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The Athletic / Adam Fantilli's highlight-reel OT winner sends Blue Jackets past Ducks, snaps skid

By Aaron Portzline – December 17, 2025

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Adam Fantilli came back into his own zone to gather a rimmed-around puck from Columbus Blue Jackets teammate Kent Johnson. There was less than two minutes to play in overtime, and Johnson was headed off the ice for a breather.

Most players may have taken the opportunity to carry the puck further into their own end and behind the net, buying time to allow two fresh teammates to come over the boards for a final three-on-three push.

Not Fantilli on Tuesday night.

The 21-year-old center scored what will surely be one of the Blue Jackets' top goals this season, sending Columbus to a 4-3 win over the Anaheim Ducks before a crowd of 14,120 in Nationwide Arena, snapping a five-game (0-4-1) winless streak.

"That's a great goal and a big moment for our group, too," Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski said. "He stepped up big time."

Werenski had two goals and an assist, his fourth three-point game this season. Captain Boone Jenner added a goal and an assist, while Johnson had two assists. Goaltender Jet Greaves made 24 saves for his first win since Nov. 20.

The lingering memory from this game will be Fantilli's goal, his second overtime winner, both coming this season.

Fantilli gathered the puck off the wall from Johnson's rim, then turned sharply and fired the afterburners to skate wide around and past Anaheim's Leo Carlsson as they came through the neutral zone.

As he carried the puck into the right circle, Fantilli closed in on Anaheim's Olen Zellweger, pulling back the puck and firing it through Zellweger's legs before it whizzed past goaltender Ville Husso, who may not have seen the puck.

"Once I got that rim from (Johnson), I kind of realized the guy who was on me (Carlsson)," Fantilli said. "He'd been out there for a minute or so at that point, so I kind of wanted to try him with speed and see if I could get around him."

"Once I did, I knew I had a one-on-one, and I just tried to shoot through a screen."

Fantilli made it seem so matter-of-fact. His teammates were impressed.

"He just had the determination," Jenner said. "He turned on the jets there, and he's got that shot, and it's a heck of a shot. When he comes in with that much steam, shooting through screen? It's very dangerous."

Werenski was impressed, but he wasn't surprised.

"I've seen it a bunch in summer skates and practices and whatnot," Werenski said. "I actually think you could probably do that more in games. He's such a big body with so much speed, and he's got a great shot and a release. He can just beat goalies, and a lot of guys can't do that. He's a special player in that way.

"Once he figures out that he can just, you know, shoot it past the goalie, he's going to score a lot more goals."

The Blue Jackets carried a 1-0 lead into the second period, when the game temporarily went off the rails.

The Blue Jackets and Ducks combined for four goals (two each) in the span of 1:54. Werenski and Jenner scored only 19 seconds apart. The Ducks got goals from Ryan Strome and Mikael Granlund to keep Anaheim within 3-2.

Then the game settled into its previous flow.

The Ducks scored the tying goal with 3:16 remaining, continuing a trend that the Blue Jackets just can't seem to shake. This one deserves to be viewed a touch differently, for two reasons.

First, the goal scored by the Ducks was a nifty idea from Jackson LaCombe, who fired a puck from below the goal line that hit the back of Greaves' mask, glanced off his shoulder and fell into the net to tie the score.

Second, the loser's point for the Ducks ends up in the Western Conference. Not the Blue Jackets' concern.

"It went off Jet's head," Fantilli said. "Like, it's a sick shot. You've got to hand it to him (Lacombe), but like, if that's what we're giving up in the third period, come on.

"We're playing. We're doing the right thing. So let's just stay the course."

There's another wrinkle that made Fantilli's overtime goal — and the way it played — even more intriguing.

At the 2023 NHL Draft, most expected forwards Connor Bedard and Fantilli to go No. 1 and No. 2 to Chicago and Anaheim, respectively. The Blue Jackets were absolutely devastated at that year's lottery when they slid to No. 3, believing that both would be gone by the time they picked.

