



Columbus Blue Jackets News Clips
January 8-10, 2025

Columbus Blue Jackets

- PAGE 02: The Columbus Dispatch: Columbus Blue Jackets keep rolling amid injury shortage with 6-2 win over Seattle Kraken
- PAGE 03: The Columbus Blue Jackets: Columbus Blue Jackets 'kids' power blowout of Seattle Kraken: 4 takeaways
- PAGE 05: The Columbus Dispatch: Columbus Blue Jackets' Sean Monahan on IR: Adam Fantilli fronts plan to replace him
- PAGE 07: The Columbus Dispatch: Columbus Blue Jackets 2024-25 midseason report card: As, Bs and a couple Cs
- PAGE 10: The Columbus Dispatch: Mathieu Olivier gives Columbus Blue Jackets their own 'Tom Wilson'
- PAGE 12: The Columbus Dispatch: Columbus Blue Jackets injury update: Sean Monahan to miss 'some time' with wrist injury
- PAGE 14: The Columbus Dispatch: Columbus Blue Jackets finally end vexing road losing streak to Pittsburgh Penguins
- PAGE 16: The Columbus Dispatch: Columbus Blue Jackets end Pittsburgh woes on push from Fantilli, Voronkov: 5 takeaways
- PAGE 18: The Athletic: Blue Jackets lean on call-ups Luca Del Bel Belluz and Owen Sillinger in rout of Kraken
- PAGE 20: The Athletic: Blue Jackets report card: Offensive exploits mask defensive woes, lead to good grades
- PAGE 24: The Athletic: Blue Jackets end a decade's worth of misery in Pittsburgh, but lose Monahan to injury
- PAGE 26: The Hockey Writers: Blue Jackets Race Past Kraken Behind Young Guns
- PAGE 27: NHL.com: Gaudreau to have No. 8 jersey retired by Dubuque of USHL

Cleveland Monsters/Prospects

- PAGE 29: Cleveland 19 News: Trio of Monsters named to North Division Roster for AHL All-Star Classic

NHL/ Websites

- PAGE 30: The Athletic: NHL Playoff Report: Blue Jackets and Senators on the rise, New York teams falling off
- PAGE 35: ESPN: Top prospects, biggest surprises from the 2025 World Juniors
- PAGE 41: ESPN: NHL Awards WATCH: Who's leading for Hart, Norris, Calder?

The Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets keep rolling amid injury shortage with 6-2 win over Seattle Kraken

By Brian Hedger – January 10, 2025

The Blue Jackets' first game without Sean Monahan couldn't have gone much better Thursday night at Nationwide Arena.

Forced into dressing a lineup with multiple prospects filling key roles for missing regulars, including Adam Fantilli in Monahan's center spot on the top line, the Blue Jackets won, 6-2, in front of 15,497 who saw them take control with four goals in the second period.

"We were excited about how the team conducted themselves here tonight," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "For the most part, a lot of really solid play from the whole group."

Sean Kuraly and Seattle's Eeli Tolvanen traded goals in the first, but the Blue Jackets (19-17-6) broke it open in the second with goals by Zach Werenski, Kent Johnson and rookies Luca Del Bel Belluz and Denton Mateychuk for a 5-1 lead starting the third.

Del Bel Belluz's goal was his first of the season in his season-debut and second of his NHL career in the same number of games. Mateychuk netted his first NHL goals with his dad watching in the arena while in town visiting from Dominion City, Manitoba in Canada (population 319). There was also an NHL debut for the Blue Jackets, who dressed Owen Sillinger, 27, as an emergency recall from AHL Cleveland. He replaced his younger brother, who was scratched with an illness along with veteran defenseman Jack Johnson.

"It was a rollercoaster full of emotions," Sillinger said. "Getting the win helps. Anytime you can hop into a new team with (the same) systems and get the win and have a positive impact, that's a great thing and that's what I thought did tonight."

Elvis Merzlikins (28 saves) improved to 15-10-3 to help the Jackets win their third straight game and keep their spot as the second wildcard in the Eastern Conference at 44 points. Despite a growing list of unavailable regulars, Columbus won for the sixth time in the past eight games.

The Blue Jackets also set their goal cannon off six more times, scoring six goals in a game for the 10th time in just 42 games. That's just one shy of tying the franchise record for a season with 40 games remaining.

"This team, this team in particular, the most important thing is the two points," Evason said. "That's what's awesome about this group. Sure, are we happy for people (to reach milestones)? Yeah, 100%, but the people that we're happy for are happy to win, as opposed to just scoring a goal or making their debut or whatever. It's just a Columbus Blue Jackets win."

The Columbus Blue Jackets / Columbus Blue Jackets 'kids' power blowout of Seattle Kraken: 4 takeaways

By Brian Hedger – January 10, 2025

A roomful of injured NHL regulars watched the Blue Jackets on Thursday from Nationwide Arena's press level.

Captain Boone Jenner (shoulder), center Sean Monahan (wrist), forward Justin Danforth (lower body) and alternate captain Erik Gudbranson (shoulder) sat next to top prospect Cayden Lindstrom (back), while center Cole Sillinger (illness) and defenseman Jack Johnson (illness) watched elsewhere.

The Blue Jackets' list of injuries and illnesses is growing for the third straight season, but it's different this time. The veterans are still missed, but the Jackets are also loaded now with emerging talent that continues to ripen in the NHL and with the AHL's Cleveland Monsters. The annual health conundrum is more of a side note than a season-crushing subplot, which is evidence the Blue Jackets' rebuild is trending up.

Their kids can play, which they proved again Thursday in a 6-2 victory over the Seattle Kraken. Despite icing a lineup with young players skating in some key roles, the Jackets steamrolled Seattle with two goals scored by veterans (Zach Werenski and Sean Kuraly), two goals scored by young NHL forwards (Kirill Marchenko and Kent Johnson), and two goals by rookies (Denton Mateychuk and Luca Del Bel Belluz).

The future in Columbus appears bright and present. Here are four takeaways:

Columbus Blue Jackets' prowess grows at Nationwide Arena

After storming back for a rare road victory Tuesday in Pittsburgh, where they hadn't won since 2015, the Blue Jackets returned to the comforts of home ice to face the Kraken.

It was another rousing success in front of 15,497, who watched the hosts improve their record on home ice to 14-5-3 while trouncing Seattle with a four-goal second period. The Blue Jackets are 5-12-3 on the road, which will likely determine their playoff fate.

Improving on the road while continuing to win in Columbus could become an unthinkable golden ticket to the postseason for a team that was universally written off before playing a single game.

Columbus Blue Jackets rookie Denton Mateychuk picks timely game for first NHL goal

Mateychuk played his eighth NHL game and continues to impress while shifting with veteran Ivan Provorov on the Blue Jackets' second defensive pairing.

After notching his first career point with an assist on New Year's Eve against the Carolina Hurricanes, Mateychuk scored his NHL goal to help the Jackets build a 5-1 lead in the second period against Seattle. His tally made it 4-1 after he pinched low to the bottom of the left circle to get a feed from James van Riemsdyk.

Mateychuk's dad, Jason, celebrated in the stands while visiting his son from their hometown of Dominion City, Manitoba in Western Canada (population 319).

"It's awesome," Mateychuk said. "I wouldn't be here without him. He's done so much for me over the years, and it's awesome to have him in attendance tonight."

Columbus Blue Jackets developing 'swagger' at NHL, AHL levels

Rookie call-ups from the past three seasons enjoyed playing in the NHL with the Blue Jackets, but those were grim years in Columbus. This year is different with the Jackets contending for the playoffs midway through the season and the Cleveland Monsters battling for the top spot in the AHL North again.

"They've got swagger (and) they've got confidence," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "Most of those guys who come up, they've got a ton of points (for the Monsters), but they play the right way. It just sets them up to have success when they get here."

Columbus Blue Jackets rookie Owen Sillinger replaces one 'Silly' with another

Owen Sillinger got a call Thursday he's been waiting a long time to receive. Chris Clark, the Blue Jackets' director of player personnel and the Cleveland Monsters' GM, told the 27-year old rookie forward to start heading South to Columbus.

The Blue Jackets used an emergency recall to add Sillinger for his NHL debut, which happened because his younger brother, Cole, was sick. It was a "Silly for Silly" swap that put a smile on a lot of Blue Jackets faces.

"Things happened in a weird way," Owen Sillinger said. "(Cole) called me and said, 'I can't even get to the bathroom on my own. Like, you're going to be in,' and I was like, 'Yeah, absolutely. I already talked to 'Clarky' and I'm way ahead of ya.'"

Owen Sillinger agreed to his first NHL contract last offseason with the Jackets. He's now the third member of the Sillinger family to play for the Blue Jackets, following Cole and their father, Mike, who played two seasons (2001-03) in Columbus.

The Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets' Sean Monahan on IR: Adam Fantilli fronts plan to replace him

By Brian Hedger – January 9, 2025

Adam Fantilli is about to be tested on what he's learned from watching Sean Monahan.

The Blue Jackets placed Monahan, 30, on injured reserve Thursday with a wrist injury going into a game against the Seattle Kraken at Nationwide Arena, putting Fantilli into the veteran's main role at center for a high-scoring forward line with Kirill Marchenko and Dmitri Voronkov as wingers.

It's a continuation of how the Blue Jackets concluded a 4-3 shootout win Tuesday in Pittsburgh, where Monahan was injured in the second period and exited after skating the first shift of the third. Fantilli, who's exactly 10 years younger and was drafted third overall in 2023, sparked a two-goal comeback with an assist on a goal by Voronkov and his own goal to tie it, 3-3, on a late power play while playing Monahan's "bumper" spot between the circles.

"He's done all the right things," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "We've talked about 'earning' (roles and ice time). He's earned the right (to center the top line). ... he earned the right to go there."

Fantilli's second NHL season has challenged him from a statistical standpoint, which is common for second-year players and especially those who play center. While trying to survive at the faceoff dots against a slew of more experienced veterans – who are usually stronger physically – young NHL centers also must learn a long list of nuances in all three zones they simply didn't need at lower levels.

Columbus Blue Jackets' centers are learning from Sean Monahan

Monahan, the Blue Jackets' third-leading scorer with 41 points (14 goals, 27 assists) has mastered those details. He anticipates plays astutely, gains advantages with stick lifts and body positioning, and his feel for playing the "bumper" spot in a 1-3-1 power play might be the biggest factor in the Jackets' recent surge up the NHL's man-advantage success rankings.

He does it all for the Blue Jackets, including penalty-killing, and Monahan's demeanor while doing it mirrors his calm, usually monotone style of doing interviews.

"If he's out of our lineup, it's a huge part of our team," Evason said. "It's not only the point production or even the defensive game – killing penalties, winning faceoffs – but also the calmness he brings on the bench and the leadership, as far as 'by example' that he provides not only for our young guys but all the guys. It's extremely valuable and it's a reason why we've had some success, in large part, because of his leadership qualities."

Monahan chose to play for the Blue Jackets a free agent last summer. There were multiple factors, including a five-year contract worth \$27.5 million, but the main one was obvious.

After becoming Johnny Gaudreau's close friend with the Calgary Flames, he eagerly anticipated a reunion with him in Columbus. Gaudreau's shocking offseason death in New Jersey rocked the sport of

hockey and crushed the Blue Jackets emotionally — especially Monahan, who planned to live a couple houses away from Gaudreau. Had Monahan struggled this season, nobody would've batted an eye.

Instead, he's arguably become the Jackets' most important forward.

Monahan, a key veteran, has pushed his new teammates — young and older — to reach new heights. Marchenko, for instance, is leading the Blue Jackets in scoring during a breakout season by hounding pucks and throwing his body around to win more possession battles. Voronkov is becoming a net-front menace at 6 feet 5, 240 pounds with soft hands, great vision and a willingness to play in a high-contact area.

Fantilli has also gained just by watching Monahan closely.

"His details are so good," Fantilli said. "I don't know what his (faceoff) stats are since he came into the league, but someone was saying he's, like, top five in the league since he came in. His (defensive zone) details are unreal, and where he is in the (offensive zone), he doesn't even have to skate much. He's just finding himself in the right spots. So ... I'm learning off him, and it's been great."

Evason notices something else about Monahan's demeanor that has helped the Blue Jackets grow.

"Stuff like getting frustrated coming off (after) you miss an opportunity," Evason said. "Fantilli, in the past, would come off and be extremely emotional. You see Monahan come off the ice after missing opportunities ... he just sits down and gets ready for the next shift and he gets another one, right? Coaches can talk until they're blue in the face, but if they see a player of his stature doing those type of things, the right type of things, it's extremely valuable."

Adam Fantilli, Cole Sillinger and Columbus Blue Jackets center depth will be tested

Now, without Monahan, it's time for Fantilli and Sillinger to keep the Blue Jackets' top lines humming, assuming they stay healthy. Sillinger will be a gametime decision Thursday due to illness, while Jenner and Justin Danforth are also out with injuries. Once again, health issues have ravaged what started out for the Blue Jackets as a deep pool of NHL center options.

Longer-term, Fantilli will anchor the top line without Monahan and Sillinger will center the second group after previously handling a role as the Jackets' third-line pivot. The two "bottom six" lines will be centered by veteran Sean Kuraly and rookie Luca Del Bel Belluz, while rookie Owen Sillinger, 27, could make his NHL debut Thursday in a "Silly for Silly" swap should his younger brother not play.

Evason said Johnson or Voronkov could also switch to center, but there's no easy way to replace Monahan. Good thing he's been around half a season to provide tutorials.

"It's really good to see sometimes," Fantilli said "Less is more, as a centerman, where you just slow down. ... I don't always have to skate as fast as I can. You can slow down, and you're in a better position because of it. I've learned that from (Monahan), and from Boone last year. It's been really helpful."

The Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets 2024-25 midseason report card: As, Bs and a couple Cs

By Brian Hedger – January 9, 2025

There's a long way to go, but the Blue Jackets are in the race for a playoff spot at midseason.

They took possession of the Eastern Conference's second wild-card spot Tuesday night with a soul-cleansing 4-3 shootout victory over the Pittsburgh Penguins at PPG Paints Arena and host the Seattle Kraken on Thursday with a respectable 18-17-6 record.

