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Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets remain alive in playoff hunt thanks to Canadiens' loss to Blackhawks

By Lori Schmidt – April 15, 2025

The Blue Jackets are still a part of the NHL playoff hunt ... barely.

The Montreal Canadiens (39-31-11) needed a win on April 14 to eliminate Columbus. Instead, they gave up a 2-0 first-period lead and fell 4-3 to the Chicago Blackhawks (24-46-11) in a shootout.

The Jackets (38-33-9) and Canadiens are the only two Eastern Conference teams still alive at this point, but Columbus needs to win out and needs Montreal to lose their regular-season finale against the Carolina Hurricanes (47-28-5) on April 16 in regulation.

Given that the Hurricanes have their postseason spot locked up, they will likely rest some of their regulars for that pivotal contest.

Still, the fact that the finish is this dramatic is appropriate considering everything the Blue Jackets have gone through this season.

What is the remaining schedule for the Blue Jackets and Canadiens?

Montreal:

April 16 vs. Carolina, 7 p.m.

Columbus:

April 15 at Philadelphia, 7 p.m.

April 17 vs. New York Islanders, 7 p.m.

How can the Blue Jackets make the playoffs?

The Blue Jackets need to beat the Flyers and Islanders, which would extend the Jackets' current win streak to six straight, and they need the Canadiens to fall to the Hurricanes in regulation. That would give both clubs 89 standings points, and the Blue Jackets would advance by virtue of a tiebreaker (wins in regulation).

Columbus Dispatch / Greaves, Fantilli help Columbus Blue Jackets stay afloat in playoff chase: 5 takeaways

By Brian Hedger – April 15, 2025

WASHINGTON — It was supposed to be a ‘revenge’ game to end the Blue Jackets’ playoff hopes.

Instead, the scrappy Jackets avoided the chopping block for a fourth straight game Sunday night at Capital One Arena. Led by Adam Fantilli’s two goals and red-hot rookie Jet Greaves’ 29 saves, they swept a back-to-back set with a 4-1 victory over the Washington Capitals — after drubbing the Caps 7-0 on Saturday to spark feelings that Sunday’s rematch would flip the script.

Instead, the Blue Jackets (38-33-9) put the onus of elimination squarely on the Montreal Canadiens’ shoulders Monday night against the Chicago Blackhawks. It was the Jackets’ fourth straight elimination escape in less than a week, following victories over the Ottawa Senators, Buffalo Sabres and Capitals at Nationwide Arena.

“It’s definitely our mindset, right?” defenseman Zach Werenski said. “It’s one of those things where we can only control what’s in front of us, and that’s the games and winning them. We know it’s win or go home ... and it’s been a lot of fun. Hopefully we just keep this thing going.”

Here are five takeaways:

Montreal Canadiens still control Columbus Blue Jackets' playoff fate

The Canadiens conclude the regular season with two games they should probably win on home ice at Bell Centre. The Blackhawks are second-to-last among the NHL’s 32 teams, and the playoff bound Carolina Hurricanes will likely rest their top players Wednesday to avoid key injuries before the postseason.

All that’s needed to clinch the East’s final playoff spot with the second wild card are two points, whether it’s by winning a game or losing both by overtime or shootout.

Money Puck gives Montreal a 96.4% chance of getting that done, while the Blue Jackets’ odds have grown to 3.6% after dropping to 0.5% starting last week.

Columbus Blue Jackets’ net Jet continues to soar

Greaves and Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason practically hunch their shoulders and say, “aw, shucks,” when asked about the rookie goalie’s outstanding play since Elvis Merzlikins was ruled out with an injury Thursday at Nationwide Arena.

Joining the Blue Jackets as an emergency recall from the AHL’s Cleveland Monsters the same day Merzlikins left a morning skate prematurely, Greaves has sizzled between the pipes to spark the Jackets’ winning streak. He’s won three straight games in just four days — four straight wins in five days counting a Wednesday AHL start in Cleveland — and he’s shown no fatigue.

“It’s just hockey,” Evason said. “It can’t be that much work. Gosh, when we were kids, you’d play two in one day. Why, when you become a pro, can’t you play two hockey games in one day? You do it as a kid all the time. What’s the difference?”

Greaves might not be double dipping games on the same day, but goalies take a physical toll in every game and Sunday was his fourth in five days. It was also another outstanding performance, running his

numbers since being recalled to 3-0-0 with a 1.00 goals-against average, .968 save percentage and one shutout.

In nine NHL starts this season, Greaves easily has the best numbers among all three Blue Jackets goalies – albeit a smaller sample size than Merzlikins’ workload. Greaves is 5-2-2 in nine appearances with a 2.22 GAA, .927 save percentage and Saturday’s 22-save shutout.

After joining Alex Ovechkin’s list of goalies he’s scored against, Greaves settled into a groove against Sunday against the Capitals and played another key role in a big Blue Jackets victory.

“It’s fun to challenge yourself against the best guys in the world,” Greaves said. “It’s awesome to have those opportunities to be in that situation. I’m just trying to keep the puck out of the net, as always.”

Columbus Blue Jackets center Adam Fantilli shines again

Adam Fantilli came out of the weekend with a bloodied, fat lip and four goals over two games against the Capitals – champions of the Metropolitan Division and the East’s top team.

Is that all?

Each time the stage gets bigger, Fantilli seems to correspondingly lift his play to meet it. He led the way offensively in the Blue Jackets’ weekend sweep of the Capitals, running his season goal total to 29 with two games remaining.

“We’ve talked about Fantilli a lot this year,” Evason said. “(Sean) Monahan was out for a long time, and (Fantilli’s) conducted himself like a seasoned pro. Had a lot on him early in the year, played a lot of minutes, plays in a lot of different situations for us. So, yeah, are we happy with his development and where he’s at as a pro and all of that? Absolutely, 100 percent. We’re happy with a lot of development in our group.”

Zach Werenski nets another big goal for Columbus Blue Jackets

After breaking his own franchise record for goals by a defenseman in a season to start the scoring in Saturday’s rout, Werenski pushed the bar another goal higher Sunday.

His 22nd goal of the season tied it 1-1 with 5:34 left in the first, capping an impressive stretch with the Blue Jackets controlling play in the Washington zone. Evening the score before the end of the first period was a huge emotional lift for his team after Ovechkin’s goal put the Capitals up early.

The goal also gave Werenski a two-goal cushion over Capitals defenseman Jakob Chychrun for second in goals among NHL defensemen.

Columbus Blue Jackets gaining valuable ‘playoff’ experience

No matter what playoff fate awaits, the Blue Jackets have already gained a lot of experience that’s similar to postseason hockey.

They’re in a stretch where the situation is akin to a Game 7 to decide a playoff series, only winning in Game 7s means advancing. In the Jackets’ current situation, winning just keeps their hopes going until another ‘Game 7’ rolls around. Still one of the NHL’s youngest teams, the Jackets’ current existence could become a huge resource whenever they do qualify for the playoffs.

“It’s great for our group,” Werenski said. “I obviously wish we were controlling our own destiny right now, but I think just getting these experiences inside of these big games at big times of the year is only going to help our group, moving forward. We’re responding well right now, we’re winning these must-win games, so continue to do that and see what happens.”

The Athletic / Blue Jackets still have playoff hopes heading into must-win game vs. Flyers

By Aaron Portzline – April 15, 2025

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Incredibly, implausibly, the Columbus Blue Jackets still have a chance to qualify for the Stanley Cup playoffs.

The Montreal Canadiens, who could have eliminated the Blue Jackets with a win on Monday against the 31st-place Chicago Blackhawks, blew an early 2-0 lead and lost 4-3 following a truly bizarre shootout before 21,105 stunned fans in Bell Centre.

That loser's point earned by the Canadiens pushes the Blue Jackets one point closer toward elimination, but it feels as if they've been living on the brink for more than a week now. And it's going to send the pressure and angst sky-high in hockey-mad Montreal over the next 48 hours.

The scenarios now are pretty clear if Columbus is going to pull off a late-season miracle.

The Blue Jackets must win their final two games in regulation — Tuesday at Philadelphia and Thursday at home vs. the New York Islanders — and the Canadiens must lose their regular-season finale in regulation on Wednesday at home against the Carolina Hurricanes.

In that scenario, the Blue Jackets and Canadiens would each have 89 points, but the Blue Jackets would have a 30-29 edge in regulation wins, which is the NHL's first tiebreaker.

Blue Jackets players were expecting to gather on Monday in Philadelphia to watch the Canadiens play the Blackhawks with their season on the line. One can only imagine the emotions in that room when the Canadiens tied the score at three on a power-play goal with 2:57 remaining, or when the Blackhawks prevailed in a shootout with two strange events.

Chicago's Frank Nazar lost the puck off his stick as he approached Montreal goaltender Sam Montembeault in the bottom half of the first round. Nazar gathered the puck and lifted a shot off his backhand, but NHL officials lost track of the puck and assumed it sailed into the crowd.

Frank Nazar's shootout attempt was originally ruled a miss, despite the puck going into the net. The play was then reviewed, and ruled a goal, after Montreal's first attempt.

After Montreal's Patrik Laine failed on his attempt at the start of the second round, the Blackhawks began complaining to officials that they hadn't been credited with Nazar's goal. Sure enough, seconds later, officials looked in the net behind Montembault and unwedged the puck from the netting.

When Chicago's Teuvo Teravainen was denied in the bottom half of the second round, that left Montreal captain Nick Suzuki to keep the game alive.

Suzuki's shot from close range glanced off Arvid Soderblom's right pad, caromed off the crossbar, then shot straight up above Soderblom before landing behind him in the crease and bouncing between his pads back out in the crease.

Hockey is a game of inches, and that's never more true than this time of year. It looked as if there was a force field in front of the Blackhawks' net on Suzuki's attempt.

The Blue Jackets were never supposed to sniff a playoff race, much less still be in the mix in mid-April. But they'll play game No. 81 on Tuesday with a chance to make the playoffs for the first time since 2019-20, when they won a qualifying round series against the Toronto Maple Leafs.

Most predicted the Blue Jackets would be among the worst teams in the NHL this season, especially after the late-summer tragedy that took the life of beloved teammate and perennial All-Star winger Johnny Gaudreau.

But the way the Blue Jackets have responded — not just learning to play at a high level amid the grief, but honoring Gaudreau by keeping his memory front and center — has made them one of the best stories in the NHL this season.

It all seemed to be drifting away, however, when they endured a 4-11-1 slump from early March into early April, earning just two regulation wins while getting shut out six times during that 16-game span. Miraculously, it didn't end their season.

Now, the Blue Jackets have won four straight games, including three wins over playoff-bound teams. On Saturday and Sunday, the Jackets completed a home-and-home sweep against the Washington Capitals, who have been the Eastern Conference's best team all season.

While Zach Werenski has been the Blue Jackets' superstar, and young players such as Kirill Marchenko (31 goals) and Adam Fantilli (29 goals) have burst onto the scene, a new standout has arrived in recent games: goaltender Jet Greaves.

On Monday, Greaves was named the NHL's first star of the week after going 3-0 with a .968 save percentage and 1.00 goals-against average in three starts since he was recalled from AHL Cleveland. He had his first career shutout on Saturday against the Capitals (22 saves), then stopped 29 of 30 shots to beat the Caps again on Sunday.

At one point early last week, the Blue Jackets were in 12th place with four teams — Detroit, the New York Rangers, New York Islanders and Montreal — between them and the final playoff spot. They were eight points behind the Canadiens.

Now, just as the Blue Jackets started heating up, the Canadiens have cooled. They've lost three straight (0-1-2) following a six-game winning streak.

Here's another ominous number: Montreal is just 2-10-3 in the last 15 meetings vs. Carolina, though they did beat the Hurricanes 4-0 on Feb. 25 to end a nine-game losing skid.

The odds are still against the Blue Jackets. They can't trip in either of their final games. But this storybook season has a chance for a storybook ending.

The Hockey News / Blue Jackets' Prospect Skates For First Time Since April 5th 2024

By Jason Newland – April 15, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets received some good news today. Their first-round draft pick, Cayden Lindstrom, joined the scratches and skated with them ahead of the Medicine Hat Tigers' second-round game tonight.

Lindstrom hasn't played a game since April 5, 2024, when he was injured and underwent surgery on his back. Since then, he has been doing rehab to build back up his strength.

If skating with the scratches goes well, he could be closer to joining the team in the playoffs if they were to make it past the second round.

The 19-year-old was expected to miss the entirety of the season due to the back issue. However, he was expected to be ready for next season, whether that is with the Tigers of the WHL or potentially with a college in the NCAA.

The Hockey News / Blue Jackets Sweep Weekend Series Against Washington; Stay Alive In Playoff Race

By Jason Newland – April 15, 2025

Zach Werenski(22), Adam Fantilli(28, 29), and Dmitri Voronkov(22) scored the goals for Columbus, while Jet Greaves was fabulous, stopping 29 Washington shots.

The Columbus Blue Jackets swept the Washington Capitals in back to back games this weekend, outscoring them 11-1 in two games. Goalie Jet Greaves, who made his 3rd NHL start in 4 days and 4th in 5 days, including the AHL, stopped all but one shot this weekend. He's also stopped 90 of 93 shots since his call-up.

The Blue Jackets will now be rooting hard for the Chicago Blackhawks to beat the Montreal Canadiens on Monday. If the Habs lose, the CBJ will be alive when they take the ice on Tuesday against the Philadelphia Flyers. If the Habs win, the Jackets' playoff hopes end, with one game left to play.

