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The Athletic / Blue Jackets Sunday Gathering: What must Luca Del Bel Belluz do to stick in the NHL?

By Aaron Portzline – September 28, 2025

A collection of notes, insights, ruminations and did-you-knows gathered throughout the week that was for the Columbus Blue Jackets:

Item No. 1: 'Del Bel' waits

We've noted since the start of this Blue Jackets training camp that the roster is pretty much settled. The past 10 days haven't been in vain, for certain, but most attentive fans could have jotted down the club's 22- or 23-man roster with only a couple of question marks or uncertainties.

The Blue Jackets confirmed as much on Sunday when they made a massive whack at the roster and settled on 24 players for the final week of camp, the only extra being No. 3 goaltender Ivan Fedotov, who will likely join AHL Cleveland by the middle or end of the week.

But there is a question that is fair to ask: What must 21-year-old center Luca Del Bel Belluz do to get over the threshold and become a regulation NHL player?

Del Bel Belluz was one of eight players sent outright to AHL Cleveland on Sunday, while three others were placed on waivers with the purpose of joining the top minor-league affiliate should they clear on Monday.

The Blue Jackets asked Del Bel Belluz, a 2022 second-round pick, to get bigger and stronger in the offseason, and they were pleased with the results when he showed up early for training camp. He's also led the Blue Jackets in scoring so far in camp (2-1-3), including a goal and an exhibition shootout winner on Saturday in Pittsburgh. (More on that later.)

This comes after a productive 2023-24 season with AHL Cleveland — 27-26-53 in 61 games — and a solid stretch with the Blue Jackets (2-6-8 in 15 games) when injuries forced his recall.

"It's tough," GM Don Waddell told *The Athletic*. "He still has some things to work on. He got so much stronger this past year, and he has to continue to work on that.

"(These players) also have to be put in the right situation. For him to be a fourth-line center isn't going to do him or us any good. He's a skill guy, has great hockey sense. Being patient with a player like this, it always pays off in the end. It doesn't do us or him any good to have him playing 10 minutes on our fourth line."

At this time next season, Del Bel Belluz will require waivers to be sent to the minor leagues. So while Sunday had to be a tough day — several veteran players reached out to Del Bel Belluz to encourage him to keep plugging away — he's not far from having more control over the situation.

Waddell met with all of the players who were farmed out on Sunday. As for the talk with Del Bel Belluz...

"I told him to make sure you keep doing what you're doing," Waddell said. "You have a lot of off days (in the AHL) where you can be in the gym, so make sure when we need somebody that you're ready. We don't call guys based on what they did in training camp. We talk to the coaches and they tell us who is most deserving based on how they're going during the season. So keep going."

Along with Del Bel Belluz, the Blue Jackets sent forwards Mac McCue, James Malatesta, Luca Pinelli and Jack Williams, defensemen Corson Ceulemans and Stanislav Svozil, and goaltender Nolan Lalonde to AHL

Cleveland. Forwards Hudson Fasching, Brendan Gaunce and Mikael Pyyhtiä were placed on waivers and will join them if they clear on Monday.

In other moves, the Blue Jackets released veteran defenseman Brendan Smith from his professional tryout agreement and loaned forward Oiva Keskinen to Tappara, his club in Finland's Liiga.

Truthfully, it would have taken an injury or a major upset for any of those players, Del Bel Belluz included, to earn a roster spot. That's how settled the Blue Jackets' roster is.

But credit Del Bel Belluz for making it interesting, and he ended camp on a high note on Saturday. He takes a lifelong memory with him to Cleveland.

Legendary Pittsburgh Penguins goaltender Marc-Andre Fleury signed a one-day contract and played the third period of Saturday's 4-1 Pittsburgh win, making eight saves in regulation and stopping two of three shots in the pre-arranged shootout that followed.

Fleury, who drew loud cheers from a sold-out crowd in PPG Paints Arena, had a perfect night until Del Bel Belluz scored in the final shootout attempt. He was booed lustily except on the Blue Jackets' bench, which erupted in cheers and laughter.

It was a beautifully awkward moment.

"It's obviously good that I scored," Del Bel Belluz said. "But I feel like I kind of ruined the party for him there. He's a hell of a goalie, somebody I grew up watching. It was special for me to score that one, but I felt a little bad. That could go down as the last goal ever on Fleury. I guess I could say I have it.

"It's definitely a moment I'll never forget. I don't think I've ever been in a building that loud before; it was really electric."

Item No. 2: Sweatin' Fedotov

The Blue Jackets made an aggressive decision early last week, putting Fedotov on waivers and clearing him through to AHL Cleveland, even though they don't plan to send him there just yet. Waddell admitted to feeling stress while he waited to see if Fedotov cleared.

The plan to have Jet Greaves and Elvis Merzlikins serve as the Blue Jackets' top two goaltenders is not in jeopardy with one week to go in training camp, but the Jackets wanted to make sure they could keep Fedotov as the AHL starter because they see great promise.

By putting him through waivers early, Waddell wanted to make other GMs — those who may need a goaltender — make decisions at least a few days before they were ready to make them, based on their training camps and preseason.

The Blue Jackets have already played five preseason games, but some teams have only had two games to evaluate their young players. Also, the longer camps go, the greater chance for an injury that could put a club back into the market.

Fedotov has played just 29 games in the NHL. His numbers aren't pretty — 6-14-5 with an .874 save percentage — but there are a couple of issues to consider. First, he played for a Philadelphia Flyers club that really suffered defensively the past two seasons. Second, he's still getting used to North American-style hockey.

Asked if he's shown his best in the NHL yet, Fedotov got a strange look on his face.

"Oh, oh, no," Fedotovo said "Not even close. I mean, not *even* close. I've been building my game, getting better month by month and day by day. I feel different now, more relaxed. I don't want to squeeze. Last

season and a little before that, I was squeezing. Stressing. It wasn't (all bad), but it was up and down, up and down."

Fedotov has stopped 38 of 40 shots he's faced in four periods this preseason.

The only nervousness he feels now, he said, is waiting for his phone to ring. Fedotov's wife, Nadezhda, has remained in Philadelphia because she's due to give birth to the couple's first child in two weeks. He's already mapped out the flight times and drive times from Columbus to Philadelphia.

"We were hoping it would happen earlier (in the summer) or later (into the season)," Fedotov said. "But everything will be fine. Our phone (conversations) are me telling her not to worry about me, that I'm fine. And she's always saying not to worry about her, that she's fine. But, yes, it is on my mind."

Item No. 3: Take 5, Damon Severson

"Take 5" is our weekly brief and (mostly) non-hockey conversation with a Blue Jackets player, coach, broadcaster or staffer. This week, it's defenseman Damon Severson:

What part of Columbus do you call home?

Three places we looked at were New Albany, Dublin and Upper Arlington. She was really drawn to Upper Arlington because it's so close to downtown and so close to so many things to do, and we got used to going into New York City on an off day when I played in New Jersey. But there were so many guys with their families moving to New Albany. That's where we landed. Great neighbors, great street. We couldn't be happier.

Favorite vacation spot?

I haven't been to a ton of places, to be honest. Cabo (San Lucas, Mexico) is cool. Love the resorts there. We live in Kelowna (British Columbia) in the summer, and a lot of people think of that as a vacation spot. We don't use it that way necessarily, but it's unbelievable. Just beautiful.

What did you buy with your first NHL check?

I bought a vehicle, but I waited a year before I did it. I signed on Sept. 10, 2012, and the lockout (of 2012-13) started just a few days later (on Sept. 15). It took until Christmas for me to get my first signing bonus, because I had to get my visa and (international papers) done first. I was in junior. I waited a year and the following year I bought a 2004 Porsche Cayenne. It was nine years old, low miles. I actually went shopping for a Jeep Wrangler, and my old man and I were walking out of the showroom and a salesman came running after us. He said, "You might want to see this. We just got it in." I wasn't going to buy it. But then I test-drove it.

Favorite sandwich?

Man, that's tough. What are the other guys saying? Mine doesn't have a name, I guess. It's just cold cuts, cheese and lettuce, maybe a little mayonnaise. That's where my mind went, to my mom's homemade sandwiches. My mom was one of the best cooks ever. I'd have friends over to the house growing up and they'd always find a way to stay long enough to have dinner.

What movie can you watch over and over?

Have you seen "Olympus Has Fallen" or any of the "Fallen" series? I've watched those a bunch of times. They're on all the time, it seems. There's a couple sports movies I'd watch over and over. "Moneyball," for sure.

Item No. 4: Snacks

- The Blue Jackets were pleased with Brendan Smith's training camp, and it's fair to say that in many, many previous Columbus camps, he would have signed a contract and made the club. But Waddell spoke highly of him, and did him the favor of releasing him a week early, giving him time to latch on with another club that may have more of an opportunity. "That's what I said to him. 'I want to be fair to you,'" Waddell said. "Right now the guys we have here, we feel, serve us better. You didn't do anything wrong. If anybody else has interest in you, I'd be the first one to speak on your behalf."
- The cuts leave the Blue Jackets with 24 players on the roster: 13 forwards, eight defensemen and three goaltenders. That gives them one group for the rest of training camp. They'll have three full days of practice this week, two game days, and an off day on Wednesday. They'll also do a weekend overnight team-building function next weekend at Double Eagle Golf Club, the exclusive private club in southern Delaware County owned by majority owner John P. McConnell.
- The players placed on waivers on Saturday — forwards Hunter McKown and Owen Sillinger, defenseman Dysin Mayo and goaltender Zach Sawchenko — all cleared Sunday and are on their way to Cleveland. Camp for the Monsters begins Monday in Strongsville, Ohio.
- Evason has noticed something different this training camp, he said. Several times when coaches have seen a "corrective moment" in practices or even games, they've noticed veteran players — Zach Werenski, Boone Jenner, Erik Gudbranson and others — doing the instructing of younger players before the coaches can even arrive on the scene. That is most certainly a result of a coaching staff and roster that remained mostly intact from last season, but it's also a sign of a healthy, thriving and committed dressing room, he said. "It's fantastic," Evason said. "Z speaking has a lot more weight than us coaches speaking."
- The Blue Jackets announced this week that five members of the 2000-01 inaugural club — coach Dave King, forward Kevin Dineen, defensemen Rostislav Klesla and Jean-Luc Grand-Pierre, and goaltender Ron Tugnutt — will be honored on Oct. 18 vs. Tampa Bay, part of the Jackets' 25th anniversary celebration. It's one of five "welcome back" nights for the Originals. The others: Nov. 15 vs. the New York Rangers, Dec. 13 vs. Vegas, Jan. 24 vs. Tampa Bay, and March 21 vs. Seattle.
- Many have wondered if the Blue Jackets would celebrate their 25th season with a commemorative sweater, like their expansion brethren in Minnesota are doing. But after introducing a new sweater for last season's NHL Stadium Series game at Ohio Stadium, the Blue Jackets decided to celebrate their quarter-century on the ice in other ways, according to a club spokesman.
- Only two players — Jenner and Werenski — remain from the 2018-19 Blue Jackets who swept Tampa Bay in the first round and lost in six games to Boston in the second. Charlie Coyle, acquired by Columbus in a trade with Colorado this summer, was a central figure on those Bruins clubs. "Game 1 went to OT, right?" Coyle said, smiling. "I remember that one. I scored the OT goal." He also scored earlier in the game, but the Blue Jackets held a 2-1 series lead before losing the final three. "It was a tough series," Coyle said. "We ended up winning 4-2, but it didn't seem like a six-game series. It seemed like it went the distance. They were coming in sky-high with confidence after sweeping Tampa Bay."
- This week's Sunday Gathering trivia question: Boone Jenner's first goal of the 2025-26 season will be the 200th of his career, making him the third Blue Jackets player to hit that milestone. Name the other two players with 200 goals.
- Merzlikins stopped 32 of 35 shots on Saturday, the first time this preseason he's played a full game. He played mostly very well, but one decision midway through the third period marred his outing. With the Jackets trailing 2-1, Merzlikins tried to sail a puck up the ice through a crowd of players, including

Penguins, from behind his net. But his pass was deflected down by Pittsburgh's Ville Koivunen, who then fired it into the open net. "Do we want him to throw sauce up the middle of the ice, turn it over and have it end up in our net?" Evason said. "No. Did he play really well? Yeah. He made some great saves. His 'handles' were great up to that point. He just got ahead of himself. Maybe he thought he was Fleury for a second."

- Nice touch by the Blue Jackets and the Penguins during Wednesday's preseason game to place "Quinn's Crew" decals on their helmets. Quinn Halstead, the daughter of Blue Jackets equipment manager Dusty Halstead, has been fighting serious health issues the last couple of months.
- Blue Jackets prospect winger Jordan Dumais, who has been beleaguered by injuries the past two seasons, is out again. An MRI last week revealed a right hip flexor strain, and he's been ordered by doctors to stay off the ice for three weeks.
- Trivia answers: This was an easy one, eh? The two other Blue Jackets players to score 200 goals are Rick Nash (289) and Cam Atkinson (213).

The Athletic / What we've learned in the first week of Blue Jackets training camp, preseason

By Aaron Portzline – September 26, 2025

After playing four preseason games in four days, the Columbus Blue Jackets took a break from training camp Thursday. The second week of camp — always the most interesting — begins Friday with 51 players still on the roster.

We've said since the days leading up to camp that this is the least compelling camp the Blue Jackets have operated in several seasons. That's not a critique of the organization or the players, but a compliment. The roster isn't set, but the lineup is almost fully formed.

Let's first look at the forwards.

The Blue Jackets would appear to have their 13 forwards: centers Sean Monahan, Adam Fantilli, Charlie Coyle and Isac Lundestrom, and wingers Boone Jenner, Kirill Marchenko, Dmitri Voronkov, Kent Johnson, Yegor Chinakhov, Cole Sillinger, Mathieu Olivier, Miles Wood and Zach Aston-Reese.

Chinakhov drew a lot of attention at the start of camp because of his offseason trade request, but he and coach Dean Evason have said the matter is patched up — at least for now — and they're moving forward toward the start of Chinakhov's fifth season in Columbus.

As for any trade talks, Blue Jackets general manager Don Waddell termed the situation "very quiet."

On Wednesday, Chinakhov played 12:48 on a line with Coyle and Mikael Pyyhtiä — this is the preseason, right? — and had a goal and an assist in a 4-1 win. On Sunday, he played 18:43 on a line with Cole Sillinger and Mathieu Olivier and had a plus-1 rating.

It's a situation to continue monitoring, but for now, the more compelling question with Chinakhov is whether he can earn a spot in the Blue Jackets' top six, which may mean bumping Jenner, the Blue Jackets captain, into a third-line role.

Evason has kept with his promise to juggle lines throughout camp and the first four preseason games, but we should get a better sense of what he's thinking for the Oct. 9 opener during the final three exhibition games, beginning Saturday in Pittsburgh.

It's easy to see, however, where Evason and his staff view the soft spots on the roster, how they've shaped practices and drawn preseason lineups in a way that gives them a long look at the players battling for the final spots when the rosters are set early next month.

If the Blue Jackets carry only seven defensemen, they'd have room on the roster for a 14th forward. That's why it's worth noting that Pyyhtiä and James Malatesta are the only forwards in camp who played in three of the first four games. If Aston-Reese, with a one-way contract, is the likely No. 13, those two could be fighting for a possible 14th spot.

Pyyhtiä, 23, played 47 games in a fourth-line role with Columbus last season, and has dressed in 66 games combined over the past three seasons. He is a checking forward who is positionally sound and disrupts defensively with his quickness and skating.

Malatesta, 22, played only two games with the Blue Jackets last season after dressing in 11 during the 2023-24 season. He's a much more physical player than Pyyhtiä, making noise on the forecheck and in net-front scrums. The Blue Jackets have two players — Aston-Reese and Wood — who are good comparables.

Other names who could fit into this mix, players who have dressed twice in the preseason, are Brendan Gaunce, Hudson Fasching, Luca Del Bel Belluz and Oiva Keskinen. If Keskinen doesn't earn a spot on the NHL roster, he has a clause in his contract that allows him to return home to play in Finland's Liiga.

The situation on defense is similar.

Denton Mateychuk hasn't played in a preseason game or skated with the group yet because of a groin strain, but Evason indicated that he's one good solo skate away from being cleared to join the main group, likely by this weekend.

But Mateychuk may return to a different role than the one he filled for most of his rookie season.

The Blue Jackets know that Zach Werenski and Dante Fabbro are their top pair, but they've played Ivan Provorov and Damon Severson on the second pair, allowing both Provorov (left) and Severson (right) to play on their natural sides.

Severson's struggles last season put Mateychuk on the second pair with Provorov, forcing Provorov to move to the right side of the ice.

But if those top two pairs are stable — Werenski-Fabbro, Provorov-Severson — then Mateychuk will likely play with veteran Erik Gudbranson on the third pair. Gudbranson hasn't played in a preseason game yet, either, but Evason said that was merely a scheduling quirk.

That leaves the No. 7 defenseman's spot. And, if the Jackets keep only 13 forwards, they'd be able to carry eight defenseman.

It's worth noting that Jake Christiansen and Daemon Hunt are the only defensemen who have played in three of the first four games, perhaps pitting them in a battle for the No. 7 spot.

Christiansen played in 68 games for Columbus last season, taking advantage of early-season injuries and Severson's ineffectiveness to carve out a lineup spot with regularity. But he's come to camp, he said, with the attitude of winning a job all over again.

So far, so good. Christiansen, 26, played over 22 minutes in all three of his games, totaling 17 shot attempts, eight shots on goal, a goal, an assist and a plus-3 rating.

"We (the coaching staff) just had a lengthy conversation about how well he played (Tuesday and Wednesday)," Evason said of Christiansen. "How hard he played, how detailed he played, how gritty he played. Is he battling, doing all the things we've asked him to do? Yeah.

"I think he sees that there's some competition and he's stepped up."

The Blue Jackets acquired Hunt, 23, in the trade last November that sent 2022 first-round pick David Jiricek to the Minnesota Wild. Hunt, who previously played in the NHL with the Wild, spent last season with AHL Cleveland but figures to be on a short list of call-ups this season.

The Blue Jackets still have veteran Brendan Smith in training camp on a professional tryout agreement, but Christiansen, Hunt and others may need to struggle for him to earn a contract.

That leaves goaltending. At the start of camp, the only question was if Jet Greaves or Elvis Merzlikins would earn the No. 1 job to start the regular season. The fact that those two would be the Blue Jackets' two goaltenders wasn't really up for debate.

But Ivan Fedotov, acquired in a trade with Philadelphia a week before camp, is doing his best to disrupt those preconceived notions. Fedotov has made two starts and played forty minutes in each game, stopping 38 of 40 shots (.950 save percentage).

Look for the Blue Jackets to take a large whack at the roster in the next couple of days. Their schedule shows two practice groups the next two days — including Saturday, when they play another preseason game in Pittsburgh — but then single groups beginning Sunday.

That lines up with the start of AHL Cleveland's camp Monday in suburban Cleveland.

To get several of their players from the Blue Jackets' roster to the AHL roster, they'll have to be cleared through waivers. That includes Fedotov, who is expected to be Cleveland's starter.

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Gain Flexibility With Fedotov Clearing Waivers

By Mark Scheig – September 28, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets had been searching all summer for a third goaltender to be behind Elvis Merzlikins and Jet Greaves. Just before the start of training camp, GM Don Waddell found his man.

On Sept 15, the Blue Jackets acquired goaltender Ivan Fedotov from the Philadelphia Flyers in exchange for a sixth-round pick in 2026.

The Blue Jackets had the cap room to acquire Fedotov while only having to pay \$775,000 due to his signing bonus being paid. It was a low-risk move for a player that could show he has more in his game.

That's why when the news came down that Fedotov was placed on waivers Friday, it caught some folks off guard. Why trade for a goalie only to waive him midway through the preseason?

Turns out the Blue Jackets were wise in how this was handled. They say timing is everything. Because Fedotov cleared waivers on Saturday, he can now be assigned to the AHL.

That didn't happen though. As of Saturday afternoon, Fedotov remains on the Blue Jackets' camp roster. What does this all mean?

In a word, the Blue Jackets now have flexibility.

Blue Jackets Gain Roster Flexibility

By Fedotov clearing waivers, the Blue Jackets normally get a 10-game, 30-day window in order to assign a player to the AHL. That clock doesn't start until the regular season which begins on Oct 7.

The Blue Jackets now have extra time to evaluate their situation.

If something were to happen to Merzlikins or Greaves, Fedotov is there to step in. If both goalies are ready to go, the Blue Jackets could send Fedotov to the Monsters closer to the end of camp.

With a pair of games remaining against the Washington Capitals, the Blue Jackets could choose to give Fedotov another look in a game situation. He's been excellent in this preseason.

Ivan Fedotov has been excellent in two preseason starts for the Blue Jackets. ([Amy Irvin](#) / The Hockey Writers)

Fedotov has allowed just two goals in his two appearances. Could he be giving management a little more to think about? Would the Blue Jackets open the season with three goalies on their roster? That possibility now exists.

Why would the Blue Jackets do that? It would allow Fedotov to practice with the NHL team to start. He could provide injury protection as we previously mentioned. There is no indication he wouldn't accept an assignment to Cleveland.

Teams still have most of their players at training camps. By waiving Fedotov now, the Blue Jackets bet most teams hadn't figured their rosters out yet so would therefore not claim someone when still evaluating who they do have.

Another potential reason the Blue Jackets might elect to keep three goalies is to allow potential bubble guys that would be a healthy scratch to play games in the AHL.

Now the Blue Jackets have time on their side and do not have to worry if Fedotov would clear. The organization depth remains in tact. They can now focus on deciding how the final roster will look before their opener in Nashville.

Roster flexibility was the name of the game with Fedotov. The Blue Jackets timed their move well and can now proceed with confidence based on how the rest of camp goes.

The Hockey Writers / 3 Takeaways From the Blue Jackets' 4-1 Loss to Penguins

By Matthew Buhrmann – September 28, 2025

It was a night bigger than just hockey in Pittsburgh on Saturday, as the Penguins and their fans said farewell to one of the all-time great goaltenders, Marc-André Fleury. The three-time Stanley Cup Champion returned to the city where his NHL career began and finished it off in storybook fashion. Fleury entered in the third period, stopped all eight shots he faced, and closed the book on his NHL career with a 4-1 preseason win over the Columbus Blue Jackets.

Sidney Crosby, Ville Koivunen, and Rickard Rakell provided the scoring, while Sergei Murashov played the first 40 minutes in net, stopping 12 of 13 shots for Pittsburgh. For Columbus, Elvis Merzlikins went the distance, making 32 saves on 35 shots, while Luca Del Bel Belluz scored the lone Blue Jackets' goal in the first period.

Although the Blue Jackets played with a lineup filled mostly with players on the bubble and American Hockey League (AHL) players, there were still important storylines to take away from the night. Below are three of them from the 4-1 loss.

Del Bel Belluz Pushing for a Roster Spot

Del Bel Belluz had another impressive preseason game, scoring the lone goal for the Blue Jackets as he tapped one in off a great play and pass from Yegor Chinakhov in the first period.

He centered the top line with Cole Sillinger to his left and Chinakhov to his right, taking plenty of important faceoffs in this game, including five against one of the best all-time at draws in Crosby. He went 1-for-5 on draws against Crosby, 1-for-4 against Evgeni Malkin, and 6-for-15 (40%) overall.

In the honorary shootout after regulation, Del Bel Belluz scored on Fleury in the third round with a slick move, the final NHL shot Fleury will ever face. He talked more about the goal post-game.

"It could go down as maybe the last goal ever on Fleury. I guess I could say I have it. It's definitely a moment I'll never forget. I don't think I've ever been in a building that loud before. It was really electric. It was cool. I think maybe I'll get booed every time I come here now, I don't know."

Head coach Dean Evason also spoke on the Del Bel Belluz shootout goal.

"One thought was to just shoot it in the corner, but the other is you have to play the game and score goals. We did not decide to do the shootout; they did. So we tried to score, and we did."

Del Bel Belluz also spoke on pushing for a roster spot as camp winds down, with cuts coming Sunday.

"Like I have said before, I want to be a Blue Jacket. I want to play here. Every day, every game, every time I am at the rink, it is important for me to show my best and what I can do."

Whether he makes the roster or not, he cannot be claimed off waivers due to his contract and will remain a great option in case of injuries to the forward group if sent down to the Cleveland Monsters.

Evason then spoke on the roster cuts coming Sunday and moving forward into the final two preseason games.

“We will be down to one group, then decide who plays each night. We have a couple of practices now, which is great. I do not want to give a number until things happen, but it will be pretty much our group.”

Chinakhov Pushing for Top-Six Minutes

Chinakhov has put together a really strong preseason and is making it clear he wants to stick around in Columbus. He has shown off his sharp passing, speed both with and without the puck, his quick release, and his ability to contribute on special teams. On Saturday, he set up Del Bel Belluz for the lone Blue Jackets’ goal for his third point in three preseason games and was another example of the impact he can make on the rush.

After spending plenty of time as a healthy scratch late last season, it feels like he is starting to earn back the trust of the coaching staff. If he keeps this up, I would not be surprised to see him on the top power play or at least the second unit and slotted into a top-six forward role this season.

These last two preseason games will be telling since the roster will be made up of NHL regulars, but a healthy and confident Chinakhov can be a major weapon for this team. Columbus missed him badly last season, and his presence might have helped solve some of the power-play struggles that dragged them down late in the season.

Goaltending Battle Shaking Out

Merzlikins got the start and played the full 60 minutes on Saturday night, stopping 32 of 35 shots in what was mostly a solid showing. I do not think fans should be worried about him right now, but I would not be shocked to see Jet Greaves play more games between the two this season.

Greaves has been the more impressive of the two so far this preseason, especially after his solid performance against the Buffalo Sabres last week. I would expect to see him in one of the final two preseason games, if not both. Greaves just looks calmer in goal, more positional, and has yet to show the kind of costly mistakes that have followed Merzlikins through his short NHL career.

Merzlikins’ night had its highs and lows. On the first goal, Crosby broke into the zone off a feed from Avery Hayes and beat him over the shoulder after pulling him in tight. The second goal was more unfortunate than anything else. As the clock wound down late in the second period, Merzlikins kicked out a rebound that deflected off Erik Gudbranson and landed right back in front, where Rakell buried it with just 1.6 seconds remaining for the power-play tally.

Later in the third, Merzlikins tried to play the puck up the ice from behind the net, but turned it over directly to Koivunen, who buried it.

Evason addressed his performance afterward.

“Do we want him throwing a pass up the middle and turning it over? No. But he played really well, made some great saves, and his puck-handling was fantastic up to that point. He just got ahead of himself, maybe thought he was Marc-André Fleury for a second.”

Outside of the one glaring mistake, Merzlikins actually played a solid game. He moved the puck well most of the night, made several strong saves in tight with the blocker, and flashed a sharp glove on the penalty kill. The issue remains the same as it has been, the one big error that overshadows the rest of his game. This just does not seem to be going away, as it has plagued his career in Columbus, which is why Greaves is the better fit for the starter role in my eyes.

Looking ahead, Mathieu Olivier had this to say post-game about the final stretch as we close in on the regular season.

“We are all excited for the regular season, no question. But our job is to play and focus on our own game. We have enough depth to be comfortable with anyone. These games are important to get our timing, habits, and systems in place. We need them.”

The Blue Jackets have just two preseason games left, both against the Washington Capitals. One will be at home on Tuesday, Sept. 30, and the other on the road Saturday, Oct. 4, in Washington. Faceoff is at 7:00 PM ET on Tuesday and will be shown on FanDuel Sports Network.

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Positioned to Finally Overtake Penguins

By Mark Scheig – September 27, 2025

Six Metropolitan Division teams down. Just one more team to compare to the Columbus Blue Jackets for the 2025-26 season.

The Pittsburgh Penguins will host the Blue Jackets at PPG Paints Arena on Saturday night in the one-day return of Marc-Andre Fleury. The Penguins are the last team in our series.

The Blue Jackets finished the 2024-25 season nine points ahead of the Penguins in the Metro. But traditionally, it was always the Penguins dominating the Blue Jackets especially in the Sidney Crosby era.

Father time eventually catches up with everyone. Crosby, Evgeni Malkin and Kris Letang are still there. While their presence always gives the Penguins a chance, they face a massive uphill battle to be competitive.

The task is so daunting that GM Kyle Dubas is already willing to listen on most of his best players. The Penguins are widely regarded as one of the only teams truly selling at this point in time.

The Blue Jackets and Penguins are seemingly heading in opposite directions. While 2024-25 was a start, this could finally be the year that the Blue Jackets start to sour past their I-70 counterparts.

Let's look at a few major storylines for the Penguins to start 2025-26.

The Big-3

The Penguins are not going to go down without a fight. That's especially true when the Big-3 are still around. Crosby, Malkin and Letang will do everything they can to keep the team competitive.

Unlike Penguins' teams of the past, they don't have the depth that helped them win Stanley Cups. Any success this season will need to be because of the Big-3.

And of course, there was the "offseason story" about Crosby's future. It's really not much of a story given his desire to play his entire career with the Penguins. But should the team fall out of contention, the murmurs will pick back up again.

What about Malkin and Letang's futures in that scenario? Do they have the same desire to finish out with the Penguins? This trade deadline could be one of the most interesting in recent memory should any of the Big-3 express a willingness to be dealt.

The Other-3

The Penguins have three other players that many felt would be traded by now. Those are Rickard Rakell, Bryan Rust and Erik Karlsson. How will Dubas handle these individual situations?

These three players should be able to help at least keep the Penguins competitive to start. All three would help a contender in a playoff run. The timing on potential moves will be interesting to watch. That is if they even come to pass especially in Rust's case.

A Team in Transition

The Penguins used the 2025 NHL Draft to make a lot of selections. They added the likes of Ben Kindel, Bill Zonnon and William Horcoff in the first round. Dubas has the tough task of transitioning the team with legacy players on their roster.

The 2025-26 season also marks the beginning of the Dan Muse era as head coach. He replaced the departed Mike Sullivan. Player development and teaching will be a major focus.

Dubas has established the kind of thing he hopes to accomplish. He wants more high draft picks if possible. He has begun the process of shaping what the Penguins will look like once the Big-3 do hang their skates up.

Enjoy the time that's left with them in the lineup. Because these Penguins are about to go through a major transition in the near future.

Blue Jackets Pointing Upward

The Blue Jackets fell just short of the playoffs in 2024-25. They hope their moves will be enough to take the next step.

The Blue Jackets were finally able to win a game at PPG Paints Arena last season. It took a rally and a shootout to do it. But they found a way to take the monkey off their back in a building that's been nothing but a house of horrors for them.

How do the Blue Jackets and Penguins compare now? The Blue Jackets were one of the best offensive teams last season. The Penguins were the worst defensive team in the East and third worst in the NHL. The Blue Jackets have a distinct advantage given the perceived improvement of their young talent.

But as long as the Big-3 are around, games can still be close and competitive. Special teams will keep things close between them as well.

Given where the Blue Jackets and Penguins are at in their cycles, the Blue Jackets are finally in position to overtake the Penguins not only this season, but for several seasons to come.

The Blue Jackets have the better, young skill. They have better depth. While their net is a question mark, so is the Penguins' net. Tristan Jarry and Arturs Silovs are the projected duo to start the season. Can one of them keep their team in games?

The Penguins could very well be in the Gavin McKenna discussion. The Blue Jackets expect to make the playoffs. Most believe the Blue Jackets will finish higher than the Penguins in the standings. What will be interesting to see is by how much and if the Penguins can find a way to exceed the little expectations others have placed on them.

1st Ohio Battery / Three Things: Del Bel Belluz Scores In Loss, Merzlikins Plays Full 60, Fleury Makes Final Return

By Will Chase – September 28, 2025

A final farewell for an NHL legend.

For at least one more time, it was like old times as Marc-Andre Fleury made eight third-period saves and Sidney Crosby scored as the Pittsburgh Penguins beat the Columbus Blue Jackets 4-1 on Saturday night at PPG Paints Arena.

Rickard Rakell scored twice, and Ville Koivunen scored. Luca Del Bel Belluz scored for Columbus.

Here are the three things that happened from the Blue Jackets' fifth preseason game.

Thing 1: Del Bel Belluz Helps Spoil Party

Even though this night and exhibition belonged to Fleury, there was still a hockey game to play, and Del Bel Belluz wants to prove what he can contribute this season.

At 16:08 of the first period, he scored his second goal of the preseason to give Columbus a 1-0 lead. Yegor Chinakhov and Corson Ceulemans added the assists.

Del Bel Belluz has played 16 career games and registered eight points (two goals, six assists) in 15 games last season.

Being a preseason game, the two clubs participated in a shootout at the end of the game for practice, and Del Bel Belluz scored a goal that he'll cherish for the rest of his life.

"Yeah, one hundred percent," Del Bel Belluz said after Saturday's loss. "It could go down as maybe the last goal ever on Fleury, and I guess I can say I have it. It's definitely a moment I'll never forget.

"I don't think I've ever been in a building that loud before."

Thing 2: Merzlikins Allows Three in Full Start

Elvis Merzlikins played his first full 60 minutes of the preseason in net for Columbus. He kept Pittsburgh off the board through the first period before Crosby's game-tying goal at 5:20 of the second period.

Rakell scored at 19:58 of the second period on the power play and then added an empty-net goal at 17:32 of the third period. Koivunen added a marker at 8:56 of the third period when he intercepted an ill-advised attempt by Merzlikins to play the puck.

Thing 3: A Fitting Farewell For NHL Legend

Fleury has a career ledger of 575-339-97-76 with a 2.60 GAA and .912 save percentage, and is second in career wins behind Martin Brodeur.

Coming off a season with the Minnesota Wild, the future Hall of Famer signed a PTO with the Penguins to play in one final game before hanging it up for good. Fleury played in the third period and saved all eight shots he faced.

In 26 career starts against the Jackets, Fleury was 15-7-2, .921, 2.32, with one shutout.

In the shootout, the crowd booed Del Bel Belluz when he deked and scored on Fleury, but as they say, you're doing your job on the road if they boo you.

"I think maybe I'll get booed every time I come here now," Del Bel Belluz said with a laugh.

Head coach Dean Evason shared his thoughts.

"One thought is just shoot it in the corner, and the other thought is you gotta play the game, right?" Evason said about Del Bel Belluz's shootout goal.

Merzlikins was perfect in the shootout.

Up Next:

The Blue Jackets are back at it on Tuesday when they host the Washington Capitals at 7 p.m. at Nationwide Arena. The two teams will conclude the preseason on Saturday, Oct. 4, at Capital One Arena.

The Athletic / Requiem for the NHL fitness test: Why some lament the end of whammies, sprints and the 'Torts Test'

By Fluto Shinzawa – September 27, 2025

In 2017, Morgan Geekie was drafted in the third round by the Carolina Hurricanes. At one of his first training camps, the Hurricanes were required to perform two half-mile assault bike sprints with a three-minute rest in between. The players had two minutes to complete both sets.

As Geekie remembers it, he finished his first sprint in 59 seconds. This left him 61 seconds to play with on his second spin. He just passed.

"I couldn't even see," the now-Boston Bruins forward recalls. "You're just trying to pedal as fast as you can. I fell off the bike. They had to roll me out of the way because other guys were going. It was like a conveyor belt. Looking back on it now, it's funny. It only lasts five, 10 minutes. But it was horrible."

It could have been worse. The Hurricanes initially called for three half-mile sprints. No one other than coach Rod Brind'Amour tried the three-rep test first. Brind'Amour, a fitness fiend, declared it too hard.

In all likelihood, Brind'Amour would have liked the sound of the beep test that the Winnipeg Jets once mandated. With each beep, players had to skate from goal line to goal line. The beeps would come in succession, speeding up as the test went on.

"So difficult," then-Jets forward Mikey Eyssimont remembers. "It starts off really easy, but it just gets progressively and progressively harder. It's science-backed. Some type of study shows that NHL players should be able to complete it at any point of the year. That was the reasoning. I agree with that completely. But it was very hard. Very hard."

Those days are over. The fitness tests players recently completed at the start of training camp were the last they'll take in the league. Under the NHL's new collective bargaining agreement, teams are no longer permitted to conduct fitness testing before or during the season.

Not everyone agrees.

Tests with purpose

Teams have conducted fitness testing for as long as players can remember. In the old days, it was the first step toward getting players in shape for the regular season.

Each organization had its preferences. Older players recall performing pull-ups and bench presses until they could no longer continue. Most recently, the Washington Capitals customized tests based on players' prior results.

"We just utilize it on measurables," coach Spencer Carbery says. "It's not necessarily about the total group. It's more about individuals. So we'll test them through the year and see, 'OK, your goals and objectives for the summer are X.' Then, when they come back, you can evaluate, 'OK, how was your summer? Were you able to achieve those goals? Did you drop off? Or did you stay?' It's more about that."

It used to be that coaches like Carbery had significant say in what tests would be required. John Tortorella was notorious for designing backbreakers.

With the Columbus Blue Jackets, Tortorella had his team do a two-mile run. Players had to hit the finish line in 12 minutes or less.

“That was pretty tough,” ex-Blue Jacket Joonas Korpisalo says. “Some guys don’t run that much. Some guys are not the greatest runners. Only a handful of guys passed it.”

Sonny Milano, Columbus’ first-round pick in 2014, has played for two other organizations. The Blue Jackets’ run test is the one that remains top of mind. In a way, Milano liked getting ready to put on his sneakers.

“I actually really don’t mind it,” the Capitals forward says. “It gives you something to train for in the summer. I guess I’ll be doing my own skating tests in the summer now.”

Tortorella’s philosophy was not exclusive to Columbus. He thought the same thing about fitness testing with the New York Rangers and the Philadelphia Flyers, two of his other employers.

Patrick Brown attended Rangers development camp in 2013. Tortorella was gone by then. Alain Vigneault was in charge. But the Rangers still used one of Tortorella’s tests.

“Three laps, three times, each way,” Brown recalls. “Four guys, one guy on each blue line, going around. Quite hard. You’re trying to catch the guy in front of you. He’s trying to catch the guy in front of him. So you’re all staggered. The rest, I want to say, was two-to-one rest to work. Maybe it was one-to-one. I can’t remember. That one was really hard.”

By 2022-23, Brown had moved on to the Flyers. So had Tortorella. It was Brown’s luck, if you can call it that, to be recovering from back surgery when camp started in 2022. He was given a free pass. Brown watched his teammates perform “The Torts Test,” the on-ice sprints he suffered through with the Rangers. He didn’t miss it.

In earlier years, teams believed that by informing their players of the difficulty that awaited them during testing, it would motivate them to train intensely during the summer and improve their on-ice performance.

In 2015-16, the Colorado Avalanche finished sixth in the Central Division under then-coach Patrick Roy. The Avalanche had talent. They didn’t have the legs.

“Probably the worst-conditioned team in the league at that time,” former Avalanche defenseman Nikita Zadorov recalls.

Following the 2015-16 season, players, coaches and management concluded the Avalanche needed to be fitter. The club formulated tougher tests that players would have to complete before the 2016-17 season.

“Double whammies test,” Zadorov says. “Goal line to goal line twice, finish through the red line. Three times like that. Next day, there’d be another skating test. Three laps six times, minute in between. Then we did a running test as well. Really, really hard tests during camp.”

Results did not follow. The Avalanche, under first-year coach Jared Bednar, were the NHL's worst team in 2016-17. But what Zadorov remembers is how the tests gave the Avalanche their identity for the better years to come. In 2021-22, Colorado won the Stanley Cup.

"It sent a message to the team," Zadorov says. "It sent a message of how we want to play. (They're) still playing the same style — how fast they play. They just fly all over the ice all the time. You have to be really well-conditioned to do that. That sent a message to the standard of a winning organization. That's why they won the Cup."

The Avalanche made the tests easier. They served their purpose. The players understood how hard they had to train.

That has become the case around the league. Year-round commitment to conditioning has reduced the relevance of testing.

"You ask anyone in here, they have a personal trainer in the summer and find ways to improve," the Bruins' Hampus Lindholm says. "You don't really need to push that on guys anymore. Of course, there's going to be a few guys. But you can only lead a horse to water anyway. You can't force it to drink it. Guys take care of themselves so well now. I don't think it makes a huge difference in today's game."

Coming together

Eyssimont is not in the NHL because of his hands. The 29-year-old, who split last season between the Tampa Bay Lightning and Seattle Kraken, has logged 213 career games because of his full-gas motor. The energy forward takes his conditioning seriously.

What he will not miss, though, is the anxiety of testing. Eyssimont is a worrier, one who would let the shadow of a September bike test cloud a sunny July day.

"Sometimes it takes away from how you want to attack a summer as far as on the ice, even if it's just a little bit," Eyssimont says. "Sometimes you're thinking, 'You know what? I've got to hit the bike here because there's a bike test.' Whereas maybe it's more important to be on the ice that day because you're feeling fresh."

"I always prioritize ice and how I feel on the ice. But just having that in the back of my mind, the testing, it's always daunting. Even though I'm in very good shape, very strong and good at fitness, it'll be nice not to have to stress about it."

What sticks with Eyssimont is how he was never on an island during fitness testing. He was always skating, jumping or lifting with teammates. Eyssimont's friends were cheering him on. But he was also trying to outdo all of them.

This was by design.

"There's a competitive aspect to individual testing," Bruins general manager Don Sweeney says. "It's a measuring stick that I think we still want to adhere to. Because let's be honest, this is a competitive business. Winning puck battles and being able to play at the highest level, you have to be at a fitness level that is unique."

In 2022-23, Mark Kastelic learned of Tanner Jeannot's conditioning the hard way. Kastelic, then with the Ottawa Senators, asked Jeannot to fight. The Nashville Predators forward accepted. Kastelic got his gloves off first. But Jeannot's strength allowed him to hold out Kastelic and finish the bout by pushing him to the ice.

It was during fitness testing this year that Kastelic gained even more respect for his former combatant and current teammate. When Jeannot got under the bar, Kastelic was watching.

"Saw some numbers on the bench press I've never seen before," Kastelic says. "Looking back, I'm happy he didn't connect with me too hard."

In another Boston test, the players split into groups of three to perform their bike test. Each team tried to outdo the others.

"It's hard," Jeannot says. "But it's fun. Because it's a team, competitive spirit type of thing."

The camaraderie and competition of collective suffering are gone. It will not change how players train during the offseason. When it comes to fitness, there is nowhere to hide at NHL camp.

"If you show up here out of shape," Zadorov says, "you're going to be out of the league."