



**Columbus Blue Jackets Media Clips**  
**February 11-17, 2026**

**Columbus Blue Jackets News**

- PAGE 2 NHL.com / Inside the Blue Jackets' turnaround under Rick Bowness
- PAGE 7 The Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets' Werenski, Merzlikins face Olympic challenges
- PAGE 9 The Hockey Writers / How Are the Two Blue Jackets Olympians Benefitting From the Olympics?
- PAGE 11 The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets News & Rumors: Werenski, Merzlikins & More
- PAGE 14 USA Hockey / Blue Line Blasts

**Cleveland Monsters / Prospects News**

- PAGE 17 The Hockey Writers / Cleveland Monsters Playing Best Hockey of Their 2025-26 Season

**NHL News**

- PAGE 20 ESPN / U.S. men's hockey stays unbeaten at Olympics; knockout round next
- PAGE 21 The Athletic / 'Gold or bust' mentality robs Canada, U.S. and Sweden of the true joy of the Olympics
- PAGE 24 The Hockey Writers / NHL Rumors: Oilers Drama, Blue Jackets Shift, Maple Leafs and Raddysh

**Multimedia**

## [NHL.com / Inside the Blue Jackets' turnaround under Rick Bowness](#)

By Jeff Svoboda – February 16, 2026

A month ago, Rick Bowness didn't know the Columbus Blue Jackets, and they didn't know him.

He boarded a plane Jan. 12 and flew to Columbus to take over as the team's head coach aware only of what he could see on television. Bowness was familiar with his new boss, president of hockey operations and general manager Don Waddell, and had coached Sean Monahan in Winnipeg. He had also worked with the fathers of three CBJ players – Cole Sillinger, Mason Marchment and Miles Wood – but that was about it.

It was a bold move by Waddell, but it's certainly paid dividends. The Blue Jackets won 10 of their 11 games under Bowness going into the Olympic break, pulling themselves from last in the Eastern Conference to a tie for ninth place. When the games resume next week, the Blue Jackets will be just four points out of a playoff spot and fully in the mix to end a five-year streak without postseason hockey.

So how has Bowness done it?

At its heart, by getting to know his players as quickly as he could.

"I've gotten to know the leadership group very well, spent a lot of time talking to them, but then you just watch them in practice every day and you watch them in the meal room, how they get along, all those little details," Bowness said. "I'm walking by the locker room, they don't even know, but I'm listening to what's being said and watching the group and everything.

"You learn a lot about your team in those situations, not just what you're seeing on the ice. You learn a lot about your team off the ice. I learned they're a close group, they care about each other. It starts with that. If you don't care about each other, regardless, the on-ice product is going to get affected. They care about each other. They're a good group, and I've really enjoyed working with them."

No one in the NHL has more points since Rick Bowness took over Jan. 13, and the CBJ defense has led the way

That close nature has started to pay dividends on the ice. As Bowness has said a few times, you can talk about X's and O's all you want – and the Blue Jackets have improved in some key areas under Bowness, especially defensively – but so often the game of hockey comes down to intangibles like passion and effort.

And leadership. After a number of recent games, Blue Jackets players have spoken of the accountability Bowness has brought to the table, a culture that is filtering its way into the locker room.

"I think we're just really sticking to the details and really making sure that we don't let anything creep into our game right now," Olivier said. "There's always positives in our games, but I think he's on top of what we need to do better every night. Right now, we're processing it and applying it to the games, and

I think we also expect more out of each other. Just the way we talk on the bench now, the way we are reacting to plays that maybe we shouldn't make, guys are holding us accountable.

"There's really good things going on right now."

To a head coach, that's music to their ears.

"You have to have it," Bowness said of the leadership. "(There's) the old cliché of bad teams, no one leads; good teams, the coaches lead; on a really great team, the players lead. And that's what we're trying to get to. We have great leadership, great veterans here, and they're doing a good job."

### **Communication Is Key**

Bowness skated in 173 games with five NHL teams over six seasons during his playing career, the most coming in 1977-78 when he had 61 appearances with the Detroit Red Wings. He was a classic bubble player, spending parts of six seasons in the Central Hockey League and three years in the American Hockey League.

The native of Moncton, New Brunswick, was a give-it-all-he-had role player, not a vaunted scorer by any stretch, and minutes were often hard to come by. Sometimes, they didn't come at all, which led to an experience that informed his coaching philosophy.

"When I was in the NHL, I won't tell you which team, but I sat on the bench the whole game," Bowness said. "I didn't get a shift. So I went to the coach the next day and I asked him, I said, 'OK, what can I do to play a little bit more?' And he just said, 'Work harder.'"

"Well, that's all I had was a work ethic. I wasn't a great player, but I knew I was working. That told me right there, if I'm ever gonna coach, I'm gonna be straight up with the guys. They may not like what they hear, but they are gonna know where they stand."

It also helped that Bowness got into coaching at a young age, first serving as a player/coach in 1982-83 with the Sherbrooke Jets of the AHL. He was promoted to an assistant coach with the NHL's Winnipeg Jets in 1984-85, just 29 years old when he received that opportunity.

Not to say he was making it up on the fly, but taking on the job at such a young age, Bowness knew his biggest strength was going to be how he related to players. As he's gotten older, he may have a little less of a filter – after all, at 71, he's past the point of chasing jobs – but the same strategy remains.

He has an affable personality, little ego and a way with people that makes them feel comfortable off the bat, but as a coach, he acknowledges the message he has to deliver isn't always one players want to hear. But drawing from his playing days, nothing is more important than players hearing it.

"They may not like what they hear, but they are gonna know where they stand," Bowness said. "That's where communication comes in. You have to be able to look the player in the eye, talk to him. They're not always pleasant conversations, but they have to be made. And the players don't always hear what they want to hear, but at least they know where they stand and what they need to do, and that's the most important thing for me."

