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The Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski to play for US at world championship

By Brian Hedger – May 6, 2025

Zach Werenski will play for the U.S. at the men's world championship after all.

The Blue Jackets' top defenseman was added to the U.S. roster by USA Hockey on May 5. Werenski told reporters on April 18 he wouldn't play at worlds, which will be played May 9-25 in Sweden and Denmark.

Werenski, 27, played the most hockey in the NHL during the regular season and is a first-time finalist for the James Norris Memorial Trophy as the league's top defenseman. He averaged more than a point per game with 82 points on 23 goals and 59 assists, and led the league in ice time with 2,166:22 in 81 games — an average of 26:45 per game.

Werenski also led all scorers with six points (six assists) in four games to help the U.S. win a silver medal at the 4 Nations tournament in February.

A day after the Blue Jackets finished the season two points shy of a playoff spot, Werenski cited his offseason training regimen plus a busy summer that includes his own wedding and two others as reasons he wouldn't play at worlds for a second year in a row and the third time in his career.

"I've thought long and hard about it, if we (didn't) make the playoffs, whether I'd go or not," Werenski said. "I think it's just best for me to take some time, stay off the ice, get back in the gym and focus on what I can do to help this team next season. It's definitely a tough decision. I love playing for USA Hockey, but it's just not going to work out this summer."

It's unclear what prompted the change of plans. Canada recently added Pittsburgh Penguins captain Sidney Crosby and Colorado Avalanche captain Nathan MacKinnon to its roster, and the latter had just been eliminated from the Stanley Cup Playoffs in a Game 7 first-round loss to the Dallas Stars.

That decision may indicate the two Canadian stars' desire to prepare for the NHL's return to the Winter Olympics next year in Italy. After losing to Canada in the 4 Nations tournament on an overtime goal by Connor McDavid, Werenski might be showing further dedication to USA Hockey to further his own Olympic dreams.

Werenski is the third Blue Jackets player and sixth member of the franchise who has committed to participating in the world championship. Coach Dean Evason and assistant Steve McCarthy are part of Canada's roster along with forwards Adam Fantilli and Kent Johnson.

Canada will compete in Group A, which will play its pool games in Stockholm, Sweden. The U.S. will play in Group B in Herning, Denmark. Quarterfinals will be divided between the two sites before the medal rounds shift to Stockholm to conclude the tournament.

The Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets own pick No. 14 in the 2025 NHL Draft after lottery sets order

By Lori Schmidt – May 5, 2025

The Blue Jackets own the 14th and 20th picks in the 2025 NHL Draft.

The draft lottery, which was won by the New York Islanders on May 5 against long odds, set the order. The Islanders jumped from 10th to first. The Utah Hockey Club won a second draw to determine the remaining lottery order, overcoming even longer odds to moving up a maximum 10 spots from 14th to fourth and bump the Blue Jackets back from 13th to 14th.

The draft, which will be held June 27-28 in Los Angeles, will be the second for Don Waddell as the Blue Jackets' president of hockey operations/general manager. In June, he presided over the selection of power forward/center Cayden Lindstrom fourth as the Jackets' lone pick in the first round.

This year's draft will be the first time the Blue Jackets haven't had a top-10 pick since 2020, when former GM Jarmo Kekalainen presided over the selection of forward Yegor Chinakhov with the 21st pick. Since that draft, the Jackets have selected seven players in the first round: Kent Johnson (fifth), Cole Sillinger (12th) and Corson Ceulemans (25th) in 2021, David Jiricek (sixth) and Denton Mateychuk (12th) in 2022, Adam Fantilli (third) in 2023 and Lindstrom in 2024.

The San Jose Sharks, who finished with the NHL's worst record, will pick second. The Chicago Blackhawks, Utah and the Nashville Predators round out the top five.

Columbus ended the season with a 40-33-9 record, two points shy of a playoff spot while finishing ninth in the Eastern Conference with 89 points. The Montreal Canadiens (91) earned the East's second wild card and lost to the Washington Capitals in the first round. The Blue Jackets were also fourth in the Metropolitan Division behind the Capitals (111), Carolina Hurricanes (99) and the New Jersey Devils (91).

