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## Columbus Dispatch / New York Islanders impose their will against Columbus Blue Jackets: 3 takeaways

By Brian Hedger – January 22, 2025

If there was anything good for the Blue Jackets to take away from UBS Arena on Monday night, it was timing.

Their 3-1 loss to the New York Islanders, which ended a seven-game point streak, started about the same time as the Ohio State football team's national championship win over Notre Dame, so the number of those watching hockey was likely sparse.

Otherwise, the Jackets should move past the Islanders loss quickly and focus on another daunting back-to-back against the Toronto Maple Leafs and Carolina Hurricanes on Wednesday and Thursday to close out a brutal road trip.

**Here are three takeaways:**

### **New York Islanders again too big, suffocating for Columbus Blue Jackets**

The Islanders are not a good team, starting the game Monday ahead of only the massively disappointing Buffalo Sabres in the Eastern Conference. They don't look like a team capable of making a push for the playoffs, and they lack the kind of firepower to do anything in the postseason even if they do.

The Isles, however, remain a nightmarish matchup for the maturing Blue Jackets, who are playing without injured centers Sean Monahan (wrist) and Boone Jenner (shoulder), and still lean too heavily on skill play over grit against brutish opponents.

The Jackets may eventually learn how to handle teams with clear advantages in size, strength and nastiness, but that time hasn't arrived yet. The good news is that imposing, muscle-bound teams are being fazed out in the NHL, as teams built like the Islanders are now rare.

Good thing, too, since the Islanders dominated nearly every way Monday.

Only one of their three goals in the second period was scored at 5-on-5, but the Isles exposed the Jackets' biggest weaknesses from the past three or four seasons in that frame. Columbus finished with one more shot on goal (26-25) but New York had massive 5-on-5 advantages in shot attempts (54-36, 60%), scoring chances (30-10, 75%) and high-danger scoring chances (12-2, 85.7%).

"Teams are locking it down," forward Mathieu Olivier said on the FanDuel Sports Network postgame show. "In a playoff race, teams are going to tighten it up, so we can't have any lapses like we had in the second. We've got to be dialed in for a full 60 minutes, but I think every team's going to shut it down really well defensively. We're at that point of the season now, so it's going to be harder to generate (offense) in general."

### **New York Islanders dominate draws against Columbus Blue Jackets**

The Blue Jackets likely would've struggled on faceoffs anyway, but not having Monahan or Jenner against the league's best team at winning draws was too much to ask. The Islanders owned the majority of faceoffs, which contributed to their dominance in possession. They won 68% of the game's draws (34 for 50) with Jean-Gabriel Pageau and Bo Horvat each going 11 for 14 (79%) to lead the way at the dots.

The Blue Jackets won just 32% of the game's faceoffs, as rookie Luca Del Bel Belluz (2 for 9), Cole Sillinger (3 for 13) and Adam Fantilli (7 for 20) all struggled mightily. Justin Danforth's return to the

lineup didn't factor into faceoffs because he didn't take a single one while playing right wing on Sean Kuraly's fourth line.

The importance of faceoff percentage tends to be overstated in terms of possession numbers, but this wasn't one of those games. It mattered quite a bit Monday, like it often does for the Blue Jackets against the Islanders.

### **Columbus Blue Jackets get Justin Danforth back, lose Denton Mateychuk**

It may take Danforth a game or two to get his timing and conditioning back in top form, but the Blue Jackets were happy to welcome him back to the lineup.

Danforth, who missed 18 games with a lower-body injury, is a versatile forward who can play all three positions up front with any of the Jackets' four lines. He's also solid on faceoffs, especially those held on the right side of the ice, so his return could provide a boost going into a challenging part of the schedule.

The Blue Jackets also made rookie defenseman Denton Mateychuk a late scratch against the Islanders due to illness. Without him, Ivan Provorov flipped back to his usual spot at the left point on the second defensive pairing and he reunited with Damon Severson on the right.

Sillinger missed a game earlier this month with an illness, which appears to be making its way through the Blue Jackets' roster.

## Columbus Dispatch / Merzlikins, Fantilli, Del Bel Belluz push Columbus Blue Jackets past Toronto Maple Leafs

**By Brian Hedger – January 23, 2025**

Elvis Merzlikins and the motivation stemming from two big homecomings were plenty enough for the Blue Jackets to overcome the Toronto Maple Leafs' home-ice advantage Wednesday night.

Merzlikins made 29 saves to backstop the Jackets in a 5-1 victory at Scotiabank Arena, while Adam Fantilli netted his first NHL hat trick and rookie center Luca Del Bel Belluz added a goal and assist.

Fantilli and Del Bel Belluz are both from the Toronto area. Forward James van Riemsdyk scored the other Columbus goal, and he was playing against his former team. The victory gets the Blue Jackets back on a winning track after they'd dropped their previous two games to start a four-game road trip.

They'll finish the trip Thursday with a tough matchup against the Carolina Hurricanes in Raleigh, North Carolina.

Despite the Maple Leafs possessing the puck for long stretches in the first two periods while drawing three power plays and building a 24-12 advantage in shots, the Blue Jackets led 3-0 starting the third.

Fantilli's first shorthanded goal of his NHL career made it 1-0 in the first period and his second goal of the night in the second – scored less than two minutes after Van Riemsdyk's goal – gave the Blue Jackets a surprising three-goal lead after two periods.

Those timely goals rewarded Merzlikins for making a lot of key saves to keep Toronto's potent offense off the scoreboard in the game's first 40 minutes.

Del Bel Belluz assisted on van Riemsdyk's goal and then scored one for himself to make it 4-0 early in the third for a two-point game. Auston Matthews cut it to 4-1 at 9:22 of the third for Toronto, but Fantilli sealed the win for the Blue Jackets by scoring his third goal of the game with 7:58 left to play.

It was scored into an empty net, as moments earlier, Maple Leafs coach Craig Berube pulled goalie Dennis Hildeby during a 4-on-4, which led to Fantilli's 2-on-1 look at the unguarded net.

## Columbus Dispatch / 5 reasons the Columbus Blue Jackets are the best NHL story of 2025, so far

By Michael Arace – January 23, 2025

**Five reasons the Blue Jackets are the best story in the NHL, and one of the best in all of pro sports:**

### **Nobody saw the Columbus Blue Jackets coming**

A couple of weeks before the Blue Jackets opened training camp, their star forward, Johnny Gaudreau, was killed in a brutally tragic accident. They had a new general manager in Don Waddell, a new coach in Dean Evason. On the eve of the season opener, they lost their captain, Boone Jenner, to shoulder surgery. Certainly, they were bound for a fifth consecutive draft lottery. And they always lose the lottery.

In a span of a little more than four months, these same Jackets have captured the imagination of hockey fans who, previously, could only vaguely place Columbus as the worst NHL franchise of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While the Jackets had a six-game winning streak snapped Saturday night, they were still holding down a wild card spot in the Eastern Conference coming out of the weekend.

The Gaudreau brothers' funeral gathered the hockey world together to mourn. The Jackets, with Gaudreau's jersey hanging in their locker room, home and away, are paying tribute by channeling Johnny Hockey's joy of the game. At times, it's breathtaking.

### **Columbus Blue Jackets are more fun to watch than just about anyone else**

Evason preaches defensive responsibility (a work in progress) and offensive creativity. These Jackets can score in barrages and concede with equal aplomb. They're seventh in the league in goals/game (3.30) and they're 28<sup>th</sup> in goals against/game (3.34). They've had 10 games where they've score six or more goals, and they've had 22 where they've allowed four or more.

They're a 60-minute roller coaster ride. Wheee!

### **James Norris, Jack Adams and Bill Masterton**

The Norris Trophy goes to the best defenseman. At midseason, it's a three-way conversation between Colorado's Cale Makar, who won the award in 2022, Vancouver's Quinn Hughes, who won it last year, and Zach Werenski, who is on pace for one of the best seasons in franchise history, regardless of position.

The Jack Adams Trophy goes to the Coach of the Year. If Evason keeps the Jackets in the playoff hunt, he must be in the conversation. If he actually gets this team into the playoffs, he'd be a deserving winner. At this juncture, the Jackets are on pace to make a leap of 20-plus-points over the 66 they finished with last season.

The Bill Masterton trophy goes to the player "who best exemplifies the qualities of perseverance, sportsmanship and dedication to hockey." Center Sean Monahan, 30, was riddled with injuries as he bounced from Calgary to Montreal to Winnipeg from 2022-24. He signed a free-agent contract with the Jackets last summer to be reunited with Gaudreau, his longtime teammate in Calgary and his best friend. He has been a paragon of grace for the organization and a role model for a young Jackets squad. He has also reclaimed his late prime: Before he sprained his wrist and went on IR earlier this month (he's due back soon), he had 19 goals and 41 points in 41 games.

### **Jarmo Kekalainen's kids are all right**

Former general manager Jarmo Kekalainen did well in stocking the cupboard before he was fired last year. Throughout the league, folks are taking note of the bevy of talented young forwards – Adam Fantilli, 20, Cole Sillinger, 21, Kent Johnson, 22, Yegor Chinakhov, 23, Dmitri Voronkov, 24, and Kirill Marchenko, 24.

With Monahan on the shelf, Fantilli has been centering the top line with Marchenko and Voronkov on the wings. Here's a stat: When Marchenko and Voronkov are on the ice together five-on-five, their line has outscored opposing lines by a 31-9 count.

And the next wave, which includes high-end defense prospect Denton Mateychuk, 20, forward Luca Del Bel Belluz, 21, and goaltender Jet Greaves, 23, is already getting reps in Columbus.

This is a team coming out of its rebuild and into its build phase. It has the potential to contend as it matures, and as the roster is further tweaked.

### **Goaltending!**

OK, bear with me here.

The Jackets are in wild card contention *in spite* of their goaltending, which has contributed to one of the worst road records in the league. (Matchups can be a problem for a young team on the road and goalies are critical to keeping the ice from tilting.)

There is a glimmer of hope.

Elvis Merzlikins stopped 18 of 19 shots in a 4-1 home victory over San Jose last week and was solid in a 3-1 loss to the New York Islanders Tuesday night; backup Daniil Tarasov stopped 27 of 27 shots in his last outing, a 1-0 shootout loss to the Rangers in New York. The Jackets' combined save percentage is over .900 over the past six games. Hope?

## The Athletic / Blue Jackets' Adam Fantilli scores first career hat trick in hometown: 'It's special'

**By Aaron Portzline – January 23, 2025**

The Columbus Blue Jackets boarded a plane late Wednesday and flew in the wee hours from Toronto to Raleigh, N.C., ahead of a game Thursday.

It's a shame the Jackets didn't have more time to savor a win over the Maple Leafs in Scotiabank Arena, because this felt like a momentous night for the surprising playoff hopefuls, and it was most definitely a memorable night for at least two families.

Adam Fantilli had the first hat trick of his NHL career, and Luca Del Bel Belluz had a goal and an assist to lead the Blue Jackets to a 5-1 win before 18,459, many of whom shared their last names.

Fantilli hails from Nobleton, Ontario, about an hour north of Toronto. He had nearly 100 family and friends in the crowd, and when he completed his hat trick at 12:02 of the third period, his mother Julia — seated with family in section 106 — was the first fan to sail a hat over the glass.

Del Bel Belluz is from Woodbridge, Ont., about 15 minutes south of Nobleton. When he assisted on James van Riemsdyk's goal to make it 2-0 in the second and when he scored early in the third, a roar could be heard from 50-plus family members who were at the game.

"This means a lot," Fantilli told FanDuel Sports Network's Dave Maetzold. "I was just really happy I got to do it in front of a lot of friends and family. That's very special.

"I'm super excited to go up (into the stands postgame) and see all of them. There's probably going to be too many of them to say hello to before we have to get on the bus. But I'll give them all a quick wave and tell them I love them and hit the road."

Fantilli was playing his second game in Toronto. This was Del Bel Belluz's first NHL game in his hometown. It was his second career 2-point game in his ninth outing.

"It's special, obviously, with a lot of people in the crowd supporting me," Del Bel Belluz said. "It's good to give them something they can remember from this game."

There were a lot of memorable performances and moments for the Blue Jackets, who bounced back quickly after having their seven-game point streak snapped in a rather unbecoming outing Monday against the New York Islanders.

The Blue Jackets, already without No. 1 center Sean Monahan, played Wednesday without another center, Cole Sillinger, who has an upper-body injury. In addition to being the Jackets' top two centers, they're also the top two penalty killers.

No worries.

Fantilli, playing as the top center in Monahan's absence, more than held his own against Toronto's top center, Auston Matthews, who he opposed much of the night.

Fantilli, who has 14 goals, played 18:37 and led Columbus with four shots on goal and seven shot attempts. He stepped in on the power play (in Sillinger's absence) and scored the first short-handed goal of his career at 15:40 of the first period to give the Jackets a 1-0 lead.

Matthews scored midway through the third period but still ended the night with a minus-3 rating.



“What a lot of people don’t realize is he’s stepped up all year,” Dean Evason said of Fantilli. “He’s had a lot of learning experiences with figuring out the defensive game. As you could see tonight, he has an offensive game that is fantastic, but you have to keep the puck out of the net, as well.

“If he’s not committed to doing that, he doesn’t get the looks that he’s getting. He was sound tonight. He played against one of the best players in the world for the majority of the night, and did a really good job.”

The Blue Jackets had two huge individual performances in the first period Wednesday even before the scoring started.

Only 90 seconds into the game, Toronto tough guy Ryan Reaves — looking for his first fight of the season — found a willing combatant in Blue Jackets’ ruffian Mathieu Olivier. It was an all-out brawl with all right-handed punches, and both players skated off to the penalty boxes with smiles.

Olivier landed the best punches among either fighter, especially early in the fight, but let’s call it a draw. What it did achieve, was a higher energy level, at least on the Blue Jackets’ bench.

“I know I was fired up,” Del Bel Belluz said. “I was right in front of the bench. It was awesome, (like) nothing I’d ever seen. It definitely gave me extra juice. The bench was pretty loud, so it definitely gave them juice.”

Meanwhile, Blue Jackets goaltender Elvis Merzlikins stood tall in the first period, even as the Maple Leafs controlled the early play and the Blue Jackets could manage only to counterpunch.

Merzlikins stopped William Nylander on a wide-open breakaway and had seven other strong, composed stops. He finished with 28, improving to 5-1-0 with a .913 save percentage and 2.32 goals-against average in his last six starts.

One part of Merzlikins’ game that has shown steady improvement lately, but especially Wednesday, is his positioning and patience. He’s not making as many highlight-reel saves or allowing head-scratching goals. The puck is finding him more because he’s more positionally and structurally sound.

Fantilli’s short-handed goal, sprung by an Ivan Provorov pass and helped by soft defensive coverage by Toronto’s Morgan Rielly, helped the Blue Jackets balance the ice.

Van Riemsdyk, who spent five seasons with the Leafs in the 2010s, made it 2-0 at 13:40 of the second period off a net-front pass from Del Bel Belluz. Just two minutes later, now in a quiet Scotiabank Arena, the Jackets pushed the lead to 3-0 with the type of greasy goal Evason has wanted to see.

Fantilli centered the puck to big Dmitri Voronkov at the net front. After a high-traffic battle, the puck kicked below the goal line to the right of Leafs goaltender Dennis Hildeby. Fantilli swatted it back into the crease as he skated around the back of the cage to find space on the other side.

As if designed, the puck found him on the doorstep for the easy bury.

Del Bel Belluz’s goal at 5:56 of the third gave the Blue Jackets a 4-0 lead and much-needed breathing room against the high-powered Leafs. After Matthews scored to make it 4-1, Leafs coach Craig Berube made an aggressive call, pulling Hildeby for an extra skater with more than eight minutes remaining.

That’s when Fantilli scored, with linemate Kirill Marchenko passing him the puck to get the hat trick.

The Blue Jackets have won both meetings with Toronto this season by a combined score of 11-3. But there was no time to savor it. The Jackets, back in the first wild-card spot in the Eastern Conference, face another stiff test against the Carolina Hurricanes on Thursday.

## The Athletic / Auston Matthews wanted ‘a little more energy’ from crowd after Ryan Reaves-Mathieu Olivier fight

By Jonas Siegel – January 23, 2025

Auston Matthews wasn't happy with the home crowd's reaction to Ryan Reaves' first fight of the season.

Reaves hadn't fought all year until he dropped the gloves with Mathieu Olivier less than two minutes into the first period of the Toronto Maple Leafs' loss to the Columbus Blue Jackets on Wednesday night.

"You love to see that," Matthews said. "I would've liked a little more energy from the crowd after that. I thought it was a little quiet tonight, especially after two guys like that go at it."

Reaves has played sparingly for the Leafs this season. He's been in and out of the lineup. And he's increasingly struggled to find fighting partners in a sport that's seen less fighting — and thus, fewer players like Reaves.

Reaves' invitation to fight Montreal Canadiens' defenseman Arber Xhekaj last weekend was denied.

"That's still a big part of the game," Matthews said, "and he's a big part of this team."

It's Reaves' role on the Leafs that might explain Matthews' decision to critique the home fans after a 5-1 loss, one that saw the power play struggle alongside young goaltender Dennis Hildeby.

Reaves, 38, is the oldest player on the team, a veteran of more than 900 games. He's popular, well-respected and a source of veteran wisdom and leadership. Reaves will stand at the door of the dressing room, decked in team-branded workout gear, to pump up his teammates before they head out to the ice on nights he isn't even playing.

And it was a particularly spirited fight between Reaves and Olivier, one that saw the two trading blows for over 40 seconds. It marked Reaves' 147th career regular-season fight, according to HockeyFights.com.

Matthews has never been afraid to say what's on his mind. But he is also in his first season as the Leafs' captain and might be more willing now to stand up for his teammates, even if it means challenging the home fans.

Matthews scored the only goal for the Leafs in the loss. It was his ninth goal in 10 games since he returned from injury and his 388th career goal, putting him one behind Darryl Sittler for second-most in franchise history.

