Eastern Conference playoff picture.

Once the games resume, there are just five games that separate the Blue Jackets from the 2026 NHL Trade Deadline. Thanks to a massive 11-1-0 run including winning seven in a row, GM Don Waddell now has some interesting decisions to make.

The Blue Jackets were at one point occupying the bottom of the standings in the Eastern Conference. That in part led to the dismissal of head coach Dean Evason and the hiring of Rick Bowness.

Bowness has gone 10-1 since taking over helping the Blue Jackets to being the first team out of the playoffs in the East. With more work to do to be a playoff team, Waddell has to decide which areas of the team need addressed and how much he's willing to part with in acquiring talent.

Waddell stopped by on Thursday for our annual trade deadline conversation. We discussed everything from their potential strategy to decisions on their free agents and much more. A key focus was on how much did their 11-1-0 run change the Blue Jackets' potential plans? That's where we'll begin.

Blue Jackets Not Selling

"Three weeks ago, I would have probably been selling everything now," Waddell said. "I kind of looked at our UFAs. We like our team. We like how it's going right now. You say well, instead of going out and buying more UFAs, I have the group of guys I want here. In saying that, maybe (we) adapt a little bit. There might be a UFA that we pick up."

"But if I'm going to do anything, it's going to be players with term that we like. I'm not so much interested in paying a big price to rent players at this point. I look at our players. If for some reason they don't stay, they're our rental players right now."

Among the notable UFAs are captain Boone Jenner, Charlie Coyle, Mason Marchment and Erik Gudbranson. Waddell says there are multiple things to consider regarding their futures. Do they want to stay with the Blue Jackets? And can the team find the right deal if they do?

"I think all of them have expressed that they like it here and they like what we have going on," Waddell said. "Are we about to pay them all? I don't know. There's money and term. You got to be careful with some of the contracts. We got some younger guys but got some older guys too. You can't (sign them all) just because you want to keep guys. Term becomes a factor."

Waddell did spend time over the break talking to the agents of those UFAs. He admitted there have been no negotiations with any of the UFAs at this point but there have been talks centered around how everyone feels about how things are going.

"They potentially want to stay here," Waddell said. "Because it's a little bit tricky. The one thing you don't want to have right now is a bad negotiation where we're so far apart. Because we got things going

right now, if guys want to stay here, I've said we will find a way to keep them here. It doesn't have to get done right now."

Identifying Needs & Approach

Waddell and the Blue Jackets constantly talk amongst themselves about what the team needs. At this point in time, they are of the belief that there aren't a ton of holes to fill. However, they will look at anything that makes sense.

"Rick (Nash) and I talked almost every day during the break and we really don't feel like we have a big hole any place," Waddell said. "Not to say you can't always get better, but there's not one position that we're sitting here saying we have to upgrade. (Rick Bowness) being here for weeks now, he's got a pretty good feel for these guys and he really believes in these guys as we've believed in them all season long."

How does Waddell balance the act of rewarding his team for their play versus protecting their longer-term assets? In the general manager's words, they have to be careful what they do.

"You got to be careful because of two things," Waddell said. "One is assuming if you do something that means somebody's coming in a lineup either through a trade or just out because of the numbers thing. Everybody's right now doing a pretty good job for us. The chemistry of the team, I think you talk to the guys. I think you're going to get the same feeling that they feel like we're a playoff team and we've got to go out and do it."

"Adding at the deadline doesn't work as well as what people, I guess believe it works. Because remember, only one team wins at the end. There's been a lot of teams that traded a lot of assets for not only picks but players, that go out in the first round. We certainly at this point are a franchise aren't going to do that."

Part of the Blue Jackets' approach will be identifying which teams are buyers and which are sellers. Some teams might not even know yet. Waddell says he has a pretty good idea at this point who those teams are.

"I think I have a pretty good feeling," Waddell said. "I've talked to more teams the last few days. Everybody's getting back at it as you can imagine. There's more buyers than there are sellers. If you're going into the buying market, you're paying probably a premium because you're going to be competing against multiple teams."

Waddell admits he keeps tabs on everything when it comes to a player becoming available and what the price ultimately was. With teams trying to drive prices up, keeping a book on these things help him determine who is more trustworthy to work with than others.

"I keep a book on all this stuff anytime a player becomes available and I hear what the team's asking for and then see what they really get. I keep track of all that. It was worse probably 5-8 years ago than it is now because there's so much above board. But you know which guys are probably stretching the truth and they say they got a second and I say okay, I'm not giving you a second. And then they end up trading the player for a third a week later."

"I always say in this business and I went through it with (Yegor) Chinakhov. I never, ever told anybody I had this or that until I had something. It's just the way I operate."