For his new players, the transition has been an easy one because it keeps things black and white.

“All I’ve ever wanted out of coaches, really, is the communication aspect to know exactly what he wants from me, when he wants it, because ultimately we’re trying to take out his plan and see it through,” Adam Fantilli said. “Knowing exactly what he wants helps so much. There’s no gray area, and I find that helps a lot with keeping things cut and dry.”

Players said that Bowness often stops by in the locker room for a quick chat before practice, and it’s not uncommon on the ice to see Bowness pull a player or two aside, whether it be for a quick chat or a more in-depth discussion about something. Late in a Feb. 2 practice before the Blue Jackets headed out for their final road trip before the break, Bowness and captain Boone Jenner chatted at center ice for a few minutes while the team went through power-play drills.

“He’s communicating with everybody – not only me, but throughout the whole lineup,” Jenner said. “I think it’s really good. You know where you stand, you know what’s expected. It depends on the conversation. Sometimes we’re just trying to get a feel or think about a schedule or whatever it may be, but I think the communication has been huge for our group.”

Another example of that came at the end of a January practice when Bowness gathered Fantilli, Marchment and Kirill Marchenko. The CBJ top line had just combined for nine points in a win over Tampa Bay, but the message was things weren’t about to get any easier. As the games get tighter and the Blue Jackets hit the road, Bowness told the trio he believed it could be one of the best lines in the NHL, but he had to know he could play them in all scenarios, especially when the matchups might not be so favorable.

Marchment has played for five NHL teams, including three the past two seasons, and said he appreciated what the conversation meant.

“He’s just so open and honest,” Marchment said. “You know what he wants from you. He’s an easy guy to play for that way, and you know, for our line to have that confidence and being able to play our game and go against the other teams’ top lines, it’s a huge honor and an awesome responsibility to have.

“He’s probably the most I’ve talked to (a coach). He’s very communicative and he gets his message across really well.”

### **Tweaks Here And There**

Jim Montgomery knows Bowness well. The St. Louis Blues head coach had Bowness on his staff as an assistant in Dallas, then coached against him during Bowness’ stints leading the Stars and Jets.

When the Blues hosted the Blue Jackets on Jan. 31, Montgomery noticed a few things that stood out about how Columbus had made its turnaround under his old friend.

“They’re playing with great pace and great competitive spirit,” Montgomery said. “Their will is very obvious. The structure, I don’t think he’s made that many changes. I don’t think they’ve had time ... so they’re still doing stuff in the neutral zone and in the defensive zone that I don’t see as Bones.”

Yet, it's working. Bowness has famously said you defend your way into the postseason, and the Blue Jackets have made some improvements in the defensive zone during his tenure.

Columbus is allowing just 2.18 goals per game in Bowness' 11 contests in charge, a mark that ties for second in the NHL in that span. In addition, per Natural Stat Trick, the Blue Jackets have improved from 24th in the league to fifth in expected goals allowed per 60 minutes at 5-on-5 and from 15th to first in high-danger chances allowed per 60 minutes.

Bowness knew he couldn't change everything from a scheme standpoint when he took over considering it was more than halfway through the season, but it's clear what he's tweaked has been working.

"Listen, in my mind, we're still a work in progress," Bowness said. "We'll keep getting better. It doesn't mean we're going to win every game, but there's certain areas we're going to keep addressing until we get it to where I like what I see. Monty's right, but for the most part, we're hard to play against. I talked to him after the game and he said, 'You guys are heavy, you're on top of us and we were frustrated,' and that's what we want to do."

That echoes a message Olivier has heard as he's talked opponents around the league, and what has surprised him the most is how the changes Bowness has implemented have been introduced.

"To be honest, I feel it's been easier than I thought I thought it would be because it's been very progressive," Olivier said. "Every game, there's a little something that changes, but you have to be alert and you have to be listening and registering everything that's being said. I think our group has been doing a good job at that, but they're also on top of us. The coaching staff, everyone has really doubled down and making sure that we do video, we see all those things, we make sure that players register what we're changing."

So far, the mix has been good, and Bowness went into the Olympic break happy with what he's seen from his team from an X's and O's standpoint but also in how they're working together to get the job done.

"The success comes from the guys doing their job, and trusting the other guy to do his job," Bowness said. "We're seeing much more of that trust developing. We're seeing far more communication with the defense and the backchecking. All the little details of the game, we're picking up. Now, are there some breakdowns, or breakdowns in every game? There's no such thing as a perfect hockey game, but we're seeing less and less of that."

"When I say we're a work in progress, we're getting there, and we'll just keep pushing it. But there's far more positive signs and there's far more positive video breakdowns than a couple weeks ago."

The Blue Jackets are expected to get back on the ice Wednesday after 13 days off, and the goal will be to recapture the mojo they had before they all went their separate ways – two players to Milano Cortina, everyone else to enjoy some vacation time and rest up for what will be a mad dash to the end of the NHL season.

When they step back on the ice, they shouldn't expect many major changes, though. They may not be playing the exact style of hockey Bowness has been known for, but they're playing the way they now know they can win games.

"There's not that many things we're going to change," Bowness said. "We don't have to. We're realizing the right way to play. We're starting to understand when we can and cannot make plays, so we're not turning the puck over as much. The structure has been good.

"But give the players a ton of credit, man. They've been working their butt off. They have. It's all on them. They've just bought in, so you couldn't be more proud of the guys, just their effort."

## The Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets' Werenski, Merzlikins face Olympic challenges

**By Brian Hedger – February 16, 2026**

Zach Werenski and Elvis Merzlikins are soaking up their first Winter Olympic experiences at 2026 Milano Cortina in Milan, Italy, but the Blue Jackets teammates aren't being used in the roles many expected them to hold for their countries.

Merzlikins played just two periods in Latvia's 5-1 opening loss to the United States and Werenski, who is skating mostly on the third defensive pairing.