## [BlueJackets.com / Seamless transition has led to success for Cleveland callups](#)

By Jeff Svoboda – January 22, 2025

Columbus and Cleveland are separated by around 140 miles of Interstate 71, but it's the goal of the Blue Jackets to make that distance seem as small as possible.

Every NHL team searches for synergy between itself and its American Hockey League affiliate, but given the fact the Blue Jackets have a roster full of young draft picks at both levels, it's taken on a high level of importance for Columbus in recent years.

And it's fair to say the results show that's what the organization has achieved. The Blue Jackets' impressive run into playoff contention this season has been fueled in part by players who have made an impact at both levels, with such names as Luca Del Bel Belluz, Denton Mateychuk, Jet Greaves and Owen Sillinger fitting seamlessly into the Columbus lineup as the Jackets had the best points percentage in the NHL from Dec. 19-Jan. 19.

Off the ice, the family-style cultures are similar, and the CBJ players have welcomed the new charges with open arms. On the ice, a big part of the success is that the two teams play the same systems and speak the same language, allowing players to move between the levels without having to learn a new way to play.

"I think that's a lot of credit to the coaching staffs here and there," Del Bel Belluz said. "They're on the same page. They want the same things. They teach the same things, obviously, so with them harping on the little things down there and the detail and the structure in Cleveland, it makes us come up here and just be comfortable and play.

"It's kind of engraved in our minds what the structure is and what the system is, so it's kind of easy. You don't have to think about little things in your head. Just go out there and play and do your thing."

It's not exactly rocket science that the Blue Jackets and Monsters do the same things schematically, as the setup was similar the past few years under previous CBJ regimes. First-year head coach Dean Evason has made it an emphasis, though, opening the door to third-year Monsters head coach Trent Vogelhuber to make sure it's an easy transition from Lake Erie to the banks of the Scioto River.

"The way that we play, the way that Cleveland plays sets us up to play the same way, and Trent does a fabulous job down there and his crew of playing the same way," Evason said. "It's the same mentality, the same thought process, the same team-first (mentality), and so when guys come up, they just fit seamlessly into our team."

It also helps that Cleveland – with the help of the CBJ front office, including director of player personnel and Monsters general manager Chris Clark – has put together a winning culture the past few seasons. The Monsters went all the way to Game 7 of the Eastern Conference Final a season ago and have gotten off to a strong start this season while battling for a second straight AHL North Division title.

Much of the credit has to go to a Monsters staff led by Vogelhuber, the one-time CBJ draft pick and Dublin native who has proved to be a coach on the rise with the way he's handled the squad and focused on winning details in Cleveland.

"That's massive," Sillinger said. "The coaching staff in Cleveland does a great job of preparing us. I've played there for three years now, and each year, we continue to get better. They continue to harp on those details."

Some of it also goes to the Blue Jackets leadership, which has shown it's not afraid to put its trust in a recently recalled player. From Evason and general manager Don Waddell, there is a feeling that when a player is recalled from Cleveland, he should be put in a position to succeed.

"They have swagger, they have confidence," Evason said of the Cleveland players who have come up and done their part. "They play the right way, so it sets them up to have success when they get here. They don't have to change their game.

"I know that Don and the guys upstairs, we call a guy up, it's not to play three minutes, or just because he's coming up from the minors, he has to play on the so-called fourth line. The mind-set is, this is who they are, this is where we want them to play, so we put them in those loftier spots to have success."

So far, Del Bel Belluz and Mateychuk – the AHL's top point scorer and the league's top-scoring defenseman, respectively, at the time of their recalls – have earned spots with the Blue Jackets and performed admirably, even being trusted to play in overtime of recent CBJ contests. Greaves earned a recent win in St. Louis amid a string of solid performances at the top level, while Sillinger made his NHL debut at age 27 and did his part in a recent CBJ victory.

Sillinger and Greaves have since returned to Cleveland, while Del Bel Belluz may go back as well at some point, as the Jackets should see a spate of injured forwards return to health. But it's all about doing your part when called upon, and those Monsters turned Blue Jackets have done just that.

Often in sports, that can make a huge difference, and perhaps the most notable example of that in CBJ lore came in 2009 when the team made its first playoff appearance. Goaltender Dan LaCosta was called up by the Blue Jackets in February and memorably posted two wins in two starts, including a shutout in Nationwide Arena.

It's all about synergy, and the Blue Jackets have found that just up the road.

"They do a great job there, the staff and the players, and it's an awesome environment," Mateychuk said of Cleveland. "You get excited to go into the rink every day and work with the guys. They prepare you for this. I'm very thankful for that."

## [BlueJackets.com / PREVIEW: Blue Jackets look to get back in the win column in Toronto](#)

By Jeff Svoboda – January 23, 2025

### **BLUE JACKETS (22-18-7) at MAPLE LEAFS (30-16-2), 7:30 PM, SCOTIABANK ARENA**

All good things come to an end, and so it was for the Blue Jackets on Monday night.

One game after their six-game winning streak came to a close with a shootout loss against the Rangers, the Blue Jackets saw their seven-game point streak end on Long Island with a 3-1 loss to the Islanders.

After Columbus took a first-period lead on a power-play goal by Kent Johnson, the game changed in the first six minutes of the second stanza thanks to even-strength, shorthanded and power-play goals for New York. From there, a heavy Islanders team kept the Blue Jackets attack at bay, and head coach Dean Evason said his team just didn't have its usual energy as it tried to come back.

"We didn't have any pop in tonight's hockey game," Evason said. "We were slow in all areas. We thought slow, we skated slow, we passed slow. We haven't done that lately. We've played the game fast – we've thought it fast, we got pucks going so that we could move our feet. Tonight, it looked like we were stuck in a bit of mud, and consequently we got the result we did not want."

As much as coaches don't want them to, those games happen occasionally in the NHL, and the key once they do is to bounce back as quickly as possible. That opportunity comes tonight against a Toronto team that has won eight of its last 11, so things won't come easily.

The Blue Jackets are still 10-3-2 in their last 15, so it's fair to say this is a matchup of two of the hotter teams in the NHL, placing fourth (Columbus) and tied for seventh (Toronto) in the NHL in points since Dec. 19.

"You know, we've been on a good stretch here so far getting some results, and it's just one bad game," Olivier said. "You can't dwell on it too much. Obviously we'll analyze it and see what went wrong on our part, but we have to just keep moving forward here. We have a job to do in Toronto."

Offense hasn't been much of a problem for the Blue Jackets throughout this season, but Columbus has scored just one goal so far in the first two games of its road trip. It's a short blip of the season, but the Blue Jackets also know it will be harder to find offensive chances as the game tightens and teams battle for a playoff spot.

The onus is on them to take advantage of their looks and keep the red lights flashing behind opposing goalies.

"We have been getting some opportunities," Adam Fantilli said. "We just have to capitalize on them. It's the NHL. You can't get those opportunities and not get (goals) and just say, 'Oh, next time.' Eventually you have to bear down on them. I'm staring right in the mirror at myself; I had a few tonight that I should have beared down on, and they just didn't go in."

### **Know The Foe: Toronto Maple Leafs**

**Head coach:** Craig Berube (First season)

**Team stats:** Goals per game: 3.17 (11th) | Scoring defense: 2.85 (12th) | PP: 22.2 percent (13th) | PK: 81.0 percent (12th)

**The narrative:** One season after Toronto won a postseason series for the first time in two decades, heartbreak returned to the city last year as the Leafs lost in overtime of Game 7 of the first round vs. Longtime nemesis Boston. The most talked about team in hockey made some changes – in particular, the hiring of Stanley Cup-winning coach Berube – but it's still a squad built around the high-powered forward quartet of Auston Matthews, William Nylander, Mitchell Marner and John Tavares.

**Team leaders:** Those are the team's top four scorers on the season, though Tavares (20-22-42) is on injured reserve with a lower body injury. Marner is second in the NHL in assists and fourth in points this season with a 15-52-67 line and is tied for the league lead in scoring with 29 points in 19 games since Dec. 13. Nylander's 28 goals among 49 points are second in the NHL, while Matthews got off to a slow start after last year's 69-goal campaign and has battled injuries but still has a 19-18-37 line in 33 games including nine goals in his last 10 games. Matthew Knies adds 18 tallies on the year.

In net, Joseph Woll has rebounded from an early-season injury and leads the team with 24 starts, going 17-8-0 with a 2.69 GAA and .907 save percentage. Anthony Stolarz held down the fort early but is out with a knee injury, leaving Dennis Hildeby (3-2-0, 3.18, .884) as the backup.

**What's new:** The Maple Leafs have been a fan of streaks recently, winning five straight from Dec. 31-Jan. 7, dropping three in a row, and then winning the last three after Monday night's 5-3 win over Tampa Bay. The offense scored just four goals in the three losses, then has put the puck in the net 16 times over the last three victories. Marner has led the charge with seven points during the winning streak, while Nylander and Matthews each have five.

**Trending:** Columbus won two of the three matchups a season ago as well as the first meeting this season between the teams, a 6-2 final Oct. 22 in Nationwide Arena.

**Former CBJ:** The well-traveled Max Domi (3-14-17 in 40 games) is on his seventh NHL team but seems to have found a home in Toronto, where his dad is a Leafs legend, as he signed four-year deal with the squad in the offseason. Alex Nylander has played five games with his brother without a point and has been returned to the AHL.

**Scratches:** Kevin Labanc, Jack Johnson, Denton Mateychuk (illness)

**Injured reserve, Injured/Non-Roster list:** Sean Monahan (upper body), Yegor Chinakhov (upper body), Erik Gudbranson (upper body), Boone Jenner (upper body)

**Roster Report:** Based on morning line rushes, Harris looks set to go in for Johnson on the blue line, as Mateychuk is not with the team and is also expected to miss tomorrow's game. Merzlikins was in the starter's net and looks likely to go against the Maple Leafs. Danforth also took rushes at center with Kuraly sliding to wing.

### **The Numbers Game**

Columbus has allowed just nine goals in the last six games, and CBJ goalies have a .940 save percentage in that span. ... Zach Werenski has been kept off the scoresheet in consecutive games for just the third time this season but still has a 12-29-41 line in the last 32 games and has 19 points (4-15-19) in the past 13. His average ice time of 26:49 leads all NHL players, and he's tied for first among league defensemen in goals (15) and tied for second in points (51) on the season. ... Marchenko has an 8-15-23 line in the last 18 games and 34 points in the last 28 (12-22-34). He is tied for second in the NHL with a plus-26 rating. ... Dmitri Voronkov has 19 points (10-9-19) in the last 17 games. ... Adam Fantilli and James van Riemsdyk have matching 4-4-8 lines in the last nine games. ... Columbus is tied for second in the NHL with 107 goals at 5-on-5, and their 3.26 goals per game are tied for seventh in the league. In addition, Columbus has scored at least six goals 10 times in just 46 games this season, one shy of a franchise

record (2018-19). ... Columbus has scored on 17 of 54 power plays (31.5 percent) in the last 21 games and is now 10th in the NHL for the season in power-play percentage at 23.1. ... Blue Jackets defensemen have 30 goals this season, most in the NHL. ... Cole Sillinger is three points from 100 in his NHL career.

### **This Day in CBJ History**

**Jan. 22, 2015:** The Blue Jackets kick off festivities for NHL All-Star Weekend at Nationwide Arena. It marks the first and only time so far Columbus hosts the event, which included an outdoor Winter Park of activities.

**Jan. 22, 2017:** Cam Atkinson scores an unassisted goal 1:07 into overtime to win a wild 7-6 final at Ottawa after the Blue Jackets rally from a deficit with a three-goal third period. Atkinson's goal was his second of the night, while Alexander Wennberg notches three assists.

## [BlueJackets.com / Fantilli scores first hat trick, Blue Jackets defeat Maple Leafs](#)

**By Dave McCarthy – January 23, 2025**

TORONTO -- Adam Fantilli scored his first NHL hat trick, and the Columbus Blue Jackets defeated the Toronto Maple Leafs 5-1 at Scotiabank Arena on Wednesday.

Fantilli, who grew up in Nobleton, Ontario, about a 40-minute drive north of Toronto, said at the morning skate that he would have 70 family and friends in attendance at the game.

"That means a lot," Fantilli said. "It means the world to be able to do that in front of my friends and family, everybody made the trip out. I'm super grateful they all came out and I was able to pull one off there. I could [hear them when my name was announced], I was really lucky, they had some great seats so I was able to make eye contact with a few of them after the first and second period. So it was pretty special to be able to see their faces."

Fantilli had joked in the morning that he would be paying to play after taking care of the bill for as many tickets as he did.

"I mean a lot of [my money] is gone now, so I'm just happy with the win," Fantilli said.

Luca Del Bel Belluz had a goal and an assist, and Elvis Merzlikins made 29 saves for the Blue Jackets (23-18-7), who are 7-1-1 in their past nine.

"It's huge," said Del Bel Belluz, who also grew up near Toronto in Woodbridge, Ontario. "There was a lot more on the line with a couple guys being from the Toronto area. It was just a good team win, we all did it together from the goalie out, we were clicking on all cylinders. It was fun."

Auston Matthews scored for a fifth straight game, and Dennis Hildeby made 14 saves for the Maple Leafs (30-17-2), who had won three in a row.

"I liked our start, thought we had a real good first period," Toronto coach Craig Berube said. "We were down 1-0, short-handed goal. We controlled the second period pretty much offensively, in the offensive zone. They go down, one opportunity and they score again. We had a lot of shot attempts and they blocked a lot of shots (25), but we could have been a little bit more direct with our offense."

Merzlikins kept it 0-0 at 8:24 of the first period when he made a glove save on William Nylander on a breakaway.

"There were a couple shifts there where we got hemmed in and he was the backbone there for us making some big saves," Del Bel Belluz said of Merzlikins. "It was a great performance by him, just special."

The Blue Jackets went up 1-0 at 15:40 when Fantilli scored a short-handed goal, shooting over Hildeby's blocker from just inside the left face-off circle.

Toronto went 0-for-3 on the power play, including two opportunities in the first period.

"There was maybe a little bit too much movement I thought," said Matthews, the Maple Leafs captain. "Their penalty kill in particular plays a little bit tighter, and we were a lot on the outside, not enough on the inside. Their goalie made some good saves, they blocked some shots. I thought we could have done a better job of one, two passes and try to deliver it. It was too much on the outside, too much passing with really making nothing happen."



James van Riemsdyk pushed it to 2-0 at 13:40 of the second period, taking a pass from Del Bel Belluz and shooting from the low slot.

Fantilli made it 3-0 at 15:21 when he put in a loose puck at the side of the net after Dmitri Voronkov dug the puck free from a scramble at the top of the goal crease.

Del Bel Belluz, who was playing his first NHL game in Toronto and also had several family and friends in attendance, extended the lead to 4-0 at 5:56 of the third period. After van Riemsdyk won a battle for a loose puck behind the net against Connor Timmins, Del Bel Belluz got to it and jammed it in at the side of the net.

"It's special with a lot of people in the crowd supporting me," Del Bel Belluz said. "It's good to give them one, something they can remember from this game, so it was just super fun."

Matthews' 20th goal of the season cut it to 4-1 at 9:22. Nylander fed him from below the goal line, and Matthews one-timed the pass between Merzlikins' pads at the top of the goal crease.

It was the ninth time in nine NHL seasons that Matthews has scored at least 20 goals. He has eight goals in his past eight games and nine in his past 10 since returning from a six-game absence because of an upper-body injury.

Fantilli completed the hat trick and made it 5-1 by scoring into an empty net at 12:02.

Merzlikins said it meant a lot to the Blue Jackets to see Fantilli and Del Bel Belluz have success in front of so many family and friends.

"We're really happy for them," Merzlikins said. "It's huge, you are home, they have that chance to play at home. Like I don't (because he is from Latvia). So it's nice, it's really nice and we are happy for them. They both are working hard and they deserve it."

**NOTES:** Blue Jackets forward Cole Sillinger missed the game because of an upper-body injury. He is day to day. Coach Dean Evason said Sillinger would be evaluated on Thursday before it's determined whether he'll be able to play that night at the Carolina Hurricanes. ... Matthews tied Darryl Sittler for the fourth-most 20-goal seasons in Maple Leafs history. ... Toronto forward Matthew Knies left the game late in the second with an upper-body injury after colliding with Columbus forward Kirill Marchenko and falling awkwardly into a linesman. Berube had no further update.

## [NHL.com / Evason's team-first mentality has Blue Jackets in thick of playoff race](#)

By Nicholas J. Cotsonika – January 23, 2025

COLUMBUS -- When Dean Evason took over as coach of the Columbus Blue Jackets on July 22, he talked about building a team-first mentality so the guys would play hard for each other.

He had no idea what was to come and how his philosophy would help Columbus -- first off the ice, then on it.

The Blue Jackets have become the most inspiring story in the NHL. With Wednesday's 5-1 win against the Toronto Maple Leafs, they are 7-1-1 in their past nine games and with 53 points are in position for the first wild card into the Stanley Cup Playoffs from the Eastern Conference.

Evason should be a candidate for the Jack Adams Award, which goes to the NHL coach of the year.

"I think Dean's going to have to be in the mix regardless of what happens here because of the adversity we've faced," general manager Don Waddell said.

The Blue Jackets missed the playoffs the past four seasons and finished last in the East the past two. No one was picking them to make the playoffs this season even after they signed center Sean Monahan to a five-year, \$27.5 million contract (\$5.5 million average annual value) as an unrestricted free agent July 1.

Evason knew he was taking on a challenge, but he expected to have Monahan playing with forward Johnny Gaudreau, his close friend and former Calgary Flames teammate. He expected to have captain Boone Jenner and defenseman Erik Gudbranson to lead a group of skilled young players.

The Blue Jackets traded forward Patrik Laine, a top goal-scorer, to the Canadiens on Aug. 19.

Then the unimaginable happened.

