



Columbus Blue Jackets News Clips
November 26, 2024

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- PAGE 02: The Hockey News: Columbus Blue Jackets: 20 Games In
PAGE 04: The Hockey News: Zach Werenski Named NHL's First Star
PAGE 05: 1st Ohio Battery: Shining Star: Zach Werenski Named NHL's Top Star Of The Week

Cleveland Monsters/Prospects

NHL/ Websites

- PAGE 06: The Athletic: NHL personality Paul Bissonnette assaulted by group at restaurant in Scottsdale: 'Took some, gave more'
PAGE 07: The Athletic: Weekend NHL rankings: Change in Boston, déjà vu in Ottawa and expected storylines
PAGE 11: ESPN: NHL head-coach hot seat index: Where all 32 bench bosses land
PAGE 18: ESPN: Top players to watch at 2024 CHL-USA Prospects Challenge
PAGE 20: Sportsnet.ca: Jane Gaudreau grateful for family invite to Calgary for game against Blue Jackets
PAGE 22: Sportsnet.ca: Three accused former NHL players appear in court
PAGE 23: Daily Faceoff: NHL power rankings: Zach Werenski's Blue Jackets are league's most inspiring team

The Hockey News / Columbus Blue Jackets: 20 Games In

By Jason Newland – November 26, 2024

The Columbus Blue Jackets are defying expectations and proving a lot of experts wrong. Can they keep it up though?

Let's take a look at where the Jackets are in terms of key stats, and who is leading the CBJ.

9-9-2 - 20 Points

Points

1. Zach Werenski - 20 Points - Tied for 2nd among all NHL defensemen in points.
2. Sean Monahan - 20 Points
3. Kirill Marchenko - 20 Points

Columbus Blue Jackets Win A Crazy Game Against The Lightning After Being Down Three Goals In The First Period
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Goals

1. Kirill Marchenko - 8
2. Sean Monahan - 7 - 3 power play goals
3. Werenski, Chinakhov, Olivier all tied - 6

Assists

Zach Werenski - 14 - 6 power play assists

1. Sean Monahan - 13
2. Kirill Marchenko - 12

Goalies

1. Elvis Merzljikins - 6-5-1 - .894 sv % - 3.08 GAA - 1 Shutout
2. Daniil Tarasov - 3-4-1 - .861 sv % - 4.04 GAA

Team Ranks

- Goals For - 69 - 8th in NHL
- Goals For per Game - 3.45 - 8th
- Goals Against - 72 - 27th
- Goals Against per Game - 30th
- Goals per 60 - 3.04 - 4th
- Goals Against per 60 - 2.97 - 4th Worst
- Shots On Goal - 499 - 7th
- SOG per Game - 32.1 - 10th Best

- High Danger Chances For - 59 - 3rd Most
- High Danger Chances Against - 46 - 9th Most
- Takeaways - 94 - 15th
- Giveaways - 274 - 12th Fewest
- Defensive Zone Giveaways - 124 - 10th Fewest
- Power Play - 18.2% - 19th
- Penalty Kill - 77.8% - 20th
- PIMs - 163 - 6th fewest
- Hit Given - 363 - 9th Fewest
- Hits Taken - 353 - 4th Fewest
- Shots Blocked - 279 - 13th Fewest
- 7 Home Wins - Tied for most in Metro Division; 2nd in Eastern Conference

There are still 62 games left in a very long NHL season, but so far, The Columbus Blue Jackets are doing what no one thought they could do - Be competitive and win hockey games, and they're doing it against some extremely talented clubs.

What's Next - The Blue Jackets return home on Wednesday to play the Montreal Canadiens.

The Hockey News / Zach Werenski Named NHL's First Star

By Jason Newland – November 26, 2024

The NHL has named Zach Werenski the first star for the week ending November 24th.

Werenski scored two goals and had seven points and a plus-6 rating for the week. He also totaled 14 shots on goal, had a game-winner, and leads the NHL in average time on ice. He also skated 32:17 against the Carolina Hurricanes on Saturday night.

Werenski is 2nd among all NHL defensemen with 20 points and also leads Columbus in points as well.

Zach Werenski is becoming a leader with Columbus both on and off the ice.

What's Next - The Blue Jackets return home on Wednesday to play the Montreal Canadiens.

1st Ohio Battery / Shining Star: Zach Werenski Named NHL's Top Star Of The Week

By Ed Francis – November 26, 2024

Zach Werenski was the best player in the NHL last week.

Officially.

Werenski was named the league's Top Star of the week Monday, bringing recognition to a Columbus Blue Jackets team that went a perfect 3-0-0 for the period (Nov 18th-24th) and achieved their first three-game winning streak since March of 2022.

Werenski had two goals and five assists for a total of seven points in the Blue Jackets' three wins last week, which came over top-tier teams including the Boston Bruins, Tampa Bay Lightning, and Carolina Hurricanes.

Five of the seven points came in Columbus' 7-6 overtime thriller against the Lightning, with Werenski's second goal (and fifth point) in the contest coming as in the form of his sixth career overtime winner. The game set a new career high in points for Werenski and tied the franchise record as well, with the 27-year-old becoming the first defenseman in franchise history to notch a five-point game.

Werenski was a +6 plus/minus for the week and averaged more than 28 minutes of ice time, with a bulk of that coming against the opposition's top two forward lines.

He's tied for second among all NHL defenseman in both goals (6) and points (20).

The last Blue Jacket to be named one of the three stars of the week was Patrik Laine, for the week ending February 13th, 2022. Werenski became the first Columbus player to get the Top Star honors since Cam Atkinson in February 2021.

Colorado Avalanche forward Mikko Rantanen and Toronto Maple Leafs netminder Joseph Woll were named the second and third stars, respectively.

The Athletic / NHL personality Paul Bissonnette assaulted by group at restaurant in Scottsdale: 'Took some, gave more'

By Chris Johnston – November 26, 2024

Popular hockey podcaster, broadcaster and former NHL player Paul Bissonnette was taken to a hospital Sunday after getting attacked by several men at a family restaurant in Scottsdale, Ariz.

In a three-minute video posted to X, Bissonnette said the altercation took place inside and outside of Houston's restaurant after he observed a group of guests cause issues with the restaurant manager. The 39-year-old Bissonnette said he is a regular diner at the establishment and attempted to intervene after a member of the group laid his hands on the manager.

"You could tell he was a little shocked and surprised and stunned," said Bissonnette. "It's a family restaurant. I don't think there was anybody in there who could go maybe like help him out. I went over, I just grabbed the guy's arm that was on him, I said 'Sir, if you continue to harass and assault the staff, we're going to have problems.'

"And then they just started chucking, so it escalated extremely quickly."

Bissonnette said he fought with seven different people in total. Six of those men were arrested and are accused of assault and disorderly conduct, according to Fox 10 Phoenix.

That group knocked the former NHL tough guy to the ground on a couple occasions, according to Bissonnette, but he didn't lose consciousness. He thanked police and hospital staff for their quick response and care.

"All is good, guys," said Bissonnette. "It sucks. I got (kicked) in the face a couple times, but it could have been a lot worse."

Bissonnette is part of the "Spittin' Chiclets" podcast and detailed his experience on an episode scheduled to be released Tuesday. He's also a panelist on TNT's national television coverage and indicated that he would be in the studio for Wednesday's doubleheader.

The veteran of 202 career NHL games with Pittsburgh and Phoenix was clearly shaken by the altercation with a group of men he believed had been golfing earlier in the day.

"Just bad dudes," said Bissonnette. "Way too drunk, and I don't know what else they had in their system. Yeah, I'm very, very angry at these guys and kind of want their names out there and want them to pay the piper. Just unacceptable behavior at a family restaurant just because they couldn't grab another cocktail and didn't want to hear 'No' for an answer."

Police have not identified those arrested.

As scary as the situation was, Bissonnette felt he held his own in an outnumbered situation.

"Took some," he said. "Gave more."

The Athletic / Weekend NHL rankings: Change in Boston, déjà vu in Ottawa and expected storylines

By Sean McIndoe – November 26, 2024

We're a quarter of the way through the NHL season, which means it's time for two things: saying "quarter-pole" around your most pedantic friends just to annoy them and writing pieces about how nothing is going the way we expected.

We've been covering that latter ground for most of the season around here, including last week's reminder that you were wrong about all this stuff, too. So this time, let's switch it up. Sure, this is a league where almost nothing is playing out the way we thought: The Oilers are bad, the Flames are good, the Predators are terrible, the Capitals and Wild are great, the Jets are dominant, the Avalanche are .500 and the Bruins are collapsing. Connor McDavid is outside the top 10 in points, Connor McMichael is unstoppable and Connor Bedard is regressing in Year 2. None of it makes any sense. But if we dig deep enough, surely we can find a few things that are actually playing out the way we all expected, right?