In addition to selecting No. 14, Columbus owns the Wild's first-round pick, No. 20 overall, which was acquired as part of a Nov. 29 trade that sent Jiricek to Minnesota.

The Blue Jackets also own picks in rounds three, four, six and seven, as well as the Vegas Golden Knights' seventh-round selection. Columbus parted with its second-round selection as part of the three-team deal on June 6, 2023 for defenseman Ivan Provorov — now a pending unrestricted free agent.

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Enter 2025 NHL Draft With Two Top-20 Picks

By Mark Scheig – May 5, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets entered the NHL Draft Lottery in a position to most likely stay put with the 13th overall pick. Turns out even their horrible lottery luck applies to them lower in the order.

Thanks to the New York Islanders winning the first draw and then the Utah Hockey Club winning the second draw, the Blue Jackets actually dropped a spot from 13th to 14th in this June's NHL Draft. Utah was one spot below the Blue Jackets and overcame long odds to jump to the fourth-overall pick.

The Blue Jackets now know that they will pick 14th and 20th overall in the first round. This alone makes them one of the most fascinating teams at the 2025 NHL Draft. Their current situation says so.

Picks Are Available For Right Price

The Blue Jackets want to take the next step in 2025-26 after just missing out on the playoffs. Owning two top-20 picks and a lot of cap space puts them in prime position to get now help for their team.

A bevy of possibilities exist for the Blue Jackets. GM Don Waddell could try to trade up a few spots if they see a player in the top-10 they really like. They could stand pat and make the picks at 14 and 20 if their board breaks the right way.

But more than likely, one or even both picks are available via trade. The 20th overall pick is certainly available. Then if the right deal comes along, the 14th pick could be had too.

Knowing that the Blue Jackets don't want to miss out on the playoffs again, it points to a trade being the most likely outcome, at least for now. So much can change between now and the draft.

Zach Werenski just came off the best season of his career. He isn't getting any younger. The young core showed that they were able to hang in the entire year before falling just short. The Blue Jackets have to decide which areas they need to address.

The most obvious need is on their blue line. With Ivan Provorov and Dante Fabbro unsigned at the moment coupled with how many goals the Blue Jackets allowed, defense and goaltending have to be the area of focus.

By holding two top-20 picks, the Blue Jackets have more than enough to fill that glaring need. They could even swing higher for another top-6 option.

Waddell said at the trade deadline that some deals were talked about but fell through. He also said that talks would pick back up in the offseason.

We'll start to get a better sense of where things stand at the beginning of June at the NHL Combine in Buffalo. That's when we'll start to find out which prospects the Blue Jackets talked with and more.

The main takeaway for now is that Waddell and the Blue Jackets are open for business. They're in a position to let things come to them. Running it back doesn't seem like much of an option given the defensive struggles.

If you're a team who wants a first-round pick, the Blue Jackets have just what you're looking for. Just be prepared to give them something that will help them get to the playoffs in 2025-26.

Cleveland.com / Cleveland Monsters' Calder Cup run ends with 4-1 loss to Laval Rocket

By Matt Lofgren – May 6, 2025

The Cleveland Monsters' season came to an end Tuesday night in the second round of the AHL Calder Cup North Division playoffs with a 4-1 road defeat to the Laval Rocket in Laval, Canada.

Surrendering three first-period goals, the Monsters once again struggled with penalties, which the Rocket made the most of. The Monsters committed four first-period penalties, which led to two of the Rocket's three goals on the power play.

The Monsters' Luca Del Bel Belluz scored the team's lone goal late in the second period, but the offense could not create enough opportunities the rest of the way. The Rocket held the Monsters to just 19 shots in the game, with only five coming in the final period.

Monsters goaltender Jet Greaves, who is expected to start next season with the NHL's Columbus Blue Jackets, made 32 saves for the game while his defense struggled to slow the Rocket's puck movement.

The Monsters were outshot 36-19.

The season ended on a particularly sour note with seven penalties in the third period, including a 10-minute game misconduct by the Monsters' Roman Ashcan.