Nobody outside the Blue Jackets' locker room thought that was even possible, especially after Patrik Laine was traded to Montreal in August and Johnny Gaudreau was killed a week later in a tragedy that also took his brother Matthew's life as they rode bikes in South Jersey.

Most analysts predicted the Blue Jackets would finish last among the NHL's 32 teams and gain the best odds to win the draft lottery. Others were barely more optimistic. The Blue Jackets, meanwhile, are writing their own script as they continue to mourn the loss of Gaudreau and his brother.

Here's a look at their midseason report card:

Columbus Blue Jackets: offense

Outside of a six-game winless skid in November, scoring hasn't been an issue for the Blue Jackets. Their collective skill level matches up favorably against any team in the league, which has led to them scoring six or more goals in nine games already.

That's already one more than last season's eight games with six-plus goals and just two short of tying the franchise record (11) with 41 games to play. The Blue Jackets are averaging 3.37 goals per game thus far, which has them on pace to break the franchise record of 3.15 goals per game set during the 2021-22 campaign, and their 138 goals (not counting goals added for shootout wins) are the most in team history through 41 games of a season.

Zach Werenski's prowess as one of the NHL's elite scoring defensemen is a big reason for the success, along with center Sean Monahan's addition to the top line as a do-it-all catalyst, plus big breakout efforts from Kirill Marchenko, Dmitri Voronkov, Kent Johnson and Yegor Chinakhov. Chinakhov, however, suffered an upper-body injury that's sidelined him for 19 games.

Grade: A+

Columbus Blue Jackets: defense

The flip side to having such a potent offense has been an inflated 3.61 goals-against per game through the season's first half. Forwards and defensemen have struggled with turning the puck over in their own zone, and Columbus' goalies have paid a steep price.

It's not all bad, though. Werenski has led the way defensively and meshed nicely with Dante Fabbro, a solid defender claimed off waivers from the Nashville Predators. Ivan Provorov has provided a steady

presence in the defensive top four as a pending free agent, while veteran Damon Severson got off to a fast start before inconsistency and a recent turnover or two landed him in the doghouse.

The third pairing absorbed a huge blow when Erik Gudbranson went down early with a shoulder injury that required surgery, but gritty veteran Jack Johnson picked up the slack. Jake Christiansen has stayed in the lineup in his first full NHL campaign, but Jordan Harris has struggled to earn regular ice time. Rookie Denton Mateychuk has joined the defensive rotation, skating primarily with Provorov on the second pairing, and Blue Jackets forwards have also played a role in the team's defensive outcomes.

Grade: B-

Columbus Blue Jackets: goaltending

The Blue Jackets' struggles with turnovers and defending have contributed to their goalies' inflated statistics, but that's not the sole reason Elvis Merzlikins and Daniil Tarasov are one of the NHL's most inconsistent goaltending tandems.

Merzlikins' unpredictable play on a nightly basis keeps him from becoming one of the league's elite goalies, while Tarasov's impressive finish to last season feels like ancient history. After an early funk, he's been unable to find his top form while not playing for long stretches as the primary backup.

Tarasov's slump is one of the reasons the Blue Jackets recalled rookie Jet Greaves from AHL Cleveland and opted to carry three NHL goalies for a stretch. Getting more consistent playing time might help Tarasov turn things around, but it's difficult for a team that's locked in a tight playoff race to live with a struggling goalie's hiccups while trying to work out of a slump.

As for Merzlikins, he's still working to provide consistency. There are times when he plays like the best goalie on the planet and others when he struggles to stop routine shots that turn into game-altering goals. Improvement by Merzlikins and Tarasov in the second half could give the Blue Jackets a needed boost.

Grade: C-

Columbus Blue Jackets: special teams

After the Blue Jackets' penalty kill and power play groups struggled to start the season, the two units headed in starkly different directions. The power play started clicking in early December and hasn't slowed up, lifting the Jackets to a 23.9% success rate for the season that's tied for ninth in the league.

They've scored at least one power-play goal in four straight games, including a 2-for-2 performance Tuesday in Pittsburgh, and rank second in the NHL at 37.2% since Dec. 8 in Winnipeg. After struggling on power plays for roughly seven years, the Blue Jackets are finally a dangerous threat with the man advantage.

That's not the case for Columbus' penalty killers. They are ranked 28th with a success rate of just 72.9%, and that's a reflection of a recent uptick. The Blue Jackets sank to the bottom of the NHL in penalty-killing during a stretch from Nov. 12 to Dec. 10 in which they allowed power-play goals in 14 straight games. The PK units did improve during the three weeks following the dubious streak, but they've allowed power-play goals in three straight games again.

Grade: C+

Columbus Blue Jackets: coaching

Todd McLellan, who was once the Jackets' top choice to replace Pascal Vincent, offered Dean Evason a big compliment when his Detroit Red Wings recently visited Nationwide Arena. He said Evason's "fingerprints" were all over the Blue Jackets as he studied video to prepare for the matchup, which is high praise in the coaching profession.

The Blue Jackets are working hard for Evason while striving to live up to a mantra that's now painted on a wall inside the locker room: "This is earned ... not given."

Evason's lone bit of criticism during his first season with the Blue Jackets is his tendency to gamble a little too freely with coaching challenges for goaltender interference in situations that appear to have 50/50 odds of winning, but that's a quibble. He and the assembled staff of assistants are mostly pushing the right buttons to get the most out of their team.

Grade: A-

Columbus Blue Jackets: front office

Don Waddell jumped straight into a critical, fast-paced offseason in Columbus and handled it impressively. He meshed with his inherited front office, especially Rick Nash, and reworked the Blue Jackets' roster into a competitive group by the time he finally sent Laine off to Montreal in August.

He got Kirill Marchenko, Kent Johnson and Cole Sillinger all re-signed on bridge deals as restricted free agents. He created salary-cap space by trimming some fat from last year's organizational depth chart and made impressive veteran additions with Monahan, Fabbro, James van Riemsdyk, Jack Johnson, Zach Aston-Reese and Kevin Labanc.

That's without mentioning his pivot from McLellan to Evason as head coach, which was soon followed by the heartbreaking loss of Gaudreau – a tragedy that left the Blue Jackets in emotional tatters. Waddell handled it all with integrity, professionalism and profound compassion in just a few short months on the job.

Time will tell whether it was worth risking a fourth overall pick last June by drafting power forward Cayden Lindstrom, who eventually required back surgery, but there's a solid chance that works out too.

Grade: A

The Columbus Dispatch / Mathieu Olivier gives Columbus Blue Jackets their own 'Tom Wilson'

By Brian Hedger – January 9, 2025

The hit was thunderous, echoing so loudly inside sold-out Nationwide Arena last Saturday that you didn't even need to see it to know who delivered it.

Mathieu Olivier, a power forward with a middle linebacker's build at 6 feet 1, 226 pounds, spotted the puck in the right corner of the St. Louis Blues' zone and locked onto his target, Tyler Tucker, with 7:46 left in the Jackets' 6-4 win. Lining up the Blues defenseman, Olivier drove every ounce of heft he could muster into Tucker's chest for a clean, heavy thump that rattled the boards.

The crowd roared, as Tucker, who is 6-1 and 204 pounds, stared at Olivier afterward. They didn't drop the gloves for what would've been a second fight between the two, and that was a wise decision on Tucker's part.

Olivier, one of the NHL's most fearsome enforcers, rag-dolled Tucker during their earlier fight and probably would have obliged a second chance to land some punches. His left hand is a vice grip for holding jersey collars, his right's a cinder block attached to a muscled arm and the Blue Jackets' most menacing forward also has a propensity to "black out" like the Incredible Hulk.

Good luck tangling with that combination.

Olivier, however, isn't a one-trick sideshow. Unlike his first two seasons in Columbus, he's now a fixture on the Jackets' third line and averaging a career-high 14 minutes per game. His 10 goals halfway through the season are already a career-high by four and Olivier is on pace to net 20 goals.

"You always believe in yourself," Olivier said. "I always believed I could do it, but for x number of reasons, it took until this year for it to all come together, and that's fine. It's just a journey and a process. As players, we always strive to be better, and I think this year it's just all come together. The good news is ... I think there's still more that I can improve."

Mathieu Olivier aims to give Columbus Blue Jackets their own 'Tom Wilson'

Tom Wilson, a well-known power forward for the Washington Capitals, is one of the most despised players on the NHL circuit.

He messes with goalies on a regular basis, which led to an altercation last season with the Blue Jackets' Elvis Merzlikins. He used to constantly straddle the line between legal and illegal hits and has slightly backed off from the latter as he's moved up the lineup. Wilson will fight, but his preference is to intimidate with big hits and be a force inside the offensive zone.

Olivier strives to do the same.

"Am I going to get there eventually, consistently, over the years?" Olivier said. "We'll see. There's a lot of work to do, obviously. I'm not there yet. I'm not saying I'm Tom Wilson at all, but I'm saying the goal of being a player like him is definitely something I strive to meet at some point."

He's assembling quite a case this season.

Olivier is fifth in the NHL with 147 hits, leads Blue Jackets forwards with 47 blocked shots, leads the team with three game-winning goals and leads the league with 79 penalty minutes. His increased role also includes penalty-killing and even the occasional shift to finish power plays.

Olivier feels his ascendance is related to new coach Dean Evason's mantra painted on a wall near his locker stall. It reads: "This is earned ... not given," and Olivier has taken that to heart. After struggling to stay in the lineup last season for coach Pascal Vincent, he's become one of Evason's most trusted forwards.

"I wouldn't be human if I didn't have some thoughts about last year, but there's no point in dwelling on that," Olivier said. "This year is about: 'This is earned ... not given.' That's being enforced, and if Dean feels like he can give me a bigger role and more minutes in those key moments of the game, then I've got to feel like this was earned and not given. It's something I've worked for, and thankfully they feel like I'm doing a good job."

Mathieu Olivier hopes to stay with Columbus Blue Jackets

Olivier picked a good time to put it all together.

He's finishing a two-year contract worth \$2.2 million, which means he'll be an unrestricted free agent if the Blue Jackets don't get his signature on a contract extension before July 1. A big pay raise and contractual job security await, especially if his breakout campaign continues through the end of the season.

Don Waddell, the Blue Jackets' president of hockey operations/general manager, has let it be known his objective is to re-sign Olivier, and he's got plenty of salary cap to get something done. It's also a shared goal with Olivier, who's gained a unique perspective spending the past three years in Columbus.

He's already experienced the most difficult part of the Jackets' rebuild, which started before a 2022 offseason trade that brought him to Columbus. Now, he'd like to finish the job. Olivier has gained attention across the NHL now, but his preference is to stay where everything is earned.

"I love it here, and my family loves it here," Olivier said. "There's something to be said about being there when you're at the bottom and working your way up to become a contender and a Stanley Cup champion eventually, if we get that chance. I believe in that, and I think we've got the right pieces in place within the whole organization to make that happen. So, I want to be a part of that for sure."

[The Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets injury update: Sean Monahan to miss 'some time' with wrist injury](#)

By Brian Hedger – January 8, 2025

Sean Monahan has a wrist injury after taking a hit from behind in the Blue Jackets' 4-3 shootout win Tuesday in Pittsburgh, but it's unknown how much time he'll miss.

Don Waddell, the team's president of hockey operations/general manager, provided a medical update on Monahan to NHL insider Jeff Marek during a Wednesday podcast appearance, saying he's hopeful the team's top center won't be out long-term.

"We're waiting," Waddell said. "He's getting a bone scan today. We don't have that back yet, but I think either way, his wrist is pretty swollen, and we'll miss him for some time. Hopefully not a long time."

Waddell was unavailable to speak with The Dispatch on Wednesday night.

Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason spoke with reporters Wednesday after an optional practice and didn't provide any new details on Monahan, who left the game Tuesday with an upper-body injury after one shift in the third period. Monahan was driven headfirst into the boards in the second period by Penguins defenseman Kris Letang, whose rough cross-check didn't draw a penalty.

It looked like Monahan's face hit the dasher board, which could've caused an injury, but he was spotted wearing a brace on his right wrist after the game. Evason said Monahan was questionable to return during the second intermission, when he and the Jackets' staff discussed replacement options at center that included moving Dmitri Voronkov or Kent Johnson to the middle.

Monahan started the third, but exited after losing a draw against Penguins captain Sidney Crosby and watching it turn into a rush that Rickard Rakell finished with a goal to give Pittsburgh a 2-1 lead. Adam Fantilli stepped into Monahan's role centering Kirill Marchenko and Voronkov on the top line and at the "bumper" spot with the top power-play unit.

Cole Sillinger and Sean Kuraly rounded out Evason's center rotation the rest of the game.

On Wednesday night, the Blue Jackets recalled rookie center Luca Del Bel Belluz, 21, from AHL Cleveland to add depth at center ice. Del Bel Belluz, who scored his first NHL goal on his first career shot in the Jackets' final game last season, returns to Columbus on the same day he was named to the AHL North's All-Star roster along with Cleveland Monsters teammates Trey Fix-Wolansky and defenseman Denton Mateychuk — who's also on the Blue Jackets' NHL roster.

Del Bel Belluz is leading the AHL in scoring while helping the Monsters compete for a division title and playoff spot.

As for Fantilli, the second-year center and third overall pick in the 2023 NHL draft sparked the Blue Jackets' late comeback from down 3-1 in Pittsburgh by assisting on Voronkov's second goal of the game and forcing overtime with his own power-play tally that tied it 3-3. Evason said Fantilli will retain

Monahan's roles if the veteran pivot doesn't play against the Seattle Kraken on Thursday night at Nationwide Arena.

"He's done all the right things," Evason said. "We've talked about 'earning' (roles). He's earned the right. Obviously, it's situational that 'Monny' left the game, but he earned the right to (play) there."

Fantilli said he's learned a lot about succeeding as an NHL center this season just from watching Monahan, who's dependable defensively while acting as an elite catalyst offensively. In his first season with the Blue Jackets, he's their third-leading scorer with 41 points on 14 goals and 27 assists.

"Obviously, we're hoping Monny's OK, and we're hoping everything comes back positive there because he's a huge part of our team and everything we've been doing lately," Fantilli said. "I've been able to watch him quite a bit recently, and (Tuesday) night, stepping in between (Voronkov) and (Marchenko), I thought I was able to help those guys out, fill in, and just do my best job there."

The Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets finally end vexing road losing streak to Pittsburgh Penguins

By Brian Hedger – January 8, 2025

The Blue Jackets losing streak in Pittsburgh is history after nearly a decade.

Despite losing top center Sean Monahan to an upper-body injury and trailing 3-1 in the third period, the Jackets figured out a way to finally defeat the Pittsburgh Penguins at PPG Paints Arena in a 4-3 shootout victory. Getting the game's second point also lifted the Blue Jackets (18-17-6) into the Eastern Conference's second wild-card spot via tiebreaker over the Penguins (17-17-8), who also have 42 points.

"It means a lot," center Adam Fantilli said on the FanDuel Sports Network's postgame show. "A lot of people have been talking about (the losing streak in Pittsburgh) and it felt great to get that win. It's huge."

Dmitri Voronkov scored in the first and third periods to lead the Blue Jackets' offense, but Fantilli keyed a late comeback after taking over Monahan's line in the third while the Penguins built a 3-1 on Rickard Rakell's two goals. Fantilli earned a secondary assist for starting a play that led to Voronkov's second goal, which cut the Penguins' lead to 3-2 with 7:55 left in regulation, and the young center's ninth goal of the season tied it 3-3 with 2:36 left to cap a power play.

Fantilli's goal forced OT, which the Penguins largely controlled. Blue Jackets goalie Elvis Merzlikins (20 saves) made dazzling stops on both Pittsburgh shots in overtime to force the shootout, including one against Penguins captain Sidney Crosby from close range.

In the shootout, Kent Johnson scored in the first round and Kirill Marchenko (two assists) won it with a goal in the third against Penguins goalie Tristan Jarry (26 saves).

"A lot of guys played, hopefully, happy minutes that they didn't or wouldn't play (without Monahan's injury)," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason told reporters in Pittsburgh. "To lose 'Monny,' he's a major, major piece of our hockey club, but I love the way the guys responded."

Prior to the game, the Penguins were 15-0-0 at home against Columbus since Nov. 13, 2015, when they'd last lost to the Blue Jackets, 2-1, on goals by Scott Hartnell and Brandon Saad plus Sergei Bobrovsky's 28 saves. Hartnell is now several years into retirement, Saad plays for the St. Louis Blues and Bobrovsky backstopped the Florida Panthers to the 2024 Stanley Cup.

"I don't know who talked about it this morning or someone said something about it in the coaches' room, maybe (Jared Boll), who'd been here for a while (as a player)," Evason said. "This is a different team than in the past 10 years, whatever it's been. We're a different hockey club. We're playing the way the Columbus Blue Jackets play today in order to win. So, what's happened in the past, it means nothing. ... This group, if we play hard like that every night, we'll give ourselves a chance to win regardless if we haven't won somewhere."

Monahan's health is the biggest concern for the Blue Jackets leaving Pittsburgh this time. Evason didn't have an update after the game, saying the Blue Jackets' medical staff should get a better idea Tuesday in Columbus.

The veteran center skated just one shift in the third period after getting rammed face first into the boards in the second period by an unpenalized cross-check from Pittsburgh's Kris Letang. Monahan is the Blue Jackets' third-leading scorer and a vital member of a vastly-improved power-play, so missing him for any length of time would cause a giant void.

He started the third period, but quickly left after Rakell's first goal made it 2-1 Penguins just 24 seconds into the period. That's when the Jackets turned to a three-center rotation that included Fantilli shifting with Voronkov and Kirill Marchenko (two assists) on Monahan's line.

"We're hoping Monny's OK," Fantilli said. "He's a huge part of our team and a huge part of what we've been doing lately, but I thought I clicked well with those guys. Things went well, and we were able to get the win, so it was huge."

[The Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets end Pittsburgh woes on push from Fantilli, Voronkov: 5 takeaways](#)

By Brian Hedger – January 8, 2025

It took a shootout after a nerve-wracking overtime that followed an improbable comeback from the Blue Jackets to finally exorcise their demons Tuesday in Pittsburgh.

It also took Evgeni Malkin not playing for the Pittsburgh Penguins plus another “here we go again,” moment when Rickard Rakell put the Blue Jackets in a 3-1 hole with two goals in the third period. Despite losing top center Sean Monahan to injury, the Blue Jackets forced overtime with a two-goal comeback to win 4-3 in a shootout that finally nixed a 15-game winless streak in Pittsburgh that began in 2015.

The Blue Jackets, who moved into the Eastern Conference’s second wild card spot with 42 points, ended their losing ways in the “Steel City” after nine years, one month and 26 days. Their skid there lasted 3,344 days and spanned four Blue Jackets coaches, not including Mike Babcock, who was forced to resign in 2023 before coaching a game in Columbus.

“It was just an important game in the standings, regardless, but I think there were a couple jokes about it when we flew into Pittsburgh,” forward Kent Johnson said on the FanDuel Sports Network postgame broadcast. “Guys were pretty confident, like, ‘This is the year we can do it,’ kind of thing. Obviously, we’ve been a better team (this season), so it definitely felt good to do it.”

Here are five takeaways:

Columbus Blue Jackets’ youth sets them free against Pittsburgh Penguins

How far back did the Blue Jackets’ losing streak in Pittsburgh stretch?

At the time of their previous win on Nov. 13, 2015, Barack Obama was president, gasoline in Columbus sold for \$2.02 per gallon, Adele topped music charts with “Hello,” and “The Hunger Games: Mockingjay — Part 2” was in theaters. John Tortorella had just started his tenure as the Blue Jackets’ most successful coach. Scott Hartnell and Brandon Saad scored the two goals that beat the Penguins that night, while Sergei Bobrovsky earned the goaltending win.

As for those who actually played Tuesday?

Adam Fantilli and rookie Denton Mateychuk were only 11 years old, Cole Sillinger was 12, Johnson was a 13-year old Vancouver Canucks fan who idolized Calgary Flames star Johnny Gaudreau — his future teammate — and Sidney Crosby had 862 points on 304 goals and 558 assists in 643 games as a 28-year old NHL superstar.

The Blue Jackets downplayed their accomplishment Tuesday, but it wasn’t insignificant. Many other Blue Jackets had said the same stuff about the past not mattering in the present, and then watched Crosby and the Penguins lop another ‘L’ in Pittsburgh onto their plate.

Monahan injury could deal Columbus Blue Jackets a huge challenge

Monahan is the Blue Jackets’ third-leading scorer, but his contributions to their resurgence go far beyond 14 goals, 27 assists and 41 points. He’s their top center, a catalyst for the top power-play unit in

the “bumper” role and a strong veteran leader who has quietly pushed his younger teammates to become better all-around players.

Losing him for any length of time would be extremely difficult, which is why his early exit in the third period Tuesday felt ominous. Monahan was likely injured when driven face first into the end boards with an unpenalized cross-check by Kris Letang in the second period. He returned for the first shift of the third but left after Rakell scored 24 seconds into the period.

Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason didn’t provide an update after the game and hoped to learn more Wednesday at a scheduled practice in Columbus.

Fantilli shines as Monahan’s replacement on Columbus Blue Jackets’ top line

Monahan’s departure created an immediate need at center for the top line in the third period, and Fantilli filled in admirably. In fact, he keyed the Blue Jackets’ late comeback push while moving up to skate with Dmitri Voronkov and Kirill Marchenko.

A backhand feed to Marchenko in the low slot led to an assist on Voronkov’s second goal of the night, cutting the Penguins’ lead to 3-2 with 7:55 left in the third, and Fantilli then tied it 3-3 with 2:36 left to cap a power play. Playing in Monahan’s “bumper” spot between the circles, the second-year center and third pick of the 2023 NHL draft redirected Johnson’s shot/pass from the right wing past Penguins goalie Tristan Jarry for his ninth goal of the season and second in as many games.

“He’s obviously a special player, so that was great,” Johnson said. “Just to hear Fants talking before (that power play), he was like, ‘I’ve been watching Monny a lot, so I know what to do here.’ So, he knew exactly where to be, and he’s got a world-class shot. That’s just really elite by him.”

Merzlikins’ save on Pittsburgh Penguins captain Sidney Crosby highlights overtime for Columbus Blue Jackets

Elvis Merzlikins allowed seven goals in a 7-2 loss to the Penguins during his NHL debut Oct. 5, 2019 at PPG Paints Arena, which left him in tears afterward. Merzlikins continued to struggle against the Penguins during his career, including an 0-4-0 record in five road appearances before Tuesday.

He finally earned a victory in Pittsburgh by making 20 saves, including an impressive stop 1:27 into overtime against Crosby’s backhand off an open look just outside the crease. Merzlikins deftly gloved the puck to keep OT going, made another key stop against Drew O’Connor with 33 seconds left to force the shootout and then made a big save against Bryan Rust in the first round.

Voronkov's goals help Columbus Blue Jackets end woes in Pittsburgh

Dmitri Voronkov is officially a net-front menace. Standing 6 feet 5, 240 pounds, the skilled Russian power forward is using size, strength and impressive hand/eye coordination to score a lot of goals for the Blue Jackets.

He netted two more against the Penguins for his second straight two-goal game and fourth in the past seven games, and Voronkov now has 17 goals, 11 assists and 28 points in 32 games. He’s added 9-2-11 in the past seven games and now is tracking to score 39 goals in his “sophomore” campaign.

The Athletic / Blue Jackets lean on call-ups Luca Del Bel Belluz and Owen Sillinger in rout of Kraken

By Aaron Portzline – January 10, 2025

Owen Sillinger got the call he'd always dreamed about early Thursday morning. It was AHL Cleveland's general manager, Chris Clark, letting the 27-year-old brother of Columbus Blue Jackets center Cole Sillinger that he'd been recalled to the NHL for the first time.

It wasn't until later in the day — around noon or 1 p.m., Owen Sillinger said — that he knew for sure he'd be in the Blue Jackets' lineup that night against the Seattle Kraken in Nationwide Arena.

There was barely any time to think, he said, and barely any time to get nervous. When did the moment finally hit home?

"When I walked in the dressing room and saw everybody's smiling face and how welcoming they were," Sillinger said. "I said, 'We're going to have a good one tonight.'"

Indeed.

The Blue Jackets, playing without two of their top-three centers, made quick work of the Kraken. Six different players scored goals and four players had multi-point games as Columbus rode a four-goal second period to a 6-2 rout of Seattle before 15,497 in Nationwide.

That's three straight wins and six wins in their last eight for the Blue Jackets (19-17-6), who climbed two games over .500 for the first time since Dec. 1. They also held on to the eighth and final playoff spot — the second wild card — in the traffic jam that is the Eastern Conference.

Beyond the Blue Jackets winning, it was a magical, memorable night at the rink for at least three players and their families.

Sillinger, who signed his first NHL contract last July 1, became the eighth-oldest player to make his NHL debut with the Blue Jackets. Ironically, he took Cole Sillinger's spot, because the younger Sillinger was bedridden with a flu-like illness.

Then there was Luca Del Bel Belluz, who was recalled on Wednesday when it was learned that No. 1 center Sean Monahan is out indefinitely with a wrist injury. Del Bel Belluz, playing in his second NHL game, had a goal, an assist and a plus-2 rating, while winning 7 of 13 faceoffs.

Del Bel Belluz became the first player in franchise history to score a goal in his first two games. He scored in his NHL debut — on his first NHL shot — last spring when he was recalled to play the final game of the season.

The Blue Jackets moved second-year-pro Adam Fantilli up to take Monahan's spot between wingers Dmitri Voronkov and Kirill Marchenko, while Del Bel Belluz assumed a lofty role on the No. 2 line between James van Riemsdyk and Kent Johnson.

Del Bel Belluz worked his way to the net and scored from just outside the crease, redirecting a centering pass from van Riemsdyk to give the Jackets a 2-1 lead.

"Those guys are awesome guys," Del Bel Belluz said of his linemates. "All of the guys made it easy for me. They were very welcoming, just awesome people."

Sillinger, who spent four years at Bemidji State University in Minnesota and has spent four years in the minors, played on the fourth line between wingers Kevin Labanc and Mikael Pyyhtiä.

“Any time you can join a team, win a game and have a positive impact, that’s great,” Sillinger said. “And that’s what I thought I did tonight.”

Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said he and the franchise’s other decision makers, including GM Don Waddell, have a philosophy about call-ups from Cleveland. Rather than shelter them deep in the lineup, they try to play them in NHL roles that are similar to what they play in the AHL.

“When we call a guy up, it’s not to play three minutes, or just because he’s coming up from the minors he has to play on the so-called fourth line,” Evason said. “The mindset is: ‘This is who they are. This is where we want to play them.’ We put them in those spots to have success.”

Another memorable moment: At 12:27 of the second period, Blue Jackets defenseman Denton Mateychuk — playing his eighth NHL game since being recalled from Cleveland — scored the first goal of his career. It came during a flurry of second-period goals that blew the game wide open.

Mateychuk found space in the lower left circle and buried a shot off a pass from van Riemsdyk at 12:27 to give the Jackets a 4-1 lead. Just after Mateychuk scored, the Blue Jackets showed his father, Jason, celebrating in the stands, drawing a huge cheer from the crowd.

“I wouldn’t be here without him,” said Denton Mateychuk, who hails from Dominion City, Manitoba, population 319. “He’s done so much for me over the years. It was awesome to have him in attendance.”

The Blue Jackets pulled away by scoring three goals in less than five minutes in the second period. It was 5-1 after two periods, making for a sloppy third period for both clubs. Marchenko capped the scoring with 28.4 seconds remaining, scoring an empty-net goal from the neutral zone.

It marked the 10th time this season — in 42 games — that the Blue Jackets have scored six or more goals in a game, tops in the NHL. The franchise record is 11, set during the 2018-19 season.

Zach Werenski (1-1-2) was among the players with multi-point games, giving him a 16-game home-point streak. He’s only the seventh defenseman in NHL history to have a home streak of that length.

The Athletic / Blue Jackets report card: Offensive exploits mask defensive woes, lead to good grades

By Aaron Portzline – January 9, 2025

By now, the sample size isn't so small. Now that the Columbus Blue Jackets' season has reached the midpoint, it's probably safe to simply accept that they are one of the NHL's most offensively dangerous clubs.