The Jackets have guaranteed themselves to finish over .500. They now have a record of 38-33-9 with 85 points. They sit three points behind Montreal.

Everyone will be watching the Canadiens and Blackhawks on Monday night.

Special Notes

- Zach Werenski, with his 22nd goal, breaks his own record for goals by a D-Man in a single season. His 78 points is also one behind Rick Nash(79) for 3rd all-time in points in season.
- Adam Fantilli becomes the 4th Blue Jacket to record a multi-goal game in consecutive nights. He joins Patrik Laine, Scott Hartnell, and RJ Umberger on that list.

Player Stats

- Zach Werenski scored his 22nd goal of the season.
- Adam Fantilli scored his 28th and 29th goals of the season. He had 4 goals against the Caps in the back-to-back games this weekend.
- Dmitri Voronkov scored his 22nd goal of the season.
- Sean Monahan collected his 35th assist.
- Ivan Provorov got his 25th assist.
- Kent Johnson got his 33rd assist.
- James van Riemsdyk recorded his 19th assist.
- Jet Greaves made 29 saves on 30 Caps shots.

Team Stats

- The Jackets power play went 0/2 on the night.
- The Columbus PK stopped the both power plays the Caps were awarded.
- Columbus won 39% of the faceoffs.

Up Next: The Blue Jackets travel to Philadelphia to play the Flyers on Tuesday in the final road game of the season and the penultimate game of the season.

The Hockey News / Jet Greaves Named As One Of The NHL's Three Stars

By Jason Newland – April 15, 2025

Jet Greaves is on fire!

The 24-year-old goalie from Cambridge, Ontario, was just named as one of the NHL's three stars of the week. Greaves was given the honor of being the league's first star.

Greaves was called up last week on an emergency recall and was immediately named the starter against the Buffalo Sabres. He beat the Sabres by allowing just two goals and had a .951 SV%.

Then came this past weekend. He was called upon to be the starter against the Washington Capitals on Saturday, and all he did was stop 22 shots and earn his first career NHL shutout in route to a 7-0 Columbus win.

The following night, against those same Washington Capitals, he was again put in the net in a must-win situation for the CBJ. He gave up a goal to Alex Ovechkin on the first shot of the game but then shut down the Caps after that. He made 29 saves to pick up his third win in 4 nights.

Greaves went 3-0 with a .968 SV% and gave up just a single goal. That one goal came against the NHL's new all-time goal scorer, Alex Ovechkin. You can't really complain about that one.

It remains to be seen if Greaves will start the season's final two remaining games, but I would put money on it that Greaves does.

Up Next: The Blue Jackets travel to Philadelphia to play the Flyers on Tuesday in the final road game of the season and the penultimate game of the season.

The Hockey News / Blue Jackets Faces Elimination For Playoff Contention For Third Time This Season

By Spencer Lazary – April 15, 2025

Another day, another elimination scenario for the Columbus Blue Jackets.

Tonight marks the third time the Blue Jackets could be knocked out of playoff contention — this time if the Montreal Canadiens win their game against the Chicago Blackhawks. But the key detail here is that Montreal must win in regulation. An overtime or shootout loss won't be enough to clinch.

If the Canadiens fail to close it out tonight and Columbus beats the Philadelphia Flyers on Tuesday, the Blue Jackets will move within just one point of Montreal for the final Wild Card spot in the East.

That would set the stage for a thrilling final game of the regular season on Thursday against the New York Islanders.

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets' Cayden Lindstrom Progressing, Still Ways Off From Playing

By Mark Scheig – April 15, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets have been patient with Cayden Lindstrom ever since they drafted him fourth overall at the 2024 NHL Draft. This past week, he was spotted skating with his junior team in Medicine Hat.

According to James Tubb of the Medicine Hat News, Lindstrom skated with the scratches in advance of Game 2 of their series against the Prince Albert Raiders. The Tigers went on to a 5-4 overtime win on Sunday night to go up 2-0 in their best-of-seven series.

Seeing images of Lindstrom skating with the Tigers ramped up speculation he could be close to playing. However, that is not the case at this time.

Lindstrom Latest

According to Blue Jackets GM Don Waddell, Lindstrom cannot skate with the Blue Jackets or with the Cleveland Monsters because he is an unsigned player. This is a chance to get on the ice with some of his Tigers' teammates.

As for a potential timeframe as to when he could play, that is still up in the air. Here's what Waddell told the Hockey Writers on Monday.

"He's been rehabbing in Columbus all year. He can't skate with our team. He can't skate in Cleveland because he is not a signed player," Waddell said. "So he's just been going on the ice by himself. And the time came, he saw the doctor last Monday. Then he started getting into a little bit of contact. The doctor said he's probably 4-6 weeks. If he had 20 practices, then they could reevaluate to see if he's ready for games. So I think it's a long shot whether he plays or not (for Medicine Hat.)"

"But now at least there, he can get on the ice with teammates and practice and start doing some battle drills and those types of things. But it's an opportunity. We've talked about it for a long time and the coach there has been very understanding of the whole situation. (He) knows that he's a ways from playing but he said, let me bring him in and let him at least skate with the guys. They're not going to practice that much because they're in a playoff series with travel. So at least he'll get some opportunity with his teammates."

As for Lindstrom's next step, whether it's playing in the NCAA's or not, Waddell said they've left the decision up to the player to decide where to go. If the Blue Jackets signed him, he would not be eligible for college hockey.

"We've met with him multiple times. Rick Nash has been real involved with it. He's trying to figure out what his best move is. Certainly college is an option for him because he's not a signed player. If we'd assign him at the beginning of the year, he couldn't have gone to college. But since he's unsigned, he's evaluating that. I know he's talked to quite a few schools. There's been one out there rumored quite a bit (Michigan State.)"

"And what we told him is you got to make your decision here because I know from year's past, I've been involved with junior teams where kids aren't happy. They want to get traded. They want to go some place. And I said if we get too involved and we recommend something that doesn't work out, then we're going to be the ones to blame. I always say, let's turn it over a kid, his family advisor, his parents and let

them decide what's best from them. We will always answer questions when we're asked, how we think the programs are. But we always leave it to the kid to make the decision."

For now, Lindstrom will continue to be around Medicine Hat getting some work in including some contact. If all goes well, the doctors will evaluate if he will be able to play games. Meanwhile, stay tuned to see which school he ultimately selects to play for in 2025-26.

1st Ohio Battery / Three Things: The Great 8's, Big Weekend From Fantilli, Ride The Jet

By Will Chase – April 15, 2025

Still beathing.

Adam Fantilli scored twice, and the Columbus Blue Jackets defeated the Washington Capitals 4-1 on Sunday at Capital One Arena to stay alive in the playoff race for at least one more day.

The Great 8's

Columbus knew what they had to do on Sunday if they were going to keep alive any hope of a playoff spot: Win.

Completing the weekend set with the Capitals in D.C. following Saturday's 7-0 blowout win at Nationwide Arena, you probably expected Washington would be a little angry with how events unfolded the day before. Washington had regulars back in the lineup like Alex Ovechkin, Jakob Chychrun, and Charlie Lindgren.

Just like the Blue Jackets wasted little time lighting the lamp on Saturday, this time it was Ovechkin and the Capitals getting on the board early. Ovechkin's 43rd goal of the season, 896th of his career, at 1:10 gave Washington the lead and their first goal of the weekend against Jet Greaves and the Blue Jackets. Dylan Strome picked up assist No. 52 on the year.

Immediately after the goal, and perhaps due to spillover from Saturday's contest that featured two fights, several misconducts, and 76 combined penalty minutes, Mathieu Olivier and Dylan McIlrath dropped the gloves. From where I was in the 400 section, it looked like a pretty even fight, but Hockeyfights.com gave the edge to Olivier.

That fight might have been just what Columbus needed. Playing desperate hockey with their backs against the wall and razor-thin margin for error, the Blue Jackets were able to take over from this point forward.

The other great eight in Werenski fired home the equalizer for his 22nd at 14:36 to make it 1-1. Ivan Provorov (25) and Sean Monahan (35) assisted. Werenski is on a four-game point streak (two goals, two assists). Monahan is on a four-game point streak (two goals, three assists).

Big Weekend From Fantilli

Fantilli continued his big week with an even bigger weekend.

Following his two-goal output Saturday, the second-year pro picked up where he left off with two more goals against the Capitals on Sunday.

His second-period, unassisted marker gave Columbus the 2-1 lead at 4:39 for his 28th.

The second goal, his 29th, came early in the third period at 1:57 to give the Jackets the 3-1 lead. Kent Johnson made the sick pass to Fantilli for his 33rd assist, and James van Riemsdyk picked up his 19th assist. Johnson is on a four-game point streak (one goal, five assists). van Riemsdyk is on a three-game point streak (two goals, three assists).

Ride The Jet

After backstopping the Blue Jackets to a weekend sweep over the Capitals, the world is taking notice of Greaves.

Whether the AHL or the NHL, all Greaves has done over the last week is win games. He picked up the win on Wednesday for AHL Cleveland. Then up to Columbus on emergency recall with Elvis Merzlikins out due to an upper-body injury, Greaves cooled off a hot Buffalo Sabres team after going down 2-0 in the first period of that 3-2 win.

He picked up his first-career shutout on Saturday, and then stifled the Caps again Sunday, helping Columbus secure just its second win this season on the second of a back-to-back as they improved to 2-10-0 in that scenario.

It's fair to wonder where the club is in the standings if Greaves had been up sooner.

Making 29 saves on 30 shots Sunday, Greaves stopped 51 of 52 shots over the weekend, and the Blue Jackets picked up four crucial points to move within three points of the idle Montreal Canadiens for the eighth seed in the East.

Montreal has lost two straight and hosts the Chicago Blackhawks on Monday night.

Dmitri Voronkov's 22nd goal of the season at 15:48 made it 4-1.

Lindgren made 19 saves on 23 shots.

Brotherly Love

The Blue Jackets are back at it on Tuesday, April 15, at 7 p.m. ET when they play the Philadelphia Flyers from Wells Fargo Center.

1st Ohio Battery / Blue Jackets Remain Alive In Playoff Race As Blackhawks Defeat Canadiens In Shootout

By Ed Francis – April 15, 2025

Still in it.

The Columbus Blue Jackets are still alive in the race for a spot in the Stanley Cup Playoffs as the Chicago Blackhawks beat the Montreal Canadiens 4-3 in a shootout on Monday night.

After Montreal scored two first period goals to go up 2-0, the Blackhawks scored three unanswered and had a 3-2 lead with less than three minutes left in regulation before the Canadiens tied the game on a Juraj Slafkovsky power play goal with 2:57 left. That sent the game into overtime and eventually a shootout, which was won 1-0 by the Blackhawks.

The overtime loss puts the Canadiens at 89 points on the season with one game left. That game is Wednesday night in Montreal against the Carolina Hurricanes.

Columbus is at 85 with two points left. To qualify for the playoffs, they will need to win both of their final two games in regulation.

That would put both teams at 89 points but give Columbus a 30-29 edge in regulation wins, which is the first tiebreaker. The Blue Jackets would not have the second tiebreaker of regulation + overtime wins, which is why both games will need to be regulation wins.

Columbus is in Philadelphia against the Flyers on Tuesday night.

Puck-drop is set for 7 p.m.

The Athletic / Weekend NHL rankings: A top 16, oddly specific playoff predictions and Gold Plan standings

By Sean McIndoe – April 15, 2025

Welcome to the last Weekend Rankings of the 2024-25 season.

Longtime readers know what that means: You're getting a top 16 instead of a top five, with every playoff team ranked. We'll also check in on what the Gold Plan standings would look like in the bottom five, and we'll even make a few oddly specific predictions.

When the schedule first came out, I was a bit nervous about the season ending on a Thursday, since that meant the last rankings would come out when each team still had a game or two left. What if there was a furious race down to the wire, and I couldn't do a top 16 because there were 20 or more teams still battling it out for the final spots?

Luckily, the NHL heard my concerns and responded accordingly, delivering an absolute dud of a late-season race in which we basically already know all the playoff teams and most of the matchups. Yay?

We'll get to the rankings in a bit. But first, let's make five oddly Round 1 specific predictions, a tradition inspired by the annual regular-season version we all love so much. And unlike the regular-season picks, I can actually claim to come into the postseason version on a bit of a hot streak. I went 2-for-5 on last year's predictions, finding paydirt on Mark Stone scoring the Golden Knights' first goal and the Oilers scoring seven times in their opener. I also predicted that a goalie who had a shutout in Game 1 would lose his starting job, and while there were no Game 1 shutouts in Round 1, the first goose egg of the postseason came from Stuart Skinner, who did indeed lose his job to Calvin Pickard for a few games.

In the oddly specific prediction game, like in baseball, hitting .400 basically makes you Ted Williams. Although to be honest, I'll happily settle for Mario Mendoza.

Bonus Five: Oddly specific Round 1 predictions

5. Brady Tkachuk will Brady Tkachuk — At some point in the near-certain Maple Leafs series, he's going to do something controversial and vaguely dirty that will A) have Toronto fans calling for a suspension, B) not result in that suspension, and C) make you kind of hate both fan bases over how unbearable they're being about the whole thing. In the prediction business, this is the equivalent of taking the free space on a bingo card.

4. The Oilers will win the first game in Los Angeles — And we'll all make snide remarks about playing all year for home ice only to immediately cough it up. But it's OK, because this one comes with a bonus prediction: The Kings will win the first game in Edmonton.

