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Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets stumble in playoff pursuit: 5 takeaways

By Brian Hedger- April 5, 2025

Will eight be enough?

That's how many games the Blue Jackets have left to save their playoff aspirations, which are suddenly teetering after a disastrous 7-3 loss to the Colorado Avalanche on Thursday night at Nationwide Arena.

Next is a daunting back-to-back this weekend in Toronto and Ottawa that could either slingshot the Blue Jackets (34-31-9) closer to the Montreal Canadiens for the Eastern Conference's second wild card spot or eviscerate Columbus' postseason dreams.

Their loss in regulation to the Avs combined with Montreal's victory over the Boston Bruins puts four points between Montreal and Columbus for the East's final playoff spot heading into Saturday.

"We've got to keep playing and keep trying to win games," Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski said. We all look at (the standings) but at the end of the day, if we're going to lose hockey games, we don't deserve to make the playoffs, right? We've got to do our own work in here. We can't bank on Montreal losing and the (New York) Islanders, (New York Rangers) and Detroit losing."

Here are five takeaways:

Columbus Blue Jackets' uphill climb steepens with loss to Colorado Avalanche

The Blue Jackets are jockeying with several other teams for the final wild-card spot. Eventually, one or two will separate from the pack.

The Ottawa Senators (86 points) and Canadiens (81 points) are now the top two candidates to make that happen, while the New York Rangers (79 points), Blue Jackets (77 points), Detroit Red Wings (75 points) and Islanders (74 points) are losing their grip. The Canadiens and Rangers each have seven games left, while the Blue Jackets and Red Wings have eight.

"We have to do our work and win hockey games, and we haven't done that consistently these last 14 or 15 games, so I think other teams' scores are irrelevant," Werenski said. "But it sucks (the Canadiens) get a win, and we lose. It definitely makes it harder, but it falls on us to get wins and we're not doing it."

Elvis Merzlikins' emotional exit caps tough night for Columbus Blue Jackets goalie

Prior to replacing goalie Elvis Merzlikins in the third, Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason hadn't pulled a goalie from a game all season. He was the only coach in the NHL who hadn't, instead preferring to let goalies play through their struggles.

He was asked Thursday whether the decision to yank Merzlikins in favor of Daniil Tarasov was based on performance or the starter's emotional response to allowing a goal by Miles Wood on a play he had little chance to stop. Merzlikins had boiled over, smashed his stick against the right post with a baseball swing and angrily headed toward the bench before leaving the game.

"Little of both," Evason said, dodging and weaving through his reply. "Little of both. Yeah, a little of both. I'm not going to elaborate on that, but yeah ..."

The only other time Evason has shown frustration with Merzlikins this season was following an early victory that included the goalie's heated response to losing a shutout late in the game. That one prompted a chat about the importance of goalies maintaining composure. After this meltdown, it'll be

interesting to see what happens with the Jackets' goaltending situation going into a game Saturday night in Toronto.

Merzlikins wasn't the primary issue on all seven Avalanche goals, but he's struggled to keep pucks out of the Blue Jackets' net recently. Against Colorado, he was beaten cleanly on a couple of goals that flipped momentum.

Avalanche center Charlie Coyle, who used to torment the Blue Jackets with the Boston Bruins, scored one of those to tie it 3-3 in the third. Merzlikins wasn't screened on Coyle's shot from the slot, which sailed between his right arm and body. The shot was also preceded by a turnover that allowed the Avs to come back at Merzlikins with a numbers advantage.

"Probably their third goal is kind of when we felt it (switch)," Evason said. "We just can't shoot ourselves in key situations, where the game is still sitting there and we're still in a (good) spot, and we do something kind of uncharacteristic, systematically, that we don't (usually) do, and it ends up in our net or flips the momentum of the hockey game, and we think that third goal probably did."

Columbus Blue Jackets outplayed against travel weary Colorado Avalanche

The table was set for the Blue Jackets to have a great start against the Avalanche, who played after a 22-hour turnaround following Wednesday's 3-2 shootout win in Chicago.

The Avs also didn't make it to Columbus until Thursday due to severe weather in Ohio that kept the team's charter flight grounded. The Blue Jackets practiced Wednesday, but Werenski, captain Boone Jenner, center Sean Monahan and defenseman Dante Fabbro all stayed off the ice to rest.

Colorado opted not to play two top forwards, Martin Necas and Jonathan Drouin, while replacing them with fresher legs belonging to Jimmy Vesey and Miles Wood. Still, the Avs scored first on a goal by Nathan MacKinnon and took a 2-1 lead into the first intermission. It was the 10th time in the past 11 games the Blue Jackets have allowed the first goal, going 3-7-1 in that stretch.

Columbus Blue Jackets scratch Damon Severson, play Jack Johnson

The Blue Jackets made one lineup change after Tuesday's loss, sitting defenseman Damon Severson and dressing Jack Johnson as Erik Gudbranson's defense partner on the third pairing.

No glaring statistical issues stood out about Severson's performance Tuesday against the Predators, so handedness might've played a role. Severson and Gudbranson both shoot from the right side, which can be tricky for the one playing on his "off" side. Evason wasn't thrilled with the Jackets' defensive play, in general, against Nashville and said an evaluation would be made on whether they'd stick with the same defensive look.

The answer was no.

Johnson, a lefty, played with Gudbranson to give the Blue Jackets a veteran defensive pairing that, while slow of foot, provided two big bodies to block shots and win board battles. Johnson also played two stints for the Avalanche, helping them win the 2022 Stanley Cup.

Aston-Reese ends long goal drought for Columbus Blue Jackets

The Blue Jackets' only lead came in the second period on a goal by forward Zach Aston-Reese, who put them up 3-2 with a shot from the left wing that beat Avalanche goalie Mackenzie Blackwood just inside the near goal post. It was his fifth goal of the season and first since Nov. 15, ending a 57-game goal drought.

Aston-Reese's role isn't to score a bunch of goals. It's to win puck battles, play a checking role and chip in with goals whenever he can. Still, going 57 games is a long time without providing depth scoring. It was good to see Aston-Reese end that with a goal that felt at the time like it could've sparked a victory.

Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets shut out by Toronto Maple Leafs, continue to slide in playoff chase

By Brian Hedger- April 6, 2025

TORONTO — The Blue Jackets keep watching the same sad movie on repeat, and it has just about crushed their once promising playoff aspirations.

Once again, they came out strong and dominated from the opening draw without scoring a goal. Once again, a fluke bounce created a turnover that led to the opposing team taking a 1-0 lead that became 2-0 after a second turnover in the second period Saturday night at Scotiabank Arena. After that, in keeping with a familiar plot, things got out of hand in the third period of the Toronto Maple Leafs' 5-0 victory.

"It's difficult because we did play a real strong first period," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "We started right, started with the right mind-set, the energy level was great, but for whatever reason ... you lack some confidence or whatever the hell that is, and something bad happens, like a goal, and all of a sudden it's like we're reeling a bit."

William Nylander and Nicholas Robertson each scored two goals, Auston Matthews added his 30th goal of the season and the Maple Leafs (47-25-4) got an impressive 27-save shutout from backup goalie Anthony Stolarz.

Elvis Merzlikins started for the Blue Jackets (34-32-9), who've stumbled to a 4-10-1 record in 15 games since leaving the ice March 1 at Ohio Stadium after a thrilling 5-3 victory over the Detroit Red Wings.

That win gave the Blue Jackets control of the first wild card in the Eastern Conference.

They've plummeted since, starting Saturday's game four points behind the Montreal Canadiens for the second wild card with eight games remaining.

A Canadiens victory over the Philadelphia Flyers pushed that margin to six points with seven games left for the Jackets, who are now 11th in the conference and have a 22-hour turnaround to complete a back-to-back set against the red hot Ottawa Senators on Sunday at Canadian Tire Centre.

Robertson got the scoring started late in the first with his first goal of the game, sending a wrist shot past Merzlikins for a 1-0 lead after the Jackets' goalie turned the puck over on a clearing attempt. A turnover at the Blue Jackets' blue line in the second led directly to Robertson's second goal, which made it 2-0 after 40 minutes.

Nylander scored at 1:11 and 4:21 of the third to make it 4-0 and Matthews completed the scoring with 3:33 left to notch his 30th goal of the season.

"We weren't desperate enough in the third period," Blue Jackets captain Boone Jenner said. "Coming out, they score pretty much right away. It's on us. The first period, second period, we had some good minutes, but the third just wasn't good enough."

Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets blanked by Ottawa Senators for second straight shutout loss

By Brian Hedger- April 7, 2025

KANATA, Ontario — Less than 24 hours after a frustrating meltdown in the third period in Toronto turned a close game into a 5-0 loss, the Blue Jackets' pain continued Sunday at Canadian Tire Centre.

Kept off the scoreboard for a second straight game, an early 2-0 deficit that led to goalie Daniil Tarasov being replaced by Elvis Merzlikins was more than enough in the Ottawa Senators' 4-0 victory. The loss dropped the Blue Jackets' record in the second half of back-to-backs to just 1-10-0 this season, which will be a major area to examine if they miss the postseason.

"We're fighting for the playoffs," Blue Jackets defenseman Ivan Provorov said, "Every game matters. Every point matters. So, I don't think that should be a difficult thing to get yourself going for a back-to-back."

Adam Gaudette, Nicholas Matinpalo and David Perron gave Ottawa a 3-0 lead and Shane Pinto sealed it into an empty net late in the third.

Linus Ullmark made 29 saves for the shutout.

The loss was the third straight for the Blue Jackets (34-33-9), who haven't scored a goal since captain Boone Jenner put them up 3-2 at 7:56 of the second period in a 7-3 loss to the Colorado Avalanche on Thursday at Nationwide Arena. That's a span of 152:24 without a goal, allowing the Avalanche, Toronto Maple Leafs and Senators to score 13 consecutive goals against a goaltending combination of Merzlikins (11 goals allowed) and Tarasov (two goals allowed).

The loss drops the Blue Jackets even further out of the playoff hunt in the Eastern Conference with just six games remaining — including a rematch against the Senators on Tuesday in Columbus. Starting the game, the Jackets were 11th in the conference standings in a tie with the Detroit Red Wings at 77 points each, but the New York Islanders moved past both to 78 points with a 4-1 victory over the Washington Capitals.

The Pittsburgh Penguins are now closing in on the Blue Jackets with 74 points, while the Buffalo Sabres are five points back of them at 72 and just six points behind Columbus are the Boston Bruins and Philadelphia Flyers in the last two spots of the East standings.

The Blue Jackets are now 4-11-1 in 16 games since taking control of the first wild-card spot in their conference with a 5-3 victory over the Red Wings on March 1 at Ohio Stadium — a maddening plummet from a point when it felt like they might be headed to the postseason. Their precipitous drop has been almost as remarkable as their impressive buildup before it.

Sunday's game was another tough one to swallow.

Ottawa dominated the first few minutes of the game, swarming the Blue Jackets zone and taking a quick 2-0 lead on goals at 2:24 by Gaudette and 4:26 by Matinpalo — who netted the first goal of his NHL career (37 games).

The second goal prompted Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason to make a quick goaltending change from Tarasov to Merzlikins, who started 22 hours earlier in a 5-0 loss to the Toronto Maple Leafs at Scotiabank Arena. The switch in goalies snapped the Blue Jackets awake, but their slumber was only half the issue.

They also had to contend with Ullmark, the Senators' top goalie, playing net for Ottawa. Despite putting together a stretch late in the first to close a wide gap in shots to a reasonable number, the Blue Jackets weren't able to get the puck past Ullmark in the first two periods and still trailed 2-0 starting the third.

Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets admire Ovechkin's record: 'He's still dominating'

By Brian Hedger- April 7, 2025

KANATA, Ontario, Canada — If you listened closely, you could probably hear a collective sigh coming from the Blue Jackets' locker room Sunday afternoon at Canadian Tire Centre.

Alex Ovechkin's 895th career goal — scored against the New York Islanders at UBS Arena in Elmont, New York — allowed the Jackets to relax knowing that Wayne Gretzky's goal-scoring record won't be broken during one of the back-to-back games next weekend against the Washington Capitals.

That relief was appreciated most by the Jackets' five Russian players, who've rooted for Ovechkin to break the record while crossing their fingers it didn't happen against the Jackets.

"That's the guy who I watched when I was young, and I'm just really happy for him," Blue Jackets forward Yegor Chinakhov said Wednesday, when Ovechkin was still four goals away from history. "I really hope it doesn't happen against us."

Imagine the relief felt by Blue Jackets goalies Elvis Merzlikins and Daniil Tarasov — Tarasov especially, because he's a Russian whose father was a professional goalie Ovechkin knows and occasionally still asks about. Now, Tarasov can just enjoy Ovechkin's feat without worrying about becoming the answer to a trivia question.

"For every kid back in Russia in my generation, there were Russians who came to the NHL and played at a very high level," Tarasov said. "(Ovechkin) and (Evgeni Malkin) and (Ilya) Kovalchuk, those guys and (Pavel) Datsyuk ... these are huge names for the world of hockey and especially for Russia. When you're growing up seeing those guys, it's unreal just watching plays and how they've scored some goals, especially Ovi."

Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason and Rick Nash, the team's director of hockey operations and former superstar forward, each have memories of Ovechkin. Evason's first game as a Capitals assistant coach was Ovechkin's NHL debut on Oct. 5, 2005 in Washington, and that night, Ovechkin scored his first goal against the Blue Jackets. (He scored his second less than five minutes later.)

Guess who was on the ice with a front-row view?

"I remember there was a lot of buildup coming into that game," Nash said. "I think it was after the (2005-06 NHL lockout), and it was two of these studs, (Sidney) Crosby and Ovechkin, coming into the league. So, it was the first time I got to put eyes on Ovi, and he didn't disappoint, right from the start. Seeing him in his first game, he was everything as advertised."

Evason saw the same goal from the Capitals' bench. Twenty years later, he watched from the coaches' office at Canadian Tire Centre as "The Great Eight" passed "The Great One" in all-time goals.

"It's extremely special for not only him and the Capitals, and whoever has been around it, but the hockey world," Evason said. "I'm certainly happy for him and his family. I know the hockey player that he is, and the man, and everybody has a great deal of respect for him."

Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski is certainly in that category. He's had the challenging task of defending Ovechkin for nine years as a Metro Division rival and played with the Capitals' captain on two division teams that competed in NHL's all-star games (2018, 2022).

"I've been trying to watch all their games the last couple weeks just to see the chase and see him become the greatest goal-scorer," Werenski said. "Obviously, playing against him is always a challenge. Even the goal today that breaks the record, we were talking about it in the (locker) room. There's no one in the league that shoots that puck on a power play entry beside him ... and it's a missile, top corner. He's been doing it his whole career, so it's super impressive and it was awesome to witness greatness."

The fact it didn't happen in Columbus with a group of admiring Russians on the Blue Jackets' bench made it even more special for Tarasov, Chinakhov, Kirill Marchenko, Dmitry Voronkov and Ivan Provorov.

"It's hockey history and you're really proud that a guy from your country did this incredible thing," Tarasov said. "He's 39 and he's still scoring like he was in his prime. He's showing that it doesn't matter how old you are. You can still score when you're playing with the passion that he has ... the love of hockey. For all Russians who are growing up now, they're watching this guy playing at this level at this age and he's not just skating. He's not just scoring five or 10 goals. He's still dominating."

Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets reach breaking point in 5-0 loss to Toronto Maple Leafs: Takeaways

By Brian Hedger- April 7, 2025

TORONTO — Cracks are starting to show, but the Blue Jackets are determined to mend them quickly.

Each loss piled on top of others feels twice as heavy on the Blue Jackets' shoulders now with just seven games left and their playoff hopes fading quickly. A 5-0 loss to the Toronto Maple Leafs on Saturday was the latest gut punch, and the apparent unraveling of what's been a memorable season is getting harder to watch.

This was the fifth time they've been shut out in 15 games since seizing control of the first wild-card spot in the Eastern Conference on March 1.

They're just 4-10-1 since then, have dropped to 11th in the conference, trail the Montreal Canadiens by six points for the second wild card, have allowed 10 unanswered goals in their past two games and coach Dean Evason felt a need Saturday night to stem a finger-pointing flare-up.

"That's exactly what we addressed," Evason said. "We've stuck together all year. What would we change at this point? Forget about pressure or whatever, all of that. You know, you don't change just because there's a situation that's a little bit negative ... and we haven't. We've done it (finger-pointing) a couple times, maybe, and tonight we certainly did, so we addressed it real early."

Here are three takeaways:

The way Elvis Merzlikins left the Blue Jackets' 7-3 loss to the Colorado Avalanche on Thursday, there was reason to think Evason and goaltending coach Niklas Backstrom might shift to Daniil Tarasov in Toronto.

After allowing the seventh goal to the Avalanche on a defensive breakdown that left him little chance to make a save, Merzlikins smashed his stick on the right goal post and then bent it on the ice while skating to the Blue Jackets' bench. That's when Evason made his first decision this season to pull a goalie.

Tarasov finished the game, Merzlikins snapped his stick in the tunnel area and Evason said after the game that his decision to pull Merzlikins was based partly on performance and partly on his emotional response to the seventh goal. According to TV analyst Jody Shelley during Saturday's FanDuel Sports Network broadcast, Merzlikins took the Blue Jackets out to dinner Friday as a team and apologized for his exit against the Avalanche.

He got the starting assignment against the Maple Leafs and helped the Jackets stay within striking distance for two periods. Evason was asked about the rationale behind starting Merzlikins in Toronto, but his answer said more about the Blue Jackets' frame of mind after another galling loss.

"There was all of us to blame in this hockey game," he said.

During their morning skate, the Blue Jackets unveiled a new setup with their forward lines. James van Riemsdyk replaced Luke Kunin as the lone personnel switch, but a shakeup of combinations resulted in new looks on all four lines.

Dmitry Voronkov moved from Sean Monahan's top line to the third. Kent Johnson moved from the second line to the first. Van Riemsdyk skated on the second line. Cole Sillinger centered the third line and Justin Danforth, who had been handling that role previously, moved to right wing on the fourth line.

"It's just to get a little tweak," Evason said. "As coaches, we sometimes do too much of that, but we like to leave the lines together. We have for a while now. It's just that game (Thursday against Colorado), we didn't particularly like some stuff. ... Hopefully, we made the right combinations (and) put the right magnets in place that will give us a chance to get two points here tonight."

After two periods, the results were a mixed bag.

The Jackets got off to a strong start, rolling all four lines and controlling play, but the Maple Leafs still took a 1-0 lead into the first intermission despite being outshot 12-8. Nicholas Robertson's first goal was the only one in the first 20 minutes, and he scored it off turnovers by Zach Werenski and Merzlikins.

Robertson also scored off a turnover by Werenski outside the Jackets' blue line to make it 2-0 in the second period, making the forward lines less of a story. Overall, the Blue Jackets played a solid game through the first 40 minutes. They just couldn't convert any of their scoring chances into goals against Maple Leafs backup goalie Anthony Stolarz, who pitched his second shutout of the season.

Now, they're expected to face Ottawa's No. 1 goalie, Linus Ullmark, in the back-to-back finale Sunday.

Prior to their meltdown in the third, the Blue Jackets played much better than they had the previous two games. They pounced on loose pucks, broke up plays with timely stick checks and even threw their weight around a little more with stiff body checks.

The problem was twofold.

First, they couldn't get a puck past Stolarz despite their impressive forechecking work. Secondly, two turnovers led directly to scoring chances that Robertson buried. The Blue Jackets have outscored those mistakes before this season, but every little miscue now looms larger with their playoff hopes dangling by a thread.

The Athletic / Blue Jackets' Elvis Merzlikins melts down, gets pulled in ugly loss to Avalanche

By Aaron Portzline- April 5, 2025

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Columbus Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason does not like to pull his starting goaltender, even when a game goes south. Evason explained just last week that goaltenders, like any other position player, deserve a chance to play their way out of a bump or slump.

But even Evason has his limits.

On Thursday, Evason admitted he had at least considered pulling Elvis Merzlikins during the second period of an ugly loss to the Colorado Avalanche. But Merzlikins gave Evason no choice but to make a move early in the third period, when the rout was well underway.

The Avalanche delivered a staggering blow to the Blue Jackets' playoff chances, scoring five unanswered goals to win 7-3 before a beyond-capacity crowd of 18,392 in Nationwide Arena. The post-game dressing room was as quiet as it's been all season, with a frustrated undertone.

"We're all a little bit hot in there," Evason said.

The Blue Jackets led 3-2 midway through the game, but allowed three goals in the final 7:21 of the second period for a 5-3 lead. Two of them were goals that Merzlikins would almost certainly want back, and yet Evason's hook didn't come until the third.

The Avs scored two goals only 1:48 apart early in the third. After Miles Wood scored from the slot to make it 7-3, Merzlikins slammed his stick on a goal post and shattered it. He then skated toward the bench, ostensibly to get a new one, when Evason signaled to back-up Daniil Tarasov to take the net.

It marked the first time all season the Blue Jackets had pulled their starting goaltender. They were the last club in the NHL to have that distinction until Thursday.

Asked after the game if he was planning to pull Merzlikins based on the Avs' seventh goal, or if it was the stick-slamming that ended the goaltender's evening, Evason measured his words.

"A little of both, yeah," Evason finally said. "I'm not going to elaborate on that, but a little of both."

Asked if he'd considered pulling Merzlikins earlier in the game, Evason thought long and hard before offering a one-word answer: "Maybe."

The Blue Jackets got goals from Sean Monahan, Zach Aston-Reese and Boone Jenner. Merzlikins stopped 21 of 28 shots before he exited at 5:49 of the third. Tarasov came on to a smatter of cheers and stopped all four shots he faced the rest of the way.

There's no question that Merzlikins has been markedly better this season than he was last season, just as he was markedly better last season than he was in 2022-23. But better doesn't mean good enough, and Merzlikins' play of late has been rough. Since a stellar outing in a 1-0 loss to Florida on March 20, Merzlikins has a .843 save percentage and a 5.11 goals-against average in five games. A goalie's numbers are never entirely his — the Blue Jackets could certainly stand to play tighter in front of him — but those numbers are not conducive to winning.

Merzlikins did not speak with reporters after the game.

The Avs' goal by Charlie Coyle to tie it 3-3 at 12:39 of the second appeared to be the start of Merzlikins' undoing. Mathieu Olivier was trailing the play — and Coyle appeared to be his guy on a three-on-two rush — but Coyle's shot from the right circle snuck under Merzlikins' right arm.

"Probably their third goal is when we felt it," Evason said. "We just can't shoot ourselves in key situations where the game is still sitting there and we're still in a spot and we do something uncharacteristic and it ends up in our net or flips the momentum."

It was a big night for stick swinging. After the red light went on behind Merzlikins, Olivier continued his skating path and smashed his stick into the end wall in the corner. Merzlikins' body language after the goal — he huffed and puffed — likely didn't sit well with Evason, either.

A goal just 1:23 later by Colorado's Parker Kelly sailed under Merzlikins' glove from the high slot. With 37.4 seconds remaining in the third, Cale Makar scored a power-play goal off a slap shot from high in the left circle.

Evason made it clear earlier this season that he wasn't a fan of Merzlikins' on-ice tirades, especially a scene earlier this season when he smashed his stick on the net after losing a shutout late in a game. That prompted a meeting between the goaltender and coach. It remains to be seen if there will be repercussions for Thursday's incident.

Blue Jackets players, meanwhile, circled the wagons around Merzlikins.

"There were some shots (Merzlikins) couldn't see," said Jenner, the Blue Jackets' captain. "Tricky shots. He's been an unreal player for us all year. Even tonight he made some big saves. Some are just finding the holes. That's going to happen. It's just like I said about the rest of the group. I'm sure he'll bounce back, no problem."

It was a rough night for the Blue Jackets all around. While they were losing to Colorado, Montreal was strengthening its hold on the first wild-card spot with a 4-1 win over Boston. The Canadiens (81 points, seven games remaining) now have a four-point lead over the Blue Jackets (77, eight games remaining).

The Blue Jackets now face a weekend back-to-back on the road against the Toronto Maple Leafs (Saturday) and Ottawa Senators (Sunday), and back-to-backs have been a struggle all season, especially the second games.

It sure felt as if the challenge for the Blue Jackets to make the postseason became significantly steeper on Thursday. Then again, the Blue Jackets are 4-9-1 since March 1.

As Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski noted, they can't expect help from other teams without helping themselves.

"If we're going to lose hockey games, we don't deserve to make the playoffs, right?" Werenski said. "We have to do our own work in here. We can't bank on Montreal losing, the Islanders losing, Detroit losing.

"At the end of the day, it doesn't matter. We have to do our own work and we have to win hockey games, and we haven't done that consistently (over) the last 14-15 games. It definitely makes it harder. It falls on us to get wins and we're not doing it."

The Athletic / Blue Jackets' playoff hopes fading fast after ugly loss to Maple Leafs

By Aaron Portzline- April 5, 2025

Playoff hopes have suddenly become a playoff pipe dream for the Columbus Blue Jackets.

The Blue Jackets came unglued in the third period Saturday, coughing up three goals in a 5-0 loss to the Toronto Maple Leafs before 19,179 in Scotiabank Arena. It marked the eighth time this season Columbus has been shut out, and five of those have occurred in the last 14 games.

After becoming one of the NHL's best stories for most of this season, and playing well above expectations, the Blue Jackets have looked for more than a month now as if the stage is suddenly too big for them. They're just 4-10-1, with only two regulation wins, since March 1.

"It got away from us," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "We did some individual things (in the third period) that we don't normally do. Are we disappointed in that? Yeah. Did we address it already? Yeah."

Evason didn't provide specifics, but he acknowledged there was some internal conflict in the form of finger-pointing among the Blue Jackets either during the game or after Saturday's game.

One can understand why tempers would be running hot. Coupled with Thursday's 7-3 loss to the Colorado Avalanche, the Jackets have allowed 10 unanswered goals.

"That (finger-pointing) is exactly what we addressed (after the game)," Evason said. "We've stuck together all year. Why would we change at this point? Forget about pressure and whatever, all of that. You don't change because there's a situation that's a little bit negative, and we haven't.

"We've done it a couple of times (this season), maybe, and tonight we certainly did. So we addressed it real early."

One can understand why it's a stressful situation.

The Blue Jackets only remained in the playoff race because the other teams around them battling for a playoff spot have been coughing and hacking almost as badly as the Jackets. The New York Rangers, New York Islanders and Detroit Red Wings can't get it together, either.

But the Montreal Canadiens have awakened in recent days, grabbing a firmer hold on the top wild-card spot in the East.

A 3-2 win over the Philadelphia Flyers on Saturday has opened a six-point lead over the Blue Jackets, who have only seven games remaining. The Jackets also now trail the Rangers and Red Wings in the standings, giving them two more obstacles.

Even if they win their final seven games — and what indication is there that a seven-game win streak is in the offing? — The Jackets are a long shot for the postseason.

RIP IT LIKE ROBBY! pic.twitter.com/010fj81wQT

— Toronto Maple Leafs (@MapleLeafs) April 5, 2025

Blue Jackets goaltender Elvis Merzlikins, who was pulled from a start Thursday, was sent back out for another start Saturday. He was better, but still played a role in the Maple Leafs' 1-0 goal at 10:03 of the first period, the 11th time in 12 games Columbus has allowed the first goal.

Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski was carrying a puck back into his defensive zone when his exit pass caromed off the right and then left skate of Leafs forward Steven Lorentz, sending the puck slowly toward Merzlikins in his crease.

Rather than freeze the puck, Merzlikins fired a hard pass back at Werenski from close range, the puck kicking off the inside of Werenski's left skate and skidding into the slot where the Leafs pounced. Nick Robertson scored for the slot, the first of his two goals, for a 1-0 lead.

The lead grew to 2-0 in the second period on a tough break. Jackets defenseman Dante Fabbro was backpedaling when the puck hopped over his stick and continued right into Robertson's path for a clean look on Merzlikins.

The wheels came off in the third period. It was 3-0 and 4-0 only 3:10 apart early in the third period on goals by William Nylander. Auston Matthews joined the party late in the third to cap the scoring.

"Yeah, it's frustrating," Blue Jackets defenseman Erik Gudbranson said. "We played downhill on them in the first period, for sure. I thought we did it for the most part in the second, too.

"We maybe fought the puck and stepped away from our game trying to get back in the game in the third. It's frustrating. You have to press, but you have to press responsibly, right? That's a team (Toronto) that can make you pay pretty quickly."

Blue Jackets captain Boone Jenner was more pointed.

"The third period ... we're down 2-0, but we didn't play nearly as hard or good enough for the final 20, and that's what happens. That's on us. We have to be a lot better as a group.

"I don't think we were desperate enough in the third period. They come out and score pretty much right away (1:11). That's on us. You have to go out and play hard and give yourself a chance to win. First period, second period, we had some good minutes. In the third, the push wasn't good enough."

The Blue Jackets packed up after the game and flew to Ottawa, where they'll play the first in a home-and-home series Sunday against the Senators.

As if the hill isn't steep enough now, there's this: The Jackets are 1-9-0 in the second game of a back-to-back, one of the worst records in the NHL.

"We're professionals, we have a job to do for 60 minutes," Blue Jackets winger Mathieu Olivier said. "We kind of let it slip away in the third.

"All year, we've done a good job handling adversity, and now we're right back at it (Saturday)."

The Athletic / Familiar script: Blue Jackets fall behind early, suffer second straight shutout

By Aaron Portzline- April 7, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets continue to fall behind and chase games. And now the Jackets are back in a scoring funk where they don't create many scoring chances, much less get one past the goaltender.

It's as if the club that was so vivacious and dangerous in the first five months of the season — quite possibly the best story in the NHL this season — has gone missing.

On Sunday, the Blue Jackets were shut out 4-0 by the Ottawa Senators before 15,616 at the Canadian Tire Centre, further damaging their faint playoff hopes. Less than 24 hours earlier, the Blue Jackets were blanked 5-0 by the Toronto Maple Leafs.

That's the second time this season, and the seventh time in franchise history, the Blue Jackets have been shut out in consecutive games. But that's not the ugliest of numbers: In their last 15 games, the Blue Jackets have been shut out six times and have just four wins (4-10-1).

The free fall started right after the Blue Jackets beat the Detroit Red Wings on March 1 in an outdoor game in Ohio Stadium. Since then, they've mostly gone missing.

