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The Athletic / As Blue Jackets continue to straggle, NHL-best Avs present a major challenge

By Aaron Portzline – January 10, 2026

DENVER — It seems a bit ridiculous to work out the “playoff math” for a club that’s in last place in the Eastern Conference, but it’s beneficial to understand what the Columbus Blue Jackets are up against the rest of the way.

Yes, the Blue Jackets are “only” 7 points behind the Buffalo Sabres, who hold the second wild-card spot in the East. But the Sabres, who have been one of the NHL’s hottest clubs since early December, are on pace to finish with 97 points.

To meet that pace at the finish line, the Blue Jackets would need to earn 54 points in their final 39 games, or a record in the neighborhood of 25-10-4.

The most immediate issue with that, of course, is that the Blue Jackets have shown only sporadic bursts of being close to the club that narrowly missed the postseason one year ago. There’s not much time to get that fixed.

And on Saturday comes the most significant challenge the NHL has to offer.

The Blue Jackets play the Colorado Avalanche at 4 p.m. (ET) in Ball Arena. The Avs (32-4-7) are on pace to set an NHL record for most standings points in a season, and they have yet to lose in regulation at home (18-0-2).

When the Blue Jackets hosted the Avs on Oct. 16 in Nationwide Arena, the Jackets actually felt they played pretty well for most of the game ... and they lost 4-1. Colorado just had too much jam that night.

“They’re clearly the best team in the league,” Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. “The record shows it. They’re doing a lot of amazing things up to this point, right?”

“Listen, we don’t care who we’re playing tomorrow. We better be desperate, right? I mean, we put our skates on the same as they do. So let’s go compete our asses off and see where we sit.”

The Blue Jackets had a short practice Friday at the University of Denver’s Joy Burns Arena, after which Evason confirmed Elvis Merzlikins, who hasn’t started a game since Dec. 20, will get the nod Saturday versus the Avs.

It makes sense given the schedule and the recent goalie rotation, which hasn’t been much of one.

Greaves, who has ascended to the starter’s role, has started the last eight games, the longest run of his NHL career. Also, the Blue Jackets face a road back-to-back — they play in Utah on Sunday — to end the trip.

Still, it figures to be a daunting task for Merzlikins to face the Avs after nearly three weeks without facing live pucks.

There’s also this: Among the NHL goaltenders with enough playing time to qualify for the league leaders, Merzlikins is 54th out of 61 with an .877 save percentage and 61st (last) in goals-against average (4.04).

The Blue Jackets will have to defend better than they have all season, certainly better than they defended in Thursday's 5-3 loss in Las Vegas.

To that end, Evason elevated the Blue Jackets' top defensive forward, Charlie Coyle, to the No. 1 line, where he skated at right wing with center Adam Fantilli and winger Kirill Marchenko, who switched to the left side.

Coyle, who finished last season with the Avalanche after being traded by Boston at the trade deadline, knows what the Blue Jackets are up against this season.

"Maybe I know a little bit more what to expect," Coyle said. "But we all know what they bring and how they're doing this year, how fast they are, how much firepower they have.

"It's going to be a really good opportunity for us, a great test. We have no choice but to bring our 'A' game (Saturday), and that's going to bring out the best in us."

The Blue Jackets acquired Coyle and forward Miles Wood from the Avalanche over the summer in exchange for fourth-line youngster Gavin Brindley and two draft picks. Wood, who suffered a lower-body injury on New Year's Eve, won't play Saturday.

The Blue Jackets' No. 2 line, which has been missing in action most of the season, was the most productive in Thursday's game versus Vegas. Boone Jenner had a goal and an assist, Kent Johnson ended a 15-game goal drought and Sean Monahan had two assists.

Monahan, who has been playing through an injury all season, did not skate Friday in Denver, but he's expected to play Saturday, Evason said.

Now the Blue Jackets need to get Fantilli going. He's gone 10 games without a goal, the second-longest streak of his young career.

"We've watched some video and chatted, and, you know, he's a guy who's very aware of it," Evason said. "But when he has success, he does the right things more on the defensive end than the offensive end, and that allows his skill set to come forward.

"He needs to get back to that, to getting inside and not being so outside, not so perimeter. He's aware of it, and we expect him to do that, and we expect him to produce when he gets those opportunities."

The Athletic / Blue Jackets' Boone Jenner, Sean Monahan seek 'a little more' after loss to Vegas

By Aaron Portzline – January 9, 2026

LAS VEGAS — By now, we know what the Columbus Blue Jackets are. They aren't as dangerous offensively or as stout defensively, and they have a mental block that keeps them from closing out games they lead in the third period.

But what are they trying to be?

Now well past the NHL's holiday break and two games into the second half of the season, the Blue Jackets' identity — which was so clear and reliable last season — remains a mystery.

Are they high-flying? Not really. Are they heavy and combative? Not nearly often enough. Are they resilient and relentless? Can't say that, either. All of these come and go from time to time, but they aren't sustained.

On Thursday, the Blue Jackets took a 2-0 lead only 10:41 into the game. But that wasn't enough to sustain them when the Vegas Golden Knights — everybody knows how they play, right? — made their expected push.

The Golden Knights, who lost goaltender Carter Hart to an injury on the first goal of the game, came back to win 5-3 before 17,614 in T-Mobile Arena, at one point scoring four consecutive goals.

"It comes down to how hard you're going to compete and how bad you want it, and I think that's the biggest thing," Blue Jackets center Sean Monahan said. "We've got to find ways to win games. We know we've got a good team.

"We believe in each other, and we've got to up that belief, I think. When you do that, you know you can come back in games if you're down, or if you have a lead, that you believe you can keep that lead and you're a hard team to play against. That's something we've got to get back to, and we've got to do that right away."