Gaudreau, Columbus' leading scorer the past two seasons, and his brother, Matthew, died Aug. 29 while riding bicycles at home in Salem County, New Jersey. They were struck by a suspected drunk driver who was indicted by a grand jury in December on two counts of second-degree reckless vehicular homicide, two counts of first-degree aggravated manslaughter, fourth-degree tampering with physical evidence and second-degree leaving the scene of a fatal accident.

Everyone was devastated. Waddell and Evason asked the players, "What would Johnny want us to do?" He'd want them to play hockey and enjoy coming to the rink each day like he did.

Asked if the team-first mentality provided a foundation, Evason said, "I think in part that helped." Then he deflected to others.

He credited Waddell's leadership for giving the players a voice and allowing them to grieve on their terms. Waddell should be a candidate for GM of the Year himself.

"There was no timeline for anything like this," Evason said. "It was a time where we just allowed them to be together, to heal, and a lot of guys did it different ways."

Jenner sustained a shoulder injury in practice late in the preseason, and Gudbranson sustained one in the third game of the regular season. Neither has played since. The Blue Jackets (23-18-7) have dealt with injuries to other key players.

Waddell said Evason doesn't worry about the guys he doesn't have. Evason said players have stepped up into leadership roles in ways they wouldn't have otherwise, mentioning Monahan, defenseman Zach Werenski and forwards Mathieu Olivier and Sean Kuraly. Young players have grown at the same time.

"I think that they've pulled together through all this, through adversity, regardless of what we tried to implement as far as team-first," Evason said. "I think when a tragedy like that happens, you come together, you stick together, and our group has done that."

The team-first mentality isn't empty coachspeak. It translates tangibly to the ice.

"Not to disrespect past coaching and management," Olivier said, "but I think that the approach that we've taken this year and the changes that we've made to our system and to our approach just in general has been really beneficial for our team."

Evason preaches defense but wants the Blue Jackets to play fast and use their skill on offense. He likes to roll four lines, keeping everyone fresh, involved and confident.

To do that, guys must have each other's backs.

"It's really a team thing, right?" Olivier said. "You want to be aggressive. You want to have guys that pressure the puck everywhere on the ice. But when you play that way, the other guys that are not pressuring, you've got to have them in the right positions and in the right mindset for that to be successful."

It has been a process.

The Blue Jackets started 12-15-5. As of Dec. 18, they were averaging 3.22 goals per game, 11th in the NHL, and 3.63 goals against per game, 30th in the League.

They've gone 11-3-2 since. Over this stretch, they're averaging 3.44 goals per game, fourth in the NHL, and 2.63 goals against per game, tied with the Montreal Canadiens for 11th in the League.

The offensive numbers are perhaps most surprising, considering the Blue Jackets averaged 2.85 goals per game with Gaudreau last season, tied with the Blues for 24th in the NHL. But the defensive improvement is also impressive from season to season and within this season. Columbus allowed 3.63 goals per game last season, 31st in the League.

"Do we allow our players to make mistakes? Yes," Evason said. "But do we make them accountable for those mistakes? Yes. ... We've sat some guys that maybe are a little bit [unnoticed]. People wouldn't think we did. But we give them an opportunity to learn from their mistakes, and if they don't, then there have to be repercussions, and there has to be accountability. We definitely allow them to play the game freely as long as they're doing the right things on the ice and the right side of the puck."

Werenski has established himself as a candidate for the Norris Trophy, which goes to the NHL's best defenseman, partly because he has the freedom to jump into the play and has put up big offensive numbers. He has 15 goals, one behind Cale Makar for the most among NHL defensemen, and 52 points, also one fewer than the leading defenseman Makar.

Forward Kirill Marchenko leads the Blue Jackets with 18 goals, but the big story is that he's plus-28, the best mark in the NHL. Marchenko was minus-28 over the last two seasons. Evason challenged him to play more on the inside and win more battles.

"New coach have a different system," Marchenko said. "It's help for everybody here, I think, because whole team, everybody grow up right now and [rise to] the next level. He give me confidence, trust, and I try to be good."

Seven players have 10 goals or more, including Olivier, a tough guy who has doubled the NHL career high of five he set with Columbus in 2022-23 and matched last season.

Olivier, 27, is in his seventh season of pro hockey. He has played in the Calder Cup Playoffs with Milwaukee of the American Hockey League in 2018-19 and 2021-22, and in the Stanley Cup Playoffs with the Nashville Predators in 2020-21 and 2021-22. He said Evason's system fits the team, and it's simple and predictable. The players have bought in.

"As a pro, you learn that playoff teams and teams that have success in the postseason, it's all about predictable hockey," he said. "And that's weird to say, because you'd think, 'You have the best players in the world, right? Guys could read off each other and make plays that aren't planned.' But the best teams, you have the best guys that play predictable hockey, and then their skill takes over, because the other team has to respect the way you play.

"I think this year's been a big difference for us."

## The Hockey News / Blue Jackets Struggle To Create Offense; Islanders Use Special Teams To Beat Columbus

By Jason Newland – January 22, 2025

Kent Johnson (13-PPG) scored the only goal for Columbus, and Elvis Merzljikins stopped 22 of 25 Isles shots in a 3-1 loss Monday night.

The Jackets played a decent first period and led after one, but it was a completely different story when the second came around.

The New York Islanders special teams are typically awful, but on Monday night, they used them to bury the CBJ in the second period. The NYI scored an even-strength goal, a power-play goal, and tacked on a shorthanded goal for good measure. Bo Horvat scored a PPG 5:47 into the third which would be the final nail in Monday's coffin.

It was ugly on Monday night.

Mathieu Olivier said after the game, "It's a playoff race. Teams are gonna tighten it up, so we can't have any lapses like we had in the second. We gotta be dialed in for a full 60 minutes here."

Dean Evason said, "We didn't have any pop in tonight's hockey game. We were slow in all areas. We thought slow, we skated slow, we passed slow. It looked like we were stuck in a bit of mud."

### **Player Stats**

- Kent Johnson scored his 13th goal of the season.
- Kirill Marchenko recorded his 32nd assist.
- Dmitri Voronkov tallied his 14th assist.
- Elvis Merzljikins made 22 saves and picked up his 11th loss of the year.

### **Team Stats**

- The CBJ PP scored on 1 of 4 chances.
- The Jackets PK stopped 1 of 2 Islanders' power plays.
- Columbus only won 32% of the faceoffs.

**What's Next** - The Blue Jackets travel to Toronto to play the Maple Leafs on Wednesday night.

## [The Hockey News / Patrik Laine Appears On The Spittin' Chiclets Podcast And Opens Up About His Time With Columbus](#)

By Jason Newland – January 22, 2025

Patrik Laine made an appearance on the always controversial and talked about Spittin' Chiclets Podcast and was asked about some things regarding his time in Columbus.

He was asked about John Tortorella and his dealings with the former Columbus bench boss. Laine says, "I think he benched me, it was like the third game or something. We got scored on. I was so pissed coming into the bench, and one of the assistant coaches came up to me with the iPad right away. I said not so nicely that you can leave with this iPad right now, and Torts heard it. He's like "Don't you f---ing talk to my assistants like that ever again." And yeah, I didn't play another shift in that period. So I learned pretty quick. Definitely shouldn't have said that, but the heat of the moment you say things, and of course he heard it. At least I learned the hard way, don't say those things in front of Torts."

He also talks about stepping away from hockey and going into the Player Assistance Program. "It was, at the time, the hardest decision I've had to make. Like walk away from something you love, and you kind of sacrifice everything to be here. And then, because of your own struggles, you have gotta leave that behind for a little bit. At the time, I didn't know for how long, I didn't know if I was going to play again. It was the best decision I've ever made to take that time off and prioritize my head," Laine says.

Laine says his issues started the summer before. Laine says, "I think I told Jarmo a couple times that I'm done playing, I'm not coming back, I'm not going to play again. And then I ended up coming back and I probably shouldn't have. At the time I think I should've taken the time then. Then it just started going downhill and just got to that point I was so depressed that I couldn't function anymore and just had to blow the whistle that this is not going to be good if you just try to run through the wall like it's not going to work out."

Laine talked about a variety of things, but opening up like he did was a cool thing to listen to. He wasn't asked about the comments he made about the Columbus front office and players a few weeks ago, however.

This was a very good interview.

**What's Next** - The Blue Jackets travel to Toronto to play the Maple Leafs on Wednesday night.

## The Hockey News / Pierre LeBrun Gives An Ivan Provorov Update

By Jason Newland – January 23, 2025

NHL Insider Pierre LeBrun gave an Ivan Provorov update yesterday that will get people talking.

In an article released late last night, LeBrun says that the 28-year-old Russian defenseman's agent Mark Gandler, and GM Don Waddell have had contract talks, and plan to talk again later.

LeBrun says, "The pending unrestricted free agent is very open to signing an extension with Columbus. At least at the outset of these talks, there's a mutual desire to see if there's a way to get something done."

It should be noted that Ivan Provorov's younger brother Vladimir committed to playing college hockey at The Ohio State University just last month.

LeBrun also thinks Provorov will be seeking a max extension (8 years) and looking for a raise. Provorov currently makes \$6,750,000 a season, but Columbus is only paying him \$4,725,000 thanks to 30% of the contract being retained by the Los Angeles Kings.

March 7th will be a huge day for both Columbus and Provorov as that is the NHL's trade deadline. If the CBJ can't work something out, look for Provorov to be traded, most likely to a contender and for a first-round pick. Getting a first-round pick in return would be ideal for Waddell, but it sounds like if they can work out a good deal, he could be wearing Union Blue for another bunch of years.

Would Provorov take a little more money for less term? The Jackets have a few prospects that will be ready in a couple of years. Does Waddell try to keep him around for veteran leadership, or ship him off for future picks?

Don Waddell has plenty of options, but if Pierre LeBrun is right, the Jackets may be looking to lock him up long-term.

**What's Next** - The Blue Jackets travel to Toronto to play the Maple Leafs on Wednesday night.

## The Hockey News / Blue Jackets Draft Pick Guillaume Richard Nominated For 2025 Hobey Baker Award

**By Jason Newland – January 23, 2025**

Providence College senior defenseman and Columbus Blue Jackets draft pick Guillaume Richard has been named as a 2025 Hobey Baker Award nominee.

Current Blue Jackets forward Adam Fantilli won the Hobey Baker in 2023, and Johnny Gaudreau won it in 2014.

Richard was drafted in the 4th round of the 2021 NHL Draft.

Richard has seven assists this season and has 31 blocks. In four years at Providence, he's played 124 games, scored 7 goals, and totaled 47 points.

Guillaume Richard has to be signed by the CBJ by August 15, 2025, or risk losing him to free agency.

**What's Next** - The Blue Jackets travel to Toronto to play the Maple Leafs on Wednesday night.



## The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Blow By Maple Leafs Behind Adam Fantilli's First NHL Hat Trick

By Mark Scheig – January 23, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets faced a tall task on Wednesday night without two of their best players in the lineup. With Denton Mateychuk missing a second consecutive game due to illness and Cole Sillinger dealing with an upper-body injury, it would take a total team effort to find a win in a tough building against a team with the most home wins in the NHL.

Thanks to a pair of Blue Jackets who grew up in Ontario, they were able to win in convincing fashion.

Adam Fantilli scored his first NHL hat trick in front of around 75 of his family and friends while Luca Del Bel Belluz in front of his family added a goal and an assist to lift the Blue Jackets to a convincing 5-1 win over the Maple Leafs. Elvis Merzlikins shined making 29 saves on the night.

This night belonged to Fantilli and Del Bel Belluz.

### **Game Recap**

The game started with a big bang. Two of the NHL's toughest heavyweights in Mathieu Olivier and Ryan Reaves fought for the first time ever and gave everyone something to cheer about. Both threw huge punches. At the end, Reaves tapped Olivier as a show of respect.

Then in a rare moment, Merzlikins and Auston Matthews each took offsetting minors. Merzlikins stole Matthews' stick after he lost his own. Matthews then proceeded to pick up the goalie stick. The calls were holding the stick on Merzlikins and playing with an illegal stick on Matthews. We might not see that again for a long time.

Once all that was over, the Blue Jackets went to work. On a Maple Leafs' power play, Fantilli received a pass at center and did the rest to open the scoring. His shot went upstairs on Dennis Hildeby.

Then in a span of 1:41 in the second, the former Maple Leaf James van Riemsdyk made it 2-0 and then Fantilli scored his second of the night from the side of the net to make it 3-0.

In the third, Del Bel Belluz joined the scoring party after a great forecheck by Mikael Pyyhtia created a turnover. Tears of joy streamed down the Del Bel Belluz family as he made it 4-0 in his homecoming.

Matthews was able to break Merzlikins' shutout on a good pass by William Nylander. With the score 4-1 and a 4-on-4 situation in play, the Maple Leafs decided to pull Hildeby for a 5-on-4 advantage. That ultimately resulted in a 2-on-1 in which Kirill Marchenko found Fantilli to complete his first NHL hat trick. His mother Julia was the first to throw a hat on the Scotiabank Arena ice in celebration.

With the win, the Blue Jackets jumped Montreal, Boston and Ottawa into the first wildcard spot in the East. They now go to Raleigh for a difficult back-to-back Thursday against the Hurricanes.

The Maple Leafs now get a couple days off before playing in Ottawa on Saturday night.

## 1<sup>st</sup> Ohio Battery / NYI 3, CBJ 1: Johnson's Early Power Play Goal Not Enough As Islanders End Blue Jackets' Point Streak

By Ed Francis – January 22, 2025

Less than five minutes into Monday night's game against the New York Islanders, Kent Johnson had scored for the second time in three games and the Columbus Blue Jackets ended a brief, three-game drought without a power play goal.

It all went downhill from there.

The Islanders scored three goals in the second period and shut down the Blue Jackets offense in a 3-1 victory for New York, ending Columbus' seven-game point streak.

Columbus was 6-0-1 in those seven games, their longest point streak since 2018.

Head coach Dean Evason was not happy with the effort.

"We didn't have any positives in tonight's hockey game; we were slow in all areas," said Evason. "We thought slow, we skated slow, we passed slow. We haven't done that lately."

"It looked like we were stuck in a bit of mud."

### **Here's how the loss in Elmont went down:**

#### **1st Period:**

(4:52 — CBJ PP Goal): Things start out good for the Blue Jackets as Dmitri Voronkov uses his large frame to block Islanders goalie Ilya Sorokin from seeing Johnson's wrist shot from near the left face-off dot. The power play goal is Johnson's 13th of the season, with assists to Kirill Marchenko and Voronkov.

#### **2nd Period**

(0:43, 2:57, 5:47 — NYI Goals): The Islanders get three goals in just over five minutes. Bo Horvat gets the first one at even-strength to tie the game at 1-1, Simon Holmstrom the second while short-handed to give New York a 2-1 lead, and then Horvat makes it 3-1 on the power play.

#### **3rd Period**

Trailing two entering the third period, the Blue Jackets did not register a shot on goal for the first 8:47 of the period. Columbus would pull Elvis Merzlikins with just over three minutes remaining but were unable to find the back of the net.

#### **Stat Chat:**

- The Blue Jackets won just 32% of their faceoffs and had only one takeaway for the game. Both were season lows and indicative of the outcome.
- It was another night of Zach Werenski on the ice more than off it: he logged 30:37 for the game. It was the 6th time this season he registered more than 30 minutes of action.

#### **Up Next:**

The Blue Jackets will conclude their four-game road trip with a really tough back-to-back: Wednesday in Toronto at 7:30 p.m. and Thursday in Carolina at 7:00 p.m.

## 1<sup>st</sup> Ohio Battery / Game Day #48: Blue Jackets Look To Right The Ship When They Head North Of The Border To Face Matthews, Maple Leafs

By Ed Francis – January 23, 2025

After winning six straight games, the Columbus Blue Jackets will look to avoid a third straight loss when they face the Toronto Maple Leafs on Wednesday night from the Scotiabank Arena.

It's the first leg of a back-to-back for the Blue Jackets that will conclude a four-game road trip. Columbus played the first games of that trip in New York, losing to the Rangers in a shootout Saturday night before a regulation loss Monday night to the Islanders.

The road trip will conclude Thursday with a visit to Carolina to face the Hurricanes.

It's a tough stretch at a key time for Columbus: the consecutive losses have bumped the Blue Jackets out of the wild card positions in the Eastern Conference. They enter Wednesday's game one point behind the Ottawa Senators, Montreal Canadiens, and Boston Bruins and one point ahead of both the Rangers and Philadelphia Flyers.

The Sens, Canadiens, and Bruins are in a three-way tie for the two wild card spots.

**Here's what else to know as Columbus looks to get a huge two points north of the border:**

- **RE: LEAFS**

Toronto appears set to start Dennis Hildeby in net. It will be just his sixth start of the season. Through the first five, he's got a goals against average of 3.18 and a save percentage of .884. It will be his first start since January 11th. ... The Maple Leafs have scored four power play goals over their last three games, all wins. They've also allowed four power play goals in that stretch. ... Toronto is without John Tavares, who went on Injured Reserve last week. He had 20 goals and 22 assists for 42 points through the team's first 44 games.

- **GET OUT OF THE MUD**

Head coach Dean Evason said his team played slow and as if they were "stuck in the mud" after Monday's 3-1 loss to the Isles. New York's style of play can easily lull teams into that type of game, but not Toronto. The Leafs are the perfect opponent for the Blue Jackets to wipe the mud off, and have allowed at least three goals in each of their last six games.

- **DROPPING GAA**

While Toronto has allowed at least three in six straight, the Blue Jackets have allowed three or less in seven straight. At the beginning of that stretch, the team goals against average sat at 3.63. That was tied for last in the NHL. They're not at 3.34 (a reduction of 9.2%) and at 28th in the league. Columbus' defense will have a tall order limiting the Leafs offense, but this proves to be a good litmus test to see where they're at defensively.

## 1<sup>st</sup> Ohio Battery / CBJ 5, TOR 1: Fantilli, Merzlikins Have Huge Nights As Blue Jackets Win Big Over Maple Leafs

By Ed Francis – January 23, 2025

The boys are back.