3. The Stars/Avalanche series will be a sweep — This is one of those predictions where we think of the best possible outcome for fans and then assume the hockey gods will serve up the opposite. Let's just say I better be wrong here.

2. The Habs will shut out the Capitals in one of the first two games — It goes without saying that this will make everyone freak out and conjure the memories of Jaroslav Halak. Then the Caps win the series in five.

1. The eventual Stanley Cup champion will lose their opener in overtime — And yes, this means that if your team goes to OT in Game 1, you have to root against them.

By the way: If you don't like these predictions, or think yours would be better, there's good news: The playoff prediction contest returns later this week. One question, which you will get wrong. Or will you? Make sure you get your entry in, and let's find out.

Road to the Cup

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

All 16 playoff teams, in order from least to most likely to win the Cup, based on everything we know about matchups and seeding as of this morning (which isn't quite everything, but should be enough). Each team gets two sentences each, no more, no less.

16. Montreal Canadiens — Just being here at all feels like a minor miracle, so they should just be happy to be there and bow out quickly. Then again, we've said that a few times about this team over the years, and that's exactly when they shock us.

15. Minnesota Wild — There are no bad teams in the NHL playoffs anymore. There are occasionally mediocre ones, though, and that's what I think we have here.

14. St. Louis Blues — If they'd kept winning right to the finish line, this would have been a much trickier call. As it stands, they'll be dangerous but probably overwhelmed.

13. New Jersey Devils — Damn, the Friday guys had them dead last. I don't think it's that bad, but without Jack Hughes, this doesn't feel like their year to go all the way.

12. Los Angeles Kings — After lots of back and forth, I've finally made my decision on whether I believe in them against the Oilers, even with home ice. I think this ranking tells you what that decision was.

11. Ottawa Senators — They'll have a goalie, a winnable matchup their fans will be rabid for and some legitimate "nobody believes in us" energy. If you're looking for a wild-card team that could make a surprise run, this is the one, so don't act like you weren't warned.

10. Toronto Maple Leafs — Another postseason, another matchup they should probably win and another sinking feeling that we know how it's going to end. The Leafs could absolutely win a Cup with this roster, but it feels more and more like it would take a 2018 Capitals type of year, and we're well past "believe it when I see it, not before" territory here.

9. Tampa Bay Lightning — I'm not sure how to get them any higher. But if it all comes together and they win it all, it's going to seem super obvious in hindsight.

8. Edmonton Oilers — I'm just not feeling it this year, even as all the pieces are clearly in place. Well, almost all of the pieces, depending on whether Mattias Ekholm can return (and how you feel about them deciding to entrust another McDavid/Draisaitl-era playoff run to Stuart Skinner).

7. Colorado Avalanche — I have no idea how to factor in what kind of boost, if any, they get from a Gabriel Landeskog return. Beyond that, we can all see that the Central is brutal, but these guys could absolutely be the ones to take it.

6. Florida Panthers — My Atlantic pick is no surprise if you've read the rankings all year, but I believe in them more than the standings say I should. But in a minor surprise, it turns out I don't believe in them nearly as much as the Friday guys apparently do.

5. Washington Capitals — This ranking represents a late-season drop, and I guess I lost a bit of my nerve, even as I still have them higher than the actual oddsmakers do. Don't worry, Caps fans — just think of how great it will be when they're in the Final and you all get to make fun of people like me for overthinking it.

4. Dallas Stars — They looked dominant all season, then completely broken for the last week, and recency bias is a hell of a drug. I'm scared about their path out of the Central, but if they do emerge with a healthy Miro Heiskanen, they'll be clear favorites.

3. Carolina Hurricanes — They're my Metro pick, edging out the Caps. There are more than a few flaws here, especially in terms of scoring, but I still think it adds up to a team that can at least get back to the conference finals, and maybe more.

2. Vegas Golden Knights — The first-round matchup should be an easy win, the second round no longer looks as scary as it once did, and the Central winner should be exhausted by the conference finals. They may not be the best team, but I'm not sure anyone has a more obvious path to the Cup.

1. Winnipeg Jets — I've had my doubts all year, but they've got the best goalie, lots of scoring, a fan base that's absolutely starving for a Stanley Cup and a whole country ready to get behind them if they go deep. Screw it, we ride.

Not ranked: Calgary Flames and Columbus Blue Jackets — Barring a miracle, they're both done. But thank you for being the only teams that were even vaguely trying to give us a late-season playoff race.

The bottom five

The five teams headed toward dead last and the best lottery odds for a top pick that could be James Hagens, Matthew Schaefer or someone else.

This is the time of year when we unveil what the race for the top pick would look like under the Gold Plan, an alternate method of determining draft order that I've been advocating for years. While there's little indication that the NHL has any appetite for adopting the plan, the momentum among fans has been building, helped by the PWWHL embracing the plan last year.

In short, the idea here is that the top pick goes to the team that earns the most points after being eliminated from the playoff race. So the bad teams still get an advantage, in the form of a head start when they're eliminated early, but now they have to win their way to the pick. That would mean no more cheering for your own team to lose down the stretch, plus the occasional late-season matchup between bad teams that would feel like a playoff game. (For example, yesterday's Bruins/Penguins would feel important, instead of like a waste of everyone's time.)

It goes without saying that not everyone loves the idea, because we're hockey fans and we can never agree on anything. I've tried to tackle the various objections over the years, but I also want to be an advocate instead of a zealot, which means I have to acknowledge when the other side might have a point.

So I have to admit ... yeah, this year wasn't a great one for the Gold Plan. One of the arguments against the idea has been "What happens if the conferences are so unbalanced that one side gets eliminated way earlier than the others?" And the answer was always "The odds of that happening in a meaningful way are small enough to essentially ignore." Oops. It did happen this year, thanks to an Eastern wild-card race so tepid that it means all the conference's worst teams couldn't pass the elimination mark until the season was nearly over. Meanwhile, the West's worst teams were happily banking Gold Plan points for weeks, even though their overall records weren't much worse than the East.

So is this a reason to dump the Gold Plan, or a one-off we can live with? That's up to you, but we can at least admit this year's standings get weird.

Bonus fun fact: We can't end the section without one last piece of bottom-five misery. The Blackhawks are in Montreal tonight to play the Canadiens, a team they previously beat in their only other matchup

this year. With a loss, they'll become the first team in NHL history to lose to 31 teams in a season, and the first team since 1992-93 to lose to every other team in the league at least once.

That will do it for another season. Thanks everyone for reading, and especially to all of you who argued your favorite team's case in a way that made the comment section slightly less of a trainwreck than other comment sections. Enjoy the playoffs and the offseason, and before you know it we'll be back in October with Week 1 rankings that will look absolutely terrible in hindsight.

The Athletic / Scouting the Frozen Four: What we saw and heard about top NHL prospects

By Scott Wheeler, Joe Smith and Jeremy Rutherford – April 15, 2025

ST. LOUIS — The 2025 Frozen Four featured many of the top prospects in college hockey at the Enterprise Center this week. They included first-rounders like Zeev Buium (Wild), Cole Eiserman (Islanders) and Tom Willander (Canucks), a potential 2025 first-rounder in Sascha Boumedienne, star freshman like Cole Hutson (Capitals), Mikhail Yegorov (Devils) and Hampton Slukynsky (Kings) and top college players like Alex Bump (Flyers), Jack Devine (Panthers) and Eric Pohlkamp (Sharks).

Throughout the week, The Athletic's Scott Wheeler, Joe Smith and Jeremy Rutherford were on site and picked the players' brains about, well, each other. Here's what they had to say about their peers and Wheeler's game notes on all of the prospects of note.

What Wheeler saw

Western Michigan University

Alex Bump (Flyers): Bump went scoreless in all four tournament games, his first four-game pointless streak of his college career in the last four games of it. But he had more looks than anyone else in the Frozen Four, registering 12 shots on goal (a game-high nine in the semifinal and three more in the final). Several of them came from the slot, too, and he could have easily had a couple of goals. He looked dangerous in puck control/protection, beating guys one-on-one in the guts of the offensive zone and along the wall. He tried things. He got to or got open for a lot of pucks and then held them. He looked strong. He loves the curl-and-drag wrister. He hunted and kept his feet moving, major progress since his USHL days. His average speed was noticeable at times when he couldn't pull away in transition but he also had the puck on a string at times and he worked throughout.

After his sophomore season wraps up later this week in St. Louis, Bump is expected to sign with the Flyers.

Zachary Nehring (Jets): Nehring played second-line right wing for the Broncos and finished off a bounce-back freshman year after a disappointing season in the USHL a year ago. He hit a crossbar on a wide-open net about a minute into the semifinal and was more noticeable in that game than in the final.

Joona Vaisanen (Penguins): Vaisanen was named to the All-Tournament Team and played an important role on WMU's first pair with Samuel Sjolund. I thought he had a little nerves early in the semifinal, uncharacteristically. There were times when I wanted to see him move the puck quicker on the PP as well. But he settled in nicely and was effective in moving pucks and steering play for the most part.

Vaisanen, a 20-year-old freshman right-shot defenseman, has played a pivotal role for Western Michigan.

Matteo Costantini (Sabres): Costantini centered Bump on the top line and was his usual consistent and hardworking self. He struggled in the faceoff circle but finished the semi with an assist and four shots, and was better than his pointless stat line in the final indicated. He's shifty laterally but not fast going in straight lines, and while his production didn't take a jump this year, he looks like he'll have a solid pro career, even if it's as more of an AHLer.

Ty Henricks (Rangers): WMU's depth was a story all year and the 6-foot-5 Henricks was good in a fourth-line left-wing role, finding ways to contribute on the cycle, the forecheck and around the net. They'll

need him to take a step next year and I think he's got some more in him, even if his upside may top out as more of a bottom-six AHLer than NHLer. He's worth following.

Hampton Slukynsky (Kings): Slukynsky was the goalie named to the All-Tournament Team and played well without needing to steal either of the games this week. He was square to shots, hitting his spots early. He was tracking well. He showcased his good glove. He needs to get stronger to hold the crease better on jam plays, which seemed to be the one way teams had success on him (crowding the net and poking pucks loose). With some added strength, I think he's going to be a good NHL goalie.

Tim Washe (free agent): Washe, the Broncos' captain, was named to the All-Tournament Team and was a big part of Western Michigan's success on and off the ice this season. He's a well-rounded center who can play with anyone and do whatever's needed of him.

Owen Michaels (free agent): Michaels was named the national tournament's most outstanding player and he was the clear choice for it. Michaels was outstanding in both of Western Michigan's games in St. Louis, making plays, driving, playing with speed and intention, and spending his shifts in the offensive zone. He went from seven points as a freshman to 36 as a sophomore, but staff with the Broncos will tell you he was owed better last year and that this was always who he was as a player. He's a true competitor and the kind of player you want on your team. There's already NHL interest after his one big year.

Boston University

Mikhail Yegorov (Devils): Yegorov was one of the stories of college hockey this season. The five goals he gave up in the final were the most he'd surrendered since joining the Terriers for the second semester, but he wasn't the reason they lost and he'll bounce back next year. The talent is all there. He's a big, long, lean goalie who should get strong, is super athletic and is quick on his feet and in and out of his butterfly with clear technical skills as well.

Cole Hutson (Capitals): I thought Hutson belonged on the All-Tournament Team and was one of the biggest reasons the Terriers made it as far as they did. The offensive talent and shiftiness always pops but he has really learned to play inside body positioning into contact as well. He always seems to make things happen and create looks. He was physically engaged. He had several big blocks. He created the bulk of BU's entries and rotations/swing plays inside the offensive zone. I thought he was better in the semi than the final but he had a huge year, tying Lane's freshman year to the number with 48 points in 39 games. He was also named the national rookie of the year on Friday.

Sascha Boumedienne (2025): Boumedienne played on BU's second pair with Tom Willander as the youngest player in the tournament and performed well. His movement is smooth. He had a couple of timely pinches in the offensive zone. He's starting to creep off the line more. He played tight gaps in the neutral zone. I don't think he always thinks it fast enough and there are times when he's got the puck and he takes too long to move it, but he made significant progress towards becoming a top-four D for them in the biggest games of the year.

Boumedienne's bet on himself to make the jump to Boston University in his draft year has paid off.

Tom Willander (Canucks): I didn't think Willander was very noticeable in either game, but sometimes that's a good thing in his role and the way he plays. His defending and mobility will always be his calling card. His offense doesn't flash but he should be a solid two-way NHL D.

Kamil Bednarik (Islanders): Bednarik was the Terriers' 3C as a freshman and only played 13 and 14 minutes at the Frozen Four. I wanted to see him play with more intensity in the semifinal but I thought he was better in the final. He had a fine year and is a fine college player but two goals is a little

disappointing and he'll need to get around offensive plays more next year. Look for him to be in the mix for USA's thin World Junior team down the middle next year.

Cole Eiserman (Islanders): Eiserman played third-line left wing with Bednarik and Kaplan and was one of BU's standouts in St. Louis. He was also their only player named to the All-Tournament Team. He had a couple of his usual one-and-done, trying-to-do-much moments, but he also scored a couple of big goals, was around the net and going to the net, played with energy, and found ways to make things happen, finishing the tournament with four goals in four games and the season with a team-high 25 goals and a very respectable 36 points in 39 games. I expect him to challenge for 30 goals next year.

