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**October 24, 2024**

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## Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets race past Toronto Maple Leafs: 3 takeaways

By Brian Hedger – October 24, 2024

Auston Matthews summed it up perfectly.

After watching the Blue Jackets floor the accelerator in a 6-2 blowout of the Toronto Maple Leafs on Tuesday night at Nationwide Arena, the visitors' captain gave credit where due.

“Neutral zone was the Autobahn for them tonight,” Matthews said. “They just came flying through.”

Yes, the Maple Leafs finished a back-to-back that started Monday in Toronto with their rout of the Tampa Bay Lightning. Yes, their legs were a little slow. Toronto also started third-string goalie Dennis Hildeby instead of Joseph Woll or Anthony Stolarz, not to mention a decision to dress enforcer Ryan Reaves over center David Kampf on the fourth line. All of that was true, but none of it takes away from what the Blue Jackets accomplished with an eye-opening victory.

They're 3-3-0 despite a slew of early key injuries, but performances like this send a message about what this team still has in reserve.

**Here are three takeaways:**

### **Columbus Blue Jackets hot on offense**

After Johnny Gaudreau's tragic death in late August, the Blue Jackets lost key forwards Boone Jenner and Dmitri Voronkov to shoulder injuries in the preseason. As if that wasn't bad enough for their offensive potential, playmaking winger Kent Johnson's hot scoring start came to a screeching halt with, you guessed it, another shoulder issue in just the fourth game of the season.

Those types of losses are supposed to sink NHL teams quickly, and the Blue Jackets have learned that lesson more than any other team in the league the past two years. So, what gives with their scorching hot offensive start continuing?

They're averaging four goals a game on 24 goals in the first six games, including six each in their three victories. It's a balanced effort too, paced by three goals each from Kirill Marchenko, Yegor Chinakhov, Sean Monahan and Mathieu Olivier.

Olivier?

Yeah, keep reading.

### **Columbus Blue Jackets' Mathieu Olivier has scoring touch to go with brawn**

Olivier has been promoted from the Jackets' deputy enforcement officer to their new “sheriff” after Erik Gudbranson's shoulder surgery Monday took him out long-term.

That's the role that helped the burly power forward crack into the NHL on a full-time basis a couple years ago with the Blue Jackets, but he's starting to show there's more to his game than a pair of cinder block fists. Those mitts can also be silky at times, which the Maple Leafs learned the hard way.

This was the first two-goal game of Olivier's NHL career to give him three goals in six games. He scored five, total, in each of the past two years.

Olivier's first tally Tuesday put the Jackets up 3-0 in the first period, his second made it 5-0 in the second and a headlock of Ryan Reaves in the third fulfilled his sheriff duties for the evening too. It wasn't

surprising to see the Blue Jackets' new Johnny Gaudreau inspired donkey hat, awarded by players to the "Donkey of The Game" atop his head after the game.

"Obviously, people have their own opinions of what type of hockey player I am, and that's fine," Olivier said. "I think personally you always have to believe that you've got more, and that you can continue to build your game – and this summer, for me, I really wanted to take a step in the offensive aspect of the game. I tweaked a few things here and there ... and so far, it's been working."

### **Justin Danforth thrives at center ice for Columbus Blue Jackets**

The Blue Jackets' coaching staff, led by head coach Dean Evason, juggled the 12 forwards to create four new line combinations. It was prompted by a 3-1 loss Saturday to the Minnesota Wild, when only the top line gained traction against a sticky, frustrating defensive team.

The biggest moves involved Yegor Chinakhov shifting to Adam Fantilli's line and Cole Sillinger moving from center of the third line to left wing on the top line with Monahan and Marchenko. The move that made the biggest impact against the Maple Leafs, however, was moving Justin Danforth to Sillinger's former role on the third line, skating in the middle with Zach Aston-Reese and Olivier as wingers.

Danforth is a natural center who's versatile enough to play any of the three forward spots for any of the top four lines, but his favorite is center. His speed, quickness, tenacity, playmaking and scoring touch all come into play more when he's at center — which is where he forged a unique path to the NHL with the Blue Jackets. Evason likes what he's seen from Danforth in three games since returning from offseason wrist surgery — including his goal and two assists against Toronto for the first three-point game of his NHL career.

"I've been in the game for a bit," Evason said. "I'm pretty secure with him being a really, really good center iceman, and a really good penalty-killer and a really good, hard-nosed player who has a skillset that's going to score."

## The Athletic / Blue Jackets get big boost from Mathieu Olivier, Justin Danforth in rout of Leafs

**By Aaron Portzline – October 24, 2024**

COLUMBUS, Ohio — New coach Dean Evason overhauled the Columbus Blue Jackets' forward lines after a lackluster loss Saturday, hoping to create two scoring lines that could make the Blue Jackets more challenging to defend.

It worked perfectly, and yet not in the way most expected.

The Blue Jackets simply overwhelmed the ultra-talented Toronto Maple Leafs on Tuesday, jumping to a 5-0 lead by the middle of the second period thanks to a combination of speed and structure that hasn't been seen from this club in at least a couple of seasons.

But it was the Blue Jackets' third line — or is that the fourth line? — that did much of the damage in a 6-2 win before 14,852 in Nationwide Arena.

Mathieu Olivier had the first two-goal game of his career, while center Justin Danforth (1-2-3) had his second three-point game and Zach Aston-Reese added an assist, part of a six-point night for that line.

"It's wonderful, right?" Evason said. "You've talked a lot about (Sean) Monahan's line, the success they've had analytically and obviously on the scoresheet. You want all the guys to get rewarded for playing the right way and playing hard.

"Everybody wants to score. For us to get scoring up and down the lineup ... "

There were other superlatives, of course. Monahan, James van Riemsdyk and Kirill Marchenko also scored for the Blue Jackets, who scored six goals in a game for the third time already this season. Goaltender Daniil Tarasov, making his third straight start, had 26 saves.

It was an important game for the Blue Jackets, too, as they were not pleased with a less-than-inspired effort in a 3-1 loss to Minnesota on Saturday. After that game, Blue Jackets players discussed a new "standard" with the franchise, how such a lethargic showing was "unacceptable."

In recent seasons, Blue Jackets fans have rolled their eyes at those types of comments because they weren't always backed up with a big response.

Tuesday, the Blue Jackets responded. They led 3-0 after the first period and 5-0 at 11:36 of the second period, and the game was never in doubt.

"We were aggressive and we were on top of them for most of the night," Olivier said. "They were on a back-to-back, and that's never easy, so we knew we had to get on them early. To our credit, that's what we did.

"Everyone's buying into the way we want to play. You can see it in the way we're playing. It's simple. It's black and white. And everybody's on board."

The Leafs' big four offensive players — Auston Matthews, Mitch Marner, William Nylander and John Tavares — combined for only one point, an assist by Tavares late in the game. Marner and Matthews had minus-3 ratings.

"The neutral zone was the Autobahn for them tonight," Matthews told reporters in the Maple Leafs' dressing room after the game. "They just came flying through."

Olivier was all smiles, wearing the donkey cap — yep, a donkey cap — that’s being passed around the dressing room after victories to the player of the game. It’s a nod to Johnny Gaudreau, who jabbed all of his friends by calling them “donkey.”

And Olivier should be smiling. After scoring four goals in the preseason, he now has three on the season, including two multi-point games. It’s the product, he said, of hard work over the summer to buttress the offensive side of his game, including equipment changes he declined to elaborate on.

His career high is five goals, set in each of the last two seasons (54 games in 2023-24 and 66 games in 2022-23) with Columbus.

“People have their own opinions as far as what type of hockey player I am, and that’s fine,” Olivier said. “You always have to believe that you’ve got more and you can continue to build your game. This summer I really wanted to take a step on the offensive side of the game. I tweaked a few things here and there.”

Danforth made it 2-0 at 6:21 of the first when he and Werenski came into the zone with three Maple Leafs backpedaling. Instead of reading the numbers, dumping the puck and getting a change, they pushed. Werenski made a terrific saucer pass to Danforth through the right circle.

Olivier pushed the lead to 3-0 at 12:42 of the first when he scored off the rush from the left circle. His second goal made it 5-0 midway through the second when Aston-Reese directed a centering pass through traffic to Olivier in front.

“We’re disrupting a lot of things on the forecheck,” Olivier said. “That’s how we generate our offense as a line.”

Danforth has made quite an impression on Evason since he joined the lineup after missing the first three games following offseason wrist surgery.

Evason wanted to create two scoring lines by moving third-line center Cole Sillinger to right wing on the top line and dropping Yegor Chinakhov to the second line. That was only possible, though, if Danforth was able to play center.

When asked if he’s still learning what type of player Danforth can be, the Blue Jackets’ first-year coach cut the question short.

“No, I’ve got a pretty good feel. I’ve been in the game for a bit,” Evason said. “I’m pretty secure with him being a really, really good center iceman and a really good penalty-killer and a really good, hard-nosed player who has a skill set that’s going to score.

“Does that answer your question?”

## [BlueJackets.com / Winning Thoughts: Blue Jackets race past Maple Leafs](#)

By Jeff Svoboda – October 24, 2024

BLUE JACKETS 6, MAPLE LEAFS 2

### **1. These Blue Jackets might just be different.**

Let's not go super crazy here. The team is 3-3-0 on the young season, and there's a lot more hockey to play. They're decimated by injuries to the top nine forwards, which is bound to make an impact at times. There's still a lot of players stepping up into key roles they haven't had to perform before.

But there's something about this team in the early going that has been missing in years past. Some of it is schematic – they're playing with a lot more structure than the past couple seasons, and they've been miles better at preventing teams from creating scoring chances.

And some of it is just the vibe – call it maturity, call it an aura, whatever you want, but there's a different confidence about the team thus far.

It could be frustration from the last few losing seasons, it could just be young players coming into their own, and we can't ignore the lingering impact of losing a brother over the offseason. Whatever the combination of factors is, this is a team that is starting to come together and believe it can be pretty good.

Tonight was a strong example of that. Good teams rebound from poor performances and take care of business, and that's what the Blue Jackets did tonight after Saturday's 3-1 loss to Minnesota. This was a comprehensive win, with Columbus being the better team from minute one to minute 60.

Remember last year, when the Blue Jackets took a 5-0 lead on the Maple Leafs only to need overtime to secure a victory after giving up five in the third? There was no hint of that ever happening Tuesday night, with the Blue Jackets calmly and coolly taking their 5-0 lead and getting to the postgame cannon blast and streamers without any trouble.

"(Saturday) wasn't up to our standard, but I think our group responded really well," Zach Werenski said postgame. "Everybody came back ready to play, had energy tonight, and I think that's taking steps in the right direction for sure."

### **2. Is this an offensive juggernaut in the making?**

Again, not to get too crazy here, but give credit where credit is due. For the third time in six games to start the season, the Blue Jackets scored six goals in a game, and their 24 tallies thus far are a team record for the opening sextet of contests.

That won't happen all the time – the early season in the NHL sees a lot looser hockey than you'll get as the stretch run nears – but it's a pretty darn good start. Against the Maple Leafs, 11 different players had points, including multiple from Justin Danforth (1-2-3), Mathieu Olivier (first two-goal game of his career), Sean Monahan (1-1-2), Kirill Marchenko (1-1-2) and Werenski (0-2-2).

In a fitting note for a team that now has 12 different goal scorers on the year, the production came from everywhere. The pregame chatter was about the reworked lines up top, but the so-called bottom six produced four goals (two from Olivier, one from Danforth and one from James van Riemsdyk).

"I think the best teams have depth scoring, so tonight me and Ollie had a couple, and you need that to win games," Danforth said after the second three-point night of his career. "It was a fun game."