Of course we can. I'm not sure we can find five, but let's try.

Bonus five: Early-season stories playing out pretty much the way we all expected

5. The bottom of the barrel — Apart from the Predators trying to nudge their way in, the battle for dead last has pretty much featured the teams you'd expect. The Hawks, Sharks and Habs are all struggling through another rebuild year and are holding a spot open for the mildly surprising Ducks and Blue Jackets.

4. The Leafs are good — While the path has had a few surprises, like an Auston Matthews injury and better-than-expected goaltending, the Leafs under Craig Berube are pretty much right where we would have thought: a little better defensively, a little worse offensively, on pace for home ice in the playoffs and still subject of the occasional freak-out when they lose two in a row. And, as always, good enough to be an early playoff lock but not quite good enough to feel like strong Cup contenders.

3. The Stars are really good — They're the only team from the West that's been in the top five each week so far, and I can't tell you how much I appreciate them making my job just a little bit easier every Sunday.

2. The awards races other than the Hart — The MVP race has already thrown us a curve, with Kirill Kaprizov emerging as the early favorite while McDavid starts slow and Matthews falls off the board. But elsewhere, we're closer to seeing the expected names. The Norris is shaping up to be another round of Cale Makar vs. Quinn Hughes, with a bit of Victor Hedman, Adam Fox and Rasmus Dahlin mixed in. The Calder race has been led by Matvei Michkov, Logan Stankoven and Macklin Celebrini, with a bit of Lane Hutson mixed in. And the Vezina would come down to a battle between the two consensus favorites, Connor Hellebuyck and Igor Shesterkin. Pretty much how we would have drawn it up.

1. The Metro, except for the Capitals — OK, we were all wrong about the Caps, and if you think I'm going to suggest they're in trouble now that Alex Ovechkin is out for a while, forget it. But aside from Washington, the rest of the division seems about right. The Hurricanes are very good, as always. The Rangers are also good, but leave you wanting more. The Devils are back. The Islanders are OK. The Flyers and Blue Jackets are out playing tough but aren't playoff contenders. And the Penguins are playing out the worst-case scenario of what felt like a wide range of outcomes.

It's nice when things work out the way you thought they would, if only for 20 games or so. On to this week's rankings ...

Road to the Cup

The five teams with the best chances of winning the Stanley Cup.

It's trade board time. Check out CJ's opening list of the season to find out which players your contending team will no doubt be adding for that one 27-year-old prospect and a fifth-round pick.

5. Vegas Golden Knights (13-6-2, +17 true goals differential*) — Fair warning: It's a weird week for the top five, with most of the league's top teams riding mini-slumps. That's OK for our purposes, where the long term is more important than an occasional two-game losing streak. The Knights had one earlier in the week but shook it off with wins over the Senators and Canadiens. They get Colorado and Winnipeg this week, which should be a slightly tougher test.

4. Florida Panthers (12-8-1, +1) — They dropped the rematch with the Jets on Monday, one of three straight regulation losses that have opened the door for the Leafs to pass them for top spot in the Atlantic. They get their first matchup of the season with Toronto on Wednesday, part of a very tough week that also features the Capitals and a home-and-home with the Hurricanes.

3. Dallas Stars (13-6-0, +21) — They're the only team in this week's top five that's reasonably hot, with regulation wins in five of their last six. They get the Hurricanes tonight in what may be the game of the week.

2. Winnipeg Jets (17-4-0, +34) — They took another regulation loss, their third in their last five games, and this time against a bad Predators team. Nobody should be panicking yet, but a strong performance in a showdown game with the Wild tonight would certainly help settle some nerves in Winnipeg.

In other news, Kyle Connor is a goon now.

1. Carolina Hurricanes (14-5-1, +28) — Two losses aren't a big concern. But losing another goalie would be, and Pyotr Kochetkov having to come out in overtime after a collision is bad news. We don't know the extent of the injury, so we won't count it against the Hurricanes quite yet, but it's worth watching.

*Goals differential without counting shootout decisions like the NHL does for some reason.

Not ranked: Boston Bruins — So, now what?

We got our first coach firing of the season this week, one that went from far-fetched to inevitable real quick. Jim Montgomery came into the season with the highest win percentage of any Bruins coach ever. But after the Bruins rolled over for the Blue Jackets on home ice on Monday night, it was over. On the podcast, the debate wasn't whether Boston would make a change but whether it would happen while we were recording. They held out for a few extra hours, for the record.

OK, so they've done the easy part. And the Joe Sacco era at least got off to a decent start with a pair of coach's dream low-scoring wins, 1-0 over Utah and 2-1 over the Red Wings. For all the times a good coach ends up as a scapegoat and a change doesn't help anything, sometimes you really do need a new voice and a fresh set of eyes. Maybe Sacco is that guy, and can nudge what still seems like a good team on paper back in the right direction. Or maybe the coach won't matter much, but Jeremy Swayman will finally shake off the rust of a missed camp and start playing like his pre-extension self, at which point everything else solidifies from the net out.

If not? That's where it gets tough. There really is an end-of-an-era feel about this Bruins start. Maybe we don't need to overthink it. Maybe this is a team that isn't good enough down the middle, whose second-best forward is slowing down at 36 and whose blue line isn't quite good enough to paper over a

slumping young goaltender, and it all adds up to a playoff miss nobody saw coming but maybe should have.

This is the part where I'd wonder what Don Sweeney would do in that case, only I'm not sure it would be Sweeney making those calls. The NHL's fourth-longest tenured GM has had a ton of success in Boston, and maybe this is just the inevitable ending in a league that craves parity and punishes excellence.

But as far as getting this group, or something close to it, back on track? If there's an easy answer, apart from a new-coach bounce and a goalie snapping out of his funk, I'm not seeing it. Bruins fans, where's your hope index at as we hit the quarter mark?

The bottom five

The five teams that are headed toward dead last and the best lottery odds for James Hagens, or maybe someone else.

That Bruins coaching story continued when the biggest news of the weekend came out of St. Louis, where the Blues jumped at the chance to hire Montgomery. That meant firing Drew Bannister after only 76 games, just 22 of those without the interim tag. That's a tough call to make, but clearly Doug Armstrong didn't want to let an opportunity slip by, especially with his team struggling badly in his penultimate year as GM.

For now, we'll keep the Blues out of the bottom five until we see what Montgomery can do. But that doesn't mean we don't have room for a new entry ...

5. Pittsburgh Penguins (7-12-4, -33) — I can't keep them out any longer. Not after a weekend that saw them outscored 10-2 in a pair of losses. Ah well, at least one of those goals provided a bit of history:

You've still got Crosby, Pens fans. Just don't think about how it's all going to end.

4. Columbus Blue Jackets (9-9-2, -3) — The whole David Jiricek situation is weird. You're building a culture of accountability, so you certainly don't want to hand anything to anyone based on draft pedigree. But you're also rebuilding, and the development of a guy you spent a No. 6 pick on has to be a priority. Maybe that development is more likely to happen with big minutes in the AHL, and that's all this demotion is. But it's led to some trade speculation, and GM Don Waddell didn't exactly sound like a guy who wasn't thinking that way when he was asked about it. Let's see where this goes.

3. Montreal Canadiens (7-11-2, -20) — They played maybe their best game of the season in last Monday's win over the Oilers, then maybe had too many days off to think about it before a disappointing follow-up against the Knights.

2. Chicago Blackhawks (7-12-2, -14) — You know what, it's been a rough season, we'll allow it.

Also, Bedard is a shutdown defensive center now. He also has three goals on the year, and I don't even want to think about where this discourse is going to go in the next month or two if the puck doesn't start going in for him.

1. San Jose Sharks (6-12-5, -23) — I thought this was a neat find by Eric: The Sharks are racking up goals with the goalie out, scoring a league-leading six times at six-on-five. Does that mean they should play the whole game that way? No, obviously not, don't be ridiculous. You'd definitely put a goalie in net if it was late in the third period and you were defending a lead. But should they start every game at six-on-five? Look, I'm just saying that the math checks out.

Also, Joe Thornton absolutely rules.

(And for the record, yes he still would.)

Not ranked: Ottawa Senators — They swore it wouldn't happen again.

The Senators went into the season expecting improvement. Ideally that would mean a playoff spot, although even the most optimistic fan knew that wasn't a guarantee. But at a minimum, they'd be in the race, playing meaningful hockey all season long.

The one thing that wouldn't happen — that couldn't happen — would be yet another slow start that had them looking up at the race by the end of November. That had been the theme in Ottawa for years: offseason optimism, then almost immediate disappointment, then months of finger-pointing between games that didn't matter.

