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## Columbus Dispatch / NHL, NHLPA grant Columbus Blue Jackets exemption to start season beneath salary 'floor'

By Brian Hedger – October 3, 2024

The NHL and NHL Players Association are granting the Blue Jackets an allowance to start the season beneath the league's payroll "floor" of \$65 million.

According to PuckPedia, the Blue Jackets are currently under the salary-cap minimum at \$64.43 million on a 22-man roster that includes injured forward Justin Danforth's \$1.1 million. The Jackets' salary total also includes a \$2 million signing bonus paid in July to Johnny Gaudreau, who was killed Aug. 29 in New Jersey along with his brother, Matthew, while biking together.

Sep 9, 2024; Media, Pennsylvania, USA; Columbus Blue Jackets general manager Don Waddell, right, leaves St. Mary Magdalen Parish following the funeral service for star forward Johnny Gaudreau and his brother, Matthew Gaudreau. The brothers died after being hit by a drunk driver while riding bicycles on Aug. 29.

The Blue Jackets could become compliant with the cap "floor" by signing a free agent, calling up a player for a full 23-man roster or acquiring a player via trade. They can also remain under \$65 million for an unspecified period.

Sep 9, 2024; Media, Pennsylvania, USA; NHL commissioner Gary Bettman and former general manager Brian Burke leave St. Mary Magdalen Parish following the funeral service for Columbus Blue Jackets forward Johnny Gaudreau and his brother, Matthew Gaudreau. The brothers died after being hit by an alleged drunk driver while riding bicycles on Aug. 29.

"We have consulted with the Columbus Blue Jackets and the National Hockey League Players' Association regarding the recent tragic loss of Johnny Gaudreau and, specifically in that connection, the team's plans from a competitive and roster-building standpoint," the NHL said in a statement. "After considering the totality of the circumstances, including in particular the timing of this tragedy, we have agreed with the NHLPA as follows: (1) the signing bonus payment of \$2 million 'USD' made to Mr. Gaudreau this past July on account of the 2024/25 NHL season will be included in the Blue Jackets' Averaged Club Salary for the 2024/25 League Year; and (2) if needed, and only to the extent necessary, Columbus will also be provided with a reasonable amount of additional time following the opening of the regular season (as determined by the NHL and NHLPA) to come into full compliance with its CBA obligation to establish a roster and payroll exceeding the lower limit of the team payroll range for the 2024/25 league year."

Don Waddell, the Blue Jackets' president of hockey operations/general manager, was informed of the ruling Monday in New York, where he attended the NHL's board of governors meeting. He and the Jackets' front office are still evaluating potential trades, players available on waivers plus other free agents on a daily basis. The goal is finding a "good fit" who can also make the Blue Jackets compliant.

Getting a 'floor' exemption from the NHL and NHLPA mainly just eases pressure on the Jackets to make a roster addition rooted solely in a salary to get back into the green.

"These are unique circumstances," Waddell said. "We'd traded (Patrik) Laine the week before (the Gaudreau tragedy). If we'd traded him afterward, the league would have a different position on it. But we've tried to do everything we were supposed to do, so we just thought this was fair. We're still talking to a lot of teams about potentially adding a forward, but now we have the flexibility of starting the year

off, and if we're not right there (at \$65 million), then we'll have some time to get there. But I've got a feeling we'll get there by the time rosters come out on (Oct. 7)."

## Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets preseason: Takeaways from 3-1 win over St. Louis Blues

By Brian Hedger – October 3, 2024

It's only the preseason.

That's a qualifier that cannot be overemphasized during the NHL's exhibition slate, but preseason performance can't entirely be dismissed, either. Position battles are often won or lost, players can spark fast starts for themselves and teams occasionally ride exhibition success into the regular season.

That can all happen just as easily as a strong preseason can be erased by the regular season, and that's where the Blue Jackets are with a 4-2-0 record in this preseason following a 3-1 road victory over the St. Louis Blues on Tuesday.

Despite sending mostly prospects to St. Louis to face a Blues team with more NHL experience, the Blue Jackets were the better team. Getting goals from Yegor Chinakhov, Gavin Brindley and Mathieu Olivier, they won while getting 22 saves from Jet Greaves.

The Blue Jackets swept their two-game set with St. Louis and tacked on additional victories over the Buffalo Sabres and Washington Capitals. Two more games remain before they start to count, and they're both against the Pittsburgh Penguins on Thursday and Friday.

### **Here are four takeaways from the Jackets' win in St. Louis:**

#### **Adam Fantilli is racking up points**

Adam Fantilli assisted on the goals by Chinakhov and Olivier for a two-point night that gave him six points (four goals, two assists) in four preseason games.

The second point against the Blues set up Olivier's empty-netter just before the game ended, but it wasn't a cheap assist. Fantilli was helping the Blue Jackets protect a one-goal lead during a 6-on-5 situation favoring St. Louis and slid a nice pass from the right half wall to spring Olivier down the ice.

Fantilli's first assist was also of the primary variety. During a power play, he fired a shot from the right circle that went through traffic and created a long rebound coughed up by Blues goalie Joel Hofer. Chinakhov scooped the puck in the left circle and fired a wrist shot inside the right post to tie it 1-1 less than five minutes after the Blues went up 1-0 on a goal by Justin Faulk.

Fantilli also committed a turnover that nearly led to what could've become a tying goal in the waning minutes of the game, but there's no denying his impressive offensive impact.

#### **Jet Greaves continues strong preseason**

After resting with an undisclosed illness rather than backing up Daniil Tarasov in the Blue Jackets' loss Monday to the Washington Capitals, Greaves put together a solid outing.

Barring an injury to either Tarasov or Elvis Merzlikins, he'll return to the AHL as the Cleveland Monsters' top option in net, which is not the career timeline he'd prefer. His play isn't the reason. The Jackets' NHL goaltending situation is just set in stone this season due to factors out of Greaves' control.

He has continued to impress, however, in areas that can be controlled. After proving in the past two years that he can succeed in the NHL in limited stints, the only hurdle left is handling a regular role with the Blue Jackets. In the meantime, while parked in Cleveland, Greaves' primary goal for this season is backstopping the Monsters to another North Division title.

### **Gavin Brindley and Luca Del Bel Belluz have quietly impressed**

As the Blue Jackets' front office continues to scour the NHL for available depth forwards, they have internal candidates vying for those roster spots.

Owen Sillinger, Dylan Gambrell, James Malatesta, Luca Del Bel Belluz and Gavin Brindley are all making cases to start the season in Columbus — including the last two on that list combining for the winning goal Tuesday night in St. Louis.

Del Bel Belluz, a center selected in the second round of the 2022 NHL draft, won a faceoff late in the second period that went straight back to Brindley, the Jackets' second-round pick in 2023. Wasting no time, Brindley broke a 1-1 tie by firing the puck over Hofer's glove rom deep in the left circle.

It was Del Bel Belluz's second point in as many days, after scoring a goal against the Capitals on Monday, and Brindley's third point in four preseason games (one goal, two assists). Both have put together quietly strong performances since camp began, which could put either in position to land an NHL role.

The odds still favor them starting out in Cleveland, especially with the Blue Jackets continuing to develop Del Bel Belluz at the center position. They have their top four centers in Sean Monahan, Fantilli, Cole Sillinger and Sean Kuraly, which means Del Bel Belluz might have to shift out to a wing position if he sticks around.

