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Columbus Dispatch / Rick Nash gets Columbus Blue Jackets front-office promotion

By Brian Hedger- September 21, 2024

The former star forward, whose number 61 hangs in the rafters, was named the team's director of hockey operations Friday after handling the role of director of player development the previous three years. The Blue Jackets also announced the hiring of Zach Abdou as senior manager of hockey operations plus a shift in roles for Basil McCrae from assistant general manager to director of pro scouting.

"I didn't know him at all," Blue Jackets president of hockey operations/general manager Don Waddell said of Nash. "I knew him as a player, of course, so from the first day I got here and just listening to him talk about things and what his approach was, how he thought about the game, it just kept getting better and better. Finally, I just kept including him in more discussions, and he carried himself well, and he's very well connected. So, having that kind of resource, if I didn't utilize that, it wouldn't be very smart on my part."

Nash, 40, joined the Blue Jackets' front office in 2019 as special assistant to former Blue Jackets GM Jarmo Kekalainen. He moved into his developmental oversight role two years later and has since worked his way up the ranks until getting a shot last spring to put together Canada's national team roster as a GM at the men's world championship in Czechia.

That's often an indication of a pending promotion within an executive's current team or another NHL front office. Former Blue Jackets associate GM Bill Zito took a similar route with the U.S. national team in 2018 on his way to becoming the Florida Panthers' GM. After winning the Stanley Cup last season, Zito is now the Panthers' president of hockey operations.

The Blue Jackets also have Chris Clark in their hockey operations department in the dual roles of director of player personnel/Cleveland Monsters GM. Clark was USA Hockey's GM for the 2023 men's world championship in Finland, nearly constructing a medalist team with an unheralded roster.

Inheriting both Nash and Clark as rising hockey exec, two highly regarded former NHL captains, is something Waddell doesn't take for granted.

"I've always said you surround yourself first with good people and then knowledgeable people, and those are both guys who've been unbelievable to work with," he said. "I'm very lucky to have those two guys who were already here."

Nash's executive career appears pointed in the direction of becoming the Jackets' GM at some point. Should that happen with the Blue Jackets, it would make for a storybook development for a guy who remains the only first overall draft pick in franchise history. In his new capacity, Nash will continue to oversee player development while being more involved in all aspects of the team's hockey operations.

"I appreciate Jarmo opening the door and initially bringing me back into the organization," he said. "To spend the last couple months with Don, it's been really impressive to watch him and see how he works and see the hours that he puts in. I've always felt like I've been a Blue Jacket, even when I left (as a player), and that has not changed."

Abdou joins the Blue Jackets by following Waddell to Columbus from the Carolina Hurricanes, where he held a similar position. According to the team's release, he'll now assist the Blue Jackets in "forecasting and budgeting, database management and contract analysis."

McCrae served as assistant GM to former GM Jarmo Kekalainen for five years after previously working as a pro scout and director of player personnel.

Columbus Dispatch / Blue Jackets start training camp: 5 storylines to follow

By Brian Hedger- September 21, 2024

While finding comfort from each other following the deaths of teammate Johnny Gaudreau and his younger brother, Matthew, the Blue Jackets got back on the ice Thursday for the first practices of a training camp run by their fourth head coach in two years.

The sounds of clacking sticks, slashing skates and head coach Dean Evason barking out commands brought at least some normalcy to the day, but this camp and the season ahead will not feel normal for a long time. That's simply the "new reality" the Jackets will grapple with daily, which captain Boone Jenner spoke about Wednesday at the team's media luncheon.

Gaudreau should be out there with them this week, darting around, but he can only "attend" in spirit through his now cherished No. 13 jersey hanging in the locker room. The Blue Jackets are officially back, courageously, and the challenge that awaits them is perhaps the toughest thing any NHL team will be tasked with this season.

Here are five roster storylines to follow in this year's camp:

He's no longer a wide-eyed rookie, fresh from being drafted third overall and taking in the NHL landscape for the first time.

Adam Fantilli has returned to Columbus with a familiar number on his back (19 instead of 11) and brimming with confidence after fully recovering from the severe calf laceration that cost him the second half of his rookie campaign. The Jackets' second-year center didn't feel completely healed until mid-summer, but once that happened, his powerful stride and impressive speed returned.

That's great news for the Blue Jackets, who need him to take a big step forward as an NHL "sophomore" while likely starting out as the their second center. Fantilli skated with two power forwards Thursday — recently signed veteran James van Riemsdyk on the left and Dmitri Voronkov on the right — but Evason noted that wingers will be jumbled in the preseason until chemistry emerges.

Fantilli, meanwhile, is just happy that games are nearing. His last game was during an exhibition playing for Canada in May to prepare for the men's world championship in Czechia.

"Playing that exhibition game made me feel healthy and made me feel confident in what I had in my calf there," he said. "Obviously, I still couldn't run, jump and sprint the same way. While I was on the ice, it was a completely different movement. Halfway through the summer, that all came back, and I was able to train 'full go' for the last seven, eight weeks of the offseason."

It didn't take long to see a significant shift in the way Evason plans to construct his top forward line.

During his very first practice, the new coach slid Jenner over to the left wing into Gaudreau's vacated spot while skating with center Sean Monahan and Kirill Marchenko on the right side. That's the new top line until further notice. Evason also plans to keep Jenner in a wing position, if possible, despite him being the Jackets' top option taking face-offs the past three years as a center.

Moving to the wing will free Jenner to forecheck even harder than he does at center, which could lead to forced turnovers, more scoring chances and goals for the Blue Jackets. Adding Monahan in free agency to center the top line was the key.

“I think Boone could play anywhere, right?” Evason said. “He doesn’t care where he plays, right? It’s just like he wants to help the hockey club, and right now we like the look of their line. Boone’s definitely going to start on that left side with Monahan and Marchenko, as it sits right now.”

Columbus Blue Jackets still looking to solve defensive puzzle

Not long after Don Waddell became the Blue Jackets’ president of hockey operations/general manager in late May, he began trimming a glut of depth defensemen.

Adam Boqvist’s final contract year was bought out, Jake Bean wasn’t tendered a qualifying offer as a restricted free agent and Nick Blankenburg departed as an unrestricted free agent. Those moves followed the Blue Jackets dealing Andrew Peeke to the Boston Bruins at the trade deadline last season, which removed three right-handed defensemen with NHL experience plus Bean, a lefty who’s comfortable on either side.

Aging veteran Jack Johnson was signed to a one-year deal as a free agent, returning to Columbus after bouncing around the NHL, and Jordan Harris was added in a late summer trade that sent Patrik Laine to Montreal. What all that led to was a camp that started with what appears to be more of a defined “top seven” on the NHL roster that still includes a gaping void where Seth Jones once skated on the top pairing.

The seven projected NHL defenders include Zach Werenski, Damon Severson, Ivan Provorov, David Jiricek, Erik Gudbranson, Harris and Johnson.

Since Jones was traded in 2021 to Chicago, Werenski hasn’t skated consistently with any one defensive partner who allows him to chase offense and rack up goals like a fourth forward. That must change for the Blue Jackets to even remotely start replacing what they’ve lost in scoring power, but the same vexing question remains.

Who will it be?

Severson appears to have first dibs on the role after finishing last season as Werenski’s partner, while Jiricek is skating with Provorov in what looks like the second pairing — just as he did last year, before heading to the AHL for more development work.

That leaves the third pairing, where Johnson and Gudbranson are skating together as a hulking, menacing potential third pairing that’s as physically imposing as it is slow of foot. Harris and Jake Christiansen started out working together as the likely seventh and eighth defensemen on the depth chart, while rookie Denton Mateychuk has his work cut out to climb the internal rankings this preseason.

Young forwards may fill depth roles to start out for Columbus Blue Jackets

No longer having Laine and Gaudreau among the top six forwards and easing Justin Danforth (wrist) back into top form has left the Blue Jackets shallow up front.

Signing van Riemsdyk added instant experience, leadership, size and veteran depth to the Jackets’ forwards group, but there could be room for a rookie or two to make an NHL dent if Waddell doesn’t add another veteran through trade or free agency. Danforth’s absence in team work, for example, put Owen Sillinger at left wing on the Jacket’s projected fourth line Thursday — flanking center Sean Kuraly and playing opposite right wing Mathieu Olivier.