"The outdoor game and before that, everything was great," said Blue Jackets goaltender Elvis Merzlikins, who came into the game in relief of starter Daniil Tarasov in the first period. "This is hockey. Sometimes things don't work like you want them to, and sometimes they're even better than you'd expect. Some nights we score eight, some nights we score none. We have to stick together and work the problem out."

Dating back to a 7-3 loss to Colorado on Thursday in Nationwide Arena, the Blue Jackets have allowed 14 unanswered goals, matching a franchise record that was established in the dark ages of the franchise (Feb. 18-23, 2003). Their current scoreless streak sits at 152 minutes, 4 seconds.

"We're not scoring goals," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "It just gets magnified when you get down, because you're pressing even harder, and when you're not having success and you're not scoring goals and you're pressing, it's not a good recipe."

The Blue Jackets fell behind Sunday only 2:24 into the game when Senators forward Adam Gaudette took advantage of a huge gap defensively to beat Tarasov with a wrister from the high slot off the rush.

Barely two minutes later, at 4:26, the lead grew to 2-0 when Tarasov stopped a Claude Giroux shot but left it on the doorstep for Nikolas Matinpalo, whose first NHL goal may be the easiest of his career. There were no Blue Jackets around to clear the crease, much less battle with Matinpalo.

One more Blue Jackets tendency that has changed dramatically of late: Evason, who has said he doesn't like to pull goaltenders from starts, has now done exactly that twice in three games.

Merzlikins was pulled from the loss to Colorado after he splintered his stick on the net after allowing a third-period goal, and Tarasov was pulled after Matinpalo tucked home the rebound.

Tarasov, who stopped four of six shots in only 4:26, endured the earliest pull of his career and the second-quickest hook the NHL has seen this season. Only twice in Blue Jackets franchise history has a goaltender been pulled earlier in the game, and both times it happened to Steve Mason, once in 2009-10 and once the following season.

"It's never one person's fault, and it obviously looks like that when a goaltender gets pulled," Evason said. "We certainly don't want to do that. Both of those goals were team goals. But we made a decision to try something, and obviously, it didn't work."

The only bright spot for the Blue Jackets was Merzlikins, who has struggled mightily in recent starts, but was strong in his first relief outing of the season. He stopped 22 of 23 shots the rest of the way, giving the Blue Jackets ample time to work their way back into it.

Evason has been patient with his forward lines all season, but he went to the mixer on Sunday for a second straight game. Center Adam Fantilli was elevated to the top line between wingers Dmitri Voronko and Kirill Marchenko, while center Sean Monahan skated with Boone Jenner to his left and Kent Johnson to his right. Yegor Chinakhov, a healthy scratch in the previous six games, was back in the lineup, too, with veteran Zach Aston-Reese sitting as a healthy scratch.

The changes didn't work. Columbus created just 10 high-danger chances.

The Blue Jackets are among the league leaders in two completely disparate categories. They've scored six or more goals in 14 games, more than any other NHL club. They've also now been shut out nine times this season, second only to Nashville. Go figure.

At this point, with six games remaining in the season, it would take a miracle for the Blue Jackets to reach the postseason. It might take a few miracles, actually, as the Jackets would need the teams ahead of them to simply collapse in the final two weeks of the season.

One number that hasn't changed lately: the Blue Jackets are 1-10 in the second of back-to-back games. They have one more next weekend (Saturday and Sunday) against the Washington Capitals.

"We have to have a belief that if we get on a roll and get on a run, we'll be a good spot at the end of the year," Evason said. "We have no question that everyone's competing. I don't care who it is ... Elvis, Tarasov ... they're competing. Every guy on the team is battling to try to win hockey games. We have no concerns over that."

The Athletic / Blue Jackets Sunday Gathering: Goaltending overhaul is a must-do this summer

By Aaron Portzline- April 7, 2025

COLUMBUS, Ohio — A collection of notes, insights, ruminations and did-you-knows gathered throughout the week that was for the Columbus Blue Jackets:

Item No. 1: Net dilemma

Blue Jackets GM Don Waddell has major work ahead of him this summer. The defense needs a makeover, especially if veteran Ivan Provorov departs as a free agent. The goaltending needs an overhaul, but that might be easier wished for than executed.

Goaltender Elvis Merzlikins has played better than he did last season, and he was better last season than he was in 2022-23. But better does not mean good enough, and it's fair to say that Merzlikins has not been anywhere close to good enough again this season.

Among the 47 goaltenders who have appeared in more than 25 NHL games, Merzlikins is ranked 42nd with an .890 save percentage and 44th with a 3.24 goals-against average.

A deeper dive analytically shows, according to MoneyPuck, that Merzlikins has been the fourth-worst goaltender in the league in goals above expected, a figure that measures how many goals a goaltender has actually prevented vs. how many they'd be expected to prevent based on the quality of shots they've faced.

Yes, it's a subjective figure, but it's consistently subjective from player to player. And Merzlikins' minus-10.6 goals is ahead of only Detroit's Petr Mrazek (minus-14.0), San Jose's Alexandar Georgiev (minus-19.1) and Philadelphia's Samuel Ersson (minus-21.3).

Teed up for perfection from Drury to Kelly 📷#GoAvsGo pic.twitter.com/OJOAoXOjBV

— x — Colorado Avalanche (@Avalanche) April 4, 2025

By all accounts, Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason has done a masterful job steering the Blue Jackets this season, such that he'll likely get votes for the Jack Adams Award.

But one of the enduring mysteries is how much faith he's put in Merzlikins, and, perhaps more, how little faith he's shown in backup Daniil Tarasov and AHL Cleveland's Jet Greaves, who, in spot duty, has performed better than Merzlikins or Tarasov this season.

It was particularly surprising to see Merzlikins back in the net on Saturday after he was pulled following a stick-bashing tirade in the third period of an ugly loss to Colorado on Thursday. Evason has made it clear that he despises those outward shows of anger.

When asked if Merzlikins was pulled for the seven goals he allowed or the stick he destroyed, Evason paused and said, "A little of both."

So what can be done? It's probably too late to salvage this season — the Blue Jackets were six points out of a playoff spot with seven games to play heading into Sunday's matchup with Ottawa — but just imagine how much better the Blue Jackets would be if they had reliable goaltending.

When Waddell took the job last spring, he was blunt in his assessment, saying that Merzlikins — because of his massive contract and massive struggles on the ice — was virtually untradable and the three years

remaining on his contract (at \$5.4 million per season) was too long to be bought out without far-reaching financial consequences.

Has any of this changed one year later?

It's still highly doubtful that Merzlikins is tradable. But a buyout now would extend four seasons into the future, not six, as it would have if they bought out his contract last summer.

According to PuckPedia, it would cost the Blue Jackets \$1.5 million against the cap next season, \$2.8 million in 2026-27 and \$1.63 million the following two years. That's not an unwieldy amount.

The other issue: Who would replace Merzlikins as the starter?

Waddell and Evason clearly aren't impressed with Tarasov, who has made only 13 starts (none of them successive) since Oct. 27. He's actually played pretty well over his last six outings (five starts), putting up a .914 save percentage and 2.50 goals-against average since Jan. 30.

Greaves has played well in almost every opportunity at the NHL, and he's been hot in the AHL lately. Over his last 11 starts, dating to Feb. 15, he has a .954 save percentage for AHL Cleveland, but he's been recalled for only one start in that span.

Per the two-year contract signed by Greaves last summer, he has a one-way NHL deal for next season, meaning he'll make his NHL salary (\$812,500) no matter if he plays in Columbus or Cleveland. After four seasons in the AHL, if Greaves isn't NHL-ready — he has sure looked it — he may never be.

One challenge Waddell will face is a thin free-agent market for goaltenders this summer. Among the top names available, assuming they don't sign contract extensions first, are New Jersey's Jake Allen, Calgary's Dan Vladar, Vegas' Ilya Samsonov and Carolina's Freddie Anderson.

Item No. 2: Front-row seat

On July 12, 2023, Kenny McCudden resigned as a Blue Jackets assistant coach less than two weeks after the club announced the controversial hiring of Mike Babcock. For many, McCudden's abrupt departure served as a harbinger of the blowup to come with Babcock.

McCudden had been with the Blue Jackets for eight seasons. It didn't take long for other NHL clubs to step forward with offers.

"One of the biggest reasons I chose Washington was to be a part of history, and to be able to possibly see this happen," McCudden told The Athletic. "And here we are."

McCudden has had a front-row seat to hockey history, as Washington Capitals star Alex Ovechkin sat tied with Wayne Gretzky for the NHL goal-scoring record (894) heading into Sunday, when the Capitals played at the New York Islanders.

Nobody would appreciate the view more, either. McCudden is, quite obviously, a student of the game, but he's also passionate about hockey history, with a collection of antique skates and enough memorabilia to fill a wing of a museum.

This is McCudden's second season with the Capitals, and he and Ovechkin grew closer this season when Ovechkin was working his way back from a broken fibula. McCudden, the Caps' skills coach, took the ice with him most mornings as he was nearing a return.

"To be part of those skates, and to be feeding him pucks while he's working to get back and working on his shot ... I felt like I was throwing batting practice to Hank Aaron," McCudden said.

“For a guy of his talent level and his accomplishments, he’s incredibly receptive to coaching. He tells me what he wants to work on, and then I draw up the drills for him — the ones I think will get him ready — and he says, ‘No problem, my man.’”

McCudden said Ovechkin was one of the Washington players, along with T.J. Oshie, Nicklas Backstrom, John Carlson and others, who made him feel welcomed in Washington D.C.

“They were terrific with me, starting with Ovie,” McCudden said. “He’s all ears. He trusts you. He’s a player who really relies on the medical staff and the coaching staff to get him through the day and prepared to play.”

McCudden said he’ll often pull up near Ovechkin during practice and marvel at his shot while he’s blasting one-timers — scores of them daily — at the end of every practice. The only player he’s coached with such a powerful shot, he said, was Patrik Laine when they were together in Columbus.

“He’s a bull of an athlete,” McCudden said. “When you see his back, his legs ... he’s a bull. He’s one of a kind, really. We’re all seeing the goals, and they’re amazing. But the complete picture of his game ... I don’t think we’ve seen the likes of No. 8 before, and we won’t after, either.”

Last week, as Ovechkin was drawing nearer to Gretzky’s record, he asked McCudden to go on the ice with him before the scheduled Capitals’ practice to get some more “touches.” Think of that: A player nearing 900 career goals doing early, extra work.

McCudden arranged for other young players to join so they could run more elaborate drills that simulated traffic and obstacles. He’s now scored in four straight games, including a two-goal performance vs. the Chicago Blackhawks on Friday that pulled Ovechkin into a tie with Gretzky.

“I was talking to one of our younger players (Ethen Frank) during that practice, and I said, ‘Ethen, do we have stories to tell when our days are over?’” McCudden said. “And Ethen said, ‘Kenny, I know. I’ll never forget this.’

“Some day, when I’m 85 years old, I’ll be having a beer and a shot on a rail somewhere and I’ll be able to tell an Ovi story or two, right? Something like this, it just doesn’t come around for too many coaches. I’m aware and appreciative of that.”

Item No. 3: Take 5, Josh Flynn

Take 5 is a quick, breezy sitdown with a Blue Jackets player, coach or front-office staffer. This week’s features assistant general manager and salary cap expert Josh Flynn.

You’re a foodie. Favorite spots in Columbus?

I’ve got a few for you. Our fancy, special occasion spot is Veritas. Love the creativity of the tasting menu. We maybe go there three times a year. Our more regular nice place is Cento in German Village. When we sneak away without the baby we’ll go to Hyde Park (in Upper Arlington) and share a steak at the bar. Very cozy vibe. Our favorite lunch/brunch place is Northstar Cafe.

In what part of town did you settle?

Upper Arlington. We’ve been there since 2017. I used to live right by the rink when I was single. Upper Arlington is a great location. It’s like 10 minutes from the rink and downtown, 10 minutes, maybe, to (the Ohio State University’s) campus, 10 minutes from Dublin. Plus it’s got a nice character feel to it. All of the houses are different, the old trees ...

Favorite road city?

They're all Canadian. Vancouver is No. 1. Montreal is great, Toronto is great. I love Toronto because it's home. I've never missed a Toronto-Columbus game in the 17 years since I've been here. It's always great getting back there. It's really no different for us (management) than it is for the players. The players always have a little more juice in Toronto, and those of us off the ice love it, too. All of our family and friends are watching, so that's great. Toronto's No. 1 with an asterisk because it's home. Vancouver is No. 1 otherwise.

Besides the NHL, what's your favorite sport?

Probably the NFL. It's usually on during our off days. It's a short season, with lots of games where the stakes are high. Plus, you don't have to make a big investment time wise. I love baseball. I love the Blue Jackets. But it's 162 games a year. I can find time to watch 17 Miami Dolphins games a year.

Best concert you've attended?

There's some recency bias with this one. I went to the Soulshine benefit concert in New York (Madison Square Garden) last November. It was Dave Matthews Band, which is probably my all-time favorite. I've seen them over 100 times. Goose, which is one of my favorite new bands, was there, along with Warren Haynes, Trey Anastasio, Derek Trucks, Susan Tedeschi, Robert Randolph ... all these great musicians on one stage, and they played a four-hour concert. Dave Matthews at Red Rocks (in Morrison, Colo., outside Denver) a long time ago was incredible. They played four nights when I was in Denver for law school. I saw all four nights. One more, an honorable mention: Taylor Swift, the Eras Tour.

Item No. 4: Snacks

- Merzlikins and veteran defenseman Erik Gudbranson could be seen barking at each other during play early in the third period on Saturday. It started between the time Toronto's William Nylander scored to make it 3-0 (at 1:11 of the period) and when he scored again to make it 4-0 (at 4:21), and it spilled over to the bench area during a TV timeout a few minutes later. That's what Evason was likely referring to when he said the Blue Jackets started "finger-pointing" during the loss. Gudbranson was asked after the game by reporters in Toronto about the challenge of staying united, even as the season slips away. "We're the same team from when it was going well and the same team now," Gudbranson said. "It's a great group of guys and a lot of character in this room. We're working toward a goal and sometimes you have disagreements, but we all love each other in here."
- Can you figure out this Blue Jackets team? Can anybody? The Blue Jackets have scored six or more goals in 14 games this season, not only the most in franchise history but tops in the NHL this season. (Washington has done it 13 times.) This same Blue Jackets club has also been shut out eight times, tied for second-most in the league. (Nashville has been blanked 10 times.)
- Heading into Sunday's game in Ottawa, the Blue Jackets had allowed 10 unanswered goals — the final five in Thursday's 7-3 loss to Colorado and then five more in Saturday's 5-0 loss in Toronto. It matches a season high for consecutive goals allowed — the Jackets also allowed 10 straight from March 13-17 — and it's closer to a franchise mark than you might expect. According to the NHL, the Blue Jackets once allowed 14 unanswered goals from Feb. 18-23, 2003.
- Kirill Marchenko's hat trick last Tuesday vs. Nashville gave him 75 career goals, tied with Geoff Sanderson for the second-most of any player in his first three seasons with the Blue Jackets. Only Rick Nash (89) scored more. Marchenko, who now has 31 goals this season, has seven more games to add to his total.
- Who was the opponent when Ovechkin made his NHL debut on Oct. 5, 2005, in what was then called MCI Center? It was the Blue Jackets, who led 1-0 and 2-1 before losing 3-2. Ovechkin scored two goals in

his debut. His first was scored against goaltender Pascal Leclaire at 7:21 of the second period. Others on the ice for the Jackets for No. 8's No. 1: forwards Jan Hrdina, Rick Nash and David Vyborny, and defensemen Francois Beauchemin and Luke Richardson. (Also of note: 20-year-old Blue Jackets forward Dan Fritsche matched Ovechkin, on that night anyway, with two goals.)

- Ovechkin spoke openly on the morning of his debut about wanting to score on his first NHL shift. Well, he didn't score, but he did stop the game. Only 37 seconds into the game, Ovechkin blasted Blue Jackets defenseman Radoslav Suchy so hard against the end boards in the Jackets zone that it bent the supports between the seamless glass, requiring the rink crew to fix it.
- Who was on the bench that night for Washington as a first-year assistant coach? Evason, who, after six years coaching in the Western Hockey League (Kamloops, Vancouver and Calgary) made the leap to the NHL. He spent seven seasons with the Caps, working closely with Ovechkin. "I was fortunate to be there for the first game that he played (in the NHL)," Evason said. "For (seven) years, I watched him conduct himself, not only as a hockey player but as a person and a teammate. The entire hockey world is excited about what he's doing. To have an inside look at what he did, it was pretty special."
- Zach Aston-Reese had gone 57 games without a goal before he scored in the second period of Thursday's 7-3 loss to Avs. Aston-Reese was in a scrum of players along the left sideboards, just above the goal line, when he fired a wrister out of the crowd, catching Colorado goaltender Mackenzie Blackwood by surprise. It was Aston-Reese's first goal since he scored vs. Pittsburgh on Nov. 15 and his first since he signed a one-year extension in mid-January. His previous long, a 34-game drought, came in the 2021-22 season when he played for the Penguins.
- This week's Sunday Gathering trivia question: Blue Jackets rookie Jack Williams was given a few options for a sweater number, and he chose No. 29, becoming the 13th player to wear the number. Only No. 23, currently worn by Sean Monahan, has been issued more times (15). Which is the lowest number — zero is not an option, as the NHL won't allow it to be worn — that has never been worn by a Blue Jackets player in a regular-season game?
- Pretty strong pro debut on Friday by defenseman Guillaume Richard, who signed a two-year, entry-level contract with the Blue Jackets last week and joined AHL Cleveland. He scored a goal (on his first pro shot on goal) and added an assist in a 7-1 win over Wilkes-Barre/Scranton. Richard, a fourth-round pick (No. 101) in 2021, spent four seasons at Providence College, ending with a regional loss to Denver.
- The AHL can be quite an adjustment for young players. Gavin Brindley, the Blue Jackets' second-round pick (No. 34) in 2023, endured a 22-game streak without a point before Saturday when he had a goal and an assist in Cleveland's 3-0 win over Wilkes-Barre/Scranton. Brindley, who hadn't registered a point since Jan. 25, has 6-10-16 in 46 games this season.
- Forward Roman Ahcan had 20 goals in 146 games during his first three seasons with AHL Cleveland, and his future in the AHL looked murky. He signed a PTO to start the season with the Monsters, with a legitimate shot that he could end up in the ECHL. Instead, Ahcan has had a breakout AHL season with 18 goals in 61 games this season, including his first pro hat trick in Cleveland's win over Wilkes-Barre/Scranton on Friday.
- Trivia answer: The lowest number that's never been worn in a Blue Jackets regular-season game is 60. It's one of only 12 numbers between 1 and 98 that hasn't been issued. (No. 99, worn by Wayne Gretzky, has been retired by the league.)

[BlueJackets.com / Maple Leafs pull away from Blue Jackets](#)

By Dave McCarthy- April 6, 2025

TORONTO -- Nicholas Robertson and William Nylander each scored twice for the Toronto Maple Leafs in a 5-0 win against the Columbus Blue Jackets at Scotiabank Arena on Saturday.

"Our third period, I thought we were extremely disciplined, didn't sit back," Maple Leafs goalie Anthony Stolarz said. "We continued to forecheck them, press their defense and force them to turn pucks over and that allowed us to get open ice and score some goals and defensively I thought we were fantastic. We didn't really give up any chances."

Stolarz made 27 saves for his second shutout of the season and 10th in the NHL, Auston Matthews had a goal and an assist and Morgan Rielly had two assists for the Maple Leafs (47-25-4), who won their fourth in a row and are 5-0-1 in their past six.

"Staying in games, tight games where it's tight checking," Toronto coach Craig Berube said. "Not opening it up, not forcing things and getting frustrated and then taking it over in the third period. That's the biggest thing I can tell you about what I like right now."

Toronto increased its lead for first place in the Atlantic Division to four points over the Tampa Bay Lightning, who lost 3-2 in a shootout against the Buffalo Sabres.

Elvis Merzlikins made 22 saves for the Blue Jackets (34-32-9), who have lost two in a row and are 3-3-0 in their past six.

Columbus fell to six points behind the Montreal Canadiens for the second wild card in the Eastern Conference after Montreal defeated the Philadelphia Flyers 3-2.

"It's reality, it's difficult because we can't think we played a real strong first period," Columbus coach Dean Evason said. "Started right, started with the right mindset, energy level was great but for whatever reason you lack some confidence and something bad happens like a goal and all of a sudden we are reeling a bit. It's uncharacteristic for this team, for us to do that. So we've got to find a way as coaches and players to if something does happen like that and we are outplaying a team or playing really well, we just have to stay with it."

The Maple Leafs went up 1-0 at 10:03 of the first period when Robertson, who had been a healthy scratch the past three games, took a pass from Pontus Holmberg and shot past Merzlikins' glove from the slot.

"It feels great," Robertson said. "You want to make an impact on the game and scoring a couple does that. You just try to feed off that and continue that confidence. (The scratches) gave me a reset, gives me even more of that hunger to get back in there and be effective and try and make the most of any opportunity I'm given."

Robertson pushed it to 2-0 at 12:28 of the second period. Max Domi swatted the puck away from Zach Werenski at the blue line, allowing Robertson to skate on to the loose puck and shoot between Merzlikins' pads just to the right of the right hashmarks.

"It's huge," Stolarz said of Robertson. "He's a very skilled player and works extremely hard so for him to seamlessly step back into the lineup and score two important goals for us to get us going, that's huge for us and huge for his confidence I'm sure."

Nylander made it 3-0 at 1:11 of the third period when he got to a rebound from Rielly's point shot and shot between Merzlikins' pads.

He scored again at 4:21 to make it 4-0 when he took a pass from Rielly in the neutral zone, cut into the slot and shot to the blocker side for his 44th goal of the season.

"I don't think we were desperate enough in the third period," Columbus captain Boone Jenner said. "Coming out they score pretty much right away. That's on us, tighten up, whatever it is, you've got to go out and play hard and give yourself the best chance to win. The first period, second period we had some good minutes but the third just wasn't good enough."

Matthews put the Maple Leafs up 5-0 at 16:27 with his 30th goal of the season when he took a pass from Mitch Marner, who was behind the net, and shot from just below the left hashmarks. Matthews has scored at least 30 goals in each of his nine NHL seasons, the seventh player in NHL history to do so (Alex Ovechkin, Mike Gartner, Wayne Gretzky, Jari Kurri, Mike Bossy, Bryan Trottier).

Toronto had lost its prior two games against Columbus this season, 6-2 on Oct. 22 and 5-1 on Jan. 22.

"We talked about that before the game being due," Rielly said. "I thought the other guys played well, we got a couple in the third and the score looks different but it was a close game."

"We understand the importance of these games at this time of year so being up two is a good spot and a good opportunity for our guys to work at closing games out. So we're happy with the result and the third period plays a big part in that."

NOTES: Nylander's second goal was his 261st, moving him past Wendel Clark for ninth place on the Maple Leafs all-time goals list... Marner's assist extended his point streak to seven games (three goals, eight assists). It was his 70th of the season, making him the third player in Maple Leafs history with a 70-assist season, joining Doug Gilmour (95 in 1992-93 and 84 in 1993-94) and Darryl Sittler (72 in 1977-78).

[BlueJackets.com / Ovechkin's record has plenty of Blue Jackets ties](#)

By Jeff Svoboda- April 7, 2025

Chris Clark had established himself as a versatile NHL forward when he was traded from Calgary to Washington in the summer of 2005.

The lockout that erased the 2004-05 NHL season was over, and Clark reported to the nation's capital ready to get back to work. Washington was in rebuilding mode after its failed attempt to build a winner around high-priced free agent signing Jaromir Jagr, and Clark arrived to serve as a veteran presence on a team that was going to showcase young players and try to build a winner from within.

The centerpiece of that strategy? A young Russian wing named Alex Ovechkin, who had been selected as the No. 1 overall pick in the 2004 NHL Draft. An electric goal-scoring talent with Russia's national junior teams, Ovechkin headed to Washington that summer accompanied by plenty of hype but also a curiosity in how his game would translate to the NHL level.

It didn't take Clark long to take notice.

"I really didn't know much about him," said Clark, the Blue Jackets current director of player personnel. "I knew he was the first overall pick and all that. I always got there early so I could skate with the guys. He came in a little bit early as well.

"You knew there was something there. But you didn't know 20 years later it was something like this, that's for sure."

Of course, if you've even paid a little bit of attention to hockey over the intervening two decades, you know how Ovechkin turned out. Today against the New York Islanders, he scored his 895th career NHL goal, breaking Wayne Gretzky's seemingly unbreakable record for the most scored in league history.

Ovechkin has long been a legend, but now his name has sits alone at the top of the mountain. There have been plenty of dynamic, superstar hockey players with skill, but none have had the 39-year-old's combination of talent, consistency, luck and perseverance to reach this lofty height.

And it all started on Oct. 5, 2005, at what was then known the MCI Center in the District of Columbia's Chinatown. The opponent in his first NHL game? The Columbus Blue Jackets.

How It All Began

There were 16,325 fans in attendance that night, short of capacity, a sign of just how far the league had to go to reestablish its bond with fans after a lost season as well as the lowly expectations for the Caps. When Washington left the ice at the end of the 2003-04 season, they had compiled a 23-46-10-3 record, with their 59 points tying for the second fewest in the NHL with Chicago, one point better than Pittsburgh.

The Caps won the draft lottery, though, and took Ovechkin with the first overall pick ahead of fellow Russian standout Evgeni Malkin. There wasn't much debate, as Ovechkin's exploits – he made Russia's top-level league at age 16, had 23 goals in 14 games at the World U-18 Championships and 11 in 12 games at the World Juniors – made him the consensus top choice.

He played for Dynamo Moskva during the lockout – scoring 13 goals in 37 games – before making his NHL debut, but it didn't take Ovechkin long to show he belonged. Just 28 seconds after Dan Fritsche gave Columbus a 1-0 lead in the second period, Ovechkin floated into a soft spot of open ice at the top of the

slot and one-timed a pass from Dainius Zubrus past goalie Pascal Leclaire for his first NHL goal at 7:21 of the middle frame.

Ovechkin immediately raised both arms in celebration, but his night was far from over. Fritzsche scored his second goal of the game a few minutes later, and Ovechkin tied it right up at 11:51, skating down from what would become his customary spot in the left circle on the power play and burying the rebound of a Jeff Halpern shot.

Just one game in, Ovechkin had lived up to the hype, and it didn't stop from there. He started his career with an eight-game point streak, scoring six goals in that span.

"We got a chance early to see Ovi play," said Rick Nash, who was on the ice for Ovechkin's first goal. "You could tell right away that there was something special. With him being (20) at the time and stepping in the NHL and having the impact, it wasn't like most (20)-year-olds that step in. You had that feeling."

A Career Unlike Any Other

By the time Ovechkin finished his debut season, he had scored 52 goals among his 106 points, running away with the Calder Trophy given to the NHL's rookie of the year – he received 124 of 129 first-place votes to beat out Sidney Crosby, who had his own 102-point campaign – and finishing sixth in the Hart Trophy voting for MVP.

The numbers were as consistent as they were stupefying from there, with Ovechkin scoring 46 times as a sophomore and leading the league for the first time in year three with 62 tallies. He would go on to top the NHL goal-scoring chart nine times and has led the Caps to the playoffs 16 times; he was also a force of nature on the ice, routinely finishing seasons with more than 200 hits.

The excitement he generated with his play was equaled by the exuberance he showed after goals, whether he put them in the net or his teammates did.

"I talk about this a lot with him; it wasn't about him scoring, it was about the team scoring or the team having success," said Clark, who would become the Capitals' captain in 2006-07 before being traded to the Blue Jackets in 2009-10. "So when he did score, or when it wasn't him scoring and it was somebody else on the ice, it was almost like, 'I gotta know where he is, because he's going to jump on me.' You had to be ready for it – he was 230, 240 pounds jumping on you, but he was just as excited for everybody else to have success as he was for himself."

That didn't always go over well in a staid NHL culture that at the time was much more traditional than it is today. It was a league run by veterans with a code that that focused on not showing up opponents, and Clark was in an older environment where that was very much the case in Calgary. When he arrived in Washington, with a much younger team and a budding superstar ready to celebrate every accomplishment, it was a different world.

"It rubbed a lot of people the wrong way, which is crazy to think about, especially in this day and age," Clark said. "But it's a traditional sport. It's come a long way in the last 20 years, but for him to do those things, it bucked the trend. I was the same way – 'I scored a goal, I've scored before. Go line up, let's try to get another one.'"

"I wasn't old old, I was kind of in the middle of my career, and it's something where it was fun for me to have that side, something different like that."

While Ovechkin took some getting used to for the league and its players, his performances and the joy he found in the game were a boon for hockey's popularity. He also had the perfect counterbalance in Crosby. Both were destined for greatness, but different shades of it; one wasn't afraid to ruffle feathers,

while the other played with understated elegance. They became natural rivals, often running into one another in memorable playoff duels.

“The league was almost at a crossroads,” Nash said. “I feel like the NHL was starving for that new star power, and you couldn’t think of two bigger names. The buzz around it was incredible. Some of the matchups they’ve had over the years, it’s been fun to be a competitor against them, but it’s also fun to be a fan and watch and see what they’ve done.”

Of course, Crosby’s team success came much quicker than Ovechkin’s, with the Penguins winning Stanley Cups in 2009, 2016 and 2017. While Ovechkin’s play was the epitome of consistency, the Capitals faced frustrating playoff exit after frustrating playoff exit, failing to reach the Stanley Cup Final until 2018.

That year, Washington fell into a 2-0 hole in the opening round of the playoffs vs. Columbus, but with their backs against the wall, the Capitals roared back to win four straight games to eliminate the Blue Jackets. They then vanquished the Penguins, downed the Lightning and romped to a Cup victory over the expansion Golden Knights to give Ovechkin his first Stanley Cup.

His celebrations at the time were legendary, and the win felt like the ultimate validation of a career unlike any other.

“He’s got a team-first mentality,” said CBJ head coach Dean Evason, who was an assistant in Washington for the first seven years of Ovechkin’s career. “To see him and that franchise win the Stanley Cup there a few years ago and to see him doing what he’s doing and with the class that he’s doing it with, yeah, it’s exciting.”