Instead, Anaheim surprised many and selected Carlsson at No. 2, allowing Fantilli to slide — to the Blue Jackets' astonishment — to No. 3.

The Ducks have been plenty happy with Carlsson, who has had a breakout season with 17-24-41 in 34 games. And the Blue Jackets have been delighted with Fantilli, who had 31 goals last season and now has 12 this season.

Does Fantilli still think about getting passed over by the Ducks? Nah, he said. (And he made it pretty clear at the draft that he felt like Columbus was his best fit.)

“You know about it,” Fantilli said, “but I’m not coming into this game, going, ‘Oh, this is that much bigger.’

“This is a big game for me because of where our team is at in the standings, not because some team passed on me two years ago. That doesn’t mean anything to me. I’m here to win with this franchise. I’m grateful to be here. I want to be here, and I want to win here.”

The Athletic / Bruised and bloodied, Adam Fantilli and Blue Jackets must get on track soon

Aaron Portzline – December 16, 2025

COLUMBUS, Ohio — It was two days after the injury, but Adam Fantilli's bottom lip on Monday was still twice the size of his upper lip, and there was a fading, inch-long mark — an imprint of Fantilli's upper teeth — on the left side of his smile.

Yes, the Columbus Blue Jackets are getting battered and bruised on the scoreboard and beyond these days.

Fantilli, 21, suffered a nasty high stick late in the third period of a 3-2 loss to the Vegas Golden Knights, quickly sending him to the dressing room with blood leaking from his mouth, through his hands and to the ice. He returned just a few minutes later and was back on the ice for the final 90 seconds of the game as the Blue Jackets scrambled in vain for the tying goal.

It turns out Fantilli had a rougher night than most realize.

"I came into (the dressing room), the doctor gave me a few shots and I was told I was gonna stop bleeding by the time I got back out there," Fantilli said. "Then I jumped on the ice and (the blood) started pooling again, and it was kind of filling up my mouth faster than I could spit."

Fantilli returned to the dentist chair after the game — he needed five stitches inside his bottom lip — but not before a gross scene played out in a nearby sink. "I spit out a pretty good puddle," Fantilli said.

There was no question about Fantilli playing on Tuesday. Per Monday's practice, the Blue Jackets' most-used No. 1 line this season — Fantilli centering wingers Dmitri Voronkov and Kirill Marchenko — will be back in business when the Jackets host the Anaheim Ducks.

Remember all of the conjecture this season about the jam-packed standings, and how small the gap is between the bottom of the table and the top? Well, that's no longer the case for the Blue Jackets, who have lost five consecutive games, including four straight in regulation. Even with the New York Rangers' 4-1 loss to the Ducks Monday, the last-place Blue Jackets are in the Metro cellar by four points.

"It's a really, really brutal stretch that we're in right now," Fantilli said. "We're working to get out of it. It's not like we're not caring about it, or not bringing attention to it and realizing the work we have to do to get out of it. We are putting in the work."

"It's important for us to get off this stretch before Christmas and get back in the win column at least a few times before heading into the New Year. Like, we can't be where we are in the standings and then have to claw the whole way back to get to the playoffs. We have to give ourselves a chance in the New Year."

The Blue Jackets need to awaken on both ends of the ice. They were mostly pleased with the way they checked and competed in Saturday's 3-2 loss to Vegas, but now the scoring has cooled. The Blue Jackets have just six goals in their last four games, which is why coach Dean Evason made changes on Monday.

The most noteworthy move is that winger Yegor Chinakhov is getting another opportunity in the top six, this time with veteran center Sean Monahan and winger Boone Jenner.

Chinakhov ended a 19-game streak without a point by scoring Saturday against the Golden Knights, and he nearly tied the score in the closing seconds, but his wrist from the right circle clanged off the iron.

Further, Chinakhov now has a spot on the top power play unit. He's playing on the right half-wall, with Fantilli moving to the middle of the zone to play the bumper. Monahan has been moved to the second unit.

"(Chinakhov's) willingness to compete, to stick his nose in there and play hard, has allowed him to get one or two great scoring chances a game, and it's really nice to see that," Evason said. "He scored in the last game, and hopefully that keeps him moving forward.