But those were Pierre Dorion's teams, and D.J. Smith's teams, and even Eugene Melnyk's teams. This was a new start. This time was going to be different.

So far, it hasn't been all that different.

Twenty games into a crucial season, the Senators are under .500, sitting at 8-11-1 after dropping their fifth straight, a 4-3 home loss to the Canucks on Saturday. Maybe worse, it's largely been the same story as the last few seasons: An exciting and talented core has too many lapses at too many wrong moments, and pays for it because of substandard goaltending. That last part was supposed to be fixed by the Linus Ullmark trade, and the Senators have 33 million reasons to hope his slow start is just a case of a veteran adjusting to a new team. But this has been a pattern in Ottawa, where goalies with solid track records show up and immediately get worse. And it can't happen again.

The season certainly hasn't been a disaster, and the Sens are one four-game win streak from being right back in the mix. The fall of the Bruins has put an unexpected playoff spot into play, canceling out the one the Capitals seem intent on keeping. The path is there. But with a new owner, a new GM, a new coach and a new starting goalie, there are going to be tough questions if it all plays out the same way it always does. And for once, those questions might have to start with maybe the most uncomfortable of all: Are we sure this young core is actually good enough?

Not trying to sound dramatic at all here, but next on the chopping block (if this continues) isn't the coach, or the GM, or the owner. It'll be a core piece player and it's going to sting.

For what it's worth, Steve Staios is still preaching patience, because he's an NHL GM and that's all they know how to do, at least publicly. And the players, especially captain Brady Tkachuk, are still saying all the right things. They've certainly had plenty of practice over the years. So have their fans, who have been through this enough times that they're getting used to reading pieces about their team that lean on words like "scars" and "baggage."

The next two weeks should be crucial, and if so, it's at least a decent schedule — after the Flames tonight, they head off for the three-game California trip that features two rebuilding teams, then come home for winnable games against the Red Wings, Predators and Islanders. You'd think that four-game win streak should be in there somewhere. But if it isn't ... well, maybe Julian's got it right.

Here's the thing that scares me about the Senators and their losing streak. It can get worse.

It's obvious, but, hear me out.

If you're panicking about this team now. Imagine if they lose to Calgary on Monday.

For now, we've seen this movie before in Ottawa. This time, the remake features a largely new cast. Sens fans are waiting to see if this one is going to finally have a different ending.

ESPN / NHL head-coach hot seat index: Where all 32 bench bosses land

By Greg Wyshynski – November 26, 2024

The NHL coaching carousel spun a little earlier than usual this season.

The Boston Bruins fired Jim Montgomery after 20 games. The St. Louis Blues hired Montgomery just five days later to replace Drew Bannister, whom they promoted last season on an interim basis after 28 games to replace Craig Berube. Bannister's tenure as the Blues' official head coach lasted only 22 games.

Such is life for a struggling team. The salary cap and player contracts make roster overhauls difficult -- and it's not as if the general manager is going to fire himself for a poorly constructed team. So coaches take the fall or give new hope. A tale as old as time.

These two coaching changes probably won't be the last in the NHL this season. Some other seats are getting increasingly toasty.

Here's a temperature check on the NHL's coaching hot seats for all 32 teams, including insight from sources within the coaching community.

Burning up

Derek Lalonde, Detroit Red Wings

Luke Richardson, Chicago Blackhawks

As soon as the NHL picked up its collective jaw from the floor after Montgomery's dismissal, one name appeared at or near the top of every "coaches' hot seat" ranking: Derek Lalonde of the Red Wings, for whom all the boxes can be checked for a coach in trouble.

The Red Wings have regressed in the standings after last season's 91-point campaign. Their offensive output is way down, from 3.35 goals per game last season to 2.53 after 19 games this season. Their 1.52 goals per 60 minutes at 5-on-5 is 31st in the NHL. This isn't about puck luck: Detroit's 2.06 expected goals per 60 minutes is last in the league. They're better in goals against per game season over season, but a lot of that credit should go to goalie Cam Talbot, who is making GM Steve Yzerman look smart.

But the biggest harbinger was the one that haunted Montgomery: Lalonde, in his third season with the Red Wings, does not have a contract beyond 2024-25.

The general speculation is that if the Red Wings don't make the postseason, Lalonde surely pays for that with his job. But would Yzerman pull the plug in-season, in the hopes of getting Detroit back to the playoffs for the first time since 2016?

There also has been speculation that it might happen, and one rumor that made the rounds in NHL coaching circles this month was that Joel Quenneville might take over the Detroit bench.

"Two weeks ago, I heard Quenneville for Detroit," a coaching source said.

On July 1, the NHL said it would allow three former Chicago Blackhawks executives to seek employment in the league after they were banned in October 2021 after an independent investigation into how they handled a sexual assault allegation in 2010. Former Chicago GM Stan Bowman was the first of the three to find employment, taking over as Edmonton Oilers GM from the departing Ken Holland.

Bowman spoke at length at his introductory news conference about what happened in 2010 and the fallout, including his own path back to the NHL. "I can tell you without a doubt that those things will never happen on my watch again," Bowman said.

Quenneville would obviously need to do the same no matter where he ends up, and then answer more questions beyond that. Oilers president Jeff Jackson knew what he was getting into when he hired Bowman; so would Yzerman, even if the buck stops at the GM.

"[Yzerman's] got the gravitas to pull it off both as a Detroit hero and someone who's a long-running general manager," another coaching source said.

Another source poured cold water on a Quenneville-Detroit connection, noting that Quenneville's salary could be a sticking point. The coach made around \$6 million annually for the Florida Panthers before his resignation in 2021.

Coaches don't often reduce their asking price, let alone those who have three Stanley Cup rings. "He's a great coach, but I don't think this happens unless Joel says, 'I've made so much money that I don't really care,'" the source said.

But the other issue is the Red Wings. Though they have some impact players and a promising pool of prospects, they're not a win-now team. Quenneville is 66 years old. He's 275 wins away from Scotty Bowman's all-time record for an NHL coach. He's in a win-now place.

If Detroit went with an internal candidate, it has former Panthers and San Jose Sharks head coach Bob Boughner on the bench.

Meanwhile, the situation in Chicago has caught the attention of the coaching community for several reasons.

Richardson, 55, is in his third season coaching the Blackhawks. According to reports, the first three years were guaranteed, and the Blackhawks have the option for a fourth season.

The Blackhawks are in a deep rebuilding mode, which is why Richardson has a .342 points percentage after 184 games behind the bench. They're slightly better season over season in the standings so far, but near the bottom of the league and nowhere near relevance. That has led to frustration within the Chicago locker room, especially with their franchise savior Connor Bedard.

Bedard, 19, had three goals and 12 assists in 20 games for Chicago. He's openly expressed frustration with his own game, recently saying there were "100 things" he'd like to change about it, but also with the constant losing he has experienced in his first two seasons in the NHL. To get Bedard's confidence back, Richardson recently shifted him to the wing and cast him in a more defensive role.

The way Richardson handled the benching of veteran Taylor Hall raised some eyebrows, admitting that he should have communicated that it was a possibility with the former NHL MVP before making him a healthy scratch.

Through 20 games, the Blackhawks were 30th in offense, but their team defense was in the top half of the league.

Of the internal candidates, only assistant coach Derek King has NHL head-coaching experience, having led the Blackhawks for 70 games in 2021-22 after the firing of Jeremy Colliton.

Again, it's still a considerable rebuild for Chicago, but they did invest in some veteran free agents in the offseason such as Teuvo Teravainen and Tyler Bertuzzi. Would it be worth it for GM Kyle Davidson to make a change now, or would this decision wait until the offseason? Or does he have faith that

Richardson's commitment to defense will ease some of the headaches about losing, even if it doesn't juice Bedard's scoring stats?

"To me right now, it's more of a 'when' and not an 'if' on Richardson," a coaching source said.

Hot in the summer

Andrew Brunette, Nashville Predators

Greg Cronin, Anaheim Ducks

Joe Sacco, Boston Bruins

Andre Tourigny, Utah Hockey Club

Should Brunette have been included in the "burning up" tier?

One could make the argument that with a .405 points percentage after 21 games, the second-year Predators bench boss belongs there. Of particular concern is an offense that cooked last season (3.24 goals per game) having no pop this season (2.38) despite adding Steven Stamkos and Jonathan Marchessault. But that could easily be explained by GM Barry Trotz not filling out the middle of the lineup better, as Nashville is reportedly in the trade market for a center already.

But if Trotz did make a move behind the bench, it probably wouldn't be until after the season and a full audit of what went wrong. That is, if things don't turn around for Nashville, which is another part of this equation: Brunette was the coach that helped turn around the Predators' 2023-24 season with an epic winning streak. Perhaps he can still pull off an encore with this talented roster. Obviously, they need to get U2 back at a Sphere residency and then not take the players to see them.