Boone Jenner, Kent Johnson and Kirill Marchenko scored for the Blue Jackets, and Monahan had two assists. Goaltender Jet Greaves, who has endured a heavy workload since before the holidays, allowed five goals on 26 shots.

The Blue Jackets have now lost three in a row and four in the last five (1-3-1), and it doesn't get any easier from here. On Saturday, they play the Colorado Avalanche, who have the best record (32-4-7) in the NHL and have yet to lose in regulation at home (18-0-2).

An effort like Thursday's won't cut it.

"I feel like we have our identity," Jenner said. "We know how we need to play to win, and how we need to play to get points in this league. This little stretch here ... we haven't been up to our standard of how hard we're going to play.

"It starts with myself and the older guys on the team and dragging everybody else in. We all have to give a little more here to (get to) that standard that we hold each other to in here."

Jenner's goal, a redirection of a Zach Werenski shot, made it 1-0 at 8:24 of the first. Then, only 2:17 later, Johnson ended a 15-game streak without a goal by scoring off a Monahan set-up coming through the right circle.

Vegas made it 2-1 at 12:20 of the first period, the first of four straight goals. The Golden Knights seemed to completely overwhelm the Blue Jackets at times in the second period, scoring three times for a 4-2 lead.

They had an answer for everything the Blue Jackets did. When Marchenko got behind the Vegas defenseman and cut the lead to 4-3 at 14:28 of the third, you wondered if the Jackets were going to do to Vegas what has been done to the Blue Jackets so many times this season.

But there was no late-game miracle.

Not even two minutes later, Vegas caught the Blue Jackets overcommitted in the attack zone and scored on a two-on-one to cap the scoring.

Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason pushed back on the idea that his club, 43 games into the season, hasn't forged an identity and didn't compete hard enough Thursday.

"Our guys are committed," Evason said. "They're working their asses off, trying to score, trying to defend. It's just, at this point, we're (giving up) one or two ... opportunities, glaring mistakes.

"And we're just going to have to keep grinding and keep talking about it and keep showing it (to the players in practice and film). I know our heart's there. I know our desire's there. Our grind is there."

The Blue Jackets remain in last place in the Eastern Conference, having settled into a .500 record (18-18-7) with their recent swoon. The wild-card chase is no longer the traffic jam it was just a couple of weeks ago.

Through Thursday's game, the Blue Jackets are seven points behind the Buffalo Sabres, who hold the second wild-card. The biggest obstacle — or obstacles — is that the Blue Jackets would have to jump eight teams to grab a postseason spot.

Watching them play so far on this road trip — they were outpaced by a young, up-and-coming San Jose club Tuesday, then overwhelmed by the veteran Golden Knights on Thursday — makes it hard to have that type of optimism.

Thursday's game marked the Blue Jackets debut of defenseman Egor Zamula, who signed a one-year, one-way contract with the club Tuesday. He played 11:12 on the third pair with Dante Fabbro and had a minus-1 rating and two giveaways.

It also marked the season debut in Columbus of Mikael Pyyhtiä, who was called up from AHL Cleveland following a rash of injuries. Pyyhtiä joined the fourth line with Brendan Gaunce and Zach Aston-Reese and played 9:27.

The Columbus Dispatch / Blue Jackets down Mammoth to end skid, lose Mateychuk

By Brian Hedger – January 11, 2026

It took overtime, but the Blue Jackets finally got a win to conclude an otherwise brutal road trip.

Dmitri Voronkov redirected a pass from Zach Werenski into the net for a power-play winner at 1:01 of OT, downing the Utah Mammoth 3-2 on Jan. 11 at Delta Center in Salt Lake City, Utah. The victory snapped a four-game winless skid for the Blue Jackets (19-19-7), who'd lost three straight to start a four-game trip.

The Jackets now get seven of their next eight games at Nationwide Arena.

Mikael Pyyhtia and Charlie Coyle scored in regulation for Columbus, which played most of the night with just five defensemen after Denton Mateychuk was injured on Brandon Tanev's hit from behind. Jet Greaves picked up the goaltending win with 25 saves after getting a night off in the Jackets' 4-0 loss to the Colorado Avalanche on Jan. 10 at Ball Arena.

Jack McBain and Mikhail Sergachev scored goals for the Mammoth (22-21-3), who had a three game winning streak stopped. Vitek Vanecek, who'd carried a 7-0-0 career record against the Blue Jackets into the game, allowed three goals on 37 shots in his first loss to Columbus.

Pyyhtia gave the Blue Jackets a quick 1-0 lead with his first goal of the season just 2:47 into the game, but Utah scored the next two. McBain tied it 1-1 late in the first with a fortunate bounce that sent a rebound off his helmet and into the Blue Jackets' net, and Sergachev put the Mammoth up 2-1 with a long shot through traffic just 1:02 into the second.

It took most of the remaining time in the second, but Coyle tied it 2-2 with 1:29 left in the period to end the Jackets' eight-game stretch without a power-play goal. It stayed that score through the third to force OT, which started with the Blue Jackets getting a 4-on-3 power play that carried over from the end of regulation.

The Columbus Dispatch / Avalanche show Blue Jackets how far they have to go: Takeaways

By Brian Hedger – January 11, 2026

The last thing the Blue Jackets needed was a game against the NHL's top team, the Colorado Avalanche, a mile above sea level in Denver.

The Avalanche hold a double-digit lead for the Presidents' Trophy, which goes to the team that finishes atop the league's standings. They haven't lost in regulation time at home in the regular season since April 10, and their 4-0 victory cruise against the Jackets on Jan. 10 was their 17th straight win at home.

It was the fourth straight loss for the Blue Jackets (18-19-7), who have dropped three in row during a miserable four-game road trip and need to Jan. 11 in Salt Lake City to avoid a clean sweep. So, yeah, they could have done without a predictable thrashing by the Avalanche (33-4-7), who also dominated them Oct. 16 in Columbus.