Matt Copponi (Oilers): I thought Copponi, the Terriers' 2C, was one of their most consistent forwards in the two games. He had a couple of dashes off the wall to cut and attack into the middle third. He picked up an assist and seven shots on goal in the two games. He had ton of good shifts. And he was on a lot of pucks and poised when he had it.

Ryan Greene (Blackhawks): The Terriers' 1C and captain, Greene played an important all-situations role for them over the last three seasons. I thought he was underwhelming in St. Louis and wasn't at his best, turning some pucks over and struggling to create, but his contract with the Blackhawks is well-earned.

Green, a 6-foot-1, 195-pound two-way center, is expected to make his NHL debut on Monday.

Jack Harvey (Lightning): I thought Harvey was good without being a standout on BU's second line. He scored the empty-netter in the semifinal and had a couple of good looks around the home plate area, playing 20 and 16 minutes in the two games.

Devin Kaplan (Flyers): An alternate captain and third-line winger for the Terriers, Kaplan hasn't taken the steps I hoped he would in college. He's a good, strong player at this level. He works and he's got size. He's a competitor. He had some drives over the weekend and an assist in both games, but I don't find he creates much of his own offense.

Shane Lachance (Devils): A first-line forward and co-captain for the Terriers, Lachance's size and ability to shield pucks well on the cycle make him consistently impactful and noticeable out there. I thought he was skating well, too, even if he wasn't able to break through.

Brandon Svoboda (Sharks): Svoboda fits as a 4C at the college level, but I'm not sure he'll become much more than that. He needs to work on his hands and poise. He can be sloppy in control of it. He certainly has the physical frame and the skating/forechecking down, but I don't see enough skill to project it into a fourth-line NHL role someday.

Jack Hughes (Kings): Hughes is a player I liked in his draft year for his smarts but who never took a step in college to put himself in the conversation for an NHL contract. He played his best hockey down the stretch for the Terriers, though, and made some plays in the last few weeks on the second line with Copponi and Harvey.

Quinn Hutson (free agent): Hutson was quiet on BU's first line with Lachance and Greene at the Frozen Four but had a big year, hitting 50 points and breaking 20 goals to put himself in line for lots of NHL interest. He's a talented 5-foot-11 scorer with legit puck skill and an NHL shot who should be an AHL scorer at minimum.

Gavin McCarthy (Sabres): Hutson's partner on BU's first pair, McCarthy is the same player he has always been: A little chaotic at times but firm and competitive, too.

University of Denver

Zeev Buium (Wild): Buium played a ridiculous 51:41 in a game that ran just over 80 minutes in Denver's semifinal. As you can imagine, given how much he was out there, there was inevitably some good and some bad. He turned some pucks over, looked gassed on a few shifts hemmed in and got beat a couple of times. But he also looked his usual calm walking the line with a guy off him in a dangerous area, made a couple of plays and came alive on a couple of shifts in the third and overtime, helping to set up the game-tying goal and nearly winning it on a dancing moment to the slot in overtime. All in all, this was a heck of a year from a heck of a player. I think he's ready for the Wild right now and into the playoffs.

Eric Pohlkamp (Sharks): Pohlkamp was used as Denver's No. 2 D during this stretch run, even though he technically played on a separate pair from Buium, and played almost 40 minutes himself in the semi. I thought he was excellent. He's always decisive with his shot but I thought he was decisive in other ways. He was physical and on time defensively. He forechecked when in a couple of sequences for his team. He attacked. He side-stepped pressure and skated pucks. And fittingly, it was his point shot that led to the 2-2 goal. He had an excellent year after his transfer to Denver and should be one of their top players next year after they lose their best player at every position (Buium on D, Davis in net and Devine up front).

Hagen Burrows (Lightning): Burrows was a fourth-line right winger for Denver in his freshman year. I noticed him working to apply pressure a couple of times early but he didn't play a ton.

Jack Devine (Panthers): I thought Devine, the country's leading scorer this year, actually had a bit of a quiet game in the semifinal. He struggled to get to the inside and play-make like he has over the last two seasons. Still, he's just put together 56- and 57-point junior and senior years and pro hockey is up next for him.

Sam Harris (Canadiens): Harris had a really positive development year but wasn't much of a factor at left wing alongside Samu Salminen and opposite James Reeder on Denver's second line in the semi.

Rieger Lorenz (Wild): Lorenz skated as a third-line left winger for the Pioneers and I thought he played some good hockey down the stretch and into the tournament. He was on pucks on the cycle throughout the semi but struggled to generate out of his puck protection and battles. They'll need him to take a step and become more of an offensive catalyst next year.

James Reeder (Kings): I thought Reeder was OK in the semifinal, if a little vanilla. He broke 10 goals and 20 points as a teenage freshman this year, though, which is a solid year.

Samu Salminen (Devils): Salminen slotted as the Pioneers' 2C and had one great look that just missed the far post in the third period and seemed to be around the net consistently on scrambles. He took an unnecessary holding penalty in the offensive zone as well, though, and hasn't progressed since the draft like I hoped he would (I was a fan but his pace has never come and he still looks a little stilted out there).

Aidan Thompson (Blackhawks): Thompson was an important part of Denver's impactful top line this season, skating at left wing alongside captain Carter King and Devine. He had the puck a lot in the semifinal but struggled to break through until he scored in the third period. He bobbled a couple of pucks but also drove play and played hard and was one of their more noticeable players. This was a big year for Thompson, who broke 50 points and earned an NHL deal with the Blackhawks out of it. He plays an up-tempo, driven game and has some skill and quiet competitiveness. I'm not sure he's going to be a full-time NHLer but he's going to be a good top-nine AHLer and probably get some call-ups at some point.

Jared Wright (Kings): In a game where the Pioneers' forwards by and large struggled to get to the interior and create around the net, Wright was central to the third line having some success doing that and finished with a team-high four shots, scoring on a jam play at the top of the crease to tie the game and send it to overtime.

Garrett Brown (Jets): Brown played more with Boston Buckberger out following an injury against Western Michigan in the conference championship, slotting onto the team's third pair with Tory Pitner. He skated some pucks up ice and swung deep into the offensive zone a few times. He can look a little awkward out there at times but he's a strong skater going north when he gets going. He can create havoc when he gets a head of steam, too, and nearly set up a goal in overtime. He also turned a couple of pucks over and got caught flat-footed in his own zone a couple of times, though, and got beat one-on-one a couple of times as well.

Penn State University

Aresenii Sergeev (Flames): Sergeev lost the puck on a routine shot into his body off the rush on the 1-0 goal and made a mistake by spinning off it and revealing it to Jack Hughes, but played well the rest of the way. He covers a lot of the net down low and uses his size well.

Aiden Fink (Predators): Fink was one of the leading scorers in all of college hockey this season, and the big thing I was looking out for in the semifinal was his speed against a quick BU team. He's a little winger with tons of individual talent and offense, but his knees have always knocked and his awkward skating stride resulted in him falling to the Preds further than his talent otherwise merited. I thought his feet looked quicker and his stride looked less wonky, too. He got out in transition and created off the rush a few times.

Reese Laubach (Sharks): Laubach emerged as the Nittany Lions' 1C this year and had a really positive sophomore campaign (though he would sometimes play 16-17 minutes to Cerrato's 20), finishing with 30 points in 35 games. I thought he was just OK in the semifinal but he has progressed well for a kid taken 217th in the draft.

Charlie Cerrato (2025 NHL Draft): Cerrato is an overager with a chance to get picked in 2025 after he became an important 2C. I thought he protected pucks well in the semifinal and was consistent for them all year, and the 42 points in 38 games are a testament to that. So is the way he was relied upon by Guy Gadowsky. He's an average-sized, average-skill player but I'd consider using a late-round pick on him. He was a very good college center this year.

What we heard

On Cole Hutson

BU HC Jay Pandolfo: He just has a confidence about him and he wants the puck on his stick. He's really competitive, he sees the game really well, he uses his instincts, and he has the confidence. He wants to help our team win.

Eiserman: He's so good with the puck, protects it like no other guy I've been around. He's not the biggest guy, but the way he moves and protects the stick. Super strong with his stick. When you're on the ice, nobody can really touch him. Sick passer.

Slukynsky: (It's) just how dynamic he is on the blue line. You see him out there breaking guys' ankles basically, going downhill from there. I would say those two things, for sure.

On Zeev Buium

Eiserman: He's one of my good buddies. Won some games with him. Great kid. Unbelievable on the ice. At Shattuck, he was very good. He made the program, and that was huge for him, he wasn't necessarily a lock. When we got to the program, I'm like, "This kid is legit." He was playing with Leonard, Smith and Perreault on that power play, so he might have gotten overlooked a little bit. But he comes to a place like Denver, he's absolutely dominating. He's been good, but he's gotten very good.

Slukynsky: (Buium's) similar to Hutson how dynamic he is at the blue line, how good he is at making guys miss and going downhill from there.

C. Hutson: He's a really good two-way player, super skilled. Took a few things from his game to put in mine, learning from him at World Juniors was really cool too.

On Tom Willander

Pandolfo: Tom's a great two-way defender. I mean, he's an 11th overall pick, so he's obviously highly touted. He's competitive, he's really tough to play against, he ends plays quickly with his stick and his strength, and he transitions really fast. I mean, he's a tremendous player. You're going to see him in the National Hockey League in the not-too-distant future, and he's a big part of our D core.

On Cole Eiserman

Slukynsky: You see it every game. He loves to shoot, too. You can see his stick bend in real time when he's shooting. He's got a really quick release, a really hard shot, and really accurate, too. He's tough to stop, for sure.

Cole Hutson: I think it's more his one-timers, he shoots it so hard and places it so well. It's similar to Quinn's. He's a good guy to have on the power play for sure.

On Mikhail Yegorov

Pandolfo: We wanted to strengthen the goaltender position. In the first half, we just felt like we needed some help there and we thought that he could come in and compete for the starting job. And we gave him an opportunity and he really never looked back. That was kind of the thought process behind it: "Let's see if he can do it." He's a terrific kid. He's just got an infectious personality. And he's really grateful for the opportunity that he has gotten and he has enjoyed every moment. There's just a lot of great things about him and we're certainly glad to have him.

On Hampton Slukynsky

Eiserman: Very flexible. We were in the gym stretching before practice and he's doing these crazy splits. Then you get on the ice with him, he's super competitive. Super agile on his feet. Very good goalie, very hard to score against. Very nice kid, so you really respect him.. He's so good at being in spots where you think you have him and he makes a crazy save. He's never out of it.

C. Hutson: What I noticed with him is he's really good side to side. He's a mobile goalie that can control where pucks go after it hits him.

On Alex Bump

Western Michigan captain Tim Washe: Nobody can take the puck from him. He's big, he's strong, he can skate. Great shot. But he wants that puck on his stick and he makes plays with it.

Slukynsky: The way he creates, it looks like he has nothing. But the way he creates, the way he can finish, it's unreal.

Vaisanen: He's a great, great player, a great leader, and one of those players that is so talented that he can take games over. And he's just a great goal scorer overall but he also helps his team win. He's definitely a huge part of our team and coming in as a freshman, he kind of makes everyone comfortable and just shows the culture and the hard work that everyone needs to bring into this team. And then during games, he's just trying to get the best out of everyone and he shows the way first.

Eiserman: You watch him, he's had a great year. You see all the goals and points. A pretty big OT winner for them in their championship, lot of credit to him.

On Eric Pohlkamp

Denver HC David Carle: Eric has been a great addition as a human first. It's hard to embed yourself into a team as a transfer sometimes with how much he wants to win. And then he's a hell of a hockey player. I think it was probably Eric's best weekend he's had all year just with keeping pucks in front of him, staying firm, and playing a defense-first game that allows him to play my offense. I'm really happy for him and I'm certainly happy that he chose Denver.

On Rieger Lorenz

Carle: I think he has bought into that power forward type mentality in terms of being first on pucks. You need good depth and Rieger is really confident that he can play a full 200-foot game and given the chances that they get that he'll be able to chip in offensively as well.

On Quinn Hutson

Pandolfo: He's the older brother, not drafted like his two younger brothers are. He has come a long way as a player for us. He has always had the ability to score. I think he has the most goals for our team over the last three seasons. He can really shoot. But he has rounded out the rest of his game. He's a real good defensive player for us now. I think he's over plus-20, so that tells you that and he's also out against the other team's top lines a lot. He plays with Ryan Greene and Shane Lachance and they get tough matchups and not only are they very good defensively but they also chip in offensively and help us that way. He has come a long way as a player and I think for him, he has shown NHL teams that they're certainly going to have interest in him and I'm certainly pretty sure that he's going to find his way onto an NHL roster at some point. He's going to get an NHL contract and he deserves it. He has earned it, he has worked at it, and it's a credit to him. He has been a great player for us the last three years and he's a big reason why we've been to three Frozen Fours.

C. Hutson: He's a goal scorer, can put the puck in the net. It's not easy to do.

On Jack Hughes

Pandolfo: He's a really good player, he's got really good skill, but he's also very good defensively. He's got a great stick. He's really smart. He's an intelligent player ... The first half of the year, we didn't really use him on the penalty kill and I think in the second half that has really helped his overall game. He's usually first over the boards on the kill and he's so quick and anticipates the play really well. He has been tremendous for us. He's got really good offensive ability as well and that's starting to show a little bit more too. I'm really happy with where he's at. He's a senior but he's only 21 years old and he's really young, he came into college as a 17-year-old, so sometimes it takes a little bit longer but he's really starting to find his game and we're really happy for Jack.