Sacco is the interim coach for the Bruins after they fired Montgomery. He has waited since 2012-13 to get another head-coaching gig in the NHL, having gone 130-134-30 in four seasons with the Colorado Avalanche (2009-13).

The Bruins have played well early for him and there's a lane where this could end up being his gig permanently. If not, would Boston stay in-house and give assistant coach Jay Leach the shot he has been waiting to have? Or would they import someone from outside the family? A lot would depend on where president Cam Neely and GM Don Sweeney see this roster trending.

Cronin is a tough one on whom to get a handle. Multiple sources said GM Pat Verbeek's front office plays things very close to the vest, so getting a read on everything from Cronin's status to the future of Trevor Zegras is a difficult task. Verbeek did say after last season that he has "a super long time for Greg Cronin" and that he loves "his approach to life and his approach to our hockey team. I'm very happy with the job that he did this year."

The Ducks have hovered around .500 this season, with a slightly improved offense -- thanks to the continued improvement of players such as Leo Carlsson and Olen Zellweger -- and a much improved goals-against per game, thanks to an incredible start for goalie Lukas Dostal. Anaheim's team defense is still a mess, as no one gives up more shots (34.6) or had a higher expected goals against (3.46 per game) through 19 games. But great goaltending make for safe coaches, as Cronin might be witnessing firsthand.

Tourigny received a contract extension before the Arizona Coyotes franchise shifted to Salt Lake City, putting him under contract through 2026-27. He had gotten a lot out of a little during his three years in Arizona. But this is Utah, with cash-rich owners and elevated expectations for a new NHL franchise that wants to be competitive immediately.

The Utah Hockey Club squandered a hot start and now has a points percentage under .500. Tourigny has had some terrible luck with long-term injuries to defensemen Sean Durzi and John Marino, and the inexplicable dud of a season from goalie Connor Ingram. There's still time to turn it around for a well-liked head coach. But he's a coach that owner Ryan Smith inherited and one whose contract he didn't approve.

One more note on Smith: There has been plenty of chatter around the NHL about his relationship with Tampa Bay Lightning coach Jon Cooper.

The two are friends, and as one source put it "golfing buddies." Smith has lavished praise on Cooper, telling The Athletic that the Bolts coach is the NHL's version of Ted Lasso. He even set up a mentorship situation between Cooper and Utah Jazz coach Will Hardy, believing the Lightning head coach has excellent attention to detail.

The relationship between Smith and Cooper might not mean anything regarding the status of Utah's current coach. But it's a link that certainly hasn't gone unnoticed since Smith became an NHL owner. Hockey culture loves connecting dots.

Getting warmer

Peter DeBoer, Dallas Stars

Kris Knoblauch, Edmonton Oilers

Peter Laviolette, New York Rangers

Patrick Roy, New York Islanders

Martin St. Louis, Montreal Canadiens

John Tortorella, Philadelphia Flyers

It might be a little odd to see last season's Western Conference finals coaches listed here, but that's the way the NHL works.

In Knoblauch's case, the Oilers set the bar as high as it can be set for a team chasing the Stanley Cup, losing in Game 7 of the Final. He helped patch a sinking ship when he arrived in Edmonton last season after 13 games. The Oilers have been inconsistent at best so far in 2024-25, thanks in no small part to rather ghastly goaltending.

But the regular season doesn't matter -- unless Edmonton doesn't qualify for the playoffs. The postseason matters, and that's where Knoblauch's status will become clearer in the eyes of a general manager (Bowman) that didn't hire him. Although his boss did, to the delight of the franchise's star player who had Knoblauch in juniors, which does make this more interesting ...

DeBoer is signed through 2025-26 season. Again, the expectations are massive: Dallas has made consecutive conference finals. DeBoer lasted three seasons in Vegas and Florida, four in New Jersey and five in San Jose -- in the latter two cases, having made the Stanley Cup Final with those teams. The results have clearly been there for Dallas under DeBoer -- his .675 points percentage is his highest with any team -- but his contract and the Stars' window to win make this a situation worth watching.

Laviolette is another coach whose team has lofty expectations, with two trips to the conference finals in three seasons. The Rangers have him signed through 2025-26, and there's no reason to believe he'd be gone before that season barring a surprising playoff miss in the Eastern Conference. But given the contract, the market and the James Dolan of it all, who knows after that?

Tortorella is signed through the 2025-26 season. The Flyers see him as an ideal coach for shaping a young roster, including the tough love moments he has had with players such as rookie star Matvei Michkov. Management has backed him, even though the current brass didn't hire him. If The Flyers don't show season-over-season improvement, is that just a growing pain from the rebuild, or something they reassess with Tortorella before a lame-duck season?

Bottom line: Tortorella is most likely the head coach at the start of next season, and then it's matter of how good management believes the Flyers should be vs. where they are.

Montreal exercised a two-year option on St. Louis in April 2024, meaning that the coach is signed through the 2026-27 season. The Canadiens are on track to drop in several statistical categories and in the standings season over season. But this is another situation in which previously dependable goaltending becomes wobbly and rest of the team is affected by it. Canadiens management has lavished praise on St. Louis for multiple seasons; but at some point, the training wheels have to come off this team.

Roy is reportedly signed through the 2025-26 season. At this point, the Islanders have a 50-50 chance of making the postseason cut, per Money Puck, which is apropos for a .500 team. Would a third straight playoff appearance and another first-round exit be enough to keep Roy around? Is it enough to keep GM Lou Lamoriello around? The Islanders have an aging roster seemingly stuck in stasis, and one wonders how long ownership is going to follow that plan.

Just seated

Scott Arniel, Winnipeg Jets

Craig Berube, Toronto Maple Leafs

Dan Bylsma, Seattle Kraken

Dean Evason, Columbus Blue Jackets

Travis Green, Ottawa Senators

Jim Hiller, Los Angeles Kings

Sheldon Keefe, New Jersey Devils

Jim Montgomery, St. Louis Blues

Lindy Ruff, Buffalo Sabres

Ryan Warsofsky, San Jose Sharks

All of these coaches have been hired since April, although in Hiller's case he took over the Kings on an interim basis in February before getting that label taken off in the offseason.

Hiller joins coaches such as Arniel, Berube and Keefe who have seen instant success in their new gigs. Ruff seems to be turning the Sabres in the right direction, and the same could be said of Evason and the Blue Jackets. Warsofsky is in his first NHL head-coaching season for a rebuilding team with zero expectations. The ink on Montgomery's five-year deal with the Blues is just drying.

The one coach that hasn't really gotten things going is Green with the Senators, who haven't translated improvements in offense and defense season over season into success in the standings. But that should generate a lot more chatter and action around the construction of the roster than the coach, who is signed through the 2027-28 season.

Long-tenured temp check

Jared Bednar, Colorado Avalanche

Rod Brind'Amour, Carolina Hurricanes

Jon Cooper, Tampa Bay Lightning

Bednar and Brind'Amour are both signed through the 2026-27 season. The Hurricanes have been one of the best teams in the NHL while the Avalanche are starting to get rolling now that they've gotten some players back in the lineup.

Cooper is signed through the 2025-26 season. He's the longest tenured coach in the NHL, having been hired on March 25, 2013. The Lightning look like a playoff team so far this season, having made the cut for seven straight seasons under Cooper that included back-to-back Stanley Cup wins.

It'll be interesting to see what Cooper and the Lightning want out of their respective futures. Victor Hedman, Nikita Kucherov, Andrei Vasilevskiy and Jake Guentzel are all north of 30 years old, while 34-year-old Stamkos was allowed to leave, signing with Nashville. Would the Lightning want to pay Cooper's lofty salary during what could be a retool? Would Cooper want to hang in there with an aging roster?

Or are there other challenges the coach would like to take on in the NHL? He turned the Lightning into champions. Teams would be lining up, bags of cash in hand, to get him to do the same for their franchises.

Planet Sullivan

Mike Sullivan, Pittsburgh Penguins

He's one of the NHL's longest-tenured coaches, but his seat should be scorching.

The Penguins are a disaster this season, giving up nearly four goals per game on average, mustering only 2.5 goals per game offensively, and currently with a 1.9% chance of making the Stanley Cup playoffs, per Money Puck. It's a team with a veteran core of star players that seems destined to finishing outside of the postseason for a third straight season.

Normally, this would get any coach fired, especially one who has been with a team for a decade. But Sullivan is still there, behind the Pittsburgh bench, watching the definition of insanity play out on the ice every night.