That's not how the NHL works, though, especially during a year when the league's schedule is compressed on both sides of a lengthy pause in February for the Winter Olympics. Games, and losses, are arriving in waves because of it, and the Blue Jackets' playoff hopes are quickly being washed out to sea.

They remain last in the Eastern Conference. The differential in points between them and the playoffs continues to widen with each loss, and the Avalanche again showed the Jackets what a legitimate Stanley Cup contender looks and plays like. It wasn't a typical blowout win for the Avalanche, whose top stars were stalemated, but it wasn't close either.

The Blue Jackets couldn't beat a rookie goalie, Trent Miner, in the fifth start of his NHL career while the Avs sent four pucks past veteran Elvis Merzlikins in his first start since Dec. 20. The outcome was never in doubt, which had to be disheartening for the Blue Jackets to admit in a season they started back in October with a legitimate claim as a playoff contender.

Nothing short of a miraculous turnaround will get them to the postseason now. Here are three takeaways from the Blue Jackets' loss to the Avalanche:

Elvis Merzlikins faces tough matchup vs Colorado Avalanche

Merzlikins hadn't played in three weeks, so the Blue Jackets couldn't have expected more than what he gave them with a 27-save performance in a losing effort.

The veteran goalie made some elite stops to keep stars Nathan MacKinnon and Cale Makar from scoring but also showed rust in anticipation and puck tracking that led to Colorado's second and third goals. All things considered, he was solid enough that coach Dean Evason and his staff should find additional spots to play Merzlikins before he leaves for the Olympics to play for his country (Latvia).

"Overall, I'm happy," Merzlikins said. "It could've ended up uglier ... so, I'll take it. I just need to keep working, and now, obviously, I need to watch the goals (allowed) and keep working now."

Gavin Brindley trade bites Columbus Blue Jackets

Getting two veteran forwards from the Avalanche last summer, Charlie Coyle and Miles Wood, came with a steep cost. It required sending skilled forward Gavin Brindley, whom the Blue Jackets drafted 34th overall in 2023, to Colorado.

After making the Avalanche' roster out of training camp, Brindley has earned a regular role at right wing on the fourth forward line. He pestered the Blue Jackets all game, finishing with two assists for his fourth multi-point effort of his rookie season.

Wood is out with a lower-body injury, but Coyle played left wing on the Jackets' top line and joined the top power-play unit. He and Coyle, prior to the injury, provided the quality depth up front that Blue Jackets president/GM Don Waddell sought in the trade. Still, watching Brindley excel while playing a regular role for the NHL's bestteam had to sting for the Blue Jackets.

Columbus Blue Jackets' offense continues to sputter

Last season, the Blue Jackets set a franchise record for goals (267) and led the NHL with 16 games scoring at least six goals. This season, it's been a lot tougher putting the puck in the net.

This was the second time they've been shutout and 18th time they've been held to two-or-fewer goals. Their record in those games is just 1-15-2, which explains how they've dropped to the bottom of the Eastern Conference after missing the playoffs by just two points last season.

The Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets steamrolled by Avalanche for 4th straight loss

Brian Hedger- January 10, 2026

The Blue Jackets were heavy underdogs on Jan. 10, and that's how things played out in Denver.

Facing the NHL's best team, the Colorado Avalanche, the Jackets dropped their fourth straight game, 4-0, and third in a row on a four-game road trip that concludes Jan. 11 at Utah.

After staying even at 0-0 with the Avalanche (33-4-7) for 13-plus minutes, things unraveled for the Blue Jackets (18-19-7) after 40-year old defenseman Brent Burns scored the first of his two goals with 6:02 left in the first period. Victor Olofsson made it 2-0 3:30 later to give Colorado a 2-0 lead after the first period, and the Avalanche added unanswered goals by Ilya Solovyov in the second, his first in the NHL, and Burns again to make it 4-0 at 8:33 of the third.

Trent Miner, a rookie goalie, made 29 saves for his first career shutout in his fifth NHL game while backstopping the Avs to their 17th straight win on home ice, where they improved to 19-0-2. Gavin Brindley, who was traded by the Blue Jackets to the Avalanche in a summer deal to acquire Charlie Coyle and Miles Wood, assisted on both of Burns' goals for his fourth multi-point game in his rookie season.

Elvis Merzlikins started in the Blue Jackets' net for the first time since Dec. 20 and made 27 saves on 31 shots.

The Blue Jackets, who are last in the Eastern Conference and dropping out of playoff contention quickly, must salvage a win or point against the Mammoth on Jan. 10 in Salt Lake City, Utah to avoid this becoming their their worst road trip of a frustrating season.

The Columbus Dispatch / Elvis Merzlikins doesn't play Vegas and that's a Blue Jackets problem

By Brian Hedger – January 9, 2026

Always the showman, Blue Jackets goalie Elvis Merzlikins flipped his goalie stick around and strummed it like a guitar.

He struck a pose reminiscent of Elvis Presley, who often played Vegas, and celebrated the first shutout of his NHL career by leaping into the arms of former Blue Jackets captain Nick Foligno. That was Jan. 11, 2020 at T-Mobile Arena, almost five years to the day before Merzlikins watched from the bench Jan. 8 as Jet Greaves made his eighth straight start in the Blue Jackets' 5-3 loss to the Vegas Golden Knights.

It was "Elvis Night" at T-Mobile Arena, where fans received a Golden Knights themed Elvis Presley bobblehead and some dressed up like the former music icon, white jumpsuits and all. It was a perfect setting for hockey's Elvis to make his return to the net amid another frustrating, disastrous season for him, personally, and now the Blue Jackets as a team.

That's not how his coaches saw it, though, and the term "coaches" is necessary because head coach Dean Evason has gone to great lengths this season to mention the process he and his staff use to make tough decisions, such as choosing plucky role players over those with elite skills in 3-on-3 overtime and determining which goalie starts.