As for Olivier, he received the postgame donkey hat in the locker room, and we'd have to assume it was largely for the two-goal effort but also for jumping in to tame Ryan Reaves when he went after David Jiricek for a perfectly executed shoulder check in the final few minutes.

For a player who has made his reputation in the league as being a punishing forechecker as well as tough a combatant as there is when the gloves come off, notching his second and third goals of the season was rewarding.

"People have their own opinions of what type of hockey player I am, and that's fine," he said. "I think personally, you always have to believe you have more and that you can continue to build your game, and I think this summer for me, I really wanted to take a step in the offensive aspect of the game. I tweaked a few things here and there. ... So far it's been working."

### **3. Daniil Tarasov played like a No. 1 tonight.**

The Blue Jackets had the puck a lot more than the Maple Leafs the whole evening, but a team as talented as Toronto is going to get its chances. When they did, the CBJ goalie was lights out, turning in his best performance of the season so far.

Tarasov finished with 26 saves, including some dandies on Matthew Knies and Auston Matthews. He turned aside John Tavares from right in front just minutes in and built on it from there, looking calm in net and playing like he did late last season when he found his game for an extended stretch.

When asked postgame if Tarasov might be earning the chance to get some more starts with his play, head coach Dean Evason answered in the affirmative.

"100 percent," he said. "I really liked his rebound control tonight against a team that obviously has elite shooters. They didn't get second and third opportunities. He was like Velcro, smothering pucks. He was not allowing pucks to bounce all over the place and create chaos. He was very calm.

"He's got better the more starts that he's not, so absolutely. We talk about earning – he's earned a lot of that."

## The Hockey News / Mathieu Olivier And Daniil Tarasov Help Columbus Trounce Toronto At Nationwide Arena

**By Jason Newland – October 24, 2024**

Mathieu Olivier(2,3), James van Riemsdyk(2), Justin Danforth(1), Sean Monahan(3), and Kirill Marchenko(3) all scored for Columbus in the win. Daniil Tarasov made 26 saves, as the visiting Leafs were easily swept out of Nationwide Arena last night.

The common theme for the players after the ugly loss to the Wild on Saturday was the slow start. The Jackets did everything but start slow on Tuesday, as they went 0 to 100 quickly. They brought the energy early and never took their foot off the gas. The CBJ pumped 29 shots on the Leafs goalie Hildeby through two periods and fired another nine in the third for a total of 38.

The Blue Jackets won on the shot clock, won the faceoff battle, held the Leafs O-fer on the power play, and shut down their big stars. Their "Big 4" had a total of one point.

Jacket slayer Auston Matthews' 9-game goal streak against Columbus was broken on Tuesday. William Nylander, who came into this game scorching hot, was held to just one shot on goal. Goalie Dennis Hildeby was pummeled by the Jackets to the tune of a .842 save % on the night. It was not a good night for the Toronto Maple Leafs.

Former Jacket Max Domi was on his worst behavior in this one, punching Adam Fantilli in the back of the head, drawing a penalty. The Jackets had the Leafs frustrated all night.

The Blue Jackets blow the Leafs out of Nationwide Arena 6-2.

The "Donkey Of The Day" was Mathieu Olivier.



## The Hockey News / Defenseman Zach Werenski Talks About His Team In Weekly Radio Interview

**By Jason Newland – October 24, 2024**

Werenski was asked about the game last night against Toronto. Zach said, "Yeah, we played hard last night. Obviously, We weren't too happy with our game. It didn't really matter who we were playing last night, I think we were going to come out flying. Obviously nice to get a few quick goals to start the game off and get a lead. Really happy with how our team played last night."

On what happened in training camp that he's now seeing on the ice. "I think in training camp you could tell there was a lot of guys that went home over the summer and weren't too happy with how last year went, put the work in. You see it in practice and see it through the pre-season, but then you're not sure how it's going to translate into the regular season. I feel like for us, all of our work is paying off. Outside of the one Minnesota game, we've been playing hard for 5 of the first 6 games. If we play with that structure, and intensity, and play that hard, we're a tough team to beat," Werenski says.

He was asked about how it was to play against a skilled Leafs team. "It's a lot of fun actually. I take a lot of pride in it. It's always a lot of fun for us to try to shut them down. It was a lot of fun playing against them. We were really focused last night going into it, we had a game plan and we just executed it really well."

He also talked about his friendship with Auston Matthews and who picks up the tab when they go to dinner. He also addresses the questionable play from Max Domi on Adam Fantilli in last night's game, and much more.

## The Hockey Writers / 3 Noticeable Blue Jackets' Changes Under Dean Evason

**By Mark Scheig and The Hockey Writers – October 24, 2024**

Coming off an impressive 6-2 win on Tuesday night against the Toronto Maple Leafs, the Columbus Blue Jackets are off to a 3-3-0 start in 2024-25. Given the way many hockey experts gave them no chance to do anything this season, this start has turned some heads.

What makes this start even more impressive is that the Blue Jackets are off to their best offensive start in franchise history. Their 24 goals in six games is a new record for them breaking the old mark of 22.

The Blue Jackets are also getting contributions from all over the lineup. They have 12 different goal scorers with four players tied with three goals each.

It's early but there is a different feeling around these Blue Jackets. What has changed so soon for them? Enter head coach Dean Evason.

### **Evason Brings Experience**

After John Tortorella left the Blue Jackets, it's been an adventure when it comes to the bench boss. Brad Larsen made it only two seasons. Mike Babcock couldn't even make it to training camp. Pascal Vincent was thrown into the fire and made it just one season.

When GM Don Waddell first came on board, he quickly identified the importance of finding a head coach with NHL experience. It was easy to see why. Not counting the Babcock debacle, two first-time NHL head coaches found it very difficult to have success.

Although the coaching search took a little longer than first anticipated, the Blue Jackets took their time to get this hire right. Waddell elected to bring Evason on. He had both experience and success on his resume.

A 3-3-0 record at the six-game mark with convincing wins over the Colorado Avalanche and Toronto Maple Leafs counts as a successful start even if it is a small sample size of games. Scoring six in each game against two teams considered by many as true Stanley Cup contenders is nothing to sneeze at.

Evason has the Blue Jackets playing well so far. The question we're going to consider here is how? How are they doing it and what changes has the new head coach brought to the table that's leading to some good early results?

### **Evason Willing to Experiment**

Recall under Vincent that the Blue Jackets tried some experiments. The big one that comes to mind was when Patrik Laine moved to center. That kind of experiment was an admission they had no other answers given who was on the roster.

The Blue Jackets then had major center issues. This led them to try Laine at center. While it was good that it was his idea to help the team, that wasn't the kind of experiment the team needed at that time.

The kind of experiments Evason is trying is on a completely different level than what we've previously seen. Two major experiments have come up in recent days that will be interesting to watch.

The first was having Zach Werenski and Ivan Provorov play together. They were picked one spot apart in the 2015 NHL Draft. Normally having two lefties together like this poses major challenges.

But not here. Even though Provorov is on the right and on his off-side, he's a good enough player to make it work. His presence has also allowed Werenski to play a freer offensive game.

"I think he's just so solid," Werenski said of Provorov. "It's easy to make reads off him. He's got a lot of talent, a lot of skills and can make plays, but he's never too offensive. He's always in the right spot. He's always reading the game well. He's just super steady. Maybe in a sense, it does. It allows me to play more offense knowing he's back there."

"I don't want free range to just go do whatever. I still want to be responsible as well. I definitely think just him being so steady and so solid back there subconsciously allows me to do that (play more offense.)"

The Blue Jackets' defense came into the season full of questions. Would it be Damon Severson or David Jiricek playing with Werenski? Instead, a calculated experiment by Evason to put Provorov on his off-side has had a domino effect on the lineup. Their success has stabilized the blue line while allowing other pairs to thrive.

Jake Christiansen and Severson have played well together on the second pair. These kind of experiments have a more defined purpose than ones of the past.

While injuries to a degree have forced changes, Evason admitted the situation has allowed him to experiment with some things.

"We're trying to shift around," Evason said. "We didn't have a very productive night offensively the other night (against Minnesota Saturday.) We thought we did some real good things defensively. We thought we limited them pretty good. So we're looking after our defensive zone but we got to find ways to score some goals. And we're trying to just move some stuff around to get some balance. Hopefully, we can generate some more offense because of it."

The change Evason is referring to was moving Yegor Chinakhov off the top line so he could play with Adam Fantilli. Cole Sillinger moved to the top line to play on Sean Monahan's wing. This kind of experiment was done to bring balance to the lineup.

While that's just part of the reason for success, Evason's willingness to do things like this is a change for the better compared to recent seasons. Previous changes were done out of desperation. The kind of changes done now were on a more calculated basis.

### **A New Approach**

The Blue Jackets of the last couple of seasons didn't have much structure to it. They were out of position a lot. There were times some players didn't even know where to go on the ice.

The noticeable change Evason has brought to these Blue Jackets is not only structure, but a certain level of predictability to that structure.

Mathieu Olivier scored two big goals Tuesday night against the Maple Leafs. He talked on Monday exclusively to the Hockey Writers about how there needs to be a some predictability in what they do. Ultimately, the structure becomes second nature.

"I think the structure is good," Olivier said. "I think we're playing to our strengths which is our speed and our skill as a whole. I think they've been very clear as to what they want. That black and white in our systems is huge as a hockey player. It's weird to say but you almost want to be predictable as a teammate but also as a team in terms of what you're going to do because the less time you think about what you have to do on the ice, the easier it is and the faster we can play which is what we're aiming for

here. We're heading into that direction where we're very direct, very aggressive. We don't think twice and it's very black and white what we have to do and I'm all for it."

The striking thing here is the tone and confidence these things are being said. At no point during the last couple of seasons was the confidence in the systems and structure this high. The overwhelming consensus is that the players are buying into it.

The Blue Jackets are playing a faster game not only with the puck but away from it too. They're playing a more aggressive style with their forecheck. Then once they get the puck, they're heading north quickly.

Evason has brought a simplified style to the Blue Jackets that the players love. That will yield results over time once they become more accustomed to it.

### **Team Togetherness**

In year's past, you could point to different things suggesting not everyone on the team was on the same page. With different personalities, that can happen.

However under Evason, everything from the smallest detail to the biggest thing is about one concept. Team.

It's clear in the early going this season these Blue Jackets are much more together than before. While coming together over the loss of Johnny Gaudreau absolutely is a part of this conversation, the togetherness factor is a mandatory part of how Evason operates.

Take for example the way the Blue Jackets handled losing to the Wild on Saturday night. Nobody liked their performance from the coach all the way down through the players. To a man, each said they vowed not to let that happen again.

Saying it is one thing. But doing it to back up those words is something else. Tuesday night's 6-2 win over the Maple Leafs showed that together as a team, they made sure to play a much better game.

There is a new sign in the Blue Jackets' locker room. It says "Everything is earned." Whether it's ice time or role or your place in the lineup, it has to be earned. When everyone is on the same page, it brings a team together.

Just six games into the new season, Evason has helped bring the Blue Jackets together. While there is so much more they have to do, they're off to a good start.

The Blue Jackets will win as a team. They'll lose as a team. Being in the room, it's plainly obvious how important this concept is to everyone. It's helping lead to some early, promising results. They hope it's only the beginning of something good.

## 1<sup>st</sup> Ohio Battery / Three Things: Franchise Record Offense, Olivier Has A Career Game, New Lines, No Problem

By Will Chase – October 24, 2024

The line blender provided another offensive spark.

The Columbus Blue Jackets scored six times in Tuesday night's 6-2 win over the Toronto Maple Leafs.

Justin Danforth had three points with a goal and two assists. Mathieu Olivier scored twice. Kirill Marchenko and Sean Monahan both scored and had an assist. James van Riemsdyk scored. Zach Werenski had two assists.