### **Mathieu Olivier is gaining trust in short-handed situations**

Olivier now has four goals in four games, including a short-handed tally and two empty-netters. It's a reflection of his usage by new coach Dean Evason, who's looking for effective and willing penalty-killing forwards.

Olivier got some penalty-killing time last year, too, so it's not surprising to see him back out in that capacity for exhibition games, while Evason and his staff makes role decisions. Olivier could land a more concrete spot killing penalties in the regular season and has earned enough trust in the preseason to protect late leads.

Should that continue, Olivier may become the Blue Jackets "closer" who puts the finishing touches on victories the way Gustav Nyquist did it with empty-net goals a couple years ago.

## Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets' Elvis Merzlikins new goalie mask is a tribute to Johnny Gaudreau

By Brian Hedger – October 3, 2024

Elvis Merzlikins had already approved a new mask design.

Dave Gunnarsson, the famed Swedish mask painter for many NHL goalies, was prepared to create a glossy red, white, blue and silver design this summer featuring the Blue Jackets' main logo along with stars, a red heart and familiar cartoonish logos on the back that Merzlikins uses for personalization.

Sep 30, 2024; Columbus, Ohio, USA; Columbus Blue Jackets goaltender Elvis Merzlikins (90) wears a new mask featuring the No. 13 on the front for teammate Johnny Gaudreau during warm-ups prior to the NHL hockey game against the Washington Capitals at Nationwide Arena.

A week later, Johnny Gaudreau and younger brother Matthew were killed Aug. 29 in New Jersey by a driver who tested above the state's legal blood-alcohol limit. Merzlikins, who'd witnessed the death of Blue Jackets goalie Matis Kivlenieks on July 4, 2021, knew a design change was necessary.

He contacted Gunnarsson, added Gaudreau's No. 13 to the chin and provided two more subtle ideas to memorialize yet another teammate's death. Merzlikins just received the new lid recently and wore in warmups Monday before the Blue Jackets' preseason game against the Washington Capitals.

"I just wanted to have Johnny with us this season, and with me, on my helmet," Merzlikins said. "I did the same thing with Matis, but I didn't want to do exactly the same thing. I had '80' for Matis with wings, and here I put a '13' on the front, but I also added two little details that in my mind were two of Johnny's favorite things."

Sep 30, 2024; Columbus, Ohio, USA; Columbus Blue Jackets goaltender Elvis Merzlikins (90) wears a new mask featuring the No. 13 on the front between a bottle of Coors Light and a plate of spaghetti for teammate Johnny Gaudreau during warm-ups prior to the NHL hockey game against the Washington Capitals at Nationwide Arena.

A closer look at the chin of Merzlikins' mask shows nods to Gaudreau on each side. On the left, while looking at it straight on, is a plate of pasta with a fork — Gaudreau's favorite pregame meal. On the right is beer bottle, representing Gaudreau's preferred postgame beverage.

"He always had a huge pasta bowl," Merzlikins said, smiling. "That's why there's the pasta plate, and there's also a beer bottle, because he loved to have a Coors Light after games. Those were just fun little details that I knew about Johnny."

Sep 30, 2024; Columbus, Ohio, USA; Columbus Blue Jackets goaltender Elvis Merzlikins (90) wears a new mask featuring the No. 13 on the front between a bottle of Coors Light and a plate of spaghetti for teammate Johnny Gaudreau during warm-ups prior to the NHL hockey game against the Washington Capitals at Nationwide Arena.

Merzlikins has a second mask being created by Calgary-based painter Jordan Bourgeault, who did last season's "La Catrina" design for Merzlikins that drew rave reviews. The only detail Merzlikins is offering about his second mask is that a new logo will be included.

"I asked them to create one of Matis and Johnny together," Merzlikins said. "That one is going to be like my patch from now on, on my back plate all the time."

His current mask includes other logos, too, and those also have special meanings.

There's a cartoon character named "Bubbles" from "Powerpuff Girls" to represent his wife, Aleksandra, who picked it out herself. There's a green No. 80 with a purple 'KIVI' printed underneath for Kivlenieks, using the Joker's colors from Batman. There's a Latvian flag, paw prints for the family's dog, Koby, a gray cross with three vertical letters (VSR) next to it — initials of Merzlikins' mother, father and brother — and there's also a new cartoon hero.

Sep 30, 2024; Columbus, Ohio, USA; Columbus Blue Jackets goaltender Elvis Merzlikins (90) wears a new mask during warm-ups prior to the NHL hockey game against the Washington Capitals at Nationwide Arena.

Spidey.

A small Spider-Man cartoon is painted on the front, right under the top bar of his protective cage. A larger version is on the back, next to Aleksandra's "Bubbles" logo. Spidey is for Knox Matiss Merzlikins, the couple's son, who is 3-years old now and "acting like a teenager."

Two years ago, Merzlikins put a small Bluey logo on his mask for Knox, a fan of the "Bluey" TV series. Last year, it was Lightning McQueen of the "Cars" movies.

"I decided that every year I'm going to change the character to whatever Knox's favorite thing is," Merzlikins said. "I'm looking forward to showing him the new mask, because he still hasn't seen it. Usually, for luck, I like to give it to him, and he likes to wear my masks and run around the house. It's become a little tradition since Knox came to us."

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Merzlikins also has a four-leaf clover on the back plate, located opposite of Gaudreau's number on the front for the entire team's benefit — keeping their friend and teammate's memory with them on the ice.

"There's really no words to describe it," Merzlikins said. "It's so sad. It's just ... awful. It also shows that we have to enjoy life. Be nice. Love the people we have here, because you never know what's going to happen in the next step that you take in your daily life."

## [BlueJackets.com / Camp Q&A: Marchenko put in the work this summer](#)

By Jeff Svoboda – October 3, 2024

In the past two seasons, Kirill Marchenko has become a fan favorite for his talent on the ice and his personality off of it.

The Russian wing is just the second CBJ player in franchise history to begin his NHL career with the team by scoring 20 goals in each of his first two seasons. After setting the Columbus record for rookies with 21 goals in 2022-23, he upped his production to 23 goals and 42 points a season ago.

He's started this fall where he left off, playing on the top line with Sean Monahan and Boone Jenner, and the hope is Marchenko can keep filling up the net while showcasing his trademark smile on and off the ice.

BlueJackets.com caught up with Marchenko after a practice last week to discuss his return to the United States and his offseason work. This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

**You were saying the other day it takes you a while to pick up English again. How difficult is it when you come back to America?**

“Yeah, of course. I just hold some words in my head. I forget a little bit of the rules of English, but now I’ve been here two weeks. I think I am good. It comes back pretty quickly. One, two weeks, you start to think about English.”

**When did you first learn English? Because you were pretty good when you got here.**

“No, I was terrible in the English when I came. I didn’t learn English, I just tried to speak with everybody the first two, three years, try to find some words in my head. Now I think, I know more English. But I still I don’t know a lot of words and I don’t know a lot of rules, too. Now I think I want to really like step up. I need to start learning more, just like your normal talk.”

**Yeah, you can learn the language, but sometimes it’s the interactions that are difficult, right? Like, words have double meanings sometimes.**

“It’s more important how guys are talking with me. It’s accent and everything. I can understand you really quick and it’s easy for me, but for some guys who start talking really quickly, I have no idea. Usually it’s people on the street or some stores who just don’t know I am from Russia. I say, ‘What, sorry? I don’t understand, sorry.’ Sometimes it’s hard. But once I am in sports, I am good.”

