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## The Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets tripped up by Buffalo Sabres in second preseason tilt: 3 takeaways

**By Brian Hedger – September 22, 2025**

The second game of the Blue Jackets' preseason slate didn't go nearly as well as the first.

After downing the St. Louis Blues 4-1 on Sept. 21 at Nationwide Arena to open the preseason, the Jackets lost 4-0 to the Buffalo Sabres on Sept. 22 with a largely different roster. They've now got games Sept. 23 in Buffalo and Sept. 24 at home against the Pittsburgh Penguins to complete a stretch of four straight games in four days to open the exhibition schedule.

Bowen Byrum, Beck Malenstyn, Jack Quinn and Konsta Helenius scored goals for the Sabres (1-0-0), who got a combined shutout from goalies Alexandar Georgiev (16 saves) and Devon Levi (six saves). Elvis Merzlikins started for the Blue Jackets and stopped eight of 10 shots before Jet Greaves took over halfway through the second period for 23 saves on 24 shots.

Here are three takeaways:

### **Elvis Merzlikins, Jet Greaves split the net evenly for Columbus Blue Jackets**

The Blue Jackets' top two goalies, Elvis Merzlikins and Jet Greaves, got into their first preseason game as a tandem. They split the net almost exactly 50/50, with Greaves replacing Merzlikins at 9:59 of the second period.

Merzlikins allowed two goals on 10 shots in his 29:59, both in the second period, while Greaves closed the game out with 23 saves on 24 shots. Merzlikins is expected to handle the No. 1 role to start the season, but it won't be a surprise if Greaves gives him a serious internal push.

"(Greaves) was real good, real calm and did what he does," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "Elvis too, right? We thought both guys were real good. Elvis couldn't do anything on the second (goal) and didn't see the first one, but he made some real good saves and was real calm, too, in his half game. I was happy with the start for both of them."

### **Justin Danforth impresses in first game against Columbus Blue Jackets**

Justin Danforth wanted to re-sign with the Blue Jackets, but his asking price didn't quite fit into the team's payroll planning. So, the versatile veteran signed a two-year contract on July 1 with the Sabres worth \$1.8 million per season. This was his initial return to Columbus to face the Blue Jackets, who provided his first NHL opportunity in 2021 by signing him out of the Kontinental Hockey League.

Danforth played 14:54 on 20 shifts while skating at right wing on the Sabres' second line and won 9 of 12 draws (75%). He also contributed to Malenstyn's goal to make it 2-0 by forcing a turnover.

"We wanted to get something done with Columbus, but at the end of the day it comes down to business," Danforth said. "That's the way it goes in hockey, but they have a great team. It's going to be a fun year for that group. I think they've got all the pieces they need to get to that next level."

In four seasons with the Blue Jackets, Danforth posted 31 goals, 33 assists and 64 points in 183 games while spending time skating on all four lines. His late winning goal to defeat the Detroit Red Wings on March 1 in the NHL's stadium series at Ohio Stadium won't soon be forgotten in Columbus.

### **Columbus Blue Jackets draw early NHL scouting interest**

The scouts' section of Nationwide Arena's press box was bustling for the Blue Jackets' first two preseason games Sept. 21-22 against the St. Louis Blues and Sabres.

The credential list against Buffalo included scouts from nine different teams just one day after roughly that many showed up to watch the Blue Jackets down the Blues 4-1. The interest might not have anything to do with trade assessments, but multiple teams are still looking to round out their NHL rosters via trades or unsigned free agents playing on professional tryout offers.

## The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets' Charlie Coyle Hopes to Bring Winning Culture to Team

**By Matthew Buhrmann – September 23, 2025**

Ever since GM Don Waddell took over the role for the Columbus Blue Jackets before the 2024-25 season, he made one thing a top priority. He wanted to address the center depth.

Waddell wasted no time in adding Sean Monahan on a five-year deal. That allowed the Blue Jackets to run their four centers as Monahan, Adam Fantilli, Cole Sillinger and Sean Kuraly. While other players stepped in when needed, center depth was no longer an issue.

Despite the improvement up the middle, it wasn't good enough. The Blue Jackets fell short of the playoffs. Waddell went to work on addressing their needs up front.