The Athletic / NHL first-round playoff matchups: Projecting and analyzing the 8 series

By Julian McKenzie – April 15, 2025

The NHL regular season ends on Thursday, so it's getting late for those on the outside of the playoff picture. In the Eastern Conference, two teams remain in contention for one wild-card spot, while in the Western Conference, three teams remain in the running for the two wild-card spots.

The Columbus Blue Jackets and the Calgary Flames are the only teams not currently in playoff spots that haven't been eliminated yet. The Blue Jackets are three points behind the Montreal Canadiens, and each team has two games remaining. The Flames, with two games left, are two points behind the St. Louis Blues and three points behind the Minnesota Wild, who each have one game left.

Meanwhile, more playoff series are beginning to take shape. Once again, we look at the standings and analyze the first round if it began today.

Eastern Conference

Washington Capitals (M1) vs. Montreal Canadiens (WC2)

The Capitals will enter the playoffs as the Eastern Conference's best team. Meanwhile, the Canadiens continue to fight for their postseason spot. Montreal had chances to clinch against the Ottawa Senators and Toronto Maple Leafs, in games on Friday and Saturday, but lost both. They still hold their own destiny, though. The door remains open, albeit slightly, for the Blue Jackets to run the table and somehow usurp the Canadiens to enter the playoffs.

Regardless of who steps into that second wild-card spot, they'll trek to the American capital. Washington could use a jolt before they enter the playoffs, as they've only won three times in their last 10 games, including back-to-back losses to Columbus this weekend.

Carolina Hurricanes (M2) vs. New Jersey Devils (M3)

This matchup is locked in. The Devils can't catch the Hurricanes in the standings, and the Hurricanes can't catch the Capitals. This matchup will be the sixth time these teams have met each other in the playoffs. Carolina has won the last four meetups, with the Devils' sole series win coming during the 2000-01 season — the year they represented the Eastern Conference in the Stanley Cup Final against Colorado.

The underlying metrics love the Hurricanes at five-on-five, whether it's through Corsi, expected goals or high-danger changes according to Natural Stat Trick. New Jersey, meanwhile, boasts a top-10 defense but is running a bit cold lately, with three consecutive losses, including a 7-2 loss to the Boston Bruins last week.

Toronto Maple Leafs (A1) vs. Ottawa Senators (WC1)

It's looking pretty likely that we'll get this series, too. The Senators are locked into the first wild-card spot after Sunday's overtime win over the Philadelphia Flyers. Toronto is locked into a top-two finish in the Atlantic Division, thanks to their overtime win over Montreal on Saturday night. If Toronto gets one more point or the Lightning lose a point, the Atlantic Division will belong to the Maple Leafs and they'll host the Senators in a playoff series for the first time since 2004.

Senators owner Michael Andlauer has already said he's ready for the Leafs. The Senators swept the Leafs in their regular-season series this year. But if you've followed the history of this rivalry in the playoffs, you know that only means little.

Tampa Bay Lightning (A2) vs. Florida Panthers (A3)

The Battle of Florida looks set in stone, too. Florida is guaranteed a top-three finish in the Atlantic Division after Ottawa won in overtime on Sunday. Meanwhile, as noted above, Tampa Bay still has a chance at the Atlantic Division crown despite being four points back with two games to play. The Panthers, meanwhile, can only finish as high as second in the division. This means home-ice advantage is still very much in play for either team.

Florida had home-ice advantage in each of its last three playoff encounters against Tampa Bay but won only once — in last year's first-round matchup, en route to its first-ever Stanley Cup championship.

Western Conference

Winnipeg Jets (C1) vs. St. Louis Blues (WC2)

The Jets are the Presidents' Trophy winners for the first time in their history and have assured themselves of home-ice advantage throughout the playoffs. But who will enter the postseason in that second wild-card spot? Three teams still have a chance as of Monday morning.

St. Louis currently occupies that position, with the Minnesota Wild one point above them in the first wild-card spot. If both teams win their final games of the season on Tuesday night, St. Louis will remain second and meet Winnipeg in the first round. If either Minnesota or St. Louis loses Tuesday night, Calgary can enter as long as it wins out the rest of the way.

Dallas Stars (C2) vs. Colorado Avalanche (C3)

The collision between these Western Conference powers has been projected for some time. That matchup was finalized on Saturday night. The biggest thing we're wondering about between now and the end of the regular season is Colorado captain Gabriel Landeskog's availability. The forward scored his first pro hockey goal in three years during a conditioning stint while playing with the Avs' AHL affiliate, the Colorado Eagles, on Saturday. The Stars are locked in the Central Division's second position as Colorado cannot catch them, and the Jets have already wrapped up the Central Division and the league's best record.

Vegas Golden Knights (P1) vs. Minnesota Wild (WC1)

Vegas clinched its fourth division title in eight years on Saturday night with a win over the Nashville Predators. The Golden Knights are locked into a matchup against the first wild-card team in the Western Conference. Thanks to an overtime win over Vancouver on Saturday and St. Louis' shootout loss to Seattle, the Wild are in that first wild-card position. A win on Tuesday would cement that spot for them, meaning Marc-André Fleury's final NHL postseason would begin in one of his previous stops along his likely Hall of Fame career.

Los Angeles Kings (P2) vs. Edmonton Oilers (P3)

For the fourth straight year, the Oilers and Kings will meet in the opening round of the playoffs. The Oilers have an outside chance at jumping the Kings for second in the Pacific Division, as they're only four points behind with two games remaining. If Los Angeles gets home-ice advantage, they will lean on having the Western Conference's best home record this year and that they've taken two of three regular-season games against Edmonton so far. The teams will have a first-round dress rehearsal on Monday night in Edmonton.

The Athletic / Early NHL free agent big board: The 15 top UFA targets to watch this offseason

By Chris Johnston – April 15, 2025

The opening of NHL free agency is still more than two months away, which means we don't yet have a full picture of how the landscape will look at noon ET on July 1.

Some fortunes are bound to rise and fall with playoff performances. And there's plenty of time remaining for pending unrestricted free agents to negotiate a contract extension that would remove them from the open market before even officially hitting it.

Still, virtually every NHL team is flush with cap space in a rising cap environment and the offseason planning is already well underway behind the scenes.

As free agency draws nearer, we'll dust off the Big Board to more closely track the movements of the marketplace.

But, first, an appetizer.

Let's start with 15 (potential) free agents to watch.

(Note: Contract terms are via PuckPedia.)

1. Mitch Marner

Position: Right Wing

Age: 27

Current team: Toronto Maple Leafs

2024-25 stats: 26 goals, 99 points

Current contract: 6 years, \$65.4 million

On pace for the first 100-point season of his NHL career, Marner represents the kind of blue-chip player that rarely hits the open market in his prime. Adding him would be viewed as a franchise-altering move in several markets across the league because of a unique skill set that not only makes Marner one of the NHL's most offensively gifted performers but also one of its more trusted forwards on the defensive side of the puck. The former Selke Trophy finalist has been a top penalty-killing option for years and routinely uses his elite instincts to pressure opponents into turnovers when defending at five-on-five. It's little wonder why the Maple Leafs made serious attempts to sign Marner to an extension earlier this season and will almost certainly try again before July 1.

2. Sam Bennett

Position: Center

Age: 28

Current team: Florida Panthers

2024-25 stats: 25 goals, 50 points

Current contract: 4 years, \$17.7 million

Bennett is on the younger end of this free-agent class and brings something that can't be measured with boxcar numbers: tenacity. One NHL exec referred to him recently as a "dog on a bone." So while other centers with longer track records of regular-season production will be available in free agency, Bennett may be more in demand because he's viewed as a player who could tip the scales for a team in the playoffs. That's a significant piece of leverage to bring to market. His performance for Florida during back-to-back trips to the Stanley Cup Final, not to mention a strong appearance for Team Canada at the 4 Nations Face-Off earlier this year, will only help solidify his reputation as a big-game player. Bennett should be able to command a maximum-term seven-year deal in free agency.

3. John Tavares

Position: Center

Age: 34

Current team: Toronto Maple Leafs

2024-25 stats: 38 goals, 74 points

Current contract: 7 years, \$77 million

Drinking from the fountain of youth in his 16th NHL season, Tavares is unexpectedly pushing the 40-goal threshold for the first time since 2018-19. It's a reflection of the fact that, while his skating has never been a strength, his hockey IQ and hands are as sharp as ever. Tavares remains incredibly driven in his preparation, and he's deadly when the puck is on his stick around the net. He's also elite in the faceoff dot. When you couple that package of skills with his impressive resume and positive dressing-room impacts, you've got a unique player. The only real point of concern from a free-agent suitor will be the length of contract, given that Tavares turns 35 in September. There's also a belief that he's not too eager to leave Toronto.

4. Nikolaj Ehlers

Position: Left Wing

Age: 29

Current team: Winnipeg Jets

2024-25 stats: 24 goals, 63 points

Current contract: 7 years, \$42 million

Steady as a drumbeat, Ehlers has been an automatic 20-plus-goal player for a decade and consistently drives play for teammates. While not physically imposing at 6 feet and 172 pounds, he backs opponents off with his immense skill. Ehlers can both start plays and finish them, and he's posted a 55 percent expected goals percentage at even strength through more than 600 career NHL games. He's also a power-play threat who produced points at the best rate of his NHL career this season. While he'd be a useful top-six addition for basically every team in the league, there may be some durability concerns over the long term.

5. Vladislav Gavrikov

Position: Defenseman

Age: 29

Current team: Los Angeles Kings

2024-25 stats: 4 goals, 27 points

Current contract: 2 years, \$11.75 million

A top-pairing defenseman on one of the stingiest defensive outfits in the league, Gavrikov may not be a household name, but that hasn't stopped him from accumulating plenty of admirers across the NHL. The Kings' leader in total ice time this season, Gavrikov is known as a player who seals the wall and keeps the game in front of him. There's also an element of physicality and bite to his game that prevents opponents from getting through him, and he keeps the play moving, which is reflected in the high-end possession metrics Los Angeles produces with him on the ice. While Gavrikov lacks the offensive tools and production to be viewed as a No. 1 defenseman, he's got a credible case as a No. 2.

6. Ivan Provorov

Position: Defenseman

Age: 28

Current team: Columbus Blue Jackets

2024-25 stats: 7 goals, 32 points

Current contract: 6 years, \$40.5 million

Provorov is an all-situations defender who is equally comfortable lining up on the right and left side, which boosts his value slightly. He's been a 20-plus-minute player since stepping into the NHL at age 20 and possesses a smooth skating stride that should age well. While prone to the occasional defensive error, he excels at getting play going in the right direction with a good stick to force turnovers and a strong breakout pass. It's no certainty that he'll hit the open market with his younger brother, Vladimir, set to move to Columbus to attend Ohio State.

7. Brock Nelson

Position: Center

Age: 33

Current team: Colorado Avalanche

2024-25 stats: 26 goals, 56 points

Current contract: 6 years, \$36 million

A strong, straight-line player with a dangerous shot and a knack for scoring goals, Nelson will be of interest to teams looking to fill a hole at second-line center. Viewed as defensively responsible after developing his game on Long Island, he also has utility as a playmaker. Now, at this stage of his career, Nelson may not be counted on to drive his own line full-time. He'd benefit from having an offensive weapon at his side. But he's a useful special teams contributor who can kill penalties and man the net front on the power play.

8. Matt Duchene

Position: Center

Age: 34

Current team: Dallas Stars

2024-25 stats: 30 goals, 81 points

Current contract: 1 year, \$3 million

Still skating like the wind and producing like a viable top-six option in his 16th NHL season, Duchene has vastly outperformed a bargain contract for two years running in Dallas. While it may be unreasonable to expect him to replicate this season's 30-goal, 81-point campaign due to a high shooting percentage, he's still a useful offensive weapon who will have options if he's willing to move on from the Stars. Duchene is best slotted as a second-line player at this stage of his career and remains reliable in the faceoff dot. A good short-term bet if the price is right.

9. Brock Boeser

Position: Right Wing

Age: 28

Current team: Vancouver Canucks

2024-25 stats: 25 goals, 49 points

Current contract: 3 years, \$19.95 million

He's scored at a 30-goal-per-82-game pace across his NHL career, while only actually cresting that mark once, when he scored 40 times in 2023-24. Boeser is a pure sniper with a dangerous release, which makes him a threat both on the power play and at even strength. Injuries and inconsistency have plagued him at times during his career, but there's no getting around the fact that he excels at the most difficult thing in the game to do. Getting a fresh start after a difficult final season in Vancouver could put some wind in his sails.

10. Neal Pionk

Position: Defenseman

Age: 29

Current team: Winnipeg Jets

2024-25 stats: 9 goals, 38 points

Current contract: 4 years, \$23.5 million

A right shot who makes good decisions with the puck and produces decent offensive numbers, Pionk is in line for a raise. Among his strengths are joining the attack or getting a wrist shot through traffic for teammates to tip or collect rebounds. While there may be some modest concerns about his defensive impacts, Pionk is logging more than 22 minutes per night on the NHL's best regular-season team. Expect the Jets to try and make something work to keep him in Winnipeg.

11. Ryan Donato

Position: Center

Age: 29

Current team: Chicago Blackhawks

2024-25 stats: 31 goals, 61 points

Current contract: 2 years, \$4 million

The relentless high-energy player exploded for a career season in Chicago at the perfect time. He's an eight-year NHL veteran who has bounced around to five teams and will leave suitors questioning if his

high-water mark can be repeated. Donato made some strides with his skating this season and has the hands necessary to bury offensive chances when he gets them. There have already been some discussions about a potential extension with the Blackhawks.