**You learned some English in Russia, right?**

“A little bit. I’d say I just tried to speak English with the import guys. We had a lot of Sweden and Finland guys on the team, and they speak only English, and I tried to speak with those guys. I tried to learn something.”

**I remember at the end of last season, you talked like you had a good year, but I got the sense you thought it could have been better. Did that motivate you in the offseason?**

“I don’t think about it. I don’t follow my emotions that are in my head. I know what I want to do every season. The last three years, I know where I am bad, where I am good, right? I just don’t think about my emotions – good season, bad season. I just try to work. It’s not like if I have a good season, I take two months rest and go to work again. Every time, I take rest for two or three weeks and start working again. I started skating after one month. Still, same process like a year ago and two years ago. Everything is the same. A little different drills on the ice and in the gym, different exercises, but only a little bit. It's more



about adapting for me, personally, but the offseason is the same. I don't think about good season or bad season. Every time, I go to work."

**If you only took two weeks off, that means you started training again in May. That's a long time, isn't it?**

"I don't know, but it's not that hard work. I work like that the last three years. I am adapted to it. It's not a big problem for me. It's just my work. The offseason, I take two, two and a half weeks off, take the time with my family, and come back to the practices. I enjoy it. I like to go in the gym. I'm not a really big guy. It is my (body) structure. But I like to work in the gym. It's not like, the first two months, I like it, and after, I say, 'What the (heck)? Too many gyms.' But yeah, it is my work and I like to do it."

**Do you get a chance to see Yegor Chinakhov and Dmitri Voronkov much in the summer?**

"Not a lot, but we practiced together a couple of times. I skate in a different place, but every Friday, we have a gameday, just scrimmage, and I come and play with those guys in the games. I have a good summer, but I take the time with my family. I see those guys every day all season. Need a rest a little bit. (Laughs.)"

**Since you've been working out since May, four months later, you have to be ready for some games, right? You want to see that hard work pay off.**

"Games are way different. You can work one year or two years or six months, five months (in the gym) – it doesn't matter how much you work or how you work, the first two games are hard every time because it's different. It's just different. A lot of guys who have experience in the NHL, they say the best practice is in the game. It's good for your body and everything."

**In your first two years here in Columbus, fans really enjoyed watching you play. How cool is it to have that support?**

"It's really important for me. I love the fans here. It doesn't matter how we play, they are with us every time. I want to say thank you. I enjoy it, of course. It's big support for me, too, when we have the fans and they are like, 'Marchy! Marchy!' It's really good. My first goal is to do my best and be a good team on the ice and doing what I can do."

## The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets' Denton Mateychuk Continues to Impress at Camp

**By Mark Scheig – October 3, 2024**

Denton Mateychuk is on the verge of breaking through to the NHL full-time. His performance at Training Camp is a big reason for this.

No matter what he's been asked to do, Mateychuk has had an answer. Thanks to his performance in his last two outings this week, he's making it very difficult on the Blue Jackets to not include him on the opening-night roster.

The team wanted to have some tough decisions. Thanks to Mateychuk, they're going to have exactly that. His case will provide an early test to new management on their mindset when it comes to roster composition.

### **Mateychuk's Been Here Before**

Turn back the clock to last training camp. Mateychuk was in the same position of trying to make the team. As a 19-year old defenseman then, the odds were stacked against him.

Yet, Mateychuk played well enough to become one of the last cuts of camp. A serious argument could be made that he did enough to make the roster. Thanks to contract status and waiver eligibility, keeping Mateychuk then would have required another move.

Going back to junior didn't faze Mateychuk out one bit. In a situation where he would be expected to dominate, he did. He won WHL Defenseman of the Year. His team the Moose Jaw Warriors won the league and advanced to the Memorial Cup.

But that's not all. Right after their Memorial Cup run was over, Mateychuk entered the AHL Playoffs in the Eastern Conference Final. Down 3-0 in their series to the Hershey Bears, the Cleveland Monsters came roaring back and forced Game 7 overtime.

Although the Monsters eventually lost in that overtime, Mateychuk's impact was visible. He immediately entered the lineup and did not look out of place. He showed unusual patience and poise for someone not yet 20 years old. A serious argument could be made that his presence alone almost flipped the series around.

### **Short Offseason No Bother**

With the Monsters' season ending later in June, this meant Mateychuk didn't have a full offseason like most everyone else did. After getting a little bit of rest, he ramped things back up and started getting ready for 2024-25.

Just like last offseason, Mateychuk is in the conversation to make the Blue Jackets. Consider for a moment how impressive his year has been.

In the span of a year, Mateychuk could have been an NHL'er at 19 years old. He won his league's highest honor as a team captain. His team won their league and represented them in the Memorial Cup. Then he helped almost knock out the AHL's defending champions in a historic way.

Certain players have that "it" factor to them. You know it when you see it but you can't exactly describe what "it" is. Mateychuk has that "it" factor. He's done everything possible to make his case to the Blue Jackets he's ready right now.

## **Last Two Preseason Games**

The Blue Jackets split their last two preseason games. They lost 3-2 to the Washington Capitals on Monday and defeated the St. Louis Blues 3-1 on Tuesday.

Mateychuk played in both games. He impressed in different ways showing off his two-way ability in the process.

On Monday against the Capitals, Mateychuk scored a goal from the left circle in which his shot beat Logan Thompson clean. In the moment, he had to decide on a 2-on-1 rush if he was going to shoot or make the pass. What was his thought process?

“I like to be a pass-first player,” Mateychuk said. “On that one, it got in my feet so I really didn’t have time to look across to see what I had and how the D was reacting. The first thing I’d seen when I looked was shot so that’s what I went with.”

Mateychuk’s ability to process the game like that stands out for someone yet to play in a regular season game. He was able to determine shot was the best play and then made an NHL-quality shot to boot.

Later in the game, Erik Gudbranson left the game due to a minor injury. Mateychuk then had to play with different D-partners as the Blue Jackets played 5D in the third period. That didn’t faze him either.

“You got to be able to adapt on the fly, right? It’s unpredictable. I think we did a pretty good job of that. It’s tough to lose a guy like that but you got to go out there and finish for 20 minutes.”

Mateychuk took shifts with Zach Werenski and Ivan Provorov at times in that third period. Most notably, he played on the right which is his offside.

Despite that, Mateychuk was the best Blue Jacket on the ice. He’d get an immediate chance on Tuesday to build off that. What does he do? Not only was he the best player on the ice, he did it in a different fashion than Monday.

Mateychuk didn’t record a shot on goal Tuesday in St. Louis. But what he did do was play the most of any Blue Jacket while providing a positive impact on the game defensively.

Mateychuk’s awareness and execution shined on Tuesday. He made the correct reads and was able to get the puck where it needed to go. He helped break up plays. Most notably, he was on the ice late in a 2-1 game when the Blues pulled Joel Hofer. He helped shut things down in a crucial situation.

Jordan Kyrou is one of the Blues’ best skaters. With the puck on his stick speeding down the right side, Mateychuk was able to disrupt him enough to force the puck away. These are the kind of plays that won’t hit a scoresheet. But they’re the kind of plays that help you win hockey games.