A Legendary Impact

As Ovechkin was piling up goals and redefining what it meant to be a power forward in the NHL, a young kid in Barnaul, Russia, was watching.

Kirill Marchenko was just 5 years old when Ovechkin made his NHL debut and 22 when he made his own, meaning he’s watched Ovechkin first as a hero and now one of his peers, and Marchenko has made no bones about what the Caps superstar has meant to him over the years.

“He is my favorite player of all time,” Marchenko said. “When I grow up, he was the guy for me, the best of the best.”

When Marchenko first arrived in the NHL, he hadn’t met Ovechkin, but that changed after his callup to the Blue Jackets when the two were among a group of players went out to dinner in Columbus. Marchenko has since become a dynamic scorer in his own right, topping 30 goals this season for the first time, but he still speaks of Ovechkin in reverential tones.

“Yeah, I meet with him, but we have 14 years difference,” Marchenko said. “I am real shy. I can’t speak a lot with him, but I really respect him, and he’s a really good guy. He’s always asking, ‘How are you?’ and I want to say thank you for that. It’s really nice for me.”

Ovechkin, in many ways, remains a study in contrasts. He seemed to want to score more than anyone else, yet he always celebrated his teammates’ successes with the same gusto. He was one of the best players of his era, yet he had to wait so long for the ultimate team prize. He has aged better than almost anyone in NHL history, yet his fondness for Subway sandwiches and a beer or two has become part of his aura.

It all comes back to him being his authentic self, which has earned respect and admiration throughout the league.

"I always make time to see him after games or in pregame skates, and it's amazing the transition from young teenager to father and husband," Clark said. "He's a grownup now. The last 10 years since I've been out and seeing him, the hair is getting a lot grayer, he's a lot more mature. He's asking me about my family, he's talking about his family and stuff like that. As players do, they transform from young teenagers full of life to grown up and mature."

The constant has been his ability to score goals. Despite fracturing his fibula just over a month into this season – his first major injury in his entire career – Ovechkin's record-breaking goal was his 42nd of the year, making him the second-oldest NHL player to reach 40 goals in a season. Even with all the talented players who have come into the league over the years, Ovechkin is third in the NHL this season in goals.

For those who have been through the grind, Ovechkin's longevity makes him a marvel. Indeed, the Russian machine never breaks.

"Most players, myself included, your body just gives out on you," Clark said. "You can't do it anymore because of the wear and tear, but he's still able to do it. That's why you can't predict anything because you need the talent, you need the teammates, and I'm not going to say it's luck, but you need something to go your way to play that long. It is freakish."

Evason has been around the NHL for Ovechkin's career, first on his side and then facing him on the opposing bench. His respect for the Great 8 is informed by what he saw behind closed doors and on the hockey world's biggest stages, and the CBJ head coach can't help but be impressed by what he has seen.

"Him and I both started at the same time," Evason said. "For eight years, I watched him conduct himself not only as a hockey player but a person and a teammate. Obviously the entire hockey world's excited about what he's doing, but to have an inside look at what he did was pretty special."

BlueJackets.com / Blue Jackets shut out by Senators

By Callum Fraser- April 7, 2025

OTTAWA -- Linus Ullmark made 29 saves for the Ottawa Senators in their second straight shutout win, 4-0 against the Columbus Blue Jackets at Canadian Tire Centre on Sunday.

"We've stressed it a lot from the beginning: You don't have games or stretches like this without your goalies playing well," Ottawa coach Travis Green said.

It was Ullmark's fourth shutout of the season for the Senators (42-29-6), who lead the NHL with 10 shutouts. Anton Forsberg made 40 saves in a 3-0 victory against the Florida Panthers on Saturday.

"Lately, we haven't done as many immature mistakes," Ullmark said of the team's defensive play. "We don't force plays as much as we did earlier in the season. You know, we take what's there, and if there's no play, we chip it out, live to fight another day."

Nikolas Matinpalo scored his first NHL goal and Thomas Chabot had two assists for the Senators, who have won three straight and moved within two points of the Florida Panthers for third in the Atlantic Division.

"I thought we played a pretty complete game," Green said. "I loved our start, loved how we came out and kind of set the game how we wanted to play, to be honest. Really liked our third period; spent a lot of good time in their zone and played a really good, complete game. And Linus was good in net."

Ottawa is also seven points ahead of the Montreal Canadiens for the first wild card in the Eastern Conference.

Elvis Merzlikins made 22 saves in relief for the Blue Jackets (34-33-9), who were shut out for the second straight game following a 5-0 loss to the Toronto Maple Leafs on Saturday. Daniil Tarasov was pulled early in the first period after allowing two goals on six shots.

"You've got to be patient, as I've said from the start of the season," Merzlikins said. "We're not a bad hockey team. I believe in my boys. I know they are trying and they are working their [behinds] off and sooner or later it's going to come. I know it didn't [come]. I know they're frustrated — I see that. It's just about patience. It's a team sport. You cannot be an individual. This is the NHL."

Columbus, which has lost three straight, is six points behind the Canadiens for the second wild card.

"Clearly, we're not scoring goals," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "So, it just gets magnified when you get down because you're pressing even harder, and when you're not having success and you're not scoring goals and you're pressing, it's not a good recipe."

Ottawa went in front 1-0 at 2:24 of the first period when Adam Gaudette beat Tarasov blocker side with a wrist shot from the top of the slot on the rush. It was Gaudette's first goal in 24 games.

"I don't think it's 'Tary's' fault, obviously," Columbus defenseman Ivan Provorov said of Tarasov being pulled. "I think the whole team, as a team, we didn't start on time. Once again, on a back-to-back. Honestly, I don't really know what our problem is with back-to-backs, but this has been our weakest spot so far of the season."

Matinpalo tipped Claude Giroux's shot from the point and then scored on his own rebound at the edge of the crease to make it 2-0 at 4:26.

“I was alone in front of the net — I don’t know why,” Matinpalo laughed. “[The puck was] just bouncing and I just put it in.”

Perron pushed the lead to 3-0 at 4:32 of the third period. Crashing the net, Perron juggled a Drake Batherson rebound with his right skate and batted it in.

Shane Pinto scored into the empty net for the 4-0 final at 19:19.

NOTES: Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski had a game-high eight shots. ... Columbus forward Mathieu Olivier had a game-high seven hits. With the shutout, the Senators tied a franchise record for shutouts in a single season with 10 between Ullmark (four), Forsberg (three) and Leevi Merilainen (three). ... The Senators' home shutout streak is at 153:00, the franchise's longest streak since a run of 154:53 from March 23 to April 8, 2017. ... Ottawa is an NHL-best 33-6-0 when scoring first.

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Fall to Maple Leafs Behind Robertson's & Nylander's Two Goals

By Mark Scheig- April 6, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets entered the weekend looking for a spark in their race to the playoffs. Instead, they ran into a buzzsaw in Toronto on Saturday night.

Anthony Stolarz pitched a 27-save shutout to help lift the Toronto Maple Leafs to a 5-0 win over the Blue Jackets. Both Nick Robertson and William Nylander scored twice. Auston Matthews scored his 30th of the season giving him nine consecutive 30-goal seasons for the Maple Leafs.

For the Blue Jackets, the game didn't start out bad. But mistakes did ultimately catch up to them.

Game Recap

The Blue Jackets came out flying in the first period. Overall, they played the kind of period that's required in tight games. But a bad bounce helped the Maple Leafs to open the scoring.

Elvis Merzlikins' pass hit Zach Werenski's skates and deflected right to Robertson. He buried his 13th of the season to make it 1-0. After being a health scratch for some time, this was a much-needed game from Robertson as the Maple Leafs are looking to settle what their playoff lineup will look like.

The Blue Jackets outshot the Maple Leafs 11-8 in the first period. However, they couldn't keep the momentum up in the second. The teams didn't allow much in the middle of the ice. Then a turnover created Robertson's second goal.

Max Domi was able to get the puck off Werenski. The bounce went right to Robertson who scored his 14th of the season to make it 2-0. Stolarz made it all stand up.

From there, the Blue Jackets faced an up-hill battle against a team in the Maple Leafs who are doing a better job of playing a shut down game. They got rewarded for their efforts in the third.

Nylander scored both of his goals in the third 3:10 apart to expand their lead to 4-0. He now has 44 goals on the season, second only to Leon Draisaitl.

Auston Matthews then put the finishing touches on the scoring finishing off a pass from Mitch Marner to make it 5-0. There were some chippy moments in the game. Steven Lorentz and Sean Kuraly had a fight. Simon Benoit fought Mathieu Olivier. Olivier also had a hit on Robertson that didn't look good at first. Robertson appeared to be okay.

Merzlikins finished with 22 saves on the night. Stolarz recorded his second shutout of the season. He will improve on the 2.34 goals-against and .920 save percentage he came into the game with.

With the Canadiens 3-2 win over the Flyers, the Blue Jackets now trail the last wildcard spot by six points. They have a game in hand on Montreal. Both teams do play on Sunday with the Blue Jackets in Ottawa while the Canadiens have to travel to Nashville.

The Maple Leafs now own a four-point lead in the Atlantic. They head to Florida to take on the Panthers Tuesday night in Sunrise.

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Face Tough Road to Playoff Berth

By William Espy- April 6, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets have only seven more games in the 2024-25 season, and their playoff chances are riding on their upcoming performances. Despite being seen as bottom-feeders by many entering the season, they've overcome the odds and put themselves in a battle that nobody expected. Regardless of what happens, they've exceeded expectations in their first season under head coach Dean Evason. However, this group of players wants to make the playoffs together, but it'll be a difficult task looking at the opposition ahead of them.

Blue Jackets' Recent Performances

The Blue Jackets haven't had an easy schedule for a while now, as they've constantly been facing opposition that they're battling for a wild card spot and teams who are almost certainly heading to the postseason over the past few weeks. Teams like the New York Islanders and Ottawa Senators are actively trying to knock the Blue Jackets out of the playoffs to secure their own berth, while the reigning Stanley Cup champion Florida Panthers also visited Columbus a few weeks ago.

So far in April, the Blue Jackets have faced two teams that have already clinched their way into the playoffs, the Colorado Avalanche and the Toronto Maple Leafs. Neither game went Columbus's way, as they lost on home ice to the Avalanche 7-3, meanwhile north of the border, Toronto walked away with a 5-0 victory over the Blue Jackets on Saturday night. The one bright spot so far this month, was the Blue Jackets did beat the Nashville Predators, who have already been eliminated from playoff contention, with a dominant 8-4 performance.

Blue Jackets' Difficult Road Ahead

The Blue Jackets' tests are only going to get more difficult from here, as every point matters and the majority of their opponents are in the same boat as them. Their next two games will be a home-and-home against the Ottawa Senators. The first of which will be played Sunday (April 6), on the second half of a back-to-back following the defeat to the Maple Leafs the night before. While Ottawa hasn't officially clinched the playoffs, it would take a substantial turn of events for them to drop out of the first wild card spot. They currently lead the Montreal Canadiens by five points for that spot. The bright side for the Blue Jackets will be that the Senators are also on the second half of a back-to-back, as they defeated the Panthers 3-0 on Saturday night.

After their two games against Ottawa, the Blue Jackets will host the Buffalo Sabres, who are on paper the weakest opposition they have left this season. The Sabres have been surging lately, though, as they're 7-3-0 in their last ten games. Then, the Blue Jackets face Alexander Ovechkin and the Washington Capitals in another home-and-home series. The Capitals are currently fighting the Winnipeg Jets for the Presidents' Trophy, and it's going to be very difficult for the Blue Jackets to slow down Washington's offense, especially if Ovechkin is still looking to surpass Wayne Gretzky's goal record at that point.

After their game in the nation's capital, the Blue Jackets will travel to the City of Brotherly Love for their final road game of the season. While the Philadelphia Flyers are eliminated from the playoffs, they've been playing well under interim head coach Brad Shaw, a name which should be familiar to many Blue Jackets fans. Under Shaw, the Flyers are 3-1-0, with their only loss coming to the Canadiens on Saturday.

Lastly, the Blue Jackets will host the New York Islanders in what could end up being crucial for both teams. With both currently in the fight for the final wild card spot, it's possible it becomes a winner-

takes-all situation. Lately, the Islanders have been struggling, but recently broke a six-game losing streak with a win over the Minnesota Wild on Friday.

While no team's road to the playoffs is ever easy, the Blue Jackets undoubtedly got one of the toughest possible draws for their final month. If they're going to make the playoffs and continue their miracle season, they're going to need to overcome the odds. That's far from impossible, though, as they've done just that multiple times this season.

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Unable to Solve Linus Ullmark in Loss to Senators

By Mark Scheig- April 7, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets went to Ottawa hoping to find a way to erase what happened to them on Saturday night in Toronto. Despite their best efforts, they were shutout for the second time in the span of less than 24 hours.

Linus Ullmark stopped all 30 shots he faced. Thomas Chabot had a pair of helpers while four different players scored goals to lead the Senators to a 4-0 win over the Blue Jackets. Suddenly, the Atlantic Division is a race.

The story of this game for the Blue Jackets was finding themselves in an all too familiar spot early in the game. They were trailing less than three minutes into the game.

Game Recap

If the Blue Jackets were going to salvage a split on the weekend, their goaltender was going to have to be the reason. But just 2:24 into the game, Adam Gaudette beat Daniil Tarasov to get the Senators off and running.

Given how the Blue Jackets have fared of late, even being down 1-0 felt like a huge mountain to climb. Then less than two minutes later, it was 2-0 thanks to a goal by Nikolas Matinpalo.

Dean Evason decided to pull Tarasov as to that point in the game, shots were 6-0 Senators. This felt like more of a wake up the team goalie pull than anything else. Elvis Merzlikins came into the game and to his credit, kept the game at 2-0 for a while giving his team a chance to get back into the game.

That never materialized however. The Blue Jackets had a couple of small stretches in the game where they had some pushes. But Ullmark was there to answer them all. Until the very last push with Merzlikins pulled, Ullmark's life wasn't made all that difficult. The Blue Jackets rarely got second or third chances to score.

The Blue Jackets did have to kill a slew of penalties in the second period in which they did. That for a moment gave them some life to try to get back into the game. They themselves weren't given any power-play chances in the game despite some missed calls, most notably a high-stick on Yegor Chinakhov that cut him in the face.

David Perron extended the Senators lead to 3-0 less than five minutes into the third. It stayed that way until Shane Pinto hit the empty net from his own zone to get to the final score of 4-0.

With the win, the Senators now sit only two points back of the Florida Panthers for third in the Atlantic pending the outcome of their game against the Detroit Red Wings. They are well positioned to return to the playoffs.

For the Blue Jackets, while they're still mathematically alive, they're left to wonder what changed after the Stadium Series. They've gone 4-9-1 since March 6 going from the first wildcard to now having the 10th worst record in the NHL.

Merzlikins stopped 22 of 23 in relief of Tarasov one night after allowing five in Toronto. Every Senators skater finished as a plus player on the game.

The Blue Jackets and Senators will play again on Tuesday night, this time at Nationwide Arena for the Senators only trip to Columbus on the season.

1st Ohio Battery / Three Things: M&M Show, Magic From Monahan And Jenner, The Hook

By Will Chase- April 5, 2025

Even Mother Nature can't slow down elite skill.

Nathan MacKinnon and Cale Makar each had a goal and two assists as the Colorado Avalanche defeated the Columbus Blue Jackets 7-3 Thursday night at Nationwide Arena. The Avalanche clinched a playoff berth with the win.

Mackenzie Blackwood made 27 saves on 30 shots.

M&M Show

The Avalanche were delayed getting to Columbus due to bad weather, so they stayed back in Chicago a little longer following their 3-2 shootout win over the Blackhawks on Wednesday night.

Even though it meant the Avalanche wouldn't get to Columbus until after noon on Thursday, it didn't slow them down too much.

MacKinnon scored to give Colorado the early 1-0 lead at 3:25. He leads the NHL with 114 points. Artturi Lehkonen (17) and Devon Toews (32) assisted. Mackinnon is on a six-game point streak (three goals, five assists).

Brock Nelson (24) regained the Avalanche lead at 18:05 to make it 2-1. The goal is the 299th of his career. Cale Makar (59) and Toews (33) assisted. Makar is on a three-game point streak (three goals, three assists).

Makar (30) scored at 19:22 to make it 5-3 on the power play and became the first defenseman to score 30 goals in a season since Mike Green in 2008-09. MacKinnon earned the assist, and Charlie Coyle (10) got the secondary assist.

Toews (9) made it 6-3 at 4:01 of the third period. Makar (60) and MacKinnon (83) picked up their second assists of the game. MacKinnon leads the league with 83 assists.

The Avalanche came into the night leading the NHL with 47 goals by its defensemen, and Columbus, second with 46. Makar leads all defensemen with 90 points, 30 goals, and 60 assists.

The Avalanche also had goals by Parker Kelly (8) in the second period, which tied the game 3-3. Jack Drury (9) assisted. Miles Wood scored his third of the season at 5:49 of the third period, and Coyle (11) picked up his third point with the assist.

Magic From Monahan And Jenner

It only took 3:10 before Sean Monahan tied the game 1-1 at 6:35 with assists to Dante Fabbro (16) and Dmitri Voronkov (23). Fabbro is on a four-game point streak (two goals, five assists).

With Monahan out of the lineup between Jan. 8 and March 23, the Blue Jackets put up 2.82 goals for per game (22nd). Since then, with Monahan back in the lineup, Columbus is third in goals per game (4.40).

In Tuesday's 8-4 win over the Nashville Predators, Kirill Marchenko had a hat trick and assisted Monahan's power-play goal. Monahan had four points with two goals and two assists, including an assist on Marchenko's second and third goals.

With those two together through 46 games this season, the duo puts up 4.97 goals for per 60 and allows 2.30 goals per 60.

Zach Aston-Reese (5) scored at 4:16 of the second period to tie the game 2-2.

Boone Jenner (6) scored at 7:56 of the second to give Columbus a 3-2 lead, their only lead of the game. Jack Johnson (6) and Kent Johnson (28) assisted, and the point gives Kent his first 50-point campaign.

After Thursday's game, Jenner's points-per-60 is up to 3.48 and Monahan's is up to 3.12.

The Hook

Head coach Dean Evason gave the hook to his goaltender for the first time all season.

Following two more third-period goals by Colorado, the final goal was the last straw as Evason made the rare in-game goaltending change. Evason said Merzlikin's post-goal reaction, in which his net minder slammed his stick, also contributed to being pulled.

"A little of both," Evason said. "I'm not going to elaborate on that, but yeah, a little of both."

The Blue Jackets have regained their ability to score goals lately. They're also allowing more goals, which has been a trending problem, with seven on Thursday and 29 in their last six games.

What's the level of concern defensively?

"Very concerned that we're not dialing in to keep it out of our net," Evason said. "It's our job as coaches to systematically dial it back in and get them to play the right way."

"This point in the year, it seems like you shouldn't have to do that, but there's definitely some mistakes in this hockey game, and we talked about them in the last hockey game, that pucks shouldn't have went in the net and or we shouldn't have gave them that opportunity to have those scoring chances."

"You'd think at this point in the year, you'd be pretty dialed in. There are some things we think may be a contributing factor to that. We'll evaluate it and look forward to the next one in Toronto."



Merzlikins made 21 saves on 28 shots. Daniil Tarasov stopped all four shots he faced. The Blue Jackets are four points out of the final Eastern Conference wild-card spot and two points behind the New York Rangers.

To The Road

The Blue Jackets go for the regular-season sweep of the Toronto Maple Leafs from Scotiabank Arena on Saturday, April 5 at 7:00 p.m. ET.

1st Ohio Battery / TOR 5, CBJ 0: Blue Jackets Blanked For Fifth Time In 14 Games As Playoff Chances Go On Life Support

By Ed Francis- April 6, 2025

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CBJ GOALS: None				

Another shutout loss for the Columbus Blue Jackets.

Nick Robertson and William Nylander scored twice each for the Toronto Maple Leafs on Saturday night, leading the Leafs to a 5-0 win over the Blue Jackets and putting Columbus' playoff chances on life support.

"I don't think we were desperate enough in the third period," said captain Boone Jenner. "They scored pretty much right away. So that's on us."

It was Columbus' fifth shutout loss in the last 14 games after being held off the scoreboard just three times in their first 61 games.

This one puts the Blue Jackets' playoff chances in serious jeopardy: the loss, combined with a win by the Montreal Canadiens, sends Columbus six points back of the final wild card spot in the Eastern Conference with just seven games left on their schedule.

Here's how an Ontario back-to-back got started in a tough way:

1st Period:

(10:03 — TOR Goal): Werenski has the puck in Columbus' own zone but his attempt to move it up ice is unsuccessful after the puck bounces off Toronto's Steven Lorentz near the blue line. It slides to Merzlikins, but his clearing attempt goes off the skate off Werenski. The puck drifts over to Pontus Holmberg, who dishes to Robertson in the slot. His shot beats Elvis Merzlikins; 1-0 Toronto.

2nd Period:

(6:41 — Kuraly vs. Lorentz): Sean Kuraly gets his first fighting major since opening night of the 2021-22 season when he drops the gloves with Steven Lorentz.

(12:28 — TOR Goal): The Maple Leafs extend their lead to 2-0 on Robertson's second goal of the night. This one involves another unfortunate bounce for Werenski the Blue Jackets: Z's clearing attempt off the boards is successful but gets batted down just outside of the zone. Domi picks it up and enters the zone with Robertson on a 2-on-1. Robertson gets the puck, fires from the circle, and doubles the Toronto lead.

3rd Period:

(1:11, 4:21 — TOR Goals): Nylander scores his team-leading 43rd and 44th goals of the season just over three minutes apart to put the game out of reach for the Blue Jackets. His first comes after picking up a rebound before Merzlikins could reset; that made it 3-0. His second goal comes after cutting into the slot past Provorov and firing a wrister to make it 4-0.

(8:59 — Olivier vs Benoit): Another fight, this time between Mathieu Olivier and Simon Benoit. There's not much to it, but Olivier gets an early one to land before the refs eventually jump in.

(16:27 — TOR Goal): Auston Matthews gets his 30th goal of the season to add another exclamation point and make it 5-0 Toronto.

CBJ	GAME STATS	TOR
27	SHOTS	27
42%	FACEOFFS	58%
0/1	POWER PLAY	0/1
1/1	PENALTY KILL	1/1
18	HITS	24
17	GIVEAWAYS	15
5	TAKEAWAYS	2
15	BLOCKED SHOTS	14
ALL SITUATIONS ADVANCED STATS		

CBJ	GAME STATS	TOR
1.62	EXPECTED GOALS	2.38
58	SHOT ATTEMPTS	54
21	SCORING CHANCES	28
7	HIGH-DANGER CHANCES	11
Data via NHL.com & NaturalStatTrick.com		

Stat Chat:

- The Blue Jackets equaled the Maple Leafs in shots on goal (27) and had a slight, 58-54 edge on shot attempts — but the shot quality was not good. Columbus had just seven high-danger chances on the night and only one in the third period when they needed a goal most.
- Kent Johnson's ascension to the top line for this game yielded nothing. He had no shots on goal in 16:45 of ice time, including 1:46 on the power play.
- Merzlikins has now allowed 30 goals in his last starts, an average of five per game. His save percentage is .838 in those starts.

Up Next:

The second leg of an Ontario back-to-back concludes with a 5 p.m. puck-drop Sunday afternoon against the Ottawa Senators. This is more or less a must-win for the Blue Jackets.

1st Ohio Battery / Three Things: Mistakes Lead To Robertson Goals, Nylander Puts It Out Of Reach, Watching Playoff Hopes Slip Away

By Will Chase- April 6, 2025

Time has all but run out.

Anthony Stolarz stopped all 27 shots for his second shutout. Nick Robertson and William Nylander each scored twice as the Toronto Maple Leafs beat the Columbus Blue Jackets 5-0 on Saturday at Scotiabank Arena.

Elvis Merzlikins made 22 saves on 27 shots as his three-game winning streak against Toronto — all in Toronto — ended. The Blue Jackets had won four of five versus the Maple Leafs coming in and won both prior meetings this season — a 6-2 win at Nationwide Arena on Oct. 22 and a 5-1 win in Toronto on Jan. 22.

Mistakes Lead To Robertson Goals

There wasn't much offense through the first 40 minutes, and the little there was went the way of the home team.

Robertson (13) scored at 10:03 of the first period to strike first for the Leafs. Pontus Holmberg picked up his 10th assist.

The play came about as Zach Werenski had the puck in his zone and his clearing attempt caromed off the right and then left skate of Steven Lorentz. The puck slid to Merzlikins in the crease, who fired the puck at Werenski. The puck went off Werenski's left skate and ended up in the slot for Holmberg, setting up Robertson for the goal.

Robertson's (14) second goal at 12:28 of the second period, assisted by Max Domi (23), made it 2-0.

Werenski cleared the puck just outside the Jackets' end, but Toronto made quick work to bat it down and end up in an odd-man rush the other way to create the goal.

Nylander Puts It Out Of Reach

It wasn't over when the Blue Jackets came out for the third period down a pair of goals, but Nylander's pair of third-period goals in the first 4:21 all but solidified it.

The 3-0 goal by Nylander at 1:11 was his 43rd of the season. Morgan Rielly (29) and Brandon Carlo (10) assisted.

The 4-0 goal at 4:21 was the 44th for Nylander, extending a career high and leading the team, and was assisted by Rielly (30) and Auston Matthews (41).

Matthews then found the opportunity to score his 30th of the season, 398th of his career, assisted by Mitch Marner (70) and Matthew Knies (26) at 16:27 of the third, to make it 5-0 and mercifully end this one. Marner is on a seven-game point streak (three goals, eight assists).

Columbus hasn't scored since leading 3-2 at 7:56 of the second period against the Avalanche on Thursday night, and has allowed 10 straight unanswered goals since then.

Jackets Watching Playoff Hopes Slip Away

In a game the Blue Jackets needed to have, they came up short again.

The New York Rangers were shut out 4-0 by the New Jersey Devils on Saturday afternoon at Prudential Center. Meanwhile, the team everyone is chasing for the coveted second wild card spot in the Eastern Conference, the Montreal Canadiens, overcame a 1-0 deficit in the third period to beat the Philadelphia Flyers 3-2 on Saturday and now holds a six-point lead over Columbus. The Rangers are still two points ahead of the Blue Jackets, and New York trails Montreal by four points. The Detroit Red Wings are tied with Columbus in points but have passed Columbus based on the tie-breaker scenarios.

James van Riemsdyk returned to the lineup after being a healthy scratch for the last four games.



Back-To-Back With Senators

The Blue Jackets are off to Ottawa as they conclude the weekend back-to-back on Sunday, April 6 at 5 p.m. ET from Canadian Tire Centre. Then Columbus travels home to face the Senators on Tuesday, April 8, at 7 p.m. ET. The Blue Jackets are 1-9-0 in the second of back-to-backs this season and 6-12-2 in back-to-back games overall.

1st Ohio Battery / OTT 4, CBJ 0: Tarasov Chased After Two Quick Goals, Senators Roll Past Blue Jackets

By Will Chase- April 7, 2025

An all too familiar result.

	1	2	3	F
	0	0	0	0
	2	0	2	4
CBJ GOALS: None				

Linus Ullmark stopped all 30 shots he faced to pick up his fourth shutout of the season, and Nikolas Matinpalo scored the first NHL goal of his career as the Ottawa Senators beat the Columbus Blue Jackets 4-0 on Sunday at Canadian Tire Centre.

Ullmark has won five of his last six starts. The Senators have won three straight while Columbus has dropped three in a row.

While Columbus came off a 5-0 loss on Saturday to the Maple Leafs in Toronto, the Senators defeated the Florida Panthers 3-0 on home ice.

Daniil Tarasov last played in relief on Thursday of a 7-3 loss to the Colorado Avalanche and made his last start in Ottawa on Saturday, March 29, a 3-2 loss. His day on Sunday was short-lived as he allowed two goals on six shots and was pulled for Merzlikins. Merzlikins made 22 saves.

Damon Severson was a healthy scratch for the third consecutive game. Yegor Chinakhov was in the lineup in place of Zach Aston-Reese. Brady Tkachuk missed the game with an upper-body injury.

Here's how the second of the Blue Jackets' weekend back-to-back culminated on Sunday evening:

1st Period:

(2:24 — OTT Goal): Adam Gaudette and the Senators wasted no time getting on the board first, as Gaudette broke a 12-game pointless drought for his 17th goal. Thomas Chabot (31) earned the assist.

(4:26 — OTT Goal): Matinpalo scored his first career NHL goal when he cleaned up a juicy rebound left by Tarasov. Matinpalo had one assist in 36 games this season. Claude Giroux (33) and Fabian Zetterlund (21) picked up the assists.

(4:26 — Goaltender Change): Desperate times call for desperate measures.

The Blue Jackets were the last team to make an in-game goalie change when head coach Dean Evason brought Tarasov in for Merzlikins in Thursday's loss to the Avalanche. After two goals allowed by Tarasov in the first 4:26, Evason did it again, bringing Merzlikins in early.

"It's never one person's fault, and it obviously looks like that when a goaltender gets pulled, and I certainly don't want to do that," Evason said. "Both those goals were team goals. We made a decision to try something, and obviously it didn't work."

2nd Period:

There was no scoring in the second period. The Blue Jackets killed a 5-on-3 power play as the Senators entered Sunday with the seventh-best power play on home ice (27.6%).

3rd Period:

(4:26 — OTT Goal): David Perron's ninth of the season bounced off Merzlikins and past the goalie for the Senators' third goal of the game to take a 3-0 lead. Drake Batherson (39) and Chabot (32) assisted.

(19:19 — OTT Goal): Shane Pinto's 18th of the season came with the net empty as the Senators won 4-0. Jake Sanderson added his 43rd assist.

The Blue Jackets' line of Kent Johnson, Sean Monahan, and Boone Jenner generated the most offensive chances for the Jackets in this game. The line of Dmitri Voronkov, Adam Fantilli, and Kirill Marchenko registered 0.68 xGF.