12. Patrick Kane

Position: Right Wing

Age: 36

Current team: Detroit Red Wings

2024-25 stats: 21 goals, 57 points

Current contract: 1 year, \$6.5 million

If you're looking for signs of encouragement here, Kane has scored and put up points at a better rate in the two seasons after hip surgery than the two immediately before it. The procedure looks to have given new life to one of the best American players ever. Still, he hasn't appeared in a playoff game during that period and might be tempted to jump to a contender under the right circumstances. He remains an elite playmaker and puck handler who would nicely complement high-end offensive teammates.

13. Brad Marchand

Position: Left Wing

Age: 36

Current team: Florida Panthers

2024-25 stats: 22 goals, 50 points

Current contract: 8 years, \$49 million

One of the more compelling free agents in this class, Marchand's resume and intangibles will certainly pique interest. He's a high-motor, high-character player with Stanley Cup pedigree and Team Canada bona fides, but the injuries have also stacked up in recent years. It's been a slow start for him in Florida since coming over from Boston at the trade deadline, although perhaps that's to be expected after spending his entire career with the Bruins. Of particular note with Marchand is that he hasn't earned as much as peers of his quality throughout his NHL career, so he's not expected to come at a discount.

14. Aaron Ekblad

Position: Defenseman

Age: 29

Current team: Florida Panthers

2024-25 stats: 3 goals, 33 points

Current contract: 8 years, \$60 million

Still relatively young and already with nearly 800 total NHL games on his resume, Ekblad is a bit of a polarizing player among scouts. The fact that he chews through minutes as a top-pairing right-shot defenseman should make him incredibly valuable, especially since his resume includes a Stanley Cup in 2024 with the Panthers. Not only is he big and strong, but he's also a good passer who has consistently put up solid offensive numbers throughout his career. However, there are some concerns out there

about how well Ekblad's game will age. He's also been plagued by injuries in recent years and is currently serving a 20-game suspension for violating the NHL/NHLPA Performance Enhancing Substances Program.

15. Jake Allen

Position: Goalie

Age: 34

Current team: New Jersey Devils

2024-25 stats: 12-16-1, 2.61 GAA, .908 save percentage

Current contract: 2 years, \$7.7 million

A well-known commodity who has appeared in more than 450 career NHL games, Allen has been a bright spot in the No. 2 role for the Devils. Not only is his .911 save percentage a couple ticks above his career average, but he's among the best performers in goals saved above expected per 60 this season. The fact that Allen appears on this list is also a reflection of how thin the UFA market is at the position with Frederik Andersen, Ilya Samsonov, Anton Forsberg, Dan Vladar and Alexandar Georgiev among the other potential options. Not many sure things among that group.

ESPN / Offseason keys for NHL teams, including draft, free agency

By Ryan S. Clark, Kristen Shilton – April 15, 2025

The 2024-25 NHL regular season will end Thursday, with exciting races for playoff seeding and the draft lottery order right until the final horn.

But not every team gets to participate in the postseason. This is the place where we look ahead to the offseason for all the teams eliminated from contention: Who will those teams try to add via free agency, trades and the draft? How much better will the team be in 2025-26?

Read on for a look at what went wrong for each eliminated team, along with a breakdown of the biggest keys this offseason and realistic expectations for next season. Note that more teams will be added to this story as they are eliminated.

Note: Profiles for the Atlantic and Metro teams were written by Kristen Shilton, and Ryan S. Clark analyzed the Central and Pacific teams. Stats are collected from sites such as Natural Stat Trick, Hockey Reference and Evolving Hockey. Projected cap space per PuckPedia. Dates listed with each team are when the entry was published. Teams are listed alphabetically by publication date.

April 14: Anaheim Ducks

Projected cap space: \$39.55 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 2nd (WPG), 3rd, 3rd (TOR), 4th (DET), 5th, 5th (EDM), 6th, 7th

What went right? The team's young core made progress. Unlike his rookie season, Leo Carlsson wasn't limited to a certain number of games, and the result was a 20-goal season. Goaltender Lukas Dostal won 20 games, and was in the top 20 in save percentage. Cutter Gauthier flirted with a 20-goal season as a rookie. Jackson LaCombe went from 17 points in 71 games in 2023-24 to having 14 goals and 43 points in 70 games, averaging an additional three minutes of ice time. Mason McTavish had his first 20-goal and 50-point season.

Those players are all key building blocks, and all played a role in the Ducks finishing with more than 70 points after consecutive, sub-60-point seasons.

What went wrong? The defensive infrastructure around Dostal. After finishing the 2023-24 season with a minus-91 goal differential, the Ducks needed to be better in the defensive zone in 2024-25. This season, they did cut the differential to minus-34, which speaks to some progress. But their underlying metrics prove there's still more work to be done. Natural Stat Trick's data shows that the Ducks gave up the NHL's most shots per 60 minutes, the most scoring chances per 60 and the most high-danger chances per 60.

Keys to the offseason: Again, it goes back to the young core. Dostal is a pending restricted free agent and is expected to receive a significant increase from his \$812,500 salary. McTavish timed his first 20-goal season well; his entry-level contract ends, meaning he'll also need to sign a new deal this offseason. Securing those contracts should still give the Ducks quite a bit of cap space as they seek to add more help around their core for the next phase.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: In a way, they appear to be on the same path the Utah Hockey Club took in 2024-25. Although the playoffs might not be in reach next season, the Ducks were nearly at a point-per-game pace. Another year of experience for their core -- coupled with what they could do in free agency -- could have them contending for a wild-card spot until next season's final weeks.

April 14: Boston Bruins

Projected cap space: \$27.14 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 2nd (CAR), 2nd (STL), 3rd, 4th (PHI), 5th, 6th, 7th

What went right? The best thing Boston did this season was lean all the way into a rebuild. It was inevitable that after a decade of perennial playoff contention the Bruins were going to take a step back -- and take stock. GM Don Sweeney's early coaching change -- from Jim Montgomery to Joe Sacco -- didn't give Boston a boost, and by the trade deadline it was smart for Sweeney to be a big-time seller. The Bruins acquired valuable draft capital -- including four picks in the first and second rounds -- and they added some intriguing new faces such as Casey Mittelstadt and Fraser Minten. Some burgeoning late-season chemistry between David Pastrnak and Morgan Geekie is a nice bonus for the Bruins as a potential pairing to watch.

What went wrong? Boston lost seven of its first 11 games. That was hardly a good omen for what was ahead. The Bruins' calling card has long been its defensive play, so losing top defenseman Hampus Lindholm to a season-ending patella fracture in mid-November was crushing. Montgomery was fired the same week. Jeremy Swayman -- following a contentious contract dispute -- was mediocre in net. And there was little help from the Bruins' offense in making up for any of their defensive and goaltending issues. Boston is 29th in scoring, averaging just 2.63 goals per game, and on the power play (15.5%).

Charlie McAvoy's upper-body injury in early February at the 4 Nations Face-Off was another gut punch. It's no wonder Sweeney keyed on major changes -- such as moving on from captain Brad Marchand -- considering how much these Bruins pale in comparison to what previous teams produced.

Keys to the offseason: The Bruins need a permanent head coach. Sweeney could opt to remove Sacco's interim tag or explore who else is available. Once Sweeney has that person in place, they can start preparing for an important upcoming draft in which Boston will have a high first-round selection and two picks in the second round. Those picks take on a greater meaning now considering the Bruins don't have a deep prospect pool. The focus then shifts to determining which of Boston's young players will be ready to take a leap in the NHL, and how the Bruins will prioritize adding veteran players around them in free agency. The rebuild will be in full swing.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Boston still has a 40-goal scorer in Pastrnak. If Lindholm and McAvoy return to full health, and Swayman can be a game-changer in net again, there's hope for the Bruins to be a fun club to watch -- if not one that reaches the playoffs after a one-year absence. It's not as if they're starting from scratch.

April 14: Buffalo Sabres

Projected cap space: \$22.32 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 4th (MIN), 5th, 6th, 7th, 7th (NSH), 7th (WSH)

What went right? Buffalo proved this season it is capable of being a playoff team. The Sabres overcame a slow start to hold a postseason slot at Thanksgiving, which is often a good indicator of a club's potential to stay there through the season. Tage Thompson had a terrific season, scoring 44 goals and averaging a point per game; when the Sabres do finally break through, they'll have him in large part to thank for keeping their offensive engine going. Rasmus Dahlin also continues to be a standout with 62 points from the back end.

GM Kevyn Adams was able to trade underperforming Dylan Cozens and added Josh Norris (injured for most of his Sabres' tenure to date) for the future.

What went wrong? The Sabres have failed to qualify for the playoffs in 14 straight seasons. That's tied with the New York Jets for the longest active drought in major professional sports. But Buffalo had its chance. The Sabres were in the mix until a 13-game winless streak through December torpedoed things. And Adams didn't do anything at the trade deadline to make Buffalo better despite its many flaws. The Sabres' collective goaltending was awful, with the league's second-worst save percentage. Buffalo gives up the fourth-most goals per game (3.47) and that's all the more disappointing considering the Sabres are seventh in scoring (3.27).

The Sabres can be their own worst enemy. Ditto with how Buffalo started strong -- with the third-most first period goals -- only to offer up the fourth most in the third period. The Sabres' attention to detail wasn't where it needed to be, and expected growth from players such as Jack Quinn and Zach Benson didn't materialize.

Keys to the offseason: This was Adams' fifth season in Buffalo -- all, obviously, without a playoff appearance. Will ownership keep him on for another kick at that can? It was Adams who installed Lindy Ruff as coach (again) last season, and that alone might keep Adams around. The Sabres have several personnel decisions to make from there. Quinn, JJ Peterka, Bowen Byram, Devon Levi and Ryan McLeod are all restricted free agents. Who will Buffalo retain -- and who winds up without a qualifying offer?

Then it's on to additions from the outside. The Sabres need stronger goaltending next season, and if Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen and Levi can't provide it as a tandem, then Adams must explore the market for a veteran who can either support one of them or take the reins as a No. 1. That would go a long way in supporting Buffalo toward consistently being the team it has been of late, winning 10 of 13 through March into April -- when, unfortunately, it was all too little, too late.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Dare we say it? Playoffs. That's where Buffalo absolutely must get. And they have the talent to do it. It's on management to fill in the gaps and get the Sabres out of their historic skid.

April 14: Chicago Blackhawks

Projected cap space: \$29.17 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 1st (TOR), 2nd, 2nd (DAL), 3rd, 4th, 4th (NYR), 6th, 7th

What went right? The Seth Jones trade. After Jones told Blackhawks management that he wanted to be moved to a contender, how would they strike a deal for a player with three more years on his contract worth \$9.5 million annually?

Blackhawks GM Kyle Davidson found a suitor in the Panthers, and received a 2026 first-round pick and goalie Spencer Knight, while retaining \$2.5 million of Jones' salary each of the remaining seasons. The trade got the Blackhawks their goalie of the present and future in Knight, and provided them with another first-round pick for 2026, extending a streak of multiple first-round picks dating to 2022.

What went wrong? There was only nominal improvement after one of the more aggressive free agency windows of any team last offseason. They had 22 wins through 78 games, and though they trimmed their goal differential from minus-111 in 2023-24 to minus-74, it was still a season of frustration that peaked with the firing of coach Luke Richardson after 26 games, replacing him with interim coach Anders Sorensen.

Keys to the offseason: Does Sorensen get the full-time coaching job, or do the Blackhawks go in another direction? There's also a discussion about what to do with Ryan Donato, who led the team in goals this season. Donato is a pending unrestricted free agent, who is having the best season of his career. The Blackhawks obviously have the cap space, but might it be better spent elsewhere?

Once they have agreed upon new deals for their four-player restricted free agent class that includes Philipp Kurashev and Arvid Soderblom, the Blackhawks could use the remaining money while having one eye on what lies ahead after the 2025-26 season.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Next season will be a crucial one, mainly because another season without significant progress could prompt the front office to face bigger questions; after all, the Blackhawks are looking to reach the 70-point plateau for the first time since 2019-20.

So, what does the future look like? Connor Bedard, Frank Nazar and Knight, who are all central to their future plans, are going to be entering the final years of their respective deals. Bedard and Nazar are coming off their entry-level contracts, and Knight would be seeking his third deal -- but his first as a No. 1 goalie.

April 14: Detroit Red Wings

Projected cap space: \$22.98 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 3rd (NYR), 4th (TB), 5th, 6th, 7th, 7th (STL)

What went right? Detroit showed its tenacity and resilience multiple times this season. The Red Wings overcame a slow start by leaning into a coaching change -- from Derek Lalonde to Todd McLellan -- that ignited the team's December surge into a playoff spot. Detroit fell in and out of contention until February and looked ready to go on a run. Leading that charge was captain Dylan Larkin -- with 29 goals this season -- and Lucas Raymond, who leads Detroit in points with 75. Raymond's development has been especially positive for Detroit and signals how he can continue carrying their offense into the future. The Red Wings also must feel good about being buoyed by a fourth-ranked power play (27.6%).

What went wrong? The Red Wings' defensive play has been a hindrance for years. This season was no exception. Detroit gave up the 12th-most goals against per game (3.14), while ranking 23rd in scoring (2.81). That's a tough combination to overcome. The Red Wings' putrid penalty kill was also worst in the league (69.6%), another indication of their defensive deficiencies.