He's under contract through 2026-27 but wouldn't suffer from lack of options if he and the Penguins ever parted ways. Penguins president of hockey operations Kyle Dubas and Fenway Sports Group ownership have backed Sullivan in public and private. Sullivan told The Athletic that he's not going to leave on his own accord.

"I'm invested in the Pittsburgh Penguins," Sullivan said. "I care very, very deeply about this organization. I care deeply about the group of guys who have been in that locker room for a very long time. I love this organization with all of my soul. This organization and so many people associated with it have changed my life in so many ways. And so, for me, the challenge of trying to move this team forward and transition this team, it's a different kind of challenge, but it's one that I am welcoming."

That tracks with what sources in the coaching community believe.

"He's committed to win with that team. He knew what he was getting into," a source said. "I think he's the best coach in the league. People in Pittsburgh don't realize that these guys are all years older from when the last time they won, and there's just not a lot of young fresh talent there."

Ice cold

Spencer Carbery, Washington Capitals

Bruce Cassidy, Vegas Golden Knights

Ryan Huska, Calgary Flames

John Hynes, Minnesota Wild

Paul Maurice, Florida Panthers

Rick Tocchet, Vancouver Canucks

For various reasons, these coaches can sit comfortably on their rumps with nary a singe from a hot seat.

Maurice won the Stanley Cup last season. Tocchet won the Jack Adams and is not considered one of Vancouver's issues at the moment. Hynes, Cassidy and Carbery have their teams playing well this season -- the Wild in particular are making a case of being the West's best team through two months. Huska also has the Flames playing well in the Pacific, but even if they level off, Calgary's retool means Huska sticks around for a while.

That said, the temperature can change in a hurry. One coach who was in the "ice cold" tier in 2023? Jim Montgomery of the Boston Bruins.

ESPN / Top players to watch at 2024 CHL-USA Prospects Challenge

By Rachel Doerrie – November 26, 2024

The CHL USA Top Prospects Challenge is taking place on Tuesday and Wednesday, with two games in Ontario. Teams, scouts and fans have clamored for this type of best-on-best hockey for draft-eligible players in North America.

The CHL's Annual Top Prospects Game featured the best draft-eligible players from three Canadian Major Junior Leagues. However, the excitement about this Prospects Challenge, which pits the United States National Team Development Program against the Canadian Junior hockey leagues, is one that many scouts have circled on the calendar.

Only a few top prospects that were expected to participate will miss out with injury: Carter Amico and LJ Mooney for the USNTDP and projected top-10 pick Roger McQueen for the CHL.

The USNTDP is loaded with talent, even without James Hagens who is at Boston College. The NTDP is the most centralized team of draft-eligible players in the world. While there are other draft-eligible players in the USHL that are expected to be taken in the first few rounds, the NTDP has the highest concentration of top-end players.

Canada does not centralize an under-18 team, as their under-18 World Championship team is made up of eligible players on teams already eliminated from Memorial Cup contention. Given that many of Canada's best players will be unavailable for the spring tournament, this is likely the best opportunity for scouts and fans to see the best from Canada face off against the USNTDP. Here's a rundown of the top players to know who will be in action this week:

The CHL has three players who are expected to go in the top 5 on the roster with Porter Martone (Brampton), Michael Misa (Saginaw) and Matthew Schaefer (Erie). Those three players will see plenty of ice time in front of curious eyes, given the expectation that they won't be available in the spring for the U18s. Martone and Misa are in the mix with Hagens to be the No. 1 pick in the 2025 draft.

Martone has a knack for lifting his game in big moments. Combine that with his production and physical package, and we shouldn't be surprised if he's the talk of the scouting room at the end of this week.

Misa is producing at a flabbergasting rate, on pace for one of the most productive seasons by a draft-eligible prospect in the OHL -- his 46 points through 23 games project to a 136-point season. His ability to find the soft areas and outthink his opponents is masterful. Tack on an elite skill set, and he'll likely make at least three or four plays that will make everyone say "Wow!" this week.

Schaefer is the best defenseman in the draft class, with my model projecting him to become a top-pair defenseman in the NHL. His mobility and two-way ability will be on display against the best from the U.S., a rare opportunity for him to show he can dictate play from the blue line against elevated competition.

Other Canadians to keep an eye out for include Caleb Desnoyers, Lynden Lakovic, Malcolm Spence and Blake Fiddler. All four are expected to go in the top 20, and two may sneak into the top-10. Desnoyers stands out as a play driver, consistently creating scoring opportunities while outthinking almost every opponent.

Spence and Lakovic aren't producing at the pace you'd expect out of players pegged for the top 15, but both have qualities that scouts like to see out of players this age. Spence is a nightmare to play against, consistently disrupting plays, mixing it up and driving the opponents crazy. As the scouts say, "He's the

type of guy you win with." Lakovic's physical package combined with an ability to create from all over the ice has scouts believing his game is more translatable than other players producing at a more impressive rate.

Fiddler -- the son of 877-game NHL veteran Vernon Fiddler -- is the lone defenseman in this cohort, and he will not go unnoticed this week. He plays a hard-nosed, physical game at 6-4, 209 pounds, and is most noticeable for his ability to dictate the net front. His puck-moving continues to improve, and the combination of a big defender that owns the net front and can move the puck effectively will have GM's smiling ear to ear.

Given that the NTDP plays together throughout the season, scouts and fans are familiar with the players who will feature in the games this week. One caveat to note: Three players who will play in this event are not eligible to be drafted until 2026: Landon Hafele, Casey Mutryn and Lincoln Kuehne. They won't play prominent roles this week, but their inclusion speaks to how highly USA Hockey thinks of their talent.

Jack Murtagh has been the NTDP's most consistent player this season, and leads them in points per game. He's not a standout superstar, though he's highly effective and makes use of his elite shot. Playing against the CHL's best, this is an opportunity for Murtagh to firmly insert himself into first-round consideration.

William Moore is widely believed to be the top forward from this NTDP class, and is expected to go in the top 20. He's not producing at the rate scouts would like (17 points through 20 games), but he's consistently involved on both sides of the puck. He's got an opportunity to show that he can outplay his peers this week, and would help downplay the concerns about his production.

Charlie Trethewey will attract a lot of attention for the USA given Amico's absence. The right-handed defenseman has shown he can be a play driver from the back end. He reads the play at a high level, puts himself in excellent positions and involves himself physically. His skating is a plus attribute, and will continue to underpin his package as a probable first-round pick. Expect him to play a lot this week and don't be surprised if he climbs up draft boards with a few good outings.

This is the inaugural faceoff between many of the top American prospects and almost all of the top Canadian ones. One thing is certain, there will be viral highlights from these games. While that doesn't draw the attention from scouts the way it does for the fans, this is the first real opportunity for many of these prospects to introduce themselves to the casual fan.

Many of the players in these games will dominate draft conversations in the lead-up to June, and this is sure to be an exciting display of competition between peers.

[Sportsnet.ca / Jane Gaudreau grateful for family invite to Calgary for game against Blue Jackets](#)

By Eric Francis – November 26, 2024

Facing her first Thanksgiving without her sons, Johnny and Matthew, Jane Gaudreau still wants to give thanks.

As part of the endless love and support that has been flowing from Calgary since the brothers' passing in August, her family has been invited to attend the Flames game next Tuesday when the Columbus Blue Jackets come to town.

The Gaudreaus will do so, en masse.

Although the Flames have kept details of their Dec. 3 tribute under wraps, the Gaudreau family will be flown in to be part of an evening honouring Johnny Hockey for his work in the community and the nine years of brilliance he exhibited as one of organization's most popular stars.

"We are deeply grateful to the Flames organization for inviting us back," said Jane in a text message from her home in New Jersey.

"Guy and I, along with our entire family, are looking forward to reconnecting with many friends in Calgary.

"The love and support so many have shown for John, Matty, and our entire family has helped us through the hardest time of our lives."

It promises to be one of the most stirring evenings in Saddledome history, as Flames fans will get a chance to wrap their arms around a man, his brother and a family that meant so much to the organization and city.

And it couldn't come at a better time.

"It's been a really tough few months for Guy and me," admitted Jane, referring to her husband, who taught Johnny how to skate using Skittles as lures.

"Some days are okay, but others are incredibly challenging. This past week, with Thanksgiving approaching, was especially difficult for us."

Although his parents flew out west for regular visits throughout his time in Calgary, Johnny missed seeing family for things like Thanksgiving so much that it prompted him to sign in Columbus in 2022 to be closer to home.

The move was upsetting to Flames fans, but nothing compared to the hurt the city felt when news of his passing hit.

The day after the two were struck and killed while bicycling on the side of a rural road near their family home in New Jersey by an alleged drunk driver, thousands of Calgarians made emotional pilgrimages to the 'Dome to pay their respects.