Monsters head coach Trent Vogelhuber, who became Cleveland's first head coach to reach the playoffs in back-to-back seasons this year, will have an offseason of moves and acquisitions to consider. It is expected that Vogelhuber will lose Greaves, and defenseman Denton Mateychuk, who scored three goals and two assists in six postseason games.

The Monsters finished the regular season fifth in the North Division with a 35-26-11 record, scoring 206 goals with 225 surrendered.

The Athletic / NHL 2024-25 regular-season games that changed the outcome of the draft lottery

By Sean McIndoe – May 7, 2025

Did you enjoy this year's draft lottery? I did. I thought the new format for the broadcast, which featured the full draw happening live, was a major improvement. As much as I like to complain about the lottery, and occasionally suggest alternatives that would be way better, we appear to be stuck with what we've got. And if so, at least the league kind of nailed the presentation this year.

But while the NHL changed the broadcast, they didn't change the underlying mechanism. That means they still assigned each team a group of combinations, based on their record. And that means that all those combinations, including the winning ones, were tied to a specific spot in the standings. And that means that shifting the teams that finished in the winning 19th and 23rd spots in the standings would have changed the results.

Which means ... yep, we get to go looking for games that changed the lottery results.

This is a gimmick we break out every now and then, if and when the results allow it. Sometimes we get a drawing like last year, where the Sharks won the lottery after being five points worse than any other team. No game can give you a five-point swing, so there was no point looking any deeper. But this year, the lottery gods had a few surprises up their sleeves with those long-shot wins for the Islanders and Utah, so we can have some fun with the results.

Well, "fun" might be relative here. Half the point is that this won't be fun for certain fan bases, who may not realize just how close they came to a potentially franchise-altering draft pick. We're trying to make you sad here. It's kind of our thing.

As always, if you're the sort of person who wants to make philosophical arguments about the premise, going on about butterfly effects or deterministic nonlinear systems or whatever, kindly hit your back button now and go find somewhere to argue about Sam Bennett. Preferably on a post that has nothing to do with him. Maybe even in a different league. I'm not here to tell you how to live your life.

Will anything ever top the all-time greatest lottery-changing moment when Patrik Stefan's infamous open-net flub in 2007 ultimately meant that Patrick Kane went to Chicago instead of Edmonton? No, never, but that doesn't mean we can't chase that high. Let's find five games from the 2024-25 season that changed the lottery results.

Kings at Blue Jackets, January 25

With the Blue Jackets locked in a battle for the East's final wild-card spot with Montreal, Ottawa and Tampa Bay, the Kings paid a Saturday night visit to Nationwide Arena. The teams traded first-period goals, then played a goalless second before Dante Fabbro scored early in the third to give Columbus a 2-1 lead.

They'd hold that lead through the third, killing a late penalty to Damon Severson along the way, and seemed set to ride a strong game from Elvis Merzljikins to an important regulation win. With 1:15 left to go and the Kings' net empty, Zach Werenski gathered the puck and had an opportunity to clear the zone. But his attempt was gloved down at the blue line by Jordan Spence, at which point this happened.

Werenski didn't have many bad shifts in a Norris-caliber season, but that one would qualify. The good news is that the Blue Jackets would go on to win the game in a shootout. All's well that ends well, right?

Sort of. Two points is two points, as the cliché goes. Except that's not always true in the NHL, where different types of wins factor into different types of tie-breakers. The Blue Jackets ultimately ended the season with 89 points and 30 regulation wins, tied in both categories with the Utah Hockey Club. But Utah had more overtime wins, giving them the second tie-breaker and meaning they finished 19th while the Blue Jackets dropped to 20th.

If Werenski clears the zone against the Kings and the Blue Jackets hold on to win without going to overtime, their 31 regulation wins would have bumped them up to 19th, which we now know was the winning spot for the second lottery. They'd be picking fourth, instead of 14th.

Ten spots, based on one clearing attempt. See, Columbus fans, this is fun, right?

Islanders at Sabres, November 1

In theory, this should have been an easy matchup for the Sabres, one which would start the season's second month off with a much-needed win after a mediocre October. They were at home and had had three days of rest, facing a slumping Islanders team in the middle of a road trip. New York came in having lost three straight, including decisions to the Ducks and Blue Jackets in which they'd scored just one goal total.