Sillinger, who is Cole Sillinger’s older brother and the oldest of former Blue Jackets center Mike Sillinger’s three sons, signed his first NHL contract this past summer. Others who may vie for that role until Danforth returns include rookies James Malatesta, Luca Del Bel Belluz, Trey Fix-Wolansky and Hunter McKown.

Unlike recent years, when upwards of 70 players started camp in Columbus, the Blue Jackets only brought 55 into this season's starting field.

The Jackets officially list 31 forwards, 16 defensemen and eight goalies on the camp roster, but Danforth and rookie forwards Cayden Lindstrom (back) and Jordan Dumais (lower body) are skating apart from the team. Evason plans to cut the roster down into NHL and AHL groups relatively soon, after the youngest prospects head back to junior teams.

Paring down that quickly allows the coaching staffs of the Blue Jackets and Monsters to dive into Evason's preferred systems and strategies earlier – which became an issue last year under first-time NHL coach Pascal Vincent. Evason is also getting to know his new team, which would be tougher with 15-20 additional players on the ice.

"I find it a lot easier to teach," Evason said. "It's a lot easier for us, myself in particular, in getting to know the guys, and we want to get to our (NHL) group. We've got a lot of teaching to do."

Columbus Dispatch / NHL pays another visit to Ohio Stadium to plan Blue Jackets' outdoor game

By Brian Hedger- September 22, 2024

After sending league representatives for site visits during the Buckeyes' football season last year and again in the spring, not long after officially announcing the game against the Detroit Red Wings, the NHL was back in Columbus this week. Dean Matsuzaki, the league's executive vice president of events, arrived Thursday for another visit that culminated with Ohio State's game Saturday against Marshall.

Matsuzaki helped plot things such as rink placement and where the NHL's "ice plant" will be set up nearly two weeks prior to the game, and he walked through the stadium with representatives from ESPN — the primary U.S. television rightsholder for the game — to assess camera angles and seating areas that may need to be blocked off for broadcast purposes.

He also soaked up the full atmosphere of a game day at OSU, from the band's skull session to the dotting of the 'i' in script Ohio to other in-game traditions the NHL may mix into the Blue Jackets' matchup against the Red Wings.

"It's our third day here now, so we've had a lot of planning and operational things the past couple days," Matsuzaki said prior to the Buckeyes' game. "Today is now all about game day, front of house, operations in-stadium, traffic, parking and then all the pomp and circumstance, the game presentation ... all of that. We're going to try to lean into all of what Ohio State does and then use it for our game as well and create the ties."

It didn't take Matsuzaki long to pick up on two things about Buckeyes fans. First, they really support OSU with intensity. Second, they really detest "that state up North" with the same level of intensity.

"We've learned the passion here, and we've learned how much people want to beat a state or a team from up in Michigan, as well," he said. "There's been a lot of that. We've heard about the crossing out 'Ms' on campus, and things like that, and somebody mentioned to me about crossing out 'Ds' for our game. So, that was pretty interesting."

Wait until he finds out that crossing out 'Ms' isn't just a thing on campus. And that's a big reason the NHL makes multiple site visits to their planned outdoor venues each year. The Blue Jackets are the 30th of the league's 32 teams to be featured in one of them, which means the league has gotten a lot of practice turning their signature "NHL Winter Classic" and "Stadium Series" matchups into full-on outdoor extravaganzas.

The NHL's ice crew will show up 10 to 12 days prior the game to construct the rink on the field between the 17-yard lines and inside the numbers.

Tickets are available on a presale basis to Blue Jackets season-ticket holders and OSU students, who will watch from the student section, while Oct. 4 is when the NHL will offer tickets to the public through Ticketmaster. There is already a local push to either meet or exceed the attendance of the 2008 NHL Winter Classic between the Red Wings and Toronto Maple Leafs held at Michigan Stadium.

The number for the Blue Jackets and/or OSU fans to match or beat is 105,491, which set an NHL attendance record on a frigid, snowy day in Ann Arbor. Current seating plans don't include on-field seats, which is mostly because the NHL uses that space for staging live music performances and logos, but also because sitting on the field for an outdoor game isn't ideal.

It's not like sitting on or near the glass at Nationwide Arena, where the ice surface is still lower than seats in the lower bowl. The outdoor rink is slightly elevated, so viewing angles from field level seats are usually poor. As for matching Michigan's snow and cold, holding this game March 1 in Columbus carries a lot more risk in terms of getting weather conducive for NHL ice.

This year on March 1, the temperatures in Columbus reached a high of 46 degrees and low of 27. On March 1, 2023, there was a high of 75 degrees and a low of 37. Matsuzaki said ideal conditions for the NHL's ice crew are slightly higher than 32 degrees with overcast skies and no rain.

"We've purposely timed the game (6 p.m.) so the sun is off the stadium, things like that," Matsuzaki said. "Weather is the big (concern), but also logistics. We spent a lot of time (Friday) figuring out where we're going to put our ice plant and how to run the piping to the floor and not interfere with other logistics of the stadium, the concourse and things like that."

As for how the NHL plans to give this outdoor game an Ohio flavor, it's safe to assume the Ohio State marching band will be involved quite a bit, along with other signature Buckeye traditions. A tribute memorializing Blue Jackets star Johnny Gaudreau and his brother, Matthew — who were killed Aug. 29 while bicycling in South Jersey — will also be featured.

"We're very excited, because we've been talking to the Blue Jackets for a long time," Matsuzaki said. "We've actually been talking to Ohio State for quite a long time, and that's part of the timing of the game, with respect to trying to do a game, but moving it a little later gave everyone a little more comfort with the winter conditions here and the winterization of the stadium. So, we are super excited about this game."

Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets building new identity with 'bite' under new coach Dean Evason

By Brian Hedger- September 23, 2024

Dean Evason's Minnesota Wild teams were known for their physical play.

The Blue Jackets have added several players this offseason who fit that mold.

Evason says he wants his team to play "high intense hockey all over the ice."

Dean Evason served 1,002 minutes in the penalty box during a 13-year NHL career that spanned 803 games.

Suffice to say his rap sheet wasn't all hooking and tripping infractions.

"Some people have called me a 'pugilist,' but I don't believe it," the Blue Jackets' coach said. "It's just hard hockey. It's just intense, and I want the guys to play hard every night. I like to think that I'm an intense person, and hopefully that translates to the group."

More:Columbus Blue Jackets start training camp: 5 storylines to follow

Assuming it does, as it did during Evason's first NHL head coaching stint with the Minnesota Wild, a new brand of hockey is brewing with the Blue Jackets. After adding three veterans in free agency who have boosted the roster's average size, strength and experience — forwards Sean Monahan and James van Riemsdyk plus defenseman Jack Johnson — the Jackets are better equipped to play Evason's preferred style now.

They've joined a roster that already included "grit" with defenseman Erik Gudbranson, center Sean Kuraly and forwards Mathieu Olivier and Dmitri Voronkov.

While that's not exactly the "Broad Street Bullies" of 1970s Philadelphia Flyers fame, it should be plenty enough "sandpaper" to keep opposing teams on their toes. There is still plenty of speed and skill in the Blue Jackets' lineup, but the average age, size, strength, experience and physicality all line up better now with Evason's brand of "intense" hockey.

Leaning into scoring off counterstrikes following long periods of defending could soon become a thing of the recent past in Columbus.

"People ask all the time, 'What kind of coach are you?' " Evason said. " 'Are you a defensive coach? Are you an offensive coach? Are you a players' coach?' I'm just who I am, and I want to be as well-rounded as we want our team to be."

That's how Evason coached the Wild, which their fans enjoyed until a rough start last season led to his dismissal. In fact, Minnesota hounded the Blue Jackets so heavily with physical play in 2021-22 that former general manager Jarmo Kekalainen felt obligated the following offseason to acquire Gudbranson and Olivier as, essentially, bodyguards.

Upon hearing his Wild teams described as playing "a certain style" that fans appreciate, Evason smirked.

"Hopefully you're (saying) that our teams played hard every night, that they played strong defensively, they played really well in the neutral zone ... and they scored lots of goals," he said. "I don't want just an offensive guy on the ice. I want a guy that plays defense, I want a guy that is real good through the neutral zone, a guy that works his butt off and a guy that scores goals."

