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## The Athletic / Blue Jackets stall out of the gate again, fall behind early in loss to Devils

**By Aaron Portzline- March 12, 2025**

One of the Columbus Blue Jackets' strengths this season has been a high-scoring, well-balanced offense that has allowed them to outscore their defensive lapses, average goaltending and, on occasion, slow starts. But that's never been the plan or a pathway to success.

The Blue Jackets limped back to Columbus late Tuesday after winning just one game on a four-game trip. There was a common thread through all three losses, especially the trip-ending, 5-3 defeat to the New Jersey Devils before 15,630 in Prudential Center.

"We have to start better than we did here tonight," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason told reporters in Newark, N.J.

The Devils led 1-0 at 6:37 of the first period, made it 2-0 at 10:49 and pushed it to 3-0 at 18:51, marking the second time this season the Blue Jackets have allowed three or more first-period goals. They pushed back hard in the second period, but it was too deep of a hole.

That's becoming a trend. Or at least it was on this four-game stretch, the last long trip of the season.

The Jackets were down 2-0 only 97 seconds into the game one week ago in Tampa Bay, eventually losing 6-2. Two nights later, they were down 1-0 less than six minutes into the game on their way to a 3-0 loss against Florida, the defending Stanley Cup champs.

It wouldn't be fair to skip over the Jackets' big 7-3 win over the New York Rangers on Sunday, but they fell back into the slow-start trap on Tuesday against a New Jersey club they trailed by only four points in the Eastern Conference standings.

"We have to tighten up early," Evason said. "We're pushing. We want to be aggressive. We want to get in on the forecheck, all that good stuff. But we have to keep it out of the net first to give ourselves a chance.

"You can't let the game get out of hand. We have to tighten up early in the game, get ourselves into the game properly, and then do what we do."

Mathieu Olivier scored two goals and Kirill Marchenko added a goal for the Blue Jackets, who did push back in the second period, pulling to 3-2 after Olivier and Marchenko scored less than four minutes apart.

Marchenko's goal, his career-high 25th of the season, was made possible by a stellar backhand pass by center Adam Fantilli, who threaded the puck through two Devils and put it right on Marchenko's stick coming through the right circle.

"We liked how we pushed (in the second), but having said that, it doesn't matter," Evason said. "Timely, right? Bad timing that they score on those two opportunities. And we were thinking (at 4-2), if we can get that next goal ...

"We were just fighting it all night. One of those games."

As much as the Devils set the pace in the first period, they chased the play in the second. But New Jersey delivered a double whammy on both sides of the second intermission, and that pretty much ended it.

With 3:11 remaining in the second, New Jersey's Timo Meier scored off the rush to make it 4-2. Then, only 26 seconds into the third, Luke Hughes sailed in a shot from above the left circle to make it 5-2.

"We can't give up that one, first shift of the third," Blue Jackets captain Boone Jenner said. "That's our line. We can't start a period like that."

Blue Jackets goaltender Elvis Merzlikins did not have a strong trip. He was 13-5-2 in his 20 starts before the trip, but went 0-3 with an .879 save percentage and a 4.09 goals-against average.

One bright spot for the Blue Jackets was Olivier, who signed a six-year, \$18 million contract extension early in the trip.

He pulled the Blue Jackets to 5-3 midway through the third period when he outbattled Dennis Cholowski behind the net, twisting away from a check and carrying the puck with one hand on his stick as he headed to the front of the net.

Olivier lofted a shot up and over goaltender Jacob Markstrom from tight range, scoring his 15th goal of the season. It was Olivier's second two-goal game this season and his third goal in two games.

The 15 goals are not only a career high, but also three times his previous high.

"I tried to do my part," Olivier said. "I scored two, but (New Jersey's) fifth goal goes through my legs, and I don't get a piece of it. So you have to find a way to contribute every night and finish on the plus side. But at the end of the day, we didn't get the win. That's where my focus is at."

Despite the loss, the Blue Jackets remain in the second wild-card spot in the Eastern Conference. But they've drifted six points back of the Devils for third place in the Metro. The New York Rangers, who lurk just two points behind Columbus, did the Jackets a favor by losing 2-1 in Winnipeg on Tuesday.

## The Athletic / How Adam Fantilli's stellar growth, maturity have helped save Blue Jackets' season

**By Aaron Portzline- March 12, 2025**

NEW YORK — There are three NHL clubs who already have had five players score 20 goals or more this season: the Columbus Blue Jackets, Tampa Bay Lightning, and Toronto Maple Leafs. Of those three, the Blue Jackets are probably the biggest surprise.

But the league better get used to it.

The average age of those five Blue Jackets players is 23.4 years old, considerably younger than Tampa Bay (28.4) and Toronto (27.6), whose rosters are in their prime.

Adam Fantilli (20 years old), Kent Johnson (22), Kirill Marchenko and Dmitry Voronkov (24) are rising stars, while Zach Werenski — the “old guy” at 27 — is an established player whose game has moved into a different stratosphere this season.

While Fantilli is no secret in Columbus or the greater NHL — he was the No. 3 overall pick at the 2023 draft — not enough attention is being paid to the way Fantilli has bloomed, under less-than-ideal circumstances, into a two-way force.

On one of the NHL's grandest stages, and in a game with major playoff implications, Fantilli scored the second hat trick of his career (both this season) when the Blue Jackets routed the New York Rangers 7-3 in Madison Square Garden on Sunday.

But this story could have been written before Sunday's game. Because the two most impressive accomplishments this season for Fantilli started long before the puck dropped against the Rangers.

### Two-way force

First-year Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason made a big deal out of the clean slate he was bringing to Columbus, how he wasn't watching previous game film and didn't want insights or opinions on his new players from the holdover assistant coaches on his staff.

It didn't take him long to see that Fantilli needed work, almost entirely from the red line back. But Evason was not alarmed in the least. This is fairly typical of young, uber-talented players who aren't challenged physically and mentally in hockey until they hit the NHL.

Evason and his staff went to work both on the ice and in the film room, and they encountered a player who was eager to learn. (This is not always typical of a young, uber-talented player.)

Fantilli opened the season between veterans Kevin Labanc and James van Riemsdyk on the Blue Jackets' third line, but quickly played his way higher in the lineup, settling into the middle of the No. 2 line behind veteran Sean Monahan on the top line.

In January, Evason was asked if he'd ever had a 20-year-old center that he trusted as much as Fantilli. He said he hadn't, but that answer made him smile.

“If you would have said to us two months ago that ‘Mo’ (Fantilli's given first name is Adamo) would be playing 24-plus minutes at this point, I would have thought you were crazy,” Evason said. “But I think it's a credit to him and what he has done, and the work he's put in ... not as a skilled hockey player, but as a pro, to be able to play in all situations.

“There’s been a lot of video teaching to Adam Fantilli by every single coach in there. That’s fantastic, and it’s a credit to the coaching staff, but for him to buy in is even more exciting.”

The coaching went beyond Evason’s staff, though.

Monahan is one of the most complete and professional players to ever set foot in Nationwide Arena. The way he prepares for practices and games, and the quiet confidence he carries with him both during games and in the dressing room, are something young players learn to emulate.

And the little things he does on the ice — the stick lifts, the way he supports a player under pressure, the small-space passes he makes to alleviate pressure and create space — are almost awe-inspiring to fellow players.

Monahan saw how Fantilli was playing frantically in the defensive zone, but his well-intended attempts to play hard were unsuccessful. Monahan’s suggestion sounded counterintuitive.

“Slow down,” Monahan told him.

Fantilli said he was taking himself out of position by over-responding to shifts in play. He was flying the zone in anticipation of possession, and even when that didn’t backfire, he was often too far ahead of his linemates to rely on each other moving up the ice.

After his hat trick on Sunday, Fantilli deflected the accolades for the steps he’s made this season.

“I’ve said it so many times, that I’ve gotten to watch some pretty amazing centermen,” Fantilli said. “I had to learn how to chill out and slow down in my (defensive) zone, and that’s helped me produce offense, in a weird way. The better you are there and the less time you spend, the quicker you get to the offensive zone.

“A lot of credit to Sean Monahan and Boone Jenner. I’ve been playing behind them for a long time.”

A big test

On Jan. 7, the Blue Jackets were losing 3-1 in Pittsburgh. Worse, they’d lost Monahan to a wrist injury after a hit along the wall by Penguins defenseman Kris Letang. At first, the injury wasn’t considered long-term, but Monahan ended up needing surgery and is now expected to return later this month.

When Monahan was lost, the Blue Jackets were already playing without Jenner. And of all the injuries the Blue Jackets had absorbed and somehow managed to hover around a .500 record, the loss of Monahan could well have been the death knell.

Instead, it’s been the opposite. Not only have the Blue Jackets thrived — they’re 13-7-2 since Monahan went down — but Fantilli has stepped into his No. 1 spot between Voronkov and Marchenko and helped it remain one of the NHL’s best lines.

“It sucks the way I was able to get this opportunity,” Fantilli said. “But I’m very grateful to have it. It’s been going great.”

It started on that night in Pittsburgh when Monahan was hurt. Fantilli, not just replacing him on the top line but taking over Monahan’s spot as the power-play “bumper,” scored a tying power-play goal with 2:36 remaining in regulation.

The Blue Jackets went on to win on Kent Johnson’s shootout goal for their first win in Pittsburgh in more than a decade.

“Is it exciting for the organization? Absolutely,” Evason said. “To have somebody like that step up in the absence of a Monahan or a Jenner or someone who is in that position, yeah, it’s fantastic.”

Since Monahan went down, Fantilli has 12-10-22 and is a plus-12 in 22 games. Only Werenski, who has been on a five-month burner, has as many points as Fantilli in that stretch.

Incredibly, all of Fantilli's points have come at even strength during his two months in Monahan's stead. He leads the Blue Jackets with 64 shots and has been whistled for only two minor penalties.

Evason has been saying all season that he doesn't give a hoot — our word, not his — how many points Fantilli scores. He's measuring Fantilli's game by his all-around attributes and his conforming to a team structure, but all of those are in place, too.

In early February when the Blue Jackets played in Salt Lake City, Fantilli came back to the bench after a lousy shift, which ended when he tossed a puck out to the middle of the ice and turned it over to a Utah forward. Fantilli noticed something out of the corner of his eye.