For two games, Mateychuk was the Blue Jackets’ best player. He showed in different ways how he was their best player. Now the big question. Will it be enough for him to make the team? It’s not quite as easy as it sounds.

## **Proceed With Caution**

This is where an overall look at the situation is required to make the most informed decision. While Mateychuk’s play easily puts him in a position where he should make the team, the question must be asked. Is it in his best interest to be on the Blue Jackets right here, right now?

If you’re basing it on performance alone, the answer is a resounding yes. But other questions have to be considered. Is Mateychuk ready for the rigors of an 82-game regular season? Is he physically ready for the pounding he would take on a nightly basis?

Then there's the part of Mateychuk having limited pro experience so far. While he was excellent in his limited AHL stint last year, he still hasn't had the chance to play against pros for an extended length of time. In other words, is he good enough to completely skip the AHL? Would he benefit from not learning more of the pro game before coming to the Blue Jackets?

Then there's the roster composition part of things. Only David Jiricek doesn't need waivers of the perceived top defensemen on the Blue Jackets. Jiricek played well Tuesday night and appears to be in line to make the team as he's a righty.

However going into Tuesday, an argument could be made that Mateychuk had outplayed Jiricek. Is that enough to elevate one over the other? These are the tough questions the Blue Jackets now face.

It is worth noting that Mateychuk was in the AHL group practicing before this last set of games. It seemed to point to him going to Cleveland to start the season. That may still happen. But this week may give the team second thoughts.

Here's Evason on Mateychuk from Monday night.

"He's a good player, right? He's young, right? So let's see what shakes out here. We still got some games. But what he has shown clearly, he's been that guy for a long time. And he's going to be an NHL player for a long time. If he starts here, wonderful. If he doesn't, his development is going to be just continually steady because of what we've seen and how he's played. He's gotten better and better. His career is going to go like that as well."

### **What's Next?**

The Blue Jackets are off Wednesday and then end their preseason with a pair of games against the Pittsburgh Penguins. The team has until Oct 7 at 5 P.M. eastern to finalize their opening-night roster.

Let's see if they give Mateychuk one more opportunity to make a last impression before they have to decide. At minimum, he's done enough that the Blue Jackets need to really think about how to proceed here.

Personally, I'd still start him in Cleveland. It comes down to one thing. What is the rush? Let him continue to develop where he plays 20-25 minutes a night and gets that pro experience while playing every important situation including the role of a number-one defenseman.

In the NHL, Mateychuk's a bottom-pair guy getting less ice time to start. Certainly if an injury comes up he's on the short list for a call up. But he needs to be playing a lot. Putting him in Cleveland gives him the best chance to play a lot and in meaningful situations.

Take nothing away from what Mateychuk has done. He's earned his playing time. He's earned the right to potentially make the opening-night roster. But all things considered, there's no need to rush him. It's always good to be over-ready rather than under-ready.

## The Hockey News / GM Don Waddell Has Some Difficult Decisions To Make This Week

**By Jason Newland – October 3, 2024**

Don Waddell has said over the last few months that he likes his youngsters to develop in the American League as much as they can before dropping them into an NHL lineup. Right or wrong, it's his team to make those decisions.

Was Waddell preparing us for the inevitable "Denton Mateychuk and David Jiříček have been sent to the Cleveland Monsters to start the regular season" post by the CBJ?

Fast forward to training camp, and Waddell may have some wild decisions to make, especially on defense. Denton Mateychuk, the young defender from Manitoba, Canada has shown that he's not going to make this decision easy for Waddell. That's a good thing.

Mateychuk has played three of the six preseason games, with two more to go. What has he done? He's averaged just over 18 minutes a game on the ice, scored two goals, and is a plus-3. More importantly, though, there's been nothing that has stood out that would warrant someone saying, "Mateychuk needs to be sent to the AHL."

If there has been one player on the ice that has been scrutinized the most, it's Mateychuk. Searching for reasons to send him down. Those reasons just aren't there. Everything from his puck handling and shot-blocking to his decisions without the puck has been watched. There's very little wrong with Mateychuk's game right now.

Of course, people will point out that it's just the preseason and the competition hasn't been the best, but it's the NHL and young players always need to be playing to the best of their ability - which he is.

What would stop Mateychuk from making the opening night roster? Overcrowding.

The Jackets have Zach Werenski, Erik Gudbanson, Damon Severson, and Ivan Provorov locked into the top 6. Good or bad, it is what it is. It's the next three that gets murky. Jordan Harris came to Columbus in the Patrik Laine trade and is considered a good young defenseman. Jack Johnson was brought in as a veteran presence to help with the young guys. Jake Christiansen is another good young defenseman who could be a very serviceable player for years in the NHL, but probably won't make the cut. That leaves Mateychuk and Jiříček.

That's eight players for seven spots.

If Mateychuk and/or Jiříček were to both make the team, what happens to Jordan Harris and Jack Johnson? Personally, I've always thought, regardless of what happens in the preseason, that Mateychuk will start the season in the AHL, giving Jiříček the NHL minutes to start the season. The problem is that Jiříček hasn't stood out much, while Mateychuk has. Could it be Jiříček who starts in the AHL?

Would Don Waddell give an opening night spot to the 20-year-old Mateychuk?

## The Hockey News / 13 Days Until Opening Night At Nationwide Arena: Johnny Gaudreau

**By Jason Newland – October 3, 2024**

Normally in this series, we talk about every player who has worn a specific number, what they've done, and where they are. But today, it can only be about one man - Johnny Gaudreau.

This is a short and sweet Johnny Gaudreau Appreciation piece.

As people around the world continue to mourn Johnny and Matthew's passing, the NHL season has started, which has provided a bit of a distraction for fans of the Jackets, and its players. As many Blue Jackets have said, "Johnny would want us to play hockey." So they are.

Johnny Hockey made the people of Columbus very happy in July of 2022. But he also made the people of Calgary happy for nine seasons. Since the tragedy, Blue Jackets and Flames fans have come together as one united fan base, acting as one group of fans who remember Johnny in their own special ways.

Johnny played 602 games for the Calgary Flames, scoring 210 goals and totaling 609 points. His 602 games rank 11th all-time in Flames history, while his 609 points are good enough for 5th in Flames history. His 210 goals are 9th, and his 399 assists are also 5th.

Gaudreau once had six points in a game. On March 12, 2019, against the New Jersey Devils, he scored three goals and had three assists. Those six points are tied for the second most points scored in a single Flames game. In that same game, he also tied a record by recording four points in a single period.

On April 4, 2022, he scored a goal 10 seconds into the game, which was the 5th fastest goal in Flames history. He also owns the Flames record for most OT points in a career, with 28.

Johnny has the 5th most multi-point games in Flames history with 156 and has 33 multi-goal games, which is 10th. He also had 85 multi-assist games.

For Columbus, Johnny wasn't able to set many records as he only played two seasons. But in 2023 he did tie one. On March 14, 2023, against the San Jose Sharks, he scored two goals and totaled five points to tie a franchise record. Five points hadn't been recorded in a single CBJ game since Artemi Panarin did it in 2017.

Johnny also set more records this past summer, when he broke the record for most career points by an American during the IIHF World Championships. He also set the record for most career assists in that same game.