That included addressing their center depth. The four above mentioned centers are all left-handed. That left the door open to acquire or sign a right-handed center who can play in multiple roles.

Thanks to a trade with the Colorado Avalanche, Waddell got just what he was looking for. In addition to landing Miles Wood, he landed right-handed center Charlie Coyle. His presence changes the look of the Blue Jackets' forward group.

As for Coyle, he hopes to bring a winning culture with him into the Blue Jackets' locker room. As it turns out, that's all he knows.

### **Coyle Knows Success**

Coyle made his NHL debut in the 2012-13 season with the Minnesota Wild. This season with the Blue Jackets marks his 14th season in the NHL.

Coyle is 13 for 13 in making the Stanley Cup Playoffs. He hasn't missed them yet in his entire NHL career.

Not only did Waddell add an element to their center depth, he brought in someone that knows what it takes to grind through a regular season in order to make the playoffs. Coyle hopes that can rub off on his teammates.

The Blue Jackets will again be among the youngest teams in the NHL in 2025-26. Coyle knows that he will need to step up in the leadership role. What does he bring and how can he help this team take the next step?

"Well, it's experience," Coyle said. "I've had a couple years of experience now being one of the older guys (on my team) which is crazy. I've played on some pretty good teams and learned from some really solid leaders and just older veterans I played with. So kind of just taking that that knowledge, what I've gained and gathered from those guys and passing it on."

"We have a younger team. I think we're one of the youngest teams in the league if I'm not mistaken. And so veteran presence and leadership is very crucial, and that's just a part that I can bring and a part that I've tried to work on the last however many years. While you start to age a little bit, you need to bring that element. And I'm a guy who has to do that for this team."

Coyle is a leader but isn't the vocal type. While some leaders will speak up as any opportunity presents itself, Coyle speaks when necessary but generally allows his play and experience to do the most talking.

Also being able to learn from many great leaders has helped Coyle over the years. They have helped him develop the leadership skills that will help the Blue Jackets this season.

"I think some guys have that personality where it's probably easier for some. For me, not really honestly. I'm not usually a big vocal guy," Coyle said. "Again, I've tried to work at that the last however many years because usually when you do get older, you got to be the one if things need to be said. You're kind of in a position now where you know what needs to be said from being around and being through different things. So it's something I've worked at."

"It definitely helps when you get more comfortable with guys and you start to feel out who's in what position and what guys like to do that. I'm not here to step on toes. Everyone has a voice. That's what I've gathered from other teams. We're all in it, right? We're all on a team. So everyone has a voice. Doesn't matter if you're a rookie or 20 years in the league. That's something Zdeno Chara would always say and that was a guy saying that as he was 40 years old. He would always ask for everyone else's opinion. So I think that those are things that you can pass down that I've learned from guys like that, leaders like Chara and beyond. And I think that I can definitely help out."

### **Coyle Excited Where Blue Jackets Could Go**

To be able to make 13 consecutive postseasons speaks to everything Coyle has overcome and learned in the NHL. He says being on close teams have helped him along the way along with other factors.

Coyle believes the Blue Jackets aren't far off. They have one important element in their favor at this stage.

"I'm really excited because you want to play postseason," Coyle said. "Luckily, I haven't missed postseason at all in my career. And it's something you always want to shoot for, right? And sometimes you luck out and sometimes you just are part of really good teams that have it and just know you're going to get there, right? So it's a mental thing but also you got to put in the work and the time and just getting to know each other off the ice, on the ice. It all plays a part. They always say the closer the team is, the better you're going to play and that's something we have to do and continue to do. I know this team. You can sense it already. They have that."

## The Hockey Writers / 3 Takeaways From Blue Jackets' 4-0 Shutout Loss to Sabres

By Matthew Buhrmann – September 23, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets were shut out in their second preseason game on Monday night by the Buffalo Sabres, and are now halfway through their four-game, four-day stretch to begin the preseason. The Blue Jackets didn't generate much offense throughout the lineup, finishing with just 22 shots on goal.