"There was a timeout, and he's looking directly at me," Evason said. "And I knew he was, so I was kind of avoiding him. And then I looked at him and he just said 'My bad.' And I said, 'Yep.' And that was it. He knew. He didn't need to hear anything further from me. He acknowledged it. That's what I wanted to see. That told me something."

Think of the experience Fantilli is gaining right now. Since Monahan's been injured, he's gone toe-to-toe with Toronto's Auston Matthews, Los Angeles' Anze Kopitar, Vegas' Jack Eichel and others. Again, he has a plus-12 rating in those 22 games.

"He's played incredible," Werenski said. "It seems like he's really coming into his own, he's really figured out the league. He has high-end skill, and we're seeing that right now, but he's playing the right way and that's the real reason why he's having success."

"He's not trying to cheat for offense. He's just doing all the little things right. He's using his linemates. He's getting open ice. His shot is so good, but he's making plays, too. That's hard to do as a 20-year-old in the league, so hats off to him."

For longtime fans of the Blue Jackets, the dearth of high-quality centers — more than any other position — has been a through line of the franchise. Before Fantilli, the Blue Jackets spent four top-10 draft picks on centers but never managed to land a true star.

Pierre-Luc Dubois (No. 3 in 2016) certainly looked the part early but played his way out of town under coach John Tortorella. He's now on his fourth club, the Washington Capitals, and is playing very well.

Fantilli has said he wants to be part of a group of players that pushes the Blue Jackets, who have won only one playoff series (2019) and one qualifying series (2020) in their 24-season existence, to new heights.

On the day of his draft, the Blue Jackets and then-general manager Jarmo Kekalainen were making plans to take somebody else with the No. 3 overall pick.

Everybody knew Connor Bedard was going No. 1 to Chicago, but most expected Anaheim to draft Fantilli at No. 2. In that scenario, the Blue Jackets would have taken Will Smith at No. 3. Instead, the Ducks surprised the hockey world and took Leo Carlsson with the No. 2 pick, allowing Fantilli to fall to Columbus.

The date was June 28, 2023. That's looking more and more like a franchise-altering day.

## [BlueJackets.com / Blue Jackets end road trip with setback vs. Devils](#)

**By Mike G. Morreale- March 12, 2025**

NEWARK, N.J. -- Jesper Bratt had a goal and two assists for the New Jersey Devils in a 5-3 win against the Columbus Blue Jackets at Prudential Center on Tuesday.

Luke Hughes had a goal and an assist, Cody Glass had two assists and Jacob Markstrom made 17 saves for the Devils (35-25-6), who have won consecutive games for the first time since Jan. 22-25. New Jersey won 3-1 at the Philadelphia Flyers on Sunday.

"It's a huge win in the standings and just the morale in the locker room," Hughes said. "To beat a team that's buzzing like that ... they've been hot on our tail for a long time now. It's a huge four-point swing and it's nice to stack two games together."

Glass has three points (one goal, two assists) in two games since being acquired by the Devils in a trade with the Pittsburgh Penguins on Friday.

"He's a really smart player, constantly scanning the ice whether on offense and defense," New Jersey coach Sheldon Keefe said of Glass. "He's made really good simple reads that are pretty universal in our game that he's getting right and it shows. I've been impressed with him and he's fit in pretty well from a personality standpoint too."

Mathieu Olivier had two goals and Elvis Merzlikins made 23 saves for Columbus (31-25-8), which has won once in its past four games.

"Obviously they're known to be a team that capitalizes early in their building and we didn't do a good job tonight of countering that," Olivier said. "I think we were a little too stubborn at times. We had times in the game where we were accomplishing what the game plan was and we didn't stick to it. We were stubborn in making decisions out there and it cost us."

Nico Hischier gave New Jersey a 1-0 lead with a power-play goal at 6:37 of the first period on a deflection at the left post.

Paul Cotter made it 2-0 when he picked up a puck at his blue line, skated the length of the ice, and scored on a backhand between the pads at 10:49. Cotter was reinserted into the lineup after serving as a healthy scratch on Sunday.

"You never not want to play but you got to be a good teammate, and for us to play as well as we did last game, and [Keefe] still swapped the lineup and put me in [tonight] tells me that he still believes in me so it was just a reset for me," Cotter said.

Bratt scored on a wrist shot from the slot for a 3-0 lead at 18:51.

Olivier pulled Columbus within 3-1 on a deflection from the slot at 3:30 of the second period.

"Our line (with Olivier and Kent Johnson) has been going pretty good," center Boone Jenner said. "We want to play to our strengths, get it down there and kind of grind them below the goal line, protect pucks and bring it to the goal line that way."

Kirill Marchenko made it 3-2 when he scored on a backhand while skating through the slot at 7:16.

Timo Meier extended the Devils lead to 4-2 at 16:49 on a wrist shot from the right face-off circle.

"We were a little bit too much on our heels in the second, but all four lines were going; everybody chipped in," Meier said. "That's a playoff mentality. That's how we got to approach games. This definitely feels good, but now we got to build on this one."

Luke Hughes scored on a wrist shot from the top of the left face-off circle 26 seconds into the third period for a 5-2 lead.

Olivier scored on a wrist shot at the left post that deflected off the stick of Bratt at 10:29 for the 5-3 final.

"We're in a playoff race here and we had an opportunity to do some damage in the standings and we didn't," Olivier said. "We'll analyze, shake it off, and get back to it in the next game (against the Vegas Golden Knights on Thursday)."

NOTES: Olivier has five goals and two assists in his past seven games. ... New Jersey is 8-0-0 when scoring the first goal of the game in its past eight matches. ... Hughes (16 goals, 64 assists in 141 games) is the fourth defenseman age 21 or younger in Devils/Colorado Rockies/Kansas City Scouts history with at least 80 career points. He joins Scott Niedermayer (106 points), Barry Beck (102) and Joe Cirella (88). ... Bratt moved into ninth place in franchise history with 432 career points; Aaron Broten is eighth (469).



## The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Have Sights Set on More Than Just Wild Card Spot

**By Mark Scheig- March 12, 2025**

The Columbus Blue Jackets enter action on Tuesday night holding down one of the Eastern Conference's wildcard playoff spots. Thanks to their performance this season and their upcoming schedule, they have their sights set on something more.

The Blue Jackets will play the New Jersey Devils on Tuesday night in Prudential Center. It's just the latest biggest game of the season for a Blue Jackets' team that has been in playoff mode for the last couple of months.

Besides staying in a wildcard position, the Blue Jackets now have a chance to do what many thought was unthinkable at the beginning of the season.

### Top-3 Metro in Sight?

The Blue Jackets and Devils are separated by just four points in the standings entering Tuesday night's game. But wait, there's more. The Blue Jackets have played two less games than the Devils.

Should the Blue Jackets win Tuesday night in regulation, they'll climb to within two points of the Devils while maintaining those two games in hand. In that scenario, the Blue Jackets would control their own destiny for a top-3 position in the Metropolitan Division.

The gap to second-place Carolina is 10 points with a game in hand if you wanted to look ahead. While second place is a tougher ask, third place is not only clearly in sight, but also very doable.

Tuesday will mark the second of three meetings on the season between the Blue Jackets and Devils. The Blue Jackets won the first meeting back on Dec 19. In the 4-2 win, Elvis Merzlikins stole the show making 40 saves including stopping all 13 shots from Jack Hughes.

The only Hughes' brother expected to play on Tuesday will be defenseman Luke Hughes. Jack is out for the rest of the season after having shoulder surgery. His loss is massive for a Devils' team that suddenly must look in their rear-view mirror at an oncoming Blue Jackets' team striving for more than a wildcard spot.

### Blue Jackets Handled Rangers

The Blue Jackets took advantage of a Rangers' team on the second night of back-to-back and in the midst of nine games in 16 days across multiple time zones. Their 7-3 win at Madison Square Garden put them back in the first wildcard spot as of Sunday night and in position to reel the Devils in even closer.

How have the Blue Jackets been able to enjoy all this success? It's been a team effort. They have five different 20-goal scorers. It's just the second time in franchise history they've been able to say that. Kirill Marchenko, Kent Johnson, Adam Fantilli, Dmitri Voronkov and Zach Werenski each have at least 20 goals.

The defense as a whole has improved from the start of the season. The addition of Dante Fabbro has solidified the top pair. The emergence of Denton Mateychuk has steadied the top four.

Most importantly, the goaltending has seen better results. Daniil Tarasov got the win Sunday and is back in the rotation for spot starts after missing big chunks of time earlier in the season. Elvis Merzlikins as the clear-cut number-one has played like it the last couple of months. His save percentage is now slightly over league average after a bad start to the season.

These things allowed the Blue Jackets the opportunity to go into Madison Square Garden and earn a huge win. They hope to do the same Tuesday night against a Devils' team less than 100%.

Once the Blue Jackets get through Tuesday night, they'll have plenty of home cooking waiting with 11 of their final 18 games at Nationwide Arena. They have one of the best home records in the NHL at 20-6-4 for a .733 points percentage.

#### Starting to Feel Real

The Blue Jackets all along wanted to play meaningful games in March. They've accomplished that goal. But now it's all about winning those meaningful games while maintaining a playoff spot.

As the games start to count down and the wins continue to pile up, the possibility of playoffs is starting to feel more real by the day. As long as they stay within their systems and not try to do too much, they'll have every opportunity to win on any given night.



It is truly a one game at a time approach for the Blue Jackets. That's been their message all along under head coach Dean Evason. That's not going to change now.

With two games against the Devils and three against the Ottawa Senators upcoming, those games could determine the fate of the Blue Jackets in 2024-25. If things go the right way, we will no longer be talking about wildcard possibilities.

We will be talking about top-3 in the Metropolitan Division. With destiny in their own hands, it's exactly where the Blue Jackets want to be at this time.

## 1<sup>st</sup> Ohio Battery / NJ 5, CBJ 3: Olivier Scores Twice, But Jackets End Road Trip With Loss To Devils

By Ed Francis- March 12, 2025

	1	2	3	F
	0	2	1	3
	3	1	1	5

CBJ GOALS:  
Olivier (P2, 3:30)  
Marchenko (P2, 7:16)  
Olivier (2) (P3, 10:29)

The New Jersey Devils scored three times in the first period to put the Columbus Blue Jackets in a hole they could not dig out from Tuesday night in a 5-3 loss.

The defeat sends the Blue Jackets back to Columbus with a 1-3-0 road trip.

"We knew they were going to come out quick and they did," said Denton Mateychuk. "We didn't stop battling but it's tough when you give up those opportunities early in the game."