Werenski, who is leading all NHL defensemen in goals (20) and points per game (1.19), is playing at a level that should make him a contender for the second straight year to win the Norris Trophy as the league's top defenseman and Merzlikins went into the league's Olympic break scorching hot under new coach Rick Bowness.

Should Werenski's role not increase during a U.S. bid for the gold medal that fails, a coaching staff led by New York Rangers head coach Mike Sullivan could face criticism for underutilizing the Blue Jackets star, not to mention leaving three of the NHL's top goal-scoring forwards off the roster: Jason Robertson (Dallas Stars), Cole Caufield (Montreal Canadiens) and Alex DeBrincat (Detroit Red Wings).

Latvian head coach Harijs Vitolins could face a similar chorus with Merzlikins, who has played just 40 minutes while backing up Arturs Silovs (Pittsburgh Penguins) in both ends of a back-to-back against Germany and Denmark on Feb. 14-15.

Here's a look at what's already happened and what's on tap for Werenski and Merzlikins as the tournament shifts into the single-elimination rounds:

Columbus Blue Jackets star Zach Werenski making the most of reduced role for United States at 2026 Milano Cortina

Werenski has skated 21 shifts for the U.S. in all three preliminary-round games, helping his country win Group C to earn a bye into the quarterfinals. He has two points on a goal and assist while setting up the U.S. team's first goal of the tournament and scoring its first goal Feb. 15 in a 5-1 victory over Germany.

The U.S. roster is stacked with top NHL players, including a slew of impressive defensemen, and seven defensemen dress for each Olympic game. While playing for the U.S. the past two years, Werenski has outscored every other U.S. defenseman, including Quinn Hughes, who is getting the most minutes thus far and was acquired this season by Minnesota Wild general manager Bill Guerin, who doubles as the U.S. general manager.

Charlie McAvoy, meanwhile, is a talented Boston Bruins defenseman whom Werenski is outscoring in the NHL by 16 goals and 23 points. McAvoy is also wearing a full plastic face shield stemming from a jaw injury in his final game before the Olympic break and is Sullivan's son-in-law. Favoritism probably isn't

the reason Werenski began this tournament playing his off side on the third pairing, but it will probably stand out to critics if the U.S. fails to win the gold medal.

Werenski hasn't complained about his usage, which meshes with his personality and character. He's simply doing what he always does for the Blue Jackets, only less than usual. On that note, however, the U.S. has begun to sporadically skate Werenski with Hughes.

Columbus Blue Jackets goalie Elvis Merzlikins battling with Arturs Silovs for Latvia's top spot at 2026 Winter Olympics

The announcement that Silovs would start for Latvia on Feb. 14 against Germany wasn't a shock, since he is putting together a solid NHL season for the Penguins.

Vitolins told reporters in Milan that playing Silovs in that upset victory was Latvia's pre-Olympics plan to deal with back-to-back weekend games in the preliminary round, which seemed to indicate Merzlikins was still his top goalie and would start Feb. 15 against Denmark.

Silovs started against Denmark and allowed three goals in a 4-2 loss to conclude Latvia's Group C action. Silovs allowed two early goals, including one that should have been stopped, and then gave up the third to put Latvia in a 3-0 hole. Latvia clawed back to 3-2 but couldn't pull even.

Rather than going to Merzlikins for a goaltending shakeup, Vitolins stuck with Silovs, who settled into a solid performance. Latvian fans, however, voiced their displeasure online about Merzlikins not playing.

Vitolins' goaltending decision for Latvia's playoff qualifying round matchup Feb. 17 against Sweden will be closely monitored, but the expectation now should be Silovs after seeing the coach's goalie usage in the preliminary round. Merzlikins, 31, has more international experience than Silovs, 24.

## The Hockey Writers / How Are the Two Blue Jackets Olympians Benefitting From the Olympics?

**By Wesley Minke – February 16, 2026**

The Columbus Blue Jackets entered the Olympic break as the hottest team in the league. Riding a seven-game win streak that had brought them within four points of the final wild-card spot in the Eastern Conference, the timing seemed terrible, but it might give them an extra boost for a final push.

The Blue Jackets are tied with the New York Islanders and the Buffalo Sabres for the fewest players in Milan, with two, Zach Werenski (Team USA) and Elvis Merzlikins (Team Latvia), which means the rest of the roster can breathe a little bit.

It's been 12 years since NHLers participated in the Winter Olympics, but that dream is now coming true for Werenski and Merzlikins.

### **Werenski Shines for Team USA**

This season has been near perfect for Werenski, and his Olympics have been just as steady as his play in Columbus. He has been the Blue Jackets' driving force from the back end and the team's best player, and he has also been a stabilizing force for Team USA, with a goal and an assist, heading into the knockout rounds.

If the Blue Jackets can stay hot coming out of the break and make it into the playoffs, Werenski will be in the middle of the Hart Trophy conversation as league MVP. The Hockey Writers' own Mark Scheig believes he should already be in that conversation. He leads the Blue Jackets in points, with 62 in 52 games, and he is tied for the league lead in goals amongst defensemen with 20.

At the Olympics, Werenski is averaging roughly 18 minutes of ice time per game, which is good news for fans who want him to return ready for a playoff push. He is averaging a little over 26 minutes of ice time a night in Columbus, which ranks second in the NHL. The Blue Jackets will need him to continue logging tough minutes on his return.

### **Merzlikins Confidence Not Shattered**

Given the Blue Jackets' recent success, Elvis Merzlikins went into the Olympics as one of the hottest goaltenders in the NHL. His first Olympic start came against Team USA, but he was replaced at the start of the third period after allowing four goals on 32 shots.

He played well, but Team Latvia was no match for the USA. Merzlikins has not seen the ice since that game, with Pittsburgh Penguins goaltender Arturs Silovs in net for the last two games against Germany and Denmark, with one win and one loss.