In the return of former Blue Jacket Justin Danforth to Nationwide Arena, Bowen Byram and Beck Malenstyn both scored in the second period, while Jack Quinn and Konsta Helenius added goals late in the third to seal the 4-0 win for the visitors. Alexandar Georgiev played the first 40 minutes and stopped all 16 shots he faced before Devon Levi entered for the third. Levi turned aside all six shots he faced to complete the combined shutout.

Here are my three takeaways from the loss.

### **Solid First Period, No Reward**

The Blue Jackets opened the game well in both zones, outshooting the Sabres 8-4 in the first period and generating some quality chances. Through the first period, I was impressed with the third and fourth lines, both of which played with great energy. Most of the players on those lines will likely be in Cleveland to start the season, but they were flying around the offensive zone and creating pressure. Standout players hard on the forecheck were Owen Griffin, Jack Williams, and James Malatesta.

Griffin, a 2025 fifth-round pick, was impressive to me on Monday as the fourth-line center. He played on the penalty kill and hustled up and down the ice. One area he struggled in was the faceoff circle, going 0-for-7 on draws, but he is still young and will have time to develop that part of his game when he heads back to junior soon. Either way, seeing energy out of the young prospects is always great and shows the organizational center depth.

Head coach Dean Evason liked the start but acknowledged the drop-off afterward, saying, "Really liked the first period. Did not get rewarded, but did a lot of good things. Corrected some stuff from the other night, getting pucks through, generating chances. After that, it fizzled. Did not like our game after the first, except our goalies. But we can take positives from the first."

After the first, the offense fell off, and the Blue Jackets were out-forechecked the rest of the way. Very few pucks got through on net, and chances were minimal, as they were outshot 31-14 in the final 40 minutes.

### **Lundestrom Solid in Faceoff Circle**

Free-agent signing Isac Lundestrom made his Blue Jackets debut, centering the second line between Zach Aston-Reese on his left and James Malatesta on the right. While he did not generate much offensively, he showed his strength in the faceoff circle, winning 12/16 draws (75%). That ability makes him a strong candidate for bottom-six minutes once the regular season begins, with a likely role on the penalty kill too.

When asked about his focus heading into his first preseason game, Lundestrom said, "It is always tough to start off, but it is nice to finally get the first game going. Try to win battles, be strong on faceoffs, things like that. Just keep working."

Evaluating his performance, he added, “No, I think I can do much better for sure. Like I said, first game, nice to get it out of the way.”

### **Goaltending Battle Front and Center**

Elvis Merzlikins and Jet Greaves split the game evenly as they continue their battle for the starting role. Merzlikins played until midway through the second, stopping 8/10 shots. Both goals against him came on plays where he was screened or caught in a tough spot, including one after his turnover kept the puck in the zone.

“We thought both guys were real good,” Evason said. “Elvis couldn’t do anything on the second one and didn’t see the first one. But he made some real good saves. He was real calm too in his half game. So happy with the start for both of them.”

The two goals Merzlikins gave up in the second period were tough ones with traffic in front. On the second, he tried to move the puck with a risky pass to Adam Fantilli along the wall, but Fantilli was immediately swarmed by two forecheckers. That turnover kept play alive in the Blue Jackets’ zone, and Buffalo quickly set up their offense. Owen Power sent a shot in from the blue line that redirected straight to Malenstyn, who buried it as Merzlikins was caught out of position.

Greaves entered midway through the second and faced more than twice the workload and stopped 23/24 shots. He looked sharp, showing off a quick glove, closing down gaps on shooters in tight, hugging the post when the Sabres swarmed, and using his athletic sprawl to smother rebounds. He tracked the puck well through traffic and denied plenty of looks from the outside. The only shot to beat him came from Helenius on an odd-man rush with less than a minute left in the game.

After the game, Greaves spoke about the value of getting back into live action. “I think from my perspective, it’s really just being in those game situations. Seeing the traffic. Seeing the players develop the rushes and zone play, and even the breakouts and things like that. Just getting back in the flow of the game situations, I think is super important. It’s fun just to be back out there playing again, enjoying it.”

When asked about the competition with Merzlikins, he added, “For me, it is just day to day. My focus is to come in ready to do whatever I can to help the Blue Jackets win. Just making sure I am prepared.”