The game was there for the taking. But the Sabres didn't show up.

Well, that's not quite true — one of them did. That would be Jason Zucker, who earned a Gordie Howe hat trick that included getting bloodied in a fight he'd later say was meant to wake his teammates up. But that wasn't enough, and neither was a late Owen Power goal to shave the Islanders' lead down to one. The Sabres couldn't complete the comeback, losing a dispiriting contest that Matthew wrote about [here](#).

We didn't know it at the time, but there was far worse to come for the Sabres. They'd face the Islanders again at the end of the month, losing 3-0 in what would end up being the third of 13 straight losses that essentially ended their season. Ironically, they'd ultimately snap that streak against the same Islanders, but by that point, the season was all but over.

Now we know that those two losses to the Islanders were even more costly than we thought. Flip the result of either game to a Sabres win in regulation, and they move up from 79 points on the season to 81, while the Islanders drop from 82 to 80. That change would move the Sabres up three spots in the standings, all the way from 26th to 23rd. Which, we now know, was the spot that held the winning lottery combo for the first-overall pick.

Islanders at Penguins, March 18

You could have forgiven the Penguins for going into the tank down the stretch. A few of their fans were probably wishing they would. But after being written off from the Eastern playoff race, by mid-March the Penguins had rolled off four straight wins to get to within six points of a wild-card as they prepared to host the Islanders, one of the teams they were chasing.

The game started well for the Penguins, with Tristan Jarry looking sharp and Sidney Crosby's goal late in the first period giving them a 2-0 lead they'd take into the third. That's when things fell apart. An ugly blue-line giveaway by Kris Letang handed Kyle Palmieri a long breakaway; he hit the post, but Jarry accidentally pushed the rebound into his own net. For the fragile Penguins, the collapse was on.

The Islanders tied the game a few minutes later, took the lead late and added an empty-netter to seal a 4-2 win. "The real Penguins showed up at the worst possible moment," read the headline on Josh's

game story. “Just a gut-wrenching loss for the Penguins here,” as the announcer says at the end of that clip.

More wrenching than we knew. Winning that game wouldn’t have been enough to get the Penguins into the playoffs. But a win, even in overtime or a shootout, would have moved them past the Islanders into the 23rd spot in the final standings. And that would have been the difference between picking 11th and picking first.

Literally any of this year’s Rangers/Islanders games

Hey Islanders fans, did you know that your team lost all four meetings with the Rangers this year? Have any of their fans reminded you of this fact at all? Maybe even repeatedly? Well, now you’re going to have a fun little fact to offer back to them.

Yes, this season’s edition of the legendary rivalry was a bit of a dud, with the Rangers taking all four games by a combined score of 23 to 5. The Rangers beat the Islanders 5-2 early in the season, when they were consensus Cup contenders. They beat them twice more after the 4 Nations break, when they were fading out of the playoff race. And even down the stretch, when the Rangers looked every bit like a team that just wanted the season to be over, they still managed to drop a 9-2 beating on their crosstown rivals.

You might even say that their 4-0-0 clean sweep was one of the few good things about an otherwise miserable season. Except that now we know that it wasn’t — if the Rangers had lost even one of those Islanders games in regulation, it would have been enough to flip the two teams in the standings, with the Rangers dropping from 22nd to 23rd and into the spot that would deliver the first-overall pick. Instead, they’ll pick 12th.

In other words, the Islanders won by losing, and will pick first for the fifth time in team history thanks to a crucial assist from their rivals. Hey Rangers fans, remind me, did you guys have strong feelings about any of those picks?

Red Wings at Blue Jackets, January 2

We’ll finish by going back to the Blue Jackets, but this time with a twist.

This was a midseason clash between two desperate rivals scraping to get back to .500 and into the playoff race. Columbus scored early, but the Red Wings responded with three of their own to take a 3-1 lead into the first intermission. The Blue Jackets fought back to tie the game late in the second, but a Dylan Larkin goal put the Wings back into a lead they’d hold until the dying minutes.