The biggest takeaway for Merzlikins should be that he played well against an extremely talented squad. For Blue Jackets fans, they can be reassured that Merzlikins should return to the team ready to share the workload for the stretch run.

Rick Bowness has done a lot for the team since he took over the bench last month, but Merzlikins' play has especially improved. He has seen more action in one month under Bowness than he saw in three months under Evason and has been a key reason the team has won 11 of their last 12 games.

Getting him back to Columbus healthy, rested, and ready to continue to play at the highest level will be a big boost to the team.

The Blue Jackets resume play on Feb 26 against the Boston Bruins.

## [The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets News & Rumors: Werenski, Merzlikins & More](#)

**By Mark Scheig – February 14, 2026**

For the Columbus Blue Jackets' duo of Zach Werenski and Elvis Merzlikins, their lifelong dream was finally realized when they took the ice for the first time on Thursday at the Winter Olympics. In their cases, they played against each other when Team U.S.A. played against Team Latvia.

Merzlikins drew the start in a game that would see Team U.S.A. heavily favored thanks to their depth, skill and experience. Team Latvia provided their share of NHL experience as well and would play an honest game.

Early on, the Latvians hung right in there thanks in part to some luck on a couple different fronts. But it was Werenski who helped get the Team U.S.A. party started.

### **Werenski Picks Up Where He Left Off**

Werenski found Matthew Tkachuk who then found his brother Brady to make it 1-0 just 5:29 into the game. Right away, you could tell the defenseman was feeling at home on the big stage.

Whether it was crisp, decisive passes or the way he could create space with his smooth skating, Werenski made his presence known right away with an assist on the first goal. With Quinn Hughes now with Team U.S.A., it gives them a deeper and more dynamic look on the blueline with how their collective group can shut other teams down.

But if necessary, coach Mike Sullivan can put Hughes and Werenski together if there is a need for instant offense. This happened right after a Team U.S.A. penalty kill. The pair each quarterbacked their own power-play units on Thursday.

Werenski played mostly with Jake Sanderson on the third pair which shows just how deep Team U.S.A.'s blueline is. On top of assisting on the opening goal, Werenski finished with three shots on goal and now has seven assists since the start of the 4-Nations Faceoff.

### **Merzlikins' Day**

If there was going to be any chance for the Latvians to upset Team U.S.A., Merzlikins was going to have to be a reason. Thanks to some luck and a keen eye, the game stayed closed for just over 30 minutes.

Team U.S.A. had two goals taken away due to challenge. One was for offside and the other was for goaltender interference.

Quinn Hughes thought he scored. But as Team U.S.A. gained the zone, Brock Nelson, who scored twice in the game, was deemed offside.

Then J.T. Miller found himself in front of Merzlikins. Although there wasn't a lot of contact, Miller entered the crease which was enough for the officials to wipe Nelson's goal off. The Latvians took advantage of the situation.

Renars Krastenbergs beat Connor Hellebuyck to make it 1-1. The goal came just 1:56 after Brady Tkachuk's goal.

The first period ended 1-1 with Merzlikins making 14 saves. It was a good start for him keeping his team in the game. The post also helped his cause along the way. Eventually though, the dam broke when Team U.S.A. took control of the game later in the second period.

Jack Hughes found Nelson to make it 2-1 midway through the second period. Team U.S.A. then added goals from Tage Thompson and then Nelson again near the end of the period on their way to a 17-2 shots advantage and a 4-1 lead.

Merzlikins was pulled after two periods after stopping 28 of 32. Arturs Silovs played the third period stopping five of six shots.

Merzlikins told NHL.com's Dan Rosen that he got lucky early in the game.

Rosen also reported that Merzlikins being pulled from the game wasn't injury related with the goaltender admitting that it was an attempt to change the energy at the time. All-in-all, Merzlikins did what he could to keep the Latvians in the game but Team U.S.A.'s overwhelming second period proved to be too much to overcome.

Next up for both Werenski and Merzlikins are a set of back-to-back games on the weekend. Team U.S.A. will play Denmark on Saturday and then Germany on Sunday with both games starting just after 3:00 P.M. Columbus time. Team Latvia will play Germany on Saturday and then Denmark on Sunday with Saturday's game a 6:00 A.M. eastern start and Sunday's game a 1:00 P.M. eastern start.

### **Side Dishes**

According to a report from James Murphy of The RG Media, the Blue Jackets have indicated to other teams that Boone Jenner, Mason Marchment and Charlie Coyle are off the trade market with the intention of signing them to extensions. Given their current 11-1 run, this comes as no surprise. This Olympic break was always seen as the time that GM Don Waddell would have discussions to see what could get done. What remains to be seen is how aggressive the Blue Jackets will handle the trade deadline.

The other bit of news to watch is if the Blue Jackets make progress with extensions on their notable RFA's. This includes Adam Fantilli, Cole Sillinger and Jet Greaves among others. Waddell previously stated this time would be when discussions around Fantilli would take place again. While there is no rush to get something done right this second, being able to lock up one of their most important players is a high priority.

The Blue Jackets not at the Olympics will return to practice on Wednesday Feb 18 as teams will start ramping up activities before the resumption of the season. The team will practice Wednesday and

Thursday, take Friday off and practice on the weekend. They resume their season Feb 26 in Boston against the Bruins in what is shaping up to be a massive game in the East playoff race.

## USA Hockey / Blue Line Blasts

**By Justin Felisko – February 15, 2026**

MILAN – Zach Werenski remembers cheering on Team USA during the Olympics as a kid growing up in Grosse Pointe Woods, Michigan, but he credits a different time of his life as to where he truly started to learn what it means – and what it takes – to wear the USA logo on his jersey.

“I learned the passion for playing for USA Hockey at the NTDP,” Werenski said during the U.S. Olympic Orientation Camp in August, which included a visit with this year’s current group of athletes at the National Team Development Program. “From a young age, it really gets kind of engrained in you how important it is, how special it is to put on that jersey and to just never take it for granted. Whether it’s World Juniors or World Championships, the 4 Nations, I always enjoyed playing for USA Hockey.