How much have they scored? The Blue Jackets average 3.37 goals per game, sixth-most in the league this season. It's the most goals (141) they've ever scored in the first 41 games of a season.

They have two players on pace for 90 points: Zach Werenski and Kirill Marchenko. They have three players on pace to challenge 30 goals: Marchenko, Dmitri Voronkov and Sean Monahan.

So far, the 2024-25 Blue Jackets have been fun to watch, and they've scored enough to overcome their goaltending and defensive lapses. For most players on the roster, this report card will be one you can't wait to show your parents. (Only players with 10 or more games were graded.)

The Blue Jackets arrived at midseason on a high note, too, with a 4-3 shootout win in Pittsburgh, where they hadn't won since 2015. They open the second half Thursday by hosting the Seattle Kraken in Nationwide Arena.

Unlike the past two seasons, the focus in Columbus isn't on tanking games to get better draft picks. No, they're in the playoff chase, with a big second half to come. But let's pause a moment to evaluate what we've seen to this point.

To the grades!

A-plus

Zach Werenski, D: 41 games, 12-34-46, plus-6

It's hard to overstate how terrific Werenski has been this season, both as an elite-level defenseman but also as a leader in the dressing room. He leads the NHL in ice time and is among the top blueliners in every major category. In the first quarter, we asked the question: Norris Trophy candidate? This time we'll phrase it another way: Norris Trophy candidate.

Kirill Marchenko, RW: 41 games, 17-28-45, plus-22

When GM Don Waddell signed Marchenko to a new contract last summer, he asked him to be harder on pucks and more aware in the defensive zone. He's delivered all of that and more. The numbers speak for themselves (plus-22?!?!), but Marchenko's consistency has been astounding. Only twice this season has he gone consecutive games without a point, but never three in a row.

Sean Monahan, C: 41 games, 14-27-41, plus-17

Monahan has centered one of the best lines in the NHL, no matter who ends up on his left side. (Marchenko has been a fixture to his right). He's also anchored a power-play unit that, through Tuesday's games, was ranked 10th in the NHL. Unfortunately, the club announced he will miss "some time" with a wrist injury he suffered Tuesday in Pittsburgh.

Dmitri Voronkov, LW: 32 games, 17-11-28, plus-11

It's fair to say that Voronkov hasn't been the ram-rod, physical forward the Blue Jackets were expecting — not yet, anyway — but it's hard to quibble with any part of his game given his production. He's on pace for 34 goals this season despite missing the first three weeks of the season. He's scored nine goals in his last seven games, pushing his goals-per-game (0.53) to 12th-best in the NHL.

A

Kent Johnson, LW/RW: 27 games, 10-13-23, minus-8

Johnson had a hot start to the season, scoring more than a point a game and dazzling with his puckhandling and slippery skating. He's cooled a bit now that NHL opponents have identified him as one of the Blue Jackets' top weapons, and he's being challenged to adjust. Still, you see his exceptional talent on the power play and in shootouts.

Mathieu Olivier, RW: 41 games, 10-6-16, minus-6

Olivier may be the NHL's toughest fighter. He throws righty almost exclusively, but that's a sledgehammer fist that doesn't give his dance partner time to respond. What's elevated his grade — and allowed Dean Evason to elevate his role — is his goal scoring and responsible play away from the puck. Whoever imagined Olivier playing higher than a fourth line?

B-plus

Adam Fantilli, C: 41 games, 9-10-19, minus-11

If you only look at his offensive output, Fantilli's sophomore season has been underwhelming. If you consider the role he's playing — second-line center at 20 years old — it's damned impressive. Fantilli is squaring off against some of the NHL's top players, drawing power-play time and taking important faceoffs. And with Monahan out, he'll elevate to the top line.

Dante Fabbro, D: 31 games, 3-6-9, plus-9

It's been quite the adjustment for Fabbro, who went from barely playing in Nashville to a top-pairing role next to Werenski after the Jackets claimed him on waivers. He's more than kept up, though. From his time next to the Predators' Roman Josi, Fabbro knows how to play with top-flight offensive defensemen. He's been a very good complement to Werenski.

Ivan Provorov, D: 41 games, 3-15-18, plus-1

A month ago, the idea of trading Provorov at the trade deadline seemed obvious. Now, with the Blue Jackets hanging in the race, it'd be a tough pill to swallow given that Provorov is one of the most reliable players on the Columbus back end. He's switched from left to right and back again to facilitate others without complaint.

B

Cole Sillinger, C: 40 games, 6-16-22, minus-14

After bouncing between center and wing at the start of the season, Sillinger has settled into a third-line role. He's also started to add a little spice to his game, becoming the object of the opponent's scorn on many nights as the season moves along. Like Fantilli, he's going to get a bigger role with Monahan out of the lineup. It'll be a challenge.

B-minus

James van Riemsdyk, LW: 34 games, 6-6-12, minus-10

With Yegor Chinakhov and Justin Danforth injured, van Riemsdyk has become a lineup regular after a November stretch when he was a frequent healthy scratch. The Jackets count on van Riemsdyk to be a puck protector down low and a net-front presence, especially on the power play. He's delivered.

Jack Johnson, D: 27 games, 0-2-2, minus-7

Truth be told, Johnson has probably played more games than anybody expected. The long-term injury to Erik Gudbranson is part of that, certainly, but Johnson has been a steady hand on the end of the ice that's been the biggest challenge. He has mostly eliminated the turnovers and risky passes that were an unfortunate element of his game early in his career.

Zach Aston-Reese, LW: 40 games, 4-7-11, minus-6

Aston-Reese has been a solid addition to the bottom six, though it's probably fair to say his game hasn't been as noticeable in recent weeks as it was earlier in the season. He's been a steady wing on the Blue Jackets fourth line and will likely take on added importance down the stretch.

Jake Christiansen, D: 41 games, 1-6-7, plus-1

The Blue Jackets made Christiansen the surprise roster pick out of training camp. He's played almost exclusively on the third pair, settling in lately next to Johnson. There haven't been many highlights. But he hasn't played to the detriment of the team, either.

Mikael Pyyhtiä, LW: 31 games, 4-2-6, minus-10

Pyyhtiä spent almost a month in the minors after the Blue Jackets sent him down to gain offensive confidence in the hope that he'd start playing more aggressively with the puck. Message delivered. Pyyhtiä may never be an impact NHL player, but he scored a hard-to-the-net goal versus St. Louis that was impressive.

C

Sean Kuraly, C: 41 games, 3-6-9, minus-1

No surprise that the Blue Jackets' penalty kill improved when Kuraly rejoined the unit after a mysterious and lengthy absence early in the season. His role has been shrinking in Columbus, from 15:04 per game two seasons ago to only 11:00 this season. The only season he's drawn less ice time was his rookie season (2016-17) with Boston.

Elvis Merzlikins, G: 27 games, 14-10-3, .887, 3.17

With Tuesday's 4-3 shootout win in Pittsburgh, Merzlikins has surpassed his win total for last season. That's the good news. The not-so-good news is that Merzlikins' save percentage (.887) is one of the worst in the league and continues to lag way below the league average (.900). That's not all his doing, of course. He could use some help out front.

Kevin Labanc, LW/RW: 28 games, 2-10-12, plus-2

Labanc has played all over the lineup without truly finding a home yet this season. For a recent two-week stretch, the Blue Jackets opted to dress 11 forwards and make Labanc a healthy scratch, which had to sting. He returned to the lineup Tuesday in Pittsburgh.

Jordan Harris, D: 24 games, 1-2-3, minus-5

We've heard repeatedly — not just from scouts, but from Harris — that Harris has an offensive skill set that has yet to emerge at the NHL level. We're beginning to wonder. Evason's system encourages defensemen to engage offensively, but Harris seems reluctant to take him up on the offer.

D

Damon Severson, D: 38 games, 6-11-17, minus-1

It's not as if Severson hasn't played well, at times, this season. He has. But the careless turnovers that pockmarked his game early in his career have not been eliminated, as seen by his recent play. He's been a healthy scratch in two straight and three overall, which is quite a statement regarding a player with six years remaining on his contract.

Daniil Tarasov, G: 10 games, 3-6-1, .857, 4.23

No, Tarasov has not played well. Look at the numbers. It's irrefutable. But there's at least an argument to be made that he's not being handled fairly. We get that backup goaltenders (by definition) don't get a heavy workload, but to sit a guy for three weeks and expect him to step into the lineup and be sharp is unrealistic. It ultimately won't help Merzlikins, either.

Incomplete

Justin Danforth, C/RW: 25 games, 3-5-8, minus-7

The Blue Jackets have been without Danforth, their jack-of-all-trades forward, since the middle of December. Thursday versus Seattle will be the 14th consecutive game he's missed and the 17th game overall. He was given a 'B' in our first-quarter grades but hasn't been around enough to evaluate during this period.

Yegor Chinakhov, LW: 21 games, 7-7-14, plus-2

Chinakhov's injury history is becoming a concern. This marks the third straight season he's missed significant time with an injury, which makes it hard for him to get any traction toward what could be a strong career. This lineup misses him. Tonight will be his 21st straight game on the shelf.

The Athletic / Blue Jackets end a decade's worth of misery in Pittsburgh, but lose Monahan to injury

By Aaron Portzline – January 8, 2025

With eight minutes left in the third period in Pittsburgh, the Columbus Blue Jackets were down by two goals, playing without their No. 1 center, Sean Monahan, and staring at a steep climb in a building that's never been welcoming to them.

The Blue Jackets reached the midpoint of this improbable season — they're hovering around .500 and sniffing a playoff spot — with perhaps their most improbable win of the season.

Adam Fantilli, who moved up in the lineup due to Monahan's absence, scored a power-play goal with 2:36 remaining to force overtime, and Kent Johnson and Kirill Marchenko scored shootout goals in the Blue Jackets' 4-3 win before 16,060 in PPG Paints Arena.

Let's say that again: A win in PPG Paints Arena.

The last time the Blue Jackets won in Pittsburgh was Nov. 13, 2015, when Fantilli was an 11-year-old playing PeeWee-level hockey for the Toronto Junior Canadians in the Toronto suburbs. They were 0-10-5 in the regular season during that streak.

"There were jokes about it when we flew into Pittsburgh (on Monday)," Johnson said. "Guys were confident that this year was the year we could do it. We've been a better team, so it definitely feels good to do it."

Dmitri Voronkov scored twice and Kirill Marchenko added two assists, while goaltender Elvis Merzlikins stopped 20 of 23 shots in regulation, then stopped Bryan Rust and Sidney Crosby in the shootout. Merzlikins also had a stellar glove save on an all-alone Crosby during three-on-three overtime.

Voronkov, who now has 17 goals, has scored nine goals in his last seven games.

The win snapped a four-game (0-3-1) losing streak on the road, which has been one of the Blue Jackets' struggles this season. With the win, they improved to 5-12-3 away from Nationwide Arena.

"We were made away today that it had been a while — been a minute — since we'd won here," Blue Jackets defenseman Jack Johnson said. "It's always nice to get the monkey off your back, but especially winning on the road.

"For whatever reason, road wins have been hard for us to come by this year."

Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason did not have an update on Monahan after the game. Monahan was injured in the second period, Evason said, and came out to play the first shift of the third period before leaving with an upper-body injury, the club said.

Monahan had a brace on his right wrist as he presented the Blue Jackets' "donkey cap" to Fantilli after the game in the visitors' dressing room.

Obviously, losing Monahan for any period of time would be a huge hit for the Blue Jackets. He's been a stabilizing force between wingers Voronkov and Marchenko this season and a big part of the power play, too, playing the role of bumper on a unit that's been on a tear lately.

It was from that bumper position that Fantilli scored the Jackets' second power-play goal of the evening. Kent Johnson found Fantilli in the slot for a punch shot that beat Penguins goaltender Tristan Jarry, completing the two-goal comeback.

"To lose Monny ... he's a major, major piece of our hockey club," Evason said. "But I loved the way the guys responded and played the right way. They didn't panic. Just kept plugging away and doing the right things. We found a way to win.

"Fants has played fantastic in all areas. I know there's probably been some concern or talk of his offensive production, but that's not what we're worried about. We want him to play the right way every night, and he's committed to doing that."

The shootout goals by Johnson and Marchenko were mirror images. They must have had a book on Jarry. Johnson, a left shot, skated wide through the right circle and scored through his five-hole. Marchenko, a right shot, drifted through the left circle before scoring through Jarry's pads.

The Blue Jackets hurried off the bench to celebrate with Merzlikins on the other end of the ice. It's been a while since the Blue Jackets have celebrated in Pittsburgh.

Only one player on the ice on Tuesday for the Blue Jackets was on the ice in 2015 when they beat the Penguins 2-1. That was Jack Johnson, who left the Blue Jackets in 2017 to chase (and win) the Stanley Cup, and returned this season as a free agent.

The only other player on the roster back then was Boone Jenner, but Jenner has been out since the start of the season with a shoulder injury.

It's probably best that most of the players in the Blue Jackets' dressing room are so young as to be oblivious to the club's history, not just in Pittsburgh but anywhere. Evason isn't young, of course, but he just came aboard last summer. The losing streak was news to him.

And, he noted, rather meaningless.

"I don't know who talked about it this morning, or somebody said something in the coaches room," Evason said. "Maybe it was Boller, who has been (in Columbus) a while.

"This is a different team than in the past 10 years, or whatever it's been. We're a different hockey club. We're playing the way the Columbus Blue Jackets play today in order to win. What's happened in the past means nothing. This group, if we play hard like that every night, we give ourselves a chance to win."

An improbable night in the midst of an improbable season. With the win, the Blue Jackets jumped Ottawa and Pittsburgh to claim the eighth and final playoff spot in the Eastern Conference.

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Race Past Kraken Behind Young Guns

By Mark Scheig – January 9, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets were going to need contributions from all over the ice to replace the injured Sean Monahan and ill Cole Sillinger. Thanks to the performance of their young guns, they found another win at home.

Luca Del Bel Belluz recorded a goal and an assist. Denton Mateychuk added his first NHL goal and an assist to help power the Blue Jackets to a convincing 6-2 win over the Seattle Kraken.

It was a total team effort that helped the Blue Jackets to two points on Thursday night.

