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## Cleveland.com / 3 reasons why Zach Werenski's obsession with making Team USA is exactly what Columbus needs: Blue Jackets season preview 2025-26

By Tim Bielik – October 6, 2025

Back in September at the Blue Jackets media luncheon, Zach Werenski made something clear.

He wants to be in Milan, Italy for the 2026 Winter Olympics representing Team USA.

"Not going to sugarcoat it, but I'm going to be thinking about it every day all year," Werenski said.

"Obviously, I want to do my best here in Columbus for team reasons, and then usually when that stuff works itself out, you end up having individual success. And, yeah, that's my goal. Obviously. I want to be on that team, and it'd be a huge honor. I think it'd be one of the greatest honors you could have to represent your country at the Olympics."

This February's Olympics will be the first in 12 years that NHL players can represent their respective countries. And coming off a career-high 82-point season and a runner-up finish in the Norris Trophy voting to Cale Makar of the Avalanche, Werenski is in a good position to get the call from Team USA.

It will probably require him to keep up his great form from last season, and that should only help the Blue Jackets.

Here are 3 reasons why the Blue Jackets can benefit from Werenski's Olympics push:

### **1. High-end point production**

It's probably not fair to expect Werenski to be at a point-per-game again after never having more than 57 prior to last season.

But maybe it's a sign of ascendancy as he enters his late 20s because his last two seasons have been his best two seasons in terms of scoring.

Werenski's 82 points tied for 20th in the NHL in scoring and second among defensemen to Makar (92).

Clearly, Dean Evason's system was a great fit for Werenski, especially on even strength where the Blue Jackets led the NHL in scoring. Asking him to replicate that might be tough, but if he can get close, he and the Blue Jackets won't be hurting for offense.

### **2. He spends more time on the ice than anyone**

No skater was on the ice more for his team last season than Werenski. In 81 games, Werenski averaged 26 minutes and 45 seconds of ice time. The next closest was Canucks defenseman Quinn Hughes (25:44).

That means on average, Werenski was on the ice for a full minute longer than any player in the entire NHL.

The Blue Jackets should ideally try to pare down his ice time next season. But the fact that he was on the ice that long and still as strong as he was on both ends of the ice speaks to Werenski's value.

According to Advanced Hockey Stats, Werenski was tied for 11th in wins above replacement (4.5) with Jake Guentzel and Sam Reinhart.

When you have such an important player like Werenski on the ice for as long as he is, it obviously bodes well for team success.

### **3. Extra motivation to start an important season**

Werenski and Adam Fantilli both said that this season will be a failure if they miss the playoffs.

They missed the postseason by only two points, and getting off to a hot start is going to be so important to make the playoffs for the first time since 2020.

Werenski's strong performance will be crucial in achieving this.

The typical rule in the NHL is that about 75% of teams in a playoff spot at American Thanksgiving will move onto the playoffs. So getting off to a good start will be so important for every team, including the Blue Jackets.

For a player like Werenski who is not only chasing individual but team goals, he will have extra reason to start hot. If he can, it can only mean good things for the Blue Jackets.

## The Athletic / Blue Jackets Sunday Gathering: Feisty, disruptive Miles Wood looks the part

By Aaron Portzline – October 5, 2025

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

### **Item No. 1: Miles and miles**

If you asked an AI generator to create an image of the quintessential veteran hockey player, it might spit out Miles Wood's headshot. The Blue Jackets' new fourth-line left winger has permanent stubble, a collection of scars and a smile that's missing two teeth.

He has no plans for more dental work.

"I have eight (false) teeth right now," Wood told *The Athletic* this week. "This is who I am, for now. I used to hear about it a lot, but I think everybody knows by now. This is me."

Wood was acquired in June, along with third-line center Charlie Coyle, from the Colorado Avalanche. It's true that Coyle was the focal point of the trade, because the Blue Jackets wanted a third-line upgrade, a right-shot to take faceoffs and another veteran presence.

But there was intrigue with Wood, too, especially since Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason is intent on having a faster, more disruptive forecheck than his club flashed one year ago.

That style of play is in Wood's DNA, and the fact that he's one of the NHL's best skaters — despite his 6-foot-2, 195-pound size — makes it all possible.

"We want him to finish every single check," Evason said. "We want every other player on the team to do the same thing. But it comes naturally to him to do that."

"His foot speed is awesome, right? When you first see him, this big body ... it moves extremely well up and down the ice."

Wood was one of the NHL's top third-line players at the start of his career with the New Jersey Devils, routinely finishing with double-digit goals and 20-plus points while finishing near the top of the club in hits and penalty minutes. Not bad, considering he's played an average of 13 minutes, 5 seconds, per game in his career.

It hasn't been an easy run for Wood, though. When you play his brand of hockey, there are consequences. He played only three games in the 2021-22 season due to hip surgery. He played only 37 games last season with Colorado after having back surgery.

That's probably a bit of a concern for the Blue Jackets, considering Wood is signed through 2028-29 at \$2.5 million per season. But Wood did return to play for the Avalanche down the stretch last season, and he passed his pre-training camp physical.

He was all smiles late last week, even after a long and arduous camp.

"It's crazy," Wood said. "I was fortunate enough to be healthy for eight years of my career. When I came into the league, I was a little too reckless and I got hurt a lot. I would always come back and I'd always be able to play in pain."

That becomes more difficult with age. Wood, who turned 30 in September, said he's learned how to balance playing on the edge but playing smart by working with former NHL forward Ryane Clowe, whose career ended early due to lingering concussion symptoms.

"(Clowe) has helped me to start reading the play before it actually happens," Wood said. "I have that speed. That's the biggest part of my game. I can catch whoever I want, but it's about being a little more patient and smart."

Wood is expected to open the season on the Blue Jackets' fourth line with center Isac Lundestrom and right winger Zach Aston-Reese.

The Jackets made significant changes to the bottom six this summer, with Sean Kuraly, James van Riemsdyk, Justin Danforth and others moving on, and Coyle, Wood and Lundestrom replacing them. Wood said he never had a "what we expect" meeting with the Blue Jackets' coaches.

It wasn't needed.

"They haven't told me much," Wood said. "I've been in the league for 10 years and I've been playing the same way for 10 years. They traded for me because they like my style."

#### **Item No. 2: No mystery**

The deadline to set opening-night rosters across the NHL is 5 p.m. Monday, but the Blue Jackets aren't expected to create any drama between now and then. It's been that way throughout training camp. No setbacks. No surprises.

The Blue Jackets have had a clear path to getting to the league's 23-man roster limit for more than a week now. As it stands, they're at 22 players.

"When I played in Dallas (1993-94), (GM) Bob Gainey brought ... I think we had 26 guys in camp from the start," Evason said. "I like it this way. You've got your team. Honestly, watching practice (on Saturday), we've had enough reps with each other, line combinations, practices to be really sharp.

"We've got some good time here still to practice, and it's been good to really get this team together."

The Blue Jackets have not looked sharp during the preseason, though.

A 2-1 loss on Saturday in Washington, the finale, dropped them to 2-5-0 in exhibition games. The Jackets scored just 14 goals in those seven games. Mathieu Olivier, who led the Blue Jackets with three goals in the preseason, scored the only goal on Saturday.

Two veterans, defenseman Zach Werenski and forward Sean Monahan, did not travel with the club on Saturday, allowing defenseman Jake Christiansen to play on the top pair with Dante Fabbro and Yegor Chinakhov to join the top line with Dmitry Voronkov and Kirill Marchenko. Voronkov switched to center in Monahan's absence.

There's still time for roster moves if GM Don Waddell is interested.

The Blue Jackets were pleased to get goaltender Ivan Fedotov and forward Mikael Pyyhtiä through waivers so they could send them to AHL Cleveland. But they weren't so lucky with defenseman Daemon Hunt, who was acquired last season in a trade that sent David Jiricek to the Minnesota Wild.

Hunt, who had a strong camp, was the final player cut in training camp, and the organization was hoping to sneak him through to Cleveland. But Minnesota claimed him.

The Blue Jackets didn't have to waive Hunt to get down to numbers. And you wonder if he might have gotten through if he landed on waivers on Sunday — the last day to clear players through — when as many as 100 players may hit the waivers wire.

### **Item No. 3: Take 5, Jake Christiansen**

"Take 5" is our weekly brief and (mostly) non-hockey conversation with a Blue Jackets player, coach, broadcaster or staffer. This week, it's Christiansen:

#### **What part of Columbus is home?**

I live in the Short North. I just like the walking distance to the rink, and a lot of the stuff that's walkable in that area. I like a lot of the restaurants. KJ (Kent Johnson) is in the same building as me, so that's nice. The building manager is great. Nice people.

#### **Do you have an irrational fear?**

No, not really. Well, snakes. Is that irrational? I really don't like snakes. I've only seen garter snakes, so nothing too crazy, but I'm still scared of those. And they're not even doing much, right?

#### **Favorite vacation spot?**

I went to Maui a lot when I was younger. It's my favorite spot ever. We used to go there at Christmas as a family. I haven't gone since I started playing junior hockey because you only get a couple of days off (during the season). But I want to get that back on the schedule at some point, maybe when I have a family. I like a white Christmas. The Short North is great at Christmas, but, yeah, Maui.

#### **Guilty pleasure food?**

I don't eat it much, but I like mac and cheese. Homemade would be nice, like in a skillet. Yeah, like really hot. Maybe some bacon bits. There's a place back in Vancouver (his hometown) called the Tap House and it's got the best mac and cheese. It's so good.

#### **Any unpopular opinions?**

I like Nickelback, actually, a lot. That wouldn't be unpopular in (the Blue Jackets' dressing room) at all, but yeah. I think they live in Vancouver, too. I'd love to run into one of them. That'd be sick. I heard (lead singer) Chad Kroeger has a rink in his basement in the (Fraser) Valley. I was thinking it would be such a good thing to play one of our three-on-three summer games there, myself and KJ and Connor (Bedard). I'd love a little road game at his house. Coolest thing ever.