Daniil Tarasov made 26 saves.

### **Franchise Record Offense**

No matter who's in the lineup or out of it, the Blue Jackets keep finding ways to score goals, and Tuesday's win resulted in a franchise record.

With another six goals, Columbus has scored 24 goals on the season, the most through its first six games of any season.

Head coach Dean Evason and the players echoed the same sentiment following Saturday's disappointing 3-1 loss to the Minnesota Wild, saying they needed to start better and play to a higher standard.

Having a few extra days since that loss to think about things, and tinker with a new lineup, it seems like it was message received for a motivated Blue Jackets squad. The Maple Leafs were playing the second of a back-to-back following its 5-2 win on Monday night over the Tampa Bay Lightning.

In the first six games of the season for Columbus, they've alternated losses with wins, scoring six goals in all three wins, and Daniil Tarasov has been the goalie in all three victories.

### **Olivier Has A Career Game**

Among the players you might select from to have a career night on the scoresheet, where would Olivier rank on that list?

Sure enough, the 27-year-old from Biloxi, Mississippi led the Blue Jackets with his first-career two-goal game on Tuesday and now has three goals on the year through six games. Olivier had five goals all of last season, the same number of goals he scored in 2022-23, and would only need three more goals to set a new career high in that department.

Olivier scored the third goal of the opening period at 12:42 with Justin Danforth getting the first of two assists and Jake Christiansen getting a helper.

Olivier's second goal made it 5-0 at 11:36 in the second period, with the assists going to Zach Aston-Reese and Danforth.

### **New Lines, No Problem**

We wrote about a tough test that loomed for the Jackets ahead of Tuesday's game and as they looked to get back into the win column, Evason decided to jumble the lines.

Even though the first-line chemistry was evident with Yegor Chinakhov - Monahan - Marchenko, Evason was looking for a jolt with balanced scoring.

Tuesday's first line of Cole Sillinger - Monahan - Marchenko resulted in two goals and 12 shots on goal. Marchenko led the game with seven shots and Monahan was second on the team with five.

Across the board, Columbus had 11 players record at least one point.

### **Music City Miracle**

The Blue Jackets split their four-game homestand going 2-2-0. They'll be in Nashville on Saturday night to face the Predators for an 8:00 p.m. ET puck drop. Columbus is 9-31-1-6 all-time in 52 games at Nashville.

## The Athletic / What does the NHL power play of the future look like? Bad angles, low plays and the return of the spread

By Fluto Shinzawa – October 24, 2024

Tyler Johnson was a Triplet for eight seasons. Along with ex-linemate Ondrej Palat, he knows one thing about Nikita Kucherov as well as anyone: Then and now, nobody works the power play like No. 86.

“Everything strategically is meant to go off his side,” Johnson said of his former Tampa Bay Lightning linemate. “He has all those plays he’s able to do. He’s obviously one of the most talented and gifted players out there. When you give him that much firepower and that much creativity to be able to do stuff, magic happens.”

Particularly magical was Kucherov’s cross-seam, below-the-dots setup for Steven Stamkos to strike from the sharpest of angles. Stamkos is gone now, having signed with the Nashville Predators in the offseason. But Kucherov remains Tampa’s power-play maestro, on the hunt for similar plays to execute.

Masters make their reputations by being ahead of the curve. Kucherov is no exception.

For years, Kucherov has been running the NHL power play of the future.

### **Sharp-angle threats**

No matter how often Ray Ferraro watched Tampa Bay’s power play, he could not believe the skill with which Stamkos buried his bad-angle one-timer. Every time the ESPN analyst saw Leon Draisaitl sink the same shot from the other side, he thought the same thing.

“When they hit the net and score from a foot above the goal line, that shouldn’t be,” Ferraro said of Stamkos and Draisaitl. “It’s too hard.”

In 2023-24, Draisaitl scored 21 power-play goals, second-most in the league after Sam Reinhart. Stamkos was No. 3 with 19.

Between 2015-16, Draisaitl’s first NHL season, and 2023-24, the Oilers converted a league-best 24.4 percent of their power-play opportunities. The Lightning were second (23.8 percent).

It wasn’t just because Draisaitl and Stamkos were two of the best at what they do. They were part of elite units: Connor McDavid, Zach Hyman, Evan Bouchard and Ryan Nugent-Hopkins most recently for Edmonton; Kucherov, Brayden Point, Victor Hedman and Nick Paul for Tampa Bay. When McDavid is on a full-speed man-advantage rampage, of course penalty killers are going to lose their minds.

“That gets a little funky,” said the Boston Bruins’ Charlie Coyle. “As a PKer, you’re like, ‘Oh my God. Do I try and get him? I know I probably can’t get him. Do I try?’ Then things open up. You’re glued to him, so you’re like, ‘What’s this guy going to ... Oh my God, he just passed it to him.’ It’s like a snap of the finger.”

You can understand, then, why sharp-angle finishers like Draisaitl and Stamkos are not as freakish as they may seem. McDavid and Kucherov have few peers when it comes to optimizing power-play mates for goals that appear to make no sense.

The infrastructure and design, in other words, have just as much to do with a Draisaitl or Stamkos goal as it has to do with their skill. In that way, Draisaitl and Stamkos are pioneers when it comes to draining power-play goals that other players can score too.

Coaches see it coming.

## Changing design

Paul Maurice remembers the old league. Two defensemen, one elbow forward and two net-front tippers and screeners ruled the PP day.

The way the Florida Panthers coach sees it, things shifted in the late 1990s and early 2000s when Saku Koivu was the centerpiece of a down-low threesome for the Montreal Canadiens. Now, the NHL power-play default is the 1-3-1: distributor/sifter up top, quarterback on the half-wall, do-it-all threat in the bumper, one-timer on the flank, retriever at the net front and goal line.

One reason Stamkos became one of the best power-play scorers in history was the effectiveness of the setup and the skill of the unit's participants. Penalty killers had to account for Kucherov being able to do anything he wanted on the right-side half-boards, Point processing everything in the bumper and Hedman being a shooting threat from up top.

"Kucherov one-touches it to Point. Point shoots, scores," Coyle said of a typical Tampa play. "There's another one where (Kucherov) gets it. He gets it to Point. Point gets it right back to Kucherov. Right through, right through to Stamkos, one-timer, boom."

To counter the 1-3-1, approximately half of NHL teams have opted for a diamond-shaped penalty kill. One forward is responsible for covering the top of the zone. One defenseman, usually, fronts the half-wall disher. The weak-side forward shadows the bumper and the elbow shooter. A lone defenseman covers the front of the net.

But the danger of the diamond is how, at times, the goalie gets stranded on an island. Say the defenseman back closes on a puck carrier at the goal line. The other penalty killers have to collapse to the net front. It can take time to get there.

"If you're running the diamond idea, you've got one defenseman at the net, basically. That's it," Maurice said. "If you're running an aggressive diamond, you've got no one in front of the net sometimes. So that will be where everybody goes."

In response to the diamond and its net-front vulnerability, power plays sometimes select the spread over the 1-3-1's compactness. It's how the Lightning and Oilers have worked, shifting between the two.

"I bet you there'll be more teams this year doing the spread, especially against the diamond. There's always going to be change," Johnson predicted. "When you go into the spread with the diamond, you create more two-on-ones. Even some three-on-ones in different situations. It's just a way to get open. You're always thinking about your two-on-ones."

All of this points the power play to one direction: low.

## Around the net

Alex Ovechkin's trademark is his power-play one-timer from the left circle. Nobody has shot from that location with as much velocity or accuracy as the NHL's second-best goal scorer of all time.

But Ovechkin is a unicorn. A one-timer from the left circle, especially outside the dot without a slot-line pass, is a low-danger opportunity. Last season, the Capitals had the NHL's No. 18 power play (20.6 percent). Ovechkin scored 13 power-play goals. His career high is 25 in 2014-15.

Around the league, more coaches are designing their power plays for close-range chances.

"The elbows and the top guy, that used to be how power plays scored," Bruins coach Jim Montgomery said. "But if you're watching Tampa, Colorado or Edmonton, it's in and around the net. It's kind of simple. Closer the puck is to the net, better chance it's going in."



To make his case, Montgomery points to a typical Draisaitl goal off a below-the-dots slot-line pass. Draisaitl looks like an artist because of how precisely he hits his spot. It's partly an illusion. The hole is available because the goalie has so far to travel.

"The goalie's here," said Montgomery, pointing to the top of the crease on his office whiteboard.

"Now, 97 comes across and he sends it here," Montgomery continued, pointing to Draisaitl's sharp-angle location.

"Here to here," Montgomery said, tracing his finger from the high slot to the right faceoff dot, "the goalie has to go here to here to make the save," showing how the netminder only has to make a slight movement to square up to a shot.

"Here to here," Montgomery said, tracing an imaginary McDavid pass to Draisaitl below the dot, "the goalie's got to go here to the post," explaining how much more the puck-stopper has to go.

"It's a harder save there than it is there," said Montgomery, reiterating the goalie's extended movement on Draisaitl's signature strike. "Even though when you look at it, you're like, 'Oh, he's got more net.' The angle is further for a goalie. See the holes?"

Nobody knows this better than Kucherov. When he handles the puck on the right side, he's usually at the faceoff dot or below.

Through last year, Kucherov's below-the-dot location could open up a seam for Point in the bumper for a point-blank chance. If penalty killers collapsed on Point, Kucherov could seam it across to Stamkos for the low one-timer.

"Kucherov's the best half-wall guy in the league," Montgomery said. "He just works at it and works at it. It's his false information. You know he wants to go to Point as his first option. But he comes with a slap shot. Then he just switches his hands. It's amazing. And he puts it right on the tape. Like, every time. It's right in the sweet spot."

Thirty-one teams do not have Kucherov. But there are more finishers like Reinhart, Auston Matthews and David Pastrnak who can mimic Stamkos and Draisaitl if given sharp-angle opportunities.

"It's not a special talent for a good NHL player," said Montgomery. "Pasta can hit that all day."

Teams once thought little of distance. The Nashville Predators designed their power play for Shea Weber's blue-line one-timer. The Winnipeg Jets wanted Patrik Laine launching his one-timer from above the left faceoff dot.

All that's changing. Everything is moving closer.

## The Athletic / Remembering every NHL team's worst season start (that didn't really end up mattering)

By Sean McIndoe – October 24, 2024

We're a few weeks into a new season, and there's a good chance your team is off to a bad start. Maybe it's simply disappointing, or maybe it's bordering on disastrous — these things come in different flavors. But when it happens, it leads to panic and a sense of impending doom, as you can't help but hear about looming milestones like November 1 or U.S. Thanksgiving, and how the season will be a total write-off if your team isn't back on track by then. A slow start is the worst.

Also, it might not matter.

The "might" is a key word here, because a slow start can absolutely torpedo a season. But it doesn't have to, as history often reminds us. So today, let's see if we can calm a few nerves for fan bases in Colorado, Nashville, Buffalo and elsewhere, and maybe rekindle a few memories for others. Let's look back at your team's worst start to a season that ended up being just fine, thanks.

We're going to define a bad start a little loosely here, which allows us to play around with some arbitrary end points, although we want a team that's at least under .500. For some teams, that cold streak will only last a few games, while others might take months to get going. And of course, the "didn't matter" part will be in the eye of the beholder — for some of these teams, a few extra points in October could have meant home ice, or a better playoff matchup, or who knows what else down the road. But the larger point remains: Often, a few bad games are just a few bad games, and good teams find a way.

There is hope. You just need to know where to look. Let's remember some bad starts.