"We've had several meetings. We've had a couple of one-on-ones, but the staff talks to the players all the time. We have reiterated and confirmed what he's been doing and how he's been doing it on a regular basis."

The Blue Jackets should be wary of any club right now, but the Ducks are a major concern. The Jackets are just 2-6-5 in their last 13 meetings, but this is the best — or at least most dangerous — Anaheim club in several seasons. Under new coach Joel Quenneville, young players like Leo Carlsson, Cutter Gauthier, Beckett Sennecke and Mason MacTavish are blooming, and the Ducks are one of the NHL's top dynamic clubs.

Any meeting between the Blue Jackets and Ducks, of course, conjures memories of the 2023 NHL entry draft. After Connor Bedard went No. 1 to Chicago, Anaheim surprised many by selecting Carlsson at No. 2, allowing Fantilli to fall to No. 3 for the Blue Jackets, who were delighted. They never expected Fantilli to be available with the third pick.

In fact, if Fantilli had gone No. 2 to the Ducks, the Blue Jackets wouldn't have taken Carlsson at No. 3. They were set on selecting Will Smith, who went No. 4 to San Jose.

"(Carlsson's) a great player, and he's really found his stride this year, which is great to see," Fantilli said. "Their whole team is kind of on a roll right now. I've only played against him twice, but he's very sound, extremely skilled and smart player, so you've got to be aware of where he's at all the time."

The Columbus Dispatch / 2 Werenski goals give Columbus Blue Jackets 4-3 OT win over Ducks

By Dan Aulbach – December 17, 2025

Zach Werenski proved the obvious answer to the Blue Jackets' scoring issues, helping Columbus break out of a five-game losing streak with two goals in a 4-3 victory that ended with Adam Fantilli's game-winner 3:32 into overtime.

"That was huge," Fantilli said. "But that's just a step in the right direction. We got to continue this way and try to get as many points as we can here before Christmas."

Werenski's performance was the star defenseman's first two-goal game of the 2025-26 season and first since March 4, 2025.

Werenski netted the first quickly, scoring in transition at the 8:21 mark of the first period. Yegor Chinakov got a quick pass off to Boone Jenner, who dragged the puck high into the corner of the Ducks' zone. He found an open Werenski near the blue line after a line change, and Werenski sniped a wrist shot into the bottom-right corner.

Ducks fourth-line winger Ryan Strome netted the equalizer in the second period, and 20 seconds later, Werenski stepped up again. The Jackets added on when Boone Jenner netted a rebound on the right side of the Ducks' goal, just 19 seconds after Werenski's second goal.

"The whole time we were in control and comfortable," Werenski said.

There was a fourth goal scored within a 54-second window. Anaheim's Mikael Granlund swerved into open space around Werenski and Kirill Marchenko and made it 3-2.

Needing a good defensive performance to close out the third period, the Jackets matched the intensity of the first two periods and went flawless on penalty kill efforts.

"We didn't give any glaring opportunities," said head coach Dean Evason. "Obviously, that puck bounces over and we give up the breakaway, but after that, we stayed on the proper side. We didn't give up those odd-man rushes. We competed."

A late Ducks goal by Jackson LaCombe sent the game to overtime, but Fantilli's game-winner goal allowed the Jackets to down the top team in the Pacific Division.

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Down Ducks in Overtime to End Losing Streak

By Mark Schieg - December 16, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets continued their four-game homestand with a Tuesday night affair against the Anaheim Ducks. Overtime was needed to settle this one.

Adam Fantilli scored the game winner 3:32 into overtime to lift the Blue Jackets to a 4-3 win over the Ducks. With the win, the Blue Jackets' five-game losing streak is over.

Ryan Poehling with an Assist vs. Columbus Blue Jackets

The story of this game was the Blue Jackets being able to find a way to win despite not being able to hold on to another third-period lead.

Game Recap

After both teams got off to a bit of a slow start, the Blue Jackets were able to get on the board first. That seemed to help them find their legs.