Adam Fantilli scored his first career hat trick, Luca Del Bel Belluz had another multi-point game in his early NHL career, and Elvis Merzlikins was brilliant in net for the Columbus Blue Jackets as they soundly defeated the Toronto Maple Leafs 5-1.

The victory ended a brief two-game skid from the Blue Jackets, who had previously won six straight.

The two points put Columbus back into the first wild card spot in the Eastern Conference, after the club was on the outside looking in after picking up just one of four possible points in New York against the Rangers and Islanders.

For Fantilli and Del Bel Belluz, the big games came in front of plenty of friends and family. Both are natives of the Toronto area.

"(The win) means a lot," said Fantilli. "We dropped the first two on this road trip ... We knew tonight was going to be a big one, and it ended up being really great for us."

### **Here's how the Blue Jackets rebounded in a big way Wednesday night:**

#### **1st Period:**

(15:40 — CBJ SH Goal): Fantilli's career night begins with a short-handed goal late in the first period. Towards the end of the Maple Leafs power play, Ivan Provorov gets the puck in the Blue Jackets own zone and Fantilli immediately heads down the ice, seeing an opportunity. Provorov finds him near center-ice and Fantilli takes advantage of a 1-on-1, firing from near the left face-off dot and ripping it past Toronto goalie Dennis Hildeby to put the Blue Jackets in front, 1-0.

#### **2nd Period**

(13:40 — CBJ Goal): Damon Severson does not get a point on this play but was the catalyst behind it. The sequence starts with a good heads up play from Sevo: he first tries to find Kent Johnson for a would-be tip-in opportunity. The puck gets by him, but Severson goes behind Hildeby and collects the puck before the Maple Leafs can get to it. He gets it back to Johnson, who dishes it off to Del Bel Belluz. The rookie finds James van Riemsdyk near the net and JVR cashes in for his 9th goal of the season, doubling the Columbus lead to 2-0.

(15:21 — CBJ Goal): Fantilli gets his second of the night but it's also the second of the night that comes with a complete team effort. It all starts with hustle from Columbus' end, particularly Dmitri Voronkov. He keeps the puck in the Toronto zone and gets it to Fantilli, whose initial shot was blocked. He makes a good second-effort to get the puck back and chops it towards Voronkov, who's at the front of the net. He can't get it home, but Hildeby is unable to collect the puck before Fantilli, now joining Voronkov at the doorstep, is able to punch it home and extend the Blue Jackets lead to 3-0,

#### **3rd Period**

(5:56 — CBJ Goal): After assisting on the van Riemsdyk goal with a beautiful pass, Del Bel Belluz finds the back of the net in his first game in his hometown — and it all starts with excellent forechecking and hustle from LDBB. He beats the crowd to the end of the ice and then skates back in front of Hildeby just

in time for an innocuous bounce to go right to him on the doorstep, easily putting it past the Toronto goalie to make it 4-0 Columbus and start sending the Toronto faithful for the exits.

(9:22 — TOR Goal): Auston Matthews scores to end Merzlikins' shutout bid and cut the Columbus lead to 4-1. Elvis, who was named the second Star of the Night, finished with 28 saves on 29 shots. He was cool, calm, and collected throughout.

(12:02 — CBJ EN Goal): Fantilli completes the hat trick in with an empty-net goal with all kinds of time remaining in the game. With the game in a 4-on-4 situation, Maple Leafs head coach Craig Berube pulls Hildeby with over eight minutes left in the game. The gamble does not pay off, with Kirill Marchenko dishing off to Fantilli in a 2-on-1 to ensure Toronto native completes the hat trick in front of about 50 friends and family members.

#### **Stat Chat:**

- This was just the fourth time this season the Blue Jackets failed to register 20 shots on goal for the game. They were 0-3-0 in the other three and were shut out twice.
- For just the second time this season, Columbus did not get a power play attempt. They're now 2-0 when not given a man-advantage.
- The top line of Voronkov, Fantilli, and Marchenko skated 12:30 together in 5-on-5 hockey and allowed just six shot attempts in that time, none of which registered as a shot on goal. They were elite defensively, especially considering the opponent.

#### **Up Next:**

The Blue Jackets are off to Carolina immediately for a Thursday night battle against the Hurricanes. The four-game road trip concludes with a 7 p.m. puck-drop.

## [Sportsnet.ca / How the Blue Jackets have become a serious playoff contender](#)

By Adam Vingan – January 23, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets are the ultimate feel-good story. They have rallied around each other in the face of unimaginable tragedy, coming out of nowhere in recent weeks to join the crowded field of wild-card hopefuls in the Eastern Conference.

Columbus, which has not qualified for the post-season since 2020, has won 10 of its past 15 games (10-3-2). The Blue Jackets continue a critical, road-heavy stretch Wednesday against the Toronto Maple Leafs.

“I definitely look (at the standings),” Blue Jackets forward Kent Johnson told reporters. “It’s fun to look at it now. I didn’t look too much the last couple years.”

Under new coach Dean Evason, the Blue Jackets have ramped up the aggressiveness. As The Athletic explained at the start of the season, Evason’s system “starts with a two-man forecheck, which, ideally, pressures the puck while opponents are just starting to make their way out of the zone.”

That approach has paid off. Opponents have learned the hard way that the Blue Jackets will make them pay for their mistakes. Columbus has scored a league-high 68 goals within 10 seconds of a turnover, including 27 within five seconds of a giveaway (which ranks second). Kirill Marchenko, who is in the midst of a breakout season with 18 goals and 50 points, and Mathieu Olivier share the team lead with eight goals each off turnovers.

The Blue Jackets’ recent surge has highlighted the play of Zach Werenski, who is more than deserving of Norris Trophy consideration. (Just ask Olivier.)

Werenski’s league-leading 26:49 of ice time per game is a full minute more than the second skater on the list (Utah’s Mikhail Sergachev). The American defenceman, who will represent the country at the 4 Nations Face-Off next month, has logged 30 minutes in six games this season — twice as many as the next closest players (Minnesota’s Brock Faber, Colorado’s Cale Makar and Philadelphia’s Travis Sanheim).

Most importantly, Werenski has provided steady leadership following the tragic loss of Johnny Gaudreau in August. (Blue Jackets captain Boone Jenner has also not played this season after undergoing shoulder surgery in October.)

In Werenski and Marchenko, Columbus has multiple 50-point scorers through 47 games for the first time in franchise history. Werenski is on pace to shatter the single-season franchise record for scoring by a defenceman, which he shares with Seth Jones (57 points).

About a month into the season, Evason shook up his No. 1 line, putting veteran centre Sean Monahan between young wingers Marchenko and Dmitri Voronkov. In doing so, Evason created one of the league’s most dynamic lines. Voronkov, Monahan and Marchenko have outscored opponents 22-5 and generated 65.3 per cent of the expected goals at 5-on-5 — the latter of which ranks 11th out of 127 qualified forward lines (minimum 100 minutes played).

“(It’s) almost the perfect line,” Evason told NHL.com. “You’ve got a big, strong guy that goes to the net (in the 6-foot-5, 227-pound Voronkov). You’ve got a guy that plays hard, that is good on faceoffs, good defensively, good passer (in Monahan). And then you’ve got a goal-scorer that competes his butt off (in Marchenko).”

Monahan recently landed on injured reserve with a sprained right wrist, leading Evason to promote Adam Fantilli to the top line. It has not missed a beat; Voronkov, Fantilli and Marchenko have outscored opponents 4-1 and out-chanced them 35-25 at 5-on-5 over the past six games without Monahan.

Watch as Columbus Blue Jackets forward Kirill Marchenko sets up Adam Fantilli with a clever pass, leaving him with a wide-open net against the St. Louis Blues.

Over the past 15 games, the Blue Jackets' playoff chances have improved from 18.5 per cent to 31.2 per cent. If they can defy the odds and reach the post-season after all they have endured, it would be a remarkable feat.

"I don't think anyone really knows how good we are," Blue Jackets forward Cole Sillinger told NHL.com. "I think it's starting to click in with some other teams now that we're in a playoff spot and we're holding our ground. We're gaining respect."

## Toronto Star / Opinion | Blue Jackets visit Maple Leafs with Johnny Gaudreau in their hearts — and a playoff spot in their sights

**By Bruce Arthur – January 23, 2025**

It has often been easy to forget about the Columbus Blue Jackets. The franchise has won two playoff series in 23 seasons: the bizarre, magic-in-a-bottle, four-game sweep of the Tampa Bay Lightning in 2019, and the five-game bubble series in 2020 over the Maple Leafs that was a playoff series in name only. That's it.

And even the win over that powerhouse Tampa team wasn't a rivalry-maker; the Lightning won the next two Stanley Cups, and credited that sweep as motivation. If anything, the Blue Jackets were a help. The great Columbus beat writer Aaron Portzline of *The Athletic* — whose life was saved last year by a kidney transplant from a team employee he barely knew, but who knew his reputation as a person — says it well. "Nobody hates them. They haven't broken any hearts."

Their own hearts are another matter. As the Blue Jackets come to play the Leafs on Wednesday night, they sit perched on the edge of the playoff picture between what's left of Boston and what is coming in Montreal. And they are still trying to mend themselves after the stunning death of star winger Johnny Gaudreau and his brother Matthew last summer, killed by an alleged drunk driver the day before their sister's wedding. If you are not rooting for this team to make the playoffs for the seventh time in 24 seasons, why not?

"It's a real thing. I mean, nobody knew how to act, what to think, what it was going to be like to be on the ice, be at the arena," says Jody Shelley, the former NHL enforcer who is the team's lead analyst for Fox Sports and a team ambassador. "They're playing for Johnny. They said it right from the start."

"I keep waiting for the bubble to burst," says Blue Jackets general manager Don Waddell, who was hired last May, "and every night we go out — and we didn't play that well Monday night (in a 3-1 loss to the Islanders) — but every night, we give a very good effort."

It's easy to overstate the role of tragedy, but it's just as easy to elude it, too. Gaudreau's widow, Meredith, said at the funeral that Johnny would want the team to play, and play with joy, and the franchise has leaned on what she said: Play hockey. This is what Gaudreau and his wife wanted. "She's such a strong person," Waddell says.

And the team made appropriate room for grief. Coach Dean Evason keeps saying the same thing: If you need to cry, cry. If you need to smash something, we'll fix it. If you need a hug, ask for a hug. The team has offered grief counselling, and in the aftermath of the tragedy Waddell went to some of his senior leaders — captain Boone Jenner, Erik Gudbranson, Sean Monahan, Zach Werenski and Mathieu Oliver — and told them that not only did the team need to stick together, they needed to pay attention to their teammates. Grief finds people at different stages of life, and a lot of the Blue Jackets were experiencing it for the first time.

"It's refreshing to be able to know that you could share your feelings," Shelley says. "You know what I mean? I think that's the modern-day way for athletes. And I think that's important."



The team has also tried to balance that reverence — the Gaudreau locker at home and on the road, players openly talking about him at the rink — with lighter moments. There has been more golf on the road, they went curling in Winnipeg, they went to the beach in L.A.

“We’ve done more team-building things this year than I’ve ever done in one year,” Waddell says, “because we want to keep the guys together as much as we could.”

“Grieving is handled differently by everybody, and you just don’t know. Some players won’t get sleep that night. We know when they go home ... I know I think about it every night. When I go home, where my mind is just wandering, it always comes back. They’re no different than me.”

This is still the lonely franchise that fired Ken Hitchcock the year after he led the franchise to its first playoff appearance. This is the franchise that hired former Leafs coach Mike Babcock in July of 2023, and fired him in September. Artemi Panarin left for New York. Sergei Bobrovsky went to Florida.

And Gaudreau was such a blow. He chose Columbus. He was one of the bright lights of the game. And then he and his brother were gone. It was devastating.

The bottom still could fall out of this team. Columbus has a top-five shooting percentage at 5-on-5, and that could cool. They have not gotten great goaltending, their possession numbers aren’t strong, and the penalty kill is messy, but the power play is working. They have the second-best home record in the East, and one of the worst road records in the league. Starting in Toronto, as part of a tough second-half schedule, six of their next seven games are on the road.

But right now Werenski is in the Norris conversation, and youngsters like third-year winger Kirill Marchenko and second-year hulk Dmitri Voronkov are producing, and Kent Johnson, Cole Sillinger and Adam Fantilli, too. For the young players, especially, a playoff chase beats last place.

“Before the season even started, when we were going through all this, I said if we could play meaningful games in March, I think it’s gonna be a huge benefit for not only our franchise, but for our young kids, taking that next step,” Waddell says.

It has often been easy to forget the Blue Jackets, and it would be nice if this is all remembered. Whether they get there or not, it’s a team worth hoping for.

“You know, we all grieve differently,” Shelley says. “And in a way, I think Johnny would be proud, you know. Because they play for him.”

## Yahoo Sports / 'What John would want': Blue Jackets pushing for a playoff spot with heavy hearts

**By Joshua Clipperton – January 23, 2025**

Zach Werenski was slightly annoyed. The Columbus Blue Jackets were in a tailspin and on the way to another playoff-less spring.

The defenceman was spending hour after hour at the team's practice facility searching for answers.

Star forward Johnny Gaudreau? He was doing the opposite.

"Used to drive me nuts," Werenski recalled. "He was always the last one at the rink and he was one of the first ones to leave. We weren't playing well and I was like, 'Why is John showing up late? Why is he leaving first?'"

The answer would eventually become clear.

"Because," Werenski continued, "he wanted to be with his family."

Columbus has been playing with heavy hearts this season — and playing well. Gaudreau and younger brother Matthew died in August after they were hit by a suspected drunk driver while riding bicycles in New Jersey the night before their sister's wedding.

The tragedy stunned hockey and shook the Blue Jackets.

Gaudreau spent two seasons with the organization after eight with the Calgary Flames. His influence in Columbus, much like southern Alberta, lives on.

"A really hard subject to talk about," said second-year Blue Jackets forward Adam Fantilli. "I used to watch his highlights while I was eating cereal before school. For him, it was probably just playing with another rookie. But for me, it was a dream come true."

Gaudreau's former teammates have made a push in 2024-25 they hope would make him proud.

The Blue Jackets sat a point back of both Eastern Conference wild-card berths with a 22-18-7 record heading into Wednesday's action.

Columbus head coach Dean Evason, who was hired in July and then had to navigate the tragedy's raw emotion, didn't enter the season with any expectations.

"We wanted to just go day-by-day and get the group to compete their tails off," he said. "Everybody knows what's happened. The players have really bonded together."

Werenski said there was always belief for a franchise that has rarely tasted success.

"We knew we had skill, we knew we had talent," said the 27-year-old. "With the new coaching staff, we're playing the right way. I won't say we're surprised, but it's definitely been fun."

There have also been difficult moments with one locker room stall sitting empty, Gaudreau's bright smile no longer present.

"You lean on each other," Werenski said. "There's really no right or wrong way. It's just about being there for each other. There's still days where it hits you harder and you still can't believe it."

"We just want to go out there and play hard. That's what John would want."

Johnny Gaudreau played 161 games for Columbus. He left lasting impressions, including on Werenski when the blueliner stepped back to contemplate his teammate's rink attendance last season.

Following the tragedy, everything came into focus. Family made perfect sense.

"Something I've taken with me," Werenski said. "I don't spend extra time at the rink if I don't need to. I like to get home, be with my fiancée, be with my dog. We all spend as much time with our families as we can.

"Learned a lot from him in a short amount of time."

### **ATLANTIC AWAKENING**

The Florida Panthers, Tampa Bay Lightning, Boston Bruins and Toronto Maple Leafs have dominated the top of the Atlantic Division in recent years.

This season has seen other clubs — finally — begin to close the gap, with the Ottawa Senators, Montreal Canadiens and Detroit Red Wings all challenging for playoff spots.

"Teams that were probably counted out have really made a charge," Lightning head coach Jon Cooper said. "It's going to make one hell of an Eastern Conference race."

### **UNHAPPY CAMPER**

Philadelphia Flyers general manager Danny Briere used a portion of his midseason media availability to criticize Hockey Canada's use of the organization's prospects at the recent world junior hockey championship.

Jett Luchanko, a forward and captain of the Ontario Hockey League's Guelph Storm, averaged just over 12 minutes of ice time and registered one goal as the country finished a disappointing fifth for the second time in 12 months.

The 18-year-old selected 13th at the 2024 NHL draft has 25 points in 20 games this season after suiting up four times with the Flyers.

"We were disappointed in the role they gave him," Briere told reporters. "He barely played."

The GM was also confused by Canada's usage of Oliver Bonk. The minute-crunching defenceman occupies the bumper role on the power play for the OHL's London Knights, but was asked to quarterback his nation's top unit.

Bonk, who was picked 22nd in 2023, has 25 points in 28 games with London.

"He had a big role," Briere said. "But they put him in positions that are not really what is going to be his strength moving forward, which was really weird to us."

## The Athletic / NHL trade candidates under the radar: 10 players who are falling out of favor

By Harman Dayal and Chris Johnston – January 22, 2025

Which NHL players are falling out of favor or perhaps not getting the opportunity they could receive elsewhere?

The signs aren't hard to pick up on if you pay close attention. Players in this category often go through a significant dip in offensive production, ice time, role or performance. It's either that or they're struggling to carve out a meaningful role in the first place.

We've already spent time covering the big trade deadline targets. Here, we will highlight 10 under-the-radar trade candidates falling out of favor. This doesn't guarantee they'll be dealt by the March 7 deadline — some of these players could be shopped in the summer and some of the less valuable RFAs on this list may not be tendered qualifying offers if there's limited trade interest. Maybe a few of these players even figure it out with their current team.

But one way or another, here are 10 players whose stock is dropping internally and who have a decent chance of moving teams before the 2025-26 season starts.

### **Philipp Kurashev, Chicago Blackhawks**

Kurashev amassed 54 points while riding shotgun with Connor Bedard last season and can't even consistently crack the Blackhawks lineup today.