The Blue Jackets did make a game of it, though. Mathieu Olivier and Kirill Marchenko scored less than four minutes apart early in the second period to cut New Jersey's lead to 3-2 before the Devils would regain momentum with a late-period goal to go up 4-2 through forty minutes.

Less than 30 seconds into the third period, the Devils would restore their three-goal lead. Olivier's second goal of the night at the 10:29 mark of the third trimmed it to a 5-3 game, but the Blue Jackets would commit three penalties in the final 8:05 of the game to wipe away any chance they had of a comeback.

Here's how the Blue Jackets ended their road trip:

1st Period:

(6:37 — NJ Goal): The Devils connect on their first power play attempt to take a 1-0 lead. Nico Hischier takes a pass from Jesper Bratt and while Merzlikins initially makes a pad save, the puck deflects up and bounces off his shoulder and into the net.

(10:49 — NJ Goal): Ivan Provorov's shot is blocked, which springs the Devils on a break at the end of a Columbus power play. Paul Cotter races towards Merzlikins and beats him five-hole to give the Devils a 2-0 lead.

(18:51 — NJ Goal): New Jersey makes it a 3-0 first period lead with a goal from Jesper Bratt. He's in the low slot and takes a backhand flip from Cody Glass, sweeping it past Merzlikins.

#### 2nd Period:

(3:30 — CBJ Goal): Denton Mateychuk's initial shot is blocked, but he gets it back after a nice poke from Kent Johnson and fires again. This time, his shot is perfectly disrupted by Mathieu Olivier in the low slot and beats Jacob Markstrom to get the Blue Jackets on the board and cut the Devils lead to 3-1. The assist from Mateychuk is the third of his career.

(7:16 — CBJ Goal): The Blue Jackets get to within one on Marchenko's 25th goal of the season, compliments of a fantastic pass from Adam Fantilli. The sequence starts with Werenski clearing the puck to Fantilli, who is near center ice. As he enters the zone, he sees that Marchenko has slipped behind the Devils defense. Fantilli gets off a perfectly-placed and perfectly-timed backhand pass that Marchenko is able to get past Markstrom to cut New Jersey's lead to 3-2.

(16:49 — NJ Goal): Timo Meier extends New Jersey's lead to 4-2 with a shot from the right dot that beats Merzlikins stick-side. The Devils make a quick transition from their own zone and catch Columbus in a 2-on-2, with Meier firing one off the post and in to get momentum back their way.

#### 3rd Period:

(0:26 — NJ Goal): Another early-period goal, something of a theme for Columbus as of late. This time it takes Luke Hughes just 26 seconds to give the Devils a three-goal advantage. His shot goes through Olivier's legs and past Merzlikins to make it 5-2 New Jersey.

(10:29 — CBJ Goal): The Blue Jackets get as close as 5-3 with Olivier's second goal of the night. Markstrom has a little bit of trouble playing the puck behind his net after a hard dump in from Mateychuk. His clearing attempt is disrupted by Jenner in the corner, who flips it back behind the net to Olivier as Markstrom makes his way back in net. Olivier does a quick spin move and throws it on net, slipping it in for Olivier's third goal in two games.

CBJ	GAME STATS	NJ
20	SHOTS	28
54%	FACEOFFS	46%
0/3	POWER PLAY	1/5
4/5	PENALTY KILL	3/3

CBJ	GAME STATS	NJ
27	HITS	16
10	GIVEAWAYS	11
2	TAKEAWAYS	2
14	BLOCKED SHOTS	13
ALL SITUATIONS ADVANCED STATS		
1.76	EXPECTED GOALS	2.41
51	SHOT ATTEMPTS	49
18	SCORING CHANCES	28
8	HIGH-DANGER CHANCES	12

#### Stat Chat:

- Down two or three goals for the entire period, the Blue Jackets could only muster six shots on goal in the final twenty minutes, in part because of three two-minute minors over the last nine minutes.
- Fantilli's assist gives him points in eight of his last nine games (six goals, five assists) and Zach Werenski's assist puts him just one shy of 50 on the season.
- With their 0-for-3 performance on the power play, the Blue Jackets are now at ten straight power plays without a goal over the last four games.

#### Up Next:

Home sweet home. The Blue Jackets have 11 of their last 18 at Nationwide Arena, and it starts Thursday night with a contest against the Pacific Division-leading Vegas Golden Knights. Puck-drop is set for 7 p.m.

**[The Athletic / NHL post-deadline vibe check: Huge swings, playing it safe and everything in between](#)**

**By Shayna Goldman- March 12, 2025**

Safe and dependable play is often favored in the NHL, both on and off the ice. The Carolina Hurricanes could have followed that path, leaving Martin Necas and Jack Drury on their roster.

But sometimes, safe is death. John Tortorella and the Tampa Bay Lightning embraced this mantra on their path to the Stanley Cup in 2004, and it rings true with the 2024-25 Hurricanes.

The Canes came into the season with a playoff-caliber roster. But at this point, playoff-caliber doesn't cut it for a team that has qualified in six consecutive seasons and has yet to make it past the conference finals.

On paper, Rantanen was the elite winger the Hurricanes were missing. Sometimes, even the best theoretical fits don't work out, though. As much as a team can take a calculated risk, the reality doesn't always line up, and that was the case here. The initial shock barely wore off before teams were sent to the 4 Nations Face-Off, and things didn't settle enough afterward, especially with so much swirling around whether or not Rantanen would be willing to extend.

The Hurricanes could have kept Rantanen as a rental, which the team paid for in the first place. And that would have been justifiable, especially considering some weaknesses in the Metropolitan Division and the Eastern Conference wild-card picture. But the vibes were off, and the Stars made a tantalizing enough offer.

Dallas is rightfully getting praised as the winner in this situation. Rantanen, with an eight-year extension, transforms the Stars' forward group. And the team didn't have to give up two untouchables, Wyatt Johnston or Thomas Harley, to make it happen.

The Hurricanes' Stanley Cup chances are worse without him, and time ran out to swing for another difference-maker. Logan Stankoven may look like a perfect stylistic fit for the Canes, but he isn't at Rantanen's caliber right now. And draft picks will never generate the same hype for a contending team. Sure, management has a year and a half to weaponize those two firsts as trade assets, but right now, that's just an idea filled with uncertainty and not concrete like a high-end player would be.

The Hurricanes need to move the needle to break through in the playoffs, and the only way to do that is to take a risk with an aggressive approach. Eric Tulsky, a first-time general manager, did exactly that. The final result isn't what the team hoped for, but it was an intricate situation from Day 1, and management did their best to navigate its complexities. That is more commendable than sticking with the status quo, which would likely have ended in the same results as in years past.

The Lightning are all in

Speaking of risk-taking, Julien BriseBois is no stranger to taking big swings.

Think back to 2023 when the Lightning acquired Tanner Jeannot. BriseBois unquestionably overspent on an underperforming forward whose size and strength seemed to distract from his true value. But his thought process around the odds of the draft picks he moved was perfectly sound.

"I know what the odds are of those picks turning into players. I also know what the odds are of those picks turning into players that can help us win while we have this group of players right now in their prime, ready to go for another long run. The odds of that are zero," BriseBois said in his post-trade press conference in 2023. "None of those picks were going to help. None of the players we were going to draft with those picks are going to help us win this year, or next, or probably the year after that."

That line of thinking once again inspired the Lightning's bold deadline moves in 2025, The Athletic's Pierre LeBrun reported.

"The value in having draft picks lies in our ability to convert them into players that can help us win NHL hockey games. We used some draft capital to add two good players that will help us win more games this season and beyond," BriseBois said. "Ultimately, the calculation is that trying and failing will yield less regret than failing to try."

The difference this time is that the players acquired, Yanni Gourde and Oliver Bjorkstrand, are worth the high price.

Not every team is in the position to throw caution to the wind and move out franchise-altering picks. But the Lightning absolutely are, for two reasons.

Tampa Bay's elite core is thriving this season. Andrei Vasilevskiy is back to his game-breaking ways. The return of Ryan McDonagh helped revitalize Victor Hedman and stabilize the top four. Up front, Nikita Kucherov, Brayden Point and Jake Guentzel are all difference-makers. And on the second line, Anthony Cirelli and Brandon Hagel are a nightmare to match up against.

Pair that with the ages of this core — Hedman is 34, McDonagh is 35, Kucherov is 31, and both Guentzel and Vasilevskiy are 30 — and the timing makes perfect sense. If not now, when is the best time to go all in?

Draft picks don't have the same value as supporting talent who can complete this team and solidify their contender status. There is much less certainty in what a 2027 first-rounder can become versus what Gourde and Bjorkstrand can do for this roster.

The Lightning's playoff window will eventually slam shut and the road back to contention may be long and painful. But the team may not mind rebuilding as much if it's wearing a third Stanley Cup ring. Banners fly forever, and draft picks sometimes don't even make it to the NHL.

Accounting for context in Colorado

Jared Bednar was asked about Ryan Lindgren's declining underlying metrics, and the answer sheds light on the team's process.

Even if the New York Rangers and Colorado Avalanche have the same data set, every team uses it differently and builds unique models around it. This can help a team spot a player's strengths and weaknesses and give some insight into how to maximize their strengths.

Lindgren may have struggled in New York over the last two seasons despite having the support of one of the best two-way defensemen in Adam Fox on his right. But it doesn't mean the Avalanche can't get him back on track. Management and coaching may be able to pinpoint his strengths and put him in a different position to maximize them.

That could be the case with Brock Nelson and Charlie Coyle, whose scoring declined this year.

With Coyle, the best way to mitigate some effects of age-related decline is a change in usage. He shouldered too much in Boston on the second line. But at 3C in Colorado, he can focus on winning puck battles, playing sound defense and chipping in with secondary scoring.

With Nelson, management likely spotted how his surroundings contributed to slowed scoring. A deeper look shows how strong his puck-moving and defensive game have been all season, which is exactly what this position was missing after Casey Mittelstadt regressed.

Every trade carries an element of risk, but the context around a player's situation and results goes a long way in estimating their fit elsewhere.

The Rantanen trade and extension was a home run for the Stars. But maybe the team's best move of the week was extending rising star Wyatt Johnston to a five-year, \$42 million deal that already looks like one of the most valuable contracts in the league.