The battle for the net remains open, though Greaves may have gained a little edge with his strong showing on Monday. For now, both netminders have the staff’s confidence, and a close-to-even split to start the season remains a realistic possibility.

Not many NHL players will be in the lineup on Tuesday in Buffalo. Puck drop is at 7:00 PM EST.

## The Athletic / Metropolitan Division roundtable: Each team's reason for optimism and concern — and a prediction

By Peter Baugh, Sean Gentile, Shayna Goldman, Kevin Kurz, Vince Mercogliano, Aaron Portzline and Josh Yohe – September 23, 2025

The Carolina Hurricanes have made the playoffs in seven consecutive seasons, the third-longest active streak in the NHL. A quick survey of assembled *The Athletic* writers predicts the Canes will not only make it eight straight, they'll also return to the top of the Metropolitan Division.

Boosted by the offseason additions of winger Nikolaj Ehlers and defenseman K'Andre Miller, the Hurricanes received six out of eight possible first-place votes as the top team in the Metro, even though the Washington Capitals (2024-25) and New York Rangers (2023-24) have won the last two division crowns.

With training camps around the NHL heading into the second week, it's a good time to take a look at how the Metro shifted over the offseason.

Carolina was the runaway favorite, with New Jersey and Washington regarded as playoff teams but division also-rans. Upstart Columbus and the New York Rangers are part of the mushy middle, while Philadelphia and the New York Islanders — both in transition — are in a battle near the bottom.

One club looks out of place, though. Pittsburgh, which hasn't finished last place in a division in 20 years (2005-06), was the clear pick to inhabit the basement. Teams are ranked in order of predicted finish, with eight points given for a first-place vote, seven for second place, etc.

### **1. Carolina Hurricanes (62 points, 6 first-place votes)**

Who's new?: F Nikolaj Ehlers, F Bradly Nadeau, D K'Andre Miller, D Alexander Nikishin, G Cayden Primeau

Who's gone?: F Jack Roslovic, D Brent Burns, D Dmitry Orlov, D Scott Morrow, D Riley Stillman

Reason for optimism: The Hurricanes are a regular-season juggernaut, and every summer they make substantive moves in an attempt to get over the hump in the playoffs. This summer was a prime example. They added one of the biggest names on the free agent market in Ehlers, who should bolster an already-strong forward group and could pop offensively if he gets the ice time he should have gotten in Winnipeg. The other big add is Miller, who fell out of favor with the Rangers but gets a fresh start with a club that plays his style of game. Carolina is also [expecting a big boost from Jackson Blake](#). The Hurricanes have the third-longest playoff streak in the league (seven seasons). It will be a shock if they don't make it eight, and they're heavy favorites to win the division.

Reason for concern: For all of the talent at forward, there's a soft spot in the middle of the second line. Jesperi Kotkaniemi would fit perfectly as a third-line center on a contending club, but he'll likely be the second-line center in Carolina. Does he have the offensive chops to hang with his wingers?

The other problem area is nothing new. For years, the Hurricanes have banked on average to below-average goaltending from Fredrik Andersen and others, and here we are again. At times, Pyotr Kochetkov has looked like the answer, but then other times not. Cayden Primeau's .884 save percentage in 55 NHL games is not reassuring. This won't bite them in the regular season, of course.

Bold prediction: This may be something less than bold, but Bradly Nadeau, the Canes' first-round pick (No. 30 overall) in 2023, seems ready for an NHL spot. He lit up the AHL last season with 32 goals and 58



points as a 19-year-old pro. It won't be an easy top six to crack, but Nadeau will carve out a role. — *Aaron Portzline*

## **2. New Jersey Devils (55 points, 2 first-place votes)**

Who's new?: F Connor Brown, F Evgenii Dadonov, F Arseniy Gritsyuk, F Juho Lammikko, F Thomas Bordeleau

Who's gone?: F Erik Haula, F Tomáš Tatar, F Nathan Bastian, F Justin Dowling, F Curtis Lazar, F Daniel Sprong, D Brian Dumoulin

Reason for optimism: Jack Hughes is healthy, and so is Luke Hughes. And though Luke Hughes is still a restricted free agent, that should get resolved before the season. With the Hughes brothers, Jesper Bratt, Timo Meier and captain Nico Hischier, New Jersey has a young core capable of contention. GM Tom Fitzgerald has bolstered the supporting cast the past two summers, acquiring the likes of Brett Pesce, Stefan Noesen and Connor Brown. Goaltender Jacob Markström had a solid first season with the club, most notably in the playoffs, and coach Sheldon Keefe has young talent to foster. Šimon Nemec will look to take a step, and rookie Arseniy Gritsyuk should contribute right away. When not depleted by injuries, as was the case in the 2025 playoffs, this is a legitimate roster. And surely that amount of injuries won't happen again this year, right?