“It’s a must to play hockey for your country.”

Werenski got the U.S. rolling Sunday night in the team’s 5-1 victory over Germany to win Group C at Milano Santagiulia Ice Hockey Arena when he scored with 8.7 seconds remaining in the first period, beginning a standout night for the team’s blue liners.

“Great play by Auston (Matthews) there,” Werenski said. “He gave me some time there and I definitely felt good seeing it go in the net there. Obviously, you dream of playing in an Olympics and to score a goal in one is pretty special.

“Today was our best 60 minutes, for sure,” Werenski said. “We’ve had good moments throughout the tournament. Good periods, but today was our most consistent.”

A defenseman either scored or assisted on every U.S. goal against Germany.

“I think we just know we have it,” Werenski said. “We know we can obviously produce. You look at the guys in the NHL and the seasons that they’re having. A lot of guys are having great seasons with production. And I think if you just play the game the right way the offense, you just let it come. You’re going to get it at some point, and I feel like that’s what we did tonight.”

Werenski ranks second in goals (20) among NHL defensemen ahead of the Olympic break and second in points (62). Werenski led all skaters at the 4 Nations Face-Off in assists and points (0-6—6) and became the first defenseman in NHL International Tournament history (incl. OLY, WC, WJC, WCH/4N) to lead all players outright in points.

The Columbus Blue Jackets d-man knows that any of Team USA’s blueliners are a threat to impact the game in all areas.

“You go down the list of defensemen on the team, and everyone can do everything, whether it is power play, penalty kill, five-on-five situations,” Werenski said. “It’s a really special group and a very unique

group. I feel like it's probably the deepest d-core the U.S. has ever had, and just honored to be a part of it."

One of Werenski's teammates at the NTDP in 2013-14 was Matthews. The captain of the U.S. Olympic Men's Ice Hockey Team gave the U.S. a 2-0 lead when he knocked home a rebound 3:25 into the second period off a Quinn Hughes shot on the power play. It was the first of two goals from Matthews.

"It is a big honor to wear this jersey and represent your country, to see all the support and USA flags and the chants, and my family is here as well. It has been a really special experience," Matthews said.

Seventeen of the 25 players on the U.S. Olympic Men's Ice Hockey Team played for the NTDP on their development path to the NHL.

That includes Hughes, who's four assists are the most among defensemen at the Olympics through pool play.

"We are trying to be the closest team as possible and enjoying the experience," Werenski said earlier in the week at the Starbucks Winter House. "I feel like in a short tournament like this, the closest teams have the best chance of winning, and I feel like we're already a pretty close team, this bring us bring us together even more."

"We are not just playing for our country. We want to represent our country well and come home with a gold medal."

Brock Faber, who played for the NTDP five years after Werenski and Matthews, increased the U.S. lead to 3-0 with 2:25 remaining in the second period.

Werenski's d-man partner, Jake Sanderson, later assisted on both of the United States two goals from Matthews and Tage Thompson in the third period as the U.S. distanced themselves from Germany. Sanderson also played with Faber at the NTDP.

"We keep getting better every single game building more chemistry as well," Sanderson said. "(Germany) is a really good team with a lot of skill and I thought we checked really well."

Werenski and Sanderson have been growing as defensive pairing after first playing together last year at the 4 Nations Face-Off.

"It's been awesome, and I've played with him last year at the 4 Nations for a bit," Werenski said. "He's just so quick to close plays and gap up. He's really easy to read off and I really like playing with him."

Sanderson added, "He's so good. He's so fast. He just commands the puck. Such a good skater, and he breaks out this puck really well. So yeah, he's an amazing player."

Werenski helped the U.S. end a 92-year gold medal drought at the IIHF Men's World Championship eight months ago.

Now he and the U.S. Olympic Men's Ice Hockey Team await their quarterfinal opponent (Latvia or Sweden) on Wednesday at 3:10 p.m. ET (NBC | Peacock) as the U.S. continues its pursuit of its first gold medal in men's ice hockey since 1980.

"I feel like we've ramped it up each game and we are probably in the best spot we've been in all tournament, so I think we feel good," Werenski said.

## The Hockey Writers / Cleveland Monsters Playing Best Hockey of Their 2025-26 Season

**By Mark Scheig – February 17, 2026**

The hockey in the NHL might still be on pause due to the Winter Olympics in Milan. But after holding their All-Star Weekend, the AHL is back in full swing.

For the Cleveland Monsters, that's been a very good thing of late. The team is coming off a Pennsylvania sweep knocking off both the Lehigh Valley Phantoms and the Wilkes-Barre/Scranton Penguins.

The Monsters are one of the hottest teams in the AHL at this moment. They're on an 8-1-1 run in their last 10 games and are 12-4-2 since the calendar turned to 2026. Four of the six losses have been to the two best teams in the Eastern Conference in the Providence Bruins and Laval Rocket. The Monsters do have a win in Grand Rapids in that stretch, who has been the best team in the AHL this season.

The Monsters' streak started when the team was hovering around the hockey .500 mark for the season. They were 13-11-4-1 at the start of the New Year.

The Monsters enter this week with a record of 25-15-6-1, good for third in their division and comfortably in a playoff spot in a tight Eastern Conference. They have a three-game schedule this week playing in Grand Rapids on Wednesday before hosting the Toronto Marlies for a pair of games at Rocket Arena Friday and Saturday.

We will highlight a couple of performances for the Monsters that have helped them get to this point in which they are playing some of their best hockey of the season. We'll begin with their AHL All-Star representative up to his usual tricks producing offense.

### **Del Bel Belluz Heating Up**

Monsters' center Luca Del Bel Belluz is again pacing the team on offense. Coming into this week, he's up to 40 points in 35 games including 13 goals. As he's gone, so has his team.