Johnston has progressed a lot over the last couple of seasons in various roles in the Stars' top nine. His breakthrough came in the playoffs, when he was the team's leading scoring-chance creator. But adding Rantanen could help take his game to the next level.

Rantanen was originally slotted alongside fellow Finn Roope Hintz on Saturday night, but an injury put him with Johnston sooner than expected. This is the pairing to keep an eye on.

After years of playing with righty Nathan MacKinnon, Johnston's handedness may help ease Rantanen's transition. And while Johnston isn't at MacKinnon's level, or the same player stylistically, the two have some real potential together. One of the biggest differences is that Johnston isn't as much of a puck-carrier, but Miro Heiskanen and Thomas Harley can at least add some support from the back end. Johnston's more of a shooter than a passer, but he generates a lot of high-danger passes, according to Corey Szajder's tracking. With a finisher like Rantanen at his side, maybe he becomes even more of a threat.

Via All Three Zones

Wild-card contenders aren't buyers

The second wild-card seed race is open in the West — but no one is overspending to reach the postseason.

The Vancouver Canucks have the best odds, and the decision not to move pending free agents contributes to that. So does Quinn Hughes, whose health is the biggest difference-maker for their chances.

That leaves the door open for three other teams to disrupt the playoff picture.

The Calgary Flames' standing is due to Dustin Wolf. In 38 games, he has saved 24 goals above expectations, ranking fifth in the league.

Utah's reinforcements have come from within, as Dylan Guenther, Logan Cooley and Sean Durzi have returned from injury. Pair that with Clayton Keller's excellence, Barrett Hayton's progression and Karel Vejmelka's strength in net, and this team is on the right track.

The St. Louis Blues' turnaround under Jim Montgomery has kept them in the playoff picture. Robert Thomas, Dylan Holloway and Cam Fowler have all upped their game to lead this team. Colton Parayko's injury, and the team's struggles on special teams, hold them back.

Any of these teams could have solidified their chances with an addition or two, but at what cost? The top of the conference is stacked, so the cautious approach makes sense here.

Are the Red Wings cooked?

After losing four straight games, the Detroit Red Wings' playoff chances plummeted just before the trade deadline. The deck was already stacked against the Red Wings, who face one of the most difficult schedules in the league down the stretch, but maybe management should have brought in reinforcements to give this team a shot.



The coaching change helped the Red Wings get back on track, but its impact could only go so far with this roster. Detroit's even-strength defense collapsed over the last stretch and the goaltending could only mask it for so long. Pair that with season-wide penalty kill issues and an over-reliance on the power play, and it's clear this team is not ready to contend. Friday night's implosion against the Washington Capitals only confirmed that.

Playoff hopefuls can't overhaul their rosters at the deadline — that's the time to make tweaks and accents to complete a roster, and the Red Wings need more than that. Still, with the Boston Bruins, New York Islanders and Rangers all selling key players at the deadline, there could be leeway for the Red Wings to stay in the race with Columbus and Ottawa for a wild-card seed.

Maybe management should have looked for low-key players to help this team at least stay in the race, even if it ultimately falls short. A finish just outside the playoffs would put Detroit in the same position as last year, but at least this group would gain more experience playing meaningful hockey in high-pressure moments.

#### Walman's breakout ability

The Edmonton Oilers need more top-nine help to spark offense around Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl, and an injured Trent Frederic only somewhat threads the needle. But maybe Jake Walman could be the spark that helps ignite the Oilers' bottom six.

Walman's puck-moving ability is one of his best strengths. He exits the zone often and efficiently, with 10.4 possession exits per 60, which ranks among the best in the league.

McDavid tends to share the ice with Evan Bouchard and Mattias Ekholm, who has a knack for passing the puck out of the defensive zone. Draisaitl is one of the best forwards in the league at retrieving the puck and exiting the zone with control. But no one helps ignite the bottom-six forwards. Maybe Walman can change that since he will likely share the ice with that group the most on the third pair — unless he ends up sticking with Darnell Nurse on the second. While it won't necessarily make up for some of their weaknesses on the wings, he still could help infuse some offensive support for a team that surprisingly needs it.

That was the case in his first outing on Saturday night against the Stars, when his stretch pass helped set up Zach Hyman's goal.

Walman made a strong first impression in Edmonton against one of the best in the West. The Oilers tilted the ice with a 26-10 edge in five-on-five shot attempts in his minutes, rocked an 83 percent expected goal rate, and outscored the Stars 3-0.

## [The Athletic / NHL trade deadline aftermath: New Stanley Cup favorites emerge as dust settles](#)

**By Dom Luszczyszyn- March 12, 2025**

The trade deadline is in the rearview and once again it featured an epic escalation of deals across the contending class. Now, it's time to sort through the aftermath.

The top teams operate under a 'keeping up with Joneses' mentality, which led to many of the league's best teams shoring up considerably at big prices. It was either pay up or be left behind.

Every year we take stock in the Stanley Cup race after the deadline dust settles. It's a natural point in the season to assess what each team has done to date, what they've added to help with that, and where they land relative to the field.

We don't know which moves will work and which ones won't. Nor do we know how each player will fit. But we can always make an educated guess based on how each team looks on paper.

Here's how the Stanley Cup field looks, separated into five categories.

Data as of March 10. All ratings are to the nearest whole number.

The favorites

The best chance to win it all: 12 percent or higher

Florida Panthers

Stanley Cup chances: 16 percent

The Panthers went huge at this year's deadline, adding Seth Jones and Brad Marchand. No other team added a top-six forward and a top-pair defenseman, and it's created some massive repercussions in the Stanley Cup field.

Before the deadline, Florida looked likely to finish in the dreaded 2 vs. 3 matchup with some lineup holes that left them vulnerable to an upset. The top six could've used another impact winger, and there was still a massive void left from Brandon Montour's departure. The Panthers are now arguably the deepest and most star-studded team; they have an extremely good top end matched by very few weak links. Florida's Cup chances have basically doubled over the last couple of weeks.

Jones is the prize pickup here, an offensive catalyst from the back end and a perfect fit for what the Panthers needed. That was a point of weakness without Montour (and Oliver Ekman-Larsson), one that Jones' presence likely solves. His ratings may not look as stellar as his reputation, but it feels likely that Florida will be able to maximize his value in a second-pair role. He's a do-it-all type with strong puck-moving ability.

Marchand is a luxury that considerably beefs up an already strong top six. Florida is right there with Tampa Bay and Edmonton in that regard, though the main draw is arguably Marchand adding to the second line's already tenacious identity. Marchand, Sam Bennett and Matthew Tkachuk could be one of the most annoying lines in league history. Marchand's presence also pushes Evan Rodrigues down to the bottom six and Jesper Boqvist to the fourth line — both areas in which they grade out favorably relative to league average.

With this lineup, Florida's lone potential Achilles heel is Sergei Bobrovsky in net — which is hardly a significant weakness, if one at all. Even if his play has dipped a tad this season with age, the Stanley Cup winner has been incredible in back-to-back runs to the Final.

This Panthers team is the team to beat, looking every bit as dangerous as the one that went the distance last season. There's a very good chance the Stanley Cup stays in the Sunshine State this season.

#### Dallas Stars

Stanley Cup chances: 13 percent

Top to bottom, I can't recall a stronger forward group than the one Dallas will run out come playoff time. This team is as deep as it gets after adding Mikael Granlund a month ago and Mikko Rantanen on deadline day. The Stars came away with the deadline's ultimate prize, a game-changer for the West's Stanley Cup landscape. The Stars, an already elite team, immediately jumped into the top tier as the team to beat.

Rantanen delivers some sizeable offensive oomph to the team's top end, a vulnerability that was definitely felt against Edmonton in last year's conference final matchup. His Net Rating is down a little bit due to his unproductive time in Carolina, but he's usually in the plus-15 to plus-20 range. Rantanen is a major add, someone who can help create offense and break games wide open. He should thrive next to Dallas' other big guns and it's a huge plus that his game seems to elevate in the playoffs.

The Stars' top line looks stacked and they easily have the best middle six in the league. Add a fourth line that can play to that mix and the Stars' attack looks lethal. They're projected to have the league's best offense for good reason.

On defense, they have some elite players and will look like a force once Miro Heiskanen returns. The emergence of Thomas Harley is huge and Esa Lindell remains one of the league's best defensive defensemen. But the drop-off after that is quite stark, leaving the Stars vulnerable. It would've been nice to see Dallas add a true top four defenseman as I'm skeptical Cody Ceci (or Matt Dumba or Ilya Lyubushkin or Lian Bichsel or Brendan Smith) can be that come playoff time. That may hinder what the team's stacked forward group can accomplish whenever the top three defensemen aren't on the ice.

At the very least, Jake Oettinger is back on his game this season, saving 15.6 goals above expected. He grades out as a solid starter with elite potential. That should mitigate some of the holes on Dallas' blue line, but the potential for him slipping during the series is there — we've seen it at times over the last two playoffs.

The Stars are a powerhouse and look primed to win the West this season. The competition will be fierce, but Dallas will be in the driver's seat in every series as the favorite. They're the league's best team and while the West is tough enough to drop their odds below Florida's, it looks like it could be Dallas' year.

#### Edmonton Oilers

Stanley Cup chances: 12 percent

The Oilers probably look exactly as you expected.

Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl are a terrifying one-two punch down the middle. Zach Hyman and Ryan Nugent-Hopkins — with McDavid — still form the basis of an elite first line. And the defense group led by Evan Bouchard is extremely deep, with offensive generation from the blue line being a major source of strength. Jake Walman's addition is a big one in that regard and that was on full display in his debut against Dallas. Going into the playoffs with him instead of Cody Ceci is a big deal.

If the Oilers win the Stanley Cup, those will be the tenets of victory as their strong links remain strong.

But man, are their weak links ever weak. And there are a lot of them. The Oilers have eight below-average players relative to their role which is very concerning compared to other contenders. Florida and Dallas both have just three with the average among relevant playoff teams being 4.7.

Draisaitl's wingers, whoever they end up being during the playoffs, don't compare favorably to other top-six wingers. The bottom six is fairly thin, even after adding Trent Frederic. And Stuart Skinner is probably the weakest starter on any playoff team, his rating buoyed only by strong regular season priors that he hasn't been able to repeat this season or in the playoffs.

The Oilers have a lot of holes and that has potential to be their demise.