	TOI	CF	CA	SF	SA	GF	GA	xGF	xGA
Kent Johnson - Sean Monahan - Boone Jenner	14:37	25	11	11	7	0	0	0.69	0.2
Natural Stat Trick									

CBJ	GAME STATS	OTT
30	SHOTS	30
43.4	FACEOFFS	56.6

CBJ	GAME STATS	OTT
0/0	POWER PLAY	0/3
3/3	PENALTY KILL	0/0
26	HITS	23
20	GIVEAWAYS	22
6	TAKEAWAYS	5
12	BLOCKED SHOTS	16
ALL SITUATIONS ADVANCED STATS		
2.7	EXPECTED GOALS	3.23
62	SHOT ATTEMPTS	57
29	SCORING CHANCES	21
12	HIGH-DANGER CHANCES	11
Data via NHL.com & NaturalStatTrick.com		

Stat Chat:

- The Blue Jackets are 1-10-0 in the second of back-to-back games this season and 6-13-2 in back-to-back games overall.
- They're 4-11-1 since the Stadium Series on March 1.
- The Blue Jackets have scored first in 39 games this season, ranking 17th in the league. From the beginning of the season through March 1, they were first in the league when scoring first (37).
- Columbus has been shut out six times since March 6 and has not scored since leading the Avalanche 3-2 in the second period on Thursday. They're been outscored 13-0 in that span.

- The Senators lead the league with 10 shutouts, tying a franchise record, and breaking a tie with the New Jersey Devils and Winnipeg Jets.

Up Next:

The Blue Jackets return home to Nationwide Arena looking for a win against these Senators with a 7 p.m. ET puck drop on Tuesday, April 8.

The Athletic / NHL Power Rankings: As playoff picture solidifies, what's left to worry about?

By Sean Gentile and Mark Lazerus- April 5, 2025

As the NHL playoff picture starts to come into focus, a lot of teams find themselves without a whole lot of motivation. The good teams are in, their seeds often already set thanks to Gary Bettman's universally beloved divisional playoff format.

The bad teams are out, and players already in the NHL don't give a damn about draft-lottery odds. Ask any player or coach what they have left to play for, and you'll hear the same answers every time — they're fighting for jobs, for each other, and for pride.

All of that is true. But there's always something more tangible to play for, too. With less than two weeks left in the regular season, we're taking a look at what each team's final fortnight focus should be:

1. Winnipeg Jets, 52-20-4

Last week: 1

Sean's rank: 1

Mark's rank: 1

Avoid the Avalanche: The Jets have been cruising to the top seed in the West all season, but the Stars' seven-game winning streak has them hot on Winnipeg's heels all of a sudden. Never mind the Presidents' Trophy or a division-champion banner, winning the Central could mean the difference between facing the Minnesota Wild or facing the Colorado Avalanche in the first round of the playoffs. That's all the motivation any team should need.

2. Dallas Stars, 50-21-4

Last week: 2

Sean's rank: 2

Mark's rank: 2

Also avoid the Avalanche: Barely two weeks ago, Dallas trailed Winnipeg by 11 points and was far more focused on staving off Colorado, which was just two points back. You know what's better than home-ice advantage against Nathan MacKinnon and Cale Makar? Not facing them at all. Or, at least, not until the second round. This isn't to imply Colorado is some sort of unstoppable killing machine — the Avs were 9.8 seconds away from losing to lowly Chicago for the third time this season on Wednesday night, after all — but there are playoff teams and there are scary playoff teams. The Avs remain scary until proven otherwise.

3. Washington Capitals, 48-18-9

Last week: 3

Sean's rank: 4

Mark's rank: 3

Cross their fingers on Logan Thompson: We're not just saying that because he's hurt — though Thompson did leave Washington's game against the Hurricanes on Wednesday with an upper-body

injury. We're saying it because Thompson has been, basically, bad for the last two months. In 15 games since Feb. 1, he's put up an .881 save percentage and saved nearly three goals less than expected. He'd been wonderful before that, and Charlie Lindgren is a capable backup, but if the Caps are going to deliver on their early-season promise, they need Thompson at his best.

4. Vegas Golden Knights, 45-22-8

Last week: 4

Sean's rank: 3

Mark's rank: 5

Get Tomáš Hertl up to speed: Hertl returned to practice, albeit in a non-contact jersey, for the first time since he was injured on March 23. But he still won't play until at least next week, meaning he'll have, at most, four or five games to get back up to speed before the playoffs. Hertl's been a beast since around New Year's and had two hat tricks in March before getting hurt. Having him at full strength is fundamental to Vegas' championship hopes, especially if the Knights draw the red-hot St. Louis Blues in the first round.

5. Carolina Hurricanes, 46-24-4

Last week: 6

Sean's rank: 5

Mark's rank: 4

Keep the first line rolling: Not enough has been said about how well Jackson Blake has meshed with Sebastian Aho and Seth Jarvis. In their 134 minutes together this season, nearly all of which have come since the trade deadline, Carolina has outscored opponents 9-1 and controlled more than 70 percent of the expected goal share.

6. Colorado Avalanche, 47-26-4

Last week: 5

Sean's rank: 6

Mark's rank: 6

Chase the numbers: Nathan MacKinnon had the third-highest point total in the salary-cap era last season with 140 points, and still didn't win the scoring title. He's neck and neck with Nikita Kucherov again, tied at 111 points entering Thursday night's action. MacKinnon did win the Hart Trophy last season, so he's got that going for him, which is nice. But you know the ridiculously competitive MacKinnon wants the Art Ross, too. Meanwhile, Cale Makar became the first defenseman to score 30 goals in a season since Mike Green in 2008-09, and just the third since 1989. Might as well go after Kevin Hatcher's mark of 34 goals in 1992-93, the highest total in the last 40 years (Paul Coffey's 48 in 1985-86 is safe). Colorado is pretty well entrenched in the third spot in the Central, so the Avs stars might as well stay sharp by chasing some hardware and some history.

7. Tampa Bay Lightning, 44-26-5

Last week: 9

Sean's rank: 7

Mark's rank: 8

Break-even play from the third line: We know the Lightning have high-end pieces, and we know they're capable of winning another Stanley Cup. Depth, though, continues to be an issue — and that's after their widely (and understandably) lauded additions of Yanni Gourde and Oliver Bjorkstrand at the deadline. Neither has been bad, per se, but the Lightning are still losing their minutes. That wasn't the plan.

8. Florida Panthers, 44-27-4

Last week: 7

Sean's rank: 8

Mark's rank: 7

Change Carter Verhaeghe's luck: He's a good player, as anyone who's paid attention to the last couple postseasons can attest — but this season, Verhaeghe is proof that being good isn't the same as being lucky. He's scored 17 goals, down from 35 in 2023-24, and has seen his shooting percentage nearly cut in half (14.1 to 7.5). The bright side, though, is that he's still getting looks, with nearly 28 expected goals. Florida needs some of those chances to find their way into the net.

9. Toronto Maple Leafs, 46-25-4

Last week: 10

Sean's rank: 9

Mark's rank: 9

Bubble-wrap the goaltenders: There was reason to believe in the Anthony Stolarz-Joseph Woll tandem coming into the season. There was also reason to doubt it, revolving mainly around both goalies' injury history. They're healthy now, and on the verge of helping Toronto finish as a top-10 team in save percentage. Toronto also allows 0.4 goals fewer than expected per 60 minutes of play. The Leafs are getting legitimately good play from their goalies.

10. Los Angeles Kings, 43-23-9

Last week: 8

Sean's rank: 12

Mark's rank: 10

Secure home-ice advantage against the Oilers: A Pacific Division championship is still possible for the Kings, but it's a long shot that they'll be able to make up five points in eight games without any head-to-head matchups with the Golden Knights left. So they're almost certainly looking at a fourth straight first-round matchup with Edmonton. Will things be different this year? Maybe. The Kings look good, Connor McDavid is looking like a mere demigod these days, and Stuart Skinner has been off his game for a while. And the Kings are now in the driver's seat for home ice, something they didn't have in any of the three previous matchups. Oh, and they just so happen to have a league-best 28-4-4 record at The Center Formerly Known As Staples.

11. Edmonton Oilers, 44-26-5

Last week: 11

Sean's rank: 11

Mark's rank: 11

Get right: Since the 4 Nations break, the Oilers goaltender has a .866 save percentage at five-on-five. Among No. 1 goalies, only Philadelphia's Samuel Ersson has been worse. Skinner has given up at least four goals in six of his 11 starts in that span, and the Oilers are 4-7-0 in those games. Last spring proved that the Oilers can be Cup contenders with merely adequate goaltending, but Skinner isn't even giving them that much right now. He has two weeks to figure it out.

12. St. Louis Blues, 42-28-7

Last week: 12

Sean's rank: 12

Mark's rank: 10

Stay hot: Only one of the Blues' 11 straight wins has come against a team that's safely in a playoff spot. But 11 wins is 11 wins, and the Blues are suddenly the team nobody wants to face in the first round of the playoffs. St. Louis doesn't have to extend the winning streak to the end of the season — that'd be 16 straight — to keep the good times rolling, but it needs to win most of them. Both to remain ridiculously confident heading into the playoffs, and to simply ensure they make the playoffs at all. Don't get comfortable yet.

13. Ottawa Senators, 40-29-6

Last week: 13

Sean's rank: 13

Mark's rank: 13

More of the same from Dylan Cozens: Ottawa seems to have traded for the 2023 version of Cozens — and that's great news. He has nine points in his first 14 games and looks great centering David Perron and Drake Batherson; the Sens have a goals percentage (real and expected) of about 57 with those three on the ice. If they keep that up, Ottawa could be a tougher out.

14. New Jersey Devils, 40-29-7

Last week: 15

Sean's rank: 15

Mark's rank: 14

Find some sort of bright side: Expecting a team without Jack Hughes or (potentially) Dougie Hamilton to beat Carolina in the first round is unfair, regardless of how many points New Jersey finishes with. Yes, Hamilton could return early from his knee injury; yes, Jacob Markstrom is capable of becoming the latest goalie to "goalie" the Hurricanes. Overall, though, things are bleak. No point in pretending otherwise. Since Hughes' injury on March 2, they've been outscored 47-41.

15. Minnesota Wild, 41-28-7

Last week: 14

Sean's rank: 15

Mark's rank: 14

Just make the playoffs: With just one win in their last six games, the Wild aren't exactly peaking at the right time. Next week's back-to-back on the road against Calgary and Vancouver can still carry some weight if Minnesota doesn't win a couple of games soon. The good news is, Kirill Kaprizov and Joel

Eriksson Ek are on the mend and on the way. This is a very different team with those two in the top six, obviously, and could be a more serious threat in the first round if they're both healthy and on their games. But the Wild have to get there first. And that's not set in stone just yet.

16. Montreal Canadiens, 36-30-9

Last week: 18

Sean's rank: 16

Mark's rank: 15

Let Nick Suzuki cook: Only three players have more points since the 4 Nations break than Suzuki (27). Montreal's first-line center had a goal and an assist in Thursday's win over the Bruins. That makes him the first Canadien to total at least 80 points since Alexei Kovalev had 84 ... in 2007-08. That's 16 years ago. Kovalev is currently 52 years old.

17. New York Rangers, 36-32-7

Last week: 22

Sean's rank: 17

Mark's rank: 18

Have Artemi Panarin drag them to a couple more wins: Wednesday's game against the Wild was a mess, but the Rangers pulled it out largely due to Panarin. He had a breakaway goal and two assists, including on the overtime winner. Only Nikita Kucherov has more points since March 1.

18. Vancouver Canucks. 34-28-13

Last week: 16

Sean's rank: 18

Mark's rank: 19

Run the table: The vibes have been off in Vancouver all year. A season that began with such hope and promise will forever be remembered for the J.T. Miller-Elias Pettersson rift, the Miller trade and the Pettersson swoon. And now Canucks fans have to worry about their coach leaving given Rick Tocchet's ties to the Flyers. Now they've lost three straight, including a dismal 5-0 loss to Seattle on Wednesday night. But there's still one way to make it all seem worthwhile — make a run. It won't be easy, with games against Vegas (two of them!), Dallas and Colorado still ahead. But if the Canucks win out, they very well could leapfrog the fading Wild (or the Blues if they suddenly crash back to Earth) and sneak into the playoffs, after all.

19. Calgary Flames, 36-27-12

Last week: 17

Sean's rank: 21

Mark's rank: 17

Get Dustin Wolf the Calder: Sure, the Flames are still trying to make the playoffs. But this exercise would get awfully redundant around this part of the rankings if we just wrote "try to make the playoffs" for each team. Wolf, Calgary's precocious goaltender, was starting to pull away from the trio of impressive skaters with whom he's competing for the Calder — Lane Hutson, Macklin Celebrini and Matvei Michkov — until a middling March brought him back to the pack. With two games against the Sharks and two

games against Anaheim (and one against the punchless Wild) over the final eight games, there's still time to play some good hockey and boost Wolf's candidacy. Oh, and try to make the playoffs, if you're into that kind of thing.

20. Utah HC, 34-30-12

Last week: 21

Sean's rank: 19

Mark's rank: 20

Get a better copyright lawyer: Seriously, we're just going to roll over for the water bottle people here? Ah, well. OK, here's a better one. Close out strong: Utah's done a nice job building on the promising foundation built in Arizona, and the future is bright. Now it's time to finish the year on a high note and leave a new and vibrant fan base wanting more. There's a lot of positive momentum on and off the ice in Salt Lake City, so keep building on it.

21. Columbus Blue Jackets, 34-31-9

Last week: 20

Sean's rank: 20

Mark's rank: 21

Get a save: Might be too late for that, actually.

Since a 1-0 OT loss to #TimeToHunt on March 20, #CBJ Elvis Merzlikins has an .843 save percentage and a 5.11 goals-against average.

22. Detroit Red Wings, 34-33-7

Last week: 23

Sean's rank: 22

Mark's rank: 22

Remember one thing: Bleak as things look after Wednesday's results — they went from one to four points out of a playoff spot based on a couple bounces — the Red Wings should keep something in mind; that while they're not particularly good, none of the teams they're chasing (the Canadiens, Rangers and Blue Jackets) are, either. There's still time.

23. New York Islanders, 32-32-10

Last week: 19

Sean's rank: 23

Mark's rank: 23

Prevent any more Patrick Roy theatrics: Their season feels lost (for what seems like the third or fourth time), and Roy has already publicly dragged and alienated Anthony Duclair. End the six-game losing streak, then quietly play out the string.

24. Philadelphia Flyers, 31-36-9

Last week: 30

Sean's rank: 24

Mark's rank: 24

Relax a little bit: Fellas, we get it — you were sick of playing for John Tortorella. Three consecutive wins is enough, though. The stink of that 1-10-1 stretch has been washed off; start stocking up on lottery balls.

25. Seattle Kraken, 32-38-6

Last week: 27

Sean's rank: 25

Mark's rank: 25

Stop winning games: Sure, it's fun to beat up on the Oilers and Canucks the way the Kraken did over the past week-plus. But it's not exactly what's best for the franchise at this point. Seattle is in a death struggle with Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Buffalo and Boston for 29th place. And there's quite a difference between a 9.5 percent chance at the top pick (and a guaranteed top-six pick) and a 6 percent chance at the top pick (and merely a guaranteed top-10 pick).

26. Anaheim Ducks, 33-34-8

Last week: 24

Sean's rank: 26

Mark's rank: 27

Finish above .500: Anaheim hasn't had a winning record (well, the NHL's definition of a winning record, using points percentage) since the 2017-18 season. But the scrappy Ducks have a chance at it this season. They'll have to fare well through a very difficult season-closing stretch that features only teams that are either in or fighting for playoff spots. But it'd be a heck of an accomplishment for a team few expected to be even this competitive.

27. Buffalo Sabres, 32-36-6

Last week: 26

Sean's rank: 26

Mark's rank: 28

Watch Devon Levi make a run: Still just 23, Levi has (finally) gotten some necessary AHL seasoning; he put up a .918 save percentage in 37 appearances for Rochester, was named the league's goalie of the month for February and on Wednesday helped the Amerks clinch a playoff spot.

28. Pittsburgh Penguins, 30-34-12

Last week: 25

Sean's rank: 27

Mark's rank: 28

Get what they need from Tristan Jarry: Earlier this season, Jarry almost single-handedly tanked Pittsburgh's season. In March, he almost single-handedly tanked the tank. What's best for the Penguins — for now, at least — is for Jarry to be the worst version of himself. There's nothing left to learn.

29. Boston Bruins, 30-37-9

Last week: 28

Sean's rank: 29

Mark's rank: 29

Fire Jim Montgomery for a second time: We're assuming he's somehow to blame for their current 10-game losing streak, too. Boston now has the worst points percentage in the Eastern Conference. Incredible.

30. Nashville Predators, 27-41-8

Last week: 29

Sean's rank: 30

Mark's rank: 30

Do some soul searching: Is Andrew Brunette still the right coach? Were the Steven Stamkos, Jonathan Marchessault and Brady Skjei signings fatal mistakes? Is Juuse Saros' precipitous decline a mere fluke or a trend? This season can't end fast enough for the Predators, by far the league's biggest disappointment. It's been a hard, hard season. Figuring out what to do about it might be even harder.

31. Chicago Blackhawks, 21-44-10

Last week: 32

Sean's rank: 31

Mark's rank: 31

Let the kids run wild: Connor Bedard lost a defensive-zone faceoff draw in the dying seconds of the third period on Wednesday and Cale Makar tied the game an instant later. So what? You can't become a clutch player without being put in clutch situations. Do that for everybody now. With nothing else at stake and all these 19- to 22-year-old prospects suddenly in the lineup, throw them in the deep end and see if they can swim. Have Artyom Levshunov kill penalties. Have Sam Rinzel match up against Nathan MacKinnon. See what Frank Nazar can do in do-or-die moments. Bonus: If they struggle in those situations, 32nd place and a guaranteed top-three pick are still very much within reach.

32. San Jose Sharks, 20-45-10

Last week: 31

Sean's rank: 32

Mark's rank: 32

Let Macklin Celebrini and Will Smith run wild: Smith played 25 minutes in Tuesday's overtime loss to Anaheim; he had never even played 20 before in an NHL game. More of that, please. Let Celebrini and Smith do their thing on the top line together with no pressure, developing long-term chemistry, boosting Smith's confidence heading into the offseason and maybe getting Celebrini the Calder Trophy in the process. Best-case scenario for the Sharks is they score a bunch of points, the Sharks still lose because of everyone else, they win the draft lottery and Matt

The Athletic / In NHL debuts, top prospects Gabe Perreault and Ryan Leonard buoyed by Boston College teammates

By Peter Baugh- April 5, 2025

NEW YORK — As Gabe Perreault took his first warmup lap of his professional hockey career Wednesday, the Rangers' top prospect shot a grin to the left corner of the ice. Seven screaming college students stood there, banging on the glass as hard as they could.

After attending Ryan Leonard's hyped debut with the Washington Capitals in Boston some 24 hours earlier, the Boston College crew was back at an NHL rink to support another former member of their ranks. That morning, they had piled into two cars on campus for the 3 ½ hour drive to New York. Five minutes before warmups began, a Madison Square Garden security guard led them to the corner of the glass, closer than where fans with normal-access tickets can usually go.

"I wasn't expecting them to be that close," said Perreault, who skated without a helmet for the customary solo lap ahead of his debut. "It was sick."

Three of his college friends wore Perreault's old Boston College jerseys — one maroon, one gold, one white — that they flipped around to show his name and college No. 34 on the front.

"We wanted to make it special for him," said sophomore Aram Minnetian, a defenseman and 2023 Dallas Stars draft pick who lived with Perreault at Boston College and wore the gold jersey against the glass.

The Eagles players, whose season ended Sunday in the NCAA regionals, also sported backwards Boston College jerseys while standing at the glass for Leonard's debut. Sophomore Nolan Joyce said they'd seen other college teams do it, so they thought it was a good idea.

"I wasn't shocked," Boston College coach Greg Brown said. "You know how much fun those guys have being teammates and how happy they are for Gabe to have that opportunity to play in his first NHL game. ... To get down there and to wear the Perreault jerseys was just a testament to all of them and how close a group they are."

Perreault wasn't wearing his Boston College number Wednesday, since forward Arthur Kaliyev, out for the season with an upper-body injury, has No. 34 for the Rangers. Instead he took the ice in No. 94 — the number that his father, Yanic, wore for much of a 14-year NHL career in the 1990s and 2000s.

"It was very special that he picked that number," Yanic said. "I think it looks good on him."

And the old jerseys looked good on his friends. Perreault, who called his Boston College teammates "brothers for life" after signing his entry-level contract earlier this week, knew they were coming to the game, having received a heads-up text. Sophomore Will Vote said they even tried persuading Perreault to ask for the Eagles players to read the starting lineup in the Rangers dressing room before the game.

"That was a no-go," Vote said with a laugh.

Ryan Leonard played 14:14 in his NHL debut against his hometown Boston Bruins.

Since the Bruins-Capitals game was in Boston, the entire Eagles team went. During the game, Brown heard several of his players plotting to get to New York. Seven Boston College players ended up making the trip: Minnetian, Vote, Joyce, Timmy Delay, Jacob Fowler, Will Traeger and Rangers prospect Drew Fortescue. Fortescue is from the New York area, so the group made a quick pregame stop at his family's house en route to the city.

Brady Berard, whose older brother, Brett, plays for the Rangers, was a notable omission from the crew. The younger Berard was at Leonard's debut and "really wanted to" come to Perreault's, Minnetian said, but he had two academic tests on Thursday. Brady at least got to visit Madison Square Garden earlier in the year for Brett's debut, catching a last-minute flight from Boston and arriving shortly after puck drop. Alas, a second spontaneous trip wasn't in the cards this season.

On the ice, Perreault showed off his vision and playmaking ability early in the Rangers' 5-4 overtime win over the Minnesota Wild. He deked Mats Zuccarello in the slot on his second shift, then tried to feed Alexis Lafrenière with a backdoor pass. A Wild defender managed to graze the puck with their stick, so Lafrenière couldn't get a shot off and fell to the ice reaching for it. Even if the play didn't result in a goal, Perreault said it helped him get more comfortable in the flow of the game. He nearly picked up his first point by feeding Jonny Brodzinski on a power play, but Brodzinski's shot hit the post.

"You can see his game and the way he thinks the game out there," Rangers coach Peter Laviolette said. "I'm sure the next one and the one after that they'll be a little more natural for him as opposed to the first one, but I thought he played really well."

It wasn't a seamless debut; Perreault accidentally deflected a Brock Faber shot past Igor Shesterkin for a Wild goal. But, all in all, it was a good one, especially since the Rangers picked up two much-needed points in the wild-card race. One NHL scout who watched the game remarked that Perreault, who had three shots in 13:38 of ice time, makes offensive plays you can't teach. The 19-year-old's new teammates agreed.

"That caliber of player, there's not that many of them," linemate Lafrenière said.

Perreault's buddies got to take in the game from the lower bowl, sitting in the row behind Perreault's family: father Yanic, mother July, siblings Lily and Jeremy. Yanic got a kick out of them yelling at Perreault to shoot the puck whenever he had possession.

Many of the Boston College players had never been to Madison Square Garden before, so that added to the experience.

"It's pretty unreal," said Delay as he looked around at the dining options on the concourse. "You don't really see a TAO Sushi place at TD Garden, so it's a little bit different." (Conte Forum at Boston College doesn't have sushi options either, though Vote chimed in that the school boasts the best hot dogs in college hockey.)

Brown thought his players making such an effort to support both Leonard and Perreault "speaks volumes" to the character of the now-NHLers. Before the Rangers-Wild game, the beaming Boston College players pulled their phones out to film Perreault's solo rookie lap. The in-arena camera put them on the video board. Perreault smiled and nudged the glass multiple times during warmups, and flipped his friends a puck as a souvenir.

"We'll keep it in our (dorm) room next year for sure," Minnetian said.

Perreault won't be there anymore. The symbol of a shared memory will have to do.

The Athletic / Inside Amazon's first year streaming the NHL and whether their Rogers deal will continue

By Murat Ates- April 5, 2025

When the NHL and Rogers announced last April that Amazon had signed a two-year deal to produce and stream Monday NHL games exclusively in Canada, it was reasonable to wonder about Amazon Prime Video's long-term play.

Now that the league has announced a 12-year extension of Rogers' exclusive Canadian broadcast rights — beginning at the end of next season, when the current deal expires — we have more insight into the future of hockey broadcasts on Canadian screens. Prime Video launched "Monday Night Hockey" this season by subletting one night's worth of those rights from Rogers. It will continue next season, essentially giving Amazon a two-year audition for a larger portion of NHL broadcasting rights in the future.

If Prime Video pulled off "Monday Night Hockey" with any degree of success, could the streaming giant angle for a bigger piece of the Canadian NHL deal after its first two years are up?

Tony Staffieri, Rogers president and CEO, said on Wednesday that Rogers has every intention of subletting its exclusive rights.

"Yes, we'll look to it — as a possibility and as a strong possibility," Staffieri said. "Today, we sublicense French content as well as streaming with Amazon. Those have been terrific partnerships and as we look to the next 12 years, the agreement with the NHL is that we'll look for opportunities to continue to sublicense where they make sense."

Amazon declined to comment on how Rogers' announcement affects the future of Prime Video and NHL broadcasts. Still, it has to be good news when the president of Rogers is asked about your existing sublease and says, "Those have been terrific partnerships."

Rogers paid \$11 billion for 12 years' worth of exclusive Canadian rights starting in 2026-27. One way to recoup some of its investment — and spare itself from taxing Sportsnet staff with the heavy lift of broadcasting every Canadian game — is to continue those subleasing agreements, whether to Amazon, RDS or on new frontiers.

Whether Prime Video continues its Monday night broadcasts, picks a new night or expands to add a second night remains to be seen; what's clear is that there is opportunity for it to grow its NHL footprint heading into 2026-27.

"There is nothing more valuable in this country from a media standpoint than having the rights to the NHL," NHL commissioner Gary Bettman said at the joint news conference.

How much of that value will belong to Amazon? Now that Prime Video has completed most of its first season, we have insight into how they've approached it. There are elements of Amazon's production during their Monday night broadcast (and in its behind-the-scenes documentary series "Faceoff") that are resource-intensive. Prime Video has committed budget in the form of on- and off-air broadcasting talent that travels from one city to the next. It broadcasts with features like AI-enhanced slow-motion replays, Dolby 5.1 surround sound and warm-up footage, using a 1080p HD resolution other Canadian broadcasts don't yet match.

In an effort to put a focus on the Canadian cities, the broadcast team is traveling from city to city for all 26 games. Prime Video's goal is to make each city feel like a character in the broadcast — something they've achieved in part through that travel and in part through the collection of additional footage of each city. The other way Prime Video has made the most of its resources is hiring top on- and off-air talent, said Mark Shopiro, head of Prime Video Canada.

John Forslund was one of Prime Video's key NHL hires, topping a talent list that includes Adnan Virk, Andi Petrillo, Thomas Hickey, Blake Bolden, Jody Shelley and Shane Hnidy. Forslund, whose nearly 40 years of play-calling experience include TNT, ESPN, NBC, and a host of other American broadcasts, recalls that Prime Video's pitch to him was unique.

"In my career, no one's ever asked me, 'What's your opinion on how to call a hockey game?'" Forslund said. Forslund told his wife after the interview that it was the first time in his career that it felt like someone cared how he thought a hockey game should be presented. The feeling stuck with him.

Forslund said the beauty of an NHL game is that there are 20 players on each team who could become the story on any given night. He does his homework on each one, so that he's ready no matter what happens instead of trying to shoehorn topics into the game in advance.

Shopiro also points to Prime Video's hiring success behind the camera. Each Prime Video game is directed by Mark Askin, who produced Toronto Maple Leafs games for 36 years, including for "Hockey Night in Canada." He was coaxed out of retirement. Seated at the front of the truck, watching the live action through all of Amazon's angles simultaneously, Askin spends each broadcast calling out instructions to the team of technicians who turn live audio and video into the produced broadcast. Every time there's a big play — or a subtle, important one — Askin calls cues to his crew, with staff responsible for preparing each color-coded feed in real time.

Is all of this investment working? Prime Video says it is.

Their "Monday Night Hockey" broadcast delivers significantly younger audiences than other broadcasts, according to data provided by Prime Video. The median age for their viewings is 43 years old, compared to 55 for last season's Monday night games and 54 for "Hockey Night in Canada" this season, with growth in various demographic ranges from age 18 to 54. Prime Video's analytics also show that the average length of a watching session has increased by 33 percent compared to last season.

Live sports are part of the next streaming boom, with Prime Video, Apple TV and others competing with each other for the eyeballs they don't already get from film and TV series. Now that Rogers has secured another 12 years worth of broadcast rights, will Prime continue its partnership?

"I can't speculate on future rights. I think what I can say is that we remain committed and focused to getting the game right in our first season of the deal that we're on," Shopiro said. "We're always looking at opportunities for how we can bring value and enhance the Prime membership and believe that live sport has a big part to play in that."

The Athletic / NHL goalie debate: An expert and hater argue equipment, interference, bigger nets and more

By Sean McIndoe and Jesse Granger- April 5, 2025

Let us acknowledge the noble goaltender. The last line of defense, tirelessly doing the thankless work of keeping pucks out of the net, sacrificing their own bodies to block vulcanized rubber fired at upward of 100 miles per hour, all the while knowing that they'll take the blame for the bad and rarely get the glory for the good. They're hockey's unsung heroes, doing the hardest job in all of sports without credit or complaint.

Well, unless they're just big weird oafs in oversized equipment who are ruining the game we love, robotically sucking the excitement out of the sport in between bouts of flopping and crying about somebody barely brushing up against them in what's supposed to be a contact sport.

That's the debate. Or at least, it will be today, as two of The Athletic's hockey writers have decided to go back and forth on various topics from the goaltending world. Jesse Granger is our goaltending expert, who both plays the position himself and breaks down its intricacies for the rest of us. Sean McIndoe is an old man who sits on his couch and complains about things, and he loves the very offense that goalies are there to prevent.

Like Patrick Roy in his prime, they've decided that the best way to handle a dispute is to skate out to center ice and duke it out. They got together for five mini-debates, presented below.

Argument No. 1: Equipment

The question: Goalie equipment is larger today than it was decades ago. But is it too big, or just right?

Sean says: In a league in which all the other equipment continues to get smaller and more effective, goalie gear has ballooned up to sumo size. We all know what's going on here, and the league should do something about it.

Jesse says: I'm not opposed to the idea of slimming down some areas if it's possible to do without compromising protection, but I totally disagree with the idea that goalie gear has ballooned in size. All of the equipment regulations are tighter now than they were in the 1990s, which is when I believe we actually had an issue with oversized equipment.