### **Item No. 4: Snacks**

- It's unclear how the Chinakhov situation may play out, but the 24-year-old forward has a new advisor in his ear as of this week. Chinakhov fired his longtime agent, Shumi Babaev, and hired Rick Komarow of Maverick Sports Management, who also counts Blue Jackets winger Dmitry Voronkov as a client. Chinakhov said it was a "personal decision." What it means for Chinakhov's future in Columbus is unclear. The trade request Chinakhov made over the summer — he cited Evason's ice-time allotment as the reason he wanted to play elsewhere — seemed to be put on hold once he arrived in Columbus ahead of training camp and met with Evason. But Chinakhov spent most practices last week on the fourth line, skating as the extra forward. He skated on the top line Saturday night vs. Washington. Stay tuned.

- The Wild are thought to have claimed Hunt off waivers because they need NHL depth in the wake of an injury to defenseman Jonas Brodin. When Brodin is cleared, it's not out of the question that Hunt could end up back on waivers. If that's the case, and if none of the 10 clubs below Minnesota in the

waivers claiming order put in a bid for Hunt, the Blue Jackets could reclaim him and send him directly to AHL Cleveland. Something to watch. (For the first month of the regular season, the waiver-claim pecking order is the inverse order of last year's end-of-season overall standings.)

- When the final horn sounded Saturday night in Washington, the Blue Jackets' training camp was officially in the books. The Blue Jackets now have two off days. They'll do a team-bonding overnight at Double Eagle Golf Club, the exclusive club owned by majority owner John P. McConnell. The next practice is Tuesday, two days before the opener in Nashville.
- Columbus native Jack Roslovic, who had 22 goals last season for the Carolina Hurricanes, remains the NHL's top unsigned free agent. Roslovic has been skating every other day in the Columbus suburbs. He declined to answer questions when approached by *The Athletic* this week. *The Athletic's* Pierre LeBrun reported last month that Roslovic turned down a three-year contract with the Edmonton Oilers, but it's not clear why. He also fired agent Claude Lemieux and hired Justin Duberman, who represents another central Ohio product and former Blue Jackets forward, Sean Kuraly.
- Season two of Prime Video's "Faceoff: Inside the NHL" launched Friday. The second episode features the Blue Jackets' Werenski and Monahan, along with Meredith Gaudreau, the widow of Johnny Gaudreau. Per the NHL release, the episode "...is about how those closest to Gaudreau ... redefine(d) what it means to be a family, a team, and a community in the face of tragedy."
- This week's Sunday Gathering trivia question: The Blue Jackets open the season on Thursday in Nashville, the third time they've played the season's first game in Music City. In the franchise's 25 years, two players have had four-point games in the opener. Name them.
- While the Blue Jackets open Thursday in Nashville, AHL Cleveland begins its season with a Friday-Saturday series in Utica, N.Y. The Monsters have been holding their own training camp since last Monday. Here are the forward lines: Mikael Pyytiä, Luc Del Bel Belluz and Hudson Fasching; Luca Pinelli, Brendan Gaunce and Jack Williams; James Malatesta, Hunter McKown and Roman Ahcan; Ryland Mosley, Max McCue and Riley Bezeau. The defensive pairs: Guillaume Richard and Dysin Mayo, Ole Julian Bjørgvik-Holm and Stanislav Svozil, and Caleb MacDonald and Corson Ceulemans.
- The AHL Cleveland goaltending tandem will be Ivan Fedotov and Zachary Sawchenko, with Nolan Lalonde playing in the ECHL. Fedotov was cleared through waivers last weekend, but wasn't sent to Cleveland until Thursday. The Blue Jackets allowed him to return to Philadelphia to be with his wife, Nadezhda, who is due to give birth to the couple's first child this month.
- Center Cayden Lindstrom, the Blue Jackets' No. 4 overall draft pick in 2024, made his NCAA debut on Friday in Michigan State's 4-0 exhibition win over Windsor (Canada). Lindstrom had one shot on goal, a plus-1 rating and won 6 of 13 faceoffs. Meanwhile, at Penn State, defenseman Jackson Smith — the Jackets' No. 14 overall pick this summer — was scratched from the Nittany Lions' first two games vs. Arizona State because of illness.
- Defenseman Jack Johnson, who spent last season with Columbus, was released from his tryout agreement with the Minnesota Wild late last week. If this is the end of his 19-year career, he'll finish sixth all-time among U.S.-born blueliners with 1,228 games played. Only Chris Chelios, Ryan Suter, Phil Housley, Mathieu Schneider and Craig Ludwig played more. Johnson, 38, has 77-265-342 and 639 penalty minutes with Los Angeles, Columbus (twice), Pittsburgh, the New York Rangers, Colorado (twice) and Chicago.
- Trivia answer: Rick Nash and Oliver Bjorkstrand. Nash had 2-2-4 on Oct. 5, 2007, in a 4-0 win over Anaheim; Bjorkstrand had 2-2-4 on Oct. 14, 2021, in a 8-2 win over Arizona.

## The Athletic / 2025-26 Blue Jackets bold predictions: Playoff drought ends? Boone Jenner extension?

By Aaron Portzline – October 3, 2025

We should probably quit while we're ahead, while our reputation for prognostication is at an all-time high.

Last season, when we made our bold predictions for the Columbus Blue Jackets' 2024-25 season, the results were so prophetic — some of them absolutely bang-on — that the ghost of Nostradamus was heard to groan: "Dayem."

But why quit while you're ahead, right?

The Blue Jackets may be a little more difficult to read than they were a year ago. We didn't see the last-place franchise that many predicted in 2024-25, but instead a club that was loaded with young players ready to pop and veteran players well-equipped to guide them.

That's all still in place, but now the Blue Jackets have to build on their 40-win, 89-point season that left them just two points shy of the postseason. The franchise appears to be awakening, but these things rarely follow a consistently upward trajectory. Really, do they ever?

We think the Blue Jackets are going to be very competitive again this season. But that's not what this space is, right? This is for bold opinions that have a tremendous capacity to embarrass. And with all the back-pats we took last season, that seems likely.

Enough. Let's get nutty.

### **1. Playoff drought ends**

The Blue Jackets are riding a five-year playoff drought, the second longest in franchise history. But we're stepping out on a limb to say that it ends next April. We're just not sure how.

The Eastern Conference has some behemoths. It's fair to wonder how far the Toronto Maple Leafs will slide without Mitch Marner, or if the Florida Panthers will take a tumble with Aleksander Barkov out for the season and Matthew Tkachuk out long term.

Other stalwarts don't seem to be going away anytime soon: Carolina, New Jersey, the New York Rangers, Tampa Bay and Washington. And there are other clubs, like Columbus, who feel like they're on the rise: Buffalo, Detroit, Montreal and Ottawa.

If the first seven clubs mentioned above all make it, the Blue Jackets would have to bump all four of Buffalo, Detroit, Montreal and Ottawa to earn a spot. Even if the Blue Jackets are once again dramatically better — they improved by 23 points last season — it won't be easy to survive in this conference.

Still, we say they get it done. Wins: 46. Points: 99. Seed: sixth

### **2. Jet takes off**

Jet Greaves had spent four seasons with AHL Cleveland, including recalls to Columbus in each of the last three. Last season, he had his longest run yet, starting 11 games (7-2-2) and taking over in the final two weeks of the season during a furious playoff push.



Greaves is now an NHL regular, and he'll be given every chance at equal playing time with incumbent starter Elvis Merzlikins. The hope is that Greaves' challenge to Merzlikins' playing time will push the Latvian veteran to play as he did early in his career.

But if Greaves plays well enough to do that, he'll likely just grab the top job himself.

Early in camp, Merzlikins questioned whether Greaves could handle a heavy workload in his first NHL season. It didn't seem to be a problem last spring when Greaves played six games in nine days (the final five in Columbus) and became a sensation.

It's hard to predict playing time. The Blue Jackets have 15 back-to-backs on the schedule, so there's work for two here. But we suspect Jet Greaves is cleared for takeoff. And we safely predict you'll be tired of Jet puns by early December.

### **3. Chinakhov ... boom or bust**

This is a tricky one. A truly bold prognosticator would say that Chinakhov is going to score 30 goals in a breakout season, or that the situation is going to get messy until the 24-year-old Russian is traded. The guess here is that it's going to be one or the other.

In Tuesday's preseason game vs. Washington, Chinakhov played on the top line with center Sean Monahan and winger Dmitri Voronkov, taking Kirill Marchenko's spot. But just one day earlier in practice, he appeared as the extra forward on the fourth line, alternating shifts with Zach Aston-Reese. That's how it was on Thursday, too.

There's a spot for Chinakhov in the top six, but he has to grab it. In this case, it probably means supplanting second-line wingers Boone Jenner or Kent Johnson, or taking Voronkov's spot up top. None of these will be easy, but that's life in the NHL.

Chinakhov isn't out of place on a third line with center Charlie Coyle and Cole Sillinger, but the Jackets really like playing Mathieu Olivier, who had 18 goals last season, above their fourth line. Chinakhov doesn't make sense on a fourth line, and he doesn't want to be there.

This prediction in a nutshell: we'll know by November which way this is going.

### **4. Marchenko joins '40' club**

Many have discussed Marchenko as having a breakout season in 2024-25, and he did score a career-high 31 goals. But he wasn't exactly an out-of-nowhere scorer.

Marchenko, who turned 25 this summer, had 21 goals as a rookie and 23 goals in 2023-24. Then he met Sean Monahan, gained a regular role and linemates on the top line, and saw his minutes swell by more than two minutes per game. Voila! Thirty-one goals.