### **Western Conference**

#### **Anaheim Ducks**

We're doing this alphabetically, which works out beautifully since the Ducks are one of the best examples of how little a bad start can mean. They entered the 2015-16 season with optimism after a trip to the conference final, but face-planted almost immediately. Ten games in, they had just one win, sitting at 1-7-2 and looking up at the entire league. It was such a deep hole that they didn't make it back to .500 until after Christmas, but an 11-game win streak in the second half helped them finish first in the division with 103 points. And for once, a GM promising not to make change for the sake of change actually worked.

#### **Calgary Flames**

By mid-November of the 2003-04 season, the Flames had stumbled out to a record of 6-8-0-2, which is awful for two reasons: First, because they were under .500, and second and far more importantly, because it reminds us there was a brief window where NHL records had four columns. Good times. As for the Flames, they finished strong to the tune of 94 points, then went on a run all the way to the final.

#### **Chicago Blackhawks**

The 1969-70 Blackhawks started 0-5-1, finally won a game in their seventh try, then promptly lost to the laughingstock Golden Seals. They finished with the best record in the league. More recently, the 2008-09 team started so poorly that head coach (and franchise legend) Denis Savard was fired after just four games. That team went to the conference final, then won three Cups in six years.

#### **Colorado Avalanche**

They haven't looked great this season, to put it mildly. They also didn't look great three years ago, when they were 4-5-1 through 10 games and had just been swept in a home-and-home against the Brad Larsen-era Blue Jackets. Then they ran off six straight wins, one of five streaks of at least five victories they had over the rest of the regular season. You can add two more in the playoffs, when they went 16-4 to win the Cup.

### **Dallas Stars**

Here's another of those near-perfect examples of the sort of turnarounds we're talking about. The 2019-20 Stars had one of the worst starts in franchise history, going 1-7-1, and it felt like a controversial take to not have them in my bottom five. Then they reeled off 14 wins in 16 games, and after the pandemic break, they ended up going all the way to the Stanley Cup Final for the first time in two decades.

### **Edmonton Oilers**

We could absolutely go with last year's 2-9-1 start that cost Jay Woodcroft his job, but didn't stop the Oilers from making the final. (Although three more wins would have meant home ice in that deciding Game 7, so maybe it mattered more than we realized.) Instead, I'm going to go with the 1989-90 Oilers. Still reeling from the Wayne Gretzky trade a year earlier, they started 5-8-4 and didn't make it to .500 to stay until the end of November. Then they won their fifth Cup in seven years.

### **Los Angeles Kings**

I think we have to go with the 2011-12 Kings here, even though their start wasn't so much bad as just uninspiring, with the team hovering around .500 well into December. That's when they made the switch to Darryl Sutter as coach and played well enough to earn the final Western playoff spot. The rest was history.

### **Minnesota Wild**

Just two years ago, the Wild started off by not just losing their first three games, but giving up 20 goals in the process. It was bad enough that their coach just sent them all home. They were back to .500 by November and went on to record 103 points while finishing a solid sixth in fewest goals allowed. Then they lost in the first round, because they were still the Wild.

(Also, let's send a bonus shout out to the 1990-91 North Stars, who started 4-14-5 and still made the Stanley Cup Final.)

### **Nashville Predators**

No team could probably use more of an "October doesn't matter" pick-me-up than the Predators these days, and they're in luck, since both of the best two seasons in franchise history featured slow starts. The 2016-17 team was 2-5-1 in the season's first month but still made the final. And the 2017-18 edition started 5-5-2 before winning nine of 10 and finishing the year with the league's best record.

### **San Jose Sharks**

Sharks fans have some recent experience with awful starts, including a 3-9-3 launch two years ago and of course last year's 11-game losing streak. Neither of those seasons ended well, but 2003-04 did despite the Sharks winning just three of their first 19 games. The good news was they only lost eight of those 19 — the rest were ties, back when we still did those. The Sharks shook off the start, finished with 103 points and went to the conference final for the first time in franchise history.

### **Seattle Kraken**

You didn't really think we'd leave them out, did you? The Kraken may only be in year four, but they did start 3-4-2 in 2022-23, the only year they made the playoffs. That team ended up with 100 points, and they even won a round.

### **St. Louis Blues**

With all due respect to the debut season that saw the Blues start 5-16-2 before going all the way to the Final, this has to be the 2018-19 Blues championship. Pick your record — at various points they were 1-3-2, 2-4-3, 7-10-3 and even 15-18-4 on January 3, the day they woke up dead last in the league. It may stand as the greatest turnaround season in NHL history, not to mention the season every bad team will point to for decades to come while begging their fan base for patience.

### **Utah Hockey Club**

The worst start in franchise history is (checks note) this year since the NHL is trying to tell us this is a brand-new team that never existed before. If you want to go with that, then I'm sorry Utah fans, you don't get to join in today's fun. But we all know these are the repackaged Coyotes, so let's go with the 2010-11 team that won just four of their first 14 games but finished with 99 points, second most in team history.

### **Vancouver Canucks**

Give them credit, the Canucks have a history of making sure their worst starts tend to end with their worst seasons. One notable exception was the best team in franchise history: the 2010-11 team that limped out to just two wins in their first seven games before heating up, running away with the Presidents' Trophy and then coming within a win of a championship.

### **Vegas Golden Knights**

The Golden Knights have actually only had two slow starts in franchise history, starting 1-4-0 in both 2018-19 and 2021-22. One of those years ended in almost unfathomably heartbreaking fashion, the other saw them miss the playoffs for the only time ever. OK, fine, this one is the exception that proves the rule.

### **Winnipeg Jets**

The 2017-18 Jets didn't just start the season 0-2-0, they got shelled for 13 goals in the process. The good news is they immediately recovered and went on to post a franchise-record 114 points while almost winning the Presidents' Trophy. The better news is that those shaky first two games paved the way for starter Steve Mason to lose his job to some kid named Connor Hellebuyck.

## **Eastern Conference**

### **Boston Bruins**

Can we use a single game as a bad start? I think we can if the other team raises a Cup banner in front of you, then beats you 7-0 in a loss so humiliating your future captain flips out and jumps a guy. That was how the 2018-19 Bruins opened their season; they ended it by playing in the Stanley Cup Final.

### **Buffalo Sabres**

Let's scroll down until we find a good Sabres season to work with. (Scrolls for a while.) OK, here we go. The 2005-06 team didn't look like much out of the lockout; they were still sitting at .500 in the middle of November, with just nine wins through 18 games. They'd win 43 of their last 64, finishing with 110 points and then winning two rounds before blue-line injuries derailed what could have been the

franchise's first Cup. As if to prove starts don't really matter, the next year's team flipped the script by starting 10-0-0, then went out in the conference finals yet again.

### **Carolina Hurricanes**

Their 2005-06 Cup-winning season featured a decent enough start. But go back three years earlier, and a team coached by teenage wunderkind Paul Maurice had a wobbly first few months; they didn't get over the .500 mark for good until a win in the second week of December, and that team ended up going all the way to the final. More recently, the 2018-19 team under rookie coach Rod Brind'Amour had a stretch in October and November where they lost eight of 10, and didn't get back over .500 until the new year. That team finished with 99 points and won two playoff rounds.

### **Columbus Blue Jackets**

A bad start that gives way to a successful season is tricky here, because, well, it means we have to find a successful season. That hasn't been easy in Columbus, given the team has only won a single seven-game series in franchise history. That one came in 2018-19, and their start that year was fine. So at the risk of damning with faint praise, let's turn to the 2016-17 team that lost four of its first six before flipping the switch on the way to a team-record 108-point season. Pro tip: Posting a 16-game win streak that covers all of December and beyond helps in the turnaround.

### **Detroit Red Wings**

Their recent Cup wins all had decent starts, although they were 2-4-0 two weeks into the 1996-97 season. I'm going to go a year earlier, when the 95-96 edition of the team started 5-5-2, then heated up ever so slightly to go 57-8-5 the rest of the way, setting the NHL record for wins in a year with 62. (The record has since been tied and then broken, but those came in the loser point/shootout era, so they don't count.)

### **Florida Panthers**

No need to get cute here, especially with a team that doesn't have a ton of successful seasons to choose from. Last year would qualify, to put it mildly, and they were just 2-3-0 out of the gate. Things turned out OK.

### **Montreal Canadiens**

There's plenty of history to choose from, but let's stay in the modern era by going with the 1985-86 Habs, who went 4-6-0 through October before recovering to cruise into the playoffs and win the franchise's 23rd Stanley Cup. Let's just say that for Montreal fans, it's a more pleasant reminder about October not always mattering than some other years we could mention.

### **New Jersey Devils**

We don't have to go back very far to learn a valuable lesson in not overreacting to early games, since it was just two years ago that an 0-2-0 start had fans chanting to Fire Lindy right before the team won 16 of their next 17 on their way to 112 points. But we could also go back to 1994-95, in which a seeming breakthrough season turned into a 3-5-2 start. That team didn't get over .500 until the last day of March. OK, fine, it was a lockout season, but that's still a long wait.

### **New York Islanders**

The 1979-80 team took forever to get going, hitting a nadir with a 6-11-4 record at the end of November and not getting to .500 until mid-January. Then they made a deadline deal with the Kings that you may have heard of. Then they won the Cup. Then they won the next three after that, too. Then everyone forgot all about that slow start in the fall of 1979.

### **New York Rangers**

The 1993-94 team started the season 4-5-0, reaching the mark thanks to humiliating back-to-back losses to recent expansion teams in the Mighty Ducks and Lightning (back in the era when expansion teams were supposed to be terrible). If you're not sure how this Rangers season turned out, flip on the NHL Network and wait a few seconds, they'll probably start talking about it.

### **Ottawa Senators**

The Senators are a weird team when it comes to starts; they've torpedoed themselves with bad Octobers each of the last few years, and also once started a season 13-1-0 and fired their brand new coach just a few months later. They also started the 2006-07 season with a 6-10-1 record through mid-November, but still managed to rack up 105 points and score the Stanley Cup-winning goal.

### **Philadelphia Flyers**

Old-time Flyers fans can tell you all about how starts don't always matter — this team once made it to its 38th game before suffering their second loss, but didn't win the Cup. Neither did the 1999-2000 team, but they were more useful for this premise because they started off 0-4-1, including scoring just one goal in the first three games. They immediately ran off four in a row to get back into the mix, and finished with 105 points before making it to a conference final their fans all remember for all the wrong reasons.

### **Pittsburgh Penguins**

The 1990-91 team started the season with consecutive wins, but then won only one of their next seven on the way to a 3-5-1 record. Even worse, Mario Lemieux would be out of the lineup for months, hotshot rookie Jaromir Jagr was an early bust and they had a hole on the blue line they wouldn't fill until Larry Murphy arrived in December. They ended up winning the next two Stanley Cups. Your team can too, as long as they have two of the best offensive players of all time ready to tear up the league and acquire a Hall-of-Fame defenseman for peanuts. Huh. Maybe this one isn't very helpful after all.

### **Tampa Bay Lightning**

We have to cheat just a bit on our "under .500" criteria, since the 2019-20 Lightning never quite got there. But they were close throughout October, dropping to 6-5-2 through 13 games. That was a big deal, considering they were coming off a record-setting 128-point season that saw them lose in a shocking first-round upset. Even their own captain was warning it was going to be a "really, really, really long year." It was, because they played into September and won the Stanley Cup.

### **Toronto Maple Leafs**

Leafs history certainly isn't short on bad starts, and I'm tempted to point out that they once started 1-10-0 and still made the playoffs. (With, uh, 57 points. Wendel bless the Norris Division.) Instead, let's go with the 1992-93 team that was just 2-3-1 through six games. Even worse, they'd given up at least three goals in every game, proving this new Pat Burns guy couldn't coach defense and nothing fun would happen that year.