Then came controversy. With just over two minutes left, James van Riemsdyk dug a rebound out from under Cam Talbot for what appeared to be the tying goal. But Detroit coach Todd McLellan challenged for goaltender interference, knowing that if he was wrong, his team would have to spend most of what was left of regulation killing a delay-of-game penalty.

After the usual lengthy review, the verdict came in: The goal stood. Tie game, and the Blue Jackets headed to the power play with a chance for the sort of dramatic late-game comeback that can turn a season around.

It didn’t work out that way. Despite some strong chances, the Blue Jackets were still looking for the go-ahead goal as the power play ticked down. That’s when Ben Chiarot sprawled to block an Ivan Provorov shot, deflecting the puck toward Tyler Motte, who dove to poke it to center ice, where Jonatan Berggren had just stepped out of the penalty box. He was gifted with a breakaway, beat Merzljkins with seconds

left and sealed a Red Wings win in regulation. Afterward, the Blue Jackets were devastated to have not even earned a point.

By now, you know that I'm going to tell you that a win in this game would have pushed the Blue Jackets past Utah in the final standings. And it would have, but this one is even more painful than that.

A win in regulation in this game — or from any other Blue Jackets regulation loss you want to pick — would have pushed Columbus to 91 points on the season, tying them with Montreal for the final wild card, while giving them the 31 regulation wins they'd need for the tie-breaker. In other words, you could argue that turning that late-game power play into a breakaway goal against cost the Blue Jackets a playoff spot.

But what about the draft lottery? That's where it gets complicated. Moving Columbus up to 17th bumps Montreal down to 18th, while Utah drops to 20th. That leaves the lucky 19th spot in the hands of the Vancouver Canucks, who were minding their own business that night in a shootout win in Seattle. If the Blue Jackets' power play had clicked that night against Detroit, the Canucks would be picking fifth instead of 15th in a draft that has roughly five blue-chip prospects.

That's the beauty of the lottery-changing moment, at least with the full benefits of hindsight — your favorite team doesn't even have to be involved in the game for their fate to be changed by a weird play, bad bounce or altered result. Sometimes, just existing in the same league is all it takes.

Fun, right?

The Athletic / NHL Mock Draft 2025: Matthew Schaefer to Islanders as we pick for every lottery team

By Corey Pronman – May 5, 2025

The New York Islanders won the No. 1 pick in the 2025 NHL Draft, jumping nine spots thanks to the lottery Monday, while Utah Hockey Club went from No. 14 to No. 4.

With a draft order now known, a collection of our NHL reporters combined for a mock draft of the first 16 picks. This is their best attempt to predict what will happen on draft day based on their knowledge of the teams they cover and what those teams covet in players.

The 2025 NHL Draft will take place in Los Angeles on June 27 and 28.

1. New York Islanders: Matthew Schaefer, LHD, Erie (OHL)

Believe me, when that last ping-pong ball rose up, I had visions of the Islanders selecting Long Island native James Hagens to start their turnaround. It makes too much sense! But with all the turmoil around this team now — they don't, you know, have a GM at the moment — the smart move is to find a cornerstone defenseman. Schaefer is the consensus pick here and you can't go against that, not if you're in need of some big changes as the Islanders are. — Arthur Staple

2. San Jose Sharks: Michael Misa, C, Saginaw (OHL)

Good fortune didn't strike twice for the Sharks after getting their Calder Trophy finalist Macklin Celebrini with the No. 1 pick last year, but this is still a great spot to add another high-end piece to their prospect arsenal. An exceptional status player in the OHL, Misa lived up to that with a monster season for Saginaw. The Sharks will love that he's forged tremendous chemistry with Igor Chernyshov, their second-round pick from last year. "Talented, talented player," Sharks GM Mike Grier said Monday. While they drafted Will Smith as a center, they know he can thrive on the wing. Misa also played on the wing until moving back to the middle this year. — Eric Stephens

3. Chicago Blackhawks: Porter Martone, RW, Brampton (OHL)

The Blackhawks don't have many forwards like Martone in their prospect pool. Whether it's been Connor Bedard, Frank Nazar, Oliver Moore, Roman Kantserov, Nick Lardis or others, the Blackhawks have drafted a lot of skilled forwards in the early rounds in recent years, but they haven't taken a lot of size. Martone is a mixture of that much-needed size to go along with the level of skill that can play with other elite forwards. He could be the perfect complementary top-line winger to what the Blackhawks are already building. — Scott Powers