Clearly, Evason's staff, not just the head coach, has made a big picture decision. Greaves is now the Jackets' top goalie and Merzlikins, whose contract carries a \$5.4 million charge against the NHL salary cap this season and next, is the backup.

Statistically, that shouldn't be a surprise.

Greaves has a 2.74 goals-against average and .907 save percentage over 30 games, despite allowing five goals on 26 shots in Las Vegas, while Merzlikins has a nightmarish 4.04 GAA and .877 save percentage in 14 games (all starts).

Since allowing seven goals on 40 shots in a gut-wrenching 7-6 overtime loss to the Florida Panthers on Dec. 6 in Sunrise, Florida, Merzlikins has only played twice.

He was pulled from a start Dec. 11 at Nationwide Arena after allowing three goals on five shots in the first period of a 6-3 loss to the Ottawa Senators and then allowed four goals on 28 shots in a 4-3 loss to the Anaheim Ducks on Dec. 20 in Anaheim, California.

The Ducks won that one on a goal scored against Merzlikins with 3:31 left in the third, just 3:47 after Zach Werenski tied it 3-3 for the Blue Jackets. It was their second straight loss, seventh defeat in eight games and the last time Merzlikins played. He'll head to Italy in mid-February to play for Latvia at the upcoming Winter Olympics, but for now he's a clear backup.

That's not a good thing for the Blue Jackets.

Their goaltending situation has become the objective mess some feared last offseason, when Blue Jackets president/GM Don Waddell and his front office opted to keep a struggling Merzlikins rather than seeking a trade or using a contract buyout. The likelihood of finding a trade partner now is even less

likely, the next buyout window isn't until June, if that option feels more tolerable, and sending Merzlikins to the AHL's Cleveland Monsters would require waivers plus his willingness to report.

They're stuck between a jailhouse rock and a hard place.

Not reporting to AHL assignments tends to irritate NHL GMs, which usually leads to suspensions without pay followed by the malcontented player going back on waivers for the purpose of terminating his contract, which the Blue Jackets know all about. That's exactly how they added defenseman Egor Zamula on Jan. 7, signing him to a one-year contract after the Pittsburgh Penguins terminated his previous deal for not reporting to their AHL affiliate.

Zamula made his Blue Jackets debut in Vegas, skating 11 shifts as Dante Fabbro's partner on the third defensive pairing and finishing with a -1 rating. Merzlikins hasn't played in the AHL since his rookie season (2019-20), when he begrudgingly accepted an AHL assignment and played two games for the Monsters.

Is what happened with Zamula what's next for Merzlikins?

He hasn't played in 13 of the past 15 games, so you have to wonder, and if not, then Evason and his staff must get their highest paid goalie back to a competitive level, which typically requires playing. It's hard to find fault with Greaves on the goals he allowed to the Golden Knights, especially the fifth one scored off a 2-on-1 rush created by his own team's failure to win a board battle, but he didn't look sharp either.

It was the perfect evening for Greaves to get a breather and Merzlikins to play on Elvis Night, but the spotlight never found him. Suspicious minds now wonder if Jan. 11 against the rampaging Colorado Avalanche will be a now or never moment for the Blue Jackets and Merzlikins, who always seems to face that juggernaut team at the worst possible time.

Either way, Greaves or Merzlikins, the Blue Jackets' season is fully coming apart at the seams and they can only ride with one goalie for so long. If there's any hope of salvaging this season amid a grueling, compressed schedule, a return to a two-goalie tandem feels like a necessity.

The bill has arrived and it's time for somebody with the Blue Jackets, Waddell or his coaching staff, to pay it.

The Columbus Dispatch / Blue Jackets drop third straight after blowing early lead in Las Vegas

Brian Hedger – January 9, 2026

No lead is safe for the Blue Jackets, no matter how big or when they have it.

It's the recurring theme of this season and it roasted them again Jan. 9 in a 5-3 loss to the Vegas Golden Knights at T-Mobile Arena in Las Vegas, Nevada. After racing out a 2-0 lead on goals by Boone Jenner and Kent Johnson in the game's first 10:41, the Blue Jackets (18-18-7) allowed four unanswered goals and lost their third straight game.

They've dropped the first two games of a four-game road trip that started with a 5-2 loss Jan. 7 at the San Jose Sharks and face a daunting matchup to start a back-to-back Jan. 11 at the Colorado Avalanche, who lead the Central Division with 71 points and improved to 18-0-2 on home ice with an 8-2 rout of the Ottawa Senators on Jan. 9 at Ball Arena.

A trip to Salt Lake City, Utah to wrap up this trip follows Jan. 12 against the Utah Mammoth, who are one point out of a playoff spot in the Western Conference.

Reilly Smith scored two goals to lead the Golden Knights (19-11-12), who lost starting goalie Carter Hart to an apparent leg injury prior to Jenner's goal at 8:24 of the first period. Akira Schmid played the remainder of the game and stopped 20 of 22 shots he faced for the win.

Zach Werenski pushed his point streak to nine straight games with an assist on Jenner's goal and Jet Greaves allowed five goals on 26 shots in his eighth straight start.

Mark Stone led Vegas with three points on a goal and two assists, star center Jack Eichel added a goal and assist, and Mitch Marner finished with two assists on Smith's goals.

Kirill Marchenko scored with 5:32 left in the third to cut the Vegas lead to 4-3, but the Golden Knights responded by doing something the Blue Jackets have struggled with all season. They made it stand up for a regulation win after Brett Howden scored with 3:46 left to quickly re-establish a two-goal cushion.

The Hockey Writers / 3 Blue Jackets' Aspects That Have Put Season on Edge of Destruction

By Mark Scheig – January 10, 2026

The vibes around the Columbus Blue Jackets went from very high to very low in the span of about 24 hours. They haven't recovered since.