It's a fascinating push-pull in Edmonton where, on balance, the pros far outweigh the cons — enough to give the Oilers a 12 percent chance of winning. McDavid and Draisaitl are that good and the defense group looks special, by far the best in this era of Oilers hockey. But those cons are hard to ignore, extreme pressure points that can make this season go south, quickly undoing any good brought about by the team's best players.

Once again, it will take some serious heroics by McDavid, Draisaitl and Bouchard to carry this team. They're more than capable, but at this stage of the build, they shouldn't have to be asked to shoulder this much burden.

The contenders

The biggest threats to the favorites: 8 percent to 12 percent

Winnipeg Jets

Stanley Cup chances: 9 percent

The Jets had a disappointing deadline, one that didn't move the needle at all. Given what every other contender did, Winnipeg's Cup chances took a small hit post-deadline. The Jets entered deadline day as one of the favorites to win this year, thanks to a deep roster headlined by the best goalie in the world. They exited it as the eighth-best team.

The Jets still have the fourth-best Stanley Cup odds, but that's only because of their sizeable lead in the Central Division which they have an 80 percent chance of winning. Avoiding the dreaded 2 vs. 3 matchup is important, but the good news stops there.

Looking at the lineup above shows two clear needs for Winnipeg: 2C and the third pair. Neither were properly addressed.

Vladislav Namestnikov is a fine player, but he's miscast for his current role, a vulnerability that could be seriously exposed come playoff time. Had the Jets been able to pick up Brock Nelson, they'd be in the favorites tier right now. They did nothing instead. As for the third pair, I'm skeptical that Luke Schenn is much of an upgrade over what they already have, which is not ideal given the struggles of the third pair. Not upgrading on Logan Stanley, in particular, may prove costly.

It's a deadline of what could have been for Winnipeg, but at the end of the day, the Jets are still a contender. This is still a great team made elite by the otherworldly ability of Connor Hellebuyck, a team that will be extremely difficult to knock off this season. The rejuvenation of Mark Scheifele and Kyle Connor's games have not gone unnoticed, nor has the strength of the top four anchored by Josh Morrissey. Dylan Samberg has been a revelation.

The Jets are not just Hellebuyck and friends anymore — they're an elite team that can win it all. But in a year where that's finally possible, it's disheartening that they weren't able to do more to address their needs. As the rest of the powers in the West loaded up, the Jets got left behind. We'll see if the roster they already had will be good enough.

Carolina Hurricanes

Stanley Cup chances: 9 percent

The Hurricanes are still a strong team, even after the Mikko Rantanen situation. Sebastian Aho is a strong 1C, Seth Jarvis is establishing himself as an elite two-way winger and Jaccob Slavin is one of the best defensive defenders in the league. Combine that with a whole bunch of depth throughout the lineup and the Hurricanes will be a tough out once again.

But without the oomph Rantanen (or Martin Necas) provides, the same problems still persist with Carolina's roster. The Hurricanes are a good defensive team, but can they score enough when it matters? That's tough to say and a down year from Andrei Svechnikov doesn't help. As a result, this version of the Hurricanes exits the deadline with the ninth best Net Rating — essentially an average playoff team.

And yet, here they are with the sixth-best Cup odds. That's because of Carolina's likely path: a first-round matchup against a team that's unlikely to be much of a threat (New Jersey or Columbus), and then a likely second-round matchup with the Capitals, who the model isn't high on.

Essentially, every other contender would likely have to play a top-eight team (according to the model) in one of the first two rounds. Some will have to get through two. The Hurricanes won't see one until the third round and end up with the highest odds to reach the conference final of any team as a result. Their odds drop a lot after that — just not enough to land in a lower tier.

Just getting to the top four is a big part of the battle and Carolina's strong chance of doing so is what makes the Hurricanes a contender this year — even if the roster doesn't quite look the part on paper.

The challengers

The teams that can do damage, but face a difficult path: 4 percent to 8 percent

Toronto Maple Leafs

Stanley Cup chances: 8 percent

If you've been wondering why Toronto's Cup odds have been high all season despite the team looking strangely mid for most of it, the answer is right there in the depth chart: Anthony Stolarz, with a bafflingly high Net Rating. Toronto's skaters rank eighth in the league, well behind all the other top teams, but Stolarz is, apparently, the great equalizer.

Here's why that is. Over the last two years, only Hellebuyck has saved more goals above expected than Stolarz's 43.2. And he's done that over just 51 games. On a per-game basis, here are the top 10 among goalies that have played 50 games.

Anthony Stolarz: 0.85

Connor Hellebuyck: 0.74

Jacob Markstrom: 0.44

Sam Montembeault: 0.43

Logan Thompson: 0.43

Igor Shesterkin: 0.42

Thatcher Demko: 0.40

Linus Ullmark: 0.40

Joey Daccord: 0.38

Lukas Dostal: 0.36

The model can only regress a small sample so much when the results are that bafflingly good.

What that means is the Leafs are now considered a team that lives and dies by its goalie, a potentially terrifying thought given the randomness of the position — and Stolarz's light resume. Considering the Leafs used to have to win despite goaltending, though, it may be a comforting thought knowing that the team is in relatively safe hands with Stolarz.

For Toronto to win it all and go deep in a tough division, though, the Leafs will need to play a lot better in front of their elite goaltending. That starts with Auston Matthews looking more like himself and other top players tilting the ice more. But at the very least, the Leafs had a good deadline plugging holes. Scott Laughton makes the bottom six more formidable while Brandon Carlo's game should help get the most out of Morgan Rielly.

The Leafs are not a perfect team and have weirdly struggled to control the puck this season. The team's 47.5 percent expected goals rate since January 1, worst among playoff teams, has not gone unnoticed and is why the team's skaters don't grade out as strongly as usual. The model is performing a balancing act between what the team once was and what they are now. The underlying result is a team that gets 54 percent of the goals at five-on-five — same as usual — but their method of getting there does look less sustainable, which is a concern.

The talent on the roster is there to control the scoring chance battle more going forward, especially with Laughton and Carlo. The biggest reason to be-Leaf right now is that the Leafs finally have the goaltending to go the distance — they just can't keep using it as a crutch.

Tampa Bay Lightning

Stanley Cup chances: 8 percent

Going into the deadline, everyone knew Tampa Bay's strengths ... and weaknesses. The Lightning had a gaping hole at second line right wing and the bottom six looked really concerning.

In one fell swoop, the Lightning solved those problems by acquiring Oliver Bjorkstrand and Yanni Gourde. The team's forward group immediately looks stronger now that it's no longer being weighed down by flotsam. Both Bjorkstrand and Gourde shore up the team's defensive game and give the Lightning some flexibility in the top nine.

The Lightning, whose plus-55 goal differential ranks third in the league, are a serious threat to win it all. By Net Rating, they are a top-five team. So why are their Cup chances so low? It's because of the brutal competition in the Atlantic with Florida (second in Net Rating) and Toronto (sixth), both ahead of Tampa Bay in the standings. That means a difficult Cup path, one where they're likely on the road in the first two rounds. Winning the division would provide a big boost to Tampa Bay's odds, but even finishing second would help in the opening round.

The core remains elite, Andrei Vasilevskiy has been excellent of late and the new additions offer reinforcement. But the Atlantic gauntlet is no joke — getting through that is Tampa Bay's biggest hurdle.

Vegas Golden Knights

Stanley Cup chances: 7 percent

The shiver that went down everyone's spine when the Vegas Golden Knights tweeted "hi" is the kind of feeling only a true villain can unleash. The tweet didn't lead to any big deals on deadline day, but that's okay because a run of truly great hockey has the Golden Knights looking like a serious Stanley Cup threat this year. Since Jan. 1, Vegas' 57.4 percent xG ranks second behind only Florida. The results may not have

followed (51.2 percent goal rate), but that's impressive and has led to a significant bump in the model. Vegas' projected Net Rating of plus-46 ranks seventh.

There was some model skepticism with Vegas before the season and early in it, mainly due to the team's winger situation. Things looked bleak, but credit where credit is due, things look much better now. Pavel Dorofeyev has been a revelation, Ivan Barbashev has returned to his Cup-winning form, and Victor Olofsson has been a pleasant surprise. Couple that with Mark Stone looking vintage and what was once a problem now looks solid. The Golden Knights went a step further by adding Brandon Saad and Reilly Smith, bolstering their middle six.

From top to bottom, the roster looks championship-caliber and there should be no complaints about what Vegas has built — it's just about liking the other West juggernauts a little bit more. The Stars and Avalanche beefed up considerably, while the Oilers still have McDavid and Draisaitl leading the way. That puts Vegas fourth in the pecking order, but the Golden Knights will likely only be favored in the opening round. That the Golden Knights have a comfortable division lead helps their chances, but after that is where things get tough. That's what keeps them out of the tier above.

#### Colorado Avalanche

Stanley Cup chances: 6 percent

The Avalanche have not been messing around this season. Martin Necas, Brock Nelson, Charlie Coyle, Jack Drury, Ryan Lindgren, Mackenzie Blackwood — if there was a way to make the Avalanche a better team, the Avalanche were aggressive about it. The model now rates Colorado as the league's fourth-best team.

Nelson was a substantial pickup, one that finally fills their longstanding hole at 2C. Charlie Coyle is a nice insurance policy behind him, giving the Avalanche one of the best top-three center groups in the league, naturally led by Nathan MacKinnon. On the blue line, Ryan Lindgren adds some stability to the third pair where he should be better in a reduced role and at the very least an improvement over Calvin de Haan. Colorado had a strong deadline.

But that doesn't change the predicament Colorado is in, one that leaves the Avalanche on a collision course for a matchup against the Stars in the opening round. If not the Stars, it's a date with the Golden Knights, Jets or Oilers on the road — pick your poison.

Potential Cup paths play a pivotal role when it comes to the odds of winning. Put Colorado in Carolina's position, for example, and the team's odds jump to 11.7 percent (while Carolina's would drop to 4.4 percent). It's a huge deal.

While the Avalanche could absolutely beat any one of their likely opponents, the likelihood of having to play two of them just to make it to the conference final is not ideal. That one of the few teams the Avalanche would be underdogs against, Dallas, is their likeliest first-round opponent is also not ideal.

On paper, the Avalanche are a terrifying team. But the path that lies ahead of them to go the distance may be just as scary.

#### Washington Capitals

Stanley Cup chances: 5 percent

The Capitals have had a magical season and the model was slowly buying into that. Logan Thompson is now rated as one of the league's best starters, the team's defense corps is a major source of strength and the top-six forwards look better, too. Pierre-Luc Dubois' line with Tom Wilson has been a force.