Just to start, I'd like to go over a quick history of the equipment size regulations so we understand the facts. Goalies weren't permitted to drop to the ice to make a save until 1917, and shortly after — in 1925 — the league set a limit of 12 inches in width for leg pads. That standard has fluctuated slightly, narrowing to 10 inches in 1937 and returning to 12 inches in 1989. In 2005, the league shrunk the maximum leg pad width to the current standard of 11 inches. These pads have largely remained the same size throughout NHL history, and if anything, they're covering less net now than they have over the last 30 years.

The glove has also shrunk from a maximum circumference of 50 inches in 1998 to the current maximum of 45 inches (changed in 2005), and the blocker is only allowed to be eight inches by 15 inches (one inch shorter than it was prior to 2005). The league also limited the size of chest protectors in 2018, but the dimensions vary much more due to individual goalie proportions.

The narrative of goalie pads being too large is overstated. I also think that the idea that current goalies could survive a game wearing pads the same size as Jacques Plante's isn't based in reality. The

innovations in stick technology have turned most shots into rockets that simply didn't exist back then. The biggest gripes I see about equipment size are typically in reference to the chest protector, and the current level of protection is absolutely necessary to avoid injury when facing 90-mile-per-hour shots on a regular basis.

Sean says: You're right that this isn't a new problem, and I don't think anyone wants the goalies to go back to the Original Six gear. But the NHL let the issue get completely out of hand in the 1990s, to the point where even a goaltending fan like you would have to admit it was ridiculous. Then they eventually took action and reined it back ... a little bit. But it was only a little, and mostly focused on the leg pads. Meanwhile, goalies are going out there with shoulder pads like linebackers, and we're supposed to believe it's about safety instead of an obvious attempt to take even more of the top of the net away.

Jesse says: I totally get why people want the chest protectors to be smaller. Goalies look like the Michelin Man with them on, and a turtle without its shell when they shed their gear following the game. The problem is, chest protectors need to be that size to adequately protect the goalie. More surface area better distributes the impact of 100-mile-per-hour slap shots. The league already reduced the size back in 2018, so they've "trimmed the fat." Even with the current tank-sized equipment, goalies are still regularly hit in unprotected areas up high, causing stingers near the collarbone area (or worse). Anyone who's faced shots will tell you the chest protectors aren't as bulletproof as they appear.

If there's a way to minimize the gear size without increasing the risk of injury, I'd be in favor of it. I'm sure you'd hear gripes from plenty of goalies initially, but in the long run, it would probably be good for the position. I think one of the biggest current issues with the position at the highest level is that it's tough for the best to separate themselves from the pack. Technical training has made goalies so efficient that outside of the few elite at the top, they're all very close in skill. That has resulted in teams being reluctant to sign long-term contracts at times.

Shrinking the equipment could allow for a wider range of results, giving more-skilled goaltenders a bigger edge over the rest of the pack. Unlike collarbone stingers, that doesn't sound like a bad thing at all.

Sean says: I appreciate the science, but I guess I'm just a skeptic. I've seen equipment all throughout sports — football players, baseball catchers, plus every other hockey position — get sleeker and smaller but also more effective. Just about the only exception is hockey goalies, the one position that just happens to benefit from being as big as possible. I guess it's all just a weird coincidence.

Argument No. 2: Interference

The question: Goaltender interference remains a confusing rule for many fans. But in general, do goalies get the right amount of protection from the league?

Sean says: First of all, the rule isn't that confusing. And for once, the league gets it just about right — and if anything, we should loosen the rules to make a few more of those waved-off goals count.

Jesse says: I agree with you that the amount of protection for goalies to perform their job is pretty spot-on at the moment, and your explanation of the rule is the best I've seen, including the one in the actual rulebook.

To me, the only real area of the rule that needs more clarification is when it comes to players battling for loose pucks in and around the crease. The most obvious example of this confusion happened in November 2024, when Connor Hellebuyck was driven into his net on a goal that somehow counted. After that play, Hellebuyck revealed that he had made a 45-minute presentation to the rules committee outlining the changes he would like to see to the rule.

I really, really want to see Hellebuyck's presentation skills, and I also think it's an area where the rules could be worded better to provide clarification. Outside of that, I don't have many gripes about the rule.

Sean says: I've defended the interference rule over the years, so I'm not going to completely rewrite it here. But this league needs more goals, and letting teams call for lengthy reviews to figure out a way to take them off the board works against that. The NHL has been much better over the last few seasons at only overturning the call on the ice in extreme cases, which is how it should be. If the ref on the ice sees a goal, it should stay that way unless the replay is obvious.

And sure, since we're here, I'll just say it: You goalies might get a few more calls going your way on interference if you didn't embellish the crap out of the most minor contact. It's hockey, there's going to be the occasional contact, maybe don't flop around every time a light breeze hits you.

Jesse says: This may come as a surprise, but I completely agree with you on this one. I cannot stand the flopping. I get that a goalie thinks he needs to sell the contact in order to get the correct call, but with slow-motion replay, we should be able to get it right without the acting.

In terms of the actual rule, I think it would help to separate what happens inside and outside of the crease even more dramatically than they already have. If a goalie knows that any contact — no matter how slight — inside his crease will result in goalie interference, he won't feel the need to sell the contact as much. Along those same lines, if goalies know they're not protected from contact outside of the blue paint, it will give them interesting decisions to make. Do I engage in a net-front battle with this forward in order to gain those extra few inches of precious depth and net coverage?

Argument No. 3: The Hart Trophy

The question: Only three goalies have won the Hart Trophy in the nearly six decades of the expansion era. Should goalies get more MVP love from voters?

Sean says: There have been years when I'd vote for a goalie, including this one. But can you really be the league's MVP when you only play 50 or 60 games?

Jesse says: It's a fair argument, especially with the league's current trend toward goalie tandems. Workhorse netminders are a dying breed, but they still exist, and are the exact types who should be considered for the Hart Trophy. If a goalie is in a true tandem, rotating starts, I don't think they should necessarily be considered for the Hart, no matter how brilliant they are.

The best example of this is Linus Ullmark in 2022-23. He lapped the field in most goaltending metrics that season and was the deserved Vezina Trophy winner, but starting only 58.5 percent of his team's games should rule him out for Hart consideration.

However, when a goalie is putting up historically great numbers while playing a huge share of the games — like Hellebuyck this season — he should be heavily considered for Hart. Even playing fewer games than his forward and defenseman counterparts, a goalie affects his team's wins and losses far more. Not only is he on the ice for the entirety of the game, his performance plays a bigger factor in team success.

Sean says: What about the argument you hear sometimes that says that goalies already have their own specific award in the Vezina? Between that, two postseason All-Star slots, and the Masterton, aren't we already blowing enough smoke up the goaltenders' well-padded behinds?

Jesse says: I'd simply point to the giant glass case housing the hardware for the Art Ross, Maurice "Rocket" Richard and Frank J. Selke trophies. If we're going to change the Hart Trophy to a "most valuable skater" award, then so be it, but as long as it's for the most valuable player, goalies should be in

consideration. I think it's a good way to differentiate historically great goaltending seasons and separate them from past Vezina winners.

Sean says: It's also worth noting that even a goalie who only plays 45 games is still spending more minutes on the ice than the league's most-used forward or defenseman. Wait, I'm arguing Jesse's side of this one now, let's just move on ...

Argument No. 4: The nets

The question: There was a day when heavy equipment meant that goalies had to be smaller, with most under 6 feet. Now, that's often considered too small for an NHL goaltender, and we have guys as big as 6-foot-7 protecting a net that's the same size. Is it time to make the nets bigger and restore some of that balance?

Jesse says: If these 6-7 goalies were coming in and dominating the league, I might be able to get behind this, but that's not the case. Of the 97 goalies to play in the NHL this season, only three are 6-7. Of those three, only one has played more than a handful of games — Philadelphia's Ivan Fedotov — and he has been statistically one of the worst goalies in the league.

Meanwhile, the vast majority of the goalies in the NHL are between 6-2 and 6-4. Shesterkin (6-1) and Sergei Bobrovsky (6-2) are dominating and Calgary's Dustin Wolf looks like a future star, standing only 6-0.

Athletes have gotten bigger in just about every sport over time. I don't think the strategy of putting a massive human in the crease has worked well enough to consider changing the rules because of it.

Sean says: It's not just the bigger goalies. It's bigger goalies wearing bigger equipment with better technique. Watch any replay of Wayne Gretzky winding up and scoring on some tiny 1980s goalie, then compare that to what Leon Draisaitl has to shoot at these days. One guy had a ton of space to shoot at; the other is aiming for slivers. The fact that anyone scores much at all these days is a testament to the skill of today's forwards, but all that skill is at least partially being wasted by having them try to fit the puck into a thimble.

The big objection to larger nets has always been tradition — that when in doubt, we should keep the sport as is. I agree. And for decades, the sport was meant to have enough open net for the shooters to target. We've lost that over the last few decades, and it wouldn't take a huge change to restore some of that balance.

Jesse says: I agree with a lot of your points here, but the adjustment would be absolutely brutal on the goalies. They've trained their entire lives to feel the net behind them. They are so in tune with the angles (both consciously and subconsciously) that I imagine adjusting to even an extra inch of net would be incredibly difficult. This is less of an argument against it, and more of an expression of dread for how many extra goals I'd be giving up for the Beer League Bullies every Sunday night.

Sean says: For the record, I consider "the adjustment would be absolutely brutal on the goalies" to be a feature, not a bug. If today's goalie-bots are so well-programmed that adjusting to an extra inch would throw them off, then maybe we need to shake things up.

I'll leave you with one final argument, but it won't be mine. How about this essay from a legendary big goaltender: Ken Dryden, who made the case for bigger nets a few years ago under the headline "Hockey has a gigantic goalie problem." Are you really going to tell the hockey world's single most-respected author, historian and intellectual that he's wrong here? Because I'm not, and neither is Ken Dryden.

Argument No. 5: Fun factor

The question: There's little question that modern goalies are better now than they've ever been. But what about the entertainment value of the sport's most important position? Are goalies more fun to watch these days?

Sean says: Goalies are way harder to score on today than they were when I was growing up. But they've achieved that with bigger equipment, perfect positioning and smothering rebound control that means half the scoring chances just seem to hit them in the chest. Hockey was more fun when goalies actually had to move to make a save.

Jesse says: This is going to be a tough one to argue because I'm a weirdo who finds it really fun to watch a goalie spring into perfect position with brilliant edgework, cut off any potential shooting angles and watch as the shooter has no option but to helplessly fling the puck into the crest of the goalie's jersey.

Sean says: Who hurt you, Jesse?

Jesse says: The crease can be a lonely place, Sean.

Sean says: I'll just go straight Old Man Mode here. I grew up in an era in which goalies had to actually move their limbs to make saves. The heavier equipment meant goalies had to be smaller, which meant they couldn't take away the entire net just based on their presence. (Hikes up pants.) They'd get into position, as best they could, but then they had to watch the shot and see where it was going and actually respond to it. (Waves cane around.) That led to windmill glove saves and sliding pad stacks and all sorts of other highlight-reel moves that you just don't see much these days.

Today, the only time a goalie has to actually react to the puck instead of just letting it hit him is when he makes a mistake and ends up out of position. So, once every few weeks or so. Modern goalies are the worst.

Jesse says: Goalies are still reacting to shots and making saves with their limbs; they're just doing it in a more efficient way. I'll be the first to admit, I love a good windmill. It doesn't get much better than Igor Shesterkin bringing Madison Square Garden to its feet with a flamboyant flash of the leather, but that save selection has become less common for a reason.

Goalies are playing with their hands more in front of their body, projecting the gloves toward the puck to cover more net. Then, when they see a high shot, they stab their glove or blocker forward, which is simply taking the shortest route to the puck. It requires less movement, is more repeatable, and allows the goalie to maintain vision of the puck all the way into the glove or blocker, which improves rebound control. The same goes for pad saves, which have transformed from dramatic kicking motions to a widely flared butterfly. It has less room for error and makes the rebounds more predictable.

I don't disagree that it's less visually impressive to watch, but good luck convincing goalie coaches to teach extravagance over efficiency.

Sean says: Or we could make the nets a bit bigger and force those boring goalies and their coaches to adjust, you big weird oafs.

The Athletic / NHL rumblings: Postseason salary cap to be discussed in CBA negotiations, plus Flyers' plan for draft capital

By Pierre LeBrun- April 5, 2025

The very first comment on my story earlier this week about injured NHL stars was telling.

"Pierre, do you think the next CBA will include the need for teams to be salary-cap compliant in the playoffs? It's a shame that recent miraculous 'Playoff Game 1' returns from long-term injuries are starting to make people question the legitimacy of injuries (or at least the timing of their returns) on teams who went shopping at the trade deadline," wrote Athletic subscriber G.K.

Long-term injured reserve issues and the idea of a playoff salary cap have, I believe, been blown out of proportion over the past several years, but the topic is very much on the mind of many hockey fans.

It began with Patrick Kane and the Chicago Blackhawks in 2015. Then, of course, there was the Nikita Kucherov and Tampa Bay Lightning situation in 2021. And then Mark Stone and the Vegas Golden Knights in 2023.

But in between, all kinds of teams have used LTIR around the trade deadline to maximize cap space, etc.. All-in clubs like the Toronto Maple Leafs and Florida Panthers have been very good and clever at it in recent years.

This isn't about a few isolated cases. It's about the entire league.

But to answer G.K.'s question from above? Yes.

As I reported on TSN's "Insider Trading" on Thursday, the league plans to bring up the LTIR playoff salary cap issue with the NHLPA in CBA extension talks, which began this week in New York. As to whether there's a CBA tweak that can be figured out, who knows? But at the very least, it's on the agenda for discussion.

As for a solution, it's too early to tell what shape or form that could take.

From an NHLPA perspective, it's always been difficult to know exactly how 750-plus players feel about this issue, but the hook I've always landed on is that one would think players would want as level a playing field as possible come playoff time, as far as teams competing evenly for a Stanley Cup.

Solutions?

Some GMs liked an idea that was floated last season by then-Edmonton Oilers GM Ken Holland and Dallas Stars GM Jim Nill. Nill shared it with me at the March 2024 GM meetings.

"You should be cap compliant for that game (in the playoffs)," Nill said. "You can add \$20 million if you want (via LTIR) for the playoffs, but for that game, your active roster has to be cap-compliant. That's how I would do it.

"Because, you know, we don't know what injuries we're going to get. We can't dictate injuries. You can get an injury two days before the start of the playoffs. So if you have an opportunity, if you can add something to your team, you have to do it, that's your job. But within the cap world, we want fair competition for each game. Just be cap-compliant for a game. If you added \$10 million, someone's going to have to sit out for a playoff game. That's just my take. Just be cap-compliant for a playoff game."

Ironically, Nill and the Stars have benefited from the LTIR rules this season, allowing them to make a splash at the deadline with injuries to Miro Heiskanen, Tyler Seguin and Nils Lundqvist opening up cap

space. But I can assure you Nill feels the same way today as he did last year when I quoted him saying that.

It's about finding something that works for everyone. But NHL deputy commissioner Bill Daly in the past has found solutions like Nill's suggestion too simplistic for a complicated LTIR system.

So honestly I'm not exactly sure what a tweak would look like, and perhaps in the end, the NHL and NHLPA won't find enough common ground.

But at least they're going to talk about it. We'll see what, if anything, comes of it.

Flyers open to trading picks

Since Daniel Briere took over as GM in May 2023, the Philadelphia Flyers have been unflinching in their bigger-picture vision of what it's going to take to turn over the roster and build something with lasting power.

It is a soul-sucking exercise at times, and the firing of head coach John Tortorella last week was no fun at all for the young Flyers GM.

But through it all, there's been a consistent vision from Briere of where he wants this thing to go.

Even after surprisingly flirting with a playoff berth last season, Briere and team president of hockey ops Keith Jones were transparent in communicating to everyone that they weren't done with the pain part of things — not that early into a rebuild that began less than two years ago.

In fact, they said, odds are the 2024-25 season would have more pain. And after selling off more pieces before the trade deadline, there was certainly more pain.

Well worth it, the GM told The Athletic in Toronto last week, if they deliver on the overall plan.

"Our goal is not to just become a team that makes the playoffs and kind of just squeezes in. We want to be a team that when it's time, we go and eventually be a contender, and that's what we're trying to build," Briere said. "But to get there, you've got to go through some pain. ... We believe in the end, this will help us be a better team."

The Flyers have three first-round picks in this June's draft: their own, plus picks acquired from the Edmonton Oilers and Colorado Avalanche. They also have four second-round picks.

They could use those in trades, as well.

"We're going to explore everything we can," Briere said. "Obviously we're excited about the picks, but it's more than just picks, it's assets. That's the way we see it. If we have a chance to make our team better quicker, we'll use those picks. It might be to move up in the draft. It might be to acquire a player or something that we need. We did a little bit of that in the trade with Toronto with (Nikita) Grebenkin. Him being 21 years old, he's a bit more mature, a bit more ready to help us sooner rather than later. Whereas you draft a player at 18 years old, sometimes it can take three or four years before they're ready to play.

"So we're definitely open to explore all kinds of different ways to start making our team better."

Would the Flyers be willing to trade one of their first-round picks?

"Yes, absolutely, we're open to different things," Briere said. "You need to two to tango, and you can't do that by yourself. But yes, if there are teams that are interested in doing that type of deal, yes ..."

The idea is to try to move the rebuild up a phase this summer and hopefully add real pieces. Easier said than done, of course, but that's the plan. If they can pull it off, maybe they can contend for a playoff spot next season.

The fear in any rebuild is getting stuck in forever-building mode and not getting over the hump. How does Briere make sure he never gets into that scary situation?

"You're a little bit at the mercy of the players when it comes to that," he said. "The players will tell you when they're ready to take that step. And we've seen it, we've seen guys take steps. We saw a lot of guys take a big step last year. It's part of the reason we almost made the playoffs last season. But we're going to need more.

"And the guys are aware. I like the mentality of our young guys. They want to be part of something special down the road. They know they got to put the time in for now."

The Athletic / The 8 NHL teams with the best case to make an offer sheet this offseason

By James Mirtle- April 5, 2025

There's an interesting debate in the NHL right now over whether this will be the "summer of offer sheets" or not.

Certainly the fact that the St. Louis Blues pulled off the double sheet last year with Philip Broberg and Dylan Holloway helps improve the odds, especially given how they've contributed to the Blues' midseason resurgence this year.

But the Blues were the perfect candidate to go after two of the Edmonton Oilers' young players, as they had both picks and cap space when they tendered the two offer sheets in mid-August last year. They were also a team that nearly made the playoffs the previous season and had clear roster needs to address.

Let's face it, though: Not every NHL team is well-positioned to attempt an offer sheet right now. In fact, after the giant pick purge that was the trade deadline, seven teams don't have a first-rounder in 2026, 10 don't have their second-rounder and seven don't have their third.

The Tampa Bay Lightning and Toronto Maple Leafs have even traded their 2027 first-round picks, too, which further diminishes their ability to go the offer sheet route.

With that in mind, I thought an interesting thought experiment would be to look at which teams are in the best spot to get aggressive this summer. There are typically four (or sometimes five) factors that go into considering an offer sheet for the front offices involved, so we'll rate teams by these categories and see who comes out on top.

Does the team have its own picks?

Offer sheet compensation in the NHL involves giving up various levels and quantities of draft picks, from a max of four first-rounders for a high-priced talent (an estimated more than \$12 million AAV in the summer of 2025) down to just a third-round pick (for players making under \$2.5 million). Teams need to have their own picks, not ones they've acquired from other teams, and for this exercise (and simplicity's sake) we won't include the possibility that they could reacquire their picks to attempt an offer sheet.

Does the team have enough cap space?

With the cap going up 8.5 percent to \$95.5 million next season, more teams are going to be flush with spending money going into free agency this summer. But not every team will have the kind of extra room, after signing their own RFAs and adding some UFAs, to get aggressive with an offer sheet.

Is the team going to finish in the league's basement?

A San Jose- or Chicago-like rebuilding team could theoretically make an offer sheet, but would it be worth it if they ended up giving up a top-10 lottery pick or two? (Ask the Leafs of 15 years ago.) So we'll eliminate teams projected to bottom out next year, focusing more on clubs like the Blues, who have a shot to contend (or at least be decent) in 2025-26.

Does the team have a significant roster need they can't fill elsewhere?

Most teams need something to add to their rosters, but this consideration eliminates the few rosters where a major need isn't so pressing that the front office would go the offer sheet route.

And the possible wild-card fifth factor would be: Is it a desirable location for free agents to sign, as any RFA inking an offer sheet would have to want to go to the acquiring team?

I've gone through and looked at how all 32 teams stack up in these categories and have my (very official) ranking below.

1. Los Angeles Kings

L.A. was one of the first teams that came to my mind when I thought about doing this exercise. They're a good team — eighth in the league standings — and they have all of their picks for 2026.

They also have a need up front for another scorer, as goals have been rather hard to come by. How good would Matthew Knies or JJ Peterka look on this team? (Or any of the other forwards here.)

Plus, there's plenty of pressure on the Kings to finally break through in the postseason after getting beaten by the Oilers so many years in a row. Anze Kopitar and Drew Doughty are aging but still effective, but how long is their window open?

Adding another high-end talent with some of their \$20 million-plus space makes a lot of sense, whether they find it in UFA or going the offer sheet route.

It makes a lot of sense for the Kings to want to add another top-end talent such as Matthew Knies, who is offer-sheet eligible. (Jayne Kamin-Oncea / Imagn Images)

2. Utah HC

Utah underwhelmed in the standings this year and the biggest reason was that they struggled to score. But they're likely not that far from being a consistent playoff team, as their young cast should continue to improve.

Salt Lake City has the makings of a desirable free-agent destination, too, and the Hockey Clubbers have all of their picks (plus a bunch of extras they've acquired over the rebuilding desert years). Their roster appears basically set in goal and on D; what they really need is, like L.A., to take a run at some more scoring talent.

And they have more than \$20 million to play with and no big free agents of their own to worry about re-signing. So expect them to be in on the big UFAs — and maybe RFAs, too.

3. Montreal Canadiens

This would be a lot of fun.

Montreal is clearly a young team on the rise, as they've ripped off an 11-4-4 stretch lately to get close to a surprise playoff berth. Nick Suzuki has taken a nice step, to the point he could finish top 15 in scoring, and Lane Hutson is ready to dominate far earlier than expected.

The Habs not only have all their picks, they also have close to \$20 million in cap space and not many free agents of consequence going out the door.

One complicating factor: Their biggest need is down the middle and there's not a whole lot of centers available as RFAs. But if they strike out on July 1, getting creative with an offer sheet on another top-six forward could be the right move for a front office that has quietly made a lot of them lately.

4. Anaheim Ducks

If not the Kings, why not down the road in SoCal?

Yes, the Ducks break our no teams with bad records rule, but they took a step forward this year and some of their kids appear ready to make a higher impact in 2025-26.

This would be a risky play for Anaheim, but this is their seventh consecutive season out of the playoffs. At some point, they have to start building up — and a big offer-sheet swing might help.

The Ducks have to be careful, however, as RFA netminder Lukáš Dostál could be a target from elsewhere given his strong season.

5. Calgary Flames

No, Calgary isn't always considered a hugely desirable landing spot by some players' standards. But they scored near the top of the league in most of the other categories here, and with Dustin Wolf in goal, they shouldn't be bottoming out in the standings anytime soon.

A rebuild doesn't seem to be on the table, either, not with a new building on the way in 2027.

They have a handful of their own RFAs such as Connor Zary and Matt Coronato to sign, but even after getting that business done, they should have at least another \$15 million or so to get aggressive in free agency. And they have needs on left defense and up front, given they sit second last in goals per game and have an aging cast down the middle.

It's going to take something bold for Calgary to get out of the West's mushy middle. An offer sheet certainly qualifies.

6. Winnipeg Jets

Another team in a smaller Canadian market. The difference in Winnipeg is that the team is clearly a contender, especially with Connor Hellebuyck locked up on such a reasonable contract.

The Jets are going to be absolutely swimming in cap space, too, potentially with more than \$30 million. The trouble is that at least some of that space could come as the result of losing key players to UFA, with Nikolaj Ehlers and Neal Pionk at the top of the list.

They're going to have to fill out their roster through free agency and trades, and with the UFA market so competitive, they may strike out there. Which could be where an offer-sheet play makes sense.

It's worth noting they don't currently have their 2026 second-rounder, however, so they'd have to make due with the other avenues for making this play. Or beg the Penguins for the pick they gave up for Luke Schenn back.

7. New Jersey Devils

The Devils have all their picks and are clearly in contention mode, especially considering they should be healthier next year than this one. So they feel like a perfect candidate here.

New Jersey still needs to sign RFA Luke Hughes — who isn't offer-sheet eligible — so that's one pressing offseason concern after the second half he's had. That will leave the Devils without as much cap space as all of the other teams listed here, which means their offer-sheet play would have to be more targeted.

But they're well-stocked on the blue line and in goal; an upgrade at wing would make the most sense to fill out what's already a solid roster.

8. Philadelphia Flyers

The Flyers make me a bit nervous, given how much they struggled this season. They currently have the sixth-worst record in the league, and if you're throwing around first-round picks, you definitely want to finish a lot higher than that next season.

But a high percentage of their issues have been in goal, where they have the lowest even-strength save percentage in the league and all three of their netminders have posted an .881 mark or worse. (All three are in the NHL's bottom six in goals saved above expected among goalies with 15 games played.)

If Philadelphia can find an upgrade in net, I like a lot of the rest of their team and think they could surprise with a few savvy additions. They likely have \$15 million to \$18 million to play with after signing their own RFAs and a lot of players signed, so one big play for a free-agent addition could be the right course of action to push their rebuild ahead and give Matvei Michkov more to work with.

But moving out their 2026 picks for help up front would certainly be bolder than what the Blues did last summer.

The Athletic / NHL future WATCH: Which prospect in each team's pipeline had the most promising season?

By The Athletic NHL Staff- April 6, 2025

It's what every NHL organization wants to see in its prospect pipeline: the player who shows promise that they could one day be ready for the next step and more responsibility at a higher level.

As the 2024-25 hockey season winds down, these prospects have emerged and shown what they could have to offer — enough to possibly change the way their organization perceives them or solidify their future star status.

Which prospect in each NHL team's pipeline had the most promising season?

The Athletic posed that question to its NHL staff, stipulating that while short-term call-ups this season are eligible, the prospects should not have spent most of the season in the NHL.

In response, we heard about top prospects who showed they could make the leap, hidden gems who could earn bigger opportunities and players who showed they are on the precipice of making an NHL impact. Here are the picks.

Anaheim Ducks

Sam Colangelo, RW

Colangelo was a second-round pick of the Ducks in 2020. The 23-year-old spent three up-and-down seasons at Northeastern before jump-starting his development path with a terrific solo season at Western Michigan. He's carried the momentum into his first pro year, initially leading the AHL's San Diego Gulls in scoring during his time there and then giving Anaheim a boost following his promotion. Colangelo has eight goals in 24 games and is thriving on a line with Trevor Zegras and Mason McTavish as they've emerged as a go-to offensive line down the stretch. Honorable mentions: Tristan Luneau, Beckett Sennecke, Stian Solberg. — Eric Stephens

Sam Colangelo cleans up in tight, doubling Anaheim's lead to 2 late in the first!#FlyTogether
pic.twitter.com/MFJKhowDmA

— Hockey Daily 365 | NHL Highlights & News (@HockeyDaily365) April 2, 2025

Boston Bruins

Will Zellers, LW

The Bruins acquired Zellers' rights from the Avalanche in the Charlie Coyle trade. Zellers is a scorer — the kind the Bruins really need. Through 48 games, the Green Bay Gamblers forward had scored a USHL-leading 44 goals. The left-shot forward will be a freshman at North Dakota in 2025-26. Zellers' next step is to build the rest of his game. — Fluto Shinzawa

Buffalo Sabres

Noah Ostlund, C

Ostlund has been playing as Rochester's first-line center and was recently named the AHL's rookie of the month. Despite starting with one point in his first 12 games and dealing with an early-season injury, Ostlund has 36 points in 44 games. Coaches consistently praise his leadership, toughness and 200-foot

game. The 2022 first-round pick looks on track to be a potential impact NHL player with another year of development. — Matthew Fairburn

Calgary Flames

Zayne Parekh, RHD

The Flames' top prospect had a monster season in the OHL, again, with 33 goals and 107 points to finish in the top five in league scoring as a defenseman. Flames fans have been counting down the days until Parekh joins the NHL. Honorable mention goes to Jacob Battaglia, who scored 40 goals in the OHL and just signed an entry-level deal last week. — Julian McKenzie

THE SPIRIT STRIKE FIRST 🏒️🌟 @NHLFlames prospect Zayne Parekh connects with Kristian Epperson on the back door, and Epperson buries it to give @SpiritHockey an early 1-0 lead! 🏠 #OHLPlayoffs | @CHLHockey | #Flames pic.twitter.com/ZN07UCRvuu

— Ontario Hockey League (@OHLHockey) April 3, 2025

Carolina Hurricanes

Bradly Nadeau, LW/RW

Nadeau, the No. 30 pick in the 2023 draft, has leaped over every barrier in his progression as a player. He jumped from the BCHL to Hockey East last season, scoring 19 goals and 46 points in his one season with Maine, and his move to the AHL has been met with similar success. His 27 goals with the Chicago Wolves are the most of any rookie in the league and are tied for eighth overall. It's a total made even more impressive by the fact he had just one goal in his first nine games — and had had 26 in the last 49. His one-timer is made more efficient by the fact that he plays his off-side, making him a weapon at even strength and on the power play. — Cory Lavalette

Chicago Blackhawks

Sam Rinzel, RHD

The Blackhawks had high hopes for Rinzel, a 2022 first-round pick, but it wasn't until this season at the University of Minnesota that he really took off. He added some size to his frame, and that allowed him to elevate everything else. He was among the top defensemen in college hockey this season and the early returns in the NHL look promising. — Scott Powers

Colorado Avalanche

Ilya Nabokov, G

A year ago, Nabokov took the KHL by storm as a rookie, breaking Ilya Sorokin's record for the youngest playoff MVP in history. As the first goalie off the board in the 2024 draft, many wondered if he could repeat his magical season. Nabokov answered a lot of questions with another stellar year, posting a .923 save percentage in 49 games for Metallurg Magnitogorsk. The only question now is when he comes to North America. Nabokov's contract expires at the end of this season. Avalanche backup Scott Wedgewood still has another year left on his deal. Perhaps Nabokov comes over immediately and gets AHL experience before eventually joining Mackenzie Blackwood as a tandem in 2026-27. — Jesse Granger

Columbus Blue Jackets

Luca Del Bel Belluz, C

Del Bel Belluz, a second-round pick (No. 44) in 2022, had a respectable first pro season in 2023-24, but he's taken a big stride forward this season, not just at AHL Cleveland but during his first extended NHL run early in the season when the Blue Jackets endured a wave of injuries. Del Bel Belluz had two goals, six assists and a plus-2 rating in 15 games with Columbus. There have been concerns about Del Bel Belluz's strength and his skating, but he showed significant improvement after skating last summer with fitness expert Gary Roberts, a former NHL player. Del Bel Belluz plans to work with Roberts and several other NHL players this coming summer. An NHL career is well within his grasp. — Aaron Portzline

Dallas Stars

Ayrton Martino, LW

Martino, a third-round pick in 2021, started his senior season at Clarkson with a pedestrian 9 points in his first 15 games. But the winger exploded for 42 points over his last 24 games, finishing the season with 25 goals and 26 assists in 39 games (after scoring 25 goals in his first three seasons combined). He was sixth in the NCAA in scoring, ahead of the likes of Ryan Leonard and Gabe Perreault. Martino signed an entry-level deal with the Stars on March 24, a deal that will start in the fall. — Mark Lazerus

Detroit Red Wings

Axel Sandin Pellikka, RHD

Expectations were high for Sandin Pellikka after a standout season in the SHL a year ago, but he met them anyway, posting one of the most productive seasons for a junior defenseman in the league's history and playing a major role on a playoff team. He also repeated as the best defenseman at the World Juniors. Once his season ends, all eyes will be on a jump to North America, and whether Sandin Pellikka will go straight to Detroit or spend time with AHL Grand Rapids. — Max Bultman

What You Should Read Next

As its fan base faces another likely playoff-free postseason, the prospects within Detroit's system can provide some hope for the future.