Why are we convinced Marchenko's production is still climbing? A whopping 29 of his goals were scored at even strength. Only Tage Thompson, Leon Draisaitl, David Pastrnak, William Nylander, Brandon Hagel, Alex Ovechkin and Kyle Connor scored more at even strength.

In other words, if the Blue Jackets' power play — you may have heard this before — can be merely average, Marchenko should have double-digit goal potential from his left half-wall.

Put Marchenko in the Blue Jackets' exclusive "40 club," which currently has two members: Rick Nash (twice) and Cam Atkinson.

### **5. Boone's here to stay**

NHL player contracts are a big topic across the league these days, with Kirill Kaprizov's massive deal with the Minnesota Wild and Connor McDavid's lingering contract talks with the Edmonton Oilers. The Blue Jackets have some big deals to sign in the coming years, too.

But here's one that won't draw the attention of Kaprizov or McDavid, or even the Blue Jackets' Adam Fantilli, who is a restricted free agent next summer.

This will be Boone Jenner's 13th season with the Blue Jackets, but ... doesn't it seem like he's just always been here? Jenner, currently at a franchise-record 741 games, could be the organization's first 1,000-game player, but he'll need a new contract to get there.

Jenner, 32, is an unrestricted free agent next summer. He's currently under a club-friendly deal that pays him \$3.75 million per season.

It says here that Jenner will sign a contract at some point this season — it doesn't sound as if talks have started seriously yet — that will keep him in Columbus for his entire career. The player and the franchise don't want it any other way, it seems.

## **6. Fewer fights for Olivier**

Mathieu Olivier led the NHL with 15 fighting majors last season, and he was second in the league in penalty minutes with 139. After rising in the ranks for the previous two seasons in Columbus, most agree that he is now the most feared fighter in the league.

One other aspect of Olivier's game bloomed last season, too. He scored 18 goals, which was seventh on the Blue Jackets and more than Olivier had scored in his entire career. He forechecks like a demon. He's immovable at the net-front. His hands are as soft as kittens.

With all of this now part of the brew, we expect Olivier to work more with his gloves *on* this season.

His "most-feared fighter" status will cause some young roughs to step to the champ, but mostly it will make the middleweights and part-time scrappers shy away from the challenge. It can be really hard, actually, for some guys to get a fight.

Further, Olivier's role on the Blue Jackets — he's been a third-line player throughout camp, just like he was last season — will require him to pick and choose his spots judiciously.

## **7. Special teams ... really?**

The Blue Jackets' power play has ranked among the NHL's 10 worst in each of the last eight seasons. The penalty kill hasn't finished higher than 20th since coach John Tortorella left town in 2021.

Seriously, guys?

Zach Werenski, who finished second in Norris Trophy voting, is a world-class defenseman. Sean Monahan is one of the league's best "bumpers." The playmaking of Kent Johnson, the sharpshooting of Marchenko and the net-front space-eating of Jenner should make this a very good unit.

Put another way: Adam Fantilli, who had 31 goals last season, is currently on the second unit, along with Dmitri Voronkov (23 goals).

This is where the roster continuity can come in handy, too. These players — these units, really — have played so many games together that they have a keen sense of each other's quick-twitch tendencies, and they can play off each other with just one look of the eyes.

The penalty kill will have a new look with Charlie Coyle, Miles Wood and Isac Lundestrom joining the unit. But there's plenty of grit, small-space skill and battle on this roster to be more than effective.

We're not going to say the Blue Jackets should be top 10 in either or both. But we'll predict they are in the top half of the league on both sides of the ledger, which means their special teams will be a benefit to the cause, not the typical energy drain.

#### **8. Look who's back!**

Nick Foligno has never changed his plans. When his career is finished, he and his family will settle in the Columbus suburbs. They're actually building a home right now that should be ready by the spring. See where this is going?

Foligno, who turns 38 later this month, is in the final year of his contract with the Chicago Blackhawks, and quite possibly in the final year of his career.

The NHL trade deadline this season is March 6. By then, barring a major surprise, the Blackhawks will be quite a ways back in the standings and already preparing for the 2026 NHL Draft.

It would likely be a thrill for Foligno to join his brother, Marcus, with the Minnesota Wild, should the Wild be in the Western Conference playoff picture.

But if the Blue Jackets are above the bar in the Eastern Conference, couldn't you see GM Don Waddell making a move that would boost not only the dressing room but also Nationwide Arena? Most would agree that Foligno is among the most beloved players to wear the sweater.

## The Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets celebrate 25th anniversary amid national obscurity challenges

**By Brian Hedger – October 6, 2025**

Zach Werenski has gotten used to it.

Despite logging nine NHL seasons and becoming a star for the Blue Jackets, there are still times when people in his hometown haven't heard of his team.

"People will ask what you do, and you'll go, 'I play hockey,' and then you'll say which team, and they'll go, 'Oh, what league is that?' " Werenski said. "I'm like, 'You know the Red Wings? We play them. It'll happen when I go back to Detroit in the summer. I don't care. I'm used to it, but it's definitely a little frustrating."

The frustration for Werenski, who was selected eighth overall by the Blue Jackets in the 2015 draft, is tied to his belief the NHL isn't doing enough to promote teams and players in its smallest TV markets, such as the Blue Jackets.

That's starting to change for Werenski, who was recently ranked the NHL's 17th best player by NHL Network and is featured along with Sean Monahan in Prime Video's "FACEOFF: Inside The NHL" docuseries. But he's got a point.

The Blue Jackets don't typically get a lot of national exposure and are sparingly discussed by NHL insiders unless one of their top players requests a trade. So, they're left with primarily one way to change the narrative about Columbus.

Win more, and win big.

"We'd have to win the Stanley Cup, like the (Florida) Panthers," Werenski said. "We could make the playoffs for three or four years in a row, and I still don't think they'd talk about us much, but it would help. Great individual seasons help, making the playoffs helps, but at the end of the day you have to be a playoff contender, or you have to be the (Toronto Maple Leafs) or (Montreal Canadiens), and that's about it."

The NHL's outdoor extravaganzas are a good example.

The Blue Jackets were among the last teams to be included in one of those premiere league events when a deal was finally struck with Ohio State to hold last season's 2025 NHL Stadium Series game at iconic Ohio Stadium. The attendance of 94,751 for the Blue Jackets' exciting 5-3 victory over the Red Wings was the second-largest crowd to attend an NHL game, while ESPN's ratings ballooned to 1.6 million viewers.

That was the highest ratings the network has gotten for a regular-season game since re-acquiring NHL broadcast rights in 2021.

"It's an awesome market," Werenski said. "It's a great place to play, it's a great place to live. We have great fans here. It checks a lot of boxes, and I feel like the league would want to promote it more, based on our ratings for the outdoor game. I feel like we have great players and players who are going to have big years, but they don't seem interested. You can't get caught up in it, though. It just is what it is, and you've got to win."

The Dispatch wasn't able to reach an NHL spokesman for this story despite multiple attempts.

### **Columbus Blue Jackets fighting steep uphill climb to gain national notoriety**

Werenski isn't the only Blue Jackets player, coach, staff member or employee to experience the team's anonymity while traveling outside central Ohio.

Inside their bubble area, the Blue Jackets are known and popular for multiple reasons that include efforts to foster hockey participation among kids and helping the local community with an impressive charitable foundation that has contributed more than \$15 million since its 2000 inception.

Outside the bubble, they're shrouded in obscurity, which is an astounding dynamic for a major professional sports franchise now celebrating its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary. It's not entirely unique, though, which Blue Jackets president/general manager Don Waddell knows firsthand.

Prior to joining the Blue Jackets in May 2024, Waddell held similar executive roles with the Atlanta Thrashers, an expansion team that has since moved to Winnipeg, and Carolina Hurricanes, a small-market team like the Blue Jackets. The Hurricanes weren't talked about much until they won more often, which put more weight behind organizational outreach efforts that boosted their brand.

"You can't just assume that because you're an NHL team people know who you are," Waddell said. "It doesn't work that way. I've been through it at multiple stops. Winning solves a lot of it, but you still can't assume that winning's going to do it all. Winning is number one, but it's also your grassroots programs, and we're trying to do more stuff. We're trying to reach out."

### **Columbus Blue Jackets trending upward**

Waddell will soon meet with the Cincinnati Regional Chamber, a business and civic organization, and the Blue Jackets already have a presence in Northeast Ohio with the AHL's Cleveland Monsters, their top minor league affiliate.

Gaining notice from all parts of Ohio could help the Blue Jackets' exposure grow, but a much tougher battle waits beyond the state's borders.

They entered the NHL the same season (2000-01) as the Minnesota Wild, a team from "The State of Hockey" that gets more attention from national NHL analysts in the U.S. and Canada. Prior to the Blue Jackets and Wild, the Nashville Predators (1998-99) and Thrashers (1999-00) were added in a three-year expansion rollout that pushed the league from 26 to 30 teams.

It's now 32 after adding the Vegas Golden Knights (2017) and Seattle Kraken (2021), making the battle for prominence even tougher. The Blue Jackets are armed for that challenge with a promising roster filled with talented young players, led by Adam Fantilli, and a core group of driven veteran leaders.

"As far as the national stage, we just need our team to pop," said former Blue Jackets star Rick Nash, who now is the team's director of hockey operations. "Once our team pops and we become a consistent playoff team, I think we'll get a bit more recognition."

### **Winning hasn't come easily for Columbus Blue Jackets**

There's a reason some Columbus sports fans roll their eyes when told the Blue Jackets are trending up.

They've heard it before, far too often, and losing has become the Blue Jackets' most consistent organizational trait. They're one of only two NHL teams since their inception to win fewer games than they've lost in regulation – 807-860 with 33 ties and 196 overtime losses – and rank second-to-last (.486) in points percentage.

That would be bad for any NHL team, but it's magnified exponentially in Columbus, where Ohio State's football program makes the place feel like you're living in a Dr. Pepper "Fanville" commercial.