Gaudreau played 161 games for Columbus. He scored 33 goals and totaled 134 points. Sure his two years could've been looked at like they were down years, and they were down based on his standards, but I'm sure no one was more disappointed than him. But in the end, everyone loved Johnny Gaudreau, regardless of whether he scored 5 points in a game or not.

Johnny Gaudreau will live on forever in the hearts of CBJ and Flames fans all over the world, and rightfully so.

There are 13 days left until opening night at Nationwide Arena. The Flames will have their season opener on Saturday, October 12th against the Philadelphia Flyers.

## 1<sup>st</sup> Ohio Battery / Chinakhov, Brindley Propel Blue Jackets To 3-1 Win Over Blues; Mateychuk Continues To Make His Case

By Ed Francis – October 3, 2024

The Columbus Blue Jackets moved to 4-2-0 in the preseason on Tuesday night with a 3-1 win over the St. Louis Blues, who had a majority of their regular season lineup on the ice.

With just that and two other games remaining before Columbus' regular season starts, the contest was a chance for 'fringe' Blue Jacket players to state their case to make the team.

For the most part, they delivered.

### **Here's what stood out from the exhibition dub in St. Louis:**

- In Tuesday's preview of what to look for in the game, it was noted that Denton Mateychuk was playing in back-to-back games on back-to-back nights — somewhat of a rarity in the preseason. Head coach Dean Evason and his staff must've liked what they seen, as Mateychuk played a team-leading 23:07 and saw time on both the power play (though Columbus had only one chance) and penalty kill. A deeper dive into the numbers indicate that the 20-year-old was the best player on the ice for the Blue Jackets:

Mateychuk was also the top-rated Columbus skater Monday night.

Yes, he can be sent to Cleveland without waivers. Yes, he's very young. No, Cleveland would not hurt him. But the Blue Jackets have to love what they're seeing out of the young defenseman and he's skyrocketed to the top of the blueline prospect list for the organization. Don't be surprised if he's done enough to force the Blue Jackets hand here and put him on the opening night roster.

- The preview also mentioned that it was a big game for fringe players, including Dylan Gambrell, Gavin Brindley, Trey Fix-Wolansky, James Malatesta, and Mikael Pyyhtia. Brindley scored what would be the game-winning goal for the Blue Jackets and has looked good throughout a majority of camp and the preseason. The rest didn't do much in the win over the Blues, and two of those names 1 Fix-Wolansky and Malatesta — are now heading for Cleveland as of Wednesday afternoon.

That leaves Gambrell, Brindley, and Pyyhtia — as well as Owen Sillinger, who didn't play Tuesday night — in the conversation to snag the remaining roster spots. Close race.

- The competition between Yegor Chinakhov and Dmitri Voronkov for the second-line right wing spot remains close. Chinakhov scored on the power play, but Voronkov had the assist on it. These two will probably be interchangeable once the season starts, though they provide different types of value to the club.
- The Blue Jackets have two preseason games remaining: a home-and-home against the Pittsburgh Penguins that happens Thursday night (in Columbus) and Friday. With the roster now down to 29 skaters (plus three goalies) and rosters across the league being trimmed, these final two games should be the most competitive of the two-week marathon that is the exhibition season.

## The Athletic / NHL waiver tracker: Best players on the wire throughout 2024-25 preseason

By Corey Pronman and Harman Dayal – October 3, 2024

As NHL teams trim their rosters before the regular season, The Athletic's Corey Pronman and Harman Dayal will provide analysis of the top players placed on waivers every day. Once a player is waived, the rest of the league has 24 hours to put in a claim for him. If a player goes unclaimed, they can be assigned by their team to the minor leagues.

### **Wednesday, Oct. 2**

#### **Calle Rosen, LHD, Colorado Avalanche**

Rosen, a 6-foot-1 left-shot defender, was solid in 49 games for the Blues in 2022-23. He drove decent underlying numbers in a sheltered third-pair role and chipped in with 18 points. He played well enough to deserve another NHL crack as a depth defender, but he became a victim of the numbers game. Last fall, as colleague Jeremy Rutherford explained, the Blues didn't want to risk losing Scott Perunovich or Tyler Tucker on waivers. Perunovich and Tucker were younger, higher potential defenders. Because of his older age and lack of upside, Rosen was waived and spent most of the year in the AHL. Now, on a loaded Colorado blue line, he couldn't crack an NHL roster again.—Dayal

Other players on waivers: Spencer Martin (Hurricanes), Trey Fix-Wolansky (Blue Jackets), Calle Rosen (Avalanche), Matthew Phillips (Avalanche), Jack Ahcan (Avalanche), Cal Petersen (Flyers), Jimmy Huntington (Penguins), Marc Johnstone (Penguins), Mac Hollowell (Penguins), Bo Groulx (Rangers), Andrew Poturalski (Sharks), Scott Sabourin (Sharks)

### **Tuesday, Oct. 1**

#### **Phil Di Giuseppe, LW, Vancouver Canucks**

What a difference a year can make. Last fall, Di Giuseppe not only made the Canucks out of training camp but earned a top-six role alongside J.T. Miller and Brock Boeser. The 30-year-old left winger made a strong impression on Rick Tocchet because of his disruptive forecheck and reliable defensive play. Di Giuseppe was relegated to a fourth-line role as the season progressed but stuck in the NHL as a full-time contributor for the first time in his career. Now, he's been cut after an offseason where the Canucks significantly upgraded their winger depth. Di Giuseppe could be a decent 12th/13th forward — he's trustworthy without the puck and a solid forechecker.—Dayal

Other players on waivers: Carson Meyer (Ducks), Josh Dunne (Sabres), Felix Sandstrom (Sabres), Jack Rathbone (Sabres), Brett Murray (Sabres), Mason Jobst (Sabres), Colton Poolman (Sabres), Ilya Solovoyov (Flames), Lane Pederson (Oilers), Ben Gleason (Oilers), Phil Kemp (Oilers), Collin Delia (Oilers), Jacob Moverare (Kings), Reese Johnson (Wild), Louis Domingue (Rangers), Anton Blidh (Rangers), Brandon Scanlin (Rangers), Casey Fitzgerald (Rangers), Gustav Olofsson (Kraken), Ales Stezka (Kraken), Ben Meyers (Kraken), Max McCormick (Kraken), Brandon Biro (Kraken), Jiri Patera (Canucks), Nate Smith (Canucks), Christian Wolanin (Canucks)

Update: Goalie Jiri Patera was claimed by Boston; the rest of the players cleared waivers.