### **Washington Capitals**

I'd love to use our last entry on the 1974-75 team that only won one of its first 18 games, then heated up over the rest of the year to finish with eight times that many. But no, I think we have to point to the 2017-18 team that was coming off a Presidents' Trophy win, but started the season with a 5-6-1 October. It took a while, but apparently the Caps finally learned the lesson this whole column has been about: how you start is just slightly less important than how you finish.

## ESPN / How the NHL pulled off its new goal simulation animations

By Greg Wyshynski – October 24, 2024

In an overtime game against the Philadelphia Flyers recently, Edmonton Oilers star Connor McDavid flew into the zone on a breakaway, shot the puck off the post, recovered it and passed over to a streaking Leon Draisaitl for the winning goal.

Fans could watch a video clip of that goal, but the NHL's official website offers a different way to process the play: a "goal simulation" animation.

McDavid is a small dark circle with 97 on it, being defended by orange circles with corresponding jersey numbers to the Flyers. The puck is a black speck. One can track Draisaitl's journey from his own zone to the winning goal -- and Travis Sanheim's inability to catch up to him -- including what happened outside the frame of the television cameras.

Finally, in the cheekiest part of the simulation, a series of quickly multiplying Oilers "dots" appear on the ice, as Edmonton players hop over the boards to celebrate the win and mob Draisaitl.

"People kind of discovered it organically," said Russ Levine, group vice president of statistics & information for the NHL. "They're finding unique things or little viral moments, and that has been rewarding. That's what we hoped fans would discover."

The "goal simulations" are created through the NHL's puck- and player-tracking technology, which collects data and tracks the movements of every player on the ice and the puck itself.

"We think it allows you to see a play in a different way. You can see the spacing, player positioning, gaps or lack thereof in a way that's very stark and different from a broadcast view because it's two dimensional and straight over the top," Levine said. "We think it's a really unique, quick way to review a play and see it in a different light."

**HOCKEY IS A SPORT** of constant motion. Levine said this presentation of scoring plays allows fans to see how every part of that offensive chance develops.

"I think we're always searching for things that will help fans better understand what's happening on the ice," he said. "Puck and player tracking is a way to take this very chaotic game -- with live substitutions, players hopping on and off the ice and the best players playing a third of the game -- and finding new ways to quantify performance or evaluate what happens on a play."

But the goal simulations also have an old-school charm. Seeing plays develop into digitized shots and passes conjures memories of early hockey video games, too.

"The nostalgia for that era of video games seems to be never-ending," Levine said. "And I do think you're right: It's simple, and it looks kind of like those early games."

The NHL first started developing puck- and player-tracking technology in 2013, using several different variations of infrared and optical tracking systems. In 2019, the NHL and NHLPA announced that players would wear sensors inside their uniforms that, when combined with a chip located inside the puck, would capture real-time data ranging from speed to distance to mapping locations on the ice. There's also an optical tracking component that validates that data "within a few milliseconds," according to the league, which renamed its tracking technology NHL Edge.

Over the years, the league has learned how to handle some of the challenges to ensuring NHL Edge's accuracy. Sometimes arenas move things around to obscure the sightlines of the cameras, which is part

of the league's game-night checklist for system calibration. Sometimes a chip goes out or gets knocked out of a player's gear, so the league works with equipment managers to ensure they're on the case.

"There's some technical challenges, maintenance, and then there's just some real life events that happen in games where things have to be corrected in a hurry to make sure we're accurately capturing everything," Levine explained.

Once captured, one of the uses for that data was through the SAP NHL Coaching Insights App, available to coaches and players on the bench during games via tablets. Levine said that's where the goal simulations first showed up in 2022, as a way for teams to clip and analyze how plays developed. Known as "Virtual Replay" on the app, where full games are available, the NHL says its coaches have responded positively to it.

"They've appreciated the amount of tactical focus the view provides, along with the ability to see an accurate portrayal of width and depth on the playing surface that the traditional red line camera can skew," said Brant Berglund, senior director of coaching and GM applications for the NHL. "They've also used it in video rooms and on the bench for various play reviews and coaching purposes."

But the league believed that NHL Edge data could also be used to entertain and educate fans. It started working with a company called Beyond Sports to develop real-time digital recreations of NHL games in virtual reality and platforms such as Roblox.

Things took a giant leap forward in 2023 when the NHL and Disney worked together to create the Big City Greens Classic, which combined the NHL Edge location mapping with live, real-time volumetric animations of players and teams modeled after characters on the Emmy Award-winning show "Big City Greens." As the Washington Capitals and New York Rangers played a game at Madison Square Garden, animated players mimicked their movements -- under the watchful eye of a chicken in a referee shirt.

Incremental improvements were made last season for the Big City Greens Classic 2, with the Boston Bruins playing against the Pittsburgh Penguins:

**THE NHL EDGE** goal simulation animations are decidedly more low tech than the Big City Greens Classic, and that's by design: While there's inherent entertainment value in watching little circles race around the ice, the goal is more educational and analytical.

"It's the same underlying data: multiple position points per second that can be translated, whether it's in a virtual broadcast featuring Disney characters or O's on a ring plot," Levine said. "There's a lot of different uses for it that we can imagine in the future."

The league decided to add "goal simulations" this season as part of a larger overhaul of NHL.com's game presentations. After the NHL sold its stake in MLB Advanced Media to Disney in 2021, the league eventually began running its official website in-house. The league wanted to integrate more content into its box scores, including from its tracking data. Levine said starting with a commonplace event, like a goal, made the most sense.

"The thought was, 'What can we add that will immediately sort of benefit the fan experience?' Those six-plus goal events a game are the most important bits of data we have," he said. "The idea is to just show people a clear view of what's happening on a goal."

The NHLPA signed off on player tracking years ago. Despite goal simulations occasionally putting the spotlight on players who negatively impact a play, Levine said he hasn't heard of any pushback from the players, and doesn't anticipate any.



"I don't think there's any risk of an exposure of a player-performance issue in moving dots that wouldn't be exposed by television," he said.

The next evolution for the goal simulations is to allow fans to share the clips on social media.

"That's something we're working on. I think the response we've seen on social from people reacting to them on the site indicates there is an interest in it," Levine said. "It's kind of a different way to look at a goal. There can be sort of viral aspects of some of these goals. We're excited to see what fans will do with it when we're able to make them completely shareable."

## [ESPN / NHL's 4 Nations Face-Off team jerseys revealed](#)

**By Brianna Williams – October 24, 2024**

The NHL's 4 Nations Face-Off is bringing the best of Canada, Finland, Sweden and the USA to the ice in Montreal and Boston from Feb. 12-20.

But why wait four months to feel the thrill?

Team jerseys have dropped, and fans can already get a sneak peek at the fresh threads their favorite international stars will be wearing on the ice.

Edmonton Oilers center Connor McDavid (Canada), Toronto Maple Leafs center Auston Matthews (USA), Tampa Bay Lightning defenseman Victor Hedman (Sweden) and Carolina Hurricanes center Sebastian Aho (Finland) suited up to show off the fresh sweaters for the showdown.

Canada's sweater is a bold red, showcasing a maple leaf in the center over two white stripes, with "Canada" displayed within it.

The United States jersey sports a deep blue, with "USA" written across the front and a star above red and white stripes on the sleeves.

Sweden's kit is a classic yellow, featuring the traditional three crowns, while Finland's uniform displays "SUOMI" above the Finnish crest.

The tournament will feature seven games over nine days from Feb. 12 to Feb. 20. Four games will take place at the Bell Centre in Montreal, while the remaining three, including the championship, will be at Boston's TD Garden.

## [Sportsnet.ca / 32 Thoughts: Wild's Kirill Kaprizov should be in Hart Trophy race](#)

By Elliotte Friedman – October 24, 2024

### Here's Kirill Kaprizov's Hart Trophy count:

**Last season:** Zero votes.

**2023:** One third-place vote (probably Michael Russo)

**2022:** His best result. Two firsts, four seconds, four thirds, 13 fourths and 19 fifths. He was seventh, 1,504 points behind winner Auston Matthews.

**2021:** One fourth-place vote, one fifth. He won the Calder Trophy.

I'm not here to start an argument, I lose plenty of those at home. He's a franchise player. Minnesota's going to throw the GDP of a medium-sized country at him. Connor Bedard told Colby Armstrong last season that it's hard to name a particular person he learns from, but "of I was to pick one, it would probably be Kaprizov."

Bedard is God to hockey youth, that's a major endorsement.

You know that guy. That guy who's never won the Hart Trophy. The guy who deserves more conversation, but doesn't get enough love. The guy who suddenly reaches that sweet spot where en masse, voters say, "He's earned a push." (Artemi Panarin is another example.) Kaprizov avoids the spotlight and never has reached the second round of the playoffs — not solely on him.

Watching his ridiculous assist on the Wild's fourth goal Tuesday in Florida, I couldn't help but think, this is the year he pushes to the forefront.

Kaprizov played 18:04 in Minnesota's opener. Since then, he's not been below 21 minutes. He skated 24:16 against Seattle and 27:59 in St. Louis. No winger averages a heavier early-season workload; only Connor McDavid and Nathan MacKinnon are higher among forwards.

He has 10 points in six games, at least one in five of them — the exception a loss in Winnipeg that began less than 24 hours after the Seattle showdown.

The Wild are 4-0-2, but there's a lot of road to run. The Central looks very, very tough. However, they've got a good schedule, not jammed with back-to-backs, and none as tight as the Winnipeg one.

Quinn Hughes is my Hart pick, but Kaprizov's sent an early missive. He'll be there too.

### 32 THOUGHTS

**1.** Know you love the rumours, but it is early. This is the 'we're-still-seeing-what-we've-got' phase. Predators GM Barry Trotz has the second-best hockey radio hit on The Game in Nashville. On Tuesday, he told hosts Willy Daunic, Derrick Mason and Adam Vingan, "No one is trading anyone right now. I would like to get a centre, but no one is giving their centremen away."

Two toughest things to find: a stud defender and a top centre. No more zero in the win column after Tuesday night, where they opened with Colton Sissons between Jonathan Marchessault and Steven Stamkos.

**2.** Same situation for Calgary.

The faceoff leading to Seattle's 1-1 goal last weekend illustrated a problem the Flames eventually will address. With Elias Lindholm in Boston, they don't have a right-shot centre, leading to disadvantages in the circle.

It's not a huge thing yet, as Calgary continues its joyous start during this roster re-set. "Sending a first-round pick for a guy who would be here for a year doesn't make much sense," GM Craig Conroy told Sportsnet's Eric Francis. "But if it was a first-round pick for a guy who would be here long term, we would be open to that."

**3.** The Flames did some team bonding at world-famous Banff Springs Hotel, and were hooked by one of its charms — five-pin bowling. One player was absolutely sandbagged by others holding back their best until wagering began. "One guy went from bowling 70 to bowling 200," a Flame laughed. Gotta be careful, just ask Roy Munson.

**4.** Cut-and-paste with Chicago, when it comes to centres. Centres for everyone!

**5.** Florida GM Bill Zito is taking care of business: Carter Verhaeghe, Paul Maurice and we will see about Sam Bennett. Talks are underway. Zito and agent Darren Ferris wouldn't comment, and a couple of sources painted it as "not far apart, but now everyone's dug in." We'll see. He's great for Florida, and Florida's great for him.

**6.** I watch a lot of Boston (shoutout Sophia Jurksztowicz, hope to see you back on-air soon). The eye-test isn't pretty, the underlying numbers are unusually poor. Theory from 900 km away: the Bruins' two games with Florida messed them up. The playoffs are for "taking numbers" and dealing with things next season. The Bruins desired that, it was a pointed topic of discussion. But the Panthers beat them twice, while not allowing Boston to gain any satisfying measure of physical payback.