GM Steve Yzerman didn't do much at the trade deadline to address any of the Red Wings' problems, and Yzerman's continued failure to add impact players in free agency is showing in how Detroit continues to stop short of reaching the playoffs. The Red Wings need consistency, and a strong defensive structure players buy into and can execute. There wasn't enough of it this season to get Detroit out of its nine-year playoff drought.

Keys to the offseason: Yzerman isn't one for making wild moves. But even he must be open to trying something new. There are internal choices to make, including on key RFAs Albert Johansson and Elmer Soderblom, and veterans Patrick Kane and Alex Lyon are both pending UFAs. How drastic Yzerman gets in terms of personnel turnover could foretell where Detroit goes from here.

The Red Wings need more scoring and have been top-heavy in that respect, relying on Larkin, Raymond and Alex DeBrincat for a large chunk of their output. Improving depth there, with proven defense-minded talent, will help the Red Wings keep up with their Atlantic rivals. Generally boosting the blue line wouldn't hurt, either.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Detroit has playoff potential. They've shown it repeatedly. The Red Wings' goal going into next season should be as contenders for the postseason. The question is whether Yzerman provides Detroit with more resources to get there.

April 14: Nashville Predators

Projected cap space: \$17.26 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 1st (TB), 1st (VGK), 2nd, 2nd (TB), 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, 6th (COL)

What went right? Their prospects. Of note, Matthew Wood averaged more than a point per game at the University of Minnesota before signing a professional contract. Joey Willis went from scoring 29 goals in his first two OHL seasons combined to having 27 goals this season. At the NHL level, Justin Barron, Zachary L'Heureux and Fedor Svechikov had expanded ice time.

What went wrong? Everything else. They went from being a playoff team that spent big in free agency to get Steven Stamkos, Jonathan Marchessault, Brady Skjei and Luke Schenn to having the third-worst record in the NHL. They were consistently disconnected. They are sixth in shots per game, but last in goals per game. They have one of the top 10 penalty kills yet gave up the seventh-most goals per game.

Keys to the offseason: With three first-round picks and more than \$17 million in cap space, the Preds have options -- especially if their first-round pick becomes the No. 1 pick via the draft lottery. But the Predators are trying to find a way that allows them to win now and in the future. It's why they began shifting course toward playing young players after a poor start to the season. Now it's all about strengthening that plan as they seek to recover from one of the more trying seasons in franchise history.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: The Preds can go in a number of directions. They entered the 2023-24 season as a team on the rise and made the playoffs. They entered 2024-25 as a team that could be in the conference finals discussion before ending up in the lottery. If they aren't in the playoff mix next spring, there will be some big questions for the front office to answer.

April 14: New York Islanders

Projected cap space: \$28.90 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th

What went right? The Islanders showed determination by putting themselves into a contending position this season, particularly during an 11-3-0 run through January ahead of the 4 Nations Face-Off break. They benefited from some terrific individual performances along the way, most notably from Bo Horvat (with a team-leading 54 points) and Anders Lee (pacing New York with 28 goals).

Noah Dobson continued to show why he's one of the league's burgeoning stars on the back end and Alexander Romanov appears increasingly comfortable in his role. GM Lou Lamoriello also deserves credit for the tidy trade of Brock Nelson, which primarily netted New York (among other things) a first-round pick in 2026 NHL draft and promising prospect in Calum Ritchie.

What went wrong? The Islanders failed to truly excel in any category. They're 25th in the scoring (averaging 2.77 goals per game) and gave up the 13th-most goals against (3.14), with a putrid, 31st-ranked power play (13.1%) and equally awful penalty kill (72.0%). Losing Mathew Barzal to injury for all but 30 games this season certainly took its toll in basically every respect. Starting goaltender Ilya Sorokin has been fine (with a .905 save percentage) but hardly the spectacular figure he was in helping New York reach the playoffs in recent seasons.

The Islanders didn't have enough difference-makers, and Lamoriello did not bring anyone on board before the trade deadline. In fact, Lamoriello held onto guys such as Jean-Gabriel Pageau and Kyle Palmieri -- a pending UFA -- and seemingly missed out on a chance to add draft assets for a much-needed overhaul. By the time head coach Patrick Roy was publicly calling out forward Anthony Duclair and subsequently seeing Duclair take a leave of absence from the team, it was clear how tensions were boiling over.

Keys to the offseason: New York must at least consider taking a big swing. But is Lamoriello going to do that? The Islanders should have about \$28 million in cap space to use for next season, and they've got a couple of high draft picks. It's time to decide though what direction the franchise is headed. Can Lamoriello steer this group back to contending status? Or is a rebuild on deck?

There are also critical personnel decisions to make. The Islanders have a large collection of pending RFAs, including Dobson, Romanov, Scott Perunovich, and Adam Boqvist. Who New York keeps will have a major impact on their blue line. The Islanders again need to address their scoring depth. Barzal's absence absolutely hurt New York. Shoring up the offense so it can withstand injury will go a long way. But step one is getting honest about where the organization is right now, and whether they keep pushing to compete in the Metro or take a step back and retool.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: The Islanders sputtered this season after making consecutive playoff appearances -- both with first-round exits. Unless there's some significant changes in the offseason, one-and-done in the postseason is about as good as New York can expect.

April 14: New York Rangers

Projected cap space: \$9.67 million

2025 draft picks: 2nd, 3rd (SEA), 4th (ANA), 4th (COL), 5th (MIN), 6th, 6th (SEA), 7th

What went right? New York didn't need any added distractions this season, so the fact GM Chris Drury was able to offload underperforming former captain Jacob Trouba early was a shrewd move and kept the Rangers from dwelling on that particular problem all season. The Kaapo Kakko trade was a necessary swap as well that was swiftly handled. And bringing on J.T. Miller was, at least, an attempt to give New York a needed boost up front.

Meanwhile, New York saw growth from some of its young players, especially Will Cuyll (with a career-high 20 goals and 43 points this season). Artemi Panarin has done his part to lead the Rangers on offense (37 goals and 87 points) and Adam Fox anchored the blue line with trademark efficiency.

What went wrong? Oh boy. Are the Rangers this season's biggest disappointment? It's hard to argue otherwise. Last season's Presidents' Trophy winners are a shadow of their former (114-point) selves. All the previous characteristics New York displayed as regular-season champions evaporated. The Rangers lacked consistency (they haven't won three games in a row since November), veteran contributions (Mika Zibanejad and Chris Kreider have been particularly lackluster), a functional power play (ranked 27th at 17.6%) and failed time and again to show any sort of resiliency (they have won five games all season when trailing by one in the third period).

The lack of urgency and determination that elevated New York teams of the past has been missing. But why? Was it the rumored locker room issues? Has coach Peter Laviolette's message been falling on deaf ears? Whatever the reason, New York never truly put its game together. To be officially eliminated from the postseason in a dispiriting 7-3 loss to Carolina on Saturday was a fitting salvo in a lost season.

Keys to the offseason: Can Laviolette survive to coach another season? That's question No. 1 -- and a bafflingly one to even be considering given he led the Rangers to their best regular season the season before. But it seems inevitable New York is going to make drastic changes after this clunker of a season.

Next, Drury must assess this Rangers' core and figure out who to build around, and who to move out. The way Kreider and Zibanejad have struggled could lead Drury to find them new homes. And New York's blue line is probably in need of a redo given the Rangers gave up the 14th-most goals against (3.10) and that's with one of the league's better goalie tandems in Igor Shesterkin and Jonathan Quick. It's not as if

New York has to tear it all down. Drury must identify where the biggest leaks this season came from and do what's necessary to patch the holes.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: New York can easily be a playoff team again next season. But it will require some form of change. To stand pat would send the wrong message about how poorly the Rangers performed this season. A chip on the shoulder will help New York get back to its potential.

April 14: Philadelphia Flyers

Projected cap space: \$25.64 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 1st (COL), 1st (EDM), 2nd, 2nd (ANA), 2nd (CGY), 2nd (CBJ), 3rd, 5th, 5th (CAR), 6th

What went right? Philadelphia had its moments. The arrival of Matvei Michkov signaled the start of a new era for the Flyers in which Michkov -- a 20-year-old dynamo leading all NHL rookies with 24 goals -- has seemingly unlimited potential to drive their offense into the future. And Philadelphia has other young players -- such as last year's No. 13 pick Jett Luchanko -- to be excited about too after his brief NHL audition.

The Flyers' old guard wasn't all bad, either. Travis Konecny had another strong season with a career high in points ahead of his long-term extension starting next season. Ultimately, Philadelphia can't stay in a rebuild mode forever and it was positive to see GM Danny Briere actually make some moves -- such as trading Joel Farabee and Scott Laughton and firing coach John Tortorella -- to help kick-start Philadelphia into 2025-26.

What went wrong? The Flyers were too big a mess in too many key categories. Philadelphia's collection of goaltenders produced a woeful .888 save percentage at even strength, the worst recorded by a team since 2009-10. Samuel Ersson wasn't the reliable No. 1 the Flyers needed, and it showed too often in how games slipped away. Philadelphia's putrid power play was another problem -- 30th in the league (14.9%) -- and a 24th-ranked offense hasn't been much help. By the time Philadelphia had lost 11 of 12 through mid-March, it was no surprise Tortorella was gone. Something is clearly still missing in Philadelphia.

Keys to the offseason: First, Philadelphia needs a head coach. Briere will decide quickly whether that's via removing the interim tag from Brad Shaw or a new addition. There's much work to be done with the next permanent bench boss in place.

Philadelphia absolutely must capitalize in the draft. They hold three first-round picks and four second-round choices. There's a chance if the Flyers draft high enough that one of those first-rounders steps into their lineup at some point next season. Briere must be smart in how he cashes in on that capital. Then it's all about development. Philadelphia doesn't project to be overly active in free agency given the amount of talent it already has in the NHL and waiting in the wings. What the Flyers need are for those players to take steps forward so when training camp comes around there is serious competition for spots, and it sets up Philadelphia for a competitive season.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: This is the fifth consecutive season Philadelphia has missed the postseason. The Flyers must at least challenge well into April for a spot next season. Briere has been patient with this group continuing to grow and it's about time those investments paid dividends.

April 14: Pittsburgh Penguins

Projected cap space: \$24.58 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 1st (NYR), 2nd (WSH), 3rd, 3rd (MIN), 3rd (OTT), 4th, 5th (CHI), 5th (NYR), 6th, 7th

What went right? Pittsburgh can always count on Sidney Crosby to breathe some sort of life into their season, and the captain delivered again with a 30-goal campaign that suggests the 37-year-old isn't slowing down. And that's a great thing -- because the Penguins' recent youth movement might signal brighter days ahead. GM Kyle Dubas brought up Rutger McGroarty -- acquired via trade earlier this season -- and Ville Koivunen to get Pittsburgh's next wave ready with some NHL experience. Smart decision. The Penguins needed to end the season on a high note, and showcasing what the franchise has coming seemed invigorating for old and new skaters alike.

What went wrong? It was death by a thousand cuts in Pittsburgh. The Penguins don't have the depth to compete with other Eastern Conference powerhouses -- outside of their top line (with Crosby, Rickard Rakell and Bryan Rust mostly), there wasn't enough consistent scoring. Even Evgeni Malkin struggled with only 15 goals this season.

That dearth of scoring issue was amplified by the Penguins' problems keeping pucks out of their net. Tristan Jarry flamed out as the team's expected No. 1 goaltender, being demoted to the AHL along with his 3.31 goals-against average and .884 save percentage through mid-January. To be fair, Jarry (and the Penguins other netminders) got no help from a leaky blue line that surrounded the second-most goals per game (3.58) this season. It would have challenged Pittsburgh to overcome its issues in only one phase of the game, let alone all three.

Keys to the offseason: Pittsburgh doesn't appear close to firing coach Mike Sullivan, so that allows the Penguins to hit the ground running again in figuring out how to capitalize on its youth movement. McGroarty and Koivunen will be counted on to compete for slots in training camp.

Then it's on Dubas to address the Penguins' lack of scoring with some strategic veteran additions. The market should play out in Pittsburgh's favor there -- and offering the incentive of potentially skating alongside Crosby never hurts in a negotiation. And the Penguins' defense? It can't stand as is. If Dubas is still trying to avoid a full-scale rebuild, then it's crucial to use this offseason to find roster balance between the Penguins' present and future additions. Some degree of outside help is required to make that happen.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: It's not reasonable to say Pittsburgh makes it back to the playoffs -- unless there are some key changes. If the Penguins rightly address their leaks, then there's talent enough to put Pittsburgh back as a playoff contender. But that's a mighty large question as this season comes to a close.

April 14: San Jose Sharks

Projected cap space: \$42.19 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 1st (DAL), 2nd, 2nd (OTT), 3rd (COL), 4th (STL), 4th (WPG), 5th (COL), 7th (NJ)

What went right? The blueprint for the future. Star rookie center Macklin Celebrini leads the team in points, and fellow star rookie forward Will Smith is fifth. They used the trade deadline to add a pair of first-round picks; they'll have two first-rounders in 2025 and again in 2026, continuing a trend since 2023. Even though they're going to finish with the NHL's worst record for a consecutive season, the Sharks have already shown some sense of improvement given they went from a minus-150 goal difference to minus-98 entering the final week of the regular season.

What went wrong? Well, there was quite a bit. But that's to be expected whenever a team is in the midst of a rebuild.