Captain Boone Jenner found Zach Werenski and he beat goalie Ville Husso. For Werenski, that was his 10th goal of the season making it the eighth different season he's reached double-digit goals in his career. He wasn't done scoring in what was his 600th NHL game.

In the second, goals starting coming in bunches. In all, the teams combined to score four goals in the span of 1:54. Ryan Strome made it 1-1 at 3:35.

Then 24 seconds later, Werenski added his second goal of the night and 11th of the season electing to shoot on a 2-on-1 rush. Jenner extended it to 3-1 just 19 seconds later.

The Ducks' Mikael Granlund then needed just 1:11 to cut it back to 3-2. After that flurry of activity, the game settled in with both teams getting chances but unable to score.

The Blue Jackets took the game's first four penalties. They were able to kill all of them off. That also helped uplift the bench according to the players in the room postgame. That helped keep the game in their favor until late in the third period.

Jackson LaCombe found himself below the goal line. He fired the puck off Jet Greaves' helmet and in to make it 3-3 with just 3:16 left in regulation. Overtime was required.

Fantilli saw he had Leo Carlsson on the ice for an extended shift. Instead of waiting for teammates, Fantilli took the initiative to make a play. His shot beat Husso for the 4-3 win. It was a win the Blue Jackets really needed.

Both Husso and Greaves made 24 saves on the night.

The Blue Jackets will return to action on Thursday when they wrap their homestand up against the Minnesota Wild. The Ducks will fly home and then play a back-to-back Friday and Saturday when they host the Stars and then the Blue Jackets again.

ESPN / How seven NHL goalies leveled up their play this season

By Kristen Shilton – December 17, 2025

There's a new sheriff in the State of Hockey. And a Swedish one, at that. His name? Jesper Wallstedt.

But you can call him The Wall of St. Paul. His teammates do. It's a nickname befitting of a Minnesota Wild goaltender who's rewriting the franchise's rookie record books as one of the league's breakout stars.

It's almost a mystery how these things work. Goaltending is a complicated job, after all. Goalies have to account for hundreds of different skaters on the attack, all of whom have studied that player in the crease in search of ways to beat him.

That's pressure enough -- and granted, goaltenders are a particular breed unto themselves and often boast of unique journeys to their jobs in the league.

"[Part of] what you're seeing now is that it takes a good three to five years of development for goalies," former NHL goaltender Martin Biron said of this current freshman class. "And now with the amount of goalies being used during the season you see that there is some good quality from those drafts from 2019 to 2021."

It's part of what makes the position so fascinating, particularly this season where we've seen everything from the upstarts shining (Devin Cooley has been a bright spot for Calgary) to veteran No. 1s having career years (stick taps to Logan Thompson). There have been just nine rookie goalies to appear in at least 41 games of a full season for their teams since 2019-20; there could be half that many alone this season.

We may never know why. But here is a non-comprehensive look at the unexpected who's who of the goaltending world.

Wallstedt's transition from Sweden to the Wild's American Hockey League affiliate in Iowa was fine at first. He produced a .908 SV% his first season there, and improved to .910 the one after that. He was an AHL All-Star selection. By the 2024-25 season, Minnesota had Marc-Andre Fleury and Gustavsson sharing the net.

There was no room for Wallstedt as third wheel and he went back to the AHL -- where it wasn't pretty. Wallstedt went 9-14-4 that season, with an .879 SV%. Iowa wasn't a strong team overall but Wallstedt's performance -- including his two NHL appearances that were both losses and came with an .843 SV% -- was concerning, and rightly raised questions about his NHL-readiness.

Minnesota waived Fleury off into retirement over the summer, and that left an opening for Wallstedt to step into a tandem with Gustavsson. Regardless of his past, Wallstedt was ready to soar. He went 8-0-2 through his first 10 games, while recording four shutouts to give him five in 15 career games played. That's the second-fewest starts required to reach that mark since Frank Brimsek in 1938 ("Mr. Zero" required only nine games). His road shutout streak -- going through Winnipeg, Edmonton and Vancouver -- was halted at 116:09. That was the third-longest streak of its kind in franchise history, and Wallstedt was just the fifth rookie goalie since 1929-30 to do it.