He's been scratched for 12 of the team's last 16 games, including the Winter Classic at Wrigley Field on Dec. 31.

While it is the precipitous decline in Kurashev's production that leaps off the page as the biggest issue — he's only got four goals and seven points to show for 32 games — his lack of attention to detail on the defensive side of the puck and compete level are the biggest reasons the coaching staff has lost faith in him.

The Blackhawks have been heavily underwater in shots, goals and expected goals during Kurashev's five-on-five minutes this season.

The 25-year-old winger is a pending restricted free agent who is unlikely to receive a qualifying offer from Chicago in June. It wouldn't be surprising to see them try and cut bait before then.

### **Andrei Kuzmenko, Calgary Flames**

Andrei Kuzmenko has been one of the NHL's most volatile forwards over the last three seasons.

He exploded for 39 goals with the Canucks as a first-year NHLer during the 2022-23 season. Kuzmenko's offensive IQ, net-front finishing ability and slick hands fit seamlessly on Elias Pettersson's line and Vancouver rewarded him with a two-year, \$11 million extension. He landed in Rick Tocchet's doghouse last season for his bad defensive habits and his scoring rate fell off a cliff, which prompted the Canucks to send him to Calgary as a salary dump as part of the Elias Lindholm trade.

Following the trade, Kuzmenko went on a tear for the Flames, scoring 14 goals and 25 points in 29 games to close out the 2023-24 season.

Kuzmenko's play has mysteriously cratered again. The 28-year-old winger has scored just two goals and 11 points in 33 games. He's been healthy scratched at times and has averaged less than 12 minutes in

his last five games. Kuzmenko is subpar defensively and a very slow skater, which makes it difficult for him to help his line on the forecheck or drive play. He often looks like a passenger.

Kuzmenko is a streaky, one-dimensional scorer. He can score in bunches and has unique offensive creativity when he's on, but he's proven to disappear for long stretches throughout his up-and-down career. Given his recent struggles, one-dimensional playing style and \$5.5 million cap hit, it may be difficult for the Flames to find suitors for Kuzmenko. If there are no takers, even at a retained price, the Flames will likely let him walk in the offseason as a free agent.

### **Jeff Skinner, Edmonton Oilers**

Signed last summer to be an affordable shoot-first scoring option that could help boost Edmonton's top six, Jeff Skinner never found any traction playing alongside Connor McDavid or Leon Draisaitl early in the season.

Lately, finding any playing time at all has been a challenge. He's been scratched five times since coming back from the holiday break and hasn't seen 13 minutes of ice time in any game in more than a month.

Skinner's shrinking opportunity can be chalked up to the limitations of his skill set.

An elite shooter with six 30-goal seasons on his resume, he doesn't profile as an effective bottom-of-the-roster player. Skinner has never been known as a play driver and doesn't bring any physicality. He typically needs to be paired with a strong playmaker to make a big impact.

And in a Cup-or-bust season in Edmonton, he finds himself closer to the press box than a role beside one of the team's game-breakers.

While the Oilers might prefer to move on and use his \$3 million in cap space on an upgrade at the trade deadline, Skinner controls his own destiny with a no-movement clause in his contract.

### **Danton Heinen, Vancouver Canucks**

The Canucks signed Danton Heinen to a two-year, \$2.25 million AAV contract hoping he could be a quality top-nine winger. He's never been a flashy player, but the expectation was he could be a versatile winger who could slide up and down the lineup and stabilize any line with his IQ, two-way reliability and secondary scoring, like Pius Suter.

Heinen began the season with a prime opportunity to play on Vancouver's top line with J.T. Miller and Brock Boeser. He failed to capitalize on it and has since been relegated to bottom-six duties. It speaks volumes that he's never gotten another top-six chance despite all of Vancouver's injuries and line juggling at the top of its forward lineup. Journeyman forward Phil Di Giuseppe was recently getting top-six reps ahead of him.

The 29-year-old left winger is a solid penalty killer, but his six goals in 45 games are underwhelming, his two-way metrics are mediocre and he's prone to being invisible for long stretches. He hasn't found his fit in Vancouver.

### **Ryan Lindgren, New York Rangers**

Ryan Lindgren has been a staple on the Rangers' top pair with Adam Fox for a long time. The hard-nosed, stay-at-home defenseman has driven solid defensive results over his NHL career and earned a ton of respect for the way he's sacrificed his body with such a rugged, taxing playing style.

It's fair to wonder, however, if the injuries and knocks he's accumulated are catching up to him.

Lindgren's performance has been on a downward trajectory this season. The 26-year-old left-shot defenseman has struggled at even strength; making loud, costly mistakes. He's had a decisively negative

impact on the Rangers' ability to control play. Fox's play-driving results have been miles better away from Lindgren this season.

Lindgren is still a key contributor to the Rangers' No.5 ranked penalty kill, but he hasn't been the steady top-four safety blanket the club needs him to be. He'll be a free agent at the end of this season. It's looking increasingly likely that he doesn't factor in the organization's long-term plans, especially given New York's tricky cap situation. If the Rangers decide to sell at the deadline, Lindgren would be a logical piece to dangle.

### **Max Domi, Toronto Maple Leafs**

Currently in possession of a more favorable offensive opportunity with John Tavares out of the Maple Leafs' lineup due to injury, Max Domi is desperately in need of a breakthrough. He started the season with a 22-game goal drought and has since amassed another 14-game stretch without scoring.

In fact, after signing a \$15 million, four-year extension in Toronto last summer, Domi is producing the worst per-game scoring numbers of his 10-year NHL career. He has three goals and 17 points in 39 games.

That's particularly distressing because the Leafs have spent a good portion of this season trying to squeeze more goals out of their lineup. Head coach Craig Berube has consistently asked Domi to take more shots. A playmaker by nature, he's generating just 1.4 shots on goal per game.

While Domi plays with an edge, he's not a penalty killer or defensive specialist. In order to be effective, he needs to parlay a healthy dose of offensive zone starts into actual offense for his team.

The three years remaining on his contract virtually guarantees Domi will remain in Toronto beyond the trade deadline. He also owns a 13-team no-trade clause.

### **Joel Farabee, Philadelphia Flyers**

Joel Farabee's production has cratered one year after he posted career-best totals of 22 goals, 28 assists and 50 points.

He may simply need a change of scenery.

Farabee is a strong skater with a high hockey IQ who has been knocked down the Flyers' depth chart with Tyson Foerster and Owen Tippett now slotted ahead of him at left wing. He recently had a 200-plus game Ironman streak ended by a string of three healthy scratches.

While head coach John Tortorella felt there was some poor shooting luck involved in Farabee's offensive decline earlier in the season, he more recently saw signs the 24-year-old's game had gone stale. He's seeing a minute less in ice time per game year over year as a result.

Farabee is signed through the 2026-27 season on a contract carrying a \$5 million AAV.

### **K'Andre Miller, New York Rangers**

In 2022-23, K'Andre Miller looked like one of the most promising young defensemen in the league. At 23, he'd scored 43 points in 79 games and successfully played shutdown top-four minutes. He was still far from a perfect player but his athletic tools and age pointed to tantalizing potential.

Miller plateaued last season and has regressed this year. The smooth-skating 6-foot-5 defenseman has only contributed eight points in 40 games. He hasn't made progress toward becoming a player who can drive his own top-four defense pair. Miller's puck skills and outlet passing ability are inconsistent. He doesn't have the best hockey IQ and leaves you wanting more physically.

The 25-year-old is a pending restricted free agent with arbitration rights. Would the Rangers be comfortable giving him a substantial contract, especially given the team's looming salary-cap crunch? Miller could net a significant return on the trade market because he's still youngish and possesses the rare athletic qualities with his size and skating that teams covet.

This is more likely to be an offseason decision because New York is still in the playoff mix, but Miller's future in the Big Apple is a fascinating storyline to monitor.

### **Matt Dumba, Dallas Stars**

In his prime, Matt Dumba was one of the more unique top-four defensemen in the sport. He had a cannon shot, could hit like a truck, and skated very well. Dumba's game deteriorated hard during the end of his tenure with the Minnesota Wild, however, and he didn't perform at a bona fide top-four level last season with either the Arizona Coyotes or Tampa Bay Lightning.

Despite those red flags, the Stars signed him to a two-year, \$3.75 million AAV contract. It hasn't worked out at all so far.

Dumba has only been trusted to play 15:27 per game, scoring just two points in 28 games. He's missed some time with injury, but he's also been a healthy scratch a few times this season. Dumba's been prone to turnovers and undisciplined penalties and has been at the center of some costly defensive breakdowns.

The Stars will likely be in the market for another right-side top-four defenseman. Dumba's contract is already an inconvenience — if there's a get-out-of-jail-free card to move his deal out, we'd expect Dallas to explore it.

### **Adam Boqvist, Florida Panthers**

While Adam Boqvist achieved a dream of playing with his brother Jesper in Florida this season, he basically lost his grip on a regular spot in the Panthers lineup by the time the calendar flipped to November.

The right-shot defenseman had been hoping to re-establish himself after being bought out by the Columbus Blue Jackets but hasn't been able to usurp Uvis Balinskis or veteran Nate Schmidt for consistent playing time.

Boqvist gets around the ice well and likes to be assertive on the rush offensively, but lacks the size and strength needed to excel in puck or positioning battles. His defensive play remains a work in progress.

Perhaps his most attractive attribute is the ability to effectively handle the puck and quarterback a power play. The Panthers boast the NHL's eighth-most proficient attack in that area despite dressing Boqvist for just 18 games so far.

He's playing on a one-year contract worth \$775,000 and is vulnerable to losing his spot on the roster entirely with Florida expected to be in the market for another defenseman at the deadline.

## The Athletic / LeBrun: A chaotic race in the NHL's Eastern Conference, and how it could affect the trade deadline

By Pierre LeBrun – January 22, 2025

TORONTO — The salary cap long ago created more parity in the NHL, but what we're seeing this season in the Eastern Conference is next-level.

With all due respect to several very good teams at the top of the conference, there is no juggernaut outfit strutting around.

The conference-leading Washington Capitals have been a great surprise story, a masterclass display on how to retool a roster in the modern era, but are they the favorite to reach the Stanley Cup Final? There are still doubters despite a full-value showing in the opening three and a half months.

The Atlantic Division-leading Toronto Maple Leafs have responded very well to a first season under coach Craig Berube. They're harder to play against, to be sure, and their offensive game is starting to take shape. But there are still bouts of inconsistency within that. And of course, there's the matter of their playoff ghosts. Is this finally the year?

The New Jersey Devils, my preseason pick to represent the East in the Stanley Cup Final, have bounced back impressively after missing the playoffs last season. I caught up with general manager Tom Fitzgerald last week, and he's understandably bullish on the outlook for his team, but they, too, have had their ups and downs this season. There's another level in their game.

The Carolina Hurricanes are knocking on the door, like always. But is their goaltending solid (or deep) enough? Do they need an offensive upgrade?

The reigning Stanley Cup champion Florida Panthers have played a lot of hockey over the past two and a half years, and that hangover aspect has shown up at times this season in their energy levels. They will try to upgrade the blue line before the trade deadline. Odds are we'll see a better version of their team game come playoff time, but so far it's been uneven at times.

I wrote a few weeks ago that we may all be sleeping on the Tampa Bay Lightning. Then they went out and lost five of the next 10 games after that. They've got games in hand on most teams but need to find a higher level of consistency. Their roster remains very talented but is more top-heavy than in the past.

And those are your top six teams in the conference right now. An argument can be made for any of them on any given night. But none currently screams juggernaut.

It's a pretty wide-open top of the table.

"There's a lot of teams that are up and down, on and off," veteran Maple Leafs defender Morgan Rielly said Monday. "Even us. We've had moments where we've gone on a run, and then we lose a couple in a row. So for us, we're just trying to stay focused on ourselves and the games in the near future, and I think right now it's more about just keeping that mindset, not getting too carried away by looking at the standings.

"Knowing that it's kind of right there for the taking for anyone is motivation enough to stay on top of your game."

But then, Rielly extended that thought to the conference as a whole.



“Even as you go lower in the standings, it’s tight,” he added. “So everyone is fighting. There’s no easy nights. There’s no mailing it in. It makes for competitive hockey and keeps everyone at the top of their game, or should anyway.”

Added Lightning captain Victor Hedman when asked Monday about the wide-open Eastern Conference this season: “Oh, 100 percent. It feels like everyone is winning games and getting points in games. Look at that Boston and Ottawa game (on Saturday). It looks like Boston has it, but it goes to overtime and everyone gets points.”

That was also the case for the New York Rangers and Montreal Canadiens on Sunday night — another feisty, overtime affair. Those three-point games are going to create even more chaos in the conference race before the end of the season.

The Atlantic Division, specifically, is undergoing a rather interesting shift. Sure, the Leafs and both Florida teams will probably be top three in whatever order by season’s end. But the perennial contender Bruins have had major struggles, spurring a coaching change, and they’re now in a dogfight in a large wild-card race. Meanwhile, rebuilt clubs such as the Senators, Habs and Detroit Red Wings are pushing hard to get in.

The gap that existed for many years between the top and bottom clubs in the Atlantic is feeling the winds of change.

“There was a top four, and another four, and that’s how it was for a long time,” Lightning head coach Jon Cooper said Monday. “That is clearly not the case anymore. I feel that expectations get put on teams whether you were in that top four or you were coming — that might have been unfair. And then everybody looks at these teams saying, ‘Well, they should be ready.’ We don’t know if they’re ready or not. But in playing the teams in our division, the gap has closed.

“Whether Toronto and Florida are the class of the division right now, they’re not a class above everybody else in this division where I think in years past it used to be the case. It’s a coin flip now every night.”

It sure feels like it on most nights.

And it’s not just the Atlantic.

In the Metro, the Blue Jackets are by far the best story in the NHL, pushing hard to make the playoffs — rather surprisingly, especially given the tragedy that preceded their season. Has the Rangers’ recent run saved their season? The in-transition Flyers are still in the mix.

In all, you’ve got seven or so teams battling for two wild-card spots in the East. Crazy.

“Well, that Christmas spurt where everybody kind of went on a run and I think there was a time where the (conference) was, ‘OK, the haves can take off here and the have-nots can go away.’ And it was actually the opposite,” Cooper said. “And I give them a world of credit. Teams that were probably counted out have really made a charge, and you can tell there’s belief in their teams when we’re playing them.

“It’s agonizing as the visiting coach, but it’s going to make one hell of an Eastern Conference race.”

To which Cooper also pondered whether a team might get in with a point total as low as in the 80s because there won’t be teams at the top running away with it and the points are being spread out more.

All fascinating, to be sure. And because there’s no true juggernaut at the top of the East, or at least not right now, just how much of an upset will it be if a wild-card team knocks off a top seed?

I mean, the NHL already has plenty of upsets on its resume in the salary cap era. But the Eastern Conference right now looks like the pure definition of parity.

Which begs the question: If you're a GM for the top five or six clubs in the conference, does that make you even more eager to add a piece or two before the March 7 trade deadline because you feel it could be that missing little edge needed to put you over the top? Or do you take a more agnostic view, that it doesn't really make sense to spend major assets if it's all a coin flip anyway?

Judging on what we are already hearing, I would bet on the former. Count on the top clubs in the East all trying to add. That's the competitive nature of each management group, to want to give their current roster the best shot possible.

I get it. I would probably do the same. But the feeling of trading a first-round pick or a top prospect for a rental and getting knocked out in the first round is hard to digest. And the Eastern Conference is setting up for possible chaos this spring.

## The Athletic / Ranking every NHL goalie goal ever scored in way too much detail

By Sean McIndoe – January 23, 2025

These goalies are out of control.

You already know about Alex Nedeljkovic's record-breaking Friday night, as he became the first goaltender in the NHL to record a goal and an assist in the same game. But that goal doubled down on the history by also making the 2024-25 season the first to ever feature multiple goalie goals.

In fact, we've now had four goalie goals in less than two years, with Linus Ullmark in February of 2023 and Tristan Jarry in November of that same year. And yes, Jarry and Nedeljkovic both pulling it off means the Penguins go in the books as the first team to have two different goalies score goals.

That's a lot of history. And it probably makes this a good time to regroup, with a way-too-in-depth ranking of every goalie goal the NHL has ever seen.

To be clear, for our purposes today, a "goalie goal" is when they shoot the puck the length of the ice into the net. We're not counting all the times that a goalie has been credited with a goal after being the last player to touch the puck before a team scores on itself. Those moments are neat too, but they're more statistical quirks than they are actual achievements. So with apologies to legendary offensive names such as Damian Rhodes, Chris Mason and Mika Noronen, we're looking for shooters today. Please don't come to my house and hack my ankles, Billy Smith.

As it turns out, we have an even dozen to choose from. We'll rank them from worst to best, factoring in crucial criteria such as the circumstances and the degree of difficulty, as well as important factors like the crowd, the call and the celebration. Let's do this.

### **12. Chris Osgood, March 6, 1996**

**Situation:** This one comes with 10 seconds left in a game between a record-breaking Red Wings juggernaut and a Whalers team that was, uh, not that. But it's also the first goalie goal in almost seven years, and the first that wasn't scored by Ron Hextall, so there's a neat "Oh right, that's a thing you're allowed to do" factor. 7/10.

**Style:** Nothing too fancy, but the way Osgood manages to knock down and control the puck with his extended stick is pretty impressive. After that, it's just about the shot, and he pretty much drills it. 7/10.

**Call:** We don't have the whole clip, but what we can hear is fine right up until something that's only happened three times in history is met with a "You don't see that too often." 4/10.

**Reaction:** The crowd gives it a decent reaction. It's missing the "Oh wait, is he going to try it?" buzz that really elevates a goalie goal, but that's understandable given nobody who wasn't Hextall was expected to try this. 6/10.

**Celebration:** We don't see much of it in this clip, but what's there seems fairly innocuous. I do like that quick shot of guys on the bench laughing at what they've just witnessed. 5/10.