The Sharks were in the bottom 10 in goals per game, the power play, scoring chances per 60 minutes, shots per 60 and high-danger chances per 60, which explains their offensive struggles. On defense, they

gave up the most goals per game, had the worst penalty kill, and were in the bottom 10 in most scoring chances allowed per 60, most shots allowed per 60 and most high-danger chances allowed per 60.

Keys to the offseason: Do they get the No. 1 pick for a consecutive year? Or will it be No. 2 or No. 3? Whatever happens, this will be the third straight draft cycle and the fourth time in the past five in which the Sharks have a lottery pick. Picking that high along with having a second first-round pick will certainly advance their rebuild.

Then there's the fact they'll have more than \$42 million in cap space, which can be used to address their roster -- with the caveat that the Sharks might not be major players in free agency for at least a few more years.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Continuing to watch the progress made by Yaroslav Askarov, William Eklund, Celebrini and Smith, among others, is going to be the priority. The Sharks will seek to make more improvements while further developing those franchise cornerstones in Ryan Warsofsky's second year behind the bench. But there's also a possibility the Sharks could either sign players in free agency or move on from players on their current roster ahead of the deadline to add even more draft capital for their future plans.

April 14: Seattle Kraken

Projected cap space: \$21.75 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 2nd, 2nd (TOR), 4th, 4th (DAL), 5th, 7th

What went right? All three of the trades they made this season. Moving on from Will Borgen led to them getting a one-time No. 2 overall pick in Kaapo Kakko, plus draft capital. At the trade deadline, they acquired a pair of first-round picks in 2026 and 2027 in exchange for Oliver Bjorkstrand and Yanni Gourde. Parting ways with Brandon Tanev netted them a second-round pick in the 2027 draft. Kakko has 10 goals and 29 points in 46 games for the Kraken as part of a season in which he set a career high with 43 points.

What went wrong? Between their underlying defensive metrics and the fact they sent Philipp Grubauer to the AHL? It wasn't the most consistent season for the Kraken when it came to goal prevention. Having a new coaching staff included the departure of assistant coach Jay Leach, who played a crucial role in the Kraken's defensive identity. This season, they were in the bottom 10 in shots allowed per 60 minutes, scoring chances allowed per 60 and high-danger chances allowed per 60. The underperformance from Grubauer didn't help, and in fact, Joey Daccord (who began as the backup) was one of their more consistent performers.

Keys to the offseason: Dan Bylsma's coaching staff helped pull the Kraken from the bottom five in goals per game in 2023-24 to being around league average this season. Could they find a defensive version of that solution heading into 2025-26, with the idea that it might provide the Kraken with the consistency that has eluded them as a franchise? That is one of the most significant questions facing the Kraken now that they have missed the playoffs in three of their first four seasons.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: The Kraken must be in contention for a wild-card spot (at minimum), or there will be some big questions to answer for the front office at this time next year.

April 14: Utah Hockey Club

Projected cap space: \$21.53 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th

What went right? Quite a bit. The trade during draft weekend for franchise defenseman Mikhail Sergachev set the stage for a season in which the franchise made real strides. Before moving to Salt Lake City, the Arizona Coyotes had one 80-point season since 2014-15. The Utah Hockey Club had 84 points with four games left. The team was still fighting for a playoff berth entering the final two weeks of the regular season, which was another step forward for the core -- and proves that bigger things could be on the horizon.

What went wrong? Overtime and shootouts. Entering the final two weeks of the regular season, only the Flames and Canucks had more overtime losses than Utah, two teams that were also chasing a Western Conference wild-card spot. But losing those 12 games in overtime or a shootout demonstrates how Utah was close in many games. If it can get on the winning end of those extra-time coin flips next season, the results will be different too.

Keys to the offseason: Remember how the Coyotes were hamstrung by a need to be miserly with cap space? The Utah Hockey Club doesn't have that issue. That much was made clear last offseason when GM Bill Armstrong invested \$22 million for each of the next two seasons in bolstering the defensive unit. Utah will have more than \$21 million in space this summer, which is enough to improve a roster that could seriously challenge for a playoff spot. A top priority? Improving an offense that was 21st in goals per game, with a power play that was 15th.

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Making the playoffs. It's really that simple. Utah has a core that has gone through its growing pains. It's a group that has shown it can make progress from one year to the next. Nearly the entire roster is either under contract or team control for next season, and the front office has enough cap space to add the sort of players who could help clinch a playoff berth in the club's second season in Salt Lake.

April 14: Vancouver Canucks

Projected cap space: \$15.08 million

2025 draft picks: 1st, 2nd, 3rd (SJ), 4th (OTT), 5th, 6th, 7th

What went right? Despite all the inconsistencies, the numerous injuries to key players, and the J.T. Miller-Elias Pettersson friction, the Canucks were still in the hunt for a wild-card berth entering the final two weeks of the regular season. Yes, there were those who had strong individual seasons, including reigning Norris Trophy winner Quinn Hughes and Pius Suter, who had his first 20-goal effort and more than 40 points. But those performances could only get the Canucks so far, in a season in which they will miss the playoffs after winning their division and coming within a game of the conference finals a year earlier.

What went wrong? All those inconsistencies, those numerous injuries and the Miller-Pettersson friction. One detail that speaks to those inconsistencies is that the Canucks were among the top five in the NHL in terms of fewest shots allowed per 60 minutes and scoring chances allowed per 60 -- and yet were 19th in goals allowed per game. It's what made the need for scoring depth even more crucial. This became more evident in the wake of trading Miller to the Rangers and trying to find ways to replace a forward with three consecutive seasons of more than 80 points.

Keys to the offseason: What happens to head coach Rick Tocchet? Does he stay on his one-year option as a bridge to a longer-term contract? Or could he be swayed to leave, which would then leave the Canucks searching for a fourth coach since 2020?

After the coaching situation is resolved, what happens to Brock Boeser? A six-time 20-goal scorer, he's a pending UFA who could command a significant payday should he reach the open market. Do the Canucks ink him to a long-term deal?

Realistic expectations for 2025-26: Add the Canucks to the list of teams whose situation could become clearer once free agency ends. They have most of their team either under contract or team control for next season. But two of their three leading goal scorers -- Boeser and Suter -- are pending UFAs, whereas there is also uncertainty surrounding Tocchet.

Getting those questions answered along with addressing their other concerns could provide a stronger grasp for how the Canucks navigate next season. But a return to the postseason is certainly within grasp.

[Sportsnet.ca / Weekend Takeaways: What's next for disappointing Canucks, Rangers?](#)

By Ryan Dixon – April 15, 2025

Disappointment — perhaps even heartbreak — is on tap for some teams in this final week of the regular season, as a handful of clubs kick and scratch for the final three playoff seeds still available to the 2025 Stanley Cup Playoffs. But for two high-profile organizations that began the year with big aspirations, the soul-searching is already well underway.

The New York Rangers lost 7-3 to the Carolina Hurricanes in Raleigh on Saturday to officially end any hope of a post-season appearance. The loss marked the second time in three outings that New York allowed seven or more goals to an opponent.

Meanwhile, the Vancouver Canucks' playoff fate was already sealed heading into the weekend. Still, a 3-2 overtime loss to the Minnesota Wild — a team Vancouver had previously been chasing for a wild-card spot — put a fine point on the Canucks' galling season. Ultimately, everything that happened in the game was overshadowed by concern for the wellbeing of Derek Forbort after the Canucks defenceman took a late punch from Minnesota's Yakor Trenin that, we later learned, broke Forbort's orbital bone.

Still, the game itself did not flatter the Canucks, who blew a 2-0 third-period lead and managed just 14 shots on goal during another subpar domestic performance. Vancouver has a .513 points percentage on home ice this year, worse than all but three outfits in the NHL.

Of the 16 teams that will eventually miss the big dance this year, no two clubs were coming off better showings last season than the Blueshirts and Canucks. New York was a Presidents' Trophy-winning squad that advanced to the final four, while Vancouver took top spot in the Pacific Division and came within a single victory of making the Western Conference final.

Now, both organizations are set to tackle huge questions in coming days. The Rangers situation is so rotten that a hockey operations house cleaning can't be ruled out. In Vancouver, it's a question of whether the club can retain Rick Tocchet — the coach of the year 12 months ago — now that his contract is about to expire.

Of course, roster change is coming, too. New York is more locked into its core, with long-term deals containing trade protection all over the books. This team will have to look different next fall, but there's a limit to what any GM — new or existing — can do to reshape it.

In Vancouver, the Canucks are already preparing to bid goal-scorer Brock Boeser good-bye as a UFA. Thatcher Demko — tormented by an inability to stay healthy — will have one year remaining on his deal when this season is up. At the middle of everything is Elias Pettersson, a supposed top-line centre who — when playing — has looked anything but in the 14 months since he inked a monster eight-year extension with the club. That contract has trade protection kick in on July 1, but how could the Canucks seriously contemplate dealing him before then with his value that of a 45-point player making \$11.6 million annually through 2031-32?

Hard seasons rarely beget easy answers, and reclaiming turf with the top clubs in the league is going to be a monster challenge for these two prominent franchises.

Weekend Takeaways

- Despite beating Vancouver on Saturday, the Wild have yet to officially lock down a playoff spot. A single point at home against Anaheim on Tuesday will do the trick. Assuming it gets there, Minnesota has certainly become an interesting club at the bottom of the Western Conference playoff draw. Last week, we saw Kirill Kaprizov and Joel Eriksson Ek — otherwise known as the team's two most important forwards — return from extended injury-related absences. Now, the Wild are set to add Zeev Buium — who will likely debut versus the Ducks — to the blueline after his NCAA career came to an end at the Frozen Four semifinals. It's easy to draw a line between Buium's potential and what the Wild saw from Brock Faber in 2023, when he jumped straight into the NHL fray from the college ranks. Faber played two regular-season games, then all six playoff contests as the Wild fell to a superior Dallas Stars squad in the first round. Buium certainly has the ability to step in and immediately influence games for Minny, even if it's on the third pair for now. This could be one interesting wild-card team when the dust settles.

- A few teams entered the weekend with their playoff hopes hanging in the balance and none of them responded the way the Columbus Blue Jackets did, with two resounding victories over a top-flight opponent. Granted, the Washington Capitals had some key bodies out of the lineup, but the Jackets went ahead and downed them by an aggregate score of 11-1 during a home-and-home set that played out in Ohio on Saturday afternoon and D.C. Sunday night. Adam Fantilli led the way with four goals for Columbus and the sophomore centre now sits one away from the 30-goal barrier, as the Jackets take this thing right down to the wire. At the other end of the ice, Jet Greaves stopped 51 of 52 shots by Washington in the two games. Columbus — which has won four straight — will need victories in Philly on Tuesday and at home versus the Islanders on Thursday to have any shot of overtaking a Montreal Canadiens team that holds a three-point advantage on it for the final wild card in the East.

The Week Ahead

- With Nathan MacKinnon keeping it in park for the Colorado Avalanche's final two games, Nikita Kucherov will nail down his second consecutive and third career Art Ross Trophy this week. Kucherov leads the league with 119 points after bagging a pair of goals and a helper versus Buffalo on Sunday.
- The St. Louis Blues can secure a playoff spot with a 60-minute win when Utah Hockey Club comes to visit on Tuesday. After a dozen consecutive W's, the Blues have dropped three straight, including a shootout loss in Seattle on Saturday. Anything other than a regulation victory in Game 82 for the Blues opens the door to being caught by Calgary, which hosts Vegas Tuesday and visits L.A. on Thursday.
- Will we get the NHL's first-ever 900-goal guy this week? After scoring No. 896 on Sunday, Alex Ovechkin needs four goals to get there. The Caps are on Long Island — where Ovie just broke the all-time goals record — on Tuesday and close the year out with a visit to Pittsburgh. Can you imagine Ovechkin notching No. 900 in a game versus Sidney Crosby on the final day of the regular season?
- The 2025 Stanley Cup Playoffs begin on Saturday. See you in the second season.

Red and White Power Rankings

1. Winnipeg Jets (55-22-4) Winnipeg won the Presidents' Trophy, capping a two-year run of remarkable regular season success. Since the start of 2023-24, the Jets' 107 wins is five more than anybody else in the league has posted.

2. Toronto Maple Leafs (50-25-4) Two more weekend wins have basically locked down the Atlantic Division for the Leafs, who are 7-0-1 in their past eight. Toronto is playing tight hockey these days, having surrendered two or fewer goals in six of those eight games.

3. Edmonton Oilers (47-28-5) The Oilers can overcome a lot with their high-end skill, but the news shutdown defenceman Mattias Ekholm might be done for the year is a lot to digest.

4. Ottawa Senators (44-30-6) Shane Pinto hit paydirt twice in Friday's 5-2 win over Montreal to give him 20 goals on the campaign, the same amount he scored as a rookie two years ago. With Pinto playing strong, deadline acquisition Dylan Cozens blending well and Tim Stutzle at the top of the lineup, the Sens suddenly look strong down the middle heading into the post-season.

5. Calgary Flames (39-27-14) Though they don't control their own destiny, this Flames crew has taken the playoff chase down to the wire with two home-ice wins on Friday and Sunday. However this plays out for Calgary, full marks to the Flames for the fight they've shown all season.

6. Montreal Canadiens (39-31-10) All the out-of-town scoreboard watching can end Monday night if Montreal — in what's expected to be the debut of super-prospect Ivan Demidov — can collect two points against the Chicago Blackhawks.

7. Vancouver Canucks (37-29-14) The Canucks close out the season at home on Wednesday and let's just say there should be no shortage of things to talk about when they clean out their lockers on Thursday or Friday.