4. Utah Hockey Club: Caleb Desnoyers, C, Moncton (QMJHL)

Utah may not have gotten up to the top two due to lottery rules preventing a team from moving up more than 10 spots, but this win still brings them into a totally new tier of prospects than they would have been picking from otherwise. Desnoyers is a big, two-way center who was one of the top scorers in the QMJHL this season. He'd make for a strong complement to Logan Cooley in Utah's long-term top six, joining what's already a strong farm system. — Max Bultman

5. Nashville Predators: James Hagens, C, Boston College

Soo Greyhounds center Brady Martin fits the competitive archetype the Predators covet, and I think he's in play as early as here, but how long have they been waiting for a premium skill forward in Smashville?

This is the highest Nashville has picked since it drafted Seth Jones fourth a dozen years ago, and now the Preds get their next American star and the most talented forward they've ever drafted. — Scott Wheeler

6. Philadelphia Flyers: Anton Frondell, C, Djurgården (SWEDEN-2)

The Flyers dropping two spots in the lottery wasn't ideal, but they're fortunate that the draft is deep at their position of need: center. So, we'll go with the best available one still on the board here in Frondell, giving the Flyers a couple of potential top-six pivots in their system (including Jett Luchanko, who they nabbed a year ago). The hope will be that at least one of them meshes long term with promising young winger Matvei Michkov. The Flyers once picked a Swede in the sixth-overall spot, too: a guy by the name of Peter Forsberg in 1991. — Kevin Kurz

7. Boston Bruins: Jake O'Brien, C, Brantford (OHL)

The Bruins need skill in a big way at every position, but especially at center. The right-shot O'Brien checks multiple boxes as the Bruins rebuild around David Pastrnak and Charlie McAvoy. No. 7 will be the highest selection since 2010, when the Bruins took Tyler Seguin second after Taylor Hall. — Fluto Shinzawa

8. Seattle Kraken: Radim Mrtka, RHD, Seattle (WHL)

This will be the Kraken's fifth draft. They've used their previous four first-round picks on forwards. I thought last year was the year for them to finally buck that trend and take a D. They took Berkly Catton instead, deepening their pool at forward once more. They need a premium D prospect, and Mrtka has been in their backyard all year with the Thunderbirds. Sometimes that kind of exposure can work against a player. There are also some who aren't convinced of Mrtka's top-eight merits. But we very rarely see just one defenseman taken in the top eight, and Mrtka's combination of size and skating would be unique in their pool. Brady Martin would be too — and should be a consideration here — but they're already going to have to navigate working Catton into their mix up front. — Scott Wheeler

9. Buffalo Sabres: Brady Martin, C, Sault Ste. Marie (OHL)

The Sabres fell back two spots in the lottery, and that puts them in a trickier position. Swedish winger Victor Eklund was a strong consideration here, but the Sabres are missing a player like Brady Martin, who takes over games with his speed, work ethic and physicality. It's typically wise to draft for skill at the top of the draft, and Martin has plenty of that. But that he brings a physical edge the Sabres need more of is a bonus. Roger McQueen and Carter Bear were also of interest, but the injuries make them riskier bets in the top 10. — Matthew Fairburn

10. Anaheim Ducks: Roger McQueen, C, Brandon (WHL)

This could be an interesting spot for the Ducks, who've become accustomed to falling in the draft lottery even with the high picks they've made in recent years. They're well-stocked with young impact defensemen on the club and on the way. They've got last year's No. 3 pick in Beckett Sennecke to add to their growing forward core. Could they use this pick in a deal for a proven scorer under contract with term, given that they need more offense for a club in need of heightening their expectations? Why not? But if they keep this pick, McQueen is a tantalizing choice that comes with risk. He's a huge right-shot pivot that can play a skilled game with some edge — does that sound familiar? The risk is that much of his season was spent overcoming back issues. Some serious homework on his medicals will be needed, but he might have top-five upside. — Eric Stephens