The first period saw the Kraken record the first 10 shot attempts of the game. Mikael Pyyhtia shot one at Philipp Grubauer 7:25 into the game for the Blue Jackets' first shot on goal. That did spark the Blue Jackets the rest of the way although the teams traded goals midway through the first.

Sean Kuraly opened the scoring about 12 minutes in on a deflection of an Ivan Provorov shot. It only took Eeli Tolvanen 10 seconds to tie the game on a shot down the left wing that beat Elvis Merzlikins.

The final 40 minutes belonged to the Blue Jackets. Del Bel Belluz made it 2-1 converting in front off of a James van Riemsdyk pass. That marked Del Bel Belluz's second NHL goal in his second NHL game. His

Luca Del Bel Belluz was the game's first star on Thursday night. (Photo by Ben Jackson/NHLI via Getty Images)

Zach Werenski extended the lead to 3-1 off a great pass from Adam Fantilli. The goal was Werenski's 13th of the season tying him with Cal Makar for most goals by a defenseman this season. Werenski trails Makar by just one point in the defensemen scoring race as of the end of the Blue Jackets' win.

Then Mateychuk scored his first NHL goal to extend it to 4-1. van Riemsdyk did the work to gain possession. His pass got to Mateychuk who had a wide open side of the net. The Kraken took timeout after that.

It didn't matter. Kent Johnson made it 5-1 which forced Grubauer out of the game. He 14 saves on 19 shots before Joey Daccord came in.

Tolvanen scored his second of the night to cut it to 5-2. That's as close as the Kraken would get as Kirill Marchenko hit the bullseye to get to the final score of 6-2.

On top of Del Bel Belluz and Mateychuk, Werenski and van Riemsdyk recorded two points each. 13 skaters recorded at least a point. Merzlikins stopped 29/31 for the win. Daccord only had to make four saves on the night as the Blue Jackets had just three shots in the third.

The Blue Jackets return to action Saturday night with a rematch against the St. Louis Blues this time at Enterprise Center. The Kraken head to Buffalo for a 4 P.M. eastern start to take on the Sabres on Saturday.

[NHL.com / Gaudreau to have No. 8 jersey retired by Dubuque of USHL](#)

By Adam Kimelman – January 9, 2025

Johnny Gaudreau will have his No. 8 jersey retired by Dubuque of the United States Hockey League on Saturday.

Gaudreau played for Dubuque as a 17-year-old in 2010-11. He was voted USHL Rookie of the Year after finishing second in the league with 36 goals and fourth with 72 points in 60 regular-season games, and then had 11 points (five goals, six assists) in 11 playoff games to help Dubuque win the Clark Cup as league champions.

At the 2011 NHL Draft, the Flames selected Gaudreau in the fourth round (No. 104).

Johnny Gaudreau, 31, and his brother Matthew, 29, died Aug. 29 when they were struck by an alleged drunk driver who has been charged with two counts of death by auto, while riding bicycles near their home in Salem County, New Jersey.

Gaudreau's jersey will be the first retired by Dubuque.

"Obviously we thought it would be the best thing to do, a special tribute to Johnny for everything that he did for hockey and certainly the impact he made in Dubuque and on the team," said Peter Luukko, a long-time NHL executive and part-owner of Dubuque.

Gaudreau stayed involved with Dubuque during his NHL career, taking an ownership stake in 2018.

"I had a pretty special experience in Dubuque," Gaudreau told NHL.com at the time. "My agent said, 'Do you want to be part of the ownership group?' And I said yes right away.

"When I was there it was a special experience playing out there. I want to help those kids have a special experience in the USHL too."

Joining Gaudreau in the ownership group were Luukko, Tampa Bay Lightning forward and Dubuque teammate Zemgus Girgensons and Seattle Kraken coach Dan Bylsma.

"Once he became an NHL star, he wanted to do something special and give back to create opportunities for the next generation of hockey players, and he did so by purchasing a stake in the Dubuque Fighting Saints," Luukko said. "Johnny and Matty were special guys who had a love for each other and a love for the game of hockey. As we honor their memory and their significant impact on the game, we will forever remember Johnny's contributions to the Fighting Saints, as no one will ever wear the No. 8 again as a Fighting Saint."

Luukko also had a personal connection to Dubuque and the Gaudreau family. His son, Nick Luukko, grew up playing with and against Johnny Gaudreau from the time they were 10 years old in the Philadelphia area, and they were teammates on that 2019-20 Dubuque team. Nick later went on to coach Matthew Gaudreau with Reading of the ECHL in 2019-20.

"He was baby faced and smaller than everybody else," Nick Luukko said of Johnny. "I think especially early on, people didn't really take him serious because of the way he looked. And then you get on the ice and he'd dangle everybody and score four or five points a game."

Nick said their teammates in Dubuque had a similar reaction when Johnny arrived for training camp in 2010.

"There's this kid there who's undersized, he's wearing a cage, his skates aren't tied all the way tight enough, he's got the floppy laces," Nick said. "I knew he was a good player, but other guys were like, 'Who is this guy?' And then he goes on the ice, dangles everyone and puts up a bunch of points, and then within the first month of the season, it's, 'Oh this kid can play.'"

Luukko said one memory that stands out came during the Clark Cup celebration on the ice.

"When we won the Clark Cup, it's a big trophy, and he went to raise it over his head, and he almost flew backwards and dropped the thing," Nick said. "The guys had had to hold him up."

Nick, now an assistant coach with Wilkes-Barre/Scranton of the American Hockey League, said Matthew Gaudreau was similar to his brother.

"I didn't really know Matty that well before I was able to work with him and coach him in Reading, but very similar to Johnny," he said. "Just lit up the room. Guys loved being around him. Bit of a prankster as well. Kind of had that quiet personality, but guys flocked to him, and guys really respected him, and he was a hell of a player and carried us that year, put up a bunch of points in Reading [40 points in 38 games], and was a big part of our success."

The USHL also will introduce the Gaudreau Award, which will have each USHL team nominate a player that embodies the qualities of Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau -- excellence in hockey, spirit of the game, and care and responsibility -- as decided by teammates, coaches and general managers.

"When we were assembling the team that first year, we looked for players with a high hockey IQ and compete-level who came from good families," said St. Louis Blues coach Jim Montgomery, who was a first-season coach with Dubuque in 2010-11. "Johnny was the epitome of those qualities. He was a uniquely gifted player who came from an equally special family. It's only fitting that the Fighting Saints retire his number as no other player could be his equal."

Cleveland 19 News / Trio of Monsters named to North Division Roster for AHL All-Star Classic

By Leah Doherty – January 8, 2025

Forwards Luca Del Bel Belluz and Trey Fix-Wolansky, and defenseman Denton Mateychuk will represent the Cleveland Monsters on the All-Star stage come February.

The trio was named to the North Division Roster for the 2025 AHL All-Star Classic at Acrisure Arena in Palm Desert, CA from February 2-3.

Cleveland's three player selections tie the record for most players slated to compete at this season's All-Star Classic from any one AHL club.

This will be Del Bel Belluz and Mateychuk's first AHL All-Star Classics while Fix-Wolansky will appear for the second consecutive season and the second time in his career.

In 34 appearances for the Monsters this season, Del Bel Belluz posted 17-20-37 with six penalty minutes and a +9 rating and currently leads Cleveland in goals, points, plus/minus rating, and power-play goals (5). Del Bel Belluz also leads the AHL in points and currently ranks in the league's top five in goals (T4th) so far this year.

In 29 appearances for the Monsters this season, Fix-Wolansky supplied 14-18-32 with 23 penalty minutes and a +5 rating and currently leads Cleveland in game-winning goals (4) this year.

In 27 appearances for the Monsters this season, Mateychuk registered 9-16-25 with ten penalty minutes and a +5 rating and added 0-1-1 in six NHL games for Columbus. Mateychuk currently leads all Cleveland defensemen in goals, assists, points, power-play goals (4), power-play assists (7), and power-play points (11).

The Athletic / NHL Playoff Report: Blue Jackets and Senators on the rise, New York teams falling off

By Dom Luszczyszyn – January 9, 2025

Welcome back to another edition of the NHL Playoff Report, a monthly look at the league through the eyes of each team's chances of making the playoffs: Who's up, who's down and why.

After each night's slate of games, our playoff projections page is updated taking into account the results from those games and fresh new data to feed into the model. Every night, everything changes and those changes add up quickly, especially if a team goes on a heater (or cooler). Those changes can also be difficult to view at a glance and it's good practice to take stock regularly of what's been happening.

On the rise

Columbus Blue Jackets

There is no better story in hockey this year than the Columbus Blue Jackets: A team that has rallied together amid tragedy and played incredibly inspiring hockey.

The Blue Jackets stayed steady at a point-per-game pace over December, an impressive enough feat given a difficult, road-heavy schedule. The model has become increasingly bullish on the Blue Jackets with each month and now projects their Net Rating at minus-18. They started at minus-75, better than only the San Jose Sharks. Today, they're challenging for a playoff spot, albeit in a very soft wild-card race.

That growth stems from an emerging core of genuine difference-makers who have turned the Blue Jackets into a good offensive team. Columbus is top 10 in goals this season thanks to a renaissance season from Sean Monahan and breakthroughs from his main linemates Dmitri Voronkov and Kirill Marchenko — the latter of which is pacing for 90 points. Most of all, it's thanks to Zach Werenski, who is proving he's not just an elite No. 1 defenseman but a game-changing one who is comfortably among the 10 best in the league.

It may not be a championship core yet, but that group of four shines bright enough to feel playoff-worthy. There is potential for the Blue Jackets to fall back a bit — their five-on-five numbers were rough in December — but that they've held on this long as a .500 team is meaningful. That most of the value has come from the top of the lineup has not gone unnoticed. Dean Evason has done a wonderful job with this group and they have done a magnificent job of playing their absolute best in a season in which that job could not have been harder.

I've never been happier to be wrong about a team and I hope that 19 percent keeps climbing over the next few months.

Ottawa Senators

This time last month, the Senators' playoff odds dropped from 52 percent to 18 percent thanks to a 4-7-2 record that was mostly the product of shoddy goaltending.

Immediately after that, Ottawa went on a tear, winning eight of nine as Linus Ullmark won all eight games he started. Finally, he looked like the goalie the team expected and that led to a huge surge in Ottawa's playoff odds. Combine that with the rest of the East sagging and the Senators looked like they

had the inside track on one of the wild-card spots. No team saw a bigger rise in playoff chances than Ottawa.

The Senators still have the best shot among the East's bottom 10, though their odds have dropped over the last week. That's thanks to Ullmark's injury and a sagging offense on the back half of their road trip. At 60 percent, the job isn't done yet for Ottawa.

The Senators are an average team doing average things and that could be enough this year in the East. But all it takes is one or two hot streaks elsewhere to push Ottawa out. The Senators need to lock in and get off the current roller coaster they're on.

St. Louis Blues

While St. Louis' playoff odds haven't materially changed much over the last month, the team itself looks a lot better. There's a reason the Blues wasted no time going after Jim Montgomery once Boston fired him — he's a difference-maker.

We'll have a more in-depth look at what Montgomery has managed in St. Louis next week. For now, it's worth pointing out that over the last month, the Blues' Net Rating has climbed from an abysmal minus-40 to a much more respectable minus-20. That's one of the biggest changes and provides real optimism that they are on the right track.

Since the last Playoff Report, the Blues are only playing at an 82-point pace, but it does feel like better results are on the horizon. Over that same stretch, the team has been legitimately good at five-on-five, earning 53 percent of the xG, a top 10 mark with 57 percent of the goals to show for it.

If the Blues can keep that up long-term and clean up their penalty kill, their odds of making the playoffs are a lot rosier than they're made out to be here. Montgomery has the Blues playing genuinely good hockey and the model is starting to take notice (though perhaps not quickly enough).

Los Angeles Kings

The Kings headlined last month's Playoff Report despite a 7-5-0 record, a product of the model seeing underlying improvement that could lead to a brighter future. December saw that come to fruition when the Kings were a scintillating 9-2-2, upping their playoff chances from 85 percent to just shy of 99. This team looks legit and saw an even larger rise in Net Rating this month, going from plus-17 at the start to plus-34. The Kings will be far from an easy out this April.

The continued defensive might of Vladislav Gavrikov and Mikey Anderson was a big deal, as was a potent new combo on the second line: Quinton Byfield and Warren Foegele. That duo was magic together in December, leading the team in xG and goals and dominating at both ends of the ice. If Byfield is back on track and Foegele can be a legitimate difference-maker, that will be a big plus for Los Angeles' depth advantage.

Vegas Golden Knights

The model was extremely lukewarm on Vegas' chances going into the season. Age, the threat of injury to key players, and a thin winger room all played into that. Now look at them: 28-9-3 and first in the league. The Golden Knights are a playoff lock and a threat to win the Presidents' Trophy.

At five-on-five, the Golden Knights were fourth in xG at 57 percent and led all teams in goals at 63 percent. Defensively is where the model saw the biggest jump and that's mostly thanks to the team's top pair of Alex Pietrangelo and Noah Hanifin. After a rough start, the pair got right back on track

earning over 60 percent of the xG and 70 percent of the goals last month. Couple that with Jack Eichel and Mark Stone dominating and Vegas' stars shined extremely bright.

And yet, the team's increase within the model was tepid. Why? Strength of schedule. Of Vegas' last eight games, six were at home and all eight were against some of the league's weakest teams.

Vegas walloped that group better than expected and rose up the ranks because of it, but those wins do hold less weight in the model relative to strong games against good teams. The real tests for Vegas lie ahead and it's part of the reason Vegas' Stanley Cup chances haven't climbed as much. There's still more to prove.

Falling off

New York Rangers

Once again, we have to talk about the Rangers. This time last month, their losing skid felt like a funk they'd shake off. The Rangers were 13-10-1 and had a full stable of underperforming stars capable of more.

Since then, everything has completely unraveled, leading to a grisly 5-10-1 stretch that's put the Rangers' playoff hopes on life support. No team's playoff chances dropped more than the Rangers' which went from 61 percent to 20 percent. Their season isn't over, but it is looking grim.

Over the last month, the Rangers have been a mess at five-on-five — more than usual — and have had a bafflingly bad power play. Only the New York Islanders were less effective with the man advantage as the Rangers scored just 3.3 goals per 60. At some point that should turn given the personnel available and the chances they've created.