Reason for concern: There's no guarantee injuries won't derail another season. They've been the team's downfall each of the past two seasons. Jack Hughes has suffered season-ending shoulder injuries both years. Those might be freak accidents more than a chronic concern, but the Devils can't afford another. Markström will turn 36 in the middle of the season, and the team is relying heavily on him. Will he be able to carry the load through a long season and a potential deep playoff run? If not, the Devils will be in trouble. Jake Allen is a solid No. 2, but the Devils didn't acquire him to be the main backstop. And, like with most rosters in the league, it could probably use another top-nine forward option.

Bold prediction: Jack Hughes will play more than 75 games, score 100 points and finish higher in Hart Trophy voting than he did in 2022-23 (eighth). The reasoning is simple: He's really, really good and is 24, a feasible age for him to have a huge season. He's due for a healthy year and when he's healthy, there's not much to dislike. —*Peter Baugh*

## **3. Washington Capitals (46)**

Who's new?: F Justin Sourdif, D Declan Chisholm

Who's gone?: LW Andrew Mangiapane, C Lars Eller, RW Taylor Raddysh, F Ethen Frank, D Alexander Alexeyev

Reason for optimism: The Caps are bringing back virtually every relevant piece from last season's Metro Division champion, for one. That's a good baseline reason to believe in them for 2025-26. They can run back one of the very best blue lines in the NHL and continue to rely on a productive group of forwards, led by the greatest goal scorer of all time in Alex Ovechkin. Also, in two seasons as head coach, Spencer Carbery has shown a knack for putting his players in a position to succeed. He knows how to get the most of his rosters, and there's every reason to believe he'll continue being a difference-maker. "How are the Caps so successful?" has turned into a standard question, and Carbery is an enormous part of the answer.

Reason for concern: Ovechkin is a year older, which never helps. Beyond that, there should be some level of concern that too many individual Caps hit their peaks last season. How much more can they expect from Tom Wilson? Is it fair to imagine Pierre-Luc Dubois, already an impressive reclamation project, turning into a legit 1C? Does Aliaksei Protas have another 30-goal season in him? Can Dylan

Strome continue producing enough points to wallpaper issues with his own game and Ovechkin's? Who is the real Logan Thompson? Washington loved the answers to all those questions in 2025-26, but running it all back is a tough ask.

Bold prediction: To that end, nothing would be bolder than saying that the Caps do, indeed, mount a successful follow-up. Connor McMichael anchoring a productive, substantive third line would help, as would someone such as Ryan Leonard or Andrew Cristall filling McMichael's previous role on the Dubois-Wilson line. So too would a top-10 goaltending season, front to back, for Thompson. Let's go with that. —*Sean Gentile*

#### **4. Columbus Blue Jackets (40)**

Who's new?: F Charlie Coyle, F Miles Wood, F Isac Lundestrom, G Ivan Fedotov

Who's gone?: F Sean Kuraly, F James van Riemsdyk, F Justin Danforth, D Jack Johnson, D Jordan Harris, G Daniil Tarasov

Reason for optimism: The tremendous growth shown by the Blue Jackets' swell of young players last season — Adam Fantilli, Kirill Marchenko, Kent Johnson, Dmitry Voronkov, etc. — has boosted confidence in a room that is now stocked with productive and revered veterans such as Zach Werenski, Sean Monahan and Boone Jenner. The Blue Jackets finished seventh in the NHL in scoring last season, despite long-term injuries to Jenner, Monahan and others. There were nights when they outscored their own defensive lapses and goaltending. After surprising the league last season and missing the playoffs by two points, the Jackets feel like their five-year postseason drought (the second-longest in franchise history) will end this season.