**There's been a lot early:** Jeremy Swayman's lengthy contract stalemate; Jim Montgomery going hard at captain Brad Marchand on the bench in Utah. That yelling wouldn't bother me, as long as it was a rare occurrence. I'd be more worried if it happened often, that's a sign of things coming unglued. A couple sources pointed out that they don't like coaches who only make examples of young players or fourth-liners, and Montgomery isn't afraid to criticize his stars. (The tap to Marchand was the only thing that concerned me, but didn't cross a line and surely won't happen again.)

They don't look like themselves, but repeatedly made us look like fools for anticipating their demise. High-IQ team that isn't itself right now and needs a re-start. Again, personal opinion, but I thought those Florida games really threw them (and reminded us the Panthers are still a force).

**7.** I understand why the Rangers would crave maximum term with Alexis Lafreniere, but I'm not convinced he'd want to do that. An eight-year deal takes him through his age 31 season, cutting down on the ability to strike again in his prime.

**8.** Miro Heiskanen and Roope Hintz, \$8.45 million. Jake Oettinger \$8.25 million. Want to guess what Dallas offers Wyatt Johnston, should this be a long-term extension? He's next on their list.

**9.** Jets players were disappointed Rutger McGroarty didn't last on the NHL roster until Pittsburgh/Winnipeg on Sunday. (They'll just have to be content with a 6-0 start.) Two things can be true: McGroarty is entitled to work the CBA as he wishes, and fans are entitled to make their feelings known.

**10.** Utah is determined not to do something that causes 10 years of pain in the absences of Sean Durzi (four-to-six months) and John Marino (three-to-four months) No panic, short-term moves. Being down two righties will erode anyone, but Michael Kesselring's emergence matters; one person's injury is another person's opportunity.

Another situation to watch is Michael Carcone. Scored 21 goals last season; no points in three games this year, and the Utahns are deep up-front. One stats person regularly badgers me about goals/points per-60 minutes. Carcone was sixth in the NHL last year, at 1.46. Someone will give him a spot if he can't find one here.

**11.** Clayton Keller on Utah's Dylan Guenther: "He's got a special shot and I think he's going to be a 50-goal scorer, without a doubt. After Auston (Matthews), I don't know many guys who can shoot the puck like that. So effortless and scoring from pretty much anywhere." Guenther had five goals in the first four games.

**12.** Sean Couturier played with Matvei Michkov and Owen Tippett during Tuesday's 4-1 loss to Washington. Ice-time was 17:43, highest of the season. His average beforehand was 13:32, ranging from 9:52 to 15:58. It was revealing the Flyers put him with those two, searching for somewhere for Couturier to thrive. Like last season, they are concerned about his pace, but gave him an opportunity to make it work. Not easy for anyone involved.

**13.** Kings defenceman Kyle Burroughs on Edmonton's Ty Emberson, a scratch from Tuesday's overtime loss to Carolina: "I told him to relax and make a good first pass. He'll get another 15 points just doing that." The two were teammates last season in San Jose, before Burroughs was sent to Los Angeles and Emberson to Alberta. The Oilers liked Emberson as an under-the-radar acquisition, but he's struggled so far. Burroughs preached patience, but admitted he thought the adjustment could be trouble.

"(Ty's) never seen anything like this," he said, referring to the meat-grinder (my term) of the Canadian spotlight. "He's from Wisconsin, small-town guy, never played anywhere like it." But he believes Emberson will figure it out. Burroughs added Emberson and wife Carolyn adopted a dog from a shelter, so that's someone to root for.

**14.** Watching Toronto's 5-2 win over Tampa Bay on Monday night, was thinking a lot about the goalies. First question: what is Anthony Stolarz's maximum workload? Turning 31 in January, he's never played more than 28 games in one season. Florida doesn't win the Stanley Cup without Stolarz making them confident to rest Sergei Bobrovsky. Now, he looks calm and cool claiming Toronto's top spot during Joseph Woll's eve-of-season injury.

**Second question:** What is Andrei Vasilevskiy's maximum workload? You know he wants to play every minute of every game, and the Lightning acceded to that wish for years. Last year, he missed 20 games after major back surgery and still played 52. Tampa hoped this season would be his true triumphant return. Until Tuesday, he'd started all five of their games, and I'm not convinced that's sustainable. Tampa hasn't had to worry about this for years, but it might finally be time to admit less is more for this future Hall-of-Famer.

**15.** Toronto followed up its big win over arch-rival Tampa with a stinker in Columbus. Their next one will be emotional: Craig Berube coaching against St. Louis. They should be inspired solely for him. There was something fitting about their nasty night with the Lightning, when they gave as good as they got. Last season, when Timothy Liljegren was injured by Brad Marchand, the Maple Leafs were shown videos of how Tampa consistently stood up for each other with a pack mentality, told that's the identity they needed to create.

**16.** The last possible day of the Stanley Cup Final is June 23. The draft dates are not yet set, but the June 27-29 weekend in Los Angeles is the target. (Remember, it will be decentralized this season, teams staying in their markets instead of all in one place.) That tight window means the NHL will try something different with the awards. No show.

**One possibility:** NBA style, with a media conference on an off-day during the first round, then the winner being recognized in front of their home fans. I've lived that one, it's very good, a reward for the home fans, exciting for the players. Visiting teams complain it stacks emotion even more against them, but that's just whiny. Aside from the Calder, it is rare for the major trophies to be won by a non-playoff performer. Another option: surprise visits with the trophies to someone's house, possibly presented by someone special. It's got promise. Suggestions welcome.

**17.** If he does not find something he likes with a team, NHL Hockey Operations has asked Ken Holland if he'd be interested in a role with the league.

**18.** Early trend to WATCH: five-on-five shooting percentage. Since being tracked in 2009-10, the worst number is 5.7, by the 2014-15 Arizona Coyotes. After Tuesday's games, five teams are below and one is tied. Below: Edmonton and Nashville (4.8); Islanders (5.1); Philadelphia (5.3); San Jose (5.4). Tied: Ottawa.

**19.** ALSO: who is the last regular to be on the ice for a goal against at five-on-five? Kiss of death mention for sure, but 18 players are above 50 minutes in that situation and zero goals allowed. Esa Lindell leads (117:19, per Natural Stat Trick). There are two complete forward lines: William Carrier-Jordan Martinook-Jordan Staal (Carolina) and Filip Chytil-Will Cuyille-Kaapo Kakko (NYR).

**20.** A coach is nothing without good players, but surging Washington believes it has something special in Spencer Carbery. For example, Rasmus Sandin credited how the Carberator handled their end-of-season exit interview. Unusually, they didn't have one before Sandin departed DC. "He told me, 'Let's not overthink this too much and let's talk in a couple weeks,'" Sandin said. When they did speak, "we had similar thoughts about my season. It wasn't the best, it wasn't terrible, it was average. It was OK. But that's not what I want, that's not what he wants ... What's going to be different?"

**One of the keys:** how Sandin could escape dangerous situations better. And how he could improve his shot. "I've always been a passer. We created a lot of chances to score, but either I overpass, or shot terrible."

**21.** Raphael Lavoie waited in an Edmonton hotel two weeks ago while teams played ping-pong with his future. Waived by the Oilers, snared by Vegas, taken back by his original club — but unable to go to AHL Bakersfield because someone else put in a claim — then grabbed again by the Golden Knights, who sent him to AHL Henderson because the mystery team backed off.

Suspicion centred on Colorado, but a few sources denied that. I wondered about Dallas. First, I could see the Stars being intrigued by Lavoie, as he fits their identity profile. Second, they had depth/injury concerns. Mavrik Bourque started skating when Edmonton waived Lavoie a second time; his quick return from injury made me wonder if they could have changed their minds. Teams are not to discuss waiver claims if they don't get the player.

**22.** This kind of craziness occasionally occurs. Eric Comrie went Winnipeg-Arizona-Detroit-Winnipeg over nine weeks in 2019. (One part of this was a trade.) Brian Burke recently reminisced about Wade Brookbank, who, from Dec. 17, 2003-Jan. 3, 2004 was traded twice and waived twice, going Ottawa-Vancouver-Ottawa-Florida-Vancouver. Over Christmas, no less, as Burke and then-Senators GM John Muckler played tug-of-war.

Lavoie's agent, Philippe Lecavalier, had an interesting idea: a team that loses someone on waivers should drop to last on the priority list if that player is put back on. Makes sense, since waivers exist to give players opportunities for a fresh start if not in the NHL. Another suggestion was forcing teams to keep anyone claimed on their roster for, say, a week. CBA issue, let's see if anyone wishes to address it.

**23.** Exemplary work by Columbus and Calgary in honouring Johnny Gaudreau, brother Matthew and families at their respective home openers. At the Blue Jackets' home opener, Matthew Tkachuk was supposed to be opposite close-friend Gaudreau's regular left-wing position — beautifully left vacant at puck drop. Unfortunately, his illness prevented that from occurring. Sam Bennett, who also played six-plus seasons with Gaudreau in Calgary, was an excellent replacement.

**24.** A few thoughts about goaltender interference. I agree some of the disallowed goals look incredibly soft. **Two that stood out:**

- Justin Brazeau's interference Oct. 10 (Montreal/Boston)
- and Corey Perry during the Battle of Alberta three days later.

Considering his involvement, it's funny Perry is prominently featured, and I laughed my head off when he "waved the white flag" from the bench earlier this month. But, you can make a strong argument that this is the most consistently enforced call in the rulebook. If you enter the blue paint without being pushed or held, it's on you.

**One recent difference:** Claude Giroux's 6-6 goal in Canadian Thanksgiving's maniacal Kings/Senators 8-7 shootout. David Perron clips Darcy Kuemper's skate, but the Situation Room ruled the goalie could still have made the save. Los Angeles lost its challenge.

Again, this call can look super weak. We should be biased towards goals, not against them. But if the league eases on this standard, it will lead to worse outcomes — especially during the playoffs, when the crease is attacked with gusto.

**25.** Where the NHL could really help itself is after a night like last Tuesday. Within hours, there were two different outcomes on two similar plays. Mikey Eyssimont had one disallowed for Tampa against Vancouver.

It is a video coach's job to recognize rulings and understand trends, so when I saw Michkov's first NHL goal, I knew Edmonton would challenge. The Oilers were overruled — Michkov's score stood. At the time, Edmonton had more disallowed goals (four), than actual goals (three). This is where the league should explain the discrepancy, with video.

**I have theories:** That Eyssimont jammed his stick into Arturs Silovs' pad and didn't remove it; while Michkov swatted away at the puck several times, overpowering Stuart Skinner as opposed to ramming him into the net. But I don't "know." A video — a simple explanation and comparison — would go a long way.

**26.** Mats Sundin is promoting his new book: Home and Away, with Amy Stuart. We'll save the details of our interview with him until it airs, with one exception. Ed Belfour, asked for a good story, thought for a few seconds, then broke into a big smile. "Mats threw the best Halloween parties," he said. Sundin laughed, but was proud, seeing as how throwing parties is a captain's duty.

Did he have any good costumes? "A priest," was his answer. Did anyone else have any good costumes? Matt Nichol — a redhead — formerly the Maple Leafs' strength and conditioning coach, once came as Daniel Alfredsson. Nichol now works in Ottawa. Hope he brings that one back for this year's Senators' extravaganza.

**27.** Two excellent finds from the great people at Sportsnet Stats. Macklin Celebrini's first NHL goal came 7:01 into his first NHL game. That was the second-fastest score by a rookie in league history. The fastest? The great Mario Lemieux scored on his first-ever shot, at 2:59 of his debut (Oct. 11, 1984).

**28.** Second: OHL Windsor's Ethan Belchetz — the No. 1 pick in this year's draft — had a four-goal, six-point Gordie Howe hat trick on Sept. 28, a 12-2 win over Kitchener. Only once in NHL history has a "Howe" involved four goals, by Jeremy Roenick, on Feb. 24, 1994 against Winnipeg. Owen Nolan had six points (one goal, five assists) on March 5, 1992 — during a matchup that is no longer possible: Quebec vs. Hartford.