They brought flowers, sticks, jerseys, photos, stuffies, Skittles and purple Gatorade.

They cried, they hugged, they shared, they reflected.

A candlelight vigil for the brothers was attended by more than 10,000, which included former teammates and alumni.

The Gaudreau family saw it all from afar, and used it as nourishment to help deal with their unspeakable pain.

“The Flames organization and the Calgary fans have been a special part of our lives for over 13 incredible years,” said Jane, whose son was a Flames fourth-round draft pick in 2011.

“Some of the friendships we’ve made here have become like family to us, and we will always cherish the memories we’ve created together.”

They’ll create even more Dec. 3, just four days after the Flames visit Columbus for the first time this season.

That too promises to be emotional.

Many have wondered if the Flames will retire Johnny’s No. 13, raise a banner with his name on it or pay tribute to him in other ways.

Nothing will be more enduring or powerful than the memory of seeing his pregnant wife, Meredith, and two kids, his sisters Katie and Kristen, his parents, his brother’s pregnant wife and extended family members in house.

It was Katie’s wedding they were all slated to be at the day after the brothers were killed.

Jane and Guy are beloved in Calgary, where Guy showed up several times with hockey gear in search of some beer league action.

They are recognized wherever they go, and have long been embraced by locals who watched their undersized college standout become an NHL all-star.

Aside from a video they did for Sportsnet to thank fans for their support on opening night, Jane and Guy have kept a very low profile, quietly battling through every parent’s worst nightmare.

Coming to Calgary and stepping back into the spotlight takes courage.

They’ll be welcomed with love.

“Many of our fondest memories were in Calgary,” said Jane.

“It’s where we watched John grow from a college student into a remarkable young man, and as parents we are so incredibly proud.

“We are so thankful for the time we’ve spent in this wonderful city, and look forward to seeing everyone again.”

The feeling is mutual.

[Sportsnet.ca / Three accused former NHL players appear in court](#)

By Paul D. Grant – November 26, 2024

LONDON, Ont. — Former NHL players Michael McLeod, Dillon Dube and Alex Formenton were in court during pre-trial hearings here Monday, marking their first in-person appearance.

The Superior Court jury trial is set to begin April 22 and is expected to take eight weeks, immediately following the selection of the jury. Overseeing the case will be Judge Maria Carroccia.

The case is in judicial pre-trial hearings, which could last as long as three weeks, the events of which are subject to a publication ban. Judge Bruce Thomas has been presiding over the pre-trial hearings for the case.

Charged with one count each of sexual assault are Dube, Cal Foote, Carter Hart and Formenton. McLeod has been charged with two counts of sexual assault, including one relating to aiding someone else in the offence.

The players were not re-signed by NHL teams over the summer, making them unrestricted free agents. Dube and McLeod are playing in the KHL; McLeod is with his second KHL team, the season of which is ongoing. The other three players are not playing.

In May 2022, a report revealed that Hockey Canada had settled a civil lawsuit with a woman in London after she alleged she was sexually assaulted by eight men, including members of the 2018 men's world junior team, following an event honouring the team in June 2018.

An investigation by the London Police Service was launched in the summer of 2018 and closed in February 2019, with investigators concluding that there was insufficient evidence to lay charges. After widespread scrutiny of Hockey Canada's handling of the situation, London police reopened its investigation in July 2022.

Daily Faceoff / NHL power rankings: Zach Werenski's Blue Jackets are league's most inspiring team

By Scott Maxwell – November 26, 2024

The Columbus Blue Jackets have the chance to be one of the most inspiring stories in the NHL this season. With Thanksgiving just around the corner for Americans, including the residents of Columbus, Ohio, what better way to celebrate the holiday than by showing a bit of extra appreciation for a team that is finding some success despite all they've been through in the past year? Kirill Marchenko is taking that next step, Sean Monahan has been the biggest feel-good story on this Jackets team, and Zach Werenski is red hot and possibly playing himself into the Norris Trophy conversation.

Hunter Crowther and I continue to navigate through the results so far this season with another week of our co-op power rankings. I have my same old system in which I aggregate six stats (points %, 5-on-5 goal differential, 5-on-5 xGF/60, 5-on-5 xGA/60, power play xGF/60, and shorthanded xGA/60, all coming courtesy of Natural Stat Trick) to come up with a list that eliminates my own biases, along with a rule that no team can be above a team that's more than five points ahead of them in the standings, regardless of where the aggregate places them. On the other hand, Hunter goes off his own intellect and pure vibes, and together we find a way to combine it and meet in the middle.

1. Carolina Hurricanes

Record: 14-5-1, +27

Last Week: 1st (0)

Hunter's Rank: 2nd

Scott's Rank: 1st

Scott: I'm sure Jets fans will love the fact that a 1-1-1 week from the Canes doesn't drop them down a few spots like a slow week does with Winnipeg, but that's what happens when you're a legit wagon! They probably should have beaten a weaker Blue Jackets team, but their loss to the Devils was just an overall competitive matchup between the top two teams in the league (in my opinion). Side note: I know it's the Flyers, but they managed to hit 4 expected goals in their game against them on Wednesday... at *even strength*. Insane stuff from them right now, even if they aren't getting perfect results amidst some goalie injuries.

Hunter: They're built perfectly in their four forward lines and three defensive pairings. Both their power play and penalty kill are ranked seventh in the league. Scott mentioned goaltending, and you hope Pyotr Kochetkov's potential injury isn't too serious. But, seriously, this team is built to win.

2. Winnipeg Jets

Record: 17-4-0, +34

Last Week: 3rd (+1)

Hunter's Rank: 1st

Scott's Rank: 4th

Hunter: Hey now, look at Scott putting the Jets in his top five! What a softie! Winnipeg got its revenge against the Panthers, avenging a 5-0 loss last week with a 6-3 win at home, led by a Mark Scheifele hat-trick. The 4-1 loss to the Predators came up as an impressive Friday night win over the Penguins, and I'll chalk that up to the Predators telling themselves, "Enough of this." Speaking of Scheifele, has the Jets'

star played himself onto Canada's 4 Nations Face-Off roster? Our managing editor Matt Larkin currently says no, but we're still a week away from the team announcements and things can change quickly.

Scott: I actually had them ranked 11th before the five-point rule came into effect, so the joke's on you, Mr. Crowther!

3. New Jersey Devils

Record: 14-7-2, +19

Last Week: 2nd (+1)

Hunter's Rank: 3rd

Scott's Rank: 2nd

Hunter: I haven't checked the odds lately, but I can't help but think Sheldon Keefe is one of, if not the favorite to win the Jack Adams Award (I know, Spencer Carbery has done great things with the Capitals, as well as Scott Arniel with the Jets). It's an award that thrives off narrative. What's a better one than a coach tossed to the scrapheap by the Maple Leafs, someone who allegedly couldn't get the most out of his stars, who is now taking a former non-playoff team to the top of the Metropolitan Division and might get career years out of his top guys? Voters love that stuff.

Scott: I could see the fact that everyone expected the Devils to be better than what they were last season anyway to fall under the radar for some people's ballots, but he's certainly a contender.

4. Minnesota Wild

Record: 13-3-4, +19

Last Week: 6th (+2)

Hunter's Rank: 4th

Scott's Rank: 3rd

Hunter: Not going to lie, I took the deepest of deep breaths when news came Sunday of Kirill Kaprizov avoiding serious injury after Thursday's injury against the Oilers, an injury that forced him out of Saturday's game against the Flames. It's not just because the team needs him, but selfishly, I want to see him continue his Hart Trophy-caliber campaign. As for how good this team is ... I mean, their defense has surprisingly good depth, and Filip Gustavsson is tied with Connor Hellebuyck for the best save percentage (SV%) among goalies with at least 12 starts. I don't know how long they can keep it up, but we're having fun watching.

5. Toronto Maple Leafs

Record: 13-6-2, +12

Last Week: 9th (+4)

Hunter's Rank: 5th

Scott's Rank: 5th

Scott: The Leafs had a quiet week, but still managed to improve to seven wins in their last eight games, all while adding another body to their IR after every game. They were actually first on my list, but being six points behind the Jets dropped them down. It'll be interesting to see what this team looks like when they're healthy, especially with Auston Matthews back, but for now they're quietly impressing me, although I'm still only cautiously optimistic until the playoffs.

Hunter: Cautiously optimistic is also how I'd describe my outlook on them, but seeing Mitch Marner thrive without Matthews does pave the way for some lineup blending this season. Banking these points with so many bodies out of the lineup is something I never thought we'd see out of this group. While

we're at it, every year we talk about how the Leafs are a good regular-season club, and it's the playoffs where they have to win, but they've never *truly* won their division (2021 doesn't count). How about you try to do that so you can clinch home ice in a Game 7?