Side Dishes

- Waddell said that he hasn't had any conversations yet with the pending RFA's on the Blue Jackets. That list includes Adam Fantilli, Cole Sillinger and Jet Greaves. Waddell said he anticipates having a talk with Fantilli's agent Pat Brisson in the next week. "I don't anticipate anything getting done during the break on the RFA's for sure."
- On the rising salary cap, Waddell says ownership has been very supportive when he's had a need. "I know what's doable and what's not doable. I'm not going to take something to them that I just don't truly believe in. The \$105 million, until we start being a playoff team consistently, it is not practical to think we're going to spend \$105 million in salary next season. It's just not practical. So you got to weigh all that together. Ownership, as we just went through the whole coaching change, they've been very supportive I think. They haven't said no to anything I want to do, that's for sure."
- League wide, Waddell thinks there could be some moves right after the trade freeze lifts. "I think there will be one or two deals done here pretty quick just from the rumblings I'm hearing. I think it's going to be an interesting trade deadline."

The Hockey Writers / 10 Blue Jackets' Teammate Truths Featuring Charlie Coyle

By Mark Scheig - February 19, 2026

The Columbus Blue Jackets returned to practice on Wednesday morning in advance of their season resume next Thursday night in Boston. With five more practices coming in the next seven days, the team is preparing for the stretch run still on the outside of the playoff picture.

Today, we are debuting a new feature that is both fun and hopefully informative. It will also allow us the opportunity to see what the players really think about each other.

Our new feature is called 10 Blue Jackets' Teammate Truths. It's a form of which teammate would most likely do what. The rules are pretty simple.

We will go around the Blue Jackets' room and ask the guys the same 10 questions. They can say a player more than once if it applies. These are off the wall, fun and sometimes silly questions that not only lighten the mood but also get to the truth on certain matters.

As we move forward, because it's the same 10 questions, you'll get the chance to see the different answers everyone comes up with to get a sense of who rises to the top with each question. Here's the catch. Each player we speak to CANNOT answer themselves. They must choose a current teammate.

We're going to see how well the guys know each other. Up first for our debut edition of 10 Teammate Truths is Charlie Coyle. He's had a tremendous season centering the Blue Jackets' third line and has helped solidify an important role on the team.

Coyle just played his 1,000th NHL game this season. While he's been in the league a long time, this is his first season with the Blue Jackets. How quickly has he gotten to know his teammates? We're about to find out.

With some questions, a player was named with no explanation. For others, Coyle gave some insight. Many laughs were shared. He also wanted to name Dmitri Voronkov for several of these questions. Without further ado, let's jump in and play 10 Blue Jackets' Teammate Truths.

10 Truths: Charlie Coyle

- 1. Who is the most forgetful player on the team? Who is the guy most likely to forget something on a road trip or they get to the hotel and realize they forgot something?** "Probably, is it bad there's a lot of guys that come to mind? (Laughing) Let me think. I was going to say Voronkov but he is the Russian guy. They're probably going to look after him too. I'm going to go KJ (Kent Johnson). I don't know why but I'm going to go KJ."
- 2. Who has the best taste in music on the team in which you'd want to hear their playlist?** "I don't like a lot of stuff we play. So I know who has not good taste according to me. But I think someone who has similar taste is Erik Gudbranson."
- 3. Who is the biggest napper on the team plane or bus?** "Miles Wood. I sit next to him. He's pretty much always snoozing."

4. **Who is most likely to get lost in a hotel or a new city?** “Get lost? Hmmm. I was going to go with a Russian again but they stick together. But they could be lost together. I’ll go with Voronkov for that.”
5. **Is there anyone who is the weird hotel room service guy? Strange orders, 2 A.M. deliveries?** “I’m going to say Provorov.”
6. **Who is the biggest chirper on the team?** “Gotta be Ollie (Mathieu Olivier). Lives up to it. He can do it.”
7. **Who is the most serious at the card table? At fantasy football?** “I’d say either Gudbranson or Provorov. I’ll say Provorov (card table). For fantasy football, I’m trying to think. Gudbranson won. He barely squeaked it out. Who was always trying? I’ll go with (Damon) Severson. He was stinking for a while and always trying to make moves.”
8. **Who is the best & worst at karaoke?** “Let’s see. Worst is going to be, have to say Voronkov again. (*Author’s note: Poor Voronkov*). Who’s got some good pipes? Who could sing? I think Adam Fantilli’s got a good voice. He could be a good karaoke guy. (*Author’s note: Coyle answered this as Fantilli walked right past us.*)
9. **Who is the biggest or best debater, the guy that will argue their point and die on that hill? Examples include pineapple on pizza or is a hot dog a sandwich.** “Let’s see. I would say Gudbranson for that too. He would be pretty stern on what he’s (arguing). He’s the guy for that.”
10. **Last one. Who’s the most likely to become a TikTok or YouTube star because they fell on the bench or something else silly?** “So kind of clumsy? Who’s funny? I’m going to go Elvis Merzlikins. Kind of quirky. He’ll do something. You never know exactly (what it’ll be.)”