Edmonton Oilers

Samuel Jonsson, G

Matt Savoie and Sam O'Reilly have arguably managed the two best seasons among Oilers prospects, so let's go elsewhere since they're Nos. 1 and 2 in the pipeline. Jonsson (158th pick, 2022) had what's being viewed within the organization as a remarkable campaign. He posted a .922 save percentage for BIK Karlskoga, which earned him top goalie honors in the Allsvenskan. That's quite the accomplishment for a 21-year-old in Sweden's second-best league. The 6-foot-5 Jonsson is now pushing Eemil Vinni for the distinction as Edmonton's best goalie prospect behind current organizational No. 3 Olivier Rodrigue. — Daniel Nugent-Bowman

Florida Panthers

Jack Devine, RW

When it comes to the prospect pool, the all-in, all-the-time Panthers will take any positive signs they can get, and Devine's development over the past two seasons with Denver (40 goals, 73 assists in 87 games) certainly qualifies. He's become a well-rounded offensive player, and he could well wind up as a solid complementary NHL piece. Not bad for a guy who was taken at No. 221 in 2022. — Sean Gentille

Los Angeles Kings

Hampton Slukynsky, G

With apologies to Liam Greentree, who's had a monster OHL season, the 19-year-old Slukynsky is at least a rival to Carter George as L.A.'s goalie of the future. Slukynsky was a fourth-round draft selection in 2023. Slukynsky, a freshman at Western Michigan, has backstopped the program to its first NCAA Frozen Four. While he split duties with graduate student Cameron Rowe for much of the year, Slukynsky is the backbone of the team's title chase. He's posted a 17-5-1 record, 1.92 GAA and .923 save percentage after starring in the USHL. — Eric Stephens

Minnesota Wild

Charlie Stramel, C

The easy answer would be Zeev Buium, the Wild's top prospect and Hobey Baker finalist who is expected to jump to the NHL after the Frozen Four. Hunter Haight has been impressive with 19 goals in his first pro season, too. But Stramel's year with Michigan State was the most promising considering his previous struggles at Wisconsin. The transfer last summer paid off, with Stramel playing a first-line role on one of the country's top teams. He regained his confidence and identity as a player. Stramel is returning to MSU for his senior year, but this was a great step in his development. — Joe Smith

Montreal Canadiens

Oliver Kapanen, C

Kapanen, 21, broke camp with the Canadiens but, after limited usage through 12 games, was loaned to Timrå IK of the Swedish Hockey League (SHL), where he played under former longtime NHLer Olli Jokinen. And he played a ton. There were 39 U22 players to play at least 30 games in the SHL this season, and of that group, Kapanen was by far the most efficient scorer with 35 points in 36 games. In fact, he would still be the leader in points per game if you upped the age limit to U24, and he was second among U25 players in the league. Kapanen was recalled by the Canadiens on Wednesday and should get an opportunity to help in their late playoff push. — Arpon Basu

Nashville Predators

Tanner Molendyk, RHD

The 20-year-old and 2023 first-round pick stayed on a trajectory that gives him a strong chance to be in Nashville's 2025-26 opening-day lineup. He was named a WHL All-Star after collecting 47 points and finishing with a plus-25 rating in 49 games with the Medicine Hat Tigers. He provides hope for what has become a subpar Predators defense corps. — Joe Rexrode

New Jersey Devils

Seamus Casey, RHD

Casey, who played college hockey in Michigan, made his pro debut this season and made the Devils' roster out of camp. He is currently with the NHL club, though he's only played 10 games with New Jersey this season. He's had four goals and five points in those 10 games, plus another 18 points in 30 AHL games. That's all encouraging for a 21-year-old defenseman who was a second-round pick in 2022. — Peter Baugh

New York Islanders

Cole Eiserman, LW

You're going to be scrutinized when you're the only first-round pick the team has made since 2019. Eiserman has not just lived up to the hype, he's welcomed it — an exuberant freshman year at Boston

University, with 23 goals in 37 games, plus a key utility role for Team USA at the World Juniors has made everyone around the Islanders eager to see what Eiserman can do in the future. — Arthur Staple

New York Rangers

Gabe Perreault, LW

Perreault is the Rangers' top prospect, and though his numbers at Boston College took a slight dip, he still was one of the premier players in college hockey. He had 48 points in 37 games with BC, as well as 10 points at the World Juniors. He made his NHL debut Wednesday, playing 13:38 and was a minus-1. Drew Fortescue, Perreault's college teammate, could have been another candidate here. So could Noah Laba, who recently signed out of Colorado College. He's finishing the year in the AHL on an amateur tryout. — Peter Baugh

What You Should Read Next

After attending Leonard's Capitals debut some 24 hours earlier, the crew of Eagles players headed to New York to support Perreault.

Ottawa Senators

Stephen Halliday, C

Halliday has emerged as the Belleville Senators' leading point producer in his first full season at the AHL level with 16 goals and 44 points in 63 games. That came after he earned nine points in seven games in Belleville's playoff run last year. A big-bodied presence with untapped potential at the professional level, he's certainly played his way into consideration for a roster spot next season. Expectations were already high for Carter Yakemchuk next season, but they will now also be for Halliday after this year. — Julian McKenzie

Philadelphia Flyers

Alex Bump, LW

The Flyers believe that the 21-year-old Bump, a fifth-round pick in 2022, could be one of the steals of that year's draft. Bump has led Western Michigan to an appearance in the Frozen Four and was named NCHC Forward of the Year with 23 goals and 47 points in 40 games. The 6-foot-2, 200-pound Minnesota native brings some needed size and finish to the Flyers' prospect pool, and the club is under the impression he'll be ready to turn pro when his sophomore season concludes. — Kevin Kurz

The best in the NCHC! Alex Bump is the NCHC Forward of the Year! #BroncosReign
pic.twitter.com/rY2eo0YiQn

— WMU Hockey (@WMUHockey) March 20, 2025

Pittsburgh Penguins

Sergei Murashov, G

Murashov entered the season as a very good prospect, but wasn't considered the Penguins' best prospect. That may have changed. The 21-year-old has enjoyed a remarkable season. He is 11-1-0 at the AHL level with a .916 save percentage and a 2.63 GAA. In the ECHL, he went 17-7-1 with a .922 save percentage and a 2.40 GAA. To say the least, Pittsburgh is very excited about him. — Josh Yohe

San Jose Sharks

Sam Dickinson, LHD

The Sharks' system is stacked, including Collin Graf, who made the quick leap from standing out in the AHL to holding a regular spot in San Jose, and Luca Cagnoni, an undrafted WHL free-agent defenseman who earned an audition with the big club in his first pro season. But we'll go with Dickinson, the No. 11 pick in 2024, who has been one of the best defensemen across junior hockey after leading OHL power London with 91 points in 55 regular-season games. He's only in his age-18 season (he turns 19 in June), so it'll be interesting to see if he can make the Sharks' roster next fall or spend a fourth year in a league he's outgrown. — Eric Stephens

Seattle Kraken


Berkly Catton, C

Catton dominated the WHL (again) in his draft-plus-one season and is poised to make a deep playoff run as the captain of the Spokane Chiefs this spring. Enormously creative, Catton represented Canada at the World Juniors and looks like a player who could threaten to break camp with the NHL team next fall. For a team that's short on elite talent, Catton is tracking to be precisely the sort of impact player the club was hoping for when they selected him in the top 10 of the 2024 NHL Draft. — Thomas Drance

St. Louis Blues

Jimmy Snuggerud, RW

A week ago, Blues fans wondered if 2022 first-round pick Snuggerud would turn pro or return to the University of Minnesota for his senior season. They can breathe a sigh of relief after Snuggerud signed a three-year entry-level contract with the club. He had 24 goals with the Gophers this season (the sixth most in the NCAA), and with Dylan Holloway now week to week with a lower-body injury, he's stepping right into a top-six role with the Blues. He scored his first point in his second game Thursday. — Jeremy Rutherford

Jimmy Snuggerud collects his first NHL point with his dad in attendance!  pic.twitter.com/PoK9tVaQKr

— NHL (@NHL) April 4, 2025

What You Should Read Next

Snuggerud logged 10:43 of ice time in his debut with the Blues — a 2-1 OT win over the Red Wings. Here's a closer look at his 15 shifts.

Tampa Bay Lightning

Isaac Howard, LW

Howard took a big step for a second consecutive season under head coach Adam Nightingale at Michigan State University, emerging as one of the top offensive players in college hockey, really working on his game and earning a top-10 finalist nod for the Hobey Baker Award. Howard now looks well-positioned to begin his pro career. He projects as a potential top-nine secondary scorer and power-play contributor. — Scott Wheeler

Toronto Maple Leafs

Ben Danford, RHD

The Leafs' prospect pool has been decimated and there are so few players with genuine NHL potential. Luckily, their most recent first-round pick, Danford, spent this season developing into exactly the type of defender the Leafs currently covet. His defensive game and skating improved as he took on the added responsibility of being named Oshawa Generals captain. Danford constantly threw thunderous hits and made intelligent plays with the puck, looking more like a pro by the game. His offensive numbers don't

jump off the page, sure. But his 6-foot-2 frame does. And that he paired that frame with an ability to shut down the best opposition forwards this season speaks to his growth. — Joshua Kloke

What do Luke Haymes, John Prokop and Ryan Kirwan bring to Toronto? What do their signings reveal about the state of the Leafs' prospect pool

Utah Hockey Club

Tomas Lavoie, RHD

Lavoie's promising season paid off with an NHL entry-level contract this week, as the Utahns signed him Wednesday after a breakthrough campaign with the Cape Breton Screaming Eagles in the QMJHL. Taken late in the third round of Utah's first draft last June, Lavoie now looks like he should have been a first-rounder. At 6-foot-4 and 215 pounds, he's always had NHL-ready size, but his offense — with 55 points in 60 games this season — really took off in his draft-plus-one season. He's a good skater for his size and projects as a top-four shutdown defenseman, but if the offense keeps improving, he could be even more. Maybe even the steal of the draft. — James Mirtle

We have signed 2024 third round draft choice, defenseman Tomas Lavoie to an entry-level contract.

: <https://t.co/LMEn4SwPVm> [pic.twitter.com/2hWq8pCiFC](https://t.co/pic.twitter.com/2hWq8pCiFC)

— Utah Hockey Club (@utahhockeyclub) April 2, 2025

Vancouver Canucks

Elias Pettersson, LHD

While Jonathan Lekkerimäki was a dominant AHL goal scorer, and Tom Willander thrived in a top pair role at Boston University, Elias Pettersson's accelerated development curve and unique profile is the biggest Canucks game changer in their prospect system. Pettersson is a hulking defensive defender, with exceptional skating ability, deceptive levels of offense and real physical edge in his game. He's a throwback shutdown defender, with the skill and speed to fit seamlessly into the contemporary NHL game. That's a difficult player type to find, and changes the complexion of what the Canucks blue line can develop into over the next few years. — Thomas Drance

Vegas Golden Knights

Carl Lindbom, G

Lindbom is having a brilliant debut season in North America, playing incredibly well behind a struggling Henderson Silver Knights squad. Despite playing behind a last-place team in the AHL, the 21-year-old has looked composed and impressive all season. Not only is his .914 save percentage significantly higher than that of his more experienced goalie partner, Akira Schmid (.886), but it's the highest by a Silver Knights goaltender since Logan Thompson in 2021-22. He has elevated himself into the conversation for Vegas' goalie of the future. — Jesse Granger

Washington Capitals

Andrew Cristall, LW

It'd be easy to pick Ryan Leonard, who led the NCAA in goals, then jumped into the NHL lineup. The same goes for Cole Hutson, who starred at Boston University and at the World Juniors. Our pick, though, is Cristall, a crafty, playmaking winger who produced points at a better rate than anyone else in the CHL, including mega-prospect Gavin McKenna and potential No. 1 pick Michael Misa. Cristall isn't big, and his skating isn't great, but everything else points to him turning into a top-six player. — Sean Gentile

Winnipeg Jets

Kieron Walton, LW/RW

Walton was the 187th player taken in the 2024 draft. Almost everything he's accomplished since that time makes you wonder how he lasted that long. The 6-foot-6 forward more than doubled his OHL point production this season, finishing with 92 points in 66 games after posting 43 points in his draft season. Some of Walton's scoring cooled off down the stretch, with 22 points in his last 25 games, but the smooth skater has been productive for Sudbury early in the OHL playoffs. It's rare for a forward of his size to possess such a slick offensive toolkit; Walton is doing his best to emulate the greats, watching Tage Thompson clips in his spare time and building his own highlight reel. — Murat Ates

The Athletic / Alex Ovechkin scored No. 894 ‘in theater and in style.’ His next goal will be even grander

By Sean Gentile- April 6, 2025

WASHINGTON — Sometime soon — Sunday maybe, perhaps Thursday — Alex Ovechkin will reach the summit.

In a career jammed with consequential goals, none will be remembered more than the next one. We'll talk about it then, and we'll do it in the grandest of terms, because that's how it all works.

To say he's chasing immortality, whole cloth, would be incorrect; that's a fish he caught long ago. He is, though, still chasing something. The biggest record in his sport. The biggest name. The biggest number. Scoring one goal is hard. Scoring more of them than anyone else, ever, is something else, and Ovechkin is about to walk through that door.

On Friday night, he knocked.

Ovechkin began the Washington Capitals' game against the Chicago Blackhawks with 892 goals, three away from breaking Wayne Gretzky's NHL career record. He finished it with 894. He was inches away from 895. And 896. And 897.

On a different night, in a different set of circumstances, that would qualify as some sort of disappointment. There are six games left on Washington's regular-season schedule — starting with Sunday's road game against the New York Islanders — which makes breaking the record a near-certainty. Just two of those games, though, are at Capital One Arena, in front of the fans who love him most. If you're shooting for the dream scenario, that bit of math isn't kind.

Still, what Ovechkin got on Friday night — what he gave the people in attendance, and the way he gave it to them — was more than good enough.

"Everybody here saw it," longtime teammate Tom Wilson said. "Everybody in the building got to experience it. Everybody in this locker room got to be a part of it."

Wayne Gretzky – 894 goals in 1487 games

Alex Ovechkin – 894 goals in 1486 games#Gr8Chase pic.twitter.com/UPNuT6ExyE

— NHL (@NHL) April 5, 2025

If you doubted that Ovechkin would make a run at the record on Friday night, you haven't paid attention. It's not just about his resume, either, remarkable as it is; it's about how he's played over the last few weeks. He had scored in each of his last three games. He hadn't gone more than two games without a goal since Jan. 1. For the season, somehow, he was clipping along at a 54-goal pace, waylaid only by a broken leg — and far more briefly than the standard-issue 39-year-old would be out.

In hockey, nothing is truly inevitable. The margins are too slim. The game, by definition, is too chaotic. Ovechkin, though — scoring in bunches, and doing it early — is as close as you can get.

Dylan Strome realized that. Since joining the Capitals in 2022, he has assisted on more Ovechkin goals than anyone else: 44 and, at the start of the night, 19 this season. The crowd chanting Ovechkin's name louder and longer than ever before, until the moment the puck dropped, was a clue.

"We were kind of saying before the game if he gets one in the first, then look out because he seems to score in bunches," Strome said. "Everyone knew what was happening."

And it happened quickly. Ovechkin, 3 minutes, 52 seconds into the game, and on his second shift, went post-in on Blackhawks goalie Spencer Knight. Chicago, somehow, lost him at the bottom of the right circle. The feed, naturally, came from Strome. No. 893.

If you asked the biggest Ovechkin fan to imagine one of his goals — to come up with the platonic ideal — it would've been No. 894. With 13:47 remaining and the Capitals on the power play, defenseman John Carlson shuffled the puck to Ovechkin, who was waiting in the left faceoff dot. He beat Knight more cleanly and in a tighter window than the first time.

Only Nicklas Backstrom has set up more of Ovechkin's goals than Carlson. The two won the Stanley Cup together in 2018, with Ovechkin as the team's best player and Carlson as its best defenseman.

Carlson, like Strome, was impressed. He wasn't surprised.

"It just seemed like one of those days that when guys that are larger than life like him — anybody else going for anything else probably wouldn't have happened," Carlson said. "But the greats of the greats of the greats just find a way to do it and do it in theater and in style, and tonight was no different."

The ovation Ovechkin received lasted, give or take, six minutes. The chants started, and they didn't stop. Ovechkin took time to celebrate with his teammates, who joined him on the ice. "We kind of looked at each other (on the bench) and just said like, 'Screw it, I'm going,'" Wilson said.

He pointed to the sky in tribute to his brother Sergei, who died when he was 10. He celebrated with his wife, Nastya, and his son — also Sergei, of course — along the glass.

He turned also toward the man whose company he'd just joined, and whose company he'll soon leave, and paid tribute.

"Just seeing him skate over and bow down to Wayne's box, it was just shivers," Wilson said. "It was just something that everyone dreams of being a part of, and to have a front-row seat and see him — I'm just so proud of him and so happy for him."

An hour or so after the game, Ovechkin and Gretzky were seated together at District E, an open-air theater across from the arena. With a "Gr8 Chase" backdrop behind them, flanked a tub of Bud Light tall boys, the two legends answered questions about the moment and its meaning. Gretzky was gracious and funny; Ovechkin was relaxed and, he said, relieved.

He had jokes, too. He ribbed Strome for bouncing a pass off Blackhawks defenseman Connor Murphy and past Knight in the third period, rather than giving him a shot at a wide-open net. He gently corrected Gretzky, too, for assuming that Ryan Leonard's empty net goal came at Ovechkin's expense. It was his moment — maybe the biggest he'll have in front of Capitals fans — and he was in it.

"I'm still a little shaking and still can't believe it," he said. "I just talked to my family yesterday and my father-in-law asked, 'How do you keep your energy, your mind?' And I just said like, 'I just enjoy it,' because it's a huge opportunity. It's history."

He made it on Friday. And in due time, he'll make it again.

The Athletic / Why Alex Ovechkin's 'amazing journey' to goal No. 895 meant so much to so many

By Sean Gentile- April 7, 2025

ELMONT, N.Y. — The floor was wet.

Beyond that, inside the visitors' locker room at UBS Arena, there weren't many obvious signs of what took place Sunday, what Alex Ovechkin accomplished. It felt crowded, sure, and there were a few more former All-Stars milling around than you'd typically see after a game in early April. Still, a person dropped in the middle of the scene would've noticed hockey players speaking into microphones and not much else.

Tom Wilson was one of those players. And the Washington Capitals winger, standing in a puddle of sweat and Stella Artois, had to clear his throat to maintain his composure.

"It's just an honor to be living through this," he said.

Wilson was speaking about the exploits of Ovechkin, whose two-decade chase of the NHL career record for goals had come to an end 2 hours and 21 minutes earlier. He scored No. 895 as he'd scored so many before: on a remarkable, bull-whip shot through an impossibly small window with his team on the power play.

"This is the true greatness of Alex Ovechkin," Capitals coach Spencer Carbery said. "I saw, there was nothing. I couldn't even see (Islanders goalie Ilya Sorokin), let alone netting.

"It's the ultimate goal-scorer's goal for the greatest of all time."

Wayne Gretzky's mark, initially set 31 years ago — then expanded to 894 — fell slowly, thanks to Ovechkin's 14 40-goal seasons and uncommon durability, then quickly. Ovechkin scored six goals in his last five games, putting to rest the possibility that the chase would continue into October and imbuing the end of the road with a degree of surreality.

If you think that sounds like too big a word, consider this: the hockey world watched Sunday's historic moment go from possibility to probability to virtual certainty over a span of a few weeks. Ovechkin is a 39-year-old man who broke his leg on Nov. 18. At that moment, he was 27 goals away from the record. This should not have happened — not in April, at least. And yet here we are, with five games to spare.

"Yeah," Carbery said, "you can't rationalize that part of it."

"We all knew it was 42 (at the start of the season)," center Dylan Strome said. "We all knew the number. And to break a leg and come back and do what he did, (I'm) speechless."

Ovechkin said it himself. He was still reeling after tying Gretzky, which happened about 40 hours earlier with a two-goal game against the Chicago Blackhawks. Late in the third period, he came within inches, a few separate times, of scoring No. 895 in front of a home crowd. The fact that he fell temporarily short didn't matter — Capital One Arena was a circus before, during and after. As it should've been. Two sleeps later, it was time to run it all back.

"(Friday) was such a great night, but this is something crazy," Ovechkin said. "I'm probably gonna need a couple more days or maybe a couple weeks to realize what does it mean to be No. 1."

Wilson played his part, firing a cross-ice pass to set up Ovechkin. On Friday, Wilson was on the bench and had to decide whether he wanted to jump off for the celebration. This time, the decision was made for him.

“When I was skating to the net and the puck went in the net, the next 15 seconds,” Wilson said, “I truly just kind of blacked out.”

Wilson, and presumably the rest of the Capitals, snapped out of it in time by the time Ovechkin’s post-goal belly slide was complete. He almost made it to center ice, but not quite. “Ice was bad today,” he said, “so I fell.”

The bench emptied. Strome said he felt like he needed to pinch himself. Carbery, who’s spent two years integrating Ovechkin’s chase with his team’s overall ambitions, ran the gamut of emotions from the bench.

“You’re caught off-guard a little bit,” Carbery said, “and then it’s just pure ‘hug as many staff members as you can as quickly as you can.’”

Carbery had more time than he thought. The stoppage lasted about 25 minutes — all part of the NHL’s plan. Gretzky and his wife, Janet, came out to congratulate Ovechkin, his wife, Nastya, and their sons, as Gordie Howe and his wife did for them in 1994. NHL commissioner Gary Bettman, as usual, basked in the boos. A league-produced montage of congratulations from sports and entertainment legends — led by Michael Jordan, Simone Biles, Derek Jeter, Michael Phelps, Danny DeVito and the guy from Train — played on the arena’s video board.

After another 27:26 minutes of hockey, the celebration moved to the Caps’ locker room. Gretzky, for the second game in a row, joined in. Ovechkin, for the second game in a row, was on the receiving end of a beer shower. Wilson, for the second game in a row, was in the middle of it all.

“You know, 10-year-old me or 10-year-old any of us, to be in a room with Wayne and Ovi during this moment is so special,” Wilson said. “He’s taken us on an amazing journey and it’ll be the honor of my career to play with him, learn so much from him, win with him, watch him score this goal. There’s really no words to describe it.”

Could’ve fooled us.

The Athletic / Is Alex Ovechkin's new NHL goals record unreachable? Explaining the historical context

By Mark Lazerus- April 7, 2025

The Athletic has live coverage of Alex Ovechkin's journey to break Wayne Gretzky's career goal record.

Washington Capitals winger Alex Ovechkin made NHL history on Sunday, scoring the 895th goal of his 20-year career and passing the iconic Wayne Gretzky for first place on the all-time list.

It's the hockey equivalent of Barry Bonds passing Hank Aaron with his 756th home run, or LeBron James passing Kareem Abdul-Jabbar with his 38,388th point — a modern legend chasing down one of the most revered records in sports, held by one of the most revered athletes of all time.

Here's a little historical perspective on Ovechkin's feat:

When did Gretzky set the record?

Gretzky scored his 802nd goal on March 23, 1994 against Vancouver, knocking a Marty McSorley pass into a mostly empty net and passing Gordie Howe, "Mr. Hockey," for first on the all-time list. Gretzky was in his 15th NHL season, and the goal came in his 1,117th regular-season game. Howe was widely considered the game's greatest player until Gretzky came along, posting 801 goals and 1,850 points in 1,767 games. The games-played record stood until Patrick Marleau broke it in 2021.

Howe played in five different decades (six if you count the one game he played with the International Hockey League's Detroit Vipers in 1997 at the age of 69), starting his career with the Detroit Red Wings in 1946 and finishing it with the Hartford Whalers in 1979-80. Howe's blend of skill, strength and sandpaper made him a legend, but even his numbers pale in comparison to Gretzky's.

How unreachable did the record seem when Gretzky retired?

Whenever a debate arises about who the greatest individual athlete is in team sports — Babe Ruth? Michael Jordan? Tom Brady? — hockey fans almost always go to the same mind-boggling stat. Gretzky was the NHL's all-time leading goal scorer, and yet if you took away every one of his 894 of his goals, he'd still have more points than any other player in league history. Gretzky had 2,857 points; Jaromir Jagr is next at 1,921, in 246 more games. Gretzky's dominance is unparalleled.

He has the only four 200-point seasons in NHL history, including a staggering 215-point campaign in 1985-86. In that season, he posted 163 assists. Only twice has a player other than Gretzky had more than 163 points in a season (both times it was Mario Lemieux). And while Gretzky was the greatest playmaker the game has ever seen, he also had been its most prolific finisher. He's first and second on the single-season goals list, with 92 in 1981-82 and 87 in 1983-84. He also had two 70-goal seasons, five 60-goal seasons, nine 50-goal seasons and scored at least 40 goals in each of his first 12 seasons (never reaching that mark again).

Other players were more efficient goal-scorers. New York Islanders winger Mike Bossy scored 573 goals in just 10 seasons, averaging 0.76 goals per game, before back problems cut his career short at age 30. Lemieux (0.75 goals per game), current Toronto Maple Leafs captain Auston Matthews (0.64) and Vancouver Canucks great Pavel Bure (0.62) are ahead of Gretzky and Ovechkin, who each check in next at 0.6 goals per game. But Gretzky lasted 20 seasons, finally slowing down with nine goals in 70 games with the New York Rangers in 1998-99. Ovechkin is in his 20th season, too. He's played exactly the same

number of games as Gretzky, too: 1,487. Ovechkin is showing no signs of slowing down, however, with 42 goals this season.

How has the league changed in the interim?

Gretzky was at his most dominant during the 1980s, when the game was much higher-scoring than it is today. During those 12 40-goal seasons that opened his career, NHL goalies had an average save percentage of .878. In other words, they stopped 87.8 percent of the shots they saw. In Ovechkin's career, goalies have had an average save percentage of approximately .910. The average game in the 1980s featured 1.64 more goals than the average game during Ovechkin's career, which includes the so-called "dead-puck era" of the mid-90s to the mid-2000s, when stifling defensive systems such as the neutral-zone trap ruled the day.

That said, it's not as if everyone was scoring 90 goals in the 1980s. When Gretzky set the record with his now-unfathomable 92-goal season, Bossy was second with 64. Two years later, Gretzky had 87 goals, and Michel Goulet was next with 56. Gretzky's era of dominance was more, well, dominant. But Ovechkin's consistency won out in the end. Gretzky's last four seasons saw him score 23, 25, 23 and nine goals. Ovechkin's last four seasons have seen him score 50, 42, 31 and 42 goals. As Ovechkin famously said early in his career, "Russian machine never breaks."

Is Ovechkin's record now unbreakable?

Ovechkin passing one of Gretzky's hallowed marks should serve as a reminder that anything is possible. But it's a long shot. Among active players, Matthews has by far the best shot (literally and figuratively; his release is the most lethal in the league). Even after a down season this year, Matthews is averaging more goals per game than either Gretzky or Ovechkin did over the course of their full careers. Matthews scored 69 goals last season, the 15th-highest total ever and the most in more than three decades (Alex Mogilny and Teemu Selanne each scored 76 in 1992-93, the last season of the high-scoring era).

Of course, when Gretzky had reached 600 games, he already had scored more than 500 goals. Matthews is just now approaching 400. So if Matthews hopes to get to 900 (or more) someday, he'll need to match or surpass Ovechkin's consistency and durability. It's a lot to ask.

Edmonton's dynamic duo of Connor McDavid (0.51 goals per game) and Leon Draisaitl (0.51), and Boston's David Pastrnak (0.52) are the only other players with even an outside chance of chasing down Ovechkin at this point. But all three of them have played at least 700 games and none of them has reached 400 goals yet, either. At this rate, they'll have to continue to play all-world hockey into their 40s to have any hope at all.

Ovechkin now stands alone. And it's quite a mountain to climb to catch him.

The Athletic / Alex Ovechkin passes Wayne Gretzky as NHL all-time goals leader with No. 895

By Sean Gentille- April 7, 2025

ELMONT, N.Y. — For the 895th time in his NHL career, Alex Ovechkin scored a goal, then celebrated with his teammates.

Nobody in the history of professional hockey has been better at either.

The Washington Capitals superstar, a once-in-a-lifetime fusion of incomprehensible skill, uncommon consistency and unrestrained joy, broke Wayne Gretzky's career record for goals on Sunday at UBS Arena.

Ovechkin scored on the power play 7:26 into the second period to cut Washington's deficit to 2-1. Ovechkin beat Islanders goalie Ilya Sorokin on a shot from the top of the left circle after a pass from Tom Wilson, and then, as the crowd went wild, Ovechkin dove to the ice and slid toward center ice before rising and being mobbed by teammates.

After the post-goal celebration slowed, and Ovechkin was congratulated by members of both teams, carpets were rolled out for a ceremony that included Ovechkin's wife, his two sons and his mother, plus Gretzky, commissioner Gary Bettman and others.

"What a day, huh?" said Ovechkin, who focused on thanking his teammates and family during brief comments. "We did it, boys. It's history."

Bettman began the ceremony and said: "We have all just witnessed history. Wayne, you'll always be 'The Great One,' and you had a record that nobody thought ever could be broken. But, Alex, you did it. You have been amazing. You have been the consummate player, representing the NHL extraordinarily on and off the ice."

Gretzky followed and said, in part: "I know how hard it is to get to 894 — 895 is pretty special. ... They say records are meant to be broken, but I'm not sure who is going to get more goals than that."

Before the speeches, a video played on the board at UBS Arena, with tributes from sports legends such as LeBron James and Michael Phelps.

The entire moment was a testament to two things: Ovechkin's long-term, relentless production and his short-term, late-career finishing kick that electrified the sport, taking one of its greatest records held by its greatest player and, somehow, making it feel bigger.

Ovechkin's career began in 2005 — a year after the Capitals drafted him No. 1 — with a two-goal game against the Columbus Blue Jackets and a 52-goal rookie season. In the 19 years that followed, he won three Hart Trophies as most valuable player and a Conn Smythe Trophy as the MVP of the playoffs, when Washington won the Stanley Cup. He has led the league in goals nine times. He has set an overwhelming number of records, including (just on Friday) the most game-winning goals in NHL history. He married his wife, Nastya, and became a father to two sons, Sergei and Ilya. His hair went gray.

Through it all, he never stopped scoring. He has 14 40-goal seasons, three of which have come after his 35th birthday. At his peak, he was otherworldly. In his twilight, he's found a way — and while his skating has declined, his shot has not. The ability to put pucks in the net, through a combination of brute force and pinpoint accuracy, is fully intact.

“Bottom line, he still scores goals,” longtime teammate Lars Eller said on Friday. “It’s impressive and it’s inspiring for other guys that are younger to say, ‘If he can do it, why can’t I keep doing what I’m doing for as long as him?’ It’s inspiring and it sets the bar high.”

“He’s won every trophy you can win. He’s won a Conn Smythe. He’s won a Cup. And he still wants more.”

His long connection to Russian President Vladimir Putin complicates Alex Ovechkin's legacy in the eyes of some.

That all helped Ovechkin earn the opportunity to exceed the career goals record, which seemed unreachable when Gretzky retired in 1999. Then, Ovechkin seized it. Since returning to the lineup from a broken leg on Dec. 28, Ovechkin has scored 26 goals in 42 games — a 50-goal pace. Six have come in the last five games alone, each more consequential than the last.

On Friday, with Ovechkin a hat trick away from setting the record, Gretzky began following the Capitals in anticipation of No. 895. In Washington, he watched Ovechkin score twice to pull even. In the moment, Ovechkin bowed toward Gretzky’s suite at Capital One Arena. Later in the night, after a closed-door, beer-soaked celebration in the Capitals’ locker room, the two sat down for a joint news conference.

“He’s been nothing but a champion,” Gretzky said, “and I’m so proud that we’re tied. I can live with that for 24 more hours.”

On Long Island, Gretzky watched Ovechkin pull ahead. The goal brought one of his trademark scoring binges to a historic conclusion and, once again, emptied the Capitals’ bench in celebration.

Barry Trotz on how Ovechkin has continued to evolve as opponents adjust to him: “He could take hard coaching, and that’s very, very unique.”

As the party played out, coach Spencer Carbery beamed. He was born in 1981, which makes him closer to a peer of his 39-year-old winger than the vast majority of the Capitals’ roster. It also means that when it all started for Ovechkin in Washington back in 2005, Carbery wasn’t a child — he was an NCAA hockey player. And he was taking notes.

From the jump, Carbery said on Friday, one particular element of The Ovechkin Experience popped a little more than the rest.

“You saw the goal scoring and the shot,” Carbery said. “But I think the uniqueness of him, and what always stuck out, was the hunger and the passion and fire to score. That was different. It looked different when you saw the highlights and saw his reaction and how he celebrated. Whether it was a 2-1 goal or whether it was a goal in the Stanley Cup Final, it all looked the same.

“And so when you watch hockey your whole life, when you see him react to scoring — a lot of players even talk about this. They’ve never seen someone that celebrates and enjoys scoring like Alex Ovechkin.”

And now, they’ve never seen someone who scored more.

ESPN / NHL playoff standings: Last stand for the Detroit Red Wings?

By ESPN staff- April 5, 2025

Reactions

At the start of the 2024-25 NHL season, some predicted that the Detroit Red Wings -- with one of the proudest histories among the league's 32 clubs -- would make their triumphant return to the postseason field.

Although they remain mathematically in the race with less than two weeks to go, their chances are getting slimmer by the day.

Friday night, they'll host the Carolina Hurricanes (7 p.m. ET, ESPN+), with a chance to inch their way closer to the Montreal Canadiens and New York Rangers, who have been ping-ponging the final wild-card spot back and forth in recent days.

As the games get underway, the Red Wings' 75 points are six behind both the Canadiens, and their 26 regulation wins are tied with Montreal.

Things only get harder for Dylan Larkin & Co. after the game against the Canes. Their remaining schedule features only games against teams currently in playoff position: the Florida Panthers twice, Canadiens, Tampa Bay Lightning, Dallas Stars, New Jersey Devils and Toronto Maple Leafs. Perhaps the teams that have clinched a playoff berth will take a proverbial foot off the gas pedal, but this is not exactly an ideal closing schedule for a team on the outside looking in on the playoffs.

But if the Red Wings are going to make a run, a win on Friday will go a long way (at least emotionally) to rally support. Can they do it?

With the regular season ending April 17, we'll help you track it all with the NHL playoff watch. As we traverse the final stretch, we'll provide details on all the playoff races, along with the teams jockeying for position in the 2025 NHL draft lottery.

Note: Playoff chances are via Stathead.

Jump ahead:

Current playoff matchups

Today's schedule

Yesterday's scores

Expanded standings

Race for No. 1 pick

Current playoff matchups

Eastern Conference

A1 Toronto Maple Leafs vs. WC1 Ottawa Senators

A2 Tampa Bay Lightning vs. A3 Florida Panthers

M1 Washington Capitals vs. WC2 Montreal Canadiens

M2 Carolina Hurricanes vs. M3 New Jersey Devils

Western Conference

C1 Winnipeg Jets vs. WC2 St. Louis Blues

C2 Dallas Stars vs. C3 Colorado Avalanche

P1 Vegas Golden Knights vs. WC1 Minnesota Wild

P2 Los Angeles Kings vs. P3 Edmonton Oilers

Friday's games

Note: All times ET. All games not on TNT or NHL Network are available to stream on ESPN+ (local blackout restrictions apply).

Carolina Hurricanes at Detroit Red Wings, 7 p.m.

Chicago Blackhawks at Washington Capitals, 7 p.m. (ESPN+/Hulu/NHLN)

Minnesota Wild at New York Islanders, 7:30 p.m.

Thursday's scoreboard

Montreal Canadiens 4, Boston Bruins 1

Ottawa Senators 2, Tampa Bay Lightning 1

Colorado Avalanche 7, Columbus Blue Jackets 3

St. Louis Blues 5, Pittsburgh Penguins 4 (OT)

Dallas Stars 5, Nashville Predators 1

Los Angeles Kings 4, Utah Hockey Club 2

Calgary Flames 4, Anaheim Ducks 1

Winnipeg Jets 4, Vegas Golden Knights 0

Edmonton Oilers 3, San Jose Sharks 2

Expanded standings

Atlantic Division

x - Toronto Maple Leafs

Points: 96

Regulation wins: 38

Playoff position: A1

Games left: 7

Points pace: 105.0

Next game: vs. CBJ (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 100%

Tragic number: N/A

Tampa Bay Lightning

Points: 93

Regulation wins: 38

Playoff position: A2

Games left: 7

Points pace: 101.7

Next game: @ BUF (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 99.9%

Tragic number: N/A

Florida Panthers

Points: 92

Regulation wins: 35

Playoff position: A3

Games left: 7

Points pace: 100.6

Next game: @ OTT (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 99.9%

Tragic number: N/A

Ottawa Senators

Points: 86

Regulation wins: 31

Playoff position: WC1

Games left: 7

Points pace: 94.0

Next game: vs. FLA (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 99.6%

Tragic number: N/A

Montreal Canadiens

Points: 81

Regulation wins: 26

Playoff position: WC2

Games left: 7

Points pace: 88.6

Next game: vs. PHI (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 61.1%

Tragic number: N/A

Detroit Red Wings

Points: 75

Regulation wins: 26

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 8

Points pace: 83.1

Next game: vs. CAR (Friday)

Playoff chances: 2.4%

Tragic number: 11

Buffalo Sabres

Points: 70

Regulation wins: 26

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 8

Points pace: 77.6

Next game: vs. TB (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 0.1%

Tragic number: 6

Boston Bruins

Points: 69

Regulation wins: 23

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 6

Points pace: 74.4

Next game: vs. CAR (Saturday)

Playoff chances: ~0%

Tragic number: 1

Metro Division

x - Washington Capitals

Points: 105

Regulation wins: 41

Playoff position: M1

Games left: 7

Points pace: 114.8

Next game: vs. CHI (Friday)

Playoff chances: 100%

Tragic number: N/A

x - Carolina Hurricanes

Points: 96

Regulation wins: 41

Playoff position: M2

Games left: 8

Points pace: 106.4

Next game: @ DET (Friday)

Playoff chances: 100%

Tragic number: N/A

New Jersey Devils

Points: 87

Regulation wins: 35

Playoff position: M3

Games left: 6

Points pace: 93.9

Next game: vs. NYR (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 99.7%

Tragic number: N/A

New York Rangers

Points: 79

Regulation wins: 32

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 7

Points pace: 86.4

Next game: @ NJ (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 24.1%

Tragic number: 13

Columbus Blue Jackets

Points: 77

Regulation wins: 24

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 8

Points pace: 85.3

Next game: @ TOR (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 10.5%

Tragic number: 13

New York Islanders

Points: 74

Regulation wins: 25

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 8

Points pace: 82.0

Next game: vs. MIN (Friday)

Playoff chances: 2.7%

Tragic number: 10

Pittsburgh Penguins

Points: 72

Regulation wins: 20

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 6

Points pace: 77.7

Next game: @ DAL (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 0.1%

Tragic number: 4

Philadelphia Flyers

Points: 71

Regulation wins: 20

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 6

Points pace: 76.6

Next game: @ MTL (Saturday)

Playoff chances: ~0%

Tragic number: 3

Central Division

x - Winnipeg Jets

Points: 108

Regulation wins: 41

Playoff position: C1

Games left: 6

Points pace: 116.5

Next game: @ UTA (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 100%

Tragic number: N/A

x - Dallas Stars

Points: 104

Regulation wins: 41

Playoff position: C2

Games left: 7

Points pace: 113.7

Next game: vs. PIT (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 100%

Tragic number: N/A

x - Colorado Avalanche

Points: 98

Regulation wins: 39

Playoff position: C3

Games left: 5

Points pace: 104.4

Next game: @ STL (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 100%

Tragic number: N/A

St. Louis Blues

Points: 91

Regulation wins: 30
Playoff position: WC1
Games left: 5
Points pace: 96.9
Next game: vs. COL (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 97.5%
Tragic number: N/A

Minnesota Wild

Points: 89

Regulation wins: 33
Playoff position: WC2
Games left: 6
Points pace: 96.0
Next game: @ NYI (Friday)

Playoff chances: 92.1%
Tragic number: N/A

Utah Hockey Club

Points: 80

Regulation wins: 26
Playoff position: N/A
Games left: 6
Points pace: 86.3
Next game: vs. WPG (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 0.1%
Tragic number: 4

e - Nashville Predators

Points: 62

Regulation wins: 23
Playoff position: N/A
Games left: 6
Points pace: 66.9
Next game: vs. MTL (Sunday)

Playoff chances: 0%

Tragic number: E

e - Chicago Blackhawks

Points: 52

Regulation wins: 18

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 7

Points pace: 56.9

Next game: @ WSH (Friday)

Playoff chances: 0%

Tragic number: E

Pacific Division

x - Vegas Golden Knights

Points: 98

Regulation wins: 42

Playoff position: P1

Games left: 7

Points pace: 107.2

Next game: @ CGY (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 100%

Tragic number: N/A

Los Angeles Kings

Points: 95

Regulation wins: 38

Playoff position: P3

Games left: 7

Points pace: 103.9

Next game: vs. EDM (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 99.9%

Tragic number: N/A

Edmonton Oilers

Points: 93

Regulation wins: 32

Playoff position: P2

Games left: 7
Points pace: 101.7
Next game: @ LA (Saturday)
Playoff chances: 99.9%
Tragic number: N/A
Calgary Flames
Points: 84
Regulation wins: 27
Playoff position: N/A
Games left: 7
Points pace: 91.8
Next game: vs. VGK (Saturday)
Playoff chances: 9.7%
Tragic number: 10
Vancouver Canucks
Points: 81
Regulation wins: 26
Playoff position: N/A
Games left: 7
Points pace: 88.6
Next game: vs. ANA (Saturday)
Playoff chances: 0.7%
Tragic number: 7
e - Anaheim Ducks
Points: 74
Regulation wins: 23
Playoff position: N/A
Games left: 7
Points pace: 80.9
Next game: @ ANA (Saturday)
Playoff chances: 0%
Tragic number: E
e - Seattle Kraken

Points: 70

Regulation wins: 26

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 6

Points pace: 75.5

Next game: @ SJ (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 0%

Tragic number: E

e - San Jose Sharks

Points: 50

Regulation wins: 14

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 7

Points pace: 54.7

Next game: vs. SEA (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 0%

Tragic number: E

Note: An "x" means that the team has clinched a playoff berth. An "e" means that the team has been eliminated from playoff contention.

Race for the No. 1 pick

The NHL uses a draft lottery to determine the order of the first round, so the team that finishes in last place is not guaranteed the No. 1 selection. As of 2021, a team can move up a maximum of 10 spots if it wins the lottery, so only 11 teams are eligible for the No. 1 pick. Full details on the process are [here](#). Matthew Schaefer, a defenseman for the OHL's Erie Otters, is No. 1 on the draft board.

1. San Jose Sharks

Points: 50

Regulation wins: 14

2. Chicago Blackhawks

Points: 52

Regulation wins: 18

3. Nashville Predators

Points: 62

Regulation wins: 23

4. Boston Bruins

Points: 69

Regulation wins: 23

5. Seattle Kraken

Points: 70

Regulation wins: 26

6. Buffalo Sabres

Points: 70

Regulation wins: 26

7. Philadelphia Flyers

Points: 71

Regulation wins: 20

8. Pittsburgh Penguins

Points: 72

Regulation wins: 20

9. Anaheim Ducks

Points: 74

Regulation wins: 23

10. New York Islanders

Points: 74

Regulation wins: 25

11. Detroit Red Wings

Points: 75

Regulation wins: 26

12. Columbus Blue Jackets

Points: 77

Regulation wins: 24

13. New York Rangers

Points: 79

Regulation wins: 32

14. Utah Hockey Club

Points: 80

Regulation wins: 26

15. Vancouver Canucks

Points: 81

Regulation wins: 26

16. Calgary Flames

Points: 84

Regulation wins: 27

ESPN / NHL playoff standings: Previewing all 13 games on Saturday

By ESPN staff- April 6, 2025

As is tradition, Saturday is absolutely loaded with NHL games. Hope you got a good night's sleep!

With 13 games on the schedule, it's best to go game-by-game to preview what's at stake for each team -- some in the playoff races, some who are jockeying for draft lottery position.

New York Rangers at New Jersey Devils

12:30 p.m. (ABC/ESPN+)

The Hudson River rivalry is always a must-watch for hockey fans, and the intensity ramps up when both teams are in the postseason mix. The Devils have the upper hand now -- they're eight points ahead of the Rangers at opening puck drop -- and these two points are crucial for the visiting Blueshirts, who are trying to catch the Canadiens for the second wild card.

Florida Panthers at Ottawa Senators

2 p.m. (ESPN+)

In one possible future world, this will be a first-round matchup if the Panthers make it to the first position in the Atlantic. In another, it's a series in the second round if the order stays as is and these clubs win. For now, it's the final regular-season meeting between the division rivals. Unfortunately, fans won't get to enjoy any Tkachuk-on-Tkachuk battling, as Matthew remains out with a lower-body injury.

Pittsburgh Penguins at Dallas Stars

3 p.m. (ABC/ESPN+)

The Penguins remain mathematically alive for a playoff spot, although those hopes are fading quickly. They'll need to string together many wins -- and hope that all the teams above them start losing a lot more. The Stars have already punched their ticket to the playoffs, but can improve their seeding: As play begins Saturday, Dallas is four points behind Winnipeg for the No. 1 seed in the Central.

Anaheim Ducks at Vancouver Canucks

4 p.m. (ESPN+)

The Ducks are freshly eliminated from postseason contention and sit in the top 10 of the draft lottery order as play begins. The Canucks aren't entirely out of the playoff race, but their chances have decreased rapidly in recent weeks.

Edmonton Oilers at Los Angeles Kings

4 p.m. (ESPN+)

In the past three postseasons, these two clubs have met in the first round -- with the Oilers winning each series. Will they meet again in two weeks? And can the Kings finally win a round against their Albertan rivals? This game could include some message sending.

Carolina Hurricanes at Boston Bruins

7 p.m. (ESPN+)

Carolina clinched another spot in the postseason this week, and in all likelihood will be the No. 2 seed in the Metropolitan Division (barring an epic collapse by the Capitals to boost them to first, or by

themselves to drop to third). Meanwhile, the Bruins are likely going to miss the postseason, which would be the first time since 2015-16. On the bright side, they're currently fourth in the draft lottery order, a point ahead of the Kraken and Sabres and two up on the Flyers.

Tampa Bay Lightning at Buffalo Sabres

7 p.m. (ESPN+)

The Lightning have been one of the NHL's top teams since the March 7 trade deadline, charging into second place in the Atlantic. They enter Saturday night three points back of the Maple Leafs for first and one point ahead of the Panthers. As for Buffalo, it's (likely) another spring without the playoffs in western New York, and they currently sit sixth in the draft lottery order, one point ahead of the Flyers and two ahead of the Penguins.

Columbus Blue Jackets at Toronto Maple Leafs

7 p.m. (ESPN+)

One of a handful of teams that still has a legitimate shot at the second Eastern wild card, the Blue Jackets do need all the points they can get in the remaining schedule. Their 77 points are four behind the Canadiens as Saturday's slate begins. As for the Leafs, they hold a three-point lead over Tampa Bay; if they hold on to the top spot, it'll likely yield a first-round matchup against the Senators in a renewal of the Battle of Ontario.

Philadelphia Flyers at Montreal Canadiens

7 p.m. (ESPN+)

Based on how these two teams finished last season, it would not have been surprising to learn that one of them held a wild-card spot at this juncture in 2024-25. But instead of the Flyers -- who stayed in the race until the end in 2023-24 -- it's the Canadiens, who finished with the fifth-fewest points last season. Jumping back to current events, Montreal holds the wild-card spot by two points over the Rangers and four over the Blue Jackets. Philadelphia is in the No. 7 spot in the draft lottery order, in the middle of a group of six teams within five points.

Colorado Avalanche at St. Louis Blues

7 p.m. (ESPN+)

These two won't meet in the first round of the postseason, but could meet sometime down the road, given how hot both clubs have been as of late. St. Louis has jumped ahead of Minnesota for the first wild-card spot in the West, while Colorado appears pretty well ensconced as the No. 3 seed in the Central.

Winnipeg Jets at Utah Hockey Club

7 p.m. (NHLN)

The fact that the Hockey Club is playing meaningful games this late into the season -- given where the previous version of the franchise was (geographically and emotionally) at this time last season -- is a win. And if they get on a heater and the Wild or Blues go into the dumpster, a playoff berth could be possible. As for the Jets, they are neck and neck with the Capitals to win the Presidents' Trophy as the NHL's top team this regular season -- and don't count out the Stars overtaking them.

Vegas Golden Knights at Calgary Flames

10 p.m. (ESPN+)

A large lead atop the Pacific Division has diminished to three points for the Golden Knights, as those pesky Kings just keep winning games. However, if it comes down to the regulation wins tiebreaker, Vegas is up by four, with just seven games remaining for both. With 84 points, Calgary begins play Saturday five points back of Minnesota for the final wild-card spot (and likely a first-round matchup with the Jets).

Seattle Kraken at San Jose Sharks

10 p.m. (ESPN+)

Many of Saturday's games have major playoff implications. This one is a critical one for the draft lottery standings. San Jose is first, with 50 points and 14 regulation wins, but they are just two ahead of the idle Chicago Blackhawks, who have 52 and 18. The Kraken begin play in the No. 5 spot (70 points, 26 RW), right in that mass of six teams within five points. A win here by either team can impact the table.

With the regular season ending April 17, we'll help you track it all with the NHL playoff watch. As we traverse the final stretch, we'll provide details on all the playoff races, along with the teams jockeying for position in the 2025 NHL draft lottery.

Note: Playoff chances are via Statthletes.

Jump ahead:

Current playoff matchups

Today's schedule

Yesterday's scores

Expanded standings

Race for No. 1 pick

Current playoff matchups

Eastern Conference

A1 Toronto Maple Leafs vs. WC1 Ottawa Senators

A2 Tampa Bay Lightning vs. A3 Florida Panthers

M1 Washington Capitals vs. WC2 Montreal Canadiens

M2 Carolina Hurricanes vs. M3 New Jersey Devils

Western Conference

C1 Winnipeg Jets vs. WC2 Minnesota Wild

C2 Dallas Stars vs. C3 Colorado Avalanche

P1 Vegas Golden Knights vs. WC1 St. Louis Blues

P2 Los Angeles Kings vs. P3 Edmonton Oilers

Saturday's games

Note: All times ET. All games not on TNT or NHL Network are available to stream on ESPN+ (local blackout restrictions apply).

New York Rangers at New Jersey Devils, 12:30 p.m. (ABC/ESPN+)

Florida Panthers at Ottawa Senators, 2 p.m.

Pittsburgh Penguins at Dallas Stars, 3 p.m. (ABC/ESPN+)

Anaheim Ducks at Vancouver Canucks, 4 p.m.

Edmonton Oilers at Los Angeles Kings, 4 p.m.

Carolina Hurricanes at Boston Bruins, 7 p.m.

Tampa Bay Lightning at Buffalo Sabres, 7 p.m.

Columbus Blue Jackets at Toronto Maple Leafs, 7 p.m.

Philadelphia Flyers at Montreal Canadiens, 7 p.m.

Colorado Avalanche at St. Louis Blues, 7 p.m.

Winnipeg Jets at Utah Hockey Club, 7 p.m. (NHLN)

Vegas Golden Knights at Calgary Flames, 10 p.m.

Seattle Kraken at San Jose Sharks, 10 p.m.

Friday's scoreboard

Detroit Red Wings 5, Carolina Hurricanes 3

Washington Capitals 5, Chicago Blackhawks 3

New York Islanders 3, Minnesota Wild 1

Expanded standings

Atlantic Division

x - Toronto Maple Leafs

Points: 96

Regulation wins: 38

Playoff position: A1

Games left: 7

Points pace: 105.0

Next game: vs. CBJ (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 100%

Tragic number: N/A

Tampa Bay Lightning

Points: 93

Regulation wins: 38

Playoff position: A2

Games left: 7

Points pace: 101.7

Next game: @ BUF (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 99.9%

Tragic number: N/A

Florida Panthers

Points: 92

Regulation wins: 35

Playoff position: A3

Games left: 7

Points pace: 100.6

Next game: @ OTT (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 99.9%

Tragic number: N/A

Ottawa Senators

Points: 86

Regulation wins: 31

Playoff position: WC1

Games left: 7

Points pace: 94.0

Next game: vs. FLA (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 99.6%

Tragic number: N/A

Montreal Canadiens

Points: 81

Regulation wins: 26

Playoff position: WC2

Games left: 7

Points pace: 88.6

Next game: vs. PHI (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 61.1%

Tragic number: N/A

Detroit Red Wings

Points: 77

Regulation wins: 27

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 7
Points pace: 84.2
Next game: vs. FLA (Sunday)
Playoff chances: 2.4%
Tragic number: 11
Buffalo Sabres
Points: 70
Regulation wins: 26
Playoff position: N/A
Games left: 8
Points pace: 77.6
Next game: vs. TB (Saturday)
Playoff chances: 0.1%
Tragic number: 6
Boston Bruins
Points: 69
Regulation wins: 23
Playoff position: N/A
Games left: 6
Points pace: 74.5
Next game: vs. CAR (Saturday)
Playoff chances: ~0%
Tragic number: 1
Metro Division
x - Washington Capitals
Points: 107
Regulation wins: 42
Playoff position: M1
Games left: 6
Points pace: 115.5
Next game: @ NYI (Sunday)
Playoff chances: 100%
Tragic number: N/A

x - Carolina Hurricanes

Points: 96

Regulation wins: 41

Playoff position: M2

Games left: 7

Points pace: 105.0

Next game: @ BOS (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 100%

Tragic number: N/A

New Jersey Devils

Points: 87

Regulation wins: 35

Playoff position: M3

Games left: 6

Points pace: 93.9

Next game: vs. NYR (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 99.7%

Tragic number: N/A

New York Rangers

Points: 79

Regulation wins: 32

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 7

Points pace: 86.4

Next game: @ NJ (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 24.1%

Tragic number: 13

Columbus Blue Jackets

Points: 77

Regulation wins: 24

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 8

Points pace: 85.3

Next game: @ TOR (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 10.5%

Tragic number: 13

New York Islanders

Points: 76

Regulation wins: 26

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 7

Points pace: 83.1

Next game: vs. WSH (Sunday)

Playoff chances: 2.7%

Tragic number: 10

Pittsburgh Penguins

Points: 72

Regulation wins: 20

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 6

Points pace: 77.7

Next game: @ DAL (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 0.1%

Tragic number: 4

Philadelphia Flyers

Points: 71

Regulation wins: 20

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 6

Points pace: 76.6

Next game: @ MTL (Saturday)

Playoff chances: ~0%

Tragic number: 3

Central Division

x - Winnipeg Jets

Points: 108

Regulation wins: 41
Playoff position: C1
Games left: 6
Points pace: 116.5
Next game: @ UTA (Saturday)
Playoff chances: 100%
Tragic number: N/A
x - Dallas Stars
Points: 104
Regulation wins: 41
Playoff position: C2
Games left: 7
Points pace: 113.7
Next game: vs. PIT (Saturday)
Playoff chances: 100%
Tragic number: N/A
x - Colorado Avalanche
Points: 98
Regulation wins: 39
Playoff position: C3
Games left: 5
Points pace: 104.4
Next game: @ STL (Saturday)
Playoff chances: 100%
Tragic number: N/A
St. Louis Blues
Points: 91
Regulation wins: 30
Playoff position: WC1
Games left: 5
Points pace: 96.9
Next game: vs. COL (Saturday)
Playoff chances: 97.5%

Tragic number: N/A

Minnesota Wild

Points: 89

Regulation wins: 33

Playoff position: WC2

Games left: 5

Points pace: 94.8

Next game: vs. DAL (Sunday)

Playoff chances: 92.1%

Tragic number: N/A

Utah Hockey Club

Points: 80

Regulation wins: 26

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 6

Points pace: 86.3

Next game: vs. WPG (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 0.1%

Tragic number: 4

e - Nashville Predators

Points: 62

Regulation wins: 23

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 6

Points pace: 66.9

Next game: vs. MTL (Sunday)

Playoff chances: 0%

Tragic number: E

e - Chicago Blackhawks

Points: 52

Regulation wins: 18

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 6

Points pace: 56.1

Next game: vs. PIT (Sunday)

Playoff chances: 0%

Tragic number: E

Pacific Division

x - Vegas Golden Knights

Points: 98

Regulation wins: 42

Playoff position: P1

Games left: 7

Points pace: 107.2

Next game: @ CGY (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 100%

Tragic number: N/A

Los Angeles Kings

Points: 95

Regulation wins: 38

Playoff position: P3

Games left: 7

Points pace: 103.9

Next game: vs. EDM (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 99.9%

Tragic number: N/A

Edmonton Oilers

Points: 93

Regulation wins: 32

Playoff position: P2

Games left: 7

Points pace: 101.7

Next game: @ LA (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 99.9%

Tragic number: N/A

Calgary Flames

Points: 84
Regulation wins: 27
Playoff position: N/A
Games left: 7
Points pace: 91.8
Next game: vs. VGK (Saturday)
Playoff chances: 9.7%
Tragic number: 10
Vancouver Canucks
Points: 81
Regulation wins: 26
Playoff position: N/A
Games left: 7
Points pace: 88.6
Next game: vs. ANA (Saturday)
Playoff chances: 0.7%
Tragic number: 7
e - Anaheim Ducks
Points: 74
Regulation wins: 23
Playoff position: N/A
Games left: 7
Points pace: 80.9
Next game: @ ANA (Saturday)
Playoff chances: 0%
Tragic number: E
e - Seattle Kraken
Points: 70
Regulation wins: 26
Playoff position: N/A
Games left: 6
Points pace: 75.5
Next game: @ SJ (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 0%

Tragic number: E

e - San Jose Sharks

Points: 50

Regulation wins: 14

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 7

Points pace: 54.7

Next game: vs. SEA (Saturday)

Playoff chances: 0%

Tragic number: E

Note: An "x" means that the team has clinched a playoff berth. An "e" means that the team has been eliminated from playoff contention.

Race for the No. 1 pick

The NHL uses a draft lottery to determine the order of the first round, so the team that finishes in last place is not guaranteed the No. 1 selection. As of 2021, a team can move up a maximum of 10 spots if it wins the lottery, so only 11 teams are eligible for the No. 1 pick. Full details on the process are [here](#). Matthew Schaefer, a defenseman for the OHL's Erie Otters, is No. 1 on the draft board.

1. San Jose Sharks

Points: 50

Regulation wins: 14

2. Chicago Blackhawks

Points: 52

Regulation wins: 18

3. Nashville Predators

Points: 62

Regulation wins: 23

4. Boston Bruins

Points: 69

Regulation wins: 23

5. Seattle Kraken

Points: 70

Regulation wins: 26

6. Buffalo Sabres

Points: 70

Regulation wins: 26

7. Philadelphia Flyers

Points: 71

Regulation wins: 20

8. Pittsburgh Penguins

Points: 72

Regulation wins: 20

9. Anaheim Ducks

Points: 74

Regulation wins: 23

10. New York Islanders

Points: 76

Regulation wins: 26

11. Detroit Red Wings

Points: 77

Regulation wins: 27

12. Columbus Blue Jackets

Points: 77

Regulation wins: 24

13. New York Rangers

Points: 79

Regulation wins: 32

14. Utah Hockey Club

Points: 80

Regulation wins: 26

15. Vancouver Canucks

Points: 81

Regulation wins: 26

16. Calgary Flames

Points: 84

Regulation wins: 27

Globe and Mail / Ovechkin can overcome Gretzky's record, but not his own past or politics

By Mark MacKinnon- April 7, 2025

It was a cold January night at Moscow's famed Luzhniki Palace of Sports, just 21 years ago but in a completely different world.

George W. Bush was in the White House. He had just looked into the eyes of Russia's new President, Vladimir Putin. Afterward, Mr. Bush infamously said he'd seen into Mr. Putin's soul and decided this was someone he could trust.

On the ice that night, an 18-year-old kid wearing the blue-and-white jersey of Moscow Dynamo grabbed a loose puck in the neutral zone and accelerated across the blue line as the opposing defencemen scrambled backward. After a series of fakes, he fired a snapshot from the high slot past the Yaroslavl Lokomotiv goaltender, breaking what had been a scoreless tie, then dove and jubilantly slid on his knees back toward his teammates. It proved to be the game-winning goal.

After the game, the kid wearing No. 32 for Moscow Dynamo – who would later become famous wearing No. 8 for the Washington Capitals – chatted politely with a Canadian reporter about the buzz that he was likely to be chosen first overall in that summer's NHL draft.

Wearing a black tuque and a black Nike jacket, his cheeks red with acne, Alexander Ovechkin was such a fixture at Luzhniki – he'd come up through Dynamo's youth hockey program – that even security staff at the rink called out to him by his nickname, "Sasha."

He has since gone on to NHL superstardom, scoring his 895th career goal on Sunday to set the new all-time record, surpassing Wayne Gretzky.

If the world had remained the way it was in 2004, the game when the Great Eight passed the Great One would have been a moment to celebrate the unifying power of sport. The shy kid from Moscow, who was born in the Soviet Union but grew up in an independent, democratizing Russia, eclipsing the shy kid from Brantford, Ont. The memories of all those heated Canada-vs-USSR games – Bobby Clarke's 1972 slash to Valeri Kharlamov's ankle, the 1987 line brawl at the world junior championship – would have faded a little more as we cheered the passing of the torch.

But history has gone otherwise, tainting first Mr. Ovechkin and then Mr. Gretzky as it moved.

Mr. Putin, who was briefly seen as someone who could reform and strengthen Russia's young democracy, instead crushed his domestic opposition, preparing the ground for a series of wars, including the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Meanwhile, Mr. Bush's 2003 invasion of Iraq set the United States on its own increasingly angry path that has culminated with the re-election of Donald Trump, a President who speaks admiringly of Mr. Putin and muses about annexing Canada the way Russia has illegally seized parts of Ukraine.

The Ovechkin I met in January, 2004, was obliging and humble, not unlike how Mr. Gretzky came across when he first aw-shucksed himself into the hearts of Canadians a few decades earlier.

"I don't want to think about it right now – I just want to help Dynamo make it to the playoffs," Mr. Ovechkin said via a translator when I asked him if he cared which team ended up drafting him. "When it's draft time, I'll think about it."

He was shy and soft-spoken, the opposite of his already flamboyant on-ice personality – and nothing like the fun-loving face of the NHL he would become.

Mr. Ovechkin seemed to know little about the outside world, and nothing about any of Pittsburgh, Chicago, Columbus or Washington, the four teams that were front-runners to pick No. 1 that summer. (The Capitals had the third-best odds of picking first in the 2004 draft, but leapfrogged Pittsburgh and Chicago in the lottery.)

He told me that he had no favourite NHL team. Mr. Ovechkin's hockey heroes, he made clear, were the stars of the Russian and Soviet hockey systems, not the NHL pantheon headed by Mr. Gretzky. He named Alexander Maltsev, a slick Moscow Dynamo forward who won two Olympic gold medals for the USSR, as his icon.

That patriotism, perhaps, provided a hint of what was to come.

Ovechkin's Instagram profile features a photo of him with Putin.

Mr. Ovechkin's legacy, in the eyes of many, will be tainted by the fact that he appears to have a close personal relationship with Mr. Putin, who is an avid hockey player and fan. Infamously, Mr. Ovechkin's profile picture on Instagram is a photo of him standing in the Grand Kremlin Palace beside the Russian leader.

That choice of avatar has caused Mr. Ovechkin endless grief since the start of the invasion of Ukraine, but it still remains the first image you see when you visit his page.

It's not a one-off, either. Mr. Ovechkin, who captained Russia's 2014 world championship team, caused ripples by immediately presenting Mr. Putin with the trophy – just two months after the Russian leader had seized and illegally annexed Crimea from Ukraine. Three years later, Mr. Putin called Mr. Ovechkin to congratulate him on his wedding.

While Mr. Ovechkin's defenders say he has no choice but to be publicly deferential to the dictator for his family's sake, that rings hollow to the tens of thousands of Ukrainians, Georgians, Chechens, Syrians – and Russians – who have died fighting in Mr. Putin's wars.

On the day after the invasion of Ukraine began – as missiles were raining down on Kyiv and other cities, and Russian troops and tanks were pouring over the border – Mr. Ovechkin simultaneously claimed he was not involved in politics, while also making his politics perfectly clear.

“Well, he's my President,” he said, when asked whether he still supported Mr. Putin. “Like, I am Russian, right?”

Mr. Gretzky's own awkward politics, meanwhile, have managed to mar Canada's five-decade love affair with him.

The legend that every Canadian hockey fan knows – the kid who started out firing a tennis ball at his grandmother's legs while she played goaltender in her chair, who stayed out late every night on his backyard rink and became the greatest scorer the NHL had ever seen – now has a tawdry epilogue. Mr. Gretzky went from captaining the national team at the 1987 Canada Cup to becoming the focus of nationwide ire after the now-dual national wore a blue business suit, rather than Team Canada gear, while serving as honorary captain for the final game of this year's patriotically charged 4 Nations Face-Off.

Mr. Gretzky's friendship with Mr. Trump – who has floated the idea of Mr. Gretzky serving as “governor” of Canada after it becomes the 51st state – has cost him his saintly status even in Edmonton, where he

set many of his records. Last month, the city's statue of Mr. Gretzky hoisting the Stanley Cup was smeared with feces.

Mr. Gretzky was in New York to congratulate Mr. Ovechkin after his record-breaking goal, just as Gordie Howe and Phil Esposito used to follow him around when he was breaking the records they had set. Unlike those iconic moments, in simpler times, there were likely some watching who jeered Mr. Ovechkin, Mr. Gretzky or both.

If a Canadian team had been involved in Sunday's games, national anthems might also have been booed, reflecting the dark geopolitical era in which the kid from Moscow surpassed the kid from Brantford as the top goal-scorer in NHL history.

It could have been, should have been, a great moment. If only all that other stuff hadn't happened, too.

[Sportsnet.ca / 10 thoughts on the verge of the 2025 Stanley Cup Playoffs](#)

By Justin Bourne- April 5, 2025

1. The Metro mess leaves an open door

I have been in the camp that the Washington Capitals are a good team, but not great. If you use Clear Site Analytics data going back to the 4 Nations Face-Off, they've been last in expected goal differential. Teams have bad stretches, but the underlying process is at least worth questioning.

So when you zoom out, how does the Metro shake out in the playoffs? It seems ripe for a surprise run for someone. I don't think they get upset in the first round by Montreal, the Rangers, or anyone in that spot, but I do think they could be gettable in Round 2.

2. So could it be Carolina or New Jersey?

We're going to get a Hurricanes vs. Devils series in which the Canes will be favoured, but it can't be by a ton. But in a surprising twist of fate, Carolina has been on a heater since it traded Mikko Rantanen. Logan Stankoven has six points in his 11 games as a Cane, and the team has gone 9-2 over that stretch. It just seems to fit.

The Canes are fast and they lead the NHL in shot-attempt differential, so they're going to carry the play against most teams. In the playoffs, you're going to need some saves to stand up to that, and unfortunately for the Caps, Logan Thompson just suffered an upper-body injury.

I don't think even the Canes see themselves as a big Cup threat this year, but it's not impossible to see a world where, thanks to a fortuitous draw, they find themselves in big games deep in the playoffs, yet again, and from there, you just never know.

3. The Habs have a chance to put the wild-card chase on ice by Tuesday

Is there a chance they could be caught? Sure.

But not if they play well.

They've got three non-playoff opponents coming up:

Saturday: vs. Philadelphia

Sunday: At Nashville

Tuesday: vs. Detroit

With seven games left, let's say Montreal goes 4-3 on the way in, which at 79 points through 75 games is a reasonable guesstimate. That gets them to 89 points. Columbus would have to go 6-1-1 to pass them in that instance, where the Rangers would need to go 5-2 to claim the spot, and they have a brutal final three games (@Carolina, @Florida, vs. Tampa Bay).

So: Montreal has three bottom-tier opponents in the next five nights (by its matchup Tuesday, Detroit will know if it's eliminated and may not be super motivated), while the Blue Jackets play three playoff teams.

A three-game winning streak all but locks it up for Montreal. It's go time, Habs fans.

4. The Bruins did poorly ... or did they?

The Toronto Maple Leafs haven't always been successful, but boy, did they "tank" well. They bottomed out hard for a year and hit bottom, landed Auston Matthews, then immediately bounced all the way back up into the playoffs, now qualifying them for an NHL-best ninth straight season.

This year, the Boston Bruins were a legitimate playoff and even division contender in the Atlantic, but the season started bad and got worse, from the Jeremy Swayman contract fiasco to eventually trading captain Brad Marchand.

Still, if you go back three months to early January, they were third in the Atlantic, fighting for a better playoff seed with Florida, which sat five points ahead of them. Two weeks later, they fell from a wild-card spot, and now look at this:

Dead stinkin' last in the East with a minus-55 goal differential.

I ran the draft simulator on Tankathon five times, and in those first five simulations they picked 5th, 5th, 1st, 1st and 4th.

It's more likely they'll pick sixth than first, but the top five in this draft are supposed to be very good. The Bruins are likely going to make the most of this poor season, and they still have enough quality players — David Pastrnak, Charlie MacAvoy, Jeremy Swayman, Elias Lindholm, Nikita Zadorov — that they could legitimately fill in around them this off-season and be in the playoff hunt next year, with a future all-star from the draft.

5. Could the Predators do the same?

The Predators were a debacle this season, perhaps because their big off-season additions (Steven Stamkos and Jonathan Marchessault) were there as scorned lovers, cast aside by the teams they wanted. But as you can see from the Tankathon screenshot above, they're also destined for a top-five pick.

But it's worth noting that the underlying metrics for the Preds are sneaky-good for a team in 31st. They have the puck a lot, even when factoring in score effects, according to AWS "Ice Tilt," and they got worse goaltending than they usually do. With a good off-season, and some internal improvement, could they be next year's "surprise" team?

6. The West isn't quite settled yet, but it's close

The Flames can't love the Wild's remaining schedule. Minnesota has six games left, and one is against a team currently in the playoffs.

The Flames would be a lock for playoffs in the East, where 90 points would get you in. But they're in the West, and the Wild have six games left, with a decent cushion.

If Minnesota goes let's say 3-3 in those games, they'd earn six points, which would get them to 95. The Flames would need to go 6-1 to pass them in that case, as they'd lose the tiebreaker (based on regulation wins), meaning 5-1-1 wouldn't cut it.

The Flames' schedule:

If the Wild go 2-4, suddenly going 5-2 seems a lot more feasible for Calgary. But the point is, they need the Wild to stink against soft opponents.

The other hope is that the Blues go cold, and finish 2-3 or worse, where the Flames could catch them at 95, and by then might hold the tiebreaker. Not impossible, given St. Louis' tough next three matchups.

Utah and the Canucks are (un)officially done.

7. So, Dallas?

Can't say I saw this becoming a race at any point, but hold on to your butts:

Dallas has lost twice since the trade deadline, and finishes against three pretty soft opponents. Four points back with a game in hand, this one could be a photo finish, and for the Jets, it's a race worth pushing it to win. It could legitimately be the difference between a Stanley Cup Final appearance and a first-round exit.

8. Head-to-head combat

Love that Edmonton and Los Angeles have two head-to-head games down the stretch. They play April 5, in Los Angeles, and the 14th, in Edmonton. Hockey Night in Canada is the first of the two, which I also love. And with the Kings holding the best home record in the NHL, finishing ahead of LA is probably another race worth winning.

9. The Leafs control their own destiny in the Atlantic

What we're looking at here is the back-to-back against Florida and Tampa Bay on Tuesday and Wednesday, coming up. Both are played in the state of Florida.

Win the division and get Ottawa, an exciting young team but also one that might make a few mistakes, something the Leafs' first round opponents in recent years haven't done much of.

Finish second in the division, and you're in a dog fight to get past a round.

Leafs have never won the Atlantic Division before, and have a chance to truly make this year "different" by starting there.

10. Great races, anyone's year

Wonderful to have so many great storylines in the final two weeks of the season, and it still feels like it's anyone's Cup, as I wrote here.

If Canada has been waiting for a chance – and we have - this year sees the door wide open.

[Sportsnet.ca / NHL Playoff Push: Key games to watch as playoff picture comes into focus](#)

By Sonny Sachdeva- April 5, 2025

Two weeks from now, the NHL's regular season will come to a close, and the post-season will arrive. The slate will be wiped clean, and each playoff hopeful will start their journey towards the Stanley Cup summit on level ground, their chances at stitching together a run sitting level, too.

But before they get there, the post-season crop still has a handful of games to navigate, to help aid those chances as much as they can, some clubs jostling for home-ice seeding, others still fighting to get in at all. And then there's the late-season balancing act to manage — how to prepare for the trek to come, avoiding injury and resting up for the battle, while also locking up important wins down the stretch.

That in mind, for this iteration of Playoff Push, we take a look at some key games on the schedule this weekend, and how they might impact the post-season picture:

The Atlantic Division is primed for fireworks down the stretch, with just four points separating third place from the division leader, and fourth-place picking up steam, too. Saturday's meeting between the Cats and Senators will see No. 3 play No. 4, and a win for either side would cause a bit of chaos down the stretch. The Sens have run into some tumult over the past two weeks after an early-March six-game win streak. But fresh off a 2-1 win over the Bolts, a Senators win over the Panthers would move Ottawa to 88 points, just a handful back of Florida in third place, and not far from Tampa Bay in second place — a development that would add plenty of division intrigue to the final two weeks of the campaign. On the other side, the Panthers find themselves in a three-game slide, and have lost six of their past 10 — a win to right the ship would not only hold off Ottawa, but move them to 94 points, potentially above Tampa Bay and just a pair away from Toronto and the division crown.

The Bolts will have a say in the matter too, though, with a tilt against the Sabres on deck Saturday. Before dropping that last tilt to Ottawa, the Lightning had won four straight, all in fairly convincing fashion. They should have a good chance to do the same against a basement-dwelling Sabres team they beat in the two clubs' only prior meeting this season. A win would move Tampa Bay to 95 points, helping them hold onto second place and stave off the Cats and Sens — and moving them right to the Maple Leafs' heels in that battle for the division lead.

And then there's the Maple Leafs, who find themselves in need of a win of their own Saturday to hold off those two Floridian rivals. W's for the Panthers and Lightning would move both clubs to Toronto's doorstep — for the Leafs faithful, the hypothetical of falling into second or third place, and facing a rerun first-round series against Florida or Tampa Bay, is a daunting one. Avoiding that reality means handling their business in every seemingly winnable game down the stretch, something these Maple Leafs have struggled with at times. Saturday's tilt seems another one of those meetings, and also one that could bring more pain on that front, as Toronto faces a Blue Jackets squad that, while currently outside of the playoff picture, has beat the Leafs twice this season, by a collective score of 11-3.

The Habs have been rolling, heading into their Saturday-night matchup against Philly with three straight wins — two against the defending-champion Panthers — after enduring a five-game slide. A win over the Flyers would help Montreal hold on to their wild-card spot, and their home-stretch momentum, as the clubs behind them pick up steam. It won't come easy though — the Flyers have won three straight themselves since parting ways with John Tortorella, and beat Montreal 6-4 just last week, in the first of those post-Torts games.

New York Rangers vs. New Jersey Devils

Making a win Saturday all the more important for Montreal is the Rangers' situation behind them. Sitting just two points back of the Canadiens, the Rangers face the Devils on Saturday in a key tilt of their own — a New York win and a Montreal loss would leave the clubs level with 81 points. The Rangers have the tougher weekend opponent, facing a Devils squad that sits third in the Metropolitan. But Jersey is also without two of their best, with Jack Hughes and Dougie Hamilton sidelined by injury — and the Rangers managed to beat them the last time the two clubs faced each other, when both stars were in the lineup.

The Canucks have been fighting for their playoff lives, but a recent slide has done them no favours on that front — Vancouver enters their Saturday afternoon tilt with the Ducks having dropped three straight, and have lost six of their past nine games overall. Already facing an uphill battle for a wild-card spot — sitting eight points back of Minnesota, who have a chance at two more points on Friday — Vancouver needs to claim as many wins as they can down the stretch to keep the dream alive. A victory over a Ducks side that's already been eliminated from playoff contention would seem to be key in that effort, and would move Vancouver to 83 points, potentially one back of the rival Flames.

The Flames, meanwhile, will look to extend that gap between them and the Canucks, and shrink the one between them and Minnesota. Calgary has been in the thick of the wild-card race for a fair while, but now they find themselves on the outside of the playoff picture looking in, with a sizeable gap to close. But the opportunity to climb that hill is there, with Minnesota having hit a rut, losing five of their past six heading into Friday's meeting with the Islanders. Unfortunately for Calgary, the Wild have still claimed extra-time points over their past two tilts. Still, if the Flames — who've won six of their past nine — can string together a run over the next couple weeks, they'll have a shot. First up is a tough matchup on Saturday with a Vegas side that's looking to lock up 100 points and extend its lead over the division. If Calgary can get by them, they move to 86 points, just three back of a wild-card ticket.

St. Louis Blues vs. Colorado Avalanche

The Wild might seem catchable, but the West's other wild-card squad is moving in the opposite direction. The Blues have been dominating lately, winning 11 straight games amid a run that started in mid-March. Rewind to the night before that dominant stretch, and St. Louis sat outside the playoffs, with two clubs stationed between them and a post-season berth. Now, the Blues hold the first wild-card spot comfortably, and are on the hunt for some Central Division chaos. A win against No. 3 Colorado on Saturday would bring some, as a 12th straight Blues win would move St. Louis to 93 points, just five back of the Avs. The Blues can't catch Dallas or Winnipeg either way, but if their current run of form continues, it is possible for them to overtake Colorado for third place — a late-season twist that would certainly add some intrigue to the West's first-round matchups.

At the top of the Central, the Jets will look to keep rolling as they face Utah in what should be a winnable game — Winnipeg has won two of three meetings against the Hockey Club this season, including a 5-2 victory last time out. The Jets have looked every bit the league's best since the start of the season, and sit on the cusp of setting a new franchise record for wins. More important to them is surely the chance to set themselves up for a long playoff run — holding on to the top spot in the Central would go a long way on that front, with the Jets currently on track to face the struggling Wild. Wobbling down the stretch and falling into second place, on the other hand, would leave them open for a tougher first-round test against Colorado or the red-hot Blues.

And just behind the Jets, ratcheting up the pressure on the division leader, is Dallas. Sitting just four points back of Winnipeg, the Stars have been rolling lately, winning seven straight games, that run currently the second-longest active streak in the league. Saturday afternoon offers up a fairly good chance of getting to eight-in-a-row, with Dallas set to face a Pittsburgh team that's struggled mightily all

year. The Stars beat the Pens 7-1 in their only prior meeting this season. A similar performance this weekend, coupled with a Jets loss, would move Dallas to 106 points, just two back of that top spot — making the clash between the Central's two best clubs next week all the more important.

[Sportsnet.ca / Record-breaking Ovechkin 'truly bigger than the game of hockey'](#)

By Emily Sadler- April 7, 2025

NEW YORK — Everybody knew the goal was coming.

When Alex Ovechkin launched his week-long scoring spree last Sunday, then scored another — and another — for an electric two-goal performance to tie The Great One himself on Friday, the hockey world was held captive.

When the Washington Capitals star strode into UBS Arena on Sunday morning, loosening and unlooping his tie en route to the locker room as though he couldn't hit the ice fast enough; when he emerged to cheers and chants during warmups, a sea of red amid New York Islanders orange and blue all here to witness history, the anticipation was palpable.

When he swung those famous yellow-laced skates over the boards for a second-period power play, strode across the blue line and into his office as a perfect cross-ice pass landed on his tape, every ounce of air in the arena was caught in a collective rink-wide gasp.

And when the Great No. 8 scored his 895th career NHL goal, the one he's hunted down over the course of his 20 years in the league, history was made.

That goal against the Islanders, and that diving celebration, his teammates all launching themselves from the bench to smother him in hugs and helmet pats and whoops of glee and celebratory roars, will be forever immortalized in hockey lore.

That he scored goal No. 895 with a signature laser-beam shot from just above the left faceoff dot made the moment so perfectly "Ovi."

So was the celebration, a belly-flop slide towards centre ice, reminiscent of his D.C. fountain splash with teammates after winning the Stanley Cup in 2018. And that's what this chase was all about, really — that wave of joy that rippled around the rink and far beyond it, across the entire landscape of a game forever changed by No. 8.

It was, in the words of the man himself post-game, "an unbelievable moment."

"I'm probably going to need a couple more days, maybe a couple weeks, to realize, what does it mean to be No. 1," Ovechkin said post-game.

It was, of course, a lot to take in. The NHL stopped play for nearly 25 minutes, rolling out the red carpet — or, rather, a carpet of Islanders blue — to mark the occasion with Ovechkin's family, NHL commissioner Gary Bettman, Capitals owner Ted Leonsis, and of course Wayne Gretzky, at centre ice. It felt like Mr. Hockey was there, too. Gretzky, who took over the helm from the legendary Gordie Howe in 1994 with Goal No. 802, wore a red pin on his lapel with Howe's No. 9 to honour him at centre ice as he passed the crown to Ovechkin, scorer of 895 goals.

Ovechkin's record-breaking, history-making moment was about as memorable a scene as the game can produce. Only, Tom Wilson's recollection of the whole series of events is admittedly a little spotty.

"Once the chaos kind of ensued, I don't really remember exactly what happened," says Wilson, who had the primary assist, with Dylan Strome getting the secondary power-play helper.

"I just tried to get it to his stick and I was skating towards the net and when that puck went in, it was a crazy feeling. That was pretty special. Hasn't really sunk in," he says. "The 10 seconds after the puck went into the net, I don't remember what I did, I don't remember what I said."

Like many others, he'll have the highlight on loop.

"I'll watch that back a few times, I think, for the rest of my life," he says with a smile.

Over the past week, Wilson's been more than happy to heap praise on his longtime teammate as media has zeroed in on Washington.

"He's truly a machine. He's truly bigger than the game of hockey," he says. "It's just remarkable, what he's been able to keep doing, over and over."

After a marathon of consistent scoring spread across 20 remarkable seasons, Ovechkin's sprint into the history books has been simply sensational. And even though Sunday afternoon's milestone has ultimately, technically, been in the works two decades, goal No. 895 still seemed to arrive fast enough to give those tracking his trail a little whiplash.

When asked about the fast-approaching milestone prior to Friday's two-goal game against the Chicago Blackhawks, Wilson had a pretty relatable response.

"Honestly, it kind of snuck up," he said at the time, when asked about any planned post-game celebrations as Ovi approached the big 8-9-5. "We weren't expecting him to do it this fast."

"I think even at the beginning of the season, it would be like, 'Is it gonna happen?'" explained Strome last week. "And then he had such a good start and it was for sure gonna happen. Then he got hurt, and it wasn't gonna happen." Ovechkin missed 16 games after fracturing his fibula in November but didn't miss a beat upon his return in December.

One month ago, Ovechkin brought the goal count separating himself from Gretzky to 10.

Just one week ago, the Capitals captain was on pace to pass Gretzky's long-standing record just ahead of the final game of the 2024-25 campaign, but claiming the crown by season's end was still no sure thing.

Until suddenly, it was.

"You know, he was so close [Friday night] at the end of the game, that I think when that happened, we just kind of knew that it was gonna happen," Wilson says post-game on Sunday. "Because we got so close last game, there was just a feeling that I woke up with, and I'm like, 'You know what? We're gonna do it today. He's gonna do it today.'"

That "we" he speaks of is telling. Ovechkin stands alone atop the NHL's goal-scoring list in status only — he shares his achievements, and his joy, with his teammates and they're thrilled to return to gesture.

"It doesn't matter if he scores a goal or if someone else scores a goal — he's just as happy. That's a credit to him and his character," says Strome, who had a secondary assist on Ovechkin's goal Sunday. "You can see why other people are so happy for him, because of the way he treats other people. I think that's why you kind of see everyone pulling together and so happy about it."

That includes a handful of Capitals not on the ice with him on Sunday, like T.J. Oshie, Nicklas Backstrom, and Devante Smith-Pelly, who were at Friday's game in Washington and travelled to Long Island to see their captain claim his crown.

It's fitting that Ovechkin's biggest milestone goals should involve some of his longest-tenured teammates — John Carlson set up goal No. 894 Friday night, and Wilson had the helper on No. 895 Sunday. That

Backstrom, who assisted on more of Ovechkin's goals than anyone, was in the house for both meant the world to Ovechkin.

"As soon as I saw Nick, you know, I just want to cry," says Ovechkin after the game. "He was such a big part of my success. We grow up together, we play together, we've been in so many different situations together, and that relationship, in that moment, and him and Osh being here, it's tremendous."

Oshie never misses his kids' games, but it was a no-brainer for him to make an exception for his pal.

"There's nothing that could've held me and Nick back from making our way up here," said Oshie, who joined in the locker-room melee post-game.

Asked if another fountain dive, a la 2018, could be in the works, Oshie's not ruling that out.

"I'll go in," he said with a smile. "If O wants to go in, I'll go in, 100 per cent."

Adding to the jubilation around Ovechkin is the team's success overall this season. Ovechkin's hunt for history was supposed to be a silver lining in a year projected to be a relatively lacklustre campaign for the Capitals. Certainly, no one expected Washington to open April sitting comfortably atop the East with a nine-point cushion, just three points shy of claiming the Presidents' Trophy with a playoff berth long ago locked up.

Instead, this chase has been a shining example of what the game's greats can do.

Just as the team has been exhilarated by Ovechkin's Gr8 Chase, so too have fans — no matter their allegiance. The leading man always draws a crowd — all the league's a stage when you're the greatest goal-scorer in the game — but this has been different.

Last Tuesday against the Boston Bruins, Ovechkin's 891st goal was met by enthusiastic cheers from fans donning the Spoked B. Even the rowdy fans in Raleigh, N.C., a rink that prides itself in creating a decidedly unwelcoming atmosphere to anyone who isn't a Hurricane, had nothing but love for Ovechkin — the place practically erupted when he scored goal No. 892. Chants of "Ovi! Ovi! Ovi!" rained down loud enough to trick oneself, just for a moment, into thinking you're in D.C.

There was a heavy presence of red at UBS Arena on Sunday, too, fans flocking to the rink early clad in Ovi sweaters and carrying enough signs to line the glass at the Capitals' end of the rink and behind the visitors' bench pregame. (And, OK, Long Islanders aren't always the most welcoming when it comes to non-Islanders; a sign in orange and blue breaks up the sea of Ovi signs with a simple message: "NOT TODAY.")

Lately, holding a ticket to a game against the Capitals down the stretch has been like holding a lottery ticket: Could this be the one that wins it all?

In the end, it was lucky Long Islanders that got to see the historic goal, though "lucky" likely isn't the word New York goalie Ilya Sorokin would use to describe his role in history. Entering Sunday's game, Ovechkin had yet to score on his fellow Russian. What a time to change that (though, he still surely went home happy, thanks to New York's 4-1 win). Ovechkin's kids are fans of Sorokin, and Ovechkin was quick to request a souvenir from the netminder.

"I tell him right away, I need that stick," Ovechkin tells reporters. Asked whether he'd gifted anything to the Islanders goalie in return, Ovechkin just smiled: "He don't ask me."

Everybody knew goal No. 895 was coming. Nobody knows what's next. At 39, and with one year left on his contract, no one knows how many more he'll score. The old record is broken, but the new one is still being forged — and will continue to be carved until Ovechkin decides his masterpiece of a career is complete.

“When he puts his mind to something, for the last 10 years, watching him, it’s just been unbelievable,” says Wilson. “I mean, it was 500, and everyone’s like, ‘Ah, he won’t get 600.’ And then it was 600, ‘Ah, he won’t get 700.’ And then it was 700, and 800, and now it’s like, OK, maybe 900. It’s crazy.”

Strome simply shook his head and uttered a smiley series of “I don’t knows” when asked how high Ovechkin’s goal count might go.

“You’d have to ask him that. I think obviously 900’s right there, I’m pretty confident to say something in the 900s, I would think,” said Strome.

As Gretzky, the man now with the second-most NHL goals of all time, said at centre ice as he passed the proverbial crown to the Great No. 8, records are meant to be broken.

“But I’m not sure who’s gonna get more goals than that.”