Washington's strength is its depth where every line and pair can do damage, powered by a coach who knows how to maximize talent. The Capitals are a good team, there is no denying that.

The Capitals may be doing something special that the model does not capture. But when one of the league's lowest-scoring teams last season is suddenly threatening to have the highest five-on-five shooting percentage of any team in the analytics era, there is reason for skepticism. Especially without much star power to believe in — similar to the 2022-23 Kraken who found surprising success in similar fashion. That's why the buy-in from the model has come at a glacial pace.

No team, no matter how good, shoots 11 percent forever. On top of that, it's a bit troubling that after a hot start, the Capitals have been a middle-of-the-road possession team since, relying heavily on that finishing touch and elite goaltending. This isn't like last year's Canucks. That team bought in to become a better team under the hood after going on a PDO bender to start the season. The Capitals have lacked the same fundamentals and don't have the type of history that suggests to expect it going forward.

Then the deadline came and Washington's only addition was Anthony Beauvillier. Compared to the other contenders, that's an underwhelming deal that doesn't move the needle much, creating further separation between the Capitals and the other top teams in the East.

Washington has a real shot to win it all, especially in a soft Metropolitan Division. Ryan Leonard potentially joining the playoff roster could add a further spark to that. The Capitals have proven themselves all season, but it's still a bit hard to be sold on this group.

The dark horses

The teams that can make noise, if everything goes right: 2 percent to 4 percent

Los Angeles Kings

Stanley Cup chances: 3 percent

This might be the best version of the Kings in their second era of playoff hockey with Anze Kopitar and Drew Doughty. They're even deeper than usual and defensively sound across the board. Their plus-29 Defensive Rating makes the Kings the third-best defensive team in the league. That's their strength that they'll lean on, backed by three elite defensive centers and three elite defensive defensemen.

That's enough to make the Kings a dark horse, but that may not mean much in a stacked West. Their best may not be good enough and that starts at the top of the lineup, as usual. It's a fundamental issue with the roster that's been exposed in three straight first-round losses to the Oilers. It would be an issue against almost every team in the West as the Kings do not have an offensive answer for Connor McDavid, Nathan MacKinnon, Jack Eichel or Mikko Rantanen. The Kings may be deep, but their lack of game-breaking difference-makers continues to be an issue.

That doesn't mean the Kings can't win or go deep. Their defensive might makes them a perfect foil against those star players and this is their best effort in that regard. But without some elite offensive talent to go with it, the odds will continue to be stacked against them relative to the league's powerhouse teams. Another Round 1 date with the Oilers looms large.

The rest

The likely playoffs teams that face a very difficult road in the playoffs: 0 percent to 2 percent

New Jersey Devils: The Jack Hughes injury was the final blow in New Jersey's slow descent down this list over the previous two months. A weak deadline and blue line injuries only sealed it. The Devils should still make the playoffs, but even with Hughes they looked like first-round fodder. Without him, it's hard to see them making a series against an actual contender interesting.



Minnesota Wild: After a strong start, Filip Gustavsson's play has faded a bit. In terms of GSAs per game, he's now in the bottom third of starting goalies. The model was already a bit sour on him given last season and views goaltending as a significant weakness going into the playoffs. It's also not really enamored by the lack of offensive ability on the back end. The forward group is strong enough to compensate, but compared to the best of the West, this Wild team still has a ways to go.

Ottawa Senators: The Senators' rise to playoff caliber has been nice to witness, but the next step to contention will be a bigger challenge. The core is getting there, but compared to the league's best teams, Ottawa's top players do fall behind. The Senators could make things interesting, especially if newcomer Dylan Cozens gets back on track. But it's more likely they're still a year away from doing real damage.

Vancouver Canucks: As long as Elias Pettersson continues to look like a shade of himself and Thatcher Demko remains injured (and also not himself), the Canucks have next to no shot at winning the Stanley Cup. The blue line looks stronger now, but there isn't enough offensive punch across the board.

Columbus Blue Jackets: This year's greatest story. After a big win against the Rangers on Sunday, the Blue Jackets are sitting pretty with a 62 percent chance of making the playoffs. Anything deeper though looks unlikely as the Blue Jackets still struggle defensively with a top end that, while great this season, doesn't match up with other contenders yet. Then again, even getting to this point was extremely unlikely to begin with. Who says the magic can't continue?

## [ESPN / Grading overreactions to the 2025 NHL trade deadline](#)

By Greg Wyshynski- March 12, 2025

The 2025 NHL trade deadline had a bit of everything: a superstar traded twice, a beloved captain sent to an archrival and first-round picks treated with the sacrosanctity of samples at a mall food court.

Something else the deadline had: overreactions, to the trades that were made, the teams that stayed quiet and the aftermath of those decisions.

Here are 10 overreactions to the 2025 NHL trade deadline that we judge to be absolutely reasonable or totally misguided.

#### Carolina botched the deadline

The Carolina Hurricanes made a blockbuster trade in January when they acquired Colorado Avalanche star Mikko Rantanen and Chicago Blackhawks winger Taylor Hall, shipping out leading scorer Martin Necas, forward Jack Drury a 2025 second-rounder and 2026 fourth-rounder. They were unable to sign Rantanen, who struggled offensively after arriving in Raleigh, to a long-term contract extension.

So they turned around and flipped him to Dallas for 22-year-old forward Logan Stankoven, first-round picks in 2026 and 2028 and third-round selections in 2026 and 2027.

The Hurricanes went from acquiring the missing ingredient for a Stanley Cup championship to punting on their season, their trade process with Dallas having been so prolonged that they didn't have the salary cap certainty to acquire other players they targeted at the deadline. Meanwhile, after failing to convince elite players in Jake Guentzel and Rantanen to sign extensions, Carolina's brand as a player destination is tarnished.

The verdict: OVERREACTION.

Let's talk about some concepts. The first is "recency bias."

Thanks to his background -- no other NHL general manager has a doctorate in chemistry from California Berkeley, at last check -- Eric Tulsky has been lauded as a genius. The Hurricanes have made "4D chess" moves during his time in the front office, with Tulsky having ascended to the general manager's chair this season. The team's initial trade for Rantanen received an A-plus from ESPN. But Tulsky's deadline was given a D from beat writer Cory Lavallete of The Athletic, who wrote "the acquisition, courting and departure of Mikko Rantanen will be seen as a stain on the Hurricanes."

There are a lot of critics questioning Tulsky after moving Rantanen so soon. That wasn't helped by his admission that the process took so long on Dallas' end -- signing Rantanen and completing the deal -- that the Hurricanes missed using their new draft capital to acquire trade deadline targets, which left fans baffled.

Remove Rantanen from the equation, and what the Hurricanes sent out and what they got back would be a win for Tulsky's team. There are a lot of folks around the NHL who believe Stankoven is primed to become Seth Jarvis 2.0 in Carolina. But you can't just leave Rantanen out, which brings us to our second concept: the sunk cost fallacy.

The Hurricanes acquired Rantanen with the hopes of winning the Cup with him and having him sign a long-term extension. Both objectives weren't guaranteed -- the Hurricanes have their lowest points percentage over their past five seasons and they only knew Rantanen was "open" to signing when they acquired him, not that he would. That was OK with their general manager.

"If the team was already winning [Stanley] Cup after Cup after Cup, maybe that would be a time to be conservative, but we haven't gotten to where we want to be yet. Ultimately, that means you're taking some risks," Tulsky said.

It started to become clear that it wasn't about the contract for Rantanen. Raleigh wasn't "home," according to Tulskey. So then the decision was whether to keep Rantanen for a run at the Cup, knowing he was a one-and-done, or flip him at the deadline. Tulskey said both were viable options. The latter became the more obvious choice when he saw the offers.

Trading him is "a loss for the current year," Tulskey said. The other option was to consider what the Hurricanes gave up for Rantanen -- the aforementioned "sunk cost" -- and double-down on him as a playoff rental. Instead, they opted for an outstanding young player who better fits their system, two firsts and two thirds, and not having \$13 million-plus in cap space committed annually to a player who might have overly benefitted from having Nathan MacKinnon and Cale Makar on the ice with him for the majority of his career.

The Hurricanes took a risk. They still ended up with a reward. And as bad as the optics are for the franchise and Tulskey, there should still be utmost faith that Carolina is far from done as a contender -- because of what's there, what's on the way and what they're now able to acquire.

Rantanen should have just signed with the Avalanche

Dallas and Carolina completed their trade after Rantanen agreed to an eight-year contract worth \$96 million that has an average annual value (AAV) of \$12 million. ESPN's Kevin Weekes reported that the Hurricanes offered Rantanen a deal with an average annual value somewhere between \$13 million and \$14 million. The catalyst for all of this was the contract impasse between Colorado and Rantanen that led to his trade ... and in hindsight, Rantanen was better off just taking that deal.

The verdict: NOT AN OVERREACTION.

The Avalanche had a range for Rantanen. The AAV on an extension would come in behind that of star Nathan MacKinnon (\$12.6 million) but above that of New York Rangers star Artemi Panarin (\$11,642,857), who is currently the league's highest-paid winger.

Sportsnet's Elliott Friedman said a \$11.75 million AAV was the number floating around the league for what the Avalanche were offering. At the time, there was speculation Rantanen was seeking in the neighborhood of the \$14 million AAV that Leon Draisaitl received from the Oilers last year, as the two players share an agent.

As ESPN's Rachel Doerrie noted, when three teams say you're not a \$14 million AAV player, the market says you're not a \$14 million AAV player.

The tax advantages in Texas mean Rantanen will take home more cash on this deal. But assuming the numbers are correct, he forced the Avalanche into trading him over roughly \$250,000 against the salary cap annually. That's the cost of leaving MacKinnon's wing and Makar on the power play, the cost of having his life uprooted by a trade and the cost of ending his extremely successful time in Colorado.

The Dallas Stars will win the Stanley Cup

After the Rantanen trade, the Stars rocketed up to become co-favorites for the Stanley Cup along with the Florida Panthers on ESPN BET. The team that made the Western Conference finals for two straight seasons added the fourth-best playoff scorer since 2021 in an attempt to put them over the top. In the process, they made an already elite team (third in the NHL overall) into a pending Stanley Cup champion.

The verdict: OVERREACTION.