With Jeremy Swayman still unsigned, the Bruins have landed extra goaltending insurance by claiming Patera from the Canucks. Patera posted a .903 save percentage in 25 AHL games last season, which seems underwhelming, but the Henderson Silver Knights weren't a good team. He has a .902 save



percentage in eight career NHL games with Vegas. Patera struggled during Canucks training camp. He was getting beat during rush drills very often and didn't look comfortable. That may have provided extra impetus for Vancouver to sign Kevin Lankinen. However, Patera was very good during the preseason start he got a week ago against Calgary. Patera doesn't look very big in the crease despite being listed at 6-foot-3 but has intriguing potential because of his powerful legs and movement.—Dayal

### **Monday, Sept. 30**

#### **Nikita Alexandrov, C, St. Louis Blues**

Alexandrov has intrigued scouts at points due to his high skill level combined with a solid work ethic and ability to help at both ends of the ice. He makes and finishes plays well, and is quite effective inside the offensive zone. He's average-sized with below-average skating, though, and while he's played 51 games with the Blues, there are questions on how well his game translates to the NHL with his pace.—Pronman

#### **Travis Boyd, C, Minnesota Wild**

Boyd is a veteran right-shot center with nearly 300 games of NHL experience. During the Coyotes' lean rebuilding years, Boyd was a decent middle-six stopgap, scoring in the 35-point range in back-to-back years. He was relegated to a fourth-line role last year, contributing eight points in 16 games before an injury ended his season. Boyd struggles in the faceoff circle and his two-way metrics aren't great, but he's demonstrated a long track record of contributing reliable secondary offence in a bottom-six NHL role.—Dayal

Other players on waivers: Jacob MacDonald (Avalanche), Cam Dineen (Oilers), Connor Carrick (Oilers), Jeff Malott (Kings), Devin Shore (Wild), Brendan Gaunce (Wild), Jimmy Schuldt (Sharks), Justin Bailey (Sharks), Kevin Connauton (Utah), Travis Barron (Utah)

Update: All players cleared waivers.

### **Sunday, Sept. 29**

#### **Vinnie Hinostroza, RW, Nashville Predators**

Hinostroza is a plug-and-play option for depth offense. The speedy, undersized winger has scored five-on-five points at a bona fide middle-six clip over nearly 400 career NHL games. He's a bit of a tweener, though; he isn't dynamic enough to contribute on the power play and his lack of size and strength mean he's not an ideal stylistic fit for many teams' bottom six.—Dayal

Other players on waivers: Marc McLaughlin (Bruins), Justin Kirkland (Flames), Martin Frk (Flames), Zach Sanford (Blackhawks), Brett Seney (Blackhawks), Reilly Walsh (Kings), Tyler Madden (Kings), Joe Hicketts (Kings), Glenn Gawdin (Kings), Joseph Cecconi (Wild), Cameron Crotty (Wild), Adam Raska (Wild), Lucas Condotta (Canadiens), Brandon Gignac (Canadiens), Matt Murray (Predators), Kieffer Bellows (Predators), Hunter Skinner (Blues), Hugh McGing (Blues), MacKenzie MacEachern (Blues), Mathias Laferriere (Blues), Derrick Pouliot (Lightning), Tobie Paquette-Bisson (Lightning)

Update: All players cleared waivers.

### **Saturday, Sept. 28**

#### **Grigori Denisenko, LW, Vegas Golden Knights**

Drafted No. 15 by Florida in 2018, Denisenko's initial transition to North American pro hockey was bumpy. The skilled but slightly undersized winger produced at a solid but unspectacular clip in the AHL through three seasons between 2020-21 and 2022-23 and struggled during his brief opportunities with the Panthers in the NHL. Vegas claimed him off waivers last fall.

Denisenko, 24, took a significant step in the AHL last year, producing 56 points in 65 games, although he still couldn't stick in the NHL, as he went pointless in six games for the Golden Knights. Denisenko is a crafty, slick offensive creator and the step forward he took last season could be a sign that he still has some untapped upside.—Dayal

Other players on waivers: Jonathan Aspirot (Flames), Clark Bishop (Flames), Keaton Middleton (Avalanche), Wyatt Aamodt (Avalanche), Kevin Mandolese (Avalanche), Maxime Lajoie (Kraken), Anthony Angello (Predators), Kevin Gravel (Predators), Jake Lucchini (Predators), Tyce Thompson (Islanders), Egor Sokolov (Utah), Callahan Burke (Golden Knights), Mason Geertsen (Golden Knights), Dysin Mayo (Golden Knights), Gage Quinney (Golden Knights), Robert Hagg (Golden Knights), Mason Morelli (Golden Knights), Ethen Frank (Capitals), Riley Sutter (Capitals), Alex Limoges (Capitals), Chase Priskie (Capitals), Hardy Häman Aktell (Capitals)

Update: All players cleared waivers.

### **Friday, Sept. 27**

#### **Ronnie Attard, RHD, Philadelphia Flyers**

Attard has played games in each of the last three NHL seasons but hasn't broken through yet as a full-time player. He's a big right-shot with good offensive skills and can play both ways due to his frame and compete. He isn't an amazing skater, though, and his decision making has given him issues over the years.—Pronman

Other players on waivers: Louie Belpedio (Flyers), Rnett Gardner (Flyers), Hayden Hodgson (Senators), Cole Reinhardt (Senators), Jamieson Rees (Senators), Garrett Pilon (Senators), Nikolas Matinpalo (Senators), Maxence Guenette (Senators), Jeremy Davies (Senators), Luke Henman (Kraken), Nikolas Brouillard (Kraken), Zach Sawchenko (Blue Jackets), Jake Leschyshyn (Rangers), Ben Harpur (Rangers), Alex Belzile (Rangers)

## [The Athletic / Why the 2024-25 NHL season could be the year of the comeback](#)

By James Mirtle – October 3, 2024

You could almost hear the hockey world breathe a sigh of relief when the news on Patrik Laine's injury came through Tuesday afternoon.

It was bad — he will miss two to three months with a knee sprain — but it wasn't catastrophic. His season wasn't over like last season when he managed just 18 games due to a broken clavicle and then time spent in the NHL's player assistance program.

There's hope he'll be back in regular form by midseason, patrolling the left side in the top six with the rebuilding Montreal Canadiens.

After watching the first couple weeks of training camps and preseason around the NHL, I started to pull together a list of remarkable comeback stories. There are a lot of veteran stars, up-and-comers and likable journeymen attempting to resurrect their careers this season, and Laine was going to be one of the headliners.

A popular figure since he was drafted No. 2 eight years ago, Laine is one of the game's colorful characters and landed with a marquee franchise after a lost 2023-24 campaign in Columbus.

More than just Habs fans were hoping to see him succeed. That's why his injury status was headline news after a controversial knee-on-knee collision with Toronto Maple Leafs farmhand Cedric Pare.

You see players like Laine, 19-year-old teammate David Reinbacher and Los Angeles Kings star Drew Doughty go down in preseason, and you can't help but want to see a different outcome. In the wake of those incidents, some have called for a shorter preseason — something that will certainly get support from a lot of corners around the league — but the reality is this can be a brutal, unforgiving sport, with devastating injuries rather commonplace, no matter the time of year.

Rather than focus on the negative, I wanted to highlight some of the inspiring stories that are taking place around the league this fall. Laine's is one comeback that will have to wait, but others could begin as soon as this weekend when the NHL season opens in Prague.

Here's hoping these players can turn their careers around after trying circumstances coming into the year.

### **Gabriel Landeskog, Colorado**

I was hard-pressed to find many other examples of an NHL captain missing an entire two seasons due to injury and making a comeback, outside of Mario Lemieux nearly 25 years ago. But that's what the Avalanche veteran is about to attempt.

Landeskog last took the ice on June 26, 2022 — 829 days ago — when he led Colorado to its third Stanley Cup with a win in Game 6 over the Tampa Bay Lightning. He even assisted on the game's tying goal.

Since that point, however, Landeskog has been going through some significant medical procedures to repair a badly damaged knee. He had cartilage transplant surgery in May 2023 after undergoing multiple knee surgeries in 2022.

There's no real timeline on when he can return, but the Avs have been pointing to early in the season as a possibility.