The numbers show how Wallstedt persevered to become this season's goalie sensation. And Minnesota is hoping he's just getting started. The Wild are third in the Central Division and have appeared increasingly confident right along with their goaltender. If Wallstedt continues to shine, there's no telling how far he can help carry the Wild this season.

Brandon Bussi

Carolina Hurricanes

10-1-0 | 2.07 GAA | .910 SV%

In early October, Bussi was facing an uncertain future. Little did he know it would include etching his name in the NHL record books.

At the time, Bussi had been placed on waivers by the Florida Panthers after signing a one-way, two-year contract with the reigning Stanley Cup champions in July. If he cleared, Bussi could join the Panthers' AHL affiliate. Instead, the Carolina Hurricanes swooped in to claim Bussi when Pyotr Kochetkov was hurt to start the season. That has become a defining moment for Bussi and Carolina. He has outperformed any expectation the Hurricanes could have had for him, including becoming the fastest goalie to earn 10 wins in NHL history.

That feat is impressive on its own. It's even more impressive considering Bussi came to Carolina with zero NHL experience -- but he is not technically a rookie. In order to qualify for freshman status with the league, players have to be under 26 years old on Sept. 15 of a season. Bussi turned 27 in June. Age is just a number, though, and we are not beholden to such parameters here, so Bussi gets grouped into the rookie class. But the first-year netminder hasn't played like a newbie at all.

The Sound Beach, New York, native began as a backup to veteran Frederik Andersen, making his NHL debut on Oct. 14 in a 5-1 rout of San Jose. He was so good behind Andersen that Carolina kept him in the fold even after Kochetkov returned in early November. Kochetkov would have a flare-up of the same injury weeks later, and that's when Bussi got rolling, passing Andersen as coach Rod Brind'Amour's go-to in net while reeling off a 10-1-0 to start his pro career, with a .910 SV% and 2.07 GAA. He's just the fifth NHL goalie to win nine of his first 10 appearances.

Carolina couldn't have anticipated leaning on Bussi like it has. But Andersen -- ironically one of the other five goalies that also recorded nine wins in his first 10 career games -- has struggled this season (going 5-7-2 with an .875 SV%) and if not for Bussi, Carolina could have taken a tumble while Kochetkov recovers.

If he keeps that up, time will tell what the Hurricanes goalie rotation looks like when all are healthy -- and how many wins Bussi can string together as this season's Cinderella story.

Dennis Hildeby

Toronto Maple Leafs

2-3-3 | 2.72 GAA | .923 SV%

Hildeby can't help but take over a room.

His 6-foot-7 hulking frame seems in direct contradiction to his quiet, unassuming personality. But the man affectionately known as "Hildebeast" didn't earn the moniker by running his mouth. He has done it

by using that big body to make the Toronto Maple Leafs' net look small -- and hold some of the league's best scorers at bay.

The Leafs have been in a goaltending bind throughout the season. Would-be No. 1 Anthony Stolarz was average out of the gate and then got hurt; he hasn't suited up since Nov. 11 while nursing an upper-body injury. Joseph Woll took over from there after returning from a personal leave of absence, and Hildeby -- a fourth-round draft choice by the Leafs in 2022 with just six NHL games to his credit -- tagged in on clean-up duty and a few back-to-backs.

It was Toronto's alarming defensive issues -- they were second in shots against per game and fourth in goals against per game through the end of November -- that stood out most, wasting quality starts from Hildeby, who was 1-2-1 with a .914 SV% supporting Woll.

When Woll also hit the sideline with a lower-body injury last week, Toronto had no choice but to put their full faith in Hildeby. That has paid off.