The No. 1-ranked Buckeyes are looking for a repeat of last season's national championship, so they're expected to win every time they play. That tends to foster a nearly impossible standard for themselves and other Columbus teams to meet.

"It's not for the lack of a good city or environment or arena or ownership," Nash said of the Blue Jackets' national anonymity. "It's nothing like that. I think for a national stage, the media just wants to see a consistent winner. This is a sports town, and they're just waiting for (the Blue Jackets) to explode."

The good news for the Blue Jackets is that narrowing the focus to their more recent past pushes them higher up the list of successful NHL teams.

During former coach John Tortorella's six seasons, for example, they went 227-173-54 with a .559 points percentage that ranked 17<sup>th</sup> in the league. They also qualified for the playoffs in four straight years, notching their lone playoff series win in 2019 with a sweep of the heavily favored Tampa Bay Lightning.

Filtering out Tortorella's first and final seasons pushes the Blue Jackets even higher up to eighth in NHL points percentage (.608) during a four-year playoff streak.

"When we swept Tampa, the buzz was incredible," former Blue Jackets star forward Cam Atkinson said. "Everyone wants to win the Stanley Cup, but if you make the playoffs, people come out of the woodwork. That's why the Buckeyes have been such a dominant factor in college football. They're expected to win every single year, and that's what we were trying to do with the Blue Jackets."

### **Columbus Blue Jackets are 'small market' despite large population**

Prior to this season, the Blue Jackets were commonly overlooked for national TV broadcasts by ESPN and TNT, the NHL's two largest U.S. rights-holders.

In fact, they didn't make a single national TV appearance in 2023-24 and had only the NHL Stadium Series game scheduled going into last season. A home game late in the season against the Washington Capitals was switched to a national ESPN broadcast, but that was only to make sure Alex Ovechkin's pursuit of Wayne Gretzky's all-time goal record would be broadcast nationally.

Ovechkin didn't even make the trip to Columbus after passing Gretzky a week earlier, and the Blue Jackets routed the Capitals on a Saturday afternoon. This season, the Jackets have six national TV games on either ESPN or exclusive streaming via ESPN+/Hulu.

They were again excluded from TNT broadcasts, though, and have a bit of a conundrum on their hands when it comes to population size for Columbus vs. central Ohio's Nielsen TV ratings Designated Market Area (DMA).

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Columbus ranked 15<sup>th</sup> among the country's 351 largest cities in 2024 with an estimated population of 933,263 that grew by 12,694 (1.4%) from 2023. That's 252,969 more than Cleveland (365,379) and Cincinnati (314,915) combined, and just under those two cities plus Toledo (265,638).

Additionally, the Columbus metropolitan area forming the bulk of central Ohio has an estimated population of 2.3 million, so it's not a quaint little college town. Columbus is massive, ranking as the NHL's 10<sup>th</sup> largest city.

The problem for the Blue Jackets is the stark difference between population and Nielsen's DMAs for each state. Columbus is a distant second to Cleveland, which includes Canton and Akron under its DMA umbrella. Columbus is 32<sup>nd</sup> nationally in DMA, while Cleveland-Akron-Canton ranks 17<sup>th</sup>.

That's a problem for the Blue Jackets, who don't move the needle for national TV broadcasts as a small-market team. Their DMA is larger than only four others in the NHL, which creates a challenge for

securing national exposure. That's why things such as Johnny Gaudreau picking Columbus as a free agent, the Blue Jackets' emotional push without him, Werenski's Norris Trophy chase and Fantilli netting 31 goals in his second NHL season were all boosts to the Jackets' perception.

The next step, and it's a big one, is becoming a Stanley Cup contender that qualifies for the postseason every year.

"Win more," Fantilli said. "That's it. I don't think there's much else we can do. We carry ourselves as professionals and we're a first-class organization with that stuff. It's just making it to the playoffs and climbing that ladder and getting to the top of the hill ... and that's pretty much it."

## The Columbus Dispatch / 5 unforgettable moments in Columbus Blue Jackets history

By Brian Hedger – October 6, 2025

After Nick Foligno left the ice on April 16, 2019, at Nationwide Arena, the Blue Jackets former captain was swallowed up in a sea of teary-eyed hugs heading back to the dressing room.

They'd just swept the top-seeded Tampa Bay Lightning out of the playoffs in the first round for the first postseason series victory in Blue Jackets history, and emotions ran high among fans, arena employees and team staffers who'd been there since Day 1 of the team's NHL existence.

"I think about all the years of not getting there or not getting it done, and then finally seeing some of the peoples' faces who were there as Day 1ers," Foligno said. "I was hugging security guards who were tearing up, volunteers, ushers ... you could just see how much it meant to people that have supported this team from Day 1. Every guy in that (locker) room felt so proud to be a part of that and bring that to this city."

That remains the only day the Blue Jackets have celebrated a playoff series win, but it's not their only cherished memory. While they've largely been star-crossed for a quarter century, the Jackets have also experienced some thrilling highs.

Here are five indelible moments in Blue Jackets history:

### **Columbus Blue Jackets' shocking sweep of Tampa Bay Lightning**

Pulling into his driveway after sweeping the Lightning, Foligno popped the button on his garage door opener.

What happened next left a smile on his face that lasted a while. Neighbors had propped a bunch of brooms against his garage door, and they all tumbled to the ground at once when the door went up.

"That is something I'll always remember," Foligno said, "just how much this community rallied around our team at that time. I'll never forget it."

Neither will Blue Jackets fans.

As Artemi Panarin, Alexandre Texier and Matt Duchene each sent pucks into Tampa Bay's empty net late in Game 4, tears began welling for many in the sold-out crowd of 19,328. They'd waited 19 years to see the Blue Jackets advance past the first round of the playoffs. It remains the franchise's zenith.

It was also a glimpse at what Columbus might look and sound like if the Blue Jackets ever won it all.

"The biggest thing I take away from (the 2019 sweep) was the satisfaction for the city to see us finally win a round and move on, and have everyone experience the pressure of the second round ... and hopefully the third round and Stanley Cup Final someday," said Foligno, who's now the Chicago Blackhawks' captain. "That's what I crave for this city, because they deserve it."

### **Nick Foligno scores Columbus Blue Jackets' first home playoff winner**

Prior to the Blue Jackets' stirring sweep, their biggest moments happened in games that went to overtime. One of the most memorable was Foligno's overtime goal against the Pittsburgh Penguins on April 23, 2014, in front of 18,970 at Nationwide Arena.



Scooping the puck in the neutral zone, the Blue Jackets' then-captain carried it over the blue line and sailed a wrist shot from above the circles that beat goalie Marc-Andre Fleury just 2:49 into OT. It knotted the series 2-2 and gave the Blue Jackets their first home victory in a playoff game.

Foligno's gliding goal celebration on his knees became an indelible moment that still features prominently in video montages celebrating Blue Jackets history.

"Unbelievable feeling," Foligno said. "The most unbelievable feeling I've had in hockey, just the magnitude of it, our fans getting to celebrate at home."

### **Matt Calvert gives Columbus Blue Jackets their first playoff win**

Two games before Foligno's OT goal, forward Matt Calvert did something similar in Pittsburgh to give the Blue Jackets their first-ever playoff victory.

Carrying the puck into the Penguins' zone with linemates Cam Atkinson and Brandon Dubinsky early in the second overtime of Game 2 in Pittsburgh, Calvert beat Fleury at 1:10, pouncing on his own rebound from the net-front.

Teammates mobbed Calvert after he helped the Blue Jackets pull even at 1-1 in the series. Calvert had a knack for scoring big OT goals with the Blue Jackets, adding another one in 2018 against the Washington Capitals, but his heroics in Pittsburgh remain etched in the minds of many Blue Jackets fans.

"I shot it off his pad the first time, and he put it back to me, so I shoved it high," Calvert told the Dispatch for a story published April 10, 2017. "That's the moment that freezes in time for me."

### **Rick Nash clinches Columbus Blue Jackets' first playoff appearance**

It took eight years for the Blue Jackets to clinch their first appearance in the Stanley Cup Playoffs.

That was one year too late for original majority owner John H. McConnell to see it in person, but Rick Nash's skyward point after his late tying goal April 8, 2009, in Chicago was a nod to "Mr. Mac," who died at age 84 on April 25, 2008.

Fedor Tyutin scored the lone goal of a shootout that followed overtime to give the Blue Jackets a 4-3 shootout win, but the point earned on Nash's goal to force OT was all they needed. It was a culmination for Nash, who was close to McConnell after being drafted first overall in 2002.

The result was the only postseason Nash got in nine seasons with the Blue Jackets.

### **Rick Nash scores jaw-dropping goal for Columbus Blue Jackets in Arizona**

Nash's solo effort on Jan. 17, 2008, in Glendale, Arizona, was an instant classic. To this day, 17 years later, it remains a highlight. It might be one of the greatest NHL goals ever scored, period.

After getting a stretch pass in the neutral zone, Nash kicked it into high gear while stickhandling through and around two Arizona Coyotes on his way to the net. As if that wasn't enough, he also slid the puck under goalie Mikael Tellqvist's poke check in the crease before tucking it between the left post and the goalie's skate.

Waking up the following morning, Nash fielded a call from Blue Jackets spokesman Todd Sharrock informing him that several national TV and radio shows wanted to speak with him.

That's when he started to realize how special it might be.

"I had no idea it was going to be that big," Nash said, "and that's where it kind of felt like the goal was bigger than the actual hockey game."

## The Columbus Dispatch / 6 pillars in Columbus Blue Jackets history

By Brian Hedger – October 6, 2025

The Blue Jackets' first quarter century includes some big NHL names.

Sergei Fedorov, for example, was a Blue Jacket for three seasons near the end of his illustrious career. Artemi Panarin was a Blue Jacket for two years before jumping ship to join the New York Rangers. Jeff Carter and Marian Gaborik were Blue Jackets, albeit malcontents, and both were traded.