Reason for concern: The Blue Jackets have been one of the NHL's worst defensive clubs for five seasons now, and the offseason upgrades many had hoped for — especially in goal, but also on the blue line — never came to fruition for GM Don Waddell. Remarkably, goaltender Elvis Merzlikins is back for another season, despite three straight seasons with a sub-.900 save percentage. There's a strong chance Jet Greaves, finally an NHLer after consistent improvement in the AHL, [will push Merzlikins](#) for starts and even the No. 1 role. The Blue Jackets gave Ivan Provorov a massive contract (seven years, \$59.5 million) to keep him from free agency, so the blue line has barely changed.

Bold prediction: Yegor Chinakhov made quite possibly the least effective trade request in hockey history this summer. Waddell didn't hear any offers that made him consider moving the 24-year-old winger, and the two sides — Chinakhov and coach Dean Evason — had a clear-the-air meeting before camp started. Chinakhov was the only member of their young, skilled core who hasn't yet popped, but that's coming this year. Look for Chinakhov to have 20-plus goals and 50-plus points. —*Aaron Portzline*

#### **5. New York Rangers (37)**

Who's new?: D Vladislav Gavrikov, F Taylor Raddysh, D Scott Morrow

Who's gone?: F Chris Kreider, D K'Andre Miller, D Zac Jones

Reason for optimism: It can't get worse, can it? Seemingly everything that could have gone wrong for the Rangers last season did, but they believe a full season with new captain J.T. Miller, the addition of Gavrikov to stabilize the defense and bounce-back performances from a core that's only a year removed from winning a Presidents' Trophy will propel them back into playoff contention. They're also banking a first-year-coach bump from Mike Sullivan, whom team president Chris Drury has coveted for years and finally lured to New York in May. These Rangers have responded well to changes behind the bench, posting a combined 107-47-10 record (.683 points percentage) in their first seasons under previous

coaches Gerard Gallant (2021-22) and Peter Laviolette (2023-24). Did I mention they still have Igor Shesterkin in net?

Reason for concern: On second thought, maybe it can get worse. The Rangers will rely heavily on a group of veteran forwards who are all coming off down statistical seasons and will enter the season age 32 or older: Miller, Artemi Panarin, Vincent Trocheck and Mika Zibanejad. They've struggled to develop young, affordable players to ease their burden, and their defensive corps has major questions beyond an expected top pair of Gavrikov and Adam Fox. Team defense is of particular concern. Shesterkin has masked their deficiencies for years, but the walls came crumbling down around him last season. New York ranked 29th with an average of 12.2 high-danger scoring chances against per 60, according to Natural Stat Trick, which was exacerbated by a penchant for senseless turnovers, poor net-front protection and issues breaking pucks out of their own zone. Sullivan wants to run a system that's predicated on a swarming forecheck, but the Rangers are short on effective defensive players and may not have the horses to pull it off.

Bold prediction: Fox will establish a new career high in points and make the final Olympic roster for Team USA. The 27-year-old defenseman has been a focus of criticism, particularly in the aftermath of a subpar 4 Nations Face-Off showing. But as Sullivan put it, "It's provided a lot of motivation for him to train as hard as he did." —*Vince Mercogliano*

## **6. New York Islanders (19)**

Who's new?: F Jonathan Drouin, F Maxim Shabanov, F Emil Heineman, D Matthew Schaefer, G David Rittich

Who's gone?: F Hudson Fasching, D Noah Dobson, D Mike Reilly

Reason for optimism: It's already a new era of Islanders hockey under Mathieu Darche, who is well on his way to implementing a much-needed retool. The Islanders' pipeline was depleted at the end of the Lou Lamoriello era, and Darche got off to a strong start, adding a lot of promising skill through the draft. So if the Islanders aren't in the playoff race this season, it's not a disappointment because at least there is a big-picture plan to strive for. With Matthew Schaefer in the fold, a healthy Mathew Barzal and new assistant coaches to run special teams, the Islanders should at the very least show signs of progress from last year.