He made nine saves in relief of Woll to preserve a 5-1 victory for the Leafs over Carolina, and was their No. 1 from there: Hildeby backstopped Toronto to a frustrating 2-1 shootout loss to Montreal, blanked the Tampa Bay Lightning in a hard-fought 2-0 victory, stood on his head to get the Leafs a point in their 3-2 overtime loss to San Jose and was hung out to dry in Edmonton's 6-3 rout of Toronto.

Hildeby deserved better than a 1-1-2 record in those starts, given his .934 SV% and 2.34 GAA. It's a small sample size, but Hildeby ranks second in save percentage among goalies with at least 10 starts (.923).

More than that, he has been consistently good for a club that has only recently showed defensive improvements -- although the Leafs have begun to backslide in that department again.

Toronto's glaring issue now is an inability to stay healthy in net, or on the back end. After Hildeby, there's just Artur Akhtyamov, who made his NHL debut in relief of Hildeby during last week's tilt against the Oilers. There's no telling yet when Stolarz will return, with coach Craig Berube saying on this week he's not progressing as the team had hoped. Woll made his return on Tuesday, but he has a concerning injury history. Meanwhile, Chris Tanev and Brandon Carlo are both still out from the blue-line group.

Hildeby needs a reliable partner, too. But even though Woll is ready, it'll be tough for coach Craig Berube to take the reins from Hildeby entirely given how he has exceeded expectations.

Yaroslav Askarov

San Jose Sharks

11-8-1 | 3.24 GAA | .902 SV%

Askarov might be playing in his first full NHL season, but you'd be forgiven for mistaking him for a veteran.

San Jose's rookie netminder is carrying a heavy load for the surprising Sharks, and it has made up for enough defensive deficiencies in front of him to have San Jose in the playoff mix. Askarov put a slow start behind him to produce a 9-4-0 run with a .928 SV% and 2.20 GAA while being under siege from the opposition. During that stretch, San Jose has allowed among the most high-danger chances and the

second-most shots on net, leading Askarov to average nearly 30 saves per game compared to the league average of 24.

San Jose has continued to be leaky defensively and now pace the league in shots against, and Askarov hasn't been perfect -- he was pulled in a game this month after allowing four goals on 12 shots to the Washington Capitals -- but it's hard to argue that Askarov hasn't been a prize for the Sharks overall.

The team is 22nd in offense this season -- averaging 2.88 goals per game -- and has relied on Macklin Celebrini's sensational start (with 47 points through 33 games) and Askarov's netminding to continue punching above their weight class in the Western Conference. That's a lot of pressure to put on a 23-year-old goaltender, but Askarov was ready to take on a bigger role in the NHL.

Originally drafted 11th overall by Nashville in 2020, Askarov felt pushed aside when the organization signed Juuse Saros to an eight-year contract extension in 2024 and inked Scott Wedgewood to be his backup. Askarov requested a trade, and the Sharks were all-in. After making 13 starts for San Jose last season, going 4-6-2 with an .896 SV%, Askarov is blossoming at just the right time to give the Sharks some hope for the present *and* future.

Jet Greaves

Columbus Blue Jackets

7-8-5 | 2.75 GAA | .906 SV%

Some great player stories end with a thud or turn out to be a flash in the pan. Greaves has been the opposite for Columbus.

Greaves was recalled from the Blue Jackets' AHL affiliate late last season to bolster Columbus in the crease for the team's final (albeit unsuccessful) playoff push.

That failure wasn't for Greaves' lack of effort, though. The netminder was 4-1-0 through April, with a .975 SV%. His final NHL stat line for the season: 7-2-2, with a .938 SV% and 1.91 GAA.

Could Greaves maintain those types of figures in the long term? Columbus had to find out.

Greaves came into this current campaign in tandem with veteran Elvis Merzlikins, but quickly established himself as closer to the team's No. 1. His numbers aren't dazzling, with a .906 SV% and 2.75 GAA, but dig deeper and it's clear Greaves is the difference-maker Columbus needs. He ranks eighth overall in goals saved above expectation and 10th in save percentage above expected on high-danger shots, per MoneyPuck.