Flash back to last Saturday for a moment. The Blue Jackets hosted the Buffalo Sabres and their 10-game winning streak. Everything went the Blue Jackets' way that day. They won going away ending the long winning streak. Surely, that moment would start a run back to the playoff race.

For a little bit of time Sunday, it appeared to. The Blue Jackets jumped on the Pittsburgh Penguins for an early 4-1 lead after Zach Werenski scored in the second period.

But then in a flash, everything changed. The Blue Jackets have yet to recover from it too.

The Penguins mounted a comeback yet again on the Blue Jackets' home ice. The Penguins tied the game with 14 seconds left in a moment that turned Nationwide Arena into what felt like their second home thanks to the loud cheers of their fans.

It was only a matter of time before the Penguins completed the comeback in overtime. Thanks to a mistake on a line change, Sidney Crosby did just that.

That 5-4 overtime loss was a point in the standings to be sure. But that moment felt like much more than that for the Blue Jackets. It was a painful reminder of exactly what has plagued them this season. They once again built a multi-goal lead only to lose the game.

That now meant going on the road and finding success to get the bad taste out of their mouths. After losses of 5-2 in San Jose and 5-3 in Vegas, it's abundantly clear the Blue Jackets have not recovered from Sunday's loss. They now face one of the toughest back-to-backs in the NHL when they play the Colorado Avalanche Saturday afternoon and then the Utah Mammoth on Sunday evening.

It's very possible the Blue Jackets go 0-for on this western trip. While that in itself wouldn't eliminate them from the playoffs, it would put their chances of making it on life support.

Most public models have the Blue Jackets' chances of making the playoffs at or around 10% or below coming into this weekend. To say that this is a critical part of the schedule is a major understatement. Their margin for error continues to dwindle with each passing loss.

It begs the question why. Why are the Blue Jackets in last place with room to spare in the Eastern Conference? It's an especially interesting question to consider given that they are doing some things well.

The problem is that their bad and ugly far outweigh the good. It points to the team's inability to learn from the lessons other teams are giving them. That's what we're going to try to focus on today.

In particular, there are three aspects that continue to doom the Blue Jackets. It has their season on the brink of destruction. Let's talk through them and see what can be done at this point.

Blown Leads

Should the Blue Jackets fail to qualify for the Stanley Cup Playoffs, it won't be because of this tough road trip. It'll be because of the points they're leaving behind when they've held a multi-goal lead.

The Blue Jackets were up 2-0 in the first period in Vegas. Kent Johnson scored a goal. His line had a good night overall. Things were off to a good start.

This has been the familiar story all season. The Blue Jackets are one of the best teams in the NHL in the first period. Coming into Saturday's game against the Colorado Avalanche, they're +10 in their goal differential in the first 20 minutes. That's top-five in the NHL. They've consistently showed they can start games well.

The same cannot be said for the other 40 minutes which is why the blown leads is the first aspect that needs discussed. The Blue Jackets have left nine points behind in games in which they held a multi-goal lead this season. It's the difference between being on the playoff cut line and being in last place.

Every team goes through a stretch like this at certain points. But the Blue Jackets are going through a season-long stretch of this that they cannot shake. They know it's an issue. Yet, they have proven they don't have any answers for it yet.

Now the important question. Why do the Blue Jackets struggle with this aspect? Let's acknowledge one thing here. At all three levels, management, coaches and players, they have all pointed to huge mistakes that end up in the back of their net.

Going back to our recent Q&A with GM Don Waddell, here's what he had to say about the blown leads. "But I watch every goal. I watch every goal multiple times every night. We make some dumb mental mistakes."

Here's what head coach Dean Evason said in part postgame Thursday in Vegas. "We get it to a one-goal lead and then we give up a 2-on-1. It's just, I don't know if we just shut it off, shut our brains off at that point instead of doing the right things." Evason went on to say that they made things too easy when discussing the 5-3 goal.

Zach Werenski recently said the team at times feel disconnected. He also said that their energy can dip a little later in games. "We make a mistake, kind of give them a free one. But we're still fine. It's still a 4-2 game going to the third. At home in front of a great crowd, we need to get our energy back. I think it's a big reason stuff like that happens."

Not having the energy will not only affect them physically, it could take a toll mentally too. The big mistakes are a combination of lack of execution and mental lapses.

Every team makes mistakes. But not every team can survive mistakes. The good teams are able to find a way to recover from mistakes. The Blue Jackets have shown their big mistakes end up in critical goals against.

What's the lesson to be learned? As currently constructed, the Blue Jackets aren't good enough to survive their big mistakes. While goaltender Jet Greaves has done everything he can to keep his team in games, even he can't stop everything including the big mistakes.

Here's an important question to consider too. Do the Blue Jackets have a true, elite shutdown defender on their roster? Their best defensemen are more offensive-minded defensemen. Teams have been able

to come back in part due to what the team doesn't have right now. Egor Zamula plays that kind of game but is new to the team and will play a limited role with third pair minutes.

The players you'll see in the key moments, Werenski, Damon Severson, Denton Mateychuk, Ivan Provorov and Dante Fabbro, aren't your typical shutdown defenders. Teams know that. Teams are taking advantage of that. They're able to come back in games knowing the Blue Jackets have to usually outscore their opponents to win. Waddell admitted as much in our recent Q&A.

What's the short-term answer to this? It's multi-layered. The Blue Jackets need to find their offense especially later in games. They start well but fade as games go on. They need to limit their big mistakes such as that 4-2 goal against the Penguins that jump started their comeback. They need to compete in their own zone using their sticks, breaking up passes, blocking shots and disrupting as much as possible. Smarter plays and puck possession become that much more important.

The Blue Jackets also need to find a way to keep their energy longer. That one is hard given the condensed schedule. But when Werenski admits that's a potential problem, they have to find a way to do so.