Look, nothing would be more satisfying than to see the Stars win the Stanley Cup after I predicted they would before the season, fully knowing they'd end up upgrading from Logan Stankoven to Mikko Rantanen. (Please do not look that up.)

But there are two reasons I can't quite yet start the engraving process for Dallas.

The first is as obvious as the standings: The Western Conference is ThunderDome. The Jets, challenging for the league lead all season. The brilliant brutality of the Golden Knights. Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl in Edmonton, who came within a win of the Cup last season. The Wild and Kings could be tough outs. And then the real problem: Rantanen's old mates in Denver.

Entering Saturday, there's a 70% chance the Stars finish second in the Central and a 62% chance the Avalanche finish third. Colorado improved its already potent team throughout the season, solving problems in goal and at center. Dallas' opening round could be a disaster. And it doesn't get all much easier as the path continues.

The other reason is the back end. Obviously, winning the Rantanen sweepstakes reprioritized things for Dallas at the deadline. But the Stars could have used another veteran defenseman, not only given the load the current group is carrying because of injuries but in looking forward to the postseason battles they'll wage.

The Chris Tanev trade last season was an ideal one. Though a player like that might not have been in the cards at this deadline, some quality defensive depth would have helped. Perhaps as a safety net for a young defenseman such as Lian Bichsel. Perhaps so they don't have to rely on the Matt Dumba and Brendan Smith pairing (46.7 expected goals percentage). Getting Cody Ceci from the Sharks in the Mikael Granlund trade helped to that end, but some extra reinforcement was needed.

Brock Nelson was the best "final piece" move

New York Islanders GM Lou Lamoriello finally said goodbye to one of his aging veterans, trading Nelson to the Colorado Avalanche. A member of Team USA at the 4 Nations Face-Off, Nelson is a tremendous 200-foot center who's solid defensively and can score over 30 goals in a season. The Avalanche have been searching for a solution at No. 2 center since Nazem Kadri signed with Calgary after Colorado's Stanley Cup win in 2022. No team at the deadline found a better solution for their biggest question.

The verdict: NOT AN OVERREACTION.

The center position was overall thin at this year's deadline. Nelson was the best one who moved to a contender, better than Scott Laughton (Toronto), Yanni Gourde (Tampa Bay) and Charlie Coyle, who joined him with the Avalanche.

When you expand to other positions, how many players click into place like Nelson as the No. 2 center in Colorado behind MacKinnon? The only one who comes close is Brandon Carlo as blue-line beef in Toronto, theoretically giving Morgan Rielly the partner he has needed. But that's not on the level of what Nelson could give the Avs. He's like if a second-line center were created in a lab, right down to the 52.8% faceoff winning percentage.

The return for Brad Marchand was a joke

Boston Bruins fans' hearts ached as they watched their team trade away captain Brad Marchand at the deadline. He was a player whose talent, tenacious play and comportment perfectly encapsulated the Bostonian aesthetic. That he was traded to the Florida Panthers, Boston's most hated recent tormenters, was hurt even more.

But for many fans, the real insult to injury was that he was traded for only a conditional second-round selection -- in 2027! -- despite being a star, a leader and a champion.

The verdict: OVERREACTION.

As is typical with seemingly underwhelming returns, there was a bunch happening under the surface here.

Speculation was that a slew of Western Conference contenders were seeking to acquire Marchand, the Vegas Golden Knights, Los Angeles Kings and Edmonton Oilers among them. But ESPN's Emily Kaplan reported that the trade market was much, much smaller than that: Marchand had family considerations and wanted to stay on the East Coast.

Florida made sense, not only as a defending Stanley Cup champion but because two of his former Bruins teammates, Gregory Campbell and Shawn Thornton, are members of the Panthers' hockey operations staff.

With a market limited by Marchand's preferred destinations, the Bruins retained 50% of his salary and worked a conditional second-rounder out of the Panthers, a team that has traded its share of picks in the past few seasons. The conditional second-round draft pick will become a 2027 or 2028 first-round draft pick "if Florida wins two rounds of the 2025 Stanley Cup playoffs and Marchand appears in at least 50% of the team's playoff games." Given their consecutive trips to the Stanley Cup Final, and Marchand's expected recovery from an upper-body injury, that's a reasonable assumption.

If it ends up being first-rounder, given Marchand's age, injury, expiring contract and limited trade scope, the Bruins did well here. Maybe not "re-sign the heart and soul of your team to a reasonable three-year contract to avoid having to trade him" well, but well enough.

Boston is in a rebuild now

Bruins management had signaled that its team would not be adding at the deadline after a disappointing regular season. The level of dealing the Bruins did was still shocking.

Sure, many anticipated that center Trent Frederic and forward Justin Brazeau would be traded, having been mainstays on pre-deadline trade boards. But then the Bruins traded longtime center Charlie Coyle (Colorado) and defenseman Brandon Carlo (Toronto), before sending their beloved captain Brad Marchand to the Panthers. Has a rebuild in Boston officially started?

The verdict: OVERREACTION.

What did the Bruins trade yesterday? A 36-year-old Marchand. A 32-year-old Coyle, who returned a 26-year-old Casey Mittelstadt. A 28-year-old Carlo, who gained Toronto's second-best prospect (Fraser Minten) and a first-round pick.

GM Don Sweeney talked about finding "another wave" of players, and started that process with these trades. They join a team with a sturdy foundation of three players: David Pastrnak, Charlie McAvoy and Jeremy Swayman, all signed through 2029-30.

For better or worse, "rebuilding" is not in the DNA of the franchise. Sweeney said nothing Friday that even hinted at it happening.

"We didn't burn it down," he said. "You have to have a little bit of a step back at times. Did we know this morning that we'd end up making all of these moves? No. But we were prepared if the things that we liked were presented."

The Bruins weren't a contender this season, and might not be in the near term. But it's clear that Boston sees a path back to contention without a total teardown. Now they have some assets and considerably more cap space to start down that path.

Washington, Winnipeg are strictly "regular-season elite"

The Capitals and Jets didn't make too many waves at the trade deadline. Washington acquired winger Anthony Beauvillier from the Penguins. The Jets added winger Brandon Tanev and defenseman Luke Schenn.

Perhaps they should have taken bigger swings: Despite these teams passing first in the league back and forth all season, there aren't many believers that the Caps or Jets will end up winning the Stanley Cup. ESPN BET has the Capitals with the sixth-shortest odds to win the Cup, and the Jets have the eighth-shortest odds.

The verdict: OVERREACTION.

It's understandable why these teams aren't earning more respect, because some believe the past is prologue. The Capitals were quickly swept out by the Rangers in the first round last postseason.

But this isn't the same Capitals team. They added Pierre-Luc Dubois, Jakob Chychrun and Logan Thompson since then, and all have been tremendous. Aliaksei Protas has leveled up. And rather than looking like a fading star the way he did against the Rangers, Alex Ovechkin is scoring more than a point per game, and poised to break Wayne Gretzky's all-time goals record this season. The Capitals are the league's top offensive team and are in the top five in defense.

The Jets have admitted themselves that regular-season success means nothing if they can't get it done in the playoffs. The past two years, they haven't: Winnipeg was eliminated in five games in the first round both times, first by the Golden Knights and then by the Avalanche.

The Jets are top three offensively and the best defensive team in the NHL thanks to Connor Hellebuyck, who is poised to win a second straight Vezina Trophy. While they've run back much of the same roster as last postseason, they have a different coach in Scott Arniel, who has led this team to the top of the league.

Underestimate either of them in the playoffs at your own risk. All they do is win.

By not getting a goalie, Edmonton blew its Cup chance

The Oilers came within one victory of a Stanley Cup championship last season. Leon Draisaitl and Connor McDavid are hungry to hoist the Cup for the first time, but Edmonton's decision to not upgrade its shaky goaltending (17th in team save percentage) is going to inevitably cost it the opportunity. Both Stuart Skinner and Calvin Pickard have played below expected this season.

The verdict: OVERREACTION.

The Oilers made it all the way to Game 7 of the Stanley Cup Final despite atrocious goaltending. They had the worst team 5-on-5 save percentage for teams that advanced past the first round. Skinner was famously benched in the second round. But the beleaguered goalie was rarely the reason why Edmonton lost in the postseason -- heck, in Game 7 against the Panthers, he had an expected goals-against of 1.63.

Edmonton has shown it can win a series or three with Skinner. But the bigger question in assessing this reaction: Who should they have acquired? Anaheim's John Gibson, an injury risk with a sizable cap hit they'd have to absorb? Karel Vejmelka re-signed with Utah. Everyone else available wouldn't have been much of an improvement over Skinner. In fact, the only goalie that moved at the deadline was Petr Mrazek.

Oilers GM Stan Bowman put it this way: It's less about the goalies than the team in front of them. "We're trying not to put so much pressure on them so they have to save games for us," he said Friday.

Conservative bubble teams deserve our respect

There are no less than eight teams vying for the two wild-card spots in the Eastern Conference. Four more teams are battling for the last wild-card spot in the Western Conference. Yet one glance at the most significant trades of the deadline found only one team at the bubble mentioned: Ottawa, which swapped center Josh Norris for Buffalo's Dylan Cozens.

But that's OK. The bubble is so crowded, and the teams around it are so flawed, that anyone can make the cut without taking a big deadline swing.

The verdict: NOT AN OVERREACTION.

I asked an NHL general manager the other day if his peers honestly understood what their teams were at the deadline, or if some would make trades that were more aspirational than realistic. He told me while every GM wants to get into the playoffs -- because one never knows what'll happen and because of that sweet extra ticket revenue -- they're not going to make short-term blockbusters without believing they could win the Cup.

The lack of big swings by the bubble teams underscores that philosophy.

Some teams made moves -- the Rangers added Carson Soucy, the Columbus Blue Jackets traded for Luke Kunin -- but most did nothing, and a few, like the Bruins, were straight-up sellers. Maybe they make the playoffs, maybe they don't. But understanding who they are, and not going all-in on a mediocre hand, is laudable.

Mike Grier is low-key the best GM in the NHL

The San Jose Sharks have some significant building blocks for the future in Macklin Celebrini, Will Smith and William Eklund. But in trading no less than seven players this season, GM Mike Grier has continued to amass picks and prospects to surround that core with talent -- and schooling the rest of the NHL with his asset management in the process.

The verdict: OVERREACTION.

There's no question that Grier has done a masterful job in tanking the Sharks. In fact, I argued that Grier deserved NHL general manager of the year last season for making San Jose terrible to the point where it earned them Celebrini.