**Bonus points:** Osgood really cluttered up the scoresheet, adding a second-period slashing penalty to his night's work. Somewhat amazingly, neither of Hextall's games below included a penalty. +1.

**Total score:** It's our lowest-rated goalie goal, but still gets a decent score. Why? Because all goalie goals are awesome. 30/50.

### **11. Evgeni Nabokov, March 10, 2002**

**Situation:** Pretty typical, with one exception — Vancouver’s Jarkko Ruutu is serving an elbowing major, meaning this is the first power-play goalie goal ever scored. 7/10.

**Style:** It’s a class catch-and-release, with a twist. Defenseman Brad Stuart initially looks like he’s going to take the puck, before realizing what’s happening and leaving it. That throws Nabokov off his rhythm but adds a nice bit of stop-and-start urgency to the proceedings. 6/10.

**Call:** It’s a fun 0-to-60 sort of call, as a boring late-game scenario suddenly becomes the highlight of the season. What it lacks in preamble, it makes up for in the “scooores.” 6/10.

**Reaction:** It’s a road goal, but the Vancouver crowd delivers an excellent “oh crap, is this happening?” reaction as the puck heads down the ice. They cap it off with a nice pop for the actual goal, too. 7/10.

**Celebration:** Somewhat mild under the circumstances, although still fun because the early 2000s Sharks were a classic “Wait, they had that guy?” team. Look, there’s Vincent Damphousse and Niklas Sundstrom. Oh right, Darryl Sutter was the coach. Who’s that guy who looks like Adam Graves? This may only be fun for me. 5/10.

**Bonus points:** For making Sutter smile for the only time in his life. +1.

**Total score:** It feels like this one has largely been forgotten, but it’s a solid snipe. 32/50.

#### 10. Tristan Jarry, November 30, 2023

**Situation:** Nothing all that remarkable, although it was the first goalie goal scored with over a minute to go since the 1980s. 5/10.

**Style:** Smooth. The puck is basically on and off his stick immediately, which makes this look easier than it really was. He gets some serious distance on it too. 7/10.

**Call:** Not bad at all, with a solid “you have witnessed history” drop. 7/10.

**Reaction:** It’s a road game, but there are enough Penguins fans in Tampa to give it a worthy response. 7/10.

**Celebration:** It starts off pretty standard, right up until Jarry starts vibrating. The highlight here, though, is backup goalie Alex Nedeljkovic trying to wave Jarry over for the bench celebration, which he declines. I love it when the scriptwriters slip in some subtle foreshadowing. 6/10.

**Bonus points:** The goal capped off a big night for Jarry, who’d been struggling. I will not be checking on how things turned out for him in Pittsburgh after this. +1.

**Total score:** This one probably suffers a bit from being the second goalie goal in the same calendar year, but it was a solid entry in the genre. 33/50.

#### 9. Pekka Rinne, January 9, 2020

**Situation:** It’s a midseason game between two .500-ish teams, and the game situation is pretty much the standard: Late enough in a two-goal game that the risk is minimal. At least it had been seven years since we’d last seen a goalie goal. 5/10.

**Style:** It’s not flashy, but this is a goalie who knows what he wants to do. He gets out quickly to stop the puck, there’s only a small moment of hesitation while he gathers himself, and then it’s pretty much a dead-center shot. 7/10.

**Call:** The actual call is fine, but it’s the analyst who really makes it, transitioning from laughter to an “oh my god.” 8/10.

**Reaction:** The game is in Chicago, and this might be the quietest crowd reaction to a goalie goal that we've ever had. Normally that would be bad, but luckily the celebration happens right in front of a bunch of sad-looking Hawks fans, and it's pretty hilarious. Redbeard on the right decides to pretend it's not happening, while ballcap on the left looks like he's just been traumatized for life. 6/10.

**Celebration:** Rinne would admit that he wasn't really sure what to do, but his teammates picked up the slack with some genuine excitement. Note how you can see them telling him to do the bench fly-by, but he declines. 6/10.

**Bonus points:** I'm giving Rinne two extra points because he's one of those goalies who'd been trying to score for a while and wasn't shy about it. +2.

**Total score:** Give him credit, Rinne is the guy who kicked off the new era of goalies scoring every year or so. 34/50.

### 8. Filip Gustavsson, October 15, 2024

**Situation:** The season was just four games old when Gustavsson decided to spice it up. This is also the second time a goalie has shot and scored on the power play. 6/10.

**Style:** He's helped out by Pavel Buchnevich, who fires a chest-high gimme to set up the catch-and-release. With only one Blue even near him, he has about as unobstructed a shot as you can get. 7/10.

**Call:** It's not bad, and note how the "goaaal" call actually starts a fraction of a second before the puck hits the net. 6/10.

**Reaction:** The crowd is a little muted, but we do get a shot of a sad Jordan Binnington, which has to count for something. 6/10.

**Celebration:** It's the typical group hug, made better by the momentum pushing everyone off into the corner. Gustavsson follows that with the bench fly-by, which includes a shot of Marc-Andre Fleury smiling so broadly that you can barely tell how much it's killing him that he's still never done this. (Although this one apparently was his idea.) 8/10.

**Bonus points:** For Gustavsson reportedly dropping postgame quotes about wanting to attend power-play meetings. +2.

**Total score:** Seriously, if Fleury still doesn't have his goalie goal by March, the Wild need to start making him the net-front guy on the power play. 35/50.

### 7. Jose Theodore, January 2, 2001

**Situation:** It's two very bad teams playing each other in early January. But the more important piece of this scenario is that Montreal is up 2-0 at the time, meaning Theodore becomes the first goalie to shoot and score while also recording a shutout. 7/10.

**Style:** He does it on the backhand. I still can't get my head around this. I'm not sure Connor McDavid could put a backhand in from behind his own goal line. 10/10.

**Call:** There are a few versions of this one floating around online, including this one. The calls are all fine. 6/10.

**Reaction:** It's just OK, but considering this is an Islanders home game in 2001 and they're already behind by two goals in the final minute, there's probably like 3,000 people left in the building. 5/10.

**Celebration:** It's strong, as Theodore skates out to find his teammates rather than making them come to him. 7/10.

**Bonus points:** In addition to being completely ridiculous, the backhand means that this is the slowest developing goalie goal we're likely to ever see. +1.

**Total score:** This is a better score than I expected for a goal that's been largely forgotten, so much so that there isn't even a normal broadcast rip on YouTube. Still ... a backhand! 36/50.

#### **6. Ron Hextall, April 11, 1989**

**Situation:** It's the first playoff goalie goal in history. It was also the first short-handed goalie goal, as the Flyers were down a man. (Fun trivia: The guy in the penalty box is Jakob Chychrun's dad, Jeff.) 8/10.

**Style:** Don't miss the foreshadowing of Jay Wells passing it back to Hextall like he's a defenseman playing the point on the power play. Yeah, he was a pretty decent puck-handler. He shows it by corralling a shoot-in and using his momentum to carry him right around the net and into the shot. Wait, does that count as a wraparound? 7/10.

**Call:** Maybe my favorite goalie call ever, because Doc Emrick realizes what's about to happen and explains the situation perfectly just seconds before it all plays out. Most of these calls are fun because of the shock, but this one works because the viewer has been tipped off about what could happen. And then it does. 9/10.

**Reaction:** It's decent, but given that the game is in Washington and Caps fans just watched their team lose a crucial Game 5, you can understand that they weren't super-amped for the whole thing. 5/10.

**Celebration:** Hextall is the only two-time scorer, meaning he's the only goalie who can reasonably be expected to act like he's been there before. He pretty much does, going for the classic arms-up pose. The real star here is teammate Pelle Eklund, who starts the celebration early in a great moment captured by a near-perfect shot from behind the net that starts at 1:22 of the clip above. 7/10.

**Bonus points:** A goalie scoring a goal and winning a playoff game with an .853 save percentage is pretty much the most late-'80s thing ever. +1.

**Total score:** Would it shock you to know that this is the only time in history a goalie has scored his team's eighth goal? I'm guessing it would not. 37/50.

#### **5. Linus Ullmark, February 25, 2023**

**Situation:** This was just the second goalie goal, after Osgood's, that came with a team only up by a single goal. What can you say, the Bruins were setting regular season records and were apparently bored, so they decided they could torment the Canucks in Vancouver one more time, as a treat. 7/10.

**Style:** I love the way Ullmark just casually skates out to the puck like it's a nothing play, then instantly switches to sniper mode. It's very possible that it only occurred to him to shoot at the last second, but I prefer to think that this was the hockey equivalent of an NFL quarterback lulling the defense to sleep with a fake spike. 8/10.

**Call:** Oh hey, it's our old pal Jack Edwards! 0/10.

**Reaction:** The crowd isn't bad for a road goal, but the real stars here are the actual Canucks. When they realize what's happening, three of them launch themselves at Ullmark like he's a point guard taking a three. We also get Quinn Hughes obliterating the puck in disgust, which is the correct reaction to getting scored on by a goaltender. 7/10.

**Celebration:** Ullmark becomes the first NHL goalie to do the bench fly-by. I'm old enough to think that having every single goal these days celebrated this way is kind of lame, but a goaltender? We'll allow it. They should have sent Jeremy Swayman out for the hug, though. 8/10.

(By the way, I just kidding about giving Edwards' call a zero, we're marking it down as a solid seven.)

**Bonus points:** Ullmark became the first goalie to score a goal in a season in which he won the Vezina, which is kind of just showing off. +1.

**Total score:** This one comes in higher than I expected, but it was a lot more fun than I remember it. 38/50.

#### 4. Alex Nedeljkovic, January 17, 2025

**Situation:** This is the earliest goalie goal on record, coming with almost three minutes still left. It's also against the Buffalo Sabres, which just feels mean. 5/10.

**Style:** He doesn't have a lot of time, and even has to absorb a hit to make the play. 7/10.

**Call:** I like how you can hear the excitement creeping into his voice even as Nedeljkovic is still coming around from behind the net. 7/10.

**Reaction:** The Buffalo crowd gives it a loud cheer, partly because the building seems to be half Penguins fans. 8/10.

**Celebration:** He's already halfway to the bench when the puck goes in, and goes butt-first into his teammates. Perfection, no notes. 10/10.

**Bonus points:** For the fact that he's pretty much made this his thing. +2.

**Total score:** This was a great one. We should all be making this Sidney Crosby face right now. 39/50.

#### 3. Mike Smith, October 19, 2013

**Situation:** This one comes just a couple of weeks into the season, but that's not the timing that matters. Instead, this one's best feature is that it's a legitimate buzzer beater. In fact, with how long a goalie goal takes to develop, you could argue that this is one of the most suspenseful "will it make it in time" moments in NHL history. 10/10.

**Style:** Given how little time he had, Smith's catch-and-release here is pretty fantastic. 8/10.

**Call:** Some genuine excitement, mixed with confusion over whether the goal will count. The "she's in boys" on the definitive replay really seals it. 7/10.

**Reaction:** It's a (weirdly rare) goalie goal by the home team, so you know the crowd's going to be into it. That's especially true here since the goal also ends the game and they can celebrate a win at the same time. Kudos to the goal-horn guy, who really leans into the moment, and may in fact still be wailing on that button 11 years later. 8/10.

**Celebration:** We don't actually get a great look at Smith's reaction, which is too bad because he'd been trying to score forever. Still, the game-ending nature of the play means that the entire team gets to join the pile, which is cool. 6/10.

**Bonus points:** For Smith's reputation as the league's best puck-shooting goalie, one he'd reinforce a few years later at the All-Star game. +1.

**Total score:** It had been 12 years since a goalie had shot and scored, and Smith made us wait until the very last second. 40/50.

#### 2. Martin Brodeur, April 17, 1997

**Situation:** This is the second (and to this date, only other) playoff goalie goal. It comes in Game 1 of their first-round series with Montreal. 8/10.

**Style:** He's clearly thinking goal all the way, as he corrals a puck going around the net. He almost loses it but recovers in time to get the shot off. Going down to one knee is also a classic goal-scorer's move. 8/10.

**Call:** If there's a heaven for goalie goals, Doc Emrick is the one doing all the calls. 8/10.

**Reaction:** The home crowd goes nuts, although they're a little bit distracted by a skirmish that breaks out after the goal. That's OK, though, because it leads to ... 7/10.

**Celebration:** ... Brodeur is left all alone by his teammates in the immediate aftermath, which turns out to be hilarious because he has no idea what to do. He ends up doing a little dance that has been described as a toddler looking like he has to piddle, then backing into his net while still being unable to contain his excitement. I'm not sure I've ever been as happy in my life as Brodeur is at this exact moment. 9/10.

**Bonus points:** For this goal coming with 45 seconds left, leaving enough time for the two teams to squeeze in a line brawl. +2.

**Total score:** Brodeur was credited with two other goals, although both were the fake "last to touch it" kind. Still, he certainly made the most of his one experience with the real thing. 42/50.

### 1. Ron Hextall, December 8, 1987

**Situation:** It's 4-2 late in the third period, which in theory would be a good time to go for a goalie goal if such a thing existed, which back in 1987 it did not. 7/10.

**Style:** Nothing too ridiculous, but let's appreciate the sniper's leg kick. 8/10.

**Call:** Considering that most of us had never seen it before, he pretty much nails it. Personally, I prefer the "here he goes, bidding for one" call, but they're both good. 8/10.

**Reaction:** The crowd is a highlight here. While it's true that nobody had ever done this before, Hextall had been thinking about it for a while, and it felt like a matter of when instead of if. In fact, while we don't see it in this clip, he'd just made a half-hearted attempt a few seconds earlier, which is why you can hear the Philadelphia fans start to buzz when the puck finds its way to him with some space before he even winds up. 9/10.

**Celebration:** In a move absolutely fitting of a historic first, the entire Flyers bench comes on the ice to celebrate even though there's still a minute left. And yes, they got a penalty for it. It's only two minutes, which is less than that era's team usually got for emptying the bench. 8/10.

**Bonus points:** For Hextall's postgame press conference, which he began with "Before you guys say anything, I was aiming for that corner." +3.

**Total score:** Too predictable? Maybe, but only because Hextall's first goal set a bar so high that multiple generations of goalies are still trying to reach it. 43/50.



## [The Athletic / NHL rumblings: Latest on Canucks-Miller, Blue Jackets-Provorov, Penguins' plans, Oilers' needs and more](#)

By Pierre LeBrun – January 23, 2025

It has been yet another eventful several days in the ongoing J.T. Miller–Vancouver Canucks affair.

How close did a trade come with the New York Rangers over the weekend? Not as close as some might have thought. He never would have played if the ball was at the goal line. But renewed talks with the Rangers culminated Saturday with Miller at the very least being on high alert at the possibility of being moved there.

And then it didn't happen.

So, where are we now? As of Tuesday evening, here's what I've been able to find out via several inquiries with league sources:

The Canucks and Miller have communicated clearly that a trade is the likeliest end result. There's no clear timeline, however, on when that can be accomplished. It could be this week, could be closer to the March 7 trade deadline, could be this summer. All three options remain on the table.

Miller still hasn't been asked to waive his full no-move clause during this process, which dates back six or seven weeks to the first wave of Rangers-Canucks trade talks. Miller also hasn't given the Canucks a list of preferred destinations, but there is an understanding among everyone involved of the parameters — of the kind of team that would make sense for him.

We'll see whether that trade scenario with the Rangers can be brought back in some form and pushed across the finish line, but in the meantime, there are other teams to monitor on Miller.

As I discussed on TSN's Insider Trading on Tuesday evening, the Carolina Hurricanes and New Jersey Devils are among a handful of teams that have also had talks with Vancouver. The Canes are very much interested and trying to figure out if there's something they can do that makes sense. The Devils are a more recent participant. There are internal questions in New Jersey about whether it makes sense to go all-in. But imagine a world in which you could go Jack Hughes, J.T. Miller and Nico Hischier down the middle.

The Dallas Stars are another team to keep an eye on. They have all of their Tyler Seguin cap money (\$9.85 million average annual value) to spend eventually, and I do think Miller would waive for the Stars.

One thing that's important to note: When these Miller trade talks with teams started several weeks ago, the Canucks were telling teams they needed apples to apples in a trade. They didn't want to do a futures deal because they were intent on staying in playoff contention. But now the Canucks have relented on that to some degree, knowing that Cup-contending teams don't want to disrupt their core and Vancouver would do a futures deal if it made sense.

But they've also told teams over the past few days that they're not giving him away.

A reminder that Miller is in Season 2 of a seven-year, \$56 million deal carrying an \$8 million AAV.

### **Jackets and Provorov**

My understanding is that Columbus Blue Jackets general manager Don Waddell and defenseman Ivan Provorov's agent, Mark Gandler, had a chat last week and agreed to talk again soon.

The pending unrestricted free agent is very open to signing an extension with Columbus. At least at the outset of these talks, there's a mutual desire to see if there's a way to get something done.

But I also think that Provorov, who turned 28 last week, will be seeking a maximum eight-year contract extension. I'm not convinced the Jackets would be comfortable with that, in part because of what they have coming up the pipeline. Provorov is earning \$6.75 million this season and obviously will also be looking for a raise given the rising salary cap and his importance on the team. Provorov is second on the team in ice time behind only Norris Trophy contender Zach Werenski.

Which is also why there are several Cup contenders keeping an eye on where this is headed.

If the sides can't agree to an extension as we get closer to March 7, and if the Jackets get a first-round pick offered for Provorov, I believe they would prioritize the bigger picture and deal him regardless of where they are in the standings and playoff race.

But again, both sides appear to have good intentions as their dialogue begins on a possible extension.

### **Penguins' deadline plan**

There should be no confusion about the Penguins front office's priorities ahead of the March 7 trade deadline. They are steadfast in seeking to acquire young NHL players, prospects and draft picks — in that order — to build their team back into a contender.

Lots of work ahead on that front, to be sure.