**29.** Major CHL meeting last week in Toronto, as approximately 57 teams were represented at an airport hotel. It's something those leagues have wanted to do for a long time, an excellent opportunity to discuss things like best practices for growing the game. The NCAA's expected easing of eligibility rules was another topic, with no one exactly sure how this is going to unfold.

What everyone does agree: It's going to be chaos. The current NHL-CHL agreement does not expire at the same time as the NHL/NHLPA CBA (after the 2025-26 season), it extends beyond that. When the NHL floated the idea of a 19-year-old draft a few years ago, one of the facets to it was the possibility of USHL teams competing for the Memorial Cup. The biography of Steve Lowe, the Muskegon Lumberjacks' president of hockey operations, disappeared from the team's website on Wednesday. Hold on tight, going to be a wild ride.

**30.** Attended the third annual Dallas Stars Hall of Fame ceremony on Sunday. I'm on the voting committee — although there is much more expertise among the other selectors — and got back this year after missing it in 2023. One of the Stars' charity beneficiaries is St. Philip's School & Community Center. The players were introduced by four 13-year-olds from there, all of them far more talented at their age than I am at 54.

It's a great event for a lot of reasons, but I particularly love the speeches. Broadcaster Daryl Reaugh feted the builder: Jim Lites, who hired Reaugh 28 seasons ago. Lites, with three different terms as team president, came from Detroit in 1993, playing a massive role in building the organization into what it is now. He made sure to thank a wide swath of people — for example, those near me were happy he recognized Brittany McMullen, executive assistant to the president/CEO — and discussed two truisms that are essential to winning: stable ownership (recognizing Mike Ilitch, Tom Hicks and Tom Gaglardi) and strong managers (Bob Gainey, Ken Holland, Doug Armstrong and Jim Nill).

Of the latter four, he pointed out two are in the Hall of Fame "and the other two will be there." He said Ilitch once told him "you can do a great job managing people as long as you don't care who gets the credit," and that "everybody walked taller working with Gainey."

**31.** Then, Brett Hull grabbed the microphone to welcome the player inductee: former captain Brenden Morrow. Hull started by saying if Lites took any longer, Morrow wouldn't be honoured until next year, and it got better from there. Morrow looked like "he's about 12, but when he got on the ice, he was a baby-faced assassin ... He was destined to be captain, there was no chance he wasn't going to be captain."

Hull described one game where a teammate was warned by the NHL not to fight someone, but Morrow, feeling frontier justice was necessary, took it upon himself to engage, instead. He closed by saying that Morrow "is the greatest ball finder in the world in golf," and therefore "should have scored more goals (with that) great vision."

The day before, while attending the Stars' win over Edmonton, Morrow admitted he isn't crazy about public speaking and his friends basically thought he'd be terrible. He said he considered all of the things you're supposed to do to make it easier, such as imaging the audience naked, "But I didn't realize my parents would have such great seats." (He got very emotional discussing them and his older brother.)



Then he talked about a teammate who was angry on the team plane about being benched a game or two. Another Star, Sami Helenius, who had a great attitude, spoke up and said, "You know what, I've sat 17 games in a row." Morrow said it bothered him he hadn't been aware of that, and was determined not to miss such details ever again. (This was 2001-02, his third NHL season.) Great event, I love stuff like this.

**32.** Just finished reading *Rulebreaker: The Life and Times of Barbara Walters*, written by Susan Page. I'm not within a universe of Walters' work, but there were times I found myself nodding with understanding about choices she made. A God in her field. Next: *When the Sea Came Alive*. It's an oral history of D-Day. During hockey season, I try to read non-sports, just for sanity.

## [Sportsnet.ca / NHL's Top 12 UFAs of 2025: Latest rumours, reports](#)

By Luke Fox – October 24, 2024

Captains and Cup champs. Top-pair defencemen and elite playmakers. All-world goalies and 50-goal chasers.

Yes, even with several franchise studs (Leon Draisaitl, Sidney Crosby, Victor Hedman, Carter Verhaeghe, Travis Konecny, Linus Ullmark) and key support players (Adam Larsson, Esa Lindell, Matt Duchene, Pavel Buchnevich, Joey Daccord) signing pocket-padding extensions way before deadline and avoiding the stress of free agency, the NHL's 2025 UFA class sets up to be an intriguing one.

And with the salary cap projected to rise by another \$4.5 million — to \$92.5 million — those spendy general managers should have even more budget to splash the pot on the next Steven Stamkos or Jake Guentzel to test the open waters.

Here's a rundown and ranking of hockey's best impending unrestricted free agents, plus the latest buzz circulating about their future.

Happy contract year, fellas. Make 'em pay.

### 1. Mikko Rantanen

**Age on July 1:** 28

**Position:** Right wing / Centre

**2023-24 salary cap hit:** \$9.25 million

**The latest:** Coming in hot off 105- and 104-point seasons, Rantanen is looking every bit like a star the Colorado Avalanche must re-sign long-term.

That said, there is a significant gap between the power forward's initial ask and how much the team is willing to commit before getting clarity on injured captain Gabriel Landeskog's health.

GM Chris MacFarland set the high bar for the club's internal cap structure when he re-upped MVP Nathan MacKinnon for \$12.6 million per season.

Because the league's cap will have jumped twice since MacKinnon's deal kicked in, Rantanen — one of the best power forwards and playoff performers in the sport — deserves to get near that figure.

Rantanen has a Cup ring and 101 points in 81 post-season appearances.

"No concern about it going into the season. These are not easy deals to do," MacFarland told reporters in October. "The player obviously has the UFA right to go, and the club has to make smart decisions, both for the short term and the long term."

The Avs don't have a goalie signed beyond this season, so MacFarland must budget for an Alexandar Georgiev extension or find a replacement.

Extension talks with Rantanen's agent Andy Scott — who also got the Draisaitl deal done — are ongoing.

"It's done when it's done. Business will always take care of itself. I'm just here to play hockey," Rantanen said. "I like the team. I like the city. If you win the Stanley Cup here, then why would I want to leave?"

### 2. Mitch Marner

**Age on July 1:** 28

**Position:** Right wing

**2023-24 salary cap hit:** \$10.9 million

**The latest:** While we could debate if Marner is the most impactful pending UFA of the season, there is no disputing that he'll be the most discussed.

Toronto Maple Leafs management, the all-star winger himself, and agent Darren Ferris are all on the same page when it comes to handling what could be Marner's final tour with his hometown team: Silence is golden.

Marner has expressed his desire to re-sign on multiple occasions, and he'll be targeting a long-term deal that falls between William Nylander's \$11.5 million AAV and Auston Matthews' \$13.25 million. (Does \$12.5 million times eight years — the new richest contract in franchise history — get it done?)

"Growing up in this area, I've always been a Leafs fan. I've always wanted this team to succeed and to win just to see what that would feel like fanwise. Now being part of it is very special," Marner said. "It's my home. It's the place I've grown up. I've got many, many memories watching this team play Saturday night hockey with my family. Sitting there for hours watching."

Because the two-way forward holds a full no-move clause, he can simply rack up points and skate this out.

So, the onus falls on GM Brad Treliving — who bought high on peak Nylander last winter. The GM must decide whether to meet Marner's price now, or let this breathe and see if his pricy core can finally make a deep playoff run before committing to a third eight-figure forward.

"Mitch has always been a very committed person, very committed hockey player," Leafs president Brendan Shanahan said. "When you see the work he puts in, and you see his love for the game and his love for the city of Toronto, that's what helps you believe in Mitch Marner."

### 3. Igor Shesterkin

**Age on July 1:** 28

**Position:** Goaltender

**2023-24 salary cap hit:** \$5.7 million

**The latest:** "You can see why he's going to be the highest-paid goalie in the league," Toronto's Anthony Stolarz proclaimed of his fellow union member, following the Russian's late-October star turn against the Leafs.

Yep, that's the goal of Shesterkin and his agent, Maxim Moliver.

Combine the Vezina Trophy and the playoff track record (.928) with a spiking salary ceiling, and Shesterkin should have no issue exceeding Carey Price's \$10.5-million AAV to become the most handsomely paid goaltender of the cap era.

Shesterkin also wants to be the highest-paid New York Ranger, though, and that means eclipsing Artemi Panarin's \$11.64 million.

GM Chris Drury offered eight years times \$11 million before puck drop, according to Kevin Weekes, which was turned down by Shesterkin.

"I'm not going to get into any private discussions or negotiations with Igor or his agents publicly, but you all know what I think of Igor and what we all think of Igor around here and we certainly hope he's here

and a Ranger for a long time," Drury told reporters on Sept. 20. "You know how important he is to our team and our organization. We're going to do everything we can to make sure he's here for a long time."

The goalie is pushing for \$12 million on a long-term pact, and his play hasn't slipped through the uncertainty of his future.

"I have one more year, so I don't care about it," Shesterkin said at training camp. "I love the organization. I love the team. I love the fans.

"So of course it will be great to stay here, but you never know what can happen."

#### **4. Brock Boeser**

**Age on July 1:** 28

**Position:** Right wing

**2023-24 salary cap hit:** \$6.65 million

The latest: Boeser has come out of the gates flying after his first 40-goal season, making Vancouver Canucks fans wonder if a 50-goal showing is far off. (This despite the fright Boeser had with blood clots in the playoffs.)

Such a performance would only ratchet up the price for a sniper in his prime.

"I'm expecting him to continue where he finished off last year, find the consistency and play good hockey for us," GM Patrik Allvin told colleague Iain MacIntyre at the outset of Boeser's contract year. "I have a good relationship with his agent, Ben Hankinson, and we'll see when the time is right."

Allvin confirmed that he'll need to make a decision on Boeser's future prior to the March 7 trade deadline.

The player holds a 10-team no-trade list.

#### **5. Sam Bennett**

**Age on July 1:** 29

**Position:** Centre

**2023-24 salary cap hit:** \$4.4 million

**The latest:** When Florida Panthers GM Bill Zito identifies a core piece of his championship roster worth retaining, he usually finds a way to keep his man — with an assist from his state's tax laws, of course.

Zito prioritized locking up Gustav Forsling, then Sam Reinhart, then Verhaeghe. All re-upped for fair rates.

Now, Zito is grinding away with Bennett, that rare middle-six centre who can score, defend, and truck over an opponent.

That Verhaeghe came in at a reasonable \$7-million AAV helps with the Bennett budget.

Leverage rests here with player agent Darren Ferris, who has a reputation for stressing deadlines and knows his client would be coveted league-wide because of his unique skill set and the dearth of under-30 centre options.

Ultimately it boils down to this: If Bennett likes the South Florida life, a deal will be made. If he wants top dollar, he'll find that elsewhere.

No doubt, he'd spark a bidding war — presumably landing somewhere between \$6 million and \$7 million per season, depending on term — if he reaches July 1.

## **6. Shea Theodore**

**Age on July 1:** 29

**Position:** Defence

**2023-24 salary cap hit:** \$5.2 million

**The latest:** Though Theodore's career has been hampered by injuries, the puck-moving defenceman has jumped to a strong contract year. And his chemistry with righty Alex Pietrangelo is so effortless, Team Canada might just plop that pair on the national roster.

The Vegas Golden Knights, however, are seldom in a rush to lock up core players when a pay raise looms. Just ask 2024 UFAs Chandler Stephenson, Jonathan Marchessault, and Alec Martinez how this goes.

According to Elliott Friedman, as of early September, GM Kelly McCrimmon had yet to engage Theodore's camp in serious extension negotiations.

Theodore has minimal trade protection (five-team no-trade list), but with the Golden Knights forever in go-for-it mode, it's difficult to imagine him going anywhere before the final buzzer sounds.