The big issue with the Rangers, more than anything, is the team's defense. What was once a strength, anchored by one of the best goalies in the world, is now a weakness as the team's Defensive Rating has dropped from plus-1.3 to minus-12.5 over the last month. At five-on-five the team gave up 2.81 xGA/60 and 3.13 GA/60, both among the league's worst marks, and the penalty kill was a train wreck. Igor Shesterkin had an .899 save percentage and still saved 6.6 goals above expected in nine games — that's how bad the team in front of him was. That's on a defense corps that has no one stepping up beyond Adam Fox, though it's also on a forward group struggling to help.

Many Rangers players were supposed to be much better than this. Mika Zibanejad, Chris Kreider, Alexis Lafrenière, K'Andre Miller, Ryan Lindgren — the list goes on. If this is who they are now, the Rangers don't have much hope. With how long this has gone on, the model has certainly soured on many of the team's players, leading to the massive downgrade in playoff chances. It's not just the losses, it's how the team is losing, leaving little optimism for a return to form.

And that's the big question here: Can the Rangers find their gear after all this and channel the team that went to the conference finals last year, or is this really it?

New York Islanders

In the Islanders' defense, the team dealt with some key injuries to Mathew Barzal, Anthony Duclair, Adam Pelech and Semyon Varlamov that contributed to their slow first half. But even as the team got healthier, the Islanders have struggled to net any tangible results, leaving them near the bottom of the East. Their strength of schedule only gets harder going forward.

The model still believes the Islanders are a slightly above-average team which gives them higher playoff odds than their record would suggest they deserve. But that standing has dropped over the last month; one of the biggest drops of any team.

As solid as the Islanders still are at five-on-five, both of their special teams units have been abysmal. Over the last month they've scored just 2.3 goals per 60 on the power play and have allowed 16.4 against on the penalty kill — both last in the league. No team could succeed under those circumstances. That's a trend that's stayed steady throughout the season to the point that any upward regression expected by the model has diminished. The Islanders shouldn't be this bad at both the power play and penalty kill. Their expected goal numbers suggest they should bounce back. But the longer they stay this bad, the easier it becomes to believe.

That the team is still solid at five-on-five gives some hope, but if they can't make things work on special teams over the second half, they might be doomed. It's time for the team's stars to step up. Barzal (10 points in 19 games), Brock Nelson (21 points in 40 games) and Noah Dobson (20 points in 40 games) need to be a lot more productive. Ilya Sorokin (minus-5.4 GSAx and minus-7.9 short-handed) needs to be much more formidable between the pipes.

Like the Rangers, the Islanders' stars usually shine much brighter than they've shown in the first half. The optimistic side is they haven't shown their best yet and that can spark a surge. The pessimistic side is that, like the Rangers, what the Islanders have at the top simply might not be good enough.

Vancouver Canucks

December was a trying time for the Canucks and it's turning into a season in which everything is going wrong.

Over the last month, Vancouver was without Elias Pettersson, Quinn Hughes, Filip Hronek and Thatcher Demko for stretches, leaving the team with a desolate roster. The blue line looked especially thin without the top pair and the goaltending behind it didn't help. A very public rift between Pettersson and J.T. Miller has shaken the team, leaving a tense group that doesn't have a bunch of wins to lean on to build morale. Vancouver's PDO is still above average, but not at the level it was last season.

The Canucks were 13-7-3 one month ago. They're 5-5-6 since.

It's hard to judge what the Canucks really are because of everything going on around them. We haven't seen the team with a fully healthy lineup yet and the model seems willing to believe that with good health, they will get back to being a strong team. Vancouver's Net Rating, when healthy, hasn't changed much over the last month.

With all the injuries, it's probably best not to put too much stock into the team's poor underlying numbers. The Canucks have played only 17 games with all four of Pettersson, Miller, Hughes and Hronek in the lineup and were top 10 in xG during that time (52.8 percent).

Still, all the injuries have revealed a team that's vulnerable in more ways than one. The Canucks are a team that depends on good goaltending and may not reliably get it with Demko this season. That's exacerbated by a blue line that has only two good defensemen, leading to strains whenever the top pair is off the ice. And the whole foundation is at a constant threat of falling apart whenever the losses pile up as the team's two best forwards seemingly can't stand each other unless they're winning.

It's a complete mess and it's led to a market correction in Vancouver's playoff and Stanley Cup odds. The Canucks entered the season looking poised to take the next step as a bona fide Cup contender. We

haven't seen that yet, and with how things have unfolded over the last month, it's getting harder to imagine we will.

The Canucks are one winning streak with a healthy lineup away from healing all wounds, but for now, things feel grim.

Buffalo Sabres

Whatever small chance the Sabres had of making the playoffs one month ago is basically gone now. Instead, they are projected to finish last in the East and have a higher chance of earning the No. 1 pick instead. Woof.

While there was a fair bit of hope for the Sabres to finally turn things around at the start of the season, they've been a mess, going 7-9-3 since the last Playoff Report. During that stretch, the Sabres weren't horrifically bad at any one thing, but they weren't good at any one thing either. It's death by a thousand cuts for Buffalo.

There were some bright spots over the last month, namely the play of Jason Zucker and Rasmus Dahlin. But overall, it was just more uninspiring hockey, leading to a very likely lost season. For the Sabres to make it now, they would need a dramatic turnaround that this roster likely isn't capable of.

Chicago Blackhawks

The Blackhawks' playoff chances were already cooked at the start of the month, but it is worth pointing out that they are even worse than imagined. Over the last month, they have been abysmal defensively and an effort to coax more offense has not worked well. The Blackhawks at least kept things close to start the season, but that hasn't been the case much of late. Seth Jones, in particular, has struggled since returning from injury.

No team has dropped its standing more than the Blackhawks over the last month and any hope that the team could take a meaningful step this season has evaporated.

ESPN / Top prospects, biggest surprises from the 2025 World Juniors

By Rachel Doerrie – January 8, 2025

For the first time in history, the United States has successfully defended gold at the IIHF world junior championship.

Outstanding performances were the story of the tournament this year. For the first time in recent memory, there were no complaints of "too many blowouts" or "not enough parity." Every team in the tournament was capable of a competitive game, making for a very unpredictable round robin and medal round.

From surprise upsets to last-minute goals to overtime thrillers and a shootout that lasted far too long, Ottawa put on a fantastic tournament from top to bottom.

In addition to the team competition, this was also a showcase for top prospects (both drafted and those who will be selected in 2025 and 2026), with execs and scouts from all 32 NHL teams in attendance. Here's a look at players who stood out the most for each team, along with my take on each country's overall performance:

Latvia

Latvia was the talk of the tournament. They presented problems for quite a few teams in the tournament, including a major upset over Canada, an overtime win against Germany and giving Sweden a scare in the quarterfinal matchup.

Had it not been for Petteri Rimpinen's performance in the final two games, Linards Feldbergs (undrafted) ought to have won the award for best goaltender. He won the hearts of fans, the attention of NHL teams and perhaps, a long look for the world championship team in the spring. He was nothing short of brilliant, and said he will remember the feelings he had during this tournament for the rest of his life.

Eriks Mateiko (Washington Capitals) was a force for Latvia, scoring key goals, playing in every situation and leading in every sense. If there was a play that needed to be made at a critical time, a scoring chance that needed to be created or finished, Mateiko was there. His teammates followed his lead, staying disciplined, playing strong defensively, blocking shots and sacrificing their bodies to make plays all over the ice. They forechecked hard, tracked back with tenacity and made life difficult for their opponents.

By tournament's end, they'd earned a standing ovation from the crowd in Ottawa, who showed their appreciation for the Cinderella of the tournament.

Switzerland

As for the Swiss, there was really nothing to write home about. A team that had the chance to play Cinderella failed to get the elite goaltending required. The Swiss lacked scoring punch, and never gave Sweden, Czechia or Slovakia a scare. Their most entertaining game came against Sweden, which was a 7-5 affair. While the score looked close, the Swiss were down 6-1 and scored three goals in the final 10 minutes once Sweden had taken its foot off the pedal.

They struggled to generate dangerous chances at even strength, with the lone bright spot being a third-ranked power play; seven of the team's 12 goals came with the man advantage. Without a true offensive threat up front, the Swiss struggled to get a foothold in the tournament. Many expected a quarterfinal exit, but their performance was disappointing overall.

Germany

Lacking their top scorer, Germany required an overtime thriller against Kazakhstan, who were without a top player because of suspension, to stay in the top group in 2026. The Germans struggled to create chances in dangerous scoring areas and lacked the ability to finish on the few chances they generated. Losing Kevin Bicker (Detroit Red Wings) prior to the tournament was always going to make this tournament a tough one, as he was expected to be the offensive engine.

For a country that has recently produced the likes of Leon Draisaitl, Tim Stutzle and JJ Peterka, 2025 was a disappointing tournament. The Germans were a very young group and nearly 75% of their roster will return next year with more development and physical maturity. This experience will be an important one for the returnees who will undoubtedly be motivated to improve on their ninth-place finish.

Slovakia

Slovakia started slowly and finished lower than their expectations in sixth place. Dalibor Dvorsky (St. Louis Blues) did not have the impact on this tournament that many believed he would deliver. They required overtime to beat Kazakhstan and failed to get a strong foothold in games against Sweden, Czechia and Finland.

With quite a few skilled 19-year-olds, Slovakia had an outside shot at a medal in the tournament. They were unable to establish an effective checking game to slow opponents down and allow their skilled gamebreakers to capitalize on scoring chances. By the time Dvorsky and Juraj Pekarcik (Blues) were in the game, their opponents were flying through the neutral zone and generating scoring chances from dangerous areas. Dvorsky was good but did not live up to the expectations of being one of the best forwards in the tournament.

Slovakia was going to need a quality performance from Samuel Urban (undrafted) in goal to contend for a medal, and he was unable to deliver. After getting outstanding goaltending in recent tournaments, Urban faltered at critical times and lacked the ability to make the key save at the right time.

Sweden

Sweden looked like the team to beat after the preliminary round. They went through Group B like a hot knife through butter. Axel Sandin-Pellikka (Red Wings) was brilliant from start to finish with a hat trick on Boxing Day and elite play that carried the Swedish blue line. He was a difference-maker at both ends of the ice and looked every part of a future top-four NHL blueliner. He was named the tournament's top defenseman and was Sweden's best player from start to finish.

Up front, Otto Stenberg (Blues), Anton Wahlberg (Buffalo Sabres) and Felix Unger Sorum (Carolina Hurricanes) carried the offense. All three averaged more than a point per game and were forces. The quality of scoring chances generated kept opponents on their toes and caused nightmares for goalies. All three consistently tilted the ice in Sweden's favor and wreaked havoc on the power play.

Victor Eklund (2025 draft-eligible) looked the part of a top-15 prospect with a solid performance in Ottawa, posting six points and showcasing an ability to win races, get inside position and finish plays with skill.

Sweden's reward for dominating their group? A date with Latvia, who won twice in the preliminary round. That quarterfinal matchup was a lot closer than the Swedes were expecting and likely took more out of them, leading to a semifinal loss to archrival Finland. Sweden looked like the best team for the majority of the tournament but were unable to get the job done in a tight game and lost the bronze medal game to Czechia in a shootout that went on far too long.

They will rue the missed chances, goal posts and negated goals, but their penalty kill let them down. For a team looking to avenge last year's gold medal loss on home soil, Sweden will be bitterly disappointed to leave Ottawa without a medal.

Czechia

The bronze medal-winning Czechs got great performances from quite a few players in this tournament.

Eduard Sale (Seattle Kraken) was dynamic and led the way in every sense. Offensively, he finished his opportunities, secured the bronze medal with a shootout winner and showcased his high-end puck skill and finesse consistently.

Adam Jecho (Blues) made the most of his opportunity, creating scoring chances and consistently disrupting transition for opponents. Miroslav Holinka (Toronto Maple Leafs) didn't show up on the scoresheet, but was critical to the success of the team. The details of his game in all three zones made a difference, supporting pucks and creating space for his linemates to benefit from.

Peter Sikora (Capitals) was public enemy No. 1 after drawing a debatable major penalty in the quarterfinal against Canada, and he played that role perfectly. His ability to make small plays at critical times, draw penalties and step up in key moments tilted the ice and allowed the Czechs to regain momentum.

On the defensive side, Adam Jiricek (Blues) performed very well in this tournament and has been generally good when wearing his national colors. He moved well, made good puck decisions and drove play from the blue line for Czechia. He was engaged and made his teammates better by making simple plays and not being overactive. A steady but impactful game is exactly what scouts were hoping to see, and Jiricek delivered.

Michael Hrabal (Utah Hockey Club) was steady in goal and was the ultimate difference-maker in the shootout when the Czechs needed a save. He didn't steal any games, but he didn't cost them any either. Overall, the Czechs will be pleased with back-to-back bronze medal performances.

Finland

Finland had an up-and-down tournament, starting with a shutout loss to Canada, followed later by a fantastic semifinal win over Sweden and an overtime loss in the championship game.

Finland produces a lot of two-way impact players and was forced to rely on them in the tournament because they lacked the offensive firepower of other teams. They were able to lock the opponent's best players down and keep them from dominating pace of play. Coupled with an outstanding performance in goal by Petteri Rimpinen (2025), Finland's play carried them to within one shot of the gold medal.

Rimpinen made more than a handful of saves in the semifinal and final that he can tell his grandchildren about, but the two in overtime of the final were A+. Finland likely finds themselves in the bronze medal game without his stellar performance. That is presumably what secured the tournament's top goaltender award, because Feldbergs had a legitimate case, but Latvia didn't get as far.

Konsta Helenius (Sabres) was quiet for much of the tournament but carried Finland in the semifinal with four points. He wasn't a difference-maker otherwise, registering two points in the other five games. He was good defensively and kept opposing players at bay, but the Finns needed more from him offensively.

Kasper Halttunen (San Jose Sharks) struggled to produce offense, but showed flashes of skill and ability to make plays in tight. The power play struggled, and a major part of it was Halttunen's inability to get his shot off. Jesse Kiiskinen (Red Wings) was named a top-three player for Finland and deservedly so. He was always involved in the play and finished second in tournament goal scoring with six.