If the Blue Jackets better managed this part of their game, we'd be discussing the playoff race and not why they continue blowing leads in games. Whatever it is for each individual player, they must make a more concerted effort to positively influence the game. It's going to take a team committed to making the blown leads stop for them to put an end to this ugly part of their game.

Need More From Top Players

Offense was one of the Blue Jackets' strengths last season that helped them knock on the playoff door. That offense has dried up so far in 2025-26.

The Blue Jackets can generate chances. They're fourth in the NHL and only one of five teams who average over 30 shots per game. The problem? Lack of finish. The Blue Jackets are 20th in the NHL in goals per game.

Blown leads are more apt to happen when teams can't score enough goals. The Blue Jackets have been outscored by 25 goals this season in the final 40 minutes of regulation.

One reason for this? The players the Blue Jackets depend on for goals aren't scoring the way they need to. Let's look at a couple of examples.

- Adam Fantilli has one goal in his last 16 games while playing as the team's top-line center.
- Cole Sillinger has five goals in 42 games this season.
- Johnson scored his fourth goal of the season Thursday night in 42 games.
- Sean Monahan is battling through ailments but has just six goals so far this season.

For a team that needs their offense clicking to succeed, these are some eye-opening numbers. All are more than capable of scoring. It's now up to them to find their scoring touch as the second half of the season gets into full swing.

Werenski, Kirill Marchenko and Dmitri Voronkov are each on a 30-goal pace this season. If the mentioned players above start finding their games, they can turn things around. Offensively, they have to do a better job of finishing. They're creating chances. They now need to finish them.

Figure Out the Goaltending

Elvis Merzlikins hasn't played a single minute or even seen the ice outside of practice or warmups since the season resumed after the Christmas break. That means Jet Greaves has played all the minutes. While he's earned that right, he needs help.

The fact that Merzlikins hasn't started a game tells us everything we need to know. The Blue Jackets know they need to find a way to get Merzlikins going. But they haven't trusted him due to his recent performances.

Evason said that Greaves gives them the best chance to win. While that's certainly been true of late, we're seeing recently what it means when the Blue Jackets can't turn to their other goalie. Perhaps we'll see him soon.

However they decide to handle this, the Blue Jackets have to figure their crease out. They need to keep Greaves fresh while getting either Merzlikins or even Ivan Fedotov a chance to play.

Waddell recently told the Hockey Writers that the goaltending is something they watch hourly and even minute-by-minute. There will come a moment in which a decision will have to be made. The Blue Jackets need to get to a place where they have two goalies in which they can trust to start any given game. They're not at that point right now. That must change.

The Blue Jackets' season is at stake thanks to these aspects and perhaps even a few other things too. They do get seven of eight at home after the game Sunday evening in Utah. It's not hyperbole to call that stretch their potential defining moment of the season. A 6-2-0 or better stretch could keep them within range of the wildcard.

But if the above aspects aren't fixed in short order, it's not going to even matter. A season that started with the hope of taking the next step is on the verge of complete destruction.

If that's what comes to pass, it can't be viewed any other way except as failure by everyone within the organization.

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Beat Mammoth in Overtime to Close Out Road Trip

By Jeremy Schoupe – January 11, 2026

To close out the weekend, the Utah Mammoth hosted the Columbus Blue Jackets at the Delta Center on Sunday night.

The Blue Jackets entered play at the bottom of the Eastern Conference, while the Mammoth had the chance to leapfrog the Los Angeles Kings and Seattle Kraken for a Western Conference wild-card playoff spot.

Game Recap

It was the Blue Jackets who opened the scoring just over two minutes into the game off a regroup in the defensive zone, where Ivan Provorov found Danton Heinen at center ice along the boards, who fed a streaking Mikael Pyythia, scoring his first goal of the season for the Blue Jackets.

To tie the game before the first break, the Mammoth got a fortuitous bounce when Clayton Keller fired a shot from the point. It hit Jack McBain in front and somehow found its way in the back of the net for his fifth of the season.

The Mammoth then flipped the script, with Mikhail Sergachev scoring his seventh on a shot from the point a minute into the second period for the 2-1 lead.

However, as the Mammoth did in the first, the Blue Jackets would respond late in the period with Charlie Coyle getting credited for a goal after sweeping home a puck that slid behind Vitek Vanecek after a couple of peculiar bounces after he saved Coyle's initial shortside shot.

After two, the game was tied as it started, and despite the two teams trading chances throughout the third period, the final 20 minutes solved nothing. In overtime, on the power play after a late penalty to Daniil But in the third period, Dmitri Voronkov scored his 16th of the season for the Blue Jackets on the man advantage to close out a 3-2 victory after outshooting the Mammoth 37-27.

The Mammoth will be back in action at the Delta Center on Tuesday against the Toronto Maple Leafs. This game closed out a four-game road trip for the Blue Jackets, and they will head back home to match up with the Calgary Flames that same night.

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Fall to Avalanche Behind Trent Miner's First Career Win & Shutout

By Mark Scheig – January 10, 2026

The Columbus Blue Jackets faced a tall task on Saturday afternoon. Looking to break their three-game losing streak, they went to Denver to take on the Colorado Avalanche, a team that has yet to lose in regulation at home this season.

The Avalanche took care of business. But it was their role players that stepped up on this day. Trent Miner made 29 saves to record both his first NHL win and first NHL shutout. Brent Burns paced the offense with two goals to lift the Avalanche to a 4-0 win over the Blue Jackets.

NHL Rumours for Jan. 8: Binnington Drama, Mangiapane Timeline, Cowan Trade Option & Canadiens Target

The story of this game was the Avalanche showing they can win in other ways outside of their big guns.

Game Recap

The Blue Jackets knew they were going to have to be at their best in order to stay in this game. Early on, they had some jump.

Goaltender Elvis Merzlikins, who was making his first start since before the Christmas break, made a few saves to keep it 0-0. But then a former Blue Jacket made a play and help create the game's first goal.