Johnny Gaudreau went the other direction in 2022, signing with the Blue Jackets as an unrestricted free agent, but got only two seasons in Columbus before a tragedy Aug. 29, 2024, took his life along with his brother Matthew's life as they biked in New Jersey. Patrik Laine is another big name who played for the Blue Jackets, but he wanted out after four injury-plagued seasons.

Although an argument could be made for Gaudreau, none reached the level of all-time great for the Blue Jackets, who are celebrating their silver anniversary. That's a status reserved for an exclusive club that includes current and former players who became household names in Columbus.

Here are six Blue Jackets pillars for the franchise's first 25 years:

### **6) Boone Jenner**

Jenner was selected by the Blue Jackets in 2011 (second round) and made his NHL debut in 2013. He was eight years into his career when former coach Brad Larsen assigned him the captain's 'C' prior to the 2021-22 season. Jenner, 31, is the seventh captain in franchise history and will wear that letter for a fifth straight year.

Injuries over the past four years have cost him 117 games, but Jenner still ranks in the top five in 11 all-time categories. He holds the top spot in games played (741) and hits (1,662) while ranking second in power-play goals (43) and takeaways (330).

### **5) Cam Atkinson**

It's been four years since Atkinson last wore the Blue Jackets' uniform, and his name is still at or near the top of several statistical all-time ranks. He's first in short-handed goals (16) and hat tricks (six), second only to Rick Nash in points (402), goals (213), shots (1,883) and game-winning goals (42), and ranks third in games (627).

Atkinson also ranks fifth in assists (189), and his 41 goals in 2018-19 remains tied with Nash's 41 goals in 2003-04 for the franchise high in a season. Selected in 2008 with a sixth-round pick (157<sup>th</sup> overall), the plucky underdog forward from Boston College overcame long odds to become a Blue Jackets star.

### **4) Sergei Bobrovsky**

Before backstopping the Florida Panthers to the Stanley Cup Final the past three years, including back-to-back championships in the past two, Bobrovsky rose to NHL stardom in Columbus. His prowess earned Bobrovsky the Vezina Trophy twice as the league's top goalie and Blue Jackets fans loved his nickname.

"Bob" played seven seasons in Columbus and helped the Jackets reach the playoffs four times. He struggled in the postseason for three of those years, but the fourth included Bobrovsky contributing to a shocking 2019 sweep of the heavily favored Tampa Bay Lightning in the first round.

Bobrovsky, who signed with Florida as a free agent July 1, 2019, still ranks first in Blue Jackets history in almost every all-time goaltending statistic.

### **3) Nick Foligno**

Foligno wore the captain's 'C' for the Blue Jackets from 2015-2021 and became their most recognizable player while doing it. He pushed his teammates to not accept mediocrity or poor efforts, which combined perfectly with hard-driving former coach John Tortorella.

Foligno played nine seasons for the Blue Jackets and etched his name into multiple all-time statistical categories, but there's one goal that burned brightest for Blue Jackets fans. Foligno scored in overtime on April 23, 2014, against the Pittsburgh Penguins to deliver the first home playoff victory in franchise history.

The Blue Jackets dropped the series, but Foligno's goal and ensuing celebration from his knees became part of Columbus lore instantly.

### **2) Zach Werenski**

Werenski is in the prime of his NHL career at age 28, so it's easy to forget sometimes that he's already one of the elite defensemen who's ever played in the league.

That's not hyperbole. If he stays on his current trajectory, Werenski is heading toward hockey's hall of fame. He's already the highest-scoring defenseman in franchise history, finished second in voting for the Norris Trophy last season, an award that goes to the NHL's top defensemen, and Werenski's name near the top of the the Jackets' all-time rankings.

Werenski has also thrived in a leadership role as an alternate captain and filled in as de facto captain for almost five months last season while Jenner recovered from shoulder surgery.

### **1) Rick Nash**

Nash remains the only player in franchise history who was picked first overall. Former general manager Doug MacLean traded up from the third pick to take the hulking power forward from the Ontario Hockey League's London Knights, and Nash didn't disappoint.

He's now rising in the Blue Jackets' front office as the director of hockey operations and hopes to someday become the GM, but his status as the team's all-time best player is undisputed. Nash ranks at or near the top of almost every statistical category for the Blue Jackets, who got 674 career games over nine seasons out of Nash before trading him to the New York Rangers.

Nash requested the trade out of frustration at the franchise's inability to compete for a playoff spot regularly, but he kept Columbus as his home base each summer. After retiring in 2019 at age 34 due to concussion-related complications, Nash returned to Columbus and began his executive path with the Blue Jackets.

He remains the team's career leader in points (547), goals (289), power-play goals (83), game-winning goals (43) and shots (2,278) while ranking second in games (674), assists (258), shorthanded goals (14) and hat tricks (five).

## The Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets end preseason with 2-1 loss to Washington Capitals

By Brian Hedger – October 4, 2025

The preseason means nothing.

At least, that's what the Blue Jackets are hoping after dropping their preseason finale to the Washington Capitals 2-1 on Oct. 4 at Capital One Arena in Washington, D.C. The loss was the third straight for the Jackets, who lost five of their last six exhibition games to go 2-5-0.

Declan Chisholm and former Blue Jackets center Pierre-Luc Dubois scored goals in the second period to put the Capitals up 2-0 and goalie Logan Thompson made the lead stand up. Dubois' goal became the winner after Mathieu Olivier scored the lone Blue Jackets goal late in the third on a 6-on-4 power play with the Columbus net empty.

Elvis Merzlikins (20 saves) started in net for the Blue Jackets, who didn't dress Zach Werenski and Sean Monahan, their top defenseman and center. Columbus outshot Washington 30-22 overall and 10-3 in the second period, but the Jackets' defense broke down in the middle period to create two scoring chances that led to shots Merzlikins couldn't stop.

The Blue Jackets' next game will be their season-opener Sept. 9 at the Nashville Predators.

Here are three takeaways:

### **Columbus Blue Jackets struggle offensively without Werenski, Monahan**

Jake Christiansen, who has battled to retain his spot as the Blue Jackets' seventh-and-final defenseman, played in Werenski's spot atop the defense pairings. Dmitry Voronkov filled Monahan's center spot on the first line with Yegor Chinakhov and Kirill Marchenko on the wings.

It was a great opportunity for Christiansen and Chinakhov to build a case as potential lineup regulars, while Voronkov got a chance to play a top six center role that he hasn't been asked to do since former coach Pascal Vincent's lone season in 2023-24.

None capitalized on the brief chance to play an increased role, though. All finished with -1 plus/minus ratings and none of the three contributed offensively.

That's a bigger problem for Chinakhov than the other two. After requesting a trade this past summer, he appears to be an NHL depth option up front who could start the season as a healthy scratch. Voronkov's spot at left wing on the top line is secure, while Christiansen is expected to provide depth as a reserve.

### **Columbus Blue Jackets haven't determined goalie for opener**

After practice Oct. 3 at Nationwide Arena, Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said the goaltending competition for the upcoming opener in Nashville has yet to be decided. Merzlikins and Jet Greaves each got the same amount of preseason action, and both had a chance to stake their claims.

Both had up-and-down moments, including each taking losses to the Capitals in the final two games. Greaves allowed four goals on 23 shots in a 4-3 loss Sept. 30 in Columbus, while Merzlikins allowed two goals on 22 shots in the finale.

Greaves had some tough luck on a couple of the goals he allowed to the Capitals and Merzlikins was beaten cleanly with wrist shots from high-danger areas of the ice, including Dubois' goal off a 2-on-1

rush. Evason's plan is to use his goalies as a tandem this season, especially with 15 back-to-backs in a schedule packed with games before and after the NHL's break in February for the Winter Olympics.

Merzlikins is expected to compete for Latvia in that competition, but his short-term focus is playing for the Blue Jackets. He bristled early in camp at the suggestion that Greaves could win the No. 1 job to start the season, but it's a race that could go down to the wire before the Blue Jackets' first game.

### **Columbus Blue Jackets' young centers struggle in preseason finale**

How important is Sean Monahan to the top of the Blue Jackets' forward lineup?

Well, they only won 40% of the draws against Washington and his replacement on the first line, Voronkov, went just 1 for 6 (17%). Adam Fantilli, who centers the second line heading into his third NHL season, won only 29% of his faceoffs (5 for 17) to make the Blue Jackets' top two centers a combined 6 for 23 (26%).

Veterans Charlie Coyle (7 for 12) and Isac Lundestrom (6 for 12) went a combined 13 for 24 (54%) while centering the third and fourth lines respectively. Captain Boone Jenner, who has extensive experience playing center, took just one draw and won it while playing on Fantilli's wing.

Winning faceoffs is something young centers often struggle to do, which is why teams with veterans down the middle of their lineup tend to possess the puck more off draws. Monahan is one of the NHL's best at winning faceoffs, and Jenner's winning percentage on draws is right up there when playing center.

It's something that's worth monitoring this season, especially if Monahan and/or Jenner need to miss extended time due to injuries.

## NHL.com / Golden Knights, Stars favorites to win Stanley Cup, NHL.com panel says

By NHL.com – October 05, 2025

The race for the Stanley Cup is wide open, but the eventual champ will come out of the Western Conference, according to a panel of NHL.com writers and editors.

A total of 15 staff members made their preseason predictions and five picked the Vegas Golden Knights to win the Cup, four picked the Dallas Stars and three picked the Colorado Avalanche. One staffer picked the Edmonton Oilers, while the only Eastern Conference teams to get a pick were the two-time defending Cup champion Florida Panthers and the Carolina Hurricanes.