He can't do it all, of course. The Blue Jackets haven't been tight defensively this season, and like Hildeby, Greaves' record (7-8-5) isn't exactly indicative of his performance. Columbus is allowing the third-most shots on net (31.3) per game, and the fifth-most goals against (3.47), while sitting 23rd in offense (with 2.88 goals per game).

Greaves gives the Blue Jackets a chance, though, by continuing to provide consistency in the cage. That could keep Columbus on track to work its way back into the playoff race this season -- if the rest of the Blue Jackets can start helping their goalie.

Spencer Knight

Chicago Blackhawks

10-7-5 | 2.52 GAA | .915 SV%

Connor Bedard courts most of the headlines in Chicago. Which is just fine with Knight.

The Blackhawks' goaltender is happy to cede the spotlight to Bedard while providing the necessary backbone in net to preserve the terrific season Bedard -- and the Blackhawks in general -- have been able to produce.

Knight was the primary return for Chicago when they flipped Seth Jones to Florida last season. Knight was the Panthers' 13th overall pick in 2019, a standout at Boston College and, at just 20 years old, earned a 5-1 victory in his NHL debut. He worked from there in tandem with Sergei Bobrovsky but Knight's relationship with the Panthers eventually came to an end due to a salary cap crunch over the goalie's \$4.5 million cap hit.

Florida's loss has been Chicago's gain. Knight arrived to the Blackhawks in March 2024 with a 44-25-7 career record, a .906 SV% and 2.76 GAA. It was an inauspicious finish to that campaign for Knight (5-8-2, .896 SV%), but fortunately for Chicago not a sign of things to come.

The 24-year-old has played some of his best hockey this season, going 10-7-5 with a .915 SV%, 2.52 GAA and two shutouts through his first 21 games. He has taken the brunt of the Blackhawks' workload in front of backup Arvid Soderblom, and Chicago ranks 17th in goals against per game despite giving up the fifth-most shots against. That speaks to Knight's impact and the way he has helped the Blackhawks push their way into a Western Conference wild-card spot midway through December.

It's enough to make you wonder how much Team USA GM Bill Guerin is keeping tabs on Knight as a potential option in the crease at the upcoming Milan-Cortina Olympics.

The only looming question about Knight really is: Can he maintain this level as a No. 1? Knight's previous career high in starts was 32 in 2021-22 with Florida. The Blackhawks will need more than that from Knight, perhaps working him hard all the way into spring.

Dan Vladar

Philadelphia Flyers

11-5-3 | 2.48 GAA | .908 SV%

Vladar can attest that some lessons must be learned the hard (and sometimes painful) way.

It took him a good five years after being drafted by the Boston Bruins in the third round of the 2015 draft to get a shot in the NHL and longer than that to stay full time. That opportunity came with Calgary in 2021, and after working his way to that pinnacle, Vladar wasn't about to step aside due to a lingering injury. He just kept playing through a torn labrum in his right hip for years, often to his own detriment.

It wasn't until April 2024, while still with the Flames, that the 6-foot-5 Vladar finally had surgery and started a six-month recovery process. His only regret is not doing it sooner.

Well, the 28-year-old is making up for lost time.

Vladar had a subpar 2024-25 season in Calgary while finding his footing again, post-procedure. The Prague native was stellar in the spring while representing Czechia at the IIHF World Championships (going 3-0-0 with a .951 SV% and 1.09 GAA) and earned himself a two-year, \$6.7 million contract with the Flyers in July.

It was tough for Philadelphia to know exactly what they'd get out of Vladar, especially when he was meant to be supporting Samuel Ersson's continued development. But a healthy Vladar seized the moment and has been a steadying presence -- at 11-5-3 with a .908 SV% and 2.54 GAA -- for a Philadelphia team currently holding an Eastern Conference wild-card spot.

Vladar has been a significant part of that success, producing the best numbers of his career. Tweaks like improved skating have allowed him more control over his big body and that has helped him earn coach Rick Tocchet's trust.

While Vladar may lament not trusting his own instincts about when to go under the knife, that path brought him to Philadelphia and a second chance to be the player he always aspired to be.