Landeskog is only 31 years old and in the fourth year of an eight-year, \$56 million contract he signed in the summer of 2021. He would be the first player to return from cartilage transplant surgery, making any kind of return to the ice a remarkable story.

### **Dougie Hamilton, New Jersey**

A lot of the Devils' implosion last season — as they fell from third to tied for 23rd in the overall standings — was understandably blamed on what happened in goal.

But missing their top defenseman, and one of their best (and highest paid) players, for all but 20 games was a huge reason for their freefall. Hamilton needed surgery on a torn pectoral muscle at the start of December a year ago, and without his 22 minutes a game, New Jersey threw two of the youngest defensemen in the league in Simon Nemeč and Luke Hughes into key minutes.

With Hamilton back healthy and the additions of solid veterans Brett Pesce and Brenden Dillon, the Devils suddenly have a pretty crowded group on the back end. If Hamilton can regain his 2022-23 form — when he put up 72 points and finished sixth in Norris Trophy voting — and Nemeč and Hughes take another step, New Jersey could definitely boast one of the deeper defense cores in the league.

And that's a significant reason why — in addition to the reinforcements in goal — the Devils are suddenly getting some of the best Stanley Cup odds in the league.

### **Matt Murray, Toronto**

Murray missed almost all of 2023-24 due to offseason surgery on his hips.

His last NHL appearance was way back on April 2, 2023, one of only 26 games he was able to play in during his first season with the Leafs. After winning back-to-back Stanley Cups with the Penguins in 2016 and 2017, Murray has started just 109 regular-season games over the past five seasons due to a variety of injuries.

Only 30 years old, Murray is penciled in as the Leafs' No. 3 behind Joseph Woll and Anthony Stolarz this season, but he will have to clear waivers by Sunday in order to join the AHL's Marlies. He struggled in three appearances with the farm club to end last season, which marked the beginning of this latest comeback attempt.

The Leafs are likely going to need to call on Murray, however, given their two primary netminders have a long injury history and are short on experience. Murray will be back in the NHL at some point, defying the odds.

### **Kirby Dach, Montreal**

After posting two points in the Canadiens season opener a year ago, Dach's year ended after just four minutes played in Game 2 when he tore his ACL and MCL.

Montreal dealt a No. 13 pick along with a third-rounder for Dach in 2022, but the promise he displayed as a junior that led to him being picked No. 3 in 2019 has been derailed by a series of injuries.

Dach showed some nice mettle and maturity in how he spent his recovery last season, as he remained around the team, soaking up lessons from coach Martin St. Louis and helping the Habs' other young players like Juraj Slafkovský.

Dach is expected to center the Canadiens' second line this year and should receive plenty of minutes on a team that remains relatively thin up front. He's already scored a couple of goals in preseason but not having a veteran like Laine to play with until midseason is going to add another level of difficulty in his return to play.

### **Logan Couture, San Jose**

Couture is another popular NHL captain with a very murky future.

He hasn't been skating in camp with the San Jose Sharks this fall after playing sparingly last season while dealing with osteitis pubis, a painful condition involving inflammation of the pubic bones that can impact athletes in particular.

"Some days were terrible," he told The Hockey News earlier this year. "Some days, I couldn't get out of bed."

Couture's last NHL game was at the end of January, one of only six he played all of last season. He had a setback at that point and hasn't been back on the ice since, meaning his return for the rebuilding Sharks remains very uncertain.

Now 35, Couture's playing future is in doubt, but he hasn't given up on a potential return at some point.

## [The Athletic / Preseason thoughts and standouts, from Lane Hutson to Viliam Kmec](#)

By Corey Pronman – October 3, 2024

Today I will highlight some young players who have stood out to me during NHL camps and preseason. This article is not meant to be an exhaustive list of who had a good camp. I did not watch all 32 teams' camps closely, and thus if a player is not mentioned here, it is not a commentary on the player.

### **Adam Edström, C, New York Rangers**

Edström was a standout for the Rangers this fall. He is massive, and his net-front play is a standout trait in how he can generate offense around the high-percentage areas. He has some skill, too, and can create chances with his puck play. His stride is heavy, but I've seen worse-skating 6-foot-7 guys. He reminds me a little of Elmer Söderblom, who got people excited in his first Detroit camp, but the test for Edström, as with Söderblom, will be how his feet hold up game after game in the NHL.

### **Andrew Cristall, LW, Washington Capitals**

I've been skeptical of how Cristall's skating would hold up as a pro, but the early indicators have been quite positive. He's been a standout in Washington's camp, consistently creating offense against NHL defensemen due to his great skill and vision. The skating looks weird, but he's elusive enough to evade pressure and play at the higher pace.

### **Dennis Hildeby, G, Toronto Maple Leafs**

Hildeby didn't qualify for the pipeline rankings I just completed because he recently turned 23, but he's a legit top goalie prospect. He played very well against the Montreal Canadiens, who iced a lot of their top forwards. He moves quite well for a large goalie, anticipates the play well and keeps his movements mostly efficient in net. He's going to play in the NHL.

### **Hunter St. Martin, LW, Florida Panthers**

St. Martin has intrigued evaluators as a sixth-round pick in 2024, albeit a re-entry one. He's a big winger who skates quite well. He's had the NHL athletic tools, but there were serious questions on his skill/offensive abilities in junior. That question is still to be determined over a full season, but in Florida's camp he's displayed a surprising level of offense and skill.

### **Aatu Rätty, C, Vancouver Canucks**

Rätty has had ups and downs over the last five years as a prospect, but his strong camp for the Canucks is a positive sign he's still very much on the radar to be an NHL player. He is skilled and intelligent, and though his skating isn't the best, he's shown development over the past few years into a legit two-way center as a pro who projects to provide secondary offense in the NHL. His play in camp reflects this role.

### **Seamus Casey, RHD, New Jersey Devils**

Casey did everything he needed to in camp. He's a dynamic skater and puck-mover who displayed all the plays he could make in transition and from the blue line. He's a good prospect, but Casey's biggest issue will be the depth chart. He's a power-play guy in the same organization as Dougie Hamilton, Luke Hughes and Šimon Nemeč. For him to be a full-time player in the NHL, his offense will either need to be special or he'll have to show he can survive defensively as a smaller defenseman. So far as a pro, so good.

### **Luca Cagnoni, LHD, San Jose Sharks**

Cagnoni looked good for the Sharks in their rookie camp and preseason. He's a very good skater and puck-mover who will get his points at higher levels. He is 5 feet 9, though, and there will always be size questions until there aren't. He's very talented and defends OK due to his skating, but to survive in the NHL at his size and earn regular even-strength minutes, the puck play will need to be special, something like ...

### **Lane Hutson, LHD, Montreal Canadiens**

... Hutson's puck play. He's been one of Montreal's better players in the preseason. He's shown the same type of dynamic offensive tools he displayed in junior and college. Few defensemen walk the line and see the ice as he does. When he gets the puck, even versus men you see he can break down defenses at a high level with his skill, feet and elite brain. The question as he continues to face NHL competition will be his defending. His skating isn't elite for a small guy like Quinn Hughes or Samuel Girard, and I've seen him get beat with speed a bit too easily. He will need to learn to survive in the NHL as Adam Fox does to manage defensively.