Gavin Brindley, who was traded to the Avalanche as part of the deal that saw the Blue Jackets acquire Charlie Coyle and Miles Wood, drove to the net. The puck went out to Burns who scored from the slot to make it 1-0.

The Avalanche were able to double the lead 3:30 later when Victor Olofsson emerged from a scrum and beat Merzlikins with a backhand.

The second saw the Blue Jackets have the better of the chances. They had two power play chances that weren't converted on. Despite a 13-7 advantage in shots on goal in the period, it was the Avalanche who scored the only goal of the period.

That goal was memorable for Ilya Solovyov who scored his first NHL goal from the left wing. At 3-0, the only question left seemed to be would Miner get his shutout.

In the third, Burns scored his second of the game to make it 4-0. Miner and the Avalanche were able to get the job done holding the Blue Jackets off the scoreboard.

The Avalanche get the attention for their big guns Nathan MacKinnon, Cale Makar and Martin Necas. None of these three recorded a point.

It was Burns with two goals, Brindley and Parker Kelly with two assists each that did the damage offensively. Collectively, the Avalanche limited the Blue Jackets to very few if any second chances to score.

Zach Werenski, who briefly left the warmups, played in the game but was clearly bothered. He sat the last few minutes of the game. With their next game Sunday in Utah, his status is worth monitoring.

The Blue Jackets complete their road trip against the Mammoth hoping to not go 0-for in the West. The Avalanche will enjoy Sunday and return to action Monday when the Toronto Maple Leafs come to Ball Arena for a 10 P.M. eastern game.

The Hockey Writers / Today in Hockey History: Jan 10

By Matthew Zator – January 10, 2026

Some of the greatest players in National Hockey League history have had plenty of reasons to celebrate on Jan. 10. The fans in Montreal, Boston, and Buffalo were treated to multiple big moments throughout the decades. It is time to fire up our hockey time machine to take a look at all the best this date has had to offer us.

A Great Date for the Great 8

Washington Capitals superstar Alex Ovechkin can say that Jan. 10 is one of his favorite dates of his remarkable career. In 2008, he signed a 13-year contract extension worth an unbelievable total of \$124 million. A contract of this length cannot be signed under the current Collective Bargaining Agreement rules. During this deal's duration, which expired after the 2020-21 season, he had 567 goals and 1,010 points in 952 games and was a huge part of the franchise's first Stanley Cup championship in 2018.

Eight years later, on Jan. 10, 2016, Ovechkin scored his 500th career goal in Washington's 7-1 win over the Ottawa Senators. Goal No. 500 came in his 801st career game, making him the fifth-fastest player to hit this plateau in NHL history. He wasted very little time going after his next big milestone by scoring his 501st goal midway through the third period.

The Great One Passes Mr. Hockey

On Jan. 10, 1989, Wayne Gretzky picked up four assists in the Los Angeles Kings' 5-4 win over his former team, the Edmonton Oilers. This gave him 2,011 combined NHL points, both regular season and playoffs, putting him ahead of Gordie Howe for the most all-time. Gretzky's old teammate, Glenn Anderson, scored his 350th career goal in the losing effort.

Howe established his record in 26 total NHL seasons. Gretzky shattered it midway through his 11th season in the league. He scored the first 1,669 regular-season points and 242 in the postseason with the Oilers.

Big Moments in Montreal

Early NHL great Newsy Lalonde scored six goals on Jan. 10, 1920, to lead the Montreal Canadiens to a 14-7 win over the Toronto St. Pats. The 21 total goals remained as the most scored in an NHL game until 1985.

Maurice Richard provided all the offense needed with his 16th career hat trick on Jan. 10, 1951, to give him 274 career goals and surpass Howie Morenz as the NHL's second all-time leading goal scorer. Rookie goaltender Gerry McNeil earned his sixth career shutout in the 3-0 win over the New York Rangers.

Henri Richard, Maurice's younger brother, broke out of a 52-game goalless streak on Jan. 10, 1973, with two goals and two assists. Netminder Ken Dryden recorded his 13th career shutout as the Canadiens won 6-0 at the Minnesota North Stars.

On Jan. 10, 1996, the Canadiens became the first team in NHL history to play 5,000 regular-season games. Their milestone game ended in a 2-2 tie with the visiting Vancouver Canucks.

Sheldon Souray had a goal and five assists on Jan. 10, 2004, in the Habs' 8-0 beating of the Pittsburgh Penguins. His six points set a new single-game team record for points by a defenseman. Doug Harvey and Lyle Odelein shared the previous record of five points.

A Busy Day in Boston

The Boston Bruins ended their team-record 11-game losing streak on Jan. 10, 1925, with a 3-2 win against the Canadiens. This was the Bruins' first overtime win in team history.

Don Simmons became the second NHL goaltender to wear a mask on Jan. 10, 1960, less than three months after Montreal legend Jacques Plante was the first to do so. The mask did not hinder him as he stopped all 37 shots he faced in a 4-0 shutout of the Toronto Maple Leafs.

Johnny Bucyk became the first member of the Bruins to score 500 goals on Jan. 10, 1976, in a 3-2 win over the visiting Oakland Seals.

On Jan. 10, 1980, Jean Ratelle picked up two assists to give him 1,200 career NHL points as the Bruins lost 7-4 to the St. Louis Blues. He became the eighth player in NHL history to hit this milestone. The first 817 of those points came during his 16 seasons with the Rangers.

Winging it in Buffalo

Joe Crozier was named head coach of the Buffalo Sabres on Jan. 10, 1972, after general manager and head coach Punch Imlach suffered a heart attack. He held onto the job through the end of the 1973-74 season and went 77-80-35.