Aron Kiviharju (Minnesota Wild) was a little bit of everything in this tournament. A key player and the engine of the blue line, his size betrayed him at various points, particularly while defending in transition. When he had the puck, he made good decisions and created scoring opportunities. He showed flashes of skill and is clearly a top player among his peers, but he will need to develop his ability to defend more effectively and make quicker decisions to carve out an NHL career.

Finland's moniker of "the pesky Finns" was on full display in this tournament. They were never dominant, but they never went away. Always a thorn in the side of the top teams. They are well coached, staunch defensively and benefitted from an elite goaltending performance. They can return 13 players next year, including Rimpinen, Kiviharju, Helenius and Emil Hemming (Dallas Stars), making them an immediate contender, especially with USA, Canada and Sweden drawing into the other preliminary group for 2026.

Canada

Canada ... where do we even begin? There is a lot to unpack here from the poor team construction to the tone-deaf news conferences to undisciplined penalties. It wasn't unpredictable, as evidenced by this excerpt from my tournament preview:

"Canada's issue has never been talent, it has been getting in its own way. Whether it's undisciplined penalties, shaky goaltending, head-scratching coaching decisions or ill-timed turnovers, Canada will need everyone pulling the rope in the same direction to get back on top of the podium."

Yes, apart from shaky goaltending, all of those things occurred. Carter George (Los Angeles Kings) was outstanding for Canada, especially given how the tournament went; in fact, they may have finished fourth in their group if not for his shutout performance against Finland. The only thing that went right for Canada at this tournament was the goaltending. In recent years, there have been questions about Canada's goaltending and whether it was good enough to win gold. The goaltending was the only thing worthy of a medal at this tournament. Luckily for Canada, both George and Jack Ivankovic (2025) can return next year.

It was very apparent that this team was undisciplined. They were the most penalized team in the tournament by a wide margin, and were shorthanded for nearly a period worth of game time on multiple occasions. That is no way to win a hockey tournament at the international level.

While the coaching staff owns some of the blame for instilling a style that lends itself to physicality instead of puck possession, the nature and frequency of the penalties were egregious. Unnecessary hits, poor sticks, lazy grabs and slashes that are always called to a tighter standard in international play. That standard was not applied more harshly to Canada; Canada played a style that lent itself to physical penalties and when they became frustrated, turned into undisciplined stick work. Canada did not concede a goal at 5-on-5 until the quarterfinal against Czechia.

The team's lack of discipline cost it points against Latvia and the United States, which ultimately led to a tougher medal-round path. It was only fitting that Czechia scored the game winner on a late power play because of an overzealous, physical penalty.

Canada should never have been in that position. Playing a physical style in a tournament when you have the depth of talent to out-skill teams is a galaxy brain approach. A quick rundown of the poor decisions:

- Leaving the likes of Beckett Sennecke (Anaheim Ducks), Andrew Cristall (Capitals), Michael Misa (2025), Zayne Parekh (Calgary Flames) and Carter Yakemchuk (Ottawa Senators) at home

- Refusing to pair Brampton teammates Carson Rehkopf (Kraken) and Porter Martone (2025) together

- Playing Gavin McKenna (2026) in a lesser role, when he was one of the only players generating dangerous chances

Each of those decisions fits the bill of Dave Cameron hockey: physical, forecheck and grind over speed, skill and scoring. For the first time in tournament history, Canada did not have a player in the top 30 in points. For reference, the top German, Latvian and Kazakhstani finished with more points than the top Canadian.

Canada looked disjointed for much of the tournament, which made the decision to skip practices a peculiar one. They lamented poor special teams, inability to develop chemistry and lack of finish on multiple occasions. Practice affords teams the opportunity to work on all those things, and failing that, putting players together with established chemistry (Rehkopf-Martone), playing players in their natural power-play positions (Oliver Bonk) may speed that process along. Cameron opted to do none of that, and by the time he moved McKenna to the top line, it was too late.

Canada's lack of discipline was their ultimate undoing, but these players were not set up to succeed from the outset. Poor team-building approach, poor lineup construction, lack of practice and awful in-game management; everyone from the skaters (the goalies were great) to coaches and management had a hand in an utterly unacceptable performance on home soil.

United States

In contrast to Canada, we look to the gold medalists. It was a tremendous performance by the Americans to win back-to-back gold medals for the first time in their history.

Trey Augustine (Red Wings) started slowly and was not the best goaltender in the tournament, but he held strong when necessary and provided one more save in the final game. He was steady, made key saves and showed flashes of why Detroit believes he could be their future starter.

The Americans got exactly what they needed out of their all-Boston College top line. There was no need to reinvent the wheel or try various chemistry experiments with other players. David Carle ran the BC trio of Gabe Perreault (New York Rangers), Ryan Leonard (Capitals) and James Hagens (2025) out from start to finish, and was rewarded with an MVP performance from Leonard and key plays from Hagens and Perreault at pivotal points in the medal round. Those three combined for 29 points and finished as three of the top eight point scorers in the tournament. When they got going, their opponents had little hope of keeping them from scoring.

Outside of the top line, Cole Hutson (Capitals) was outstanding on defense, leading the tournament in scoring. He was critical to the Americans owning the top power play in the tournament and consistently created scoring chances. He averaged nearly two points per game through the tournament and didn't give back anything defensively. It was an MVP-caliber performance from the second-round pick.

Zeev Buium (Wild) returned, and while his point production was not eye-popping, his primary assist on the golden goal will be shown on his career highlight reel. A 100-foot, tape-to-tape pass to spring Teddy Stiga (Nashville Predators) in overtime. He was impactful, winning his minutes and making subtle plays that stifled opponents and allowed the Americans to strike quickly in transition.

The offensive horses on the back end showed up on both sides of the puck. They were so good, they were rarely in the defensive zone and thus, spent little time defending. When you can dictate the game from the back end the way Buium and Hutson did, it makes life a lot easier on the rest of the team.

Danny Nelson (New York Islanders) was named a top player for the United States, and deservedly so. The returnee was outstanding in an elevated role, scoring key goals, hemming opponents in and becoming a go-to guy for Carle in tight situations.

A second Islander prospect, Cole Eiserman, had quite the performance. Slotted in the 13th forward role, he scored critical power-play goals when called upon. The luxury of loading a team with skilled players is that the 13th forward can own an NHL-level release and be a key part of the game plan, regardless of how often he sees the ice. Carle pushed all the right buttons with Eiserman and was rewarded with game-breaking plays at critical points throughout the tournament.

Carle has cemented himself as the best young coach in the game with back-to-back championships at the World Juniors and two NCAA titles, all by the age of 35. He was already garnering serious NHL interest, and that will only increase as he continues to have success.

The Americans put together the best team, and their coaching staff was able to maximize the abilities of every player on the squad. When you do that, you get golden goals from unsung heroes such as Teddy Stiga, who has been lauded as "the type of guy you win with" since entering the U.S. program. Carle knows how to push the buttons, and he has multiple championships at collegiate and international levels to back it up.

ESPN / NHL Awards WATCH: Who's leading for Hart, Norris, Calder?

By Greg Wyshynski – January 8, 2025

Some NHL awards races are actual races. There are leaders, but ones who are looking over their shoulders at a pack of candidates closing in fast.

Other NHL awards races currently look a lot like when Michael Phelps or Usain Bolt would race: Everyone is just going to have to be content with second place because their leads are that insurmountable.

Again, the operative word is "currently." This is the NHL Awards Watch for January. We have a lot of season to go.

We've polled a wide selection of Professional Hockey Writers Association voters anonymously to get a sense of where the wind is blowing for the current leaders. We've made sure it's a cross-section from the entire league, trying to gain as many perspectives as possible.

Bear in mind that the PHWA votes for the Hart, Norris, Calder, Selke and Lady Byng finalists, broadcasters vote for the Jack Adams, and general managers handle the Vezina.

All stats are from Hockey-Reference.com, Natural Stat Trick and Evolving Hockey.

Hart Trophy (MVP)

Leader: Kirill Kaprizov, Minnesota Wild

Finalists: Leon Draisaitl, Edmonton Oilers; Nathan MacKinnon, Colorado Avalanche

A couple of things happened since the last NHL Awards Watch.

After leading the MVP race last month, Kaprizov's lower-body injury put him out of the Wild lineup. He has missed six of Minnesota's 40 games this season. His stats remain stellar -- 23 goals and 27 assists -- but other Hart contenders haven't missed as many games.

The other significant happening was the entirety of MacKinnon's December. The Avalanche star had seven goals and 18 assists in 13 games, helping Colorado go 10-3-0 while being named the NHL's first star for the month. Through 41 games, MacKinnon leads the NHL with 66 points and 52 assists and leads the Avalanche in scoring by eight points over Mikko Rantanen.

MacKinnon won the Hart last season. The NHL hasn't had back-to-back MVPs since Alex Ovechkin won the award in 2007-08 and 2008-09. The way MacKinnon's going, it could happen again.

And yet Kaprizov still got the majority of the first-place votes from those canvassed this month.

"In the true spirit of the award, there is just no way Minnesota is anywhere close to the unexpectedly good team they are this year without Kaprizov," a voter said.

But the MVP race behind the Wild star has changed dramatically. Last month, Kaprizov finished atop the Hart straw poll with 88% of the first-place votes. This month, he earned only 37%. MacKinnon is right behind him. So are the other players who received first-place votes this month: Draisaitl, Vegas Golden Knights center Jack Eichel, Vancouver Canucks defenseman Quinn Hughes, Tampa Bay Lightning winger Nikita Kucherov and Toronto Maple Leafs winger Mitch Marner. All of them have compelling MVP cases.

"It's getting crowded at the top, but Kaprizov is still producing more at even strength than any other player," a Kaprizov voter declared. "MacKinnon has Rantanen, Draisaitl has McDavid, Kucherov is too power-play dependent."

"I'm picking Kirill Kaprizov," another noted. "But if Colorado gets their stuff sorted for good and takes off, MacKinnon might run away with it. Central Division is where it's at."

MacKinnon won the Hart last year with 51 goals and 140 points. He's nowhere near that goal pace, but his points-per-game pace (1.63) isn't far off from his pace in his MVP season (1.71). He was the clear second choice with 26% of the first-place votes. MacKinnon was in the top three in the November Awards Watch, didn't receive a first-place vote in December and has come roaring back this month.

"MacKinnon's surge and Kaprizov's injury changed the face of that Hart race," a voter concluded.

"He not only leads the NHL in scoring but kept the Avalanche afloat long enough for them to swap out both goalies and look more like a serious contender," another explained.

Draisaitl was third in the voting (16%), right ahead of Eichel (11%). The Oilers star led the NHL in goals through Sunday with 29 tallies, well ahead of the five players tied with 23 goals. His 59 points were second to MacKinnon for the NHL lead. According to Evolving Hockey, Draisaitl leads the NHL with 22.6 expected goals above replacement.

Draisaitl helped keep the Oilers on point as teammate Connor McDavid dealt with an injury. But McDavid has played only three fewer games than Draisaitl -- and trailed him by only five points for the team lead. The season Draisaitl won his only Hart Trophy (the COVID-shortened 2019-20), he played seven more games than McDavid and tallied 13 more points.

Eichel's having the best regular season of his career. Through Sunday, the 28-year-old center led the Golden Knights with 52 points in 39 games -- nearly 20 points clear of the second-highest scorer, Mark Stone (33 points).

That Eichel had played 14 more games than Stone is exactly the point: As Vegas has had more guys out of action than a casino where the house always wins, Eichel has been the constant, playing every game and playing extremely well. His career high for points is 82 in 2018-19 with Buffalo. He's on pace for over 109 points this season.

"He's the best player on the best team, but most impressive is how Eichel has emerged as a defensive force," one Jack backer explained.

They're right about his defense, which has been improving each season since his 200-foot game earned accolades during the 2023 Stanley Cup run. Internally, Vegas has talked about Eichel getting a Selke push this season. The Knights give up just 2.16 goals-against per 60 minutes at 5-on-5 with Eichel on the ice. It should be noted, however, that Kaprizov has him bested in goals-against per 60 (1.88) and expected goals against per 60 (2.05) this season.

Kucherov, who won the Hart in 2018-19, has led the Lightning in scoring all season. Through 35 games he had 55 points, 10 points better than the team's second-leading scorer Brayden Point.

Marner received a first-place vote for holding down the fort while Auston Matthews was out with an injury. Marner has 56 points in 41 games, 13 more than the Leafs' second-leading scorer William Nylander, while continuing to be an exceptional defensive forward, too. It's a heck of a case he's making in a contract year.

Marner has never finished in the top 10 for the Hart. Quinn Hughes was seventh for the award last season, when he won his first Norris Trophy. So he's on the radar in the MVP race and pulled in one first-place vote.

In a tumultuous season for the Canucks -- from infighting to injuries -- Hughes has easily been their best player: 42 points in 34 games, including 34 assists. He's not leading all defensemen in points nor ice time, but he's leading the Canucks in both. Hughes leads Conor Garland (29 points) by 13 points for the team lead.

So it's a very crowded field and could become even more crowded if Connor Hellebuyck starts getting the credit for the Winnipeg Jets' outstanding season. The NHL hasn't had a goalie win MVP since Montreal's Carey Price in 2014-15.

"I was this close to putting Hellebuyck down for MVP," said a voter who ultimately broke for Kaprizov instead.

While he didn't earn a first-place vote, it would be foolish to discount McDavid from the race. He has won NHL MVP three times and been a finalist for the award six times in 10 seasons. With 54 points in 36 games -- his 1.50 points per game average is fourth in the NHL -- he's just a stride behind the rest of these players.

Norris Trophy (top defenseman)

Leader: Cale Makar, Colorado Avalanche

Finalists: Quinn Hughes, Vancouver Canucks; **Zach Werenski, Columbus Blue Jackets**

No major changes in the Norris race order, which we're sure will go over well in Vancouver.

Makar's lead has narrowed from earning 75% of the first-place votes to 58% from our panelists this month. His 49 points in 40 games led all defensemen through Sunday's games. That's impressive, but not nearly the total Makar's incredible start (24 points in 15 games) seemed to portend. He's a plus-13, skating more on average (25:31) than Hughes (25:08) but less than Werenski (26:28).