11. Pittsburgh Penguins: Jackson Smith, LHD, Tri-City (WHL)

Kyle Dubas recently acknowledged that the left side of his team's blue line is a mess. Thus, Jackson strikes me as a perfect pick for the Penguins in this spot. He projects as a top-four defenseman who will produce plenty of offense and perhaps be a legitimate power-play quarterback. At 6-foot-3, he's also a big and fairly physical player who can impact a game in numerous ways. — Josh Yohe

12. New York Rangers: Jack Nesbitt, C, Windsor (OHL)

The Rangers might not even make this pick. They could choose to give it to the Penguins instead of their unprotected 2026 first. Nesbitt, though, is a center, which fits an organizational need. He's also big — 6-foot-4 — which is a trait Chris Drury has valued in recent drafts. He was nearly a point-per-game player this year for Windsor in the OHL. "He has top-six forward potential and could be a second-line center," The Athletic's Corey Pronman wrote in his recent prospect rankings. A second-line center-level player would be a great outcome for the Rangers — if they make the pick. — Peter Baugh

13. Detroit Red Wings: Victor Eklund, RW, Djurgården (SWEDEN-2)

In a perfect world, I think the Red Wings would add a forward with a bit more size here, but Eklund's talent is just too much to pass up, with his speed and shot bringing potentially difference-making elements to a system that needs more pop. Physical LHD Kashawn Aitcheson was a strong consideration here as well, but ultimately, Eklund's motor and offensive ability make him the pick. — Max Bultman

14. Columbus Blue Jackets: Kashawn Aitcheson, D, Barrie (OHL)

If this is how the draft board falls, there's a chance the Blue Jackets strongly consider trading out of this pick if there's a deal available that could bring immediate help to their blue line. Aitcheson, however, would certainly brighten their long-term future and become their top defensive prospect (if you consider Denton Mateychuk now a full-fledged NHLer). The blue line became a pipeline need when David Jiricek was traded to Minnesota early in the season, which is why the Jackets own the No. 20 pick, too. The odds of them actually selecting players with both those two picks are ... pretty slim. — Aaron Portzline

15. Vancouver Canucks: Justin Carbonneau, RW, Blainville-Boisbriand (QMJHL)

The Canucks will explore their options on the trade market with the 15th selection at the draft, but if they stick and pick, they'll need to add offensive juice to their lineup above all other considerations. Carbonneau would fit the bill, and do so with the sort of "heavy skill" template this team is desperate for. — Thomas Drance

16. Montreal Canadiens: Carter Bear, LW, Everett (WHL)

The Canadiens also hold the No. 17 pick, and it is possible — if not likely — that they will make one or both of their first-round picks available in a trade for more immediate help coming off the first playoff appearance of their rebuild. If they keep the pick, and Bear is available, he fits what the Canadiens are looking to add. In his year-end news conference Monday, executive vice-president of hockey operations Jeff Gorton mentioned the need to improve the team's compete level multiple times, and that is what Bear brings along with a skilled set of hands that can produce offense in a translatable, pro style. — Arpon Basu

Pronman's audit

Two outlier cases winning the lottery turned this draft on its head. Nashville, Philadelphia, Boston, Seattle, Buffalo, Anaheim and Pittsburgh all went down two spots in the order, and now Utah is in a prime position to acquire a premium forward prospect.

Roger McQueen getting to 10 is the first interesting result of our staff mock. The NHL loves the player, and scouts mostly consider him a top-five talent in the class, but he missed almost the entire season. As one scout put it, “Cayden Lindstrom won’t help (McQueen),” referencing how Lindstrom’s back injury from his draft season kept him out all of the 2024-25 campaign. McQueen is regarded as an even better pro prospect than Lindstrom was.

The second most interesting takeaway is Victor Eklund, who most scouts consider a top 10 player in the draft, falling to 13 to Detroit. Despite this discrepancy, quite a few people in the league view this as realistic. Eklund has been beat up on calls I’ve had with people around the league. “He’s a great player, but wingers always fall, especially small wings,” said an NHL executive. This was evidenced as our mock team GMs flocked to centers and defensemen in the top 12. That said, if you’re an Eklund believer, you are pointing to Seth Jarvis and saying he could be that type of player.