But the idea that there will be some massive fire sale ahead of March 7 also would be an exaggeration, if for no other reason than the fact the team doesn't have that many notable pending UFAs.

Obviously, 2025 UFA defenseman Marcus Pettersson will be of interest. But beyond that, all of the recognizable or useful names on the roster have term past this season. That doesn't mean they can't be traded, but so-called "hockey trades" are more difficult to pull off in-season. Usually, there are more suitors and a more flexible marketplace in the summer.

Again, the Penguins' game plan is clear, but whether they can get much done before March 7 remains to be seen. GM Kyle Dubas will do what he can, for sure, but it probably won't be at the level some people expect. It certainly won't be for lack of trying.

### **Even after Klingberg signing, Oil could add another D**

With playoff depth in mind, the Oilers could very well add another defender before the March 7 trade deadline even after the John Klingberg signing Friday.

It's possible the focus there would be more for a shutdown/penalty-killing type. Having said that, after a slow start to the season, Edmonton's PK is top five in the league since November. Mattias Ekholm and Ty Emberson are tops among defensemen in penalty-kill usage, followed by Brett Kulak and Darnell Nurse — and those four overall have been really good. So it's not an urgent need as much as it wouldn't hurt to add depth there.

As it stands now — and injuries can change things — the Oilers are thinking more along the lines of a depth-type add than a bigger name. They feel they have seven solid guys. With a long playoff run again in mind, depth on the blue line is never a bad idea.

### **When will formal CBA talks start?**

Commissioner Gary Bettman told media at the Board of Governors the second week of December that he hoped to start official bargaining with the NHL Players' Association in February.

I checked Tuesday, and nothing formal is scheduled yet. But the parties have been in discussions on an informal basis since mid-December, which is very important to point out. There's been a steady flow of communication between the sides. So while nothing official is scheduled quite yet — and remember that both the league and NHLPA hierarchies will be together at 4 Nations next month — all signs still point to everyone involved wanting to get at this sooner rather than later.

## [Sportsnet.ca / 32 Thoughts: How record revenues in NHL could impact salary cap, next CBA](#)

By Elliott Friedman – January 23, 2025

When it comes to future salary ceilings, the question is not only when we will get clarity — but will we get it beyond 2025-26?

As prophesied in the current collective bargaining agreement, the 2025-26 cap will be approximately \$92.5 million — although the NHL and NHLPA can agree to lift it higher. At the December Board of Governors meeting, NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman indicated those discussions will occur, and for good reason. When the two sides negotiated the COVID-19 CBA in 2020, the cap was “de-linked” from a 50-50 revenue split, with guardrails in place in case economies did not recover from lockdowns. A strong post-COVID surge — with Bettman projecting a record \$6.6 billion (USD) in revenues this season — indicates there is plenty of room for a larger bump.

According to several sources, the league and union are not just negotiating a 2025-26 number, but beyond that. It depends on who you talk to but, if this works out, we could get up to two additional seasons solidified.

On his Agent Provocateur podcast this week, Allan Walsh said, “I am telling you right now, the upper limit of the salary cap next year will be \$97 million,” adding it could reach \$105 million by 2027-28. Walsh has better sources than I do, so he’s got better detail on numbers. But it fits with the salary cap being set for three seasons. Also, what stood out to me was his use of the word “smoothing.”

The NBA had a massive jump in the summer of 2016: \$24.1 million, and in retrospect, both owners and players hated it. Too much chaos and jealousy — the gigantic bump allowed the Golden State Warriors to sign Kevin Durant, prolonging their dynasty. In their new CBA, both sides agreed the cap can't increase by more than 10 per cent from one season to next.

That’s smoothing.

There are reasons for the NHL and its players to support this approach. Some organizations — even well-run ones — are nervous about an \$110 million cap, especially those whose revenues come in Canadian funds. Right now, two-thirds of the league is within \$2 million of the top. It’s going to be very interesting to see how much that changes as things rise.

As for the players, easing the pop allows more than one free-agent class to benefit. And, it protects them from their most-hated word: escrow. (When Scott Moore hired me at Sportsnet, he told me I’d get fired if he heard the word escrow. Thank God he’s not here now.) If the cap goes high and revenues drop, their escrow percentage rises. That’s the reverse of what they want. So, slight caution is smart for them, too.

There is hope this will happen in advance of the March 7 trade deadline — so teams and players can make more informed decisions. If it does, there’s also reason to be optimistic in CBA negotiations. If the financials are sorted out, what on earth could stop a deal?

### THOUGHTS

1. Bad news for Team Sweden as Jacob Markstrom will “miss some time,” according to Sheldon Keefe, after getting hurt Wednesday against Boston. Linus Ullmark is a question, too, and now there is concern

that whatever lingering injury is bothering William Karlsson could cause him to miss the Four Nations Face-Off. We should get clarity soon. Hopefully, everything works out for him.

**2.** The wish is that Markstrom recovers as quick as possible. One thing to remember: if Jake Allen plays 40 games, the Canadiens get a second-round selection at the upcoming draft. If not, it's a third. (He's at 15.)

**3.** Mercifully, Connor McDavid threw cold water on the red-hot takery coming out of his suspension, saying Wednesday while he thought it "might've been a little harsh, I understand their decision and have to move on." I was slightly surprised that a few players indicated they felt McDavid's previous suspension — a two-gamer in 2019 — shouldn't have factored in. The reason: they felt it wasn't relevant to this play and also thought three games was too many. "I just don't think anyone benefits from him being out three games," was a common thought. You don't hear that rationale too often. McDavid also said, "A penalty in the first is a penalty in the third, and a penalty in October is a penalty in April." When McDavid was on the Competition Committee, that was his consistent comment. Call the rulebook.

**4.** I was talking with another executive who said the Oilers and their opponents will be on high alert for how games are called in the aftermath. Do the Oilers get more power plays? Is there any bias against them? Teams worry about overcompensation. The situations are not comparable, but Calgary's penalty count went from 30th to fourth after Dennis Wideman high-sticked a linesman in 2016. So the paranoia exists.

**5.** Vancouver coach Rick Tocchet had a great line when asked if Conor Garland would face any repercussions during the rematch Thursday in Edmonton. "Yeah, he held a guy. So is that 'Wanted' posters?" This is why McDavid and Tyler Myers were guaranteed two games. If there's an opportunity for the league to turn down the heat in a rematch, it will. Possible the teams get warned, too.

**6.** Mikko Rantanen and Colorado need a deadline. Deadlines spur action. No more bluffing, true cards on the table. The big question: do the Avalanche consider March 7 to be that deadline, or are they willing to take their chances if he's unsigned by then? Even though Gabriel Landeskog signed in late July 2021, no one thought he was going to leave. Does everyone feel the same here?

**7. Team to WATCH:** Carolina. They are active, ready to pounce.

**8.** The Hurricanes and Rangers are two of the teams with permission to talk to J.T. Miller. Believe the New York offer was Filip Chytil, a first-rounder and a prospect. I get very mixed messages on New Jersey. The Rangers have the cap room to do it, but the Devils would need to perform roster surgery to pull it off. Yes, they struggled until pounding Boston on Wednesday, but that's a good team. I'm not convinced about Dallas, either. I always assume I'm missing something, though.

**9.** Elias Pettersson communicated to the Canucks he wishes to stay. We will see how all of this unfolds.

**10.** A few days after frustrated comments to a Slovakian newspaper, things have cooled down around Simon Nemec. The Devils communicated to anyone who asked they have zero interest in the dealing the 2022 second-overall selection. If anything, the Olympic qualifier injury last August hurt his chances of making New Jersey. Things will reset next fall. Let's see what unfolds then.

**11.** With all of the noise around the Penguins, I believe they have interest in some of Buffalo's younger, NHL-ready prospects. It fits what they want.

**12.** Columbus has little interest in mid-round picks for its unrestricted free agents. Everyone's rooting for them, and I'd go for it too, instead of accepting a low price. A couple of the players referred to captain Boone Jenner, injured before the season, as "our deadline acquisition."

**13.** Jack Johnson, in Toronto Wednesday with Columbus, said he wants to play one more season. That would be 20 years in the NHL, including the five games he played in 2006-07 after leaving the University of Michigan.

**14.** One executive reached out during the David Carle coaching discourse to say that the average salary for a first-time head coach is \$1.4M. I still think someone makes a legit run, but it would be a leap for his peer group.

**15.** The Blue Jackets had a great social media spot on Monday, hours before Ohio State won the NCAA football championship. Several players wore Buckeye jerseys upon arrival on Long Island for their game against the Islanders. None were the team's Michiganders. Johnson joked they were "separated" from those players, while Zach Werenski added, "There's no chance I'd be doing that."

**16.** Our Werenski interview will air on Friday's podcast. He's great, and one story stood out. There was a game this year where a Blue Jacket made an extra move at the blueline, causing teammates to go offside. A television timeout followed. One of the other players was frustrated, and, if you were really looking for it, you could see it. Werenski skated up to that player, said something, softening him into giving an encouraging tap to the offending puckhandler. "There are so many emotions within a hockey game, right? I just feel like in certain situations there's a time and place to hold teammates accountable, for sure. Don't give anyone any advantage if they see us bickering at each other or fans or whatever. Let's just handle that by ourselves in the room...It's something I wouldn't have done two years ago or maybe even last year. But I feel like with where we're at, we're so close to where we want to be. I feel like those are big moments. They're small things, but they're big moments within the team." Don't let anyone see you sweat? "Exactly. Don't give them any advantages."

**17.** I felt really old when Charlie Coyle informed me he is the second-oldest Bruin. I was 21 when he was born.

**18.** Tom McVie died this week at age 89. Very, very friendly, he had one of the most distinctive voices in the sport, gravelly and unmistakable. At one of the Roger Neilson coaches' clinics, Dave Barr, who played 614 NHL games, told a phenomenal story about playing for McVie on the 1991-92 New Jersey Devils. Barr got stripped carrying the puck in his own zone, leading to a breakaway. Their goalie made the save, but Barr, charging back as hard as he could to make up for his mistake, knocked the puck into his own net. An absolutely disastrous shift. Sitting on the bench, "I could feel (McVie's) eyes burning holes through me," Barr laughed years later. "Finally he yelled, 'Not only did you get the goal, you also got an assist!' All I could see what my teammates around me, shaking as they tried to hold their laughter."

## [Sportsnet.ca / Sportsnet's 2025 NHL Draft Rankings: January Edition](#)

By Sam Cosentino – January 23, 2025

The last month has given great context to the 2025 NHL draft class. Scouts have been able to view players in a number of different and difficult environments, with the world juniors being the most prominent of those events. The 2025 edition featured three of the projected top four picks in the upcoming draft.

Our projected first overall pick in this month's rankings, Matthew Schaefer of Erie, played just four periods at the WJC in Ottawa, but his time leading up to that, including a phenomenal showing at the CHL/USA Prospects Challenge, has vaulted him to the top of the class. Not to mention what his absence meant to Canada.

Being dethroned as the projected first overall pick for the first time in this space, American James Hagens performed exactly as expected at the world juniors. He played a key role as an underaged player on a gold medal-winning team. He was the seventh-most played forward in the tournament averaging over 20 minutes per game, while anchoring the Americans' top line. His nine points and plus-9 rating also finished in ties for third amongst all participants.

Porter Martone, like his Canadian teammate Schaefer, also missed a couple of world junior games. The scuttlebutt was that his time off was due to healthy scratches, but Martone was dealing with a groin issue that played at least a part in the decision to sit him. When he was in the lineup he played to his strengths, working the corners as well as the net front. Martone also performed well in the first-ever OHL Prospects Game, adding an assist to his overtime game-winning goal.

Michael Misa of OHL Saginaw is the fourth player who is in the conversation to go first overall. The exceptional player didn't get invited to Canada's world junior camp, but tore up the OHL while the others were away.

While Schaefer has emerged as the top defenceman, there is a gap to the next highest rated d-man in Jackson Smith of WHL Tri-City. As he continues to play a heavy schedule on North American ice, WHL Seattle's Radim Mrtka is headed towards a push into the top 10, but is currently outside that range. With a mix of forwards, centres and wingers all jockeying for position, it will be a fun ride in the second half.

Prince George netminder Joshua Ravensbergen continues to be the top rated goalie, with Brampton's Jack Ivankovic located near the bottom of my top 32. NHL Central Scouting has three other North American goalies rated after Ravensbergen and ahead of Ivankovic. Central Scouting's European goalie list also has some interesting options, including world junior top goalie Petteri Rimpinen. It will be interesting to track the netminders throughout the rest of the season, be it with their club teams or those who will participate in the world under-18 championships in April. This begs the question: how many goalies will eventually be picked in Round 1 of the draft? At this point, I still have just the two North Americans in this month's list.

As we know, defencemen and centres hold the greatest draft value. There's no shortage of high-end centre depth which, when added to the three top rated defencemen, should make for a diverse positional array of players picked with the top 10. We also have players in all sizes spread throughout the first round, from Arizona State's 5-foot-10 Cullen Potter, to Seattle's hulking defenceman, the 6-foot-6 Mrtka.

In a broader sense, it's a banner year for North American players. It's safe to say we've moved past the pandemic effect and into a golden age of North American-trained players. The pandemic definitely saw CHL draft numbers negatively impacted, especially in the top third of the draft. That trend will reverse this year, with as many as 20 CHL players likely to be taken in Round 1. That number sat at 15 last year.

More curiously, there's just one player from Russia on this list. Things have loosened up slightly in terms of scouts being able to get over there, but there remains plenty of intrigue as to how Russian players fit in the draft landscape.

It's definitely a down year for Finnish prospects. As usual, there's a number of Swedish prospects in the conversation. There's a smattering of Slovakian and Czechia-born players, with most of them entering the fray beyond Round 1. The 2025 first round will be less geographically diverse than it was last year, when we saw seven different countries represented, including two Norwegian-born players.

Typically at this time of year, fans start to become more interested in the NHL draft as their team's playoff fate is more clear. That's not quite the case this season. As of writing on Jan. 22, eight teams were within five points of the wildcard in the East, while six teams in the West were within six points of playoff contention. In total, 26 of 32 NHL teams woke up this morning thinking there's still a ticket to the Stanley Cup tournament available, and as a result, less concern about looking ahead to the future.

In the meantime, here's how things shake down for the month of January.

**No. 1: Matthew Schaefer, D, 6-foot-1, 183 pounds, Erie Otters (OHL)**

As brilliant as his play was in key games at the world juniors, his absence for Canada was equally as noticeable and evidence as to why he's the top rated player in this class.

**No. 2: James Hagens, C, 5-foot-11, 177 pounds, Boston College (NCAA)**

He played to his identity for the gold medal Americans at the world juniors. He anchored the tournament's top line and wasn't a liability defensively.

**No. 3: Porter Martone, RW, 6-foot-3, 208 pounds, Brampton Steelheads (OHL)**

Was slowed by groin issues at the world juniors, but showed enough to maintain his spot amongst the top three prospects this draft class has available.

**No. 4: Michael Misa, C, 6-foot-1, 184 pounds, Saginaw Spirit (OHL)**

At the very least, he should've been invited to Canada's world junior camp. Since the snub, has put up 26 points over his past 13 games.

**No. 5: Caleb Desnoyers, C, 6-foot-2, 178 pounds, Moncton Wildcats (QMJHL)**

By the time we get to the draft, he may very well end up being a top three pick. His details and compete level present a game mature beyond his years.

**No. 6: Victor Eklund, LW, 5-foot-11, 161 pounds, Djurgardens (Allsvenskan)**

He's so well aware of open ice, and does great work quietly finding it. Despite being a little light, he will engage and often win battles using elusiveness and a quick stick.

**No. 7: Anton Frondell, C, 6-foot-1, 198 pounds, Djurgardens (Allsvenskan)**

Utilizes his size well to present a solid, two-way game. His season has been slowed by injury, but if he can maintain his health and continue his fine play, he too may find himself amongst the top three.

**No. 8: Jackson Smith, D, 6-foot-3, 195 pounds, Tri-City Americans (WHL)**



Is rounding into form by continuing to develop his physical game. Keeps good gaps and projects to provide at least secondary offence at the next level.

**No. 9: Roger McQueen, C, 6-foot-5, 197 pounds, Brandon Wheat Kings (WHL)**

There is a cautionary tale here based on what we saw last year with Cayden Lindstrom going fourth to Columbus. With everyone else healthy and playing, it's hard to use eight early-season games and a good draft minus-one season to project McQueen over the group ahead of him.

**No. 10: Jake O'Brien, C, 6-foot-2, 172 pounds, Brantford Bulldogs (OHL)**

Gaining strength will be key for a player willing to play the game all over the ice. He has the ability to control the pace of the game when the puck's on his stick. A dual threat.

**No. 11: Ivan Ryabkin, C, 6-feet, 198 pounds, Muskegon Lumberjacks (USHL)**

After making the move over from Russia mid-season, we will need to see a full month of games in North America before we can start making the apples to apples comparison on Ryabkin.

**No. 12: Brady Martin, C, 6-feet, 178 pounds, Sault Ste. Marie Greyhounds (OHL)**

Martin's ranking has grown along with his play as the year has gone on. He's the type of player you need multiple viewings of in order to properly appreciate his game.

**No. 13: Carter Bear, LW, 6-feet, 179 pounds, Everett Silvertips (WHL)**

Excels in every facet of the game. He can play with pace, play defence, make offence, score and generally elevate his teammates.

**No. 14: Radim Mrtka, D, 6-foot-6, 207 pounds, Seattle Thunderbirds (WHL)**

Has adjusted seamlessly to play in North America despite fits and starts just after his arrival. The blend of size, skating and puck moving ability in a right shot defenceman is extremely rare.

**No. 15: Malcolm Spence, LW, 6-foot-1, 203 pounds, Erie Otters (OHL)**

Consistency is the key element in his game. Like few others his age, Spence brings consistent effort, point production and defensive detail to the table each night.