This trade deadline, he continued that aggressive and effective approach: Mackenzie Blackwood to Colorado, Mikael Granlund and Cody Ceci to Dallas, Nico Sturm to Florida, Luke Kunin to Columbus and Jake Walman to Edmonton. The Walman trade was genius: Grier acquired him with a second-rounder from Detroit in a salary dump; the Sharks made him their No. 1 defenseman, and he played well enough to earn a first-rounder from Edmonton.

But his trade of Fabian Zetterlund to Ottawa was a curious one, opting to not make the 25-year-old part of the team's core to acquire 21-year-old center Zack Ostapchuk and a second-rounder. It's a gamble, but Grier was adamant that Ostapchuk's skillset is more what the Sharks need going forward.

Overall, Grier is doing an incredible job. But the reason this is an overreaction is simple: We won't truly be able to measure Grier's effectiveness as a GM until he's building up the Sharks, which is much more difficult than tearing it all down.

## **[Sportsnet.ca / Playoff Push: Post-trade deadline questions that will be answered](#)**

**By Rory Boylen- March 12, 2025**

The 2025 NHL trade deadline has come and gone, so now the race for the playoffs is fully on.

No more outside additions. No more Plan Bs. What you have is what you've got and these next few weeks will determine who's in, who's out, and who's got the toughest road through the post-season.

We'll begin taking a more regular look at the playoff races and begin today with some questions that linger from the fall-out of last week's deadline day.

Can Seth Jones be more effective in Florida than he was in Chicago?

The initial question that followed Seth Jones' arrival in Florida was if it would change the Panthers' approach to Aaron Ekblad who, like Jones, is a right shot. Jones makes \$7 million against Florida's cap through 2029-30, whereas Ekblad's \$7.5 million expires after this season and could lead to him becoming a UFA.

Through three games with the Panthers Jones doesn't have any points yet, but he also hasn't been on the ice for a goal against and Florida has out-chanced its opponents 60-46 when he's been out there at 5-on-5.

Jones has averaged 21:03 of ice time per game with Florida, down from 24:30 with Chicago. In one of his three Panthers games he finished with less than 19 minutes of ice time, which happened only two other times over the past three years. The thought was that perhaps with a little less ice time and focus on his salary Jones may find himself again.

Now that Ekblad has been suspended 20 games for a PED program violation (and will miss two playoff games because of it) Jones is jumping up to the top pair to replace a player who was averaging 23:31 per game. How will he respond to that and will he still thrive on a better all-around Panthers team?

Will Tampa be the team to beat by the time playoffs roll around?

The 2-3 playoff matchup in the Atlantic Division will be a heck of a series with Florida, Toronto and Tampa Bay battling to avoid it by winning the No. 1 seed. Right now the Lightning have the most work to do to climb out of it. Sitting five points out of first means they're most likely to be one of these two teams.

The Lightning went more all-in on offence at the deadline, acquiring both Yanni Gourde and Oliver Bjorkstrand from Seattle. Gourde is a feisty player for the bottom-six and can kill penalties, but the Lightning are using him on their second power play unit only for now and he has a 20-goal upside. Bjorkstrand is an offensive producer with a career-high 28 goals that could be achieved again in a better lineup. He's already scored once in two games with the Lightning.

Tampa has the league's second-best offence, sixth-best power play, and generate the eighth-most high danger chances at 5-on-5 per 60 minutes. Andrei Vasilevskiy is still one of the NHL's best goalies and he's having a monster of a bounce-back season. Tampa has the NHL's fifth-best points percentage over the past two months.

The Capitals have been the East's best all season. The Panthers are the defending champs. But by the time April comes, we could be thinking about Tampa Bay as the awakening beast of the conference.

How do Carolina and New Jersey respond to disappointing trade deadlines?

Everything was setting up nicely for the Devils to have the kind of deadline that puts a team over the top. They were primarily looking for a centre, or a scorer, and had plenty of assets to work with. With so many of the types of players they were looking for available, it was setting up nicely.



But Jack Hughes' season-ending injury and Dougie Hamilton's week-to-week lay up altered New Jersey's outlook altogether. A Stanley Cup contender depleted, their March 6 trade for Brian Dumoulin was the most notable move they made. Cody Glass, who has four goals this season, was the centre they brought in and Daniel Sprong (two goals in 19 games) was the scorer.

Meanwhile Carolina went from adding the biggest score in Mikko Rantanen, to replacing that player with rookie Logan Stankoven — a fine young scorer with potential, but not one likely to make you a better team when it costs a 100-point player.

These teams may end up playing against each other in the first round, though we should note the Columbus Blue Jackets are closing in on the Devils. Both these teams had high hopes earlier this season, but now we wait to see how they react to disappointment in March.

Will the Rangers be a scary first-round opponent?

It's been a very turbulent season for the Rangers, but at least now all the trade rumours are in the past. This is the team they'll at least finish the season with — after which, we'll brace for a more interesting summer.

New York is 15-8-5 in 2025 and are showing some signs of bouncing back. J.T. Miller has been a great fit since coming in. Mika Zibanejad has been putting up more points. They aren't perfect — the Rangers still struggle to defend high quality chances and haven't defeated a team inside the playoff cutline since returning from the 4 Nations break — but they do have Igor Shesterkin, who alone could be the great equalizer.

This team, though it has experienced some change, won the Presidents' Trophy and went to the Conference Final last year. Now they could be a wild card team that may give a division winner a more difficult out than they'd like.

Did Detroit do enough?

The Red Wings only missed out on last year's playoffs by the tiebreaker and seemed ready to take another step this season. That hasn't been so smooth.

At last year's deadline, GM Steve Yzerman was quiet, still unsure if his team was ready for the big in-season investment. They got to this season's deadline outside of the playoff cutline again, but right in the middle of a heated race again. The team had also lost four games in a row heading into the deadline, though, which either screamed a need for an upgrade, or would give caution once again to the front office.

In the end, the Red Wings basically swapped out goalie Ville Husso for another goalie Petr Mrazek and Craig Smith, who has nine goals and 16 points this season. Mrazek joins Alex Lyon and Cam Talbot in Detroit's crease, which maintains its three-deep depth chart. Is that going to end up being enough to hang in the race, or will they fall short again?

Detroit has lost another two games in regulation since the deadline passed.

Will missing out on acquiring a centre bite the Winnipeg Jets?

Winnipeg's divisional rivals went big and bold. Dallas won the prize of the day in Mikko Rantanen, after previously acquiring Mikael Granlund from San Jose. Colorado completed its roster renovation with Brock Nelson and Charlie Coyle to give it a three-deep centre group that is its best since winning the Stanley Cup three years ago.

Winnipeg also needed a centre at this deadline, seeking an upgrade to Vladislav Namestnikov, and someone who could form a deep trio with Mark Scheifele and Adam Lowry. they came out of the

deadline with winger Brandon Tanev and defenceman Luke Schenn, who will both make the Jets an even tougher team to play against, but did not address the team's primary positional need.

The Jets have been the team to beat in the West all season. But will they be able to knock off these teams that have had more substantial upgrades?

Will Mikko Rantanen gel better, quicker in Dallas?

It really never worked with Rantanen and the Hurricanes. Whether it was the initial shock of being traded out of Colorado that never wore off, the fact he had little time to get used to the local scene or his teammates, or the knowledge he was never going to be a long-term part of this team, Rantanen — a 100-plus point scorer the past two years — scored just two goals and six points in 13 games with Carolina.

So, off to Dallas he went, to join a scary group of Stars forwards that is dangerous from top to bottom. Rantanen is playing with Wyatt Johnston and Jason Robertson on the top line and already has two goals and three points in two games.

Dallas has been close, eliminated in back-to-back Conference Finals, and now have added the biggest name available on this year's market. There's also stability built in this time, as Rantanen signed an eight-year extension with the Stars that made him the highest-paid winger in the league.

When will Kirill Kaprizov return, and can he help Minnesota stop the slide?

There was a time much earlier this season when the Wild were sort of hanging around with the Winnipeg Jets in that they kept their regulation losses down. But one big thing changed their entire outlook: Kirill Kaprizov's injury.

Kaprizov is the Minnesota Wild, and while optimism abounds that the team can take its giant amounts of cap space this summer and become a real contender, there is no way this plan comes to fruition unless Kaprizov re-signs. He has one more year on his contract, after which he could become a UFA. Kaprizov is eligible to sign an extension as of July 1.

In the month Kaprizov missed in late December and January, Minnesota went 7-5-0. He returned for three games, but now hasn't played since Jan. 25 and in that time the Wild are 8-7-0 and have slipped from second in the Central down to the first wild card spot.

Is Los Angeles any better equipped to take down Edmonton?

The Kings have been eliminated in the first round by the Oilers three years in a row and the two could meet there once again in 2025. While the Oilers aren't playing their best hockey right now — and several players are having down seasons — are the Kings any better equipped to take them on in a playoff series?

Los Angeles struggles to score, 18th in goals per game and 28th in power play percentage. Their defensive numbers are strong, however, as they lead the NHL in expected goals against per 60 minutes of 5-on-5 play and have the second-lowest shots against per game.

The Kings' primary need at the deadline then, was to add another scorer or someone who could help their power play. Their one addition was Andrei Kuzmenko, who has just six goals on the season between Calgary and Philadelphia.

Can St. Louis steal a wild card spot?

Just a few weeks ago the Blues were seen as a deadline day seller and potential kingmaker in the playoff race. Names such as Jordan Binnington, Jordan Kyrou and Pavel Buchnevich came up on Nick Kypreos'

trade board. They lost six of their last eight games before the 4 Nations break and were chasing the playoff race from distance.

Things have quickly changed, however. The Blues are 6-1-2 since returning from the international break and have beaten playoff teams Dallas, Los Angeles, Washington and Colorado in that time. Rather than sell off, St. Louis instead stood pat at the deadline and now have a somewhat easier schedule coming up in a run of games that includes Pittsburgh, Nashville and Chicago.

The Blues have some built-in disadvantages still. One is that as they trail the last wild card spot by one point, they have played two more games than the teams in front of them. Another is that, despite playing more games, they still trail Vancouver and Calgary in the first tiebreaker (regulation wins).

But where the race for the West's second wild card seemed to be between the Canucks and Flames once upon a time, the Blues are now a team to watch closely, catching fire at the right time and recalling memories of their run in 2019.