The winner of the Conn Smythe Trophy as most valuable player of the Stanley Cup Playoffs is more wide open, with Mitch Marner of the Golden Knights, Nathan MacKinnon of the Avalanche and Mikko Rantanen of the Stars each getting three votes. Jack Eichel of the Golden Knights got two votes, while Jake Oettinger (Stars), Matthew Tkachuk (Panthers), Sebastian Aho (Hurricanes) and Connor McDavid (Oilers) got one vote each.

The 2025-26 NHL season starts Tuesday with a tripleheader on ESPN: Chicago Blackhawks at Florida Panthers (5 p.m. ET), Pittsburgh Penguins at New York Rangers (8 p.m. ET) and Colorado Avalanche at Los Angeles Kings (10:30 p.m. ET).

Here is how our experts picked:

***Amalie Benjamin, staff writer***

### **Atlantic Division**

1. Montreal Canadiens | 2. Tampa Bay Lightning | 3. Toronto Maple Leafs

### **Metropolitan Division**

1. Carolina Hurricanes | 2. New Jersey Devils | 3. New York Rangers

### **Eastern Conference wild cards**

1. Florida Panthers | 2. Ottawa Senators

### **Central Division**

1. Dallas Stars | 2. Winnipeg Jets | 3. Colorado Avalanche

### **Pacific Division**

1. Edmonton Oilers | 2. Vegas Golden Knights | 3. Los Angeles Kings

### **Western Conference wild cards**

1. Vancouver Canucks | 2. Utah Mammoth

### **Conference champions**

**East:** Carolina Hurricanes

**West:** Dallas Stars

**Stanley Cup champion:** Dallas Stars

**Conn Smythe Trophy winner:** Mikko Rantanen, Dallas Stars

***Brian Compton, managing editor***

### **Atlantic Division**

1. Tampa Bay Lightning | 2. Toronto Maple Leafs | 3. Florida Panthers

**Metropolitan Division**

1. Carolina Hurricanes | 2. New Jersey Devils | 3. Washington Capitals

**Eastern Conference wild cards**

1. Montreal Canadiens | 2. Columbus Blue Jackets

**Central Division**

1. Colorado Avalanche | 2. Dallas Stars | 3. Winnipeg Jets

**Pacific Division**

1. Vegas Golden Knights | 2. Edmonton Oilers | 3. Los Angeles Kings

**Western Conference wild cards**

1. Utah Mammoth | 2. Minnesota Wild

**Conference champions**

**East:** Florida Panthers

**West:** Vegas Golden Knights

**Stanley Cup champion:** Florida Panthers

**Conn Smythe Trophy winner:** Matthew Tkachuk, Florida Panthers

***Nicholas J. Cotsonika, columnist*****Atlantic Division**

1. Tampa Bay Lightning | 2. Toronto Maple Leafs | 3. Florida Panthers

**Metropolitan Division**

1. Carolina Hurricanes | 2. New Jersey Devils | 3. New York Rangers

**Eastern Conference wild cards**

1. Ottawa Senators | 2. Washington Capitals

**Central Division**

1. Dallas Stars | 2. Colorado Avalanche | 3. Winnipeg Jets

**Pacific Division**

1. Vegas Golden Knights | 2. Edmonton Oilers | 3. Vancouver Canucks

**Western Conference wild cards**

1. Los Angeles Kings | 2. Utah Mammoth

**Conference champions**

**East:** Toronto Maple Leafs

**West:** Vegas Golden Knights

**Stanley Cup champion:** Vegas Golden Knights

**Conn Smythe Trophy winner:** Mitch Marner, Vegas Golden Knights

***William Douglas, staff writer*****Atlantic Division**

1. Florida Panthers | 2. Tampa Bay Lightning | 3. Ottawa Senators

**Metropolitan Division**

1. New York Rangers | 2. New Jersey Devils | 3. Carolina Hurricanes

**Eastern Conference wild cards**

1. Toronto Maple Leafs | 2. Washington Capitals

**Central Division**

1. Dallas Stars | 2. Winnipeg Jets | 3. Colorado Avalanche

**Pacific Division**

1. Vegas Golden Knights | 2. Edmonton Oilers | 3. Los Angeles Kings

**Western Conference wild cards**

1. Minnesota Wild | 2. Calgary Flames

**Conference champions**

**East:** Florida Panthers

**West:** Vegas Golden Knights

**Stanley Cup champion:** Vegas Golden Knights

**Conn Smythe Trophy winner:** Jack Eichel

*Tom Gulitti, senior writer*

**Atlantic Division**

1. Toronto Maple Leafs | 2. Tampa Bay Lightning | 3. Florida Panthers

**Metropolitan Division**

1. Carolina Hurricanes | 2. Washington Capitals | 3. New York Rangers

**Eastern Conference wild cards**

1. New Jersey Devils | 2. Montreal Canadiens

**Central Division**

1. Dallas Stars | 2. Colorado Avalanche | 3. Winnipeg Jets

**Pacific Division**

1. Vegas Golden Knights | 2. Edmonton Oilers | 3. Los Angeles Kings

**Western Conference wild cards**

1. Minnesota Wild | 2. Utah Mammoth

**Conference champions**

**East:** Carolina Hurricanes

**West:** Colorado Avalanche

**Stanley Cup champion:** Colorado Avalanche

**Conn Smythe Trophy winner:** Nathan MacKinnon, Colorado Avalanche

*Pete Jensen, senior director, fantasy*

**Atlantic Division**

1. Tampa Bay Lightning | 2. Montreal Canadiens | 3. Toronto Maple Leafs

**Metropolitan Division**

1. Carolina Hurricanes | 2. New Jersey Devils | 3. New York Rangers

**Eastern Conference wild cards**

1. Florida Panthers | 2. Columbus Blue Jackets

**Central Division**

1. Dallas Stars | 2. Colorado Avalanche | 3. St. Louis Blues

**Pacific Division**

1. Vegas Golden Knights | 2. Edmonton Oilers | 3. Los Angeles Kings

**Western Conference wild cards**

1. Minnesota Wild | 2. Utah Mammoth



### **Conference champions**

**East:** Carolina Hurricanes

**West:** Colorado Avalanche

**Stanley Cup champion:** Colorado Avalanche

**Conn Smythe Trophy winner:** Nathan MacKinnon, Colorado Avalanche

### ***Adam Kimelman, deputy managing editor***

#### **Atlantic Division**

1. Tampa Bay Lightning | 2. Toronto Maple Leafs | 3. Florida Panthers

#### **Metropolitan Division**

1. Carolina Hurricanes | 2. New Jersey Devils | 3. Washington Capitals

#### **Eastern Conference wild cards**

1. Montreal Canadiens | 2. Columbus Blue Jackets

#### **Central Division**

1. Winnipeg Jets | 2. Colorado Avalanche | 3. Dallas Stars

#### **Pacific Division**

1. Vegas Golden Knights | 2. Los Angeles Kings | 3. Edmonton Oilers

#### **Western Conference wild cards**

1. Minnesota Wild | 2. St. Louis Blues

### **Conference champions**

**East:** Tampa Bay Lightning

**West:** Colorado Avalanche

**Stanley Cup champion:** Colorado Avalanche

**Conn Smythe Trophy winner:** Nathan MacKinnon, Colorado Avalanche

### ***Mike G. Morreale, senior draft writer***

#### **Atlantic Division**

1. Toronto Maple Leafs | 2. Tampa Bay Lightning | 3. Florida Panthers

#### **Metropolitan Division**

1. Carolina Hurricanes | 2. New Jersey Devils | 3. New York Rangers

#### **Eastern Conference wild cards**

1. Washington Capitals | 2. Montreal Canadiens

#### **Central Division**

1. Dallas Stars | 2. Colorado Avalanche | 3. Winnipeg Jets

#### **Pacific Division**

1. Vegas Golden Knights | 2. Edmonton Oilers | 3. Los Angeles Kings

#### **Western Conference wild cards**

1. Minnesota Wild | 2. Utah Mammoth

### **Conference champions**

**East:** Florida Panthers

**West:** Dallas Stars

**Stanley Cup champion:** Dallas Stars

**Conn Smythe Trophy winner:** Jake Oettinger, Dallas Stars

***Tracey Myers, staff writer***

**Atlantic Division**

1. Toronto Maple Leafs | 2. Tampa Bay Lightning | 3. Ottawa Senators

**Metropolitan Division**

1. New Jersey Devils | 2. Carolina Hurricanes | 3. Washington Capitals

**Eastern Conference wild cards**

1. Florida Panthers | 2. Montreal Canadiens

**Central Division**

1. Winnipeg Jets | 2. Dallas Stars | 3. Colorado Avalanche

**Pacific Division**

1. Vegas Golden Knights | 2. Edmonton Oilers | 3. Los Angeles Kings

**Western Conference wild cards**

1. Utah Mammoth | 2. Minnesota Wild

**Conference champions**

**East:** Carolina Hurricanes

**West:** Dallas Stars

**Stanley Cup champion:** Dallas Stars

**Conn Smythe Trophy winner:** Mikko Rantanen, Dallas Stars

***Bill Price, Editor-in-Chief***

**Atlantic Division**

1. Ottawa Senators | 2. Tampa Bay Lightning | 3. Montreal Canadiens

**Metropolitan Division**

1. New York Rangers | 2. Carolina Hurricanes | 3. New Jersey Devils

**Eastern Conference wild cards**

1. Florida Panthers | 2. Toronto Maple Leafs

**Central Division**

1. Dallas Stars | 2. Winnipeg Jets | 3. Colorado Avalanche

**Pacific Division**

1. Vegas Golden Knights | 2. Edmonton Oilers | 3. Los Angeles Kings

**Western Conference wild cards**

1. Minnesota Wild | 2. Anaheim Ducks

**Conference champions**

**East:** Carolina Hurricanes

**West:** Dallas Stars

**Stanley Cup champion:** Dallas Stars

**Conn Smythe Trophy winner:** Mikko Rantanen, Dallas Stars

***Shawn P. Roarke, senior director of editorial***

**Atlantic Division**

1. Tampa Bay Lightning | 2. Toronto Maple Leafs | 3. Montreal Canadiens

**Metropolitan Division**

1. Carolina Hurricanes | 2. New Jersey Devils | 3. Columbus Blue Jackets

**Eastern Conference wild cards**

1. Florida Panthers | 2. Detroit Red Wings

**Central Division**

1. Colorado Avalanche | 2. Winnipeg Jets | 3. Dallas Stars

**Pacific Division**

1. Los Angeles Kings | 2. Edmonton Oilers | 3. Vegas Golden Knights

**Western Conference wild cards**

1. Calgary Flames | 2. Minnesota Wild

**Conference champions**

**East:** Carolina Hurricanes

**West:** Vegas Golden Knights

**Stanley Cup champion:** Carolina Hurricanes

**Conn Smythe Trophy winner:** Sebastian Aho, Carolina Hurricanes

***Dan Rosen, senior writer*****Atlantic Division**

1. Tampa Bay Lightning | 2. Florida Panthers | 3. Toronto Maple Leafs