**No. 16: Logan Hensler, D, 6-foot-2, 192 pounds, Wisconsin (NCAA)**

Was serviceable for the US at the world juniors in a third-pairing role. Skating and agility are his best assets. What that translates to at the next level is uncertain.

**No. 17: Milton Gastrin, C, 6-feet, 185 pounds, MODO (Sweden J20)**

Similar in style and stature to Liam Ohgren, who Minnesota picked 19th overall in the 2022 NHL Draft. Gastrin doesn't excel in any one area, but plays a solid, honest game with some undercover skill. Like Ohgren, Gastrin will get NHL games before many expect.

**No. 18: Cameron Reid, D, 6-feet, 193 pounds, Kitchener Rangers (OHL)**

Has rebounded after two pedestrian showings at the CHL/USA Prospects Challenge in November, and earned player of the game honours for Team East at the OHL Prospects game.

**No. 19: Jack Nesbitt, C, 6-foot-4, 185 pounds, Windsor Spitfires (OHL)**

Was less refined at this point last year, but is tracking along the lines of teammate Liam Greentree who ended up going 26th to Los Angeles in the 2024 NHL Draft.

**No. 20: Ben Kindel, C, 5-foot-10, 176 pounds, Calgary Hitmen (WHL)**

Extremely intelligent player who rarely takes a shift off. There's a little Brayden Point in Kindel. He thinks the game at an elite level and, at the same point in their careers, their skating looks a little awkward.

**No. 21: Kashawn Aitcheson, D, 6-foot-2, 196 pounds, Barrie Colts (OHL)**

Teams love his old-school approach and positive attitude. He's not likely to provide the offence level of offence at the next level that he does in junior.

**No. 22: Joshua Ravensbergen, G, 6-foot-5, 190 pounds, Prince George Cougars (WHL)**

His numbers look a little worse than last year, but his size will always be attractive. A calm, patient approach with a long developmental runway is the best path a team should take with this player.

**No. 23: Braeden Cootes, C, 6-feet, 183 pounds, Seattle Thunderbirds (WHL)**

Pro habits on and off the ice make him a safe pick. Even if he's not producing, he's good enough to impact the game in other areas.

**No. 24: Justin Carbonneau, RW, 6-foot-1, 191 pounds, Blainville-Boisbriand Armada (QMJHL)**

His skating stride could be a little more compact and efficient, but he gets to where he needs to go on time. He's strong on his stick, yet still has soft hands to protect pucks and make plays.

**No. 25: Lynden Lakovic, LW, 6-foot-4, 190 pounds, Moose Jaw Warriors (WHL)**

If he can find consistency in both effort and hard physical play, he will be a force at the next level. Absent those elements, he is still a super skilled player with size.

**No. 26: William Moore, C, 6-foot-2, 175 pounds, USNTDP**

It's been a bit of a roller coaster ride for a player thought to be in top 10 consideration at the start of the season. He's back to using his smarts and creativity and is producing at a level we expected at the start of the season. Without doubt, Moore is one of the most polarizing figures in this draft class.

**No. 27: Cameron Schmidt, RW, 5-foot-8, 161 pounds, Vancouver Giants (WHL)**

Immediately thinking of Alex DeBrincat and Cole Caufield, Schmidt is a smaller player who can shoot the lights out. The challenge will be developing his overall game to still be a contributor if he's not scoring.

**No. 28: William Horcoff, C, 6-foot-5, 190 pounds, University of Michigan (NCAA)**

Leaving the USNTDP for Michigan mid-season was a bold move, but the right one for a player who plays a pro-style game that's better suited for the structure seen at that level. NHL bloodlines (father Shawn) will always be a contributing factor in the draft process.

**No. 29: Sascha Boumedienne, D, 6-foot-1, 175 pounds, Boston University (NCAA)**

The youngest player in college hockey at the toughest position has been challenged to produce points, but when matched up against his peer group, he belongs.

**No. 30: Jack Ivankovic, G, 5-foot-11, 178 pounds, Brampton Steelheads (OHL)**

He is the only sub-6-foot goalie of the 48 listed by NHL Central Scouting, which includes goalies from North America and Europe. But all he does is stop pucks.

**No. 31: Jack Murtagh, LW, 6-foot-1, 200 pounds, USNTDP**

Has emerged as a top prospect on this year's edition of the USNTDP. He works hard, goes to all areas of the ice and has enough skill to convert the turnovers he creates.

**No. 32: Bill Zonnon, C, 6-foot-2, 185 pounds, Rouyn-Noranda Huskies (QMJHL)**

Ended 2024 with a six-point night. He hasn't been as consistent here in the new year, but there's plenty to like about him. He has shown a willingness to play a complete game and there's lots of room to add to his frame.

## [TSN.CA / Schaefer a unanimous No. 1 in McKenzie's Mid-season Draft Ranking](#)

By Bob McKenzie – January 23, 2025

No play; no problem.

Even though Matthew Schaefer broke his collarbone while playing for Canada at the World Junior Championship - undergoing surgery to repair it on Dec. 30 - and won't play another game until April, if at all this season, he cruised to the No. 1 spot in TSN's Mid-Season 2025 NHL Draft Rankings.

It wasn't particularly close either.

The Erie Otter defenceman was a unanimous No. 1 selection in TSN's survey of 10 NHL club team scouts. The survey was conducted between Jan. 7-14 - after the WJC but just prior to the Ontario Hockey League Top Prospects and USA Hockey Top Prospects Games on Jan. 15 and 16, respectively.

"As far as I'm concerned," one NHL head scout said, "[Schaefer] is No. 1 and he's staying there - even if he never plays another game this season."

It was a common refrain.

Not only did Schaefer garner all 10 first-place votes, seven of the 10 scouts declared there is a "substantial" gap between the Stoney Creek, Ont., native and the rest of the 2025 draft class. Two others described the gap as "moderate," but one said it was only "minuscule."

"I suppose it's possible [Schaefer] not playing and those other guys playing could close the gap," another scout said. "And, who knows? Maybe on draft day (reportedly June 27 in Los Angeles) someone other than Schaefer will go No. 1, but I don't think so. He's in a class all by himself."

Boston College freshman centre James Hagens, who was No. 1 on TSN's pre-season list in September, is No. 2 on the mid-season rankings. Saginaw Spirit centre Michael Misa, who was No. 7 in September, is No. 3, followed by Brampton Steelheads right winger Porter Martone (No. 4 in September) at No. 4 and Swedish centre Anton Frondell (3) at No. 5.

"I obviously can't speak for other [NHL] teams," added a third scout, "but the only race I see now is for No. 2."

The dissenting view goes to the scout who described the gap between Schaefer and the rest of the field as extremely narrow.

"With those two centres [Hagens and Misa] right behind him there, and with Schaefer not playing, it still could be a close call [on draft day] for someone," the scout said.

But as long as there are no lingering issues with Schaefer's surgically repaired collarbone, the conventional wisdom is that it will be really difficult for an NHL team picking first overall to go by a dynamic top-pair defenceman who could very well have every attribute you look for in a true No. 1 blueliner.

Schaefer is a marvelous skater who can move the puck up the ice quickly with his feet or his hands. His offensive instincts are top notch. He can make plays; he can score goals. He's totally fearless — the broken collarbone happened while driving hard to the net — and he's constantly looking to be in attack mode. He can run a power play; he can walk the blueline and get shots through from the point, and even if he's caught deep in the offensive zone on offensive forays, he can swiftly race back into defensive position

Without the puck, he can defend physically or cerebrally. He has a great stick; his gap control is excellent. He's a premier penalty killer and his game is suited to all situations in all zones.

Until he was injured in the second game of the WJC, against Latvia, he was Canada's best and most noticeable player.

No one wants to saddle him with the burden of unrealistic expectations, but when the NHL scouts were asked to identify NHL players with similar playing styles, not to be confused with anyone saying he will be a Hall of Famer or Norris Trophy winner, the comparables were quite favourable.

Scott Niedermayer and Miro Heiskanen were mentioned on more than one occasion.

"Think a left-shot Cale Makar," added another.

Others included Luke Hughes, Rasmus Dahlin, Shea Theodore and Zach Werenski.

Schaefer is still only 17 years old. He doesn't turn 18 until Sept. 5, and just misses being eligible for the 2026 NHL draft by 10 days.

Schaefer's recovery time from his surgery was estimated to be approximately three months. If all were to go well on that timeline, the defenceman would hypothetically be able to return by the end of March or early April.

But the OHL regular season ends on March 23. Erie would probably have to get out of the first round of the playoffs to entertain any notion of a possible return this season for Schaefer, although one could reasonably question the wisdom of inserting Schaefer back into the heat of the OHL playoffs coming off a three-month absence.

Especially given his status as the clear No. 1 prospect in this draft.

Three of the next four prospects rated after Schaefer on the TSN mid-season list are centres.

At No. 2, Boston College freshman pivot Hagens played well for Team USA en route to a gold-medal performance at the WJC. He got off to a bit of a slow start at BC this season.

Hagens is not quite 6 feet tall (5-foot-10 1/2, 177 pounds), which is probably why the scouts are projecting him more as a second-line centre than a first liner in the NHL. But he's a smart and skilled player, probably a better playmaker than goal scorer, but he certainly has the ability to finish.

Seven of our 10-scout panel slotted Hagens at No. 2.

Saginaw centre Misa, who has 37 goals in 38 games this season, vaulted up from No. 7 in the pre-season to No. 3 now. One scout ranked Misa second overall; five others had him at No. 3.

"He's a centre with nice size, high-end skill and elite scoring ability," said the scout who ranked Misa No. 2.

Some scouts wonder if he'll be a better NHL winger than centre, but he's expected to make his mark offensively in either spot.

Brampton 6-foot-2 3/4, 208-pound winger Martone remains in the No. 4 slot, where he was in September. He didn't play particularly well for Canada at the WJC — he was not alone on that front — but draft-eligible players are rarely penalized for failing to make an impact at the WJC.

His blend of size and belligerence, to go along with his shooting ability and nose for the net, is highly coveted. Two scouts ranked him second overall behind only Schaefer; three others had him at No. 3 and the rest at No. 4.

“I really like Martone’s ability to get inside,” said one of the scouts who ranked him at No. 2. “Five-on-five goals are hard to come by and he does some of his best work in the hard areas.”

Martone’s skating is more good than great, but his other attributes keep him solidly in the top four mix, with lots of stylistic comparisons to Ryan Smith and Corey Perry.

The top five is rounded out by Frondell, the Swedish centre who excelled at the World Junior A Challenge tourney in December.

“He’s a strong, detailed-oriented, 200-foot centre,” said a scout who ranked him third overall.

Frondell probably played better last season than he did this season. He had to deal with some early season injuries that slowed him out of the gate, but he’s been ramping it up since the Jr. A Challenge.

#### **The balance of TSN’s mid-season Top 10 is as follows:**

**No. 6: Caleb Desnoyers.** The Moncton Wildcat is viewed as perhaps the most complete two-way centre in the draft who projects in the NHL as a second-line centre or, worst case scenario, an elite third-line shutdown centre.

“Think a Phil Danault-style player,” said one scout.

Desnoyers was ranked as high as No. 5 by one scout and no lower than No. 10. He’s viewed as a safe and secure pick. If you believe his offence will pop at the pro level, he’s a top five consideration.

**No. 7: Roger McQueen.** The 6-foot-5 Brandon Wheat King centre has all the physical tools — size, strength, skating and skill — to be a top-two-line centre in the NHL, but there’s a big injury cloud hanging over his head.

McQueen hasn’t played since Oct. 11, with what has been reported as a lower-body injury. Some scouts believe it’s a lower-back ailment. It has been suggested he won’t be back in the lineup until February.

The scouts are mostly ranking him now as if he’s a healthy player, which they acknowledge he most certainly is not. So, his No. 7 ranking, down just one spot from the pre-season, has a gigantic asterisk beside it.

“We have at him at five right now,” said one scout, “but it’s really just a placeholder until we get some clarity on his health.”

“If the draft were being held tomorrow, he would be a ‘no draft’ for us,” said another scout who also ranked him fifth overall on his talent and potential, when healthy. “Without a lot more information and seeing all medical reports, we’re just not comfortable taking that chance.”

**No. 8: Victor Eklund.** The younger brother of San Jose young gun William Eklund, Victor is a sub-six-foot winger who plays a speedy, high-energy two-way game with a nice skill level. He projects as a top nine NHL forward who could elevate to top six.

**No. 9: Jake O’Brien.** The Brantford Bulldogs 6-foot-2 centre has elite hockey sense, high-end playmaking ability and is a wizard on the half wall on the power play. He has moved up from No. 14 on the pre-season list. The scouts ranked him as high as sixth and as low as 17th.

**No. 10: Jackson Smith.** The 6-foot- Tri City American defenceman is raw but athletic. He’s an elite skater with an NHL frame and can play with some bite but it’s his physical tools and two-way approach that is attractive. Ultimately, though it’s his blend of speed, size and strength that has him in the top 10.

Scouts ranked him as high as No. 8 and as low as No. 19.

Like pretty much every year, the scouts are enamored of the 2025 crop of talent available in the top 10. Actually, make that the top 15. Beyond that, though, the consensus seems to be that the class of 2025 lacks depth of talent.

“As good as the top guys are this year,” one scout said, “I’d be surprised if anyone from this draft plays in the NHL next season.”

“Nos. 1 to 8 are quite strong, but there’s a bit of a drop off after eight and then again a bigger drop off between 15 and 20,” said another scout.

One scout went so far as to say a lot of the players who will be drafted in the bottom half of the first round would in prior years be better suited to being second-round picks.

“It’s all relative of course,” the scout said, “but I’d say the second rounders this year would be third rounders in previous years where there was greater depth.”

#### **A few other notes from TSN’s Mid-Season rankings:**

- The top-rated Russian is forward Ivan Ryabkin, who slots in at No. 19 after starting the season at No. 5. In fact, Ryabkin is the only Russian in TSN’s Top 32.

When the season began, it was anticipated Ryabkin could or would follow in the footsteps of Matvei Michkov (seventh overall to Philadelphia in 2023) and Ivan Demidov (fifth overall to Montreal in 2024) as a blue-chip Russian top-10 talent.

But Ryabkin’s season got off to an inauspicious beginning and he terminated his contract with Dynamo Moscow to join the Muskegon Lumberjacks of the USHL. He scored three goals in his first four games before getting a three-game suspension for slew-footing. He’s back playing now.

Scouts are still hopeful he’ll re-establish his game and move back up the ladder into Top 10 contention, but if he fails to get traction in the USHL, he could slip and slide some more.

Eight of the 10 scouts on the TSN panel still ranked him as a first rounder, as high as 11th overall, but there was a wide variance amongst them, including the two scouts who had him well into the second round.

- One goaltender, Prince George Cougar Joshua Ravensbergen, landed in TSN’s Top 32 at No. 28.

Eight of 10 scouts surveyed had him in their Top 32 and all eight said he was their No. 1 goaltending prospect in this draft. Ravensbergen is 6-foot-5. He’s big and athletic, and while some scouts say he’s not performed as well this season as he did in his rookie WHL season when he seemed to come out of nowhere, he’s still viewed as having gigantic potential.

There are other goalies who are drawing significant attention, even though they didn’t climb into the Top 32.

Brampton Steelhead Jack Ivankovic is the consensus No. 2 netminder. He’s ranked at No. 48. Ivankovic has been phenomenal in the OHL this season but suffers from a scouting malady that isn’t easy to overcome, at least in terms of rankings. That is, he’s listed as 5-foot-11.

No scout rated Ivankovic higher than No. 32 but most pegged him as a solid second-round prospect, which is a testament to his talent because a lot of 5-foot-11 goalies don’t get the time of day from NHL scouts.

London Knight Alexei Medvedev, a Russian, is the next goalie in our Top 80, landing at No. 61. He’s followed by two more Russians who play in Russia — Semyon Frolov at No. 64 and Pyotr Andreyanov at 71.

It's not a banner year for Russian skaters but it's obviously a deep year for Russian stoppers.

- One of the most intriguing prospects in this year's draft is Oshawa General 6-foot-5 defenceman Simon Wang.

He checks in at No. 31, with one scout ranking him as high as No. 18 and one not ranking him at all in the top 64.

Wang is Chinese, born in Beijing in 2007 and raised there until he left as a teenager in 2020 to pursue his dream of playing hockey in the NHL.

Wang's father is an official in the Chinese government. His mother, Willa, is heavily involved in sport and, in fact, owned and operated five hockey arenas in China. That's where Simon, or Haoxi (pronounced How-she) as he's known at home, first learned to skate and train. There were tournaments that he played in there but he didn't really play any organized hockey, as such, until he arrived in Canada for his major bantam (U-15) season.

He initially lived in residence at St. Andrew's College in Aurora, Ont. Willa has since come to Canada to be with him and has been instrumental in Simon's hockey development and path.

Simon's goal was to go to school and play NCAA hockey and he got a commitment from Boston University. He was also drafted by the OHL Generals in the fifth round of the 2023 OHL draft. Simon wanted to go to BU because his older brother received a graduate degree from Boston University.

After playing his minor midget (U-16) and OHL draft year season for the North York Rangers of the GTHL, Simon was deciding where to play in the intervening two or three years before attending BU.

That was solved when his mother purchased the Brantford 99ers Ontario Junior Hockey League franchise and he played there last season. Willa moved the franchise from Brantford to King, Ont., in 2024, and Simon started this season with the OJHL's King Rebellion.

When the NCAA eligibility rules changed this season to allow college players to play major junior hockey, Simon joined the OHL Generals in January and now scouts are trying to get a handle on a 6-foot-5 defenceman who is a terrific skater but is a relative neophyte compared to his peers.

Wang could play at BU next season or could choose to stay another year in Oshawa. It's TBD.

Not surprisingly, the scouting opinions on him are all over the map.

As a Chinese born and bred athlete, if Simon is to make it to the NHL it's most certainly going to create a seismic event back in China, where some local media have taken to showing Oshawa General highlights and reporting news stories on Simon's exploits.

In any case, it will be fascinating to see it all play out.