Del Bel Belluz has points in eight consecutive games and has points in nine of his last 10 games overall. He has three goals and four multi-point outings in that span. He has solidified himself as the team's top center and continues to gain valuable experience there.

The Blue Jackets are mostly healthy at this point which has allowed Del Bel Belluz to get into a rhythm with the Monsters. Should something happen in Columbus after the Olympic break, he is on the short list to be called up depending on need.

The one noticeable area Del Bel Belluz is starting to make a difference is on the power play. He had eight power-play goals all of last season. He has seven so far this season with 25 games left to play. When the team needs a big goal, they look his way.

The other thing to potentially watch here is the upcoming NHL Trade Deadline. Depending on how active GM Don Waddell wants to be, Del Bel Belluz would be a player other teams would be interested in.

Del Bel Belluz doesn't turn 23 until November. He plays a premium position as a center and has demonstrated he's ready for a more full-time NHL role. In his callups to the Blue Jackets, he's played both center and on the wing.

The current depth chart with the Blue Jackets could pose a challenge to Del Bel Belluz as he is more of an offensive player. Sean Monahan and Adam Fantilli are the current top-six centers. Charlie Coyle's situation will be worth watching to see if the team can extend him.

Should the Blue Jackets be set down the middle, they will have an interesting decision to make on Del Bel Belluz. They could have him come up on the wing which is certainly within the realm of possibility.

But if Waddell sees a major opportunity to improve his club and doesn't want to part with first-round picks, teams will ask about a player like Del Bel Belluz. The Blue Jackets' organization loves this player so there would have to be incentive to consider a move here.

Del Bel Belluz is playing the best hockey of his young pro career. Now armed with multiple AHL All-Star appearances, he's hungry for more. He's heated up at the right time. With that, the Monsters have played their best hockey of the season. Both the Blue Jackets and other NHL teams have noticed.

### **Some Other Noteworthy Performances**

Del Bel Belluz isn't alone when it comes to good performances of late. Mikael Pyyhtia has stepped up in recent games. He has goals in consecutive games while recording eight points in his last seven games overall. He already has put up career offensive numbers in the AHL with 11-21-32 in 34 games played.

Luca Pinelli continues to impress despite a recent dip in his shooting percentage. He's still third on the team with 31 points while playing in more key situations.

Quick question. Who leads the Monsters in shots on goal this season without looking? If you guessed Corson Ceulemans, that's impressive. He enters this week with 103 shots on goal, one ahead of Pinelli for the team lead. Ceulemans has eight goals and 20 points in 2025-26 already shattering his personal best offensive output. He continues his rise up the Blue Jackets' prospect ranks. He's making a strong case to compete for the NHL in the next year or two. Although his path may have been different than other first-round picks, the team's patient approach is starting to payoff.

One other player we'll mention for now is someone that Rick Nash mentioned in our recent Q&A. That's Jack Williams. He has nine goals and 25 points in his first full AHL season.

On Williams, Nash had this to say: "I think Jack Williams as well. Right shot center that we got from Northeastern last year. We were excited to get him. I know he had a lot of different opportunities and I think he's showing to jump right into a pro game where he's a player that the coaches just love to throw over the bench because they trust him so much."

Williams is the Monsters' fourth-leading scorer while playing just as effectively away from the puck. He'll continue to get important reps while showing his readiness for an eventual NHL role.

On the goaltending front, Ivan Fedotov has been up and down this season but is trending in the right direction of late. He's up to a record of 17-9-4 with an .888 save percentage and a 2.85 goals against average. The Blue Jackets goaltending has been better of late which points to Fedotov being the main guy with the Monsters down the stretch of this season.

Head coach Trent Vogelhuber continues to do a nice job of managing the ebbs and flows of the season. Blue Jackets' injuries caused a bevy of callups early. Now with the team mostly healthy, the Monsters have found their game and hope to continue to build towards a berth in the Calder Cup Playoffs in 2025-26.

## ESPN / U.S. men's hockey stays unbeaten at Olympics; knockout round next

**By Associated Press – February 15, 2026**

MILAN -- Matthew Tkachuk insists he and his U.S. teammates were focused only on beating Germany in their preliminary round finale and never worried about scoring enough goals to pass Canada for the top seed at the Olympics.

"We never talked once about the top seed at all," Tkachuk said. "None of that seeding stuff. All that handles itself."

It's handled now, after the U.S. defeated Germany 5-1 on Sunday behind two goals and an assist from captain Auston Matthews and 23 saves from Connor Hellebuyck. The Americans finished group play unbeaten to clinch the second seed in the knockout round.

"The confidence just continues to grow within our group," Matthews said. "Each game, I think we've taken steps in the right direction of where we want to grow our game going into the quarterfinals, and it's good to see."

Canada put such a beatdown on France, winning 10-2, that the U.S. would have had to run up the score and beat Germany by 10 goals to pass the tournament favorite. The North American rivals cannot meet until the gold medal game.

They have to get there first. The U.S. is set to face the winner of the qualification round game Tuesday between Sweden and Latvia, while Canada plays Czechia or Denmark in the quarterfinals Wednesday.

Sweden, the only European team at the Olympics with a full roster of NHL players, won two of its three preliminary round games and dropped to seventh only because of a goal differential tiebreaker.

"A super-skilled team, a lot of guys we see throughout the NHL season," said defenseman Zach Werenski, whose goal was set up by Matthews. "They have a lot of talent on that team, and we know last year at the 4 Nations it was a hard game. I expect the same thing in the quarters if that's who we're playing against."

It could be quite the test for the U.S., which has faced Latvia, Denmark and Germany so far.

The game against Germany was a chance for the Americans to fine-tune their play before the tournament goes to single-elimination playoffs. Tkachuk had a pair of assists, and Matthews, the captain just as he was at the 4 Nations Face-Off a year ago, had his best showing of the tournament.