**Metropolitan Division**

1. Carolina Hurricanes | 2. New Jersey Devils | 3. Washington Capitals

**Eastern Conference wild cards**

1. New York Rangers | 2. Ottawa Senators

**Central Division**

1. Dallas Stars | 2. Winnipeg Jets | 3. Colorado Avalanche

**Pacific Division**

1. Vegas Golden Knights | 2. Edmonton Oilers | 3. Calgary Flames

**Western Conference wild cards**

1. Utah Mammoth | 2. St. Louis Blues

**Conference champions**

**East:** New Jersey Devils

**West:** Vegas Golden Knights

**Stanley Cup champion:** Vegas Golden Knights

**Conn Smythe Trophy winner:** Mitch Marner, Vegas Golden Knights

***David Satriano, staff writer*****Atlantic Division**

1. Tampa Bay Lightning | 2. Florida Panthers | 3. Toronto Maple Leafs

**Metropolitan Division**

1. Carolina Hurricanes | 2. New Jersey Devils | 3. Washington Capitals

**Eastern Conference wild cards**

1. Ottawa Senators | 2. New York Rangers

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**Pacific Division**

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**Conference champions**

**East:** Carolina Hurricanes

**West:** Vegas Golden Knights

**Stanley Cup champion:** Vegas Golden Knights

**Conn Smythe Trophy winner:** Mitch Marner, Vegas Golden Knights

***Derek Van Diest, staff writer***

**Atlantic Division**

1. Florida Panthers | 2. Tampa Bay Lightning | 3. Toronto Maple Leafs

**Metropolitan Division**

1. Carolina Hurricanes | 2. New Jersey Devils | 3. Washington Capitals

**Eastern Conference wild cards**

1. New York Rangers | 2. Ottawa Senators

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1. Vegas Golden Knights | 2. Edmonton Oilers | 3. Los Angeles Kings

**Western Conference wild cards**

1. St. Louis Blues | 2. Minnesota Wild

**Conference champions**

**East:** New Jersey Devils

**West:** Edmonton Oilers

**Stanley Cup champion:** Edmonton Oilers

**Conn Smythe Trophy winner:** Connor McDavid, Edmonton Oilers

***Mike Zeisberger, staff writer***

**Atlantic Division**

1. Tampa Bay Lightning | 2. Toronto Maple Leafs | 3. Florida Panthers

**Metropolitan Division**

1. Carolina Hurricanes | 2. New Jersey Devils | 3. New York Rangers

**Eastern Conference wild cards**

1. Montreal Canadiens | 2. Ottawa Senators

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1. Colorado Avalanche | 2. Dallas Stars | 3. Winnipeg Jets

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1. Vegas Golden Knights | 2. Edmonton Oilers | 3. Vancouver Canucks

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1. Utah Mammoth | 2. Minnesota Wild

**Conference champions**

**East:** Tampa Bay Lightning

**West:** Vegas Golden Knights

**Stanley Cup champion:** Vegas Golden Knights

**Conn Smythe Trophy winner:** Jack Eichel, Vegas Golden Knights

## The Athletic / Experts react to 2025-26 NHL point total projections for all 32 teams

**NHL Staff – October 4, 2025**

Are the Edmonton Oilers really the NHL's top team? Will Mitch Marner win more games playing in Las Vegas this season than his old teammates do in Toronto? Which teams are due for the sharpest rises and declines in 2025-26?

*The Athletic's* Dom Luszczyszyn has answered these questions with his point-projection model and gone deep on each result in our annual team previews, along with Shayna Goldman and Sean Gentile.

From the Chicago Blackhawks to the Edmonton Oilers, what do the experts who know each team best think of the model's analysis? Are the projections too high, too low or just about right?

Here's what they said.

### **Chicago Blackhawks**

Projected points: 70.8

Verdict: About right

Unless the young players take a massive step this season, it's difficult to envision the Blackhawks climbing much higher in the standings than in the past few seasons. They just didn't do much in the offseason to improve the team's offense and will be depending on a very young defense. The team could be 10 points better than last season and still be among the worst teams in the league. — *Scott Powers*

### **San Jose Sharks**

Projected points: 73.2

Verdict: Too high

Getting to 73 points is a reachable goal for the Sharks. Especially if Macklin Celebrini, Will Smith and the equally dynamic William Eklund continue their rise and the goaltending is stabilized and improved between Yaroslav Askarov and Alex Nedeljkovic. But a 21-point jump is still quite a bump. What might make them fall short is if GM Mike Grier conducts another deadline sell-off with all the pending UFA veterans in his lineup. They'll be assuredly better, but maybe not 21 points better. — *Eric Stephens*

### **Pittsburgh Penguins**

Projected points: 74.1

Verdict: Too low

The Penguins are projected to have the third-lowest point total this season. I think this is entirely possible and I do not believe the Penguins are good. But as currently constructed, I don't think they're the third-worst team in the league. Sidney Crosby, Bryan Rust, Rickard Rakell and Erik Karlsson form a nice foundation in terms of offense. The Penguins will score a lot of goals. They'll give up even more. If Rust, Rakell or Karlsson — or some combination of the three — get traded sooner rather than later, then yes, this could be a bottom-three team. — *Josh Yohe*

### **Seattle Kraken**

Projected points: 76.6

Verdict: Too low

Seattle lacks top-end talent, and I'm concerned about its backup goaltending, although Matt Murray looking sturdy in the preseason is an interesting development. But the Kraken are a relatively deep team with good players at every key spot. Throw in some upside with a young group of players, including Berkly Catton, who looks ready, and I see the Kraken as an 80-85 point team instead of a proper bottom-feeder. — *Thomas Drance*

### **Nashville Predators**

Projected points: 78.6

Verdict: About right

How much does psychology matter? A lot, the Predators hope — so much that it can overcome the physiological realities of this aging roster, marginally improved if at all in the offseason after a 68-point disaster of a season. The Preds entered last season with unbridled hype, which helped the early struggles snowball. Will zero expectations help these guys get gritty and competitive again? Maybe? — *Joe Rexrode*

### **Philadelphia Flyers**

Projected points: 79.1

Verdict: About right

While I tend to think this is a tad low, it's not all that far off. Until the Flyers show that they can get reliable goaltending, there's no reason to think they can be in the mix for a playoff spot. That said, this does look like a stronger roster going into a season than it did last season, particularly if Trevor Zegras can successfully transition back to the middle, and younger players such as Matvei Michkov, Tyson Foerster and Cam York continue to improve. — *Kevin Kurz*

### **Boston Bruins**

Projected points: 79.9

Verdict: About right

Jeremy Swayman and Joonas Korpisalo should be dependable in net. Charlie McAvoy and Hampus Lindholm are good No. 1 and 2 defensemen. The Bruins have a good No. 1 line with Morgan Geekie, Elias Lindholm and David Pastrnak. There's not much else. They will struggle to score. — *Fluto Shinzawa*

### **Calgary Flames**

Projected points: 80.8

Verdict: About right

It will be tough for the Flames to make the playoffs as they continue their retool/rebuild. The Pacific Division remains strong at the top, and the Flames didn't do much to address scoring concerns on their roster. Dustin Wolf has shown he can be relied upon as a starting goalie, and their youth has shown promise. But the Flames will have to surprise many with their offense, which finished last in goals at five-on-five last year. — *Julian McKenzie*

### **Anaheim Ducks**

Projected points: 81.9

Verdict: Too low

Talk is cheap when it comes to the Ducks being a team on the rise. It's time to prove it after years of stumbling, following a period of bottoming out and rebuilding. They have an interesting mix of young impact players who need to take another step as leaders and veterans who have previously been part of winning clubs. Joel Quenneville hasn't forgotten how to coach, and the bet is he'll get more out of this group. And if Lukas Dostal stars in net, Anaheim could find its way into the postseason. Too low might be too conservative here. — *Eric Stephens*

### **New York Islanders**

Projected points: 83.3

Verdict: Too low

The Islanders are retooling under Mathieu Darche's direction, so it's not surprising to see them outside of the playoff picture. That being said ... there's a way to get above the 83.3-point mark, even with this roster. A full season of Mathew Barzal (who was excellent last year) should help give the Islanders a spark up front. Plus, Ilya Sorokin's excellence could steal this team a few more wins, too. So sliding *just* above the 85-point mark (which the model gives a 17 percent chance of) feels right.