## **7. Aaron Ekblad**

**Age on July 1:** 29

**Position:** Defence

**2023-24 salary cap hit:** \$7.5 million

**The latest:** An occasional subject of trade rumours, the second-longest-serving Florida Panther played an integral role in the franchise's two trips to the fourth round and is finally entering the eighth year of his max-term contract.

While GM Zito has not made Ekblad first on his to-do list, the executive will be hard-pressed to replace the minutes and leadership Ekblad provides on the right side. And, remember, the Cats already lost another key righty, Brandon Montour, to the free agent market over the summer.

Neither Ekblad nor management are projecting concern here, despite the uncertainty.

“We had some great examples last year of how it can play out right with Reino and Forsling, all different kinds of scenarios,” Ekblad told reporters. “You never know what’s going to happen. I’m just going to ride it out and see what happens.”

Ekblad does hold a 12-team no-trade list, but the champs are expected to be a buyer, not a seller.

## **8. Nikolaj Ehlers**

**Age on July 1:** 29

**Position:** Right wing / Left wing

**2023-24 salary cap hit:** \$6 million

**The latest:** Unlike the monster extensions for centre Mark Scheifele and goalie Connor Hellebuyck signed in 2023 just ahead of their walk years, all is quiet in Winnipeg on the Ehlers extension front.

A frequent subject of trade rumours, the speedy Dane was reportedly open to a change of scenery in the off-season, according to The Fourth Period.

The scoring winger and his Jets are off to a fine start, so there is no pressure to decide just yet.

We wonder: Does a fresh set of coaching eyes offer Ehlers more opportunity and security under Scott Arniel?

"I've been here for nine years, but there's nothing new to tell," Ehlers said this fall. "(My contract situation) doesn't change anything for me. I'm gonna go out playing the same way I always do. I got teammates that I love, that I love playing with, hanging out with, so it doesn't change anything for me."

The seven-time 20-goal man holds a 10-team no-trade clause.

## **9. John Tavares**

**Age on July 1:** 34

**Position:** Centre

**2023-24 salary cap hit:** \$11 million

**The latest:** Already top 80 on the NHL's all-time scoring list, the still-productive Tavares is not entertaining any notions of quitting.

While his captaincy has been removed by the new GM and his ice time lessened by the new coach, the proud Toronto Maple Leaf is still a force in the face-off dot, a threat on the power-play and below the hash marks, and the consummate professional.

Armed with a full no-move clause and understanding he's up for a pay cut, Tavares has already shown a willingness to sacrifice a little me for the sake of the we.

His agent, Pat Brisson, and Treliving have begun preliminary extension talks — and it's clear that Tavares wants to stay.

"His goal is to probably retire as a Leaf," Brisson told The Fan Pregame on Sept. 17. "There's no timeline, but we understand clearly that the Leafs would like to keep John for a long time, and John made it clear that he would like to be a Leaf forever."

Tavares and wife Aryne are raising three young children in the city. He is close to the necessary support of his extended family. He has benefitted from multiple outside endorsement deals. And he did score the clinching goal of the one series the Leafs have won since ex-GM Kyle Dubas backed up the Brink's truck with \$77 million.

"I love playing here. It's a remarkable place to play," Tavares said. "And when I committed here six years ago, obviously I saw a tremendous amount of talent and an amazing hockey market and organization that's fully committed to winning and doing whatever it can — and I still feel that way."

## **10. Brad Marchand**

**Age on July 1:** 37

**Position:** Left wing

**2023-24 salary cap hit:** \$6.1 million

**The latest:** The Boston Bruins captain's ability to produce deep into his 30s and elevate his impact in important moments has made his previous contract look like a bargain.

But how much (and for how long) does the organization wish to invest in a core player as he nears 40?

"I want to say this now and leave it at that," Marchand told reporters in September. "I'll never talk about contract stuff in the media. I saw a report the other day. I don't know where (the reporter) is getting his information, but it wasn't from our side. We're not going to talk about it. Whatever goes on will stay between (general manager Don Sweeney) and our group, and we'll leave it at that. I think there's enough respect between the two sides that we can deal with it."

While it is difficult to imagine Marchand, like Patrice Bergeron, pulling a different sweater over his head, it would make sense for the winger to push for term here as opposed to playing this one season at a time.

The Marchand file got pushed to the backburner over the summer, as the Jeremy Swayman re-signing saga took top priority.

The Bruins don't want another sideshow, but it did raise eyebrows when coach Jim Montgomery publicly lit into his captain after a bad early-season turnover.

"We're going to get to Brad. He's learning patience as a captain as well," Sweeney said, prior to extending Swayman. "Eventually he'll extend here.

"He'll be a lifelong Bruin. That's what we should do. But we'll check that box."

## **11. Jakob Chychrun**

**Age on July 1:** 27

**Position:** Defence

**2023-24 salary cap hit:** \$4.6 million

**The latest:** From his spotty injury history to wearing three sweaters by age 26, there's been so much commotion in Chychrun's career, you wonder if the well-rounded defenceman wouldn't leap at the chance for long-term security.

The left shot has fit in seamlessly with the Washington Capitals, a post-season dark horse, and it will be up to GM Chris Patrick to either bank on a good thing or slow-play this situation and consider flipping the valuable Chychrun at the deadline.

"I think they've done a great job of improving the team, and I'm thrilled honestly. I think it's a great fit for me personally, and I'm just so excited to be able to help contribute to this team and try to take this team into the playoffs," Chychrun told reporters upon getting dealt by the Senators.

"I guess you could say (my time in Ottawa was) shorter than I thought it would be. It's just unfortunate, the way everything went when I was there. I felt I wasn't playing my best hockey. I was a little bit frustrated with the way I was playing."

## **12. Brock Nelson**

**Age on July 1:** 33

**Position:** Centre / Left wing

**2023-24 salary cap hit:** \$6 million

**The latest:** A late-career surge has Nelson riding a three-season streak of 35-plus goals into his last best chance for another payday.

No doubt, his New York Islanders covet scoring, and the first-round pick has remained loyal to the team that drafted him back in 2010.

It's difficult to imagine Nelson not re-signing with Lou Lamoriello.

Counterpoint: The Isles have the fourth-oldest roster in the league, so perhaps committing the type of term Nelson could command isn't the wisest path to getting younger.

The veteran Nelson seemed unflustered that an extension was not signed prior to puck drop.

"I'm indifferent," Nelson told reporters in late September. "I know that's the backside of it, but at the same time, right now, it's just about coming in here, working, playing, having fun, and worrying about your game.

"All of that will sort itself out. I'm pretty comfortable with Lou, and I have a great relationship with him. We'll sort things out and see how it plays out."

How it plays out should depend on how New York — a bubble team — fares in the standings between now and March.

**More notable UFAs in 2025:** Jamie Benn, Brent Burns, Adin Hill, Patrick Kane, Claude Giroux, Neal Pionk, Frank Vatrano, Gustav Nyquist, Dmitry Orlov, Vladislav Gavrikov, Ivan Provorov, Taylor Hall, Ryan Lindgren, Marcus Pettersson, Jake McCabe, Brandon Tanev, Anthony Mantha, Nicklas Backstrom, Ryan Johansen, Jeff Petry, Andrew Mangiapane, Andrei Kuzmenko, Yanni Gourde, Mikael Granlund, Reilly Smith, Tanner Jeannot, Jeff Skinner, David Savard, Alexander Georgiev, Charlie Lindgren, Logan Thompson, Marc-Andre Fleury



## [RG.org / Don Waddell on Leading the Blue Jackets Through Adversity and Unlocking Young Talent](#)

By James Murphy – October 24, 2024

In a recent one-on-one interview with RG.org, Columbus Blue Jackets General Manager Don Waddell reflected on his team's resilience through early challenges, including the loss of Johnny Gaudreau and a string of injuries.

Waddell, in his first season with the organization, emphasized how the tragedy and adversity on the ice have brought the team closer together and created opportunities for younger players to step up.

### **Handling the Gaudreau Tragedy**

Waddell couldn't have been more proud of how the team, fans, and organization came together after the loss of Johnny Gaudreau and his brother, Matthew, just before the start of the season.

"The support from the fans here has been tremendous," Waddell said. "Look, we were thrown a curveball, a tragedy, and it's obviously a very tough situation, but we're not feeling sorry for ourselves because that's not the way we operate. We're here to support the Gaudreau family... We battled through that, and now we're running into some injuries, but this is how we deal with adversity."

**Waddell highlighted how Gaudreau's wife, Meredith, has been instrumental in helping the team heal, stating, "She said, 'Johnny would want you guys to play hockey, and I want you to play hockey!' That helps the atmosphere in the locker room."**

In the wake of the tragedy, one of Waddell's biggest offseason acquisitions, Sean Monahan, has quickly emerged as a leader for the team. As one of Gaudreau's best friends, he's been instrumental in keeping the team together and guiding the younger players through a difficult time.

"There are not enough words for me to praise this young gentleman," Waddell said. "He's a true professional. Not just with all the guys but particularly the younger guys. He's a real pro, and how he's handled this so far has been remarkable."

Waddell gave credit to the leadership in the locker room, praising Monahan, captain Boone Jenner, and veteran defenseman Erik Gudbranson, despite the latter two currently being sidelined with injuries.

### **Building Team Culture**

Waddell believes the challenges the team has faced have helped build a stronger team culture and a sense of unity within the group.

"Everybody talks about culture, and I think culture is an overused word. You can't just say we're going to have a good culture. It's got to be created," Waddell said. "I'm sure what transpired had a lot to do with the guys' binding, but I could see that change started to happen when [head coach] Dean [Evason] came in. He's very straightforward, demanding but fair, and the players respect that."

New head coach Dean Evason, who has already left a significant impression on both the players and Waddell with his upfront, no-nonsense approach, has also been at the heart of this shift.

"I've watched him operate through training camp and into the season, and what I really like is that he's an upfront guy. If Dean's going to complain about a player, he's going to deal with the player directly," Waddell explained. "Players like that because they want to know where they stand. If you deal with issues head-on, they don't become a problem, and Dean's doing that."

He also emphasized the importance of leadership from within the locker room, noting that players like Monahan and Jenner have stepped up to fill the void left by the coaching staff when they're not on the ice.

### **Opportunity For Young Players & Fantilli's Potential**

With several veterans injured, Waddell is excited to see the younger players take on bigger roles. He highlighted players like Cole Sillinger and Adam Fantilli, who are expected to lead the next generation of Blue Jackets.

"Cole Sillinger is one for sure. He's still a young player, but this is his fourth year in the league, and he's got a lot of experience and leadership ability," Waddell said. "Adam Fantilli is another young guy we know who has a lot of potential, and we're looking for him to grow his game even more."

### **Fantilli is seen as a potential superstar, and Waddell is confident in his future as a leader for the team.**

"The upside is unknown, but he's going to be either a great player or a superstar," Waddell said. "He's got an amazing work ethic, and I know he will eventually be our first-line center. The sky is the limit for this young man."

Waddell's optimism and belief in the team's future are evident despite the early-season adversity. With a combination of veteran leadership, a no-nonsense coaching staff, and a crop of young talent ready to step up, the Blue Jackets are navigating these challenges with their eyes firmly set on long-term success.

### **Zach Werenski's Importance**

During this focus on developing youth Waddell sees defenseman Zach Werenski as a cornerstone of the Blue Jackets' future and believes this season is crucial for his development.

"He's already averaging almost 24 minutes a game and scoring some big goals for us. He knows he's a major part of this team now and going forward," Waddell said. "He trained unbelievably hard this offseason, and so far, he's had an excellent start for us."

Waddell stressed that the organization isn't focused on the past, but on what players like Werenski do now and in the future.