Hellebuyck also looked good in his second start, allowing only a goal to Tim Stutzle. The U.S. got the goaltending it expected from him after a shaky outing from Jeremy Swayman 24 hours earlier.

"I thought it was his best game," coach Mike Sullivan said. "I just think he was tracking pucks extremely well."

## The Athletic / 'Gold or bust' mentality robs Canada, U.S. and Sweden of the true joy of the Olympics

**By Mark Lazerus – February 14, 2026**

MILAN — If Team Canada were to come home from these Olympics with bronze medals slung around their necks, it would trigger a national crisis in the ancestral home of hockey. There would be summits held and think tanks built with the expressed purpose of figuring out what happened, where all the good goalies went. It would be a disaster.

If Team USA were to come home from these Olympics with silver medals stuffed in their pockets, it would serve as another devastating blow for a country that, by all rights, should have taken over the sport long ago, given its overwhelming population and resources. Forty-six years after the Miracle on Ice and 30 years since the World Cup, there would be four more long years of wondering why the heck the Americans still can't win the big one.

If Team Sweden were to come home from these Olympics with only one elimination-round victory, empty-handed, it would trigger harrowing memories of the 2002 Belarus debacle, which ended with every player's mug shot printed across the next day's "Aftonbladet" newspaper in Stockholm, which accused them of betraying the hockey-loving nation in 80-point bold-face type.

Now, if Latvia were to come home from these Olympics with an elimination-round victory, a bronze medal, or, my goodness, a silver medal?

It would trigger a parade. And it would probably last for weeks.

"Last time, when we won the bronze medal at the World Championship (in 2003), our national president made a holiday on that day," said Latvian goaltender Elvis Merzļikins of the Columbus Blue Jackets. "For us, it's a huge thing. Even if it was a bronze, it was a huge thing. If we bring medals home from the Olympics, I don't know what's going to happen. They're probably going to build a statue of the whole team."

The haves and have-nots of the global hockey community are very clear at the Olympic level, especially when NHLers are involved. There are Canada, the U.S., Sweden, and, to a lesser extent, Finland. And then there's everybody else. But the have-funs and the have-existential-dreads of the hockey community are every bit as clear.

For the Big Three, it's gold or bust. It's just that simple. For an Olympic skier who spends a lifetime training for one run that could be decided by hundredths of a second, a silver or bronze medal is still something to be celebrated, a wonderful culmination of untold hours of hard work. You might not hear your anthem played at the medal ceremony, but you still go home a hero.

Not for Sidney Crosby. Not for Auston Matthews. Not for Gabriel Landeskog. For those captains and their countries, anything less than outright victory is an utter failure. It's the same thing for the U.S. and Canada on the women's side, and it's specific to hockey at these games.

"It is unique, for sure," said American defenseman Zach Werenski. "But I think that's a good thing. I think it just proves how far USA Hockey has come, and how we feel about it. Now it's time to win. We have a lot of high-end NHL talent — superstars. But we haven't won in a long time, so it's time now for the U.S. to finally win a gold medal."

Contrast that mindset with what we witnessed at Milano Santagiulia Ice Hockey Arena on Wednesday afternoon. Had Finland beaten Slovakia, it would have been a nice start to the tournament for the Finns, a ho-hum, fully expected result. Instead, the newly built rink was ringing with wild cheers from delirious Slovak fans as their country pulled off a significant upset. Chants of SLO-VEN-SKA were still emanating from the concourses as Slovak players entered the mixed zone, smiling broadly and talking about how much such a victory meant. A few hours later, Italy's unheralded team was feeling unfathomable pride after pushing mighty Sweden to the brink. Meanwhile, Sweden won, and they were miserable.

As one Slovak journalist told me during the second intermission, when the opener was still tied, "One point here for Slovakia is gold." Imagine what an actual medal would mean. The cruel fact is it'll never feel like that for Canada, for the United States, for Sweden.

It's quite a burden to bear, especially once the elimination games start later in the tournament. All it takes is one hot goalie, one off night, one fluke play to cause a national meltdown. It almost happened in Sochi in 2014, when Latvia — Latvia! — stymied and frustrated and struck fear into the hearts of Canadians for 53 minutes before finally falling 2-1 in the quarterfinal. Latvians still tell the tale with a beaming pride that's so profound it flirts with the visual spectrum. Merzljikins said the Latvian players were so much in awe of Canada before that game that they were asking Crosby and other megastars for sticks like common fans. And then they almost beat them.

Latvia lost that game. But Latvians got so much more out of it than Canada ever could.

"One game can do that for a country like ours," the Czech Republic's Ondrej Kase said.

Germany's silver medal in the 2018 Olympics — which had a significantly leveled playing field due to the absence of NHL players — was a seminal moment for a rising hockey nation. Even with Leon Draisaitl as their top center, Moritz Seider as their top defenseman and Philipp Grubauer as their top goalie, nobody expects the Germans to contend with Canada, the U.S., Sweden and Finland in this tournament.

But a strong showing, one upset victory, or even a surprise bronze medal could mean more to Germany than a silver ever could for the Big Three.

"Exactly," said Dominik Kahun, who was on that 2018 German team and is back for 2026. "That's our big goal — to perform as best as we can. We don't really talk about the medals yet, but obviously, it would be a huge accomplishment if we could get a medal (against) the best players in the world. We know how strong our team is, but it's going to be, for most of the guys, the best hockey teams they've ever played against."

For the Big Three, performing as best as they can simply isn't sufficient. The result has to be there. It has to be there. That's why Nathan MacKinnon is so damn serious. The pressure on him and his teammates and his Swedish and American opponents is immense.

"Obviously, we came here to win gold — there's nothing else on our agenda," Sweden's Jesper Bratt said. "We come here for gold. We don't come here for any other."

For Canada, nothing will match the intense pressure the team felt in 2010 as the home team in Vancouver. These days, Sidney Crosby's golden goal in overtime against the Americans is remembered as one of the most joyous moments in the nation's athletic history. At the time, the collective sigh of relief from an entire country was as palpable as the collective scream of celebration. They had to win that game. Had to.

Canada also won in Sochi four years later and took the 4 Nations Face-Off last year. The Canadians are the best in best-on-best. But you have to prove it every single time.

"Playing for Team Canada over the years, that's something you learn is part of it, that expectation and that responsibility," Crosby said. "We understand that. We have high expectations (of) ourselves, and you've got to go out there and play and do all the things that are necessary to try to win. You can't think too far ahead, but we understand that's the expectation."

One interesting wrinkle in these competing mentalities is how the Big Three get everybody's best shot, every time. Sweden surely didn't take Italy terribly seriously on Wednesday evening, but for the Italian players, the opportunity to play against the mighty Swedes was a once-in-a-lifetime thing.

"We're not going to go out there and take it easy just because we're playing an 'easier' opponent," Sweden's Rickard Rakell said, using finger quotes. "Got Game 1 (on Wednesday) and that's all we're thinking about."

Yeah, but we all know that's not entirely true. Sweden is surely keeping a close eye on what Canada and the United States and Finland are doing. Because they know that to win the gold medal — the only acceptable outcome of these Olympics — they're going to have to go through those other hockey powers to do it.

Nobody gets eliminated in the group stage, so for Canada, the U.S. and Sweden, these early games are about finding chemistry on the lines and working out some system kinks as teams adapt to a new coach and new teammates.

For Italy and Latvia and Denmark and even Slovakia and the Czech Republic, every single game is an opportunity to do something that'll long be remembered in their home nations — something that'll be etched in stone and on the hearts of their countrymen. Something that lasts forever.

"It just feels amazing," Slovakia's Erik Cernak said of what, in the cold calculus of a round-robin tournament, really didn't mean anything. "Just amazing."

That's a feeling Canada, the United States and Sweden will never know. Because heavy lies the heads competing for the crown.

## The Hockey Writers / NHL Rumors: Oilers Drama, Blue Jackets Shift, Maple Leafs and Raddysh

By Jim Parsons – February 12, 2026

In today's NHL rumors rundown, the Edmonton Oilers are once again being linked to a 20-goal winger while Calvin Pickard's agent throws shade at the other two netminders. Meanwhile, the Columbus Blue Jackets are pulling key veterans off the trade market. Connor Murphy is emerging as one of the Blackhawks' top deadline chips, and the Toronto Maple Leafs are being cautioned about a splashy blue-line target.

### **Oilers Linked to McMann as Pickard Debate Lingers**

Bobby McMann continues to surface in trade chatter surrounding the Edmonton Oilers. Despite reports that GM Stan Bowman has also explored options like Nicolas Roy and Oliver Ekman-Larsson, insiders—including TSN's Chris Johnston—still see McMann as a strong fit in Edmonton.

Johnston writes:

"The Oilers are all-in to chase a championship, but they're operating with limited cap flexibility while sizing up new pieces. Enter McMann. There won't be another 20-plus goal man available at this deadline who commands a cap hit below the league's minimum salary. But the Leafs can get him there with full retention. There's going to be a premium charged for doing that, but part of being all-in is doing whatever it takes to increase your odds of winning."

source – 'NHL trade matchmaker: Predicting where top targets go by the deadline, part 5' – Chris Johnston – The Athletic – 02-11-2026

McMann, a pending UFA with 19 goals and 32 points in 56 games, carries a \$1.35 million cap hit that could drop to \$675,000 with full retention.

Meanwhile, Calvin Pickard's agent stirred conversation by questioning the Oilers' crease shuffle. Speaking in an interview with Sports 1440's Jason Gregor, Ritch Winter suggested Pickard's playoff résumé and locker-room presence compare favorably to Connor Ingram and Tristan Jarry, who he believes haven't proven they can get the job done. Winter asked, "Collectively, they haven't won 9 games in the playoffs, have they?"

He believes there is still a path for Pickard to make a difference for the Oilers this season. "These guys know what he did when their season was in tough shape. He delivered."

### **Blue Jackets Shift From Sellers to Buyers**

As per a report from RG.org's James Murphy, the Columbus Blue Jackets appear to be changing direction ahead of the March 6 deadline. Rather than moving pending UFAs Boone Jenner, Charlie Coyle, and Mason Marchment, GM Don Waddell is expected to pursue contract extensions.

The shift follows seven wins in a row under new head coach Rick Bowness, pulling Columbus within five points of a wild-card spot. Trade chatter around the trio has cooled significantly, with sources indicating they're effectively off the market.

### **Connor Murphy Drawing Strong Interest**

In Chicago, defenseman Connor Murphy is shaping up as one of the more intriguing deadline names. The pending UFA carries a \$4.4 million cap hit, and as a right-shot defender who kills penalties and brings physicality, he's exactly the type contenders covet.

Multiple teams are reportedly monitoring the situation, with Dallas viewed as a natural fit. Buffalo, Ottawa, Pittsburgh, Boston, Detroit, and San Jose have also been mentioned as potential suitors.

### **Maple Leafs Urged to Pump Brakes on Raddysh**

The Maple Leafs are once again being tied to a right-shot defenseman, this time Tampa Bay's Darren Raddysh. While the fit on paper is obvious, the reality is complicated.

Morgan Rielly's no-move clause and \$7.5 million cap hit make clearing space difficult. Tampa Bay, meanwhile, is unlikely to part with Raddysh cheaply, especially given his strong season and potential long-term value. Rumors suggest he could command \$5–6 million annually on his next deal.

For Toronto, the price—both in assets and cap space—may be too steep. The idea is enticing, but some believe this is a swing the Maple Leafs might take that ultimately backfires.