— *Shayna Goldman*

### **Detroit Red Wings**

Projected points: 83.4

Verdict: About right

I'd go a little higher, as I don't see the Red Wings going backward from last season (86 points), but it's right there in the range of likeliest outcomes. Detroit only made a couple of moves this summer, and thus will be relying on internal improvements for any gains. John Gibson should help in goal, but somewhere between 82 and 90 points feels about right. — *Max Bultman*

### **Columbus Blue Jackets**

Projected points: 85.7

Verdict: Too low

A backslide, which is what Dom has predicted, is always possible. But there are three easy reasons why that seems unlikely for the Blue Jackets, who had 89 points last season. 1) Their wave of young talents — Adam Fantilli (31 goals), Kirill Marchenko (31), Kent Johnson (24) and Dmitri Voronkov (23) — are all a year stronger, wiser and more confident. 2) Boone Jenner, Sean Monahan and Yegor Chinakhov all missed a significant number of games with injuries and they still won 40 games. 3) Goaltender Jet Greaves has a chance to push Elvis Merzlikins aside in net. — *Aaron Portzline*

### **Vancouver Canucks**

Projected points: 89.9

Verdict: About right

The projected point total for the Canucks is almost certainly off by 5-10 points. It's about right, though, because it feels like a reasonable base case for one of the NHL's most volatile bets. I won't be surprised at all if Vancouver pushes for 100 points with Elias Pettersson bouncing back, Thatcher Demko staying healthy, Quinn Hughes dominating and things coming together. I also won't be surprised at all if



Vancouver falls back to 80 points, given its concerning lack of scoring. But 90ish points is a fair enough middle bar, and in line with the betting markets. — *Thomas Drance*

### **Buffalo Sabres**

Projected points: 90.1

Verdict: About right

Dom's projection of 90.1 points would be a dramatic improvement for the Sabres, but he's also projecting them to be 10th in the Eastern Conference. This feels on-the-nose for where the Sabres are heading into this season. On paper and on the ice, they look like a better team than last season. But will they improve enough to overtake other Eastern Conference contenders and make the playoffs? They could be a bubble team right up until the end of the season. — *Matthew Fairburn*

### **St. Louis Blues**

Projected points: 90.3

Verdict: Too low

Dom made a lot of good points about the expectations and concerns for the Blues in his 2025-26 season preview. His analytics paint an understandable picture of the players based on the ages of the veterans and small sample sizes for the younger ones. But 90.3 points is a tad too low for a group coming off a strong second half, including a near upset of Winnipeg in the playoffs, and a team that will have Jim Montgomery from the onset. Dom acknowledged these facts in his article, but I still had fun telling him what he got wrong! — *Jeremy Rutherford*

### **Utah Mammoth**

Projected points: 90.5

Verdict: About right

A 90-point projection may seem low at first glance. After all, the Mammoth are a team with tons of exciting young talent that could exceed expectations, and if things break right, it's easy to see them knocking on the door of a 100-point season. However, relatively speaking, Dom's model has Utah rated as the eighth-best team in the West and with a 50 percent chance of making the playoffs. In other words, the model is expecting them to be in the thick of the playoff race with a good chance of actually breaking through, which sounds about right. — *Harman Dayal*

### **Montreal Canadiens**

Projected points: 92.1

Verdict: About right

The Canadiens might get a few more than the 92.1 points the model projects, but having them as the 16th-ranked team in the NHL is in the ballpark of where I think they might finish the season. It will be tough for the Canadiens to get back to the playoffs because many of the teams that missed last year also got better. There is definitely potential for the Canadiens to outperform this mark because of how much talent they have and how young that talent is. But with youth comes inconsistency and unpredictability. This projection seems to strike a fair balance between that talent and that youth. — *Arpon Basu*

### **Minnesota Wild**

Projected points: 93.0

Verdict: Too low

This is a team that somehow managed two 100-point seasons and made playoffs three times during the Zach Parise/Ryan Suter buyout-pain years, and last season, the Wild were tied for most points in the NHL in mid-December when they were inundated with injuries, particularly Kirill Kaprizov's. If healthy, this is a good team. Mats Zuccarello's injury, which will cause him to miss two months, is a concern. If Liam Obergren and Danila Yurov don't produce and Vladimir Tarasenko doesn't reignite, Bill Guerin will have to address second-line production. — *Michael Russo*

### **Washington Capitals**

Projected points: 93.8

Verdict: Too low

The Caps got peak performance (or something close to it) from a pretty huge chunk of their roster in 2024-25. They're returning, largely, the same group. That's a good thing — but I'd still expect some regular-season drop-off. Somewhere between the projection and another 111-point season sounds right. — *Sean Gentile*

### **Ottawa Senators**

Projected points: 94.2

Verdict: About right

The Senators looked primed to return to the playoffs after making it last season for the first time in eight years. They'll fight with teams such as Montreal to remain afloat in a wild-card spot. But depending on what happens with the Panthers, there's a world where they can jump into a top-three division spot, too. — *Julian McKenzie*

### **New York Rangers**

Projected points: 94.2

Verdict: About right

While the Rangers still have significant flaws, I do believe they'll improve upon last season's 85-point finish with a new-coach bump from Mike Sullivan. I see them in the Eastern Conference's congested 6-10 range, setting up a potentially tight race for the final few playoff spots. — *Vincent Z. Mercogliano*

### **Los Angeles Kings**

Projected points: 94.8

Verdict: Too low

For all the dismay over their inability to get out of the first round, the Kings have averaged 102 points over the last four seasons. They've been a perfectly capable team, just not among the NHL's elite. The fourth line should be better, the defense might be a little worse and that could make duplicating last season's franchise mark of 105 points difficult. But it's probably not wise to write off L.A. in Anze Kopitar's final season (or a Drew Doughty comeback season) — at least until Game 1 in April. — *Eric Stephens*

### **Florida Panthers**

Projected points: 96.0

Verdict: About right

The Panthers had 98 points a year ago and went on to win the Stanley Cup. The road to a three-peat just got that much harder without Aleksander Barkov, but forecasting a bigger dip than this — and a potential playoff miss — feels ill-advised given the talent still on the roster. Florida has a full season of Seth Jones and Brad Marchand, plus a pile of LTIR cap space for GM Bill Zito to utilize, so we're not writing them off by any means. Get in and they can win. — *James Mirtle*

### **New Jersey Devils**

Projected points: 97.6

Verdict: About right

This projects a small jump from the Devils' 91-point 2024-25. That feels fair given roster additions and the team's key players (namely, Jack Hughes) starting the year healthy. If the team can get good injury luck — far from a guarantee — it could definitely have over 100 points. — *Peter Baugh*

### **Winnipeg Jets**

Projected points: 100.5

Verdict: About right

I'll resist the urge to gently tease my colleagues for the 16 paragraphs they wrote about a Carolina Hurricane in their Jets preview but their ultimate conclusions do make sense to me: Winnipeg is probably a 100-point team that could be a conference contender if Connor Hellebuyck is great (again), Jonathan Toews is up to the 2C job and they survive injuries to Dylan Samberg and Adam Lowry. Another big key? The league's No. 1 power play has to deliver another top-10 performance. — *Murat Ates*

### **Toronto Maple Leafs**

Projected points: 101.2

Verdict: About right

I had 100-101 points in my mind for this year's Leafs team, pretty much smack on Dom's projection and a slight dip from last season's 108-point season. What might prevent that slippage? A return to MVP form for Auston Matthews, strong performances from depth performers such as Matias Maccelli, Scott Laughton and Nicolas Roy, sustained excellence from 35-year-old John Tavares and a crease that remains elite. The loss of exceptional two-way talent Mitch Marner makes some kind of step back more likely. — *Jonas Siegel*

### **Dallas Stars**

Projected points: 103.1

Verdict: Too low

Perennial contenders typically learn to go on cruise control during the regular season, but there are several reasons to think Dallas might be a little more motivated to go all-out all year. A new coach in Glen Gulutzan, a full season of Mikko Rantanen, the bitter taste of a third straight postseason ending just short of a Stanley Cup Final and the ghastly way Dallas limped to the finish line last April — with seven mostly non-competitive losses in a row that caused a lot of consternation among players and fans alike — should be enough to light a fire under one of the best teams in the league. — *Mark Lazerus*

### **Carolina Hurricanes**

Projected points: 103.8

Verdict: About right

The Hurricanes still have their question marks — Can Logan Stankoven be their No. 2 center? Can the goaltending stay healthy? Will the changes on defense be a net positive? — but overall, they're top to bottom the best team in Metro and should again push past the 100-point mark this season. — *Cory Lavalette*

### **Vegas Golden Knights**

Projected points: 104.0

Verdict: About right

This projection feels spot on for Vegas. The Golden Knights are coming off a 110-point season, and with the major offseason changes of adding Mitch Marner and losing Alex Pietrangelo, it feels like they may take some time to jell and establish new roles. They should still be a playoff team without much issue, but I could see them finishing second in the Pacific. — *Jesse Granger*

### **Colorado Avalanche**

Projected points: 105.1

Verdict: About right

Last season, Colorado reached 102 points, and that was with a disastrous start in net. This year, things look much better in the crease, even with Mackenzie Blackwood's injury. The Avalanche also get a full year with Gabriel Landeskog, so I expect a slight uptick in points from 2024-25. — *Jesse Granger*

### **Tampa Bay Lightning**

Projected points: 107.3

Verdict: About right

The Lightning are starting the year in a stronger position than last year, with a deeper forward group with Oliver Bjorkstrand and Yanni Gourde in the mix. Pair that with an elite core that absolutely crushed it last year, and there's a lot to like in Tampa Bay, even with their ages in mind. Factor in the Panthers' injury woes, and there is a very clear path to the top of the Eastern Conference for the Lightning. This is one of the top contenders in the league. — *Shayna Goldman*

### **Edmonton Oilers**

Projected points: 109.0

Verdict: About right

There are several question marks with this group: goaltending, managing to replace the production of a slew of veteran wingers, missing Zach Hyman for the first month of the season and Connor McDavid's contractual status. Still, the Oilers should be a bit better than last season. Last year's preseason Presidents' Trophy favorites attained just 101 points as they largely underachieved and most players underwhelmed. — *Daniel Nugent-Bowman*