That applies to every player, not just the designated “tough guys” who are better equipped physically to make life miserable for the opposition. Still early into this camp, Evason likes what he has seen.

“Everybody talks about our young skill,” he said. “I see more ‘bite’ in our game than people give us credit for, but that doesn’t mean we’re running around and hitting people. It just means we’re going to put pressure on a team. If you want to label what I do, I want high intense hockey all over the ice and playing with pressure, putting heat on people and playing a fast, hard game. And, after (a few) days in camp, that’s who I see our team being.”

More:Rick Nash gets Columbus Blue Jackets front-office promotion

Players have noticed.

“I think we’re going to be a much harder, more physical team all-around,” Olivier said. “Even excluding me out of that, where that’s more of my game, I just think, as a team we’re going to be leaning more toward that style of play now. For a group like us, a young group, that’s good because we’re going to showcase our skill but also implement (intensity) in our overall game, and I think that’s where we needed to improve last year.”

The Athletic / Blue Jackets roster projection: Veterans added, but youth will decide club's fate

By Aaron Portzline- September 22, 2024

COLUMBUS, Ohio — The additions of veterans Sean Monahan, James van Riemsdyk and Jack Johnson should bolster the Columbus Blue Jackets' lineup in 2024-25, but the continued emergence of the club's young talent will determine what kind of season this will be.

Adam Fantilli is 19 years old (turning 20 two days after the Oct. 10 opener), Kent Johnson and Cole Sillinger are 21, while Yegor Chinakhov is 23. They join 24-year-olds Kirill Marchenko and Dmitri Voronkov to comprise one-half of the forward group.

On defense, 20-year-olds David Jiricek and Denton Mateychuk are expected to battle for spots, with Jiricek almost certain to start the season in Columbus.

The Blue Jackets haven't made the playoffs — and they haven't had a winning record — in four seasons. Exactly nobody expects either of those to change this season, especially after the tragic loss of top winger Johnny Gaudreau late last month.

But the best path to being one of the NHL's surprise teams is for that wave of young talent, many of whom already have significant playing time in Columbus, to “pop” this season.

Center

The big offseason development here is the arrival of Monahan, an NHL veteran who, after a frustrating run of injury-riddled seasons, was finally healthy again last season. He scored 26 goals and 59 points in 83 games with Winnipeg and Montreal.

Not only does Monahan take considerable pressure off Fantilli — the youngster can, for now, settle into a No. 2 role with more favorable defensive matchups — but he allows Blue Jackets captain Boone Jenner to switch back to left wing, where he played at the start of his NHL career.

Fantilli, the No. 3 overall draft pick in 2023, has said he's 100 percent healthy after a lengthy recovery from a lacerated calf suffered in a game last winter. He could very well be the Blue Jackets' most impactful forward in short order, but there's still plenty he can learn — defensive-zone coverage, faceoffs, etc. — from a savvy veteran such as Monahan.

Incredibly, Sillinger already is heading into his fourth NHL season. He bounced back in 2023-24 after a challenging sophomore season and started to look like the highly competitive, two-way center the Blue Jackets expected when they drafted him No. 12 overall in 2021.

That leaves Kuraly, a fourth-line fixture for the fourth straight season. It's a role he embraces, along with being a top penalty-killer. If you understand how coach Dean Evason's teams typically play — think Minnesota Wild the last few seasons — it stands to reason that Kuraly will be one of his guys.

Left wing

Jenner and van Riemsdyk joining this side of the ice should radically transform the Blue Jackets' look. They're no longer light on the puck and fighting an uphill battle in most one-on-one battles, allowing them to win the puck back on one end of the ice and possess it on the other.

Jenner, 31, has had 20-plus goals in each of the last three seasons, but his best offensive season — 30-19-49 — came in 2015-16, when he was playing on the wing.

He and van Riemsdyk, who signed a one-year contract this week, could actually be interchangeable on the top two lines, depending on who works better with Monahan or Fantilli. He's another sturdy, hard-on-the-puck player who should help the Jackets hang onto the puck longer.

Then again, if Kent Johnson lives up to his considerable talents — he has elite-level vision and playmaking ability, the type rarely seen on the wing — he could play his way much higher in the lineup. Johnson had a strong rookie season (16-24-40 in 77 games in 2022-23) before slumping last season.

We picked Danforth for the fourth-line spot, even though he'll be slowed at the start of camp due to offseason wrist surgery. He's one of the NHL's more under-appreciated players, but he'll need a strong camp to hold off James Malatesta, Gavin Brindley, Owen Sillinger and others.

Right wing

Marchenko and Jenner are the only Blue Jackets to score 20-plus goals in each of the last two seasons. Yes, the goal-scoring potential is certainly there for Marchenko, and he could be in for a big season — 30 or more goals? — if he sticks on Monahan's wing.

The big challenge for Marchenko — and what coaches will demand if he's going to draw top-line minutes — is that he become more aware and more consistent in the defensive zone. In his third NHL season, he could finally play his way onto the league's radar.

Voronkov is a fascinating player. He ran out of gas last season, his first in the NHL, and Blue Jackets coaches didn't think he was in good enough shape to eat significant minutes. The hope is that Voronkov, now with a clear picture of what's expected, spent the summer getting ready for a bigger role.

If so, this could be a powerful player. He's 6-foot-5, 240 pounds, but his hands are pretty quick and soft. He moves well for his size, but is better suited on the wing, where he can really lean on opponents physically.

Chinakhov began to emerge as a goal-scorer last season, putting up 16 goals in only 53 games despite some minuscule minutes, which could be a challenge again this year. He's starting to fill out physically, though, and it's not out of the question that he could play his way higher in the lineup.

There was a small tweak from day 1 to day 2 of training camp. Evason elevated Chinakhov to the second line, with Fantilli and van Riemsdyk, and dropped Voronkov to the third line with Johnson and Sillinger.

Nobody was more excited by the Evason hire than Mathieu Olivier, whose style of play and willingness to drop his gloves will be appreciated and utilized by the new coach. If the Blue Jackets play the style Evason envisions — and they have the size, suddenly, to do that — Olivier could be a busy man.

Left defense

Zach Werenski is the Blue Jackets' big-minutes, all-situations blueliner, and now, at 27, he's well into his prime years. Last season, he set personal highs with 46 assists and 57 points, ranking 11th and 12th, respectively, in the NHL. Pretty impressive on a club that was 25th in scoring.

The big question, ever since Seth Jones was traded to Chicago in 2021, is who would play on Werenski's right side. At this point, it looks like it'll be Damon Severson. But Werenski would only benefit if that spot ceased to be a revolving door under Evason.

Just behind Werenski, at least for now, is veteran Ivan Provorov, who is heading into his second season since he was traded to Columbus from Philadelphia. We say "for now" because Provorov is a serious candidate to be moved next spring before the NHL trade deadline, due to Mateychuk's expected emergence and the fact that Provorov is in the final year of his contract.

The depth of the Blue Jackets' defense on both sides bears watching, but especially the left side. Jordan Harris came to Columbus in the trade that sent Patrik Laine to Montreal, and Harris, only 24, will likely get first dibs to claim the third-pair spot.

Be advised, though: this may be the position with the most competition in training camp. Veteran Jack Johnson, who is back in Columbus as a free agent, understands that his role may not include a spot in the lineup every game, but he won't go quietly, either.

There's also Mateychuk, who is close to being NHL-ready after a wondrous junior career with Moose Jaw of the Western Hockey League. General manager Don Waddell is a big proponent of letting prospects develop at their own pace, and he may want to see Mateychuk thrive with AHL Cleveland before his NHL career dawns.

Right defense

Severson signed a massive contract (eight years, \$50 million) last summer to join the Blue Jackets, but his first season in Columbus — by his own admission — was a struggle at times. That's not unusual for a free agent switching teams, especially with the pressure of a big-ticket contract.

The Blue Jackets don't need Severson to be a Norris Trophy candidate. They don't really need him to be anything more than he was for most of his nine seasons with New Jersey. If he sticks next to Werenski, perhaps he'll be able to just relax and play.

Evason seemed confident the Jiricek, the No. 6 overall pick in 2022, will be ready to not just claim a spot in the Blue Jackets' lineup, but to hold down a top-four job next to Provorov. There's a lot to like about Jiricek's game, but his skating — especially when asked to change directions unpredictably — can look awkward.