6. Dallas Stars

Record: 13-6-0, +22

Last Week: 7th (+1)

Hunter's Rank: 7th

Scott's Rank: 8th

Hunter: A few things stood out this week: Jake Oettinger has won six of his last seven starts; Jason Robertson bounced back with four points in their two wins; Wyatt Johnston scored his first goal in two weeks (and just his second since Oct. 13) and Matt Duchene is drinking from the fountain of youth with 11 goals and 23 points in 19 games, which leads the team! Matt freaking Duchene! Dallas baby, how 'bout 'dem Stars?!

7. Washington Capitals

Record: 13-6-1, +26

Last Week: 4th (-3)

Hunter's Rank: 8th

Scott's Rank: 7th

Scott: We were *just* starting to get excited about this team and Alex Ovechkin's goal chase, so of course the hockey gods had to be cruel and give Ovi the most serious injury of his career. In fact, he might miss more games with this injury than he has throughout his first 19 seasons combined. The team is still playing well without him, but it is noticeable, losing their last two games and scoring just three goals since his injury.

Hunter: Losing Ovechkin sucks for both the team and fans of the game, but it's an exciting opportunity to see how good this lineup is without the future Hall of Famer. I'd like to see Connor McMichael eat some of those minutes, and maybe we can see flashes of the world-class skill Pierre-Luc Dubois possesses.

8. Vegas Golden Knights

Record: 13-6-2, +17

Last Week: 11th (+3)

Hunter's Rank: 6th

Scott's Rank: 9th

Scott: The Golden Knights didn't start off their Eastern Canada road trip the way they wanted to when they were blanked by the Maple Leafs, but they followed it up with back-to-back wins to come out ahead on the trip as a whole. And all without Mark Stone. Weird, it's almost like they're used to playing without him for long stretches of time.

9. Los Angeles Kings

Record: 11-7-3, +6

Last Week: 8th (-1)

Hunter's Rank: 10th

Scott's Rank: 6th

Hunter: The Kings played just two games this week, but I thought that they outplayed both the Sabres and Kraken decisively, even if they only got two points. Quinton Byfield is back on the scoresheet (!) and Adrian Kempe's continued progression could see him turn into an 80-point player in 2024-25. Still no word on when Drew Doughty will return, but Vladislav Gavrikov has stepped up big time in his absence, posting a 60.5% even-strength expected goals share and averaging more than 23 minutes per night. He's due for a new contract at the end of the season, and he'll earn a sizable raise from the \$5.875 million he currently makes.

10. Colorado Avalanche

Record: 12-9-0, -2

Last Week: 14th (+4)

Hunter's Rank: 11th

Scott's Rank: 11th

Scott: It seems like the Avs are *mostly* out of their funk that plagued them early on in the season thanks to three straight wins, and they're definitely playing a lot better. That said, it also helps that they're finally getting healthy, and Alexandar Georgiev is at the point where he's bouncing between good and bad starts, as opposed to just always being bad like the start of the year. I think they should probably be fine from here on out, although an upgrade in net would certainly make me feel better about calling them a Cup contender.

11. Florida Panthers

Record: 12-8-1, +2

Last Week: 5th (-6)

Hunter's Rank: 9th

Scott's Rank: 14th

Hunter: I can't allow myself to believe that Sam Reinhart is going to hit the 50-goal mark again, but with nine in 10 games through November and now 16 on the season, he's well on pace to hit the mark again, and perhaps surpass it. With that being said, it's been a tough stretch for the Panthers, losing five of their last six and not getting great performances out of Sergei Bobrovksy. Florida knows how to space out a season, so it's nothing too troublesome. Still, it's worth keeping an eye on.

12. Tampa Bay Lightning

Record: 10-7-2, +9

Last Week: 13th (+1)

Hunter's Rank: 14th

Scott's Rank: 10th

Hunter: Their 7-6 overtime loss to the Blue Jackets was one of the most fun games of the season, especially since I was watching it from a sports bar at a resort in Mexico (the high-volume offense provided a heck of an atmosphere ... people like goals, who knew?) But to follow up that heartbreaker with a dud against the Stars likely left a sour taste in the Bolts' mouths. They play the Avalanche on Monday, which feels like a really good test for both clubs. I know I'll be watching from Akumal.

13. Edmonton Oilers

Record: 11-9-2, -5

Last Week: 10th (-3)

Hunter's Rank: 12th

Scott's Rank: 12th

Scott: Is it time to start getting worried about this team? Obviously they're in the playoff hunt again and should easily make the dance, but by this time last season, they were on fire and looked like a Cup contender. This year's team is still quite inconsistent and doesn't have the same energy, especially with Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl "only" playing like all the other superstars as opposed to putting up totals in a league of their own. Perhaps they're saving their energy for the playoffs, but it is a bit of a red flag.

14. New York Rangers

Record: 12-6-1, +15

Last Week: 12th (-2)

Hunter's Rank: 13th

Scott's Rank: 13th

Scott: Last week, I pointed out how the Rangers only had one win against a team in the top 15 in the standings. Well, they proved me wrong by beating the Canucks on Tuesday – who sit in 15th. They then lost to the eighth-ranked Flames and the 14th-ranked Oilers later that week to go 2-2 on a Northwest road trip. I know I've always thought of the Rangers as a paper tiger over the past few years, but at least those teams were pulling out wins against teams at their level. It will be interesting to see what happens when their schedule gets tougher.

Hunter: I went so hard in the paint for the Rangers that, I must admit, those last few losses weren't very promising. St. Louis on Monday should be a quick two points, but Wednesday against the Hurricanes, in a rematch of last season's second round series, is a good test to see if they're back on track or if there's red flags worth fixing.

15. Calgary Flames

Record: 12-6-3, +1

Last Week: 19th (+4)

Hunter's Rank: 15th

Scott's Rank: 17th

Hunter: Let's do it, let's talk about the Flames: four straight wins! How does a team with two of its leading scorers being its top-two defensemen still win games, currently holding onto the No. 2 spot in the Pacific Division? There's rumors galore of Nazem Kadri potentially being shipped out, but perhaps we should pause and see what this group is? Dustin Wolf is living up to all the hype, posting a .926 SV% with an 8-2-1 record. I don't know for certain where they'll be in a month, but what I do know is that in the last month, Jonathan Huberdeau has two goals ... and is still somehow tied for the team lead in goals.

16. Vancouver Canucks

Record: 10-6-3, -1

Last Week: 15th (-1)

Hunter's Rank: 16th

Scott's Rank: 16th

Scott: Just as things were returning to normal for the Canucks, especially with Thatcher Demko nearly back in the lineup, chaos ensued again when J.T. Miller took a leave of absence earlier last week. I wish all the best for Miller during his time away and making sure that he's okay is much more important than sports, but it also looks like Vancouver will have to tread water for a bit longer.

17. Boston Bruins

Record: 10-9-3, -19
Last Week: 16th (-1)
Hunter's Rank: 18th
Scott's Rank: 15th

Hunter: Oh how the mighty have fallen. It's weird to see this Bruins squad struggle, and it's even weirder to say they're "struggling" when you consider they were only 8-9-3 when they fired Jim Montgomery, which was still tied for a playoff spot. Some could argue Montgomery's time with the club had reached its expiration date, despite posting one of the greatest regular season winning percentages in modern history. Bruins management saw an opportunity to use a bullet and try to reboot this lineup, and it appears to have worked, with the club winning its past two games. For all we know, Jeremy Swayman will remember he's a top goalie in the league and lead this team to another second-round appearance.

18. Buffalo Sabres

Record: 11-9-1, +4
Last Week: 18th (0)
Hunter's Rank: 17th
Scott's Rank: 19th

Scott: Should I just copy and paste Hunter's blurb about the Sabres being back from our rankings two weeks ago, which followed up with me saying that they would go cold the following week (they were 1-2-0) only to get hot again the week after? This Sabres team has been very streaky, but right now the streak is good after sweeping their California road trip last week, and streaky is certainly better than most of their Atlantic Division rivals in the Red Wings, Senators and Canadiens. The Sabres have playoff a spot in the division and are a win away from tying with the Panthers for second! Can't wait to see how far they fall next week.

19. New York Islanders

Record: 8-8-5, -6
Last Week: 17th (-2)
Hunter's Rank: 19th
Scott's Rank: 18th

Hunter: While seeing Kyle Palmieri produce at a career-high pace at 33 is impressive. It leaves you wondering what is wrong with the rest of the group. Bo Horvat has two assists in his last seven games (both in the same game) and the lack of Mathew Barzal has left this team desperate for any kind of offense. He may return to the lineup either this or next week, and it won't be a moment too soon.

20. Columbus Blue Jackets

Record: 9-9-2, -2
Last Week: 27th (+7)
Hunter's Rank: 20th
Scott's Rank: 20th

Scott: Don't look now, but the Blue Jackets have won three straight, with all of the wins coming against competitive teams like the Bruins, Lightning and Hurricanes. Heck, their win over the Bruins even got Jim Montgomery fired! Zach Werenski also had himself a week, with seven points in their three wins that included a five-point performance over the Bolts, and now he's second in scoring for defensemen.

21. Nashville Predators

Record: 7-11-3, -15
Last Week: 23rd (+2)
Hunter's Rank: 22nd
Scott's Rank: 21st

Scott: I joked last week about how the Jets helped me out by waiting until after I wrote a piece on them to start losing, and the Preds sort of did the same for me by losing their game a day before I wrote about why they've struggled this season, only to win their next game (funny enough, against the Jets). You can check that piece out for a more in-depth look at my thoughts on why this team is bad, but it's a bit more than just bad luck, and that should be concerning for Preds fans.

22. Ottawa Senators

Record: 8-11-1, -3
Last Week: 21st (-1)
Hunter's Rank: 21st
Scott's Rank: 24th

Scott: Oh Ottawa, what has happened to you? I'd ask how the mighty have fallen, but you weren't even mighty to begin with. They've now lost five in a row, and have the second-worst record and third-worst points percentage in the East, and while it's still somewhat early, they're looking awfully like the same team we've seen from the past several seasons. You really have to wonder when some of the better players will get sick of the same thing happening over and over again and move on. They're all locked up to big money for big term, so it's not an easy feat, but it has to be wearing on them, especially if this slump continues.

23. Pittsburgh Penguins

Record: 7-12-4, -34
Last Week: 22nd (-1)
Hunter's Rank: 23rd
Scott's Rank: 22nd

Hunter: There's a scene from *Malcolm in the Middle* when Dewey says, "I expect nothing, and I'm still let down." That's what it feels like to watch and write about the Penguins every week. Non-stop disappointment, with flashes of major milestones and moments that will live on highlight reels for generations. Sidney Crosby became just the 21st player in league history to score 600 regular-season goals, doing so in a 6-1 loss to Utah HC on Saturday. I can't think of a better microcosm for the 2024-25 Penguins.

24. Anaheim Ducks

Record: 8-8-3, -9
Last Week: 30th (+6)
Hunter's Rank: 24th
Scott's Rank: 25th

Hunter: We're starting to see signs of progress from two second-year players in Leo Carlsson and Olen Zellweger, both having big hands in a pair of wins this week against the Stars and Blackhawks. Do my eyes deceive me, or is Anaheim getting decent goaltending from Lukas Dostal and...is that...could it be John Gibson?! What a time to be in Orange County. Also, when do we accept that Trevor Zegras is just a guy? He's got three assists in his last two games, but he only has two goals and five assists through 19 games. Let's see if he can pick up the pace before Christmas.

25. Utah Hockey Club

Record: 8-10-3, -10

Last Week: 20th (-5)

Hunter's Rank: 27th

Scott's Rank: 23rd

Hunter: You could give Utah HC credit for their win over the Penguins, but as you read earlier, Pittsburgh is not a serious team. As for Utah, they're right there with them in terms of not showing any signs of being a contender beyond the odd "catch the opponent on a bad night" type of game. The club has won twice in the last two weeks and needs a spark to find its footing in the standings. Man, losing John Marino and Sean Durzi early really torpedoed their season.

26. Detroit Red Wings

Record: 8-10-2, -14

Last Week: 26th (0)

Hunter's Rank: 25th

Scott's Rank: 27th

Scott: The Red Wings finished their nightmare California road trip with another loss that saw them blow multiple leads to the Sharks, and then after barely squeaking past the Isles on Thursday, they dropped their fourth game in the last five with a 2-1 loss to the Bruins. While it's very rare that moments that happen this early on will have significant ramifications on a team's season, I feel like Detroit not jumping on Jim Montgomery while he was available will be something they regret if they miss the playoffs again.

27. Philadelphia Flyers

Record: 9-10-2, -13

Last Week: 24th (-3)

Hunter's Rank: 26th

Scott's Rank: 28th

Hunter: I think Travis Sanheim is a talented blueliner whose game has grown exponentially this season. I just don't know if he should be playing 30 minutes per game, as John Tortorella has deployed him throughout November. Also, quick update on my personal crusade to get Travis Konecny on Team Canada in February: he has nine more points than anyone on the team and is on pace for a career year. Konecny has played so well that he's now on Matt's updated 4 Nations Face-Off roster projections. Now if we could make sure Doug Armstrong sees this...

28. Chicago Blackhawks

Record: 7-12-2, -13

Last Week: 28th (0)

Hunter's Rank: 30th

Scott's Rank: 26th

Scott: I'm not sure why I feel slightly good about a team that has lost four of their last five and sits in last place in the league, but the Blackhawks don't really look like a team that is as bad as their record is. They could still be a lot better, but I'd imagine they'll look like a team in the 22-27 range once Connor Bedard gets out of his slump. The hopeful superstar has gone pointless in all but eight games this season for Chicago, including a stretch of nine in his last 12 games.

29. Seattle Kraken

Record: 10-10-1, +2
Last Week: 25th (-4)
Hunter's Rank: 29th
Scott's Rank: 30th

Hunter: Credit to the Kraken, they looked like they controlled a good chunk of the game against the Predators last week and earned a strong win in front of their fans, but that same effort wasn't there against a better Kings squad just days later. It's weird, there's guys I like on this team: Brandon Montour and Chandler Stephenson, Jordan Eberle provides good depth, who doesn't love Brandon Tanev? But despite a semi-decent bounceback in November, I just don't see this as a serious playoff contender. Maybe it's time for Ron Francis to blow this thing up – or maybe it's time for someone else to have a turn at doing so.

Scott: What they need is an actual top-tier talent. I don't even know if there's a player on this team that I'd call a top-50 player in the NHL at the moment. Or at least outside of the crease, because Joey Daccord has been making a sneaky case to be a Vezina candidate this year.

30. St. Louis Blues

Record: 9-12-1, -21
Last Week: 29th (-1)
Hunter's Rank: 28th
Scott's Rank: 31st

Scott: We all know how I love to rag on the Blues, but I'll give them credit where I gave the Red Wings criticism: they jumped on Jim Montgomery, and that might be what swings their season. It was also incredibly bold of them to go for this hiring compared to the Red Wings. At least Derek Lalonde is on the hot seat! The Blues had only just made Drew Bannister their official head coach to start this season and they moved on from him after 22 games. I have to respect that level of cutthroat management from Doug Armstrong in his final season in the GM chair.

Hunter: I feel for Bannister, even though losing seven of their last nine and 10 of their last 14 means no one is safe. Jordan Binnington may make Team Canada's 4 Nations Face-Off roster by default, but he's hardly earned a spot, posting a sub .900 SV% and a goals against average over three. Hey, since Bannister used to both play for *and* coach the Soo Greyhounds, maybe there's a spot for him with Kyle Dubas' Penguins?

31. Montreal Canadiens

Record: 7-11-2, -21
Last Week: 31st (0)
Hunter's Rank: 31st
Scott's Rank: 29th

Hunter: It's time we start to discuss who will replace Martin St. Louis as head coach of the Canadiens. No, we didn't think this club would make the playoffs, and I'll be the first to admit that players seem to really enjoy his presence in the locker room. But there's a lot of bad habits this team has, whether it's Kirby Dach getting too cute with the puck, or the defense having little-to-no clue who to cover out front, and we're seeing St. Louis rely too heavily on several guys, including Lane Hutson and Sam Montembeault. I asked before the season if St. Louis was "the guy before the guy." I think we have our answer.

Scott: On the bright side, they've managed to decrease their 5v5 expected goals against per 60 minutes by almost an entire expected goal from where it was about a month ago. That might speak more about how historically bad they were than about how good they've been now, but that's something to celebrate!

32. San Jose Sharks

Record: 6-12-5, -27

Last Week: 32nd (0)

Hunter's Rank: 32nd

Scott's Rank: 32nd

Scott: The Sharks aren't last place in the league right now (at least by points, they are last in points percentage), but they are definitely looking like they are making a home for themselves in last place like last year. That's probably the only comparison I have to last year's poor excuse for a hockey team though, because this year's group is still an entertaining watch, and Macklin Celebrini is looking like everything the Sharks probably hoped that they would get from him in his rookie season. Hopefully they can take that next step soon though; the Joe Thornton jersey retirement ceremony has me very nostalgic about the Sharks being a powerhouse.