### **Viliam Kmec, LHD, Vegas Golden Knights**

Kmec is a big defenseman who is mobile and looks like a clear NHL athlete. He's not super offensive, but he can make a decent first pass. I was intrigued by him when watching Prince George last season and debated him for my draft list. He has some two-way potential as a pro, and though he's no sure thing, he will be better than some of the later-round picks. He played well in Vegas' camp and earned an NHL contract despite not being drafted three years in a row.

### **Ozzy Wiesblatt, RW, Nashville Predators**

Wiesblatt was cast off from San Jose after he was a first-round pick and showed little progress in the past few years. He's still probably a decent way away from the NHL, but his play since coming to the Nashville organization has been a major improvement. He's very skilled, quick and has decent enough two-way value despite being a smaller winger. He's much more on the radar now after his camp with the Predators than he has been in a long while.

### **A.J. Spellacy, RW, Chicago Blackhawks**

I haven't seen much of Spellacy's camp, but scouts I've talked to have buzzed about his athleticism and pro traits. He's an excellent skater who has played well enough versus pros to earn a long look with Chicago as an 18-year-old.

### **Carter Yakemchuk, RHD, Ottawa Senators**

A part of me wanted to skip this one for fear of being accused of overhyping this prospect, but Yakemchuk's play in the preseason merits a mention. He's displayed his offensive skills and abilities to attack. His skill and ability to move well enough suggest major pro potential. His defensive play isn't his calling card, but it looks good enough given his age and the level.

### **Zack Bolduc, C, St. Louis Blues**

I've never been a big fan of Bolduc's game the last few years, and I might be eating crow on that one if he keeps up the level of play he's shown in the Blues camp. I've always been impressed by his skating, skill and big-time shot/scoring ability, but had questions on his at-times perimeter play and consistency. That hasn't looked like much of an issue at all this fall, so it's possible I overstated that issue and he can be a legit middle-six scoring winger for St. Louis.

### **Jett Luchanko, C, Philadelphia Flyers**

Luchanko is a very likable player. He's a clear NHL skater and competitor with excellent hockey sense, and all those reasons have earned him a long look at Flyers camp. The minor question in Luchanko's game will be his overall scoring, which will be the difference on whether he ends up a top-six center or on the third line. The way he plays translates quite well to the NHL, and thus it's no surprise he's stood out in an NHL environment.



## [Sportsnet.ca / Five players who could bounce back this season](#)

Adam Vingan – October 3, 2024

Last week, we highlighted five NHL players poised for breakout seasons. Now we turn our attention to those looking to rebound from disappointing years.

Here are five players who surely will be motivated during the 2024-25 season:

### **Viktor Arvidsson, Edmonton Oilers forward**

Arvidsson was absent for most of last season, appearing in only 18 games for the Los Angeles Kings because of injuries. But in those games, Arvidsson was one of the team's top performers with 15 points (0.83 per game).

The play-driving winger registered 19 shot attempts per 60 minutes last season, which ranked 31st among 438 forwards who played at least 300 minutes in all situations. He has a well-rounded arsenal, allowing him to score from all over the offensive zone. When Arvidsson netted 26 goals in 77 games two seasons ago, 15 came from within the slot. Nine of the 26 were one-timers.

It is easy to imagine a healthy Arvidsson, who has scored at least 20 goals five times in his career, returning to form on Leon Draisaitl's wing. At \$4 million per season through 2026, Arvidsson could end up being one of the best bargains in the league.

### **Timo Meier, New Jersey Devils forward**

Meier's final numbers last season — 28 goals and 52 points in 69 games — were inflated by a late scoring binge. He recorded half of his point total (17 goals and 26 points) over the Devils' final 23 games.

New Jersey hopes it is a sign of things to come for Meier, who is the team's highest-paid forward at \$8.8 million per year. (Meier scored on 12 per cent of his shot attempts over his final 23 games, compared to 4.4 per cent through his first 46 games.)

New coach Sheldon Keefe could roll out a top line of Meier, Jack Hughes and Jesper Bratt, who played together for a total of 6:58 at even strength last season. Their collective speed would give opponents fits; Hughes and Bratt ranked first and 12th, respectively, in rush scoring chances per 60 among 245 qualified forwards (minimum 1,000 minutes played). Meier was 49th, but he should climb that list if he plays with Hughes and Bratt.

### **Juuse Saros, Nashville Predators goaltender**

Saros finished fifth in 2023-24 Vezina Trophy voting despite having his worst season as a starter, posting a 2.86 goals-against average and .906 save percentage in 64 games. It was an uncharacteristic performance from Saros, who recorded a .920 save percentage between 2020 and 2023.

The recipient of a new eight-year contract (\$7.74 million cap hit) over the summer, Saros allowed 0.02 goals above expected per 60 last season — 26th out of 36 goaltenders who played at least 2,000 minutes. That might not seem like much; it translates to just an extra 1.29 goals allowed. But the year before, Saros saved a league-leading 25.9 goals above expected, or 0.41 per 60, over the same number of games.

Saros' struggles were not a product of poor play in front of him. The Predators improved defensively in 2023-24, ranking 11th in expected goals against per 60 following a 25th-place finish the previous season.

Predators general manager Barry Trotz maxed out his credit card on July 1, spending a combined \$108.5 million on Steven Stamkos, Jonathan Marchessault and Brady Skjei. Nashville's success this season, however, largely hinges on a bounce-back performance from its star goaltender.

### **Mikhail Sergachev, Utah Hockey Club defenceman**

Over seven seasons in Tampa Bay, Sergachev blossomed into a do-it-all defenceman for the Lightning. But as long as Victor Hedman patrolled the Bolts' blue line, Sergachev would skate in his shadow.

That will not be the case in Utah, where Sergachev is expected to take on the No. 1 role after being traded there in June. (Sergachev missed 48 of the Lightning's final 49 regular-season games with various injuries, including a broken leg.)

Sergachev had the puck on his stick for 5:01 per 60, ranking 29th out of 225 defencemen who played a minimum of 500 minutes. He made the right play more often than not. Considering how much Sergachev handled the puck, his 12.9 per cent turnover rate was respectable (57th).

Two seasons ago, Sergachev was one of five NHL defencemen who averaged at least 19 minutes at even strength, two minutes on the power play and two minutes on the penalty kill per game. Utah acquired him to handle that type of workload.

"He's certainly going to get an opportunity to do that," Utah GM Bill Armstrong told reporters. "I think that's what he wants."

### **Reilly Smith, New York Rangers forward**

After a pit stop in Pittsburgh, Smith gets a fresh start in New York. Smith's lone season with the Penguins was forgettable; he scored seven goals over his final 66 games and 13 total.

The Rangers are giving Smith a prime spot in their lineup, placing him alongside Chris Kreider and Mika Zibanejad. (New York rotated through several top-line right wingers last season, including Blake Wheeler, Kaapo Kakko and Jack Roslovic.)

Smith has a knack for getting to high-danger scoring areas, averaging 5.94 pass receptions in the slot per 60 at 5-on-5 — 24th among 375 qualified forwards (minimum 500 minutes played at 5-on-5). His 2.76 inner slot shots on net per 60 were 31st.

In all situations, Smith scored 6.6 fewer goals than expected last season, making him one of the league's unluckiest forwards. There should be no shortage of offensive opportunities for Smith if he sticks with Kreider and Zibanejad. New York outscored opponents 45-33 when they were on the ice at 5-on-5 last regular season.