Reason for concern: The Islanders aren't a bad enough team to be a basement dweller — not with Ilya Sorokin between the pipes — and this doesn't project to be a playoff-caliber roster, either. So that could mean a finish in the dreaded middle. The Islanders landed the No. 1 overall draft pick last year, despite a 12th-place finish in the East, but no one should expect lightning to strike twice. That means management has to be creative this year to time this retool correctly. Another reason for concern could be Barzal's shift back to center, since the team doesn't have that same depth since Brock Nelson's departure. While the results don't matter this year, the Islanders don't want their retool to have shaky cornerstones at its foundation.

Bold prediction: Patrick Roy doesn't make it to December as the Islanders' head coach, and Bob Boughner takes over behind the bench. Sorokin bounces back with stellar numbers post-coaching change and shows what a difference-maker he can be, no matter his workload. —*Shayna Goldman*

## **7. Philadelphia Flyers (17)**

Who's new?: F Trevor Zegras, F Christian Dvorak, D Noah Juulsen, D Dennis Gilbert, G Dan Vladar

Who's gone?: F Ryan Poehling, F Jakob Pelletier, G Ivan Fedotov

Reason for optimism: On paper, the Flyers look like a better team. Zegras was acquired at a bargain and will have a chance to play center again, where he was such an offensive force in his first two years. Vladar, while not the sexiest name, should still be a huge upgrade over the team's two backup goaltenders last season. Dvorak gives them more depth down the middle and on the penalty kill, while young players such as Matvei Michkov and Tyson Foerster should keep improving. Others, such as Sean Couturier and Cam York, could do well free of John Tortorella after they were often the target of the former coach's ire.

Reason for concern: This is still a team that had the league's worst goaltending and the 30th-ranked power play last season, the two biggest reasons they finished in the Eastern Conference basement. In goal, it's not only Vladar who will have to be serviceable, but Samuel Ersson, who had an .883 save percentage and a 3.13 goals-against average last season. Rick Tocchet knows how to coach a power play, but whether there's enough skill on the roster for that part of the Flyers' game to drastically improve is debatable.

Bold prediction: Michkov will score 40 goals. The power play was so bad under Tortorella and Rocky Thompson for three seasons that it really has nowhere to go but up. Michkov will be the primary beneficiary of that, as a player who can both open up the ice and get to the front of the net. If the Flyers had even an average power play last season, Michkov (26 goals in 80 games) would have almost certainly eclipsed 30 goals. —*Kevin Kurz*

## **8. Pittsburgh Penguins (12)**

Who's new?: F Justin Brazeau, F Anthony Mantha, D Connor Clifton, D Matt Dumba, D Parker Wotherspoon, G Arturs Silovs

Who's gone?: G Alex Nedeljkovic, D Matt Grzelcyk

Reason for optimism: In Sidney Crosby, there is always hope. He remains among the greatest players in hockey, and he returns with a couple of dynamic linemates in Bryan Rust and Rickard Rakell. Throw in the recently acquired Anthony Mantha, along with a couple of talented young forwards in Rutger McGroarty and Ville Koivunen, and it's easy to imagine this team scoring pretty consistently. Also, sometimes playing for a new coach gives a team and a franchise a certain amount of juice. Perhaps Dan Muse is the guy who can add some energy to a team that has looked stagnant for many years. He will have his work cut out for him, but early returns from everyone — from Crosby on down — are very positive.

Reason for concern: The Penguins are almost certainly primed to allow among the most goals in the NHL. The blue line is woefully bad and their goaltending is probably worse. There is no easy solution here. This is one of the NHL's worst overall defensive teams and while they still remain somewhat potent offensively, maintaining leads and playing professional defensive hockey has been a trying experience for this team dating back to 2022. Erik Karlsson and Kris Letang are likely to see the most minutes on the blue line, and both players were objectively horrible last season as they inch closer to the end of their respective careers. It's not a pretty picture.

Bold prediction: The Penguins will finish the season with a top-five draft pick, something they haven't had since drafting Jordan Staal in 2006. It's just the natural progression of things. Maybe it will be presumed No. 1 overall pick in 2026 Gavin McKenna at the end of the rainbow for a franchise that knows a thing or two about landing the greatest prospects in the history of the sport. —*Josh Yohe*