Tom Barrasso made 20 saves for his fifth career shutout on Jan. 10, 1985, to beat the Bruins 3-0. This was the first time the Bruins were held off the scoreboard at Boston Garden since they lost to Montreal 2-0 on Oct. 16, 1977.

Dave Andreychuk scored twice to give him 100 career goals on Jan. 10, 1986, and added an assist as the Sabres beat the Maple Leafs 9-7.

One year later, defenseman Mike Ramsey scored a goal and added three assists to give him 200 NHL points in the Sabres' 8-5 victory over the Kings.

Pat LaFontaine scored his 12th career hat trick on Jan. 10, 1993, in a 5-3 win versus the visiting Calgary Flames. He also added an assist to lead the Sabres to their sixth consecutive victory.

A decade later, on Jan. 10, 2003, Lindy Ruff became the second head coach to get 200 victories with the Sabres with a 4-2 win over the Bruins. Rookie Ales Kotalik became the first player in franchise history to score two goals in three straight games.

Drama in St. Louis

The Ralston Purina Company announced the sale of the Blues on Jan. 10, 1983, to a group in Saskatoon led by Oilers founder Bill Hunter. However, the NHL Board of Governors rejected the deal by a 15-3 vote on May 18, 1983, feeling that Saskatoon was not big enough or financially stable enough to support an NHL team.

This led to both sides taking each other to court and the Blues boycotting the 1983 NHL Entry Draft. Ralston Purina threatened to dissolve the team and sell their existing player contracts to other franchises. Eventually, a deal was worked out to allow Harry Ornest to buy the team.

Odds & Ends

On Jan. 10, 1931, the Philadelphia Quakers ended their 15-game losing streak by beating the Montreal Maroons 4-3 in overtime. This was the longest losing streak in NHL history until the Capitals lost 17 straight games during their inaugural 1974-75 season.

Camille Henry became the second player in Rangers' franchise history to score 250 goals on Jan. 10, 1968, in a 3-3 tie with the Chicago Blackhawks.

Paul Henderson scored twice for the 200th goal of his NHL career on Jan. 10, 1973, in a Maple Leafs' 4-2 win against the visiting New York Islanders.

Winnipeg Jets defenseman and future NHL head coach Randy Carlyle played in his 1,000th career game on Jan. 10, 1992, a 6-2 win over the visiting Blackhawks.

A pair of Blackhawks set personal milestones one year later, on Jan. 10, 1993, during a 5-4 loss to the Kings. Hall of Famer Michel Goulet played in his 1,000th NHL game, while Steve Larmer became the fourth player to score 900 points with the team.

On that same night, Bob Kudelski scored three goals for the first hat trick in Ottawa's "modern" history in a 3-2 win against the visiting San Jose Sharks. The win ended an 11-game losing streak for the first-year Senators.

On Jan. 10, 1994, Felix Potvin's shutout led the Maple Leafs to a 3-0 win at the Bruins. This was the first Toronto shutout in Boston in almost 33 years since Johnny Bower did it on March 12, 1961.

Speaking of shutouts, Chris Osgood recorded his fourth of the season as the Detroit Red Wings spoiled Ken Hitchcock's NHL coaching debut with a 4-0 blanking of the Dallas Stars.

Mats Sundin scored two goals and added an assist on Jan. 10, 1998, for his 250th NHL goal and 600th career point as the Maple Leafs lost 4-3 to the visiting Blackhawks.

Later that evening, Mark Messier became the sixth player in NHL history to join the 1,000-assist club as the Vancouver Canucks skated to a 2-2 draw with Florida Panthers.

Alexander Mogilny scored a pair of goals on Jan. 10, 2001, to give him 800 career points in the New Jersey Devil's 5-1 win against the visiting Phoenix Coyotes.

A pair of netminders made history on Jan. 10, 2004. First, Tommy Salo picked up his 200th career win in his 500th career game by leading the Oilers to a 3-0 win at the Flyers. He was just the third European-born goaltender to amass 200 victories. In San Jose, Evgeni Nabokov became the first goaltender to win 100 games as a member of the Sharks with a 5-2 win over the visiting Atlanta Thrashers.

Finally, on Jan. 10, 2019, John Tortorella picked up his 600th career coaching victory when Artemi Panarin's overtime goal gave the Columbus Blue Jackets a 4-3 win over the Nashville Predators. He is the first U.S.-born head coach in NHL history and 20th overall to hit the 600-win plateau.

On Jan. 10, 2023, Moritz Seider had four assists to become the second-youngest defenseman to do so in Red Wings history. Reed Larson was 38 days younger when he did it on March 28, 1978.

On that same night, Matthew Tkachuk got his 50th point of the season to become only the third player in Panthers history to do so in 39 or fewer games. He joined Pavel Bure (34 in 1999-00) and Jonathan Huberdeau (37 in 2021-22, 38 in 2019-20) in the feat.

On Jan. 10, 2024, Jesper Wallstedt (21 years, 57 days) became the youngest goaltender in Wild history to make his NHL debut. He surpassed Derek Gustafson, who made his debut on March 9, 2001, at age 21 years, 261 days – approximately 20 months before Wallstedt was born. He was also the fourth-youngest Swedish-born goaltender in NHL history at the time of his debut, behind Robin Lehner, Jacob Markstrom, and Henrik Lundqvist.

Meanwhile, in Colorado, Nathan MacKinnon extended his home point streak to 23 games, matching the Avalanche/Quebec Nordiques franchise record – a benchmark set by Joe Sakic in 2000-01. He also tied Gretzky (1983-84) and Phil Esposito (1973-74) for the third-longest from the start of a season in NHL history.

Happy Birthday to You

A very talented group of 25 current and former NHL players were born on this date. The most successful players of the lot are Frank Mahovlich (88), Randy Manery (77), Henrik Tallinder (47), Tom Gilbert (43), Martin Jones (36), John Carlson (36), Tobias Rieder (33), and the late Hall of Famer George Hay.