After getting dinged for his defense in last season's Norris voting, Makar's underlying numbers are strong: The Avalanche are giving up 2.04 goals per 60 minutes at 5-on-5 when he's on the ice and have an expected goals-against of 2.14. Makar won the Norris in 2021-22 and finished third in the next two seasons.

One Makar voter anticipated some backlash for their choice. "Blah, blah, blah, you only pick points. But the dude is unreal and controls the game from the blue line. A total freak show," they quipped.

"He leads all blueliners in goals and assists," another Makar voter noted. "Quinn Hughes' injury may prove the difference in what was shaping to be a tight race."

Hughes, last season's Norris winner, missed four games after Christmas with an undisclosed injury. His return is imminent, which is good news for a Vancouver team whose offense struggled to score just seven goals in his absence. Hughes (42 points in 34 games) had a razor-thin points-per-game lead (1.24) on Makar (1.23) entering Monday's games.

Another factor for Hughes: He's second in the NHL in expected goals above replacement (18.5) and has added three wins to the Canucks, per Evolving Hockey. Makar (13.7 xGAR, 2.3 WAR) was a distant fifth in both categories.

Hughes garnered 26% of the votes.

"The Canucks' performance without the injured Hughes over the past few games underscores his importance to the team and gives him a slight edge over Cale Makar this time around," a Hughes voter noted.

"It's hard to argue with a plus-18 goal differential at 5-on-5," another added.

Hughes play a ton at 5-on-5 (21:12) -- more than Makar, in fact (19:34). He doesn't play much at all on the penalty kill (11 seconds per game), while Makar does (2:12).

Werenski also plays in all three situations for the Blue Jackets. In fact, he plays more than any other skater in the NHL, at 26:28 per game on average. Werenski has 12 goals and 33 assists in 40 games. He entered Monday second to Makar in goals and points on the season.

"More people should be talking about Zach Werenski," a Makar voter declared.

"The thing that stuck out to me the most [since December's Awards Watch] was how much better the Blue Jackets are with Zach Werenski on the ice," a Werenski voter said. "His impact is noticeable on both ends of the ice -- the way he drives play, his defensive ability -- and that is how he manages to be a plus-player on that bad of a team. He should be rewarded for that."

"The Columbus Blue Jackets sit nowhere near sniffing distance of a playoff spot if Werenski isn't averaging 1.13 points per game while logging almost 27 minutes every night," another Werenski voter pointed out.

These three defensemen dominated our voters' ballots. The only other two names mentioned were Winnipeg Jets defenseman Josh Morrissey, who was seventh for the Norris last season after finishing fifth one year earlier; and Washington Capitals defenseman John Carlson, who continues to thrive under head coach Spencer Carbery. He was second for the Norris in 2019-20.

Calder Trophy (top rookie)

Leader: Macklin Celebrini, San Jose Sharks

Finalists: Lane Hutson, Montreal Canadiens; Matvei Michkov, Philadelphia Flyers

Last month, we likened Celebrini to a marauding T-Rex chasing a Jurassic Park jeep, as Michkov frantically glanced in his side mirror to discover that objects may be closer than they appear.

In other words, it was only a matter of time before the San Jose Sharks rookie had the body of work voters needed to put him over the Philadelphia Flyers rookie in the Calder race, and here we are.

"Sometimes, the obvious answer is the correct answer," a Celebrini voter concluded.

After finishing second to Michkov in the December NHL Awards Watch, Celebrini pulled nearly 90% of the first-place votes from our panelists to take control of the rookie of the year race.

"A must-watch player already," a Macklin backer said. "He's absolutely electric despite having little help around him."

Entering Monday's action, Celebrini (28 points) trailed Michkov (29 points) by one point despite playing eight fewer games thanks to an early-season injury. Celebrini's 0.93 points-per-game average was tops among all rookies. He also led all rookies with 13 goals, one more than Michkov.

"Matvei Michkov had the head start, but the wonder kid in San Jose has made up for lost ground," a voter said.

Celebrini is seeing significantly more ice time (19:48) than the Flyers rookie (16:31) on average. In fact, Celebrini is second only to Hutson, a defenseman, in average ice time for rookie skaters.

"Not many rookie forwards skate almost 20 minutes per game," a voter declared.

"I lean Macklin over Michkov because of the two-way skill and effort he regularly shows on a lesser team," another added.

Michkov still has a strong case and could end up sweeping the goals and points titles among rookies, both of which have been harbingers for forwards winning the Calder. He's feasted on the power play for the Flyers, with five goals and 12 points, which led all rookies. While Celebrini has managed to keep up with Michkov as far as highlight-reel moments, Michkov has thrived under -- or despite? -- the "tough love" of John Tortorella's coaching.

"Michkov has restructured a broken power play with ease. He's reminded us the extent of impact one majestic player like him can truly have on a team's complexion," a voter explained. "I anticipate changing this to Celebrini by the end of the year, but I'm also anticipating an extremely close call."

Michkov is the only other player to earn first place votes for the Calder. Based on the number of mentions he received on voters' ballots, we're comfortable putting Hutson in that third spot just ahead of Calgary Flames goalie Dustin Wolf.

Hutson has 27 points in 39 games while skating 22:34 per game for the Canadiens. To put into perspective how much Hutson has lapped the field among rookie defensemen: The next highest scoring rookie defenseman, Nolan Allen of Chicago, is 21 points behind.

The Canadiens defenseman is a minus-8, fourth worst on the Habs for players with at least 15 games played. That's with Montreal having sheltered him with 63% of this zone starts coming in the offensive zone.

Wolf, who was third overall last month, is 12-6-2 in 20 games, with a .913 save percentage and a 2.63 goals-against average, to go along with two shutouts. Those are easily the best numbers for any rookie goalie with at least 10 appearances. With the Flames in the thick of the wild-card race, he should not be counted out for Calder consideration.

But right now, it's just "consideration." It remains Celebrini vs. Michkov, with Celebrini clearly ahead in the race.

Vezina Trophy (top goaltender)

Note: The NHL's general managers vote for this award

Leader: Connor Hellebuyck, Winnipeg Jets

Finalists: Jacob Markstrom, New Jersey Devils; Logan Thompson, Washington Capitals

This is Hellebuyck's Vezina to lose, but our voters didn't make it unanimous.

Hellebuyck is 24-6-2 for the dominant Jets, with a .926 save percentage, a 2.09 save percentage and five shutouts -- leading the NHL on all of those categories for goaltenders with at least 20 appearances.

He won his second Vezina Trophy last season and looks very much poised to win a third. Since 1981 -- when the NHL changed the criteria of the Vezina Trophy to no longer just honor the goalie who played the most games on the team that gave up the fewest goals -- only three goalies won the Vezina more than twice: Dominik Hasek, Martin Brodeur and Patrick Roy. All legends and all Hockey Hall of Famers.

"It is 'Helle-back?' Perhaps 'Helle-back-to-back?'" a voter quipped.

"Five shutouts and the season isn't half over. He'll be on Hart ballots, too," another voter predicted.

There was another goalie that snagged a first-place vote and it was a surprise: Thompson, the Capitals netminder who came over from Vegas in the offseason.

The Capitals have been one of season's best teams and Thompson has been a big reason why. In 20 games, he's an incredible 16-2-2, with a .916 save percentage and a 2.39 goals-against average. Compare those numbers to what Washington's other netminder Charlie Lindgren has posted (10-8-1, .900 and 2.70) and the contrast is stark.

"Thompson has been so incredibly efficient. Sixteen of his 20 appearances qualify as quality starts (80%)," the Thompson voter noted. "When the goals dried up for the Capitals following their hot start -- and Alex Ovechkin was injured -- Thompson kept them on track."

The other Vezina spot could go to Filip Gustavsson of the Minnesota Wild, who was in the top three in last month's NHL Awards Watch. He certainly has the numbers: 18-6-3 in 27 games, with a .926 save percentage and a 2.20 goals-against average. He also leads the NHL with 13.5 goals saved above expected per Stathletes.

But the goalie with the highest down-ballot mentions was Markstrom. He's 19-8-2 with a .911 save percentage and a 2.18 goals-against average. He hasn't been perfect, and has just 3.1 goals saved above expected this season, but a handful of voters believe he belongs in the Vezina conversation, such as it is.

"This is not a conversation by any stretch of the imagination," a Hellebuyck voter opined.

Selke Trophy (best defensive forward)

Leader: Aleksander Barkov, Florida Panthers

Finalists: Nico Hischier, New Jersey Devils; Mitch Marner, Toronto Maple Leafs

Barkov earned 42% of the first-place votes, which is slightly down from his total last month (50%) but puts him in position to win back-to-back Selkes and his third in five seasons.

The Panthers have a 2.06 goals-against and a 1.87 expected goals-against per 60 minutes with Barkov on the ice. The Panthers get 60% of the high-danger chances. He's also winning an exceptional 61% of his faceoffs this season while putting in work on the penalty kill as well.

"Aleksander Barkov is still the guy," a voter concluded.

While Barkov remains on top of the Selke leaderboard, the finalists from the December Awards Watch have changed. Out are Anthony Cirelli of the Tampa Bay Lightning and Sam Reinhart of the Florida Panthers; in come Hischier and Marner.

Hischier was second in the Selke voting in 2022-23. He wins 55.8% of his faceoffs and leads the fifth best penalty kill in the NHL, as the forward with the most short-handed ice time on average for New Jersey.

His underlying numbers aren't stellar from a defensive standpoint, although he wins a good amount of puck battles. But he's a player that certainly passes the eye test as a defensive force for New Jersey.

The same goes for Marner, a winger whose speed and tenacity make him a terrific defensive player. He leads the NHL in turnovers created (8.67) and steals per 60 (2.18) for players with at least 700 minutes of ice time, per Stathead. He's the ice time leader for the eighth best penalty kill in the NHL.

It's here we note that a non-center hasn't won the Selke Trophy since 2002-03, when Dallas Stars winger Jere Lehtinen captured the award for the third time.

Reinhart was one of five other players to receive a first-place vote, is listed as a center although he plays on Barkov's wing. He has slightly better defensive metrics than his center, and also plays on the penalty kill.

Cirelli also received a first-place vote. He wins 51.7% of his faceoffs and he's an outstanding penalty killer, with two goals and two assists shorthanded. His underlying numbers (3.51 expected goals against per 60 minutes) don't mount a strong argument at the moment. Keep in mind that Cirelli was selected for Team Canada in the 4 Nations Face-Off as a defensive specialist, and that certainly raises his profile.

Anze Kopitar won the Selke in 2015-16 and 2017-18. He's having an outstanding season for what might be the best defensive team in the NHL. The Kings have a 1.66 goals-against per 60 minutes when Kopitar is on the ice.

Jordan Staal has been searching for his first Selke win for 15 years, and finished second for the award last season. He's once again the linchpin at forward defensively for the Hurricanes, who have a 1.69 goals-against average per 60 minutes when the center is on the ice.

The other player to receive a first-place Selke vote was Jack Eichel. As mentioned earlier, the Golden Knights believe his name should be in the hat for this award. Vegas gives up 2.16 goals per 60 minutes at 5-on-5 with Eichel on the ice, and he's an effective penalty killer, too.

Barkov leads, but this is certainly still a competitive race.

Lady Byng Trophy (gentlemanly play)

This is the part where I mention that the Lady Byng Trophy for gentlemanly play should be voted on by the league's on-ice officials or by the NHL Players' Association instead of the PHWA.

Traditionally, this award goes to a player with a top 20 point total and the lowest penalty minutes among those players. Brayden Point is 16th overall in scoring with 45 points, and had only two penalty minutes through 33 games. But keep an eye out for Anze Kopitar, who won the award in 2015-16 and 2022-23. He's 34th in scoring (39 points in 38 games) and also has just two penalty minutes. What a race!

Jack Adams Award (best coach)

Note: The NHL Broadcasters' Association votes on this award.

Leader: Spencer Carbery, Washington Capitals

Finalists: *Dean Evason, Columbus Blue Jackets*; John Hynes, Minnesota Wild

Alex Ovechkin has 19 goals in 23 games this season. When he sustained a fractured leg in November, there wasn't just concern about the state of his NHL all-time goals record chase. There was concern that

it might derail what had been a stellar start for the Capitals, who went 13-4-1 with Ovechkin in the lineup through Nov. 18.

In between his injury and Ovechkin's triumphant return to the lineup on Dec. 28? The Capitals went 13-6-2, thanks in no small part to the steady leadership and strong fundamental systems of Carbery.

The second-year coach had Washington with the Eastern Conference's top points percentage heading into Monday's games. They were the top scoring team in the league (3.72 goals per game) and sixth in goals against (2.64).

Perhaps that's why Carbery was the only unanimous choice in any category in this month's NHL Awards Watch.

"He's going to run away with this, and for justifiable reasons," a voter declared.

While Evason and Hynes didn't get any first-place votes, they both received a lot of love down the ballot from our voters.

Hynes coached the Wild through some injury adversity to get near the top of the Central Division, with strong underlying defensive numbers.

"Hynes deserves a little love here," a voter argued.

Evason, in his first season with the Blue Jackets, has Columbus right at the Eastern Conference wild-card bubble after 40 games. He also has something that other candidates don't have: an emotional backstory, as Evason helped lead this Blue Jackets team through its grief following the tragic death of star forward Johnny Gaudreau before the season.

"The job Dean Evason is doing in Columbus, given everything that franchise has endured, is remarkable. To have them remotely close to a playoff spot is a huge feather in his cap," a voter explained. "If Columbus gets in, he may beat Carbery and Hynes, but those two have their teams playing consistently solid hockey."

Other coaches mentioned by our voters include Los Angeles Kings first-year coach Jim Hiller, Tampa Bay Lightning coach Jon Cooper and Colorado Avalanche coach Jared Bednar. The Winnipeg Jets' Scott Arniel, who was in the top three last month, did not receive a mention.

"Steven Stamkos is gone, Mikhail Sergachev was traded and they're one of the highest scoring teams in the league, one of the top in goal-differential, and radically turned their 5-on-5 play around," a Cooper backer noted.

"Considering injury list and goaltending woes, though, Jared Bednar should get more love in this category," another voter said.

Other coaches will get love. But it's hard to imagine any one of them breaking through the infatuation with Carbery this season.