Jiricek had major issues with Blue Jackets coaches and management last season. The new regime may handle things differently, but Jiricek will need to justify a top-four spot with his play. He believes he's ready.

You don't hear many complaints about Erik Gudbranson's \$4 million price tag these days. For one, he played pretty well last season in a mostly third-pair role, plus his presence — on the ice and in the room — is highly valued by coaches and teammates.

There are many across the NHL who would list Gudbranson (6-foot-5, 220 pounds) as one of the most feared fighters in the league. The Blue Jackets may well be in some high-temperature games this season, which suits "The Sheriff" well.

Goalie

Waddell was quite blunt when discussing Elvis Merzlikins this offseason, saying his \$5.4 million salary (with three years remaining) would make it impossible for him to be traded, all the while being way too expensive (and long-term) to buy out.

But the Blue Jackets' aren't approaching this as if they're stuck with Merzlikins, either. The hope, once again, is that the Blue Jackets can play a more competent level of defense — that's forwards and defensemen — in front of their goaltenders.

Merzlikins was much better last season (.897 save percentage) than he was in 2022-23 (.876), but he needs to be significantly better again in 2024-25. It would also help if he could stay healthy long enough to get into a rhythm. He played only 41 games last season. He's averaged only 38 games per season in his career.

The Blue Jackets — now under a new GM and coach — aren't beholden to Merzlikins like the previous regime was. Don't be surprised if Daniil Tarasov gets an equal opportunity to win the No. 1 job, and don't be surprised — if his play deserves it — if he elevates into the No. 1 job.

Tarasov gained significant trust in the dressing room late last season when he seized the job.

There's another goaltender waiting in the wings, too. Jet Greaves has a two-way NHL/AHL this season, but it becomes a one-way deal in 2025-26. That's an ominous sign that change — one way or another — is in the wind.

The Athletic / Blue Jackets Sunday Gathering: Is Rick Nash being groomed to be the next GM?

By Aaron Portzline- September 23, 2024

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

Item No. 1: Nash's new title

Ever since Don Waddell was hired as president and general manager in late May, Rick Nash's status within the Blue Jackets' front office has only elevated. The news this week that Nash now has a different title — director of hockey operations — makes it clear where all of this is going, too.

It's hard to say how long Waddell, who turned 66 last month, will want to continue in the GM's chair, but it's obvious who will get the chair next.

"Rick is going to be involved in every decision we make for this hockey team," Waddell said. "It started with the coaching search (for Dean Evason); he was a big part of that. He's a true professional. He's a quiet guy, but when you ask him a question, he gives you his honest thoughts and he gives you a very thoughtful answer.

"I knew him as a player, but I didn't know him as a person. But throughout my time here, I've gotten to know him as a person, and I wouldn't be a very smart guy running this team if I didn't surround myself with people like Rick Nash."

Nash joined the Blue Jackets in 2019, shortly after he retired prematurely due to a series of concussions late in his career. He was hired by former GM Jarmo Kekalainen as his special assistant, but two years later he began a three-year run as director of player development.

It was clear after last season that Nash had hoped to be considered for the GM's job when Kekalainen was fired, but the organization — specifically Mike Priest, who led the search — made it clear that they were looking for someone with previous NHL experience as a GM.

Waddell is the Blue Jackets' fourth GM. None of the previous hires — Doug MacLean, Scott Howson and Kekalainen — had been NHL GMs before taking the job.

The goal, over the next two or three seasons, is to put Nash as close to the job as possible under Waddell, who acknowledged this week that Nash as the club's future GM has been discussed internally.

"We've talked about it, just in general," Waddell said. "Rick has three young kids at home, and he's been away his whole career. I said to him, 'Make sure you take care of your family. Let's do that first, because that's the most important thing.'

"Everything I touch, I'm going to give you that opportunity to learn. It's a great opportunity for both of us. For me, it's an extra resource, and hopefully I can teach him some things from experience through the years."

Nash will continue to oversee the club's player development program, which is vitally important for any small-market franchise. But he'll have his hands, eyes and opinions in every aspect of the organization — contract negotiations, trade offers, scouting, etc.

"Don's been great," Nash said. "I have to say, Jarmo was great with me, too. He brought me in and opened doors to me.

“Don coming in has just meant a different way of doing things, and I’m going to be a sponge and try to learn as much as I can from him..”

For many players, retirement can be difficult. Not just the newfound time on their hands, but the absence of the adrenaline rush or playing a major-league sport and the camaraderie of practicing and traveling and hanging out in the dressing room with teammates.

But Nash made his motivation clear. He played 1,060 NHL games with Columbus, the New York Rangers and Boston. He totaled 437 goals, 805 points and 750 penalty minutes, one of the elite power forwards of his era. He won two Olympic gold medals and one IIHF World Championships gold medal with Team Canada.

However...

“I didn’t get my name on the Stanley Cup, so this is the next best chance,” he said. “That’s why I do it, to bring a championship to Columbus, to give back to our fans for all of my great memories here.”

Item No. 2: Hungry hearts

Justin Danforth was seated near the glass during the early practices in training camp, trying to listen to the coaching staff’s commands and pick up the new systems under coach Dean Evason, even though Danforth isn’t yet cleared to be on the ice.

He might not be ready for the start of the regular season, either, after having wrist surgery at midseason when other attempts to heal the injury — suffered in the penultimate game of last season — didn’t seem to make much improvement.

Danforth was cleared to start stick-handling a puck last week, which was seen as good news by Waddell and staff. But he might not be cleared for contact drills for another two or three weeks, which puts the start of the regular season in doubt.

One man’s injury is another man’s opportunity in the dog-eat-dog world of the NHL. As if the Blue Jackets’ young players hoping to move from AHL players to NHL players didn’t have enough motivation in this training camp, with a new GM (Waddell) and a new coach (Evason) to evaluate them.

Through the first three days of camp, Owen Sillinger has filled Danforth’s expected fourth-line spot with Sean Kuraly and Mathieu Olivier. The older brother of Blue Jackets center Cole Sillinger has been impressive, too, playing with a pace and passion that suggests he’s sensing the opportunity.

There are others, too, of course.

James Malatesta, who had a strong first pro season with AHL Cleveland last season, and who showed well in limited NHL time, won’t go quietly. Others to consider on that short list are Gavin Brindley, Dylan Gambrell, Hunter McKown and Luca Del Bel Belluz.

Asked if he’s sensed a healthy level of desperation so far in camp, Evason didn’t hesitate.

“One hundred percent,” he said. “I’m really looking forward to seeing it continue through the preseason games, too. It’s one thing to look good in practice.

“I do believe that the players know — well, I know they know, because Don and I have both expressed it in our meetings with them — that there’s a clean slate here. I don’t know some of the guys (who were in) Cleveland, but there’s a clean slate for all of them. And we’ve seen that with how hard they’re pushing.”

Waddell, of course, has not given up his pursuit of another proven NHL player. Even if one of those aforementioned players is deemed ready for a fourth-line job, the Blue Jackets are lacking in established NHL depth, leaving them vulnerable if/when injuries occur.

The free-agent market is pretty well picked over now. The waiver wire likely won't bear much fruit until later in training camp, but that's a possibility.

For now, Waddell has said, the trade market seems pretty quiet, but the Blue Jackets do have ample cap space should an NHL club need help getting their roster under the cap.

Item No. 3: Snacks

- The NHL produced a one-minute video honoring the lives of Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau that will air in every arena before each club's home preseason opener. It will be followed by a moment of silence.

As the preseason begins, Clubs around the League are honoring the lives of Johnny and Matthew Gaudreau with a video tribute and moment of silence.

- There's a salary cap, of course, but there's also a salary floor. With the tragic death of Gaudreau, the Blue Jackets are currently projected to be under the salary floor, which is \$65 million for the coming season. In normal circumstances, that would not be allowed once the season starts. But the Blue Jackets are awaiting word from the league and the NHL Players' Association as to whether there may be a one-time concession given the circumstances. The Jackets are presently projected to be at approximately \$61.7 million, or \$3.4 million under the current floor. The Jackets don't have to be compliant until rosters are settled a couple of days before the Oct. 10 regular-season opener. Stay tuned.

- The Blue Jackets have two noteworthy depth players who, if they don't make the NHL roster, would need to clear waivers in order to join AHL Cleveland. Forward Trey Fix-Wolansky, who has played in 26 games with the Blue Jackets over the past three seasons, and defenseman Jake Christiansen, who has dressed in 44 games during that span, both would need to be exposed to all 31 other teams before they could head to the minors. Forward Dylan Gambrell and goaltender Zachary Sawchenko also need waivers.

- Adam Fantilli ended his rookie season on the injured list after suffering a lacerated calf during a game in late January. He was back to skating soon enough to play an exhibition game for Team Canada ahead of the IIHF World Championships, but said the full use of his leg — running, sprinting and jumping — didn't return until mid-summer. "I was able to train for the last seven or eight weeks of the offseason," Fantilli said. The recovery required significant patience, and Fantilli was said to have done "too much, too soon" late last season in an attempt to return before the 2023-24 season ended. "I've thanked everybody who helped me," Fantilli said. "A lot of people worked with me, and I was maybe a little bit irritable. I was missing being on the ice, missing being around the guys. I want to say thank you (to all of them), and sorry to all of them for what they had to deal with."

- Fantilli on what he expects this season after putting up 12-15-27 in 49 games as a rookie: "I just want to keep growing, get better every single year. It's the NHL. It doesn't get easier because I'm in my second year. It's still going to be just as hard, if not harder. We've lost some pieces and we have some younger guys who have to step up. I want to be able to help out as much as possible and play my game. That's my whole plan, just keep my head down and grind."

- Kent Johnson showed up at camp looking noticeably thicker, especially through the neck. Like Fantilli, he ended the season on the shelf after suffering a torn labrum on Feb. 28. It was expected to be a six-month recovery, but Johnson seemed ahead of schedule all summer and said he feels "100 percent" at the start of camp.

- Fantilli switched sweater numbers for this season, giving up the No. 11 he wore as an NHL rookie for the No. 19 he's worn through most of his development years. "I wasn't able to wear it my first year because (Liam) Foudy (the previous No. 19) was here," Fantilli said. "I obviously feel bad for people who bought the '11' jerseys. I knew I only had one shot (this summer). I couldn't do it after two years." Fantilli's first favorite number was No. 91 — after former NHL center Marc Savard — but he was forced to pick a number lower than 30 at some point during his junior career, so he switched the numbers around. Asked if he made an offer to Foudy, who is now with the New York Islanders organization, Fantilli noted that his rookie status didn't allow for such bold acts: "I wasn't opening my mouth on that one."
- Along with the new title for Nash, the Blue Jackets hired Zach Abdou to be senior manager of hockey operations and moved Basil McRae from assistant GM to director of pro scouting. Abdou had worked closely under Waddell with the Carolina Hurricanes the past three seasons.
- Blue Jackets Sunday Gathering trivia: the Blue Jackets hosted the 2007 NHL Draft in Nationwide Arena on June 22-23, 2007. Six players selected in the first round of that draft have become Blue Jackets at some point in their careers. Name those six players.
- The anticipation already is building toward the March 1 Stadium Series game between the Blue Jackets and Red Wings. One tidbit surfaced this week in the wake of James van Riemsdyk's free-agent signing with Columbus on Sept. 15. Van Riemsdyk, who has played for Philadelphia, Toronto and Boston during a 15-year career, will be playing in his eighth outdoor game, more than any other player in the league. Chicago's Jonathan Toews, Patrik Kane, Duncan Keith and Brent Seabrook, and Pittsburgh's Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin, have each played in six outdoor games. Van Riemsdyk, who has 3-3-6 in his first seven "outings," has played in the following venues: Fenway Park (2010), Citizens Bank Park (2012), Michigan Stadium (2013), Exhibition Stadium (2017), Navy-Marine Corps Memorial Stadium (2018), Lincoln Financial Field (2019) and Lake Tahoe (2021).
- The Blue Jackets will hold an intrasquad scrimmage on Sunday at 12:15 p.m. in the Ice Haus attached to Nationwide Arena.
- Trivia answer: The obvious pick is Jake Voracek, who was selected No. 7 overall and had two stints with the Blue Jackets. The others: van Riemsdyk (the No. 2 overall selection), Sam Gagner (No. 6), Colton Gillies (No. 16), Ian Cole (No. 18) and Riley Nash (No. 21).

[BlueJackets.com / Blue Jackets ready to begin preseason at Buffalo](#)

By Jeff Svoboda- September 23, 2024

The Blue Jackets have announced their game roster for the preseason opener Monday at Buffalo. The teams will play at KeyBank Center with a 5 p.m. puck drop.

The roster features 11 players who skated NHL minutes a season ago in forwards Cole Sillinger, Dmitri Voronkov, Adam Fantilli, Mathieu Olivier, Trey Fix-Wolansky, Luca Del Bel Belluz, Mikael Pyyhtia; defensemen Jack Johnson, Jordan Harris and David Jiricek; and goalie Jet Greaves.

The full roster for the game is listed below in numerical order.

Forwards

4 Cole Sillinger	10 Dmitri Voronkov	18 Dylan Gambrell
19 Adam Fantilli	24 Mathieu Olivier	37 Cameron Butler
41 Hunter McKown	53 Luca Pinelli	64 Trey Fix-Wolansky
65 Luca Del Bel Belluz	82 Mikael Pyyhtia	88 Tyler Peddle

Defensemen

3 Jack Johnson	22 Jordan Harris	55 David Jiricek
57 Charlie Elick	74 Corson Ceulemans	81 Stanislav Svozil

Goaltenders

35 Evan Gardner	73 Jet Greaves
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[BlueJackets.com / Monahan embracing his early days as a Blue Jacket](#)

By Jeff Svoboda- September 23, 2024

For Sean Monahan, the first day of school feeling hasn't gone away.

He's an NHL veteran and one of the most consistent players in the league, but the annual arrival of training camp still gets the butterflies going.

In addition, this year is a different animal. First, Monahan is in a new city with a new team after having signed a five-year contract as a free agent in the offseason to join the Blue Jackets. There's also the weight of the tragic passing of one of his best friends, CBJ forward Johnny Gaudreau, which has made his arrival in Columbus even more emotional.

"For me, I always have a little bit of anxiety and nervousness going in, no matter if it was my first camp or my 12th," Monahan said. "You're excited. You get nervous. You want to make a good impression. You want to feel good. That's where this comes from, but there's a lot of weight on our shoulders right now. There's a huge loss, a special person that's not here. It's on my mind every day, every second."

For all of the Blue Jackets, navigating the path without Gaudreau will be a complicated thing, full of ups and downs, beautiful memories but also days where grief will take over. That's especially true for Monahan, who has spent more time with Gaudreau than anyone else – eight seasons in Calgary, including five of them as linemates.

Monahan has made no bones about the fact the two players – and families – were extremely close, and the chance to be with Gaudreau again was at least one of the benefits of signing with the Blue Jackets in the offseason.

"I think about it every day," Monahan said at the team's media day last week. "We were about to live three houses down from each other. I came in, we were stall mates. There's a lot that goes into it. He's arguably my best friend, a teammate for many years. He's someone that we're going to miss a lot as a team. Personally, I'm going to miss him. I'll miss him for the rest of my life."

In many ways, he's already started to feel part of a new family with the Blue Jackets. The team has focused on being together as much as possible in the wake of Gaudreau's passing, and welcoming Monahan to the group has been a big part of that.

Monahan was familiar a couple of Blue Jackets players before he arrived, but the process of getting to know one another has accelerated in recent weeks.

"He walked into a tough situation here meeting the guys for the first time after this happened," Zach Werenski said. "I give him a lot of credit how he handled everything. Obviously we know John was a big reason why he signed here.

"But I think it goes back to that point of being together. We're there for him. I think it maybe speeds things up a little bit, the relationships, but he's handled everything tremendously. Obviously, it's probably one of the worst times of his life and he's been awesome to be around. That speaks volumes to the type of person he is.

"As a group, we're here for him, and we're just going to be together and get through this thing together."

From Monahan's perspective, that has meant volumes, though he didn't expect anything different.

“Honestly, it’s never really awkward,” Monahan said of coming to a new locale. “I’ve never really met a bad guy in hockey. Everyone is usually pretty welcoming, makes you feel at home right away. But I was familiar with a couple of guys on the team. I met a few guys, talked to a bunch of guys over the summer. Even the young guys, they’re mature, they’re humble guys. It’s a good group. We’re surrounded by some great people in the locker room.”

On the ice, the Blue Jackets are excited to have Monahan, who is coming off a season in which he led the NHL with 83 games played and finished with 26 goals and 59 points. Those numbers are right in line with his career averages per 82 games, giving the Blue Jackets a center who can skate in the top six and contribute offensively.

Add in the intangibles – now through a needed hip surgery that cost him most of 2022-23, he’s back to being one of the more dependable players in the league, he excels at faceoffs and adds a veteran locker room presence – and Monahan was a fit for what the Blue Jackets needed.

“He’s a great player,” captain Boone Jenner said. “Obviously you can see what he brings on the ice, but he’s going to be someone in the locker room that’s huge for us. Playing against him for a while, you can see what he brings. He’s a highly skilled forward who plays center, he’s good on faceoffs, he plays all over the ice. To add that to our lineup along with the experience and the leadership qualities that he has, it’s a great addition for us.”

Monahan is penciled in to be the team’s No. 1 center at the start of the season, spending his time at the start of training camp flanked by the energetic Jenner and scoring wing Kirill Marchenko. While he’s expected to produce in the lineup there, Monahan was also brought in to serve as a mentor for such young centers in the organization as Adam Fantilli and Cole Sillinger.

“I’m excited,” he said. “There’s a lot of great young players, obviously good veteran players. I’m going to try to lead by example and do the things I do, do the things I’m comfortable with and try to help myself to get better and be able to push other guys on the team too to be better. It’s an exciting group with guys trying to start off and take off in this league and guys that are continuing to try to be great players in this league. It’s a team I’m really proud to be part of.”

While Monahan has just arrived in Columbus, he said he’s already taken a liking to the city. While the road forward won’t always be easy, he’s what he feels like is the right spot to do so.

“I love it here,” Monahan said. “It’s a beautiful place to live. My family loves it here. The staff is amazing. My teammates are welcoming and humble – great people. So it’s exciting. I feel at home here and I’m excited to get this season going.”

[BlueJackets.com / For van Riemsdyk, the fit was right in Columbus](#)

By Jeff Svoboda- September 22, 2024

Don Waddell had any lingering doubts about signing veteran forward James van Riemsdyk, he didn't have to go very far this week before having them alleviated.

All it took was one trip into the locker room to see the reaction of the Blue Jackets players for the CBJ general manager to feel good about the decision.

"Even on Tuesday, when you walk in the locker room, the players are like, 'This is great,'" Waddell said. "A lot of guys know JVR well, so the players were excited about it, too.

"For us, we just thought it was a good fit. It takes goals to score to win hockey games, and we think he can add that to us."

From van Riemsdyk's perspective, the story was very similar. He had some suitors throughout the offseason but found himself unsigned until Sunday, when the Blue Jackets gave the wing a one-year, \$900,000 contract to keep the pads on and play a 16th year at the highest level.

In the end, the deciding factor in a lot of ways was the same as it was for the Blue Jackets – the fit just seemed right.

"I was really happy when it worked out with Columbus," van Riemsdyk said. "I think there's a lot of good foundational pieces here as far as the players and a lot of youth that's looking to take the next step. I think how I can fit in with that is exciting for me. I'm excited to be a part of this group."

And that's how van Riemsdyk found himself wearing union blue in the OhioHealth Ice Haus on Thursday's first day of on-ice drills in camp. The 35-year-old comes to Columbus with plenty of NHL experience (1,011 games), a boatload of production (311 goals and 629 points), and a good perspective that the Blue Jackets think will help the standout young forwards in the organization.

For van Riemsdyk, it's a win-win – he'll have the chance to continue his playing career and add to those lofty totals while serving as a mentor. As he looks back to his career beginning back in Philadelphia – the second overall pick of the 2007 draft in Columbus, he broke into the league with the Flyers in 2009 – he remembers plenty of players who showed him the ropes.

Current Blue Jackets broadcaster Jody Shelley is on the list, as are such names as Danny Briere, Chris Pronger, Jeff Carter, Mike Richards, Brian Boucher and a host of others that he felt remiss in not mentioning.

The biggest thing he learned – never getting too high or too low and focusing on the next day would be paramount to having a long career. In this business, consistency wins.

"When I was a young guy, I found it was just watching the guys who had been playing for a while and see how they go about their business, see how they approach their craft on things like that," van Riemsdyk said. "I think I was very fortunate for that because I think that really set me up to have an approach that you can have that longevity with."

One of the key focuses of the offseason for Waddell was bringing in veteran players who can help youngsters learn the ropes, and van Riemsdyk joins such players as Sean Monahan and Jack Johnson in that regard. For the veterans already in the room like captain Boone Jenner, it's nice to have more players of that nature around.

“He’s got 1,000 games in this league,” Jenner said of van Riemsdyk. “He’s been around for a while. He’s seen a lot of things. You add someone like that into the locker room, it’s going to help us, not only on the ice but in the locker room and what he brings day-to-day around us. We’re looking forward to that. He’s a great guy that’s gonna help us.”

That’s not to say van Riemsdyk is only here to add leadership. He can still play, as well, as evidenced by the fact he had 11 goals – six on the power play – and 38 points a season ago while playing a limited role in Boston. That output gave him 15 straight seasons with double digits in goals, and van Riemsdyk says that while he wished he had put a few more pucks in the net, his game continues to mature as he gets older.

“You have to always evolve as a player and try to find new ways to be more effective and successful,” he said. “Certain situations, I think obviously fit-wise, maybe you maximize your skill set; other times, you maybe have to do things that are a little bit different than you are used to doing.

“Even looking at my year last year in Boston, obviously I would have liked to maybe contribute more goal-wise, but just playmaking-wise, that’s something I’ve worked on a lot the last few years. It’s something that was really able to jump out in my game, and I was able to have some success doing that.”

So for the 16th time, van Riemsdyk shows up for an NHL camp with an eye on making an impact. He skated the opening day with forwards Adam Fantilli and Dmitri Voronkov, and while he has more than a decade on each of those players, he still brought the same enthusiasm to workday No. 1.

“Obviously it’s a privilege and a blessing to play in this league, and I definitely don’t take any day of that for granted,” he said. “Starting out my 16th year, it definitely flies by, but I’m just as excited now as I was for year one.

“It’s fun to get started, fun to get to meet some of the guys and some of the people within the organization and things like that. A little bit of a whirlwind coming together and finalizing things over the past few days, but I couldn’t be more excited to be here.”

[BlueJackets.com / Nash's hockey journey continues with Blue Jackets](#)

By Jeff Svoboda- September 21, 2024

For more than two decades, the name Rick Nash has been synonymous with Blue Jackets hockey and the city of Columbus.

Don't expect that to change anytime soon.

The latest sign that's the case came Friday, when the organization announced Nash's promotion from director of player development to director of hockey operations. Whereas Nash had previously focused his efforts on working with the young talent in the organization, the new role will allow him the official opportunity to have a hand in more of the decision-making within the CBJ front office.

Most importantly, it gives him the chance to do it in the place he's come to call home.

"I've always felt like I've been a Blue Jacket even when I left, and that has not changed," Nash said Friday. "For me as a player, I didn't get to get my name on the Stanley Cup, so this is the next best chance to try to get my name on the Stanley Cup. That's why I do it, is to bring a championship to Columbus and give back to our fans."

GM Don Waddell and Director of Hockey Operations Rick Nash speak to the media on the second day of Columbus Blue Jackets Training Camp, presented by OhioHealth.

A championship remains the ultimate goal for the organization, one new general manager and president of hockey operations Don Waddell was hired to chase this spring. And since his arrival, Waddell quickly has found a bit of a trusted resource in Nash, involving him in the coaching search that led to the hiring of Dean Evason and turning to him more and more during discussions in the front office.

"Rick is a true professional," Waddell said. "I think he carries himself very well. He's very knowledgeable. He's a quiet guy, but when you ask him a question, he gives you his real thoughts and a very thoughtful answer.

"I knew him as a player, didn't know him as a person. I got to know him as a person throughout my time here. I wouldn't be a smart person running this team if I didn't surround myself with people like Rick Nash."

The No. 1 overall pick in the 2022 draft – ironically, that pick was acquired by Columbus in a web of trades that involved both Florida as well as an Atlanta team run by Waddell – Nash remains Mr. Blue Jacket in a lot of ways. The only player to have his number retired – No. 61 went to the rafters in March 2022 – he remains the franchise's all-time leader in goals, assists and points.

Nash did spend some time away from Columbus, concluding his career with the New York Rangers and Boston Bruins, but always considered Central Ohio home. Upon retirement in 2019, he was hired by then-general manager Jarmo Kekalainen to serve as a special assistant to the GM, all in an effort to kick-start his career in an NHL front office.

At first, he learned the ropes of what went into the day-to-day operations of running a hockey team at the side of Kekalainen and the rest of the CBJ staff. Then, in 2021, Nash became the Blue Jackets' director of player development, putting him in charge of supervising the club's development coaches, overseeing the progress of prospects throughout the organization and providing feedback to management on player advancement.

He's also dipped his hand into the international game, serving as general manager for Team Canada at the 2024 IIHF World Championship.

It's been no mistake, as Nash said he started thinking about working on the management side of hockey even while he was still playing.

"I probably thought about this path before I retired," he said. "As you get older, you have a family, and you know there's going to be life after hockey. Being a player or a professional athlete is just a small chapter in your life, so I've thought about this a lot and feel like I've put a lot of time in and been a sponge to a lot of different people to try to learn the business."

When it comes to Nash's new responsibilities, Waddell was clear.

"He's going to be involved in every decision that we make for this hockey club," he said.

Still, Nash doesn't expect things to change radically as he settles into the role. In part, he will continue to work with the team's prospects and their development because it remains a true passion in his job.

"It's similar to what I've been doing, just to keep growing within the organization," he said. "It's just a title. I'm going to still be doing everything I can to help this organization win. ... Not much has changed from my job description other than hopefully being around the team a little more."

From Waddell's perspective, though, having the input of the most successful player in franchise history is invaluable.

"From the first day I got here and just listening to him talk about things and what his approach was and how he thought about the game, it just kept on getting better and better," Waddell said. "Finally, I kept including him in more discussions, and he carried himself well. He's very well connected. Even the coaching search, he was able to call players he played with that played for not only Dean but the other guys we interviewed.

"Having that kind of resources, if I didn't use that, it wouldn't be very smart on my part."

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets' Elvis Merzlikins Used Offseason to Mentally Reset

By Mark Scheig- September 21, 2024

Things have not gone according to plan ever since goaltender Elvis Merzlikins signed an extension to stay with the Columbus Blue Jackets. Although his 2023-24 season was better statistically than the previous year, his performance is not meeting the value of his contract.

GM Don Waddell said over the summer that “nobody’s taking that contract” when discussing Merzlikins. However, it was important to note that Waddell admitted being interested in the goaltender while he was in Carolina.

Given that there’s three seasons left on that contract and the fact the Blue Jackets didn’t buy Merzlikins out, it leaves them with the option of hoping for a big turnaround in 2024-25. With Daniil Tarasov and Jet Greaves pushing for more playing time, the pressure is on Merzlikins to find his game.

This appears to be an open competition. While the contract suggests Merzlikins is the number-one, preseason performance will dictate who gets the net in Game 1. If Tarasov is clearly better, he’ll play.

Merzlikins spoke exclusively to the Hockey Writers after his group’s practice Saturday to discuss his offseason and preparation for the upcoming season.

“I feel good,” Merzlikins said. “I’m happy to be back. I miss hockey, missed the boys. So happy to be back.”

While most of the Blue Jackets’ players paid close attention to the state of the GM search, Merzlikins took a different approach on the suggestion of his wife. After the World Championships were completed, the family traveled to Europe where Elvis could mentally reset. They spent time in Warsaw where his wife Aleksandra’s family lives. They also spent time in Switzerland.

During that time, Merzlikins shut hockey off completely. It was on purpose for his benefit.

“As the moment I left Columbus until the moment I came back here, I did not care about hockey at all,” Merzlikins said. “That’s why I’m telling you I took time for myself. I had no idea what was going on in the playoffs. Of course, I watched Game 7. But I took it off. I needed to take it off. I followed my wife’s suggestion and that was the best suggestion so far because when I came back here, I felt unreal, super strong and a fresh man.”

Merzlikins came back to Columbus at the end of July. Even when the team was still looking for a head coach throughout the month, he wasn’t paying attention. Once he got back to town, he went right to work preparing for the season.

“As soon as I came back, fresh mind. I had fresh energy. So I started working out right away with my strength coaches. I think we did a pretty good job because I feel pretty good.”

While Merzlikins didn’t pay attention to the search as it was going on, he is a big fan of the new leadership in town led by Waddell and Evason.

“Amazing. I love it,” Merzlikins said. “The people here now, they’re just straight up to you and that’s awesome. We have great staff here now and I’m really excited for this year and am looking forward to it.”

Much has been made about Merzlikins' desire to be a number-one goaltender. With Tarasov and possibly Greaves not far behind, there's no guarantee Merzlikins wins the competition. While he says his relationship with them is great, he knows there is competition but they are friends and are willing to help push each other for the best result possible. Does he feel pressure going into the season knowing that there's competition and trying to live up to his contract?

"I'll tell you no," Merzlikins said. "I'm going to tell you, I don't know if it's going to come the right way or wrong way now but I don't care. I just want to go out there, have fun, play hockey and enjoy the games with the boys."

While there has been questions in the past about how well Merzlikins gets along with his teammates, he believes the the team is closer than ever.

"I'm really happy with the locker room right now. But definitely we're closer and we're going to have each other's back. I'm pretty sure this year is going to be the year that we're going to have each other's back. I'm confident and I believe in the locker room."

Nothing will be given in this goaltender competition. Merzlikins used the offseason to focus and reset. He's back now feeling good, strong and ready to show what he is able to do.

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets' Rick Nash Continues Rapid Rise in Front Office

By Mark Scheig- September 21, 2024

Rick Nash has made it no secret. It is his desire to eventually become a general manager in the National Hockey League. On Friday morning, the Blue Jackets helped Nash take one step closer to that reality.

Nash was announced as the Director of Hockey Operations. In addition, Zach Abdou was hired as Senior Manager of Hockey Operations. Basil McRae will serve as the Director of Pro Scouting. Our Nick Arnold detailed those changes here.

What will Nash be responsible for in his new role?

“Just similar to what we’ve been doing to keep growing within the organization” Nash said. “It’s just a title. I’ll still be doing everything I can to help this organization win.”

Before this announcement, Nash served as the Blue Jackets’ Director of Player Personnel. He also served in the front office on Team Canada at the recently completed Men’s World Championships. Once things got settled down for GM Don Waddell, things started to come together for this opportunity.

“I just went about my job and we talked about it over the last couple of weeks,” Nash said. “It was just ongoing. Not much has changed from my job description other than hopefully being around the team a little more.”

Ever since former GM Jarmo Kekalainen made the decision to bring Nash into the front office, he’s quickly risen up the ranks. From learning everything within the day-to-day hockey operations with the Blue Jackets to doing it on the national stage for Team Canada, Nash continues to soak everything in. His experiences are helping him prepare not only for becoming a GM in the future, but to help the team now.

“You get to meet a lot of different players, a lot of different management when you go to these tournaments,” Nash said. “For my personal growth, I get to deal with all the GM’s where I’m asking permission to talk to their players, all the agents. When you build those teams, you’re working inside a budget too on different premiums. You learn that pretty fast. There’s a lot of things you can experience.”

“You also gain a lot of knowledge at those tournaments and you’re around hockey for a month. So I feel like it’s beneficial for our organization that we have people involved in that when Chris Clark did it two years ago for Team USA. So it’s very important.”

Nash’s rise shouldn’t come as any real surprise given how highly thought of he is. From the GM all the way down through the players, they all recognize how important he is.

“He’s going to be involved in every decision that we make for this hockey team and (it) started with the coaching search,” Waddell said. “(He was a) big part of that. Rick is a true professional. I think he cares himself very well. He’s very knowledgeable. He’s a quiet guy. When you ask him a question, he gives you his real thoughts and very thoughtful answers. I wouldn’t be a smart person running this team if I don’t surround myself with people like Rick Nash.”

“Well if you ever spoke to him first, he’s an incredible man,” coach Dean Evason said. “I’ve had the opportunity to work with him with Team Canada this summer in Prague. I’ve watched how he conducts

himself around the team. I've watched his meetings. He's not a super vocal guy or a guy that comes in loud. But when he speaks, everyone listens. Don and the entire organization recognize that. We've got him in a position where he can help us put together a hockey club that hopefully someday wins the Stanley Cup."

"Rick, where do you start?" Sean Kuraly said. "Nash has meant so much to this city. He was our first superstar and kind of the guy that everyone wanted to be when you were playing, when I was growing up playing here. And it's just so important I think to have a guy with that background in this organization. To have him working on our common goal with us I think is really important. We're darn lucky to have him in this organization and we're looking forward to having him around and get better."

Nash never won the Stanley Cup as a player. That is part of his motivation of why he's chosen the front office path. In his words, "this is the next best chance to get my name on the Cup. That's why I do it."

Don't be surprised if you see Nash in the GM role sooner rather than later.

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Name Rick Nash Director of Hockey Operations

By Nicholas Arnold- September 21, 2024

The Columbus Blue Jackets' most prolific player in franchise history is continuing to climb the ranks even though his playing career is over. On Sept. 20, the team announced that Rick Nash has a new title for the 2024-25 season: Director of Hockey Operations.

Blue Jackets' current general manager (GM) Don Waddell had this to say about Nash in a press release:

"Rick Nash is an extremely bright guy who has become an important part of our hockey operations leadership group. He is very passionate about the Columbus Blue Jackets and this community and has been a great resource for me since I arrived here in late-May. Rick made a significant impact on this organization as a player and will continue to do so in his role as director of hockey operations."

Columbus Blue Jackets' Rick Nash (Photo by Bruce Bennett/Getty Images)

Nash has been speculated as a candidate to take over as the team's GM years down the line. That would further a trend of franchise players returning to manage their former team, as we've seen with Rob Blake and his Los Angeles Kings, Joe Sakic and his Colorado Avalanche, and Steve Yzerman and his Detroit Red Wings. Nash has received some experience to that end, most recently having been named the GM for Hockey Canada's team in the 2024 IIHF World Championship.

In their press release, the team writes, "In his new role, Nash will be involved in all aspects of the team's hockey operations department and will continue to oversee the development and advancement of players throughout the organization."

Among other front office changes, the team named Basil McRae as the Director of Pro Scouting and Zach Abdou the Senior Manager of Hockey Operations. McRae played almost 600 games in the NHL as a winger before retiring in 1997. He's been with the Blue Jackets in various roles since 2013, most recently serving as assistant GM. He has also been a part-owner of the Ontario Hockey League's London Knights since 2001, which was when Nash played for the team.

Abdou, 27, is someone with whom Waddell is familiar from his time as GM of the Carolina Hurricanes. His previous role as Hockey Operations Coordinator with the Hurricanes was focused on supporting management in their day-to-day activities. He previously worked as a portfolio management analyst and holds a bachelor's degree in business administration. The Blue Jackets say he'll assist the department with forecasting and budgeting, database management, and contract analysis.

A flurry of roster changes are also soon to come as training camp roles on in Ohio. With the start of the hockey season just around the corner, expect more news to start to flow again.

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets' Kent Johnson Made Most of Offseason With Quick Recovery

By Mark Scheig September 23, 2024

It was a freak faceoff play at the end of an already decided hockey game. But it was enough to end Kent Johnson's 2023-24 season.

Johnson suffered a torn labrum on the play with about 10 seconds left in the New York Rangers 4-1 win over the Blue Jackets. He was seen in discomfort heading to the bench as the final seconds were winding down.

The next day, the Blue Jackets announced that Johnson would be out indefinitely due to an upper-body injury. Then three days later, the news came down that he suffered a torn labrum and would have surgery.

At that point, it was fair to wonder what kind of an impact this injury would have on 2024-25 and beyond. Depending on the severity of the tear among other things, recovery times vary.

In some cases, it can take up to a full year to be fully recovered from a torn labrum in the shoulder. Factors such as the way the body recovers and the type of activity someone does afterwards can influence the timeline.

For Johnson, he went right to work to make sure he would be fully ready for the 2024-25 season. He stopped by on Saturday to discuss his offseason and more.

Johnson Feels Great

"(I feel) great," Johnson said. "Unreal. My body is the best it's ever felt. It was just a long summer for me. It was a really long offseason with a new trainer and a new training program. It felt like it's been a lot better for me. So I'm excited."

While recovering from this kind of injury, Johnson was able to do some strength exercises. A lot of emphasis was placed on the lower body while the shoulder got better.

Perhaps the biggest news for Johnson was how his recovery went. He was able to crush the timeline to be fully cleared and recovered.

"The recovery was three and a half months I got cleared," Johnson said. "I was really blessed with it. It was really quick and I had a lot of great people helping me out. I'm really thankful for the staff and everyone and my own people back home too. It was awesome."

Johnson then detailed what his training looked like while dealing with the recovery.

"At first, it was a lot of figuring out how to get the shoulder and upper body healthy. While I was getting the shoulder healthy, I could hammer the legs. I gained a lot of leg strength early on which I think was beneficial. Then once I got healthy, a lot of speed work. It was the transition stuff I focused more on this year and my speed. I think it's all been really helpful. Having so much time to do strength early in the summer and then transition to speed later in the summer. That was great for me."

Johnson looks visibly bigger and stronger. He knows it too. He's very excited to see all of his hard work translate on the ice once the new season gets going.

“My numbers are up and my weight is up and then most importantly, my speed numbers are up,” Johnson said. “That was something we tracked and did a much better job focusing on this summer. The speed is huge for my game and I’m really excited to see where it goes.”

Thoughts on New Management

Johnson returns to a Blue Jackets’ locker room that is now under the guidance of GM Don Waddell and head coach Dean Evason. It’s a fresh start for everybody.

Johnson’s early career has been up and down in part due to so many coaching changes. He will already have his third on-ice NHL head coach (Brad Larsen, Pascal Vincent, Evason.)

Johnson sees the excitement in the new staff from his point of view.

“I think everyone’s really enjoying it right now,” Johnson said. “It’s been a great first couple of days of camp. I think everyone’s really excited about the new staff and I’m excited to get it going.”

Johnson is now in position to potentially have his best season yet with new contract in hand. When the contract was signed, Waddell specifically mentioned Johnson as an important part of the Blue Jackets’ future.

For Johnson though, he knows and understands the work is far from finished. Even with the new contract, there is a lot he needs to do.

“I have to go do my thing and earn it every night and every time in camp, earn my role,” Johnson said. “It doesn’t feel like a contract where I’ve made it or anything. But yes, I feel lucky and grateful to have this (new) contract.”

Given the speed and skill Johnson possesses, it feels like he’s on the verge of finally realizing his breakout. He’s confident it’s coming too. What gives him that confidence?

“I have a lot of great people helping me out,” Johnson said. “I think just the work I’ve been able to put in and how I feel about my body and my game. I’ve always been a pretty confident guy. Sometimes, it might not be on your timeline but I haven’t lost belief in myself. I feel like I had a great summer. My body is in a great spot. I definitely feel confident (about 2024-25.)”

Johnson in camp has been skating on the right with Cole Sillinger in the middle and Dmitri Voronkov on the left. Whether this sticks longer term remains to be seen. Johnson was seen working on both special teams units within the first few days of camp. He and Sillinger were on the PK together.

Johnson was able to make a very quick recovery on a tricky injury. He has used the extended offseason to his full advantage. He’s fully recovered and ready to show everyone that 2024-25 could be the start of something special for him.

1st Ohio Battery / First Impressions: Getting To Know New Blue Jacket Jordan Harris

By Will Chase on September 21, 2024

As training camp gets underway for the Columbus Blue Jackets, there's always a new face or two to familiarize yourself with.

Today, we're getting more of an inside look at Jordan Harris.

The Blue Jackets acquired Harris in the trade that sent Patrik Laine to the Montreal Canadiens on Aug. 19.

A 24-year-old defenseman from Massachusetts, Harris is 5-foot-11, 189 pounds, and was a third-round, 71st overall pick in 2018. Fitting in with a bunch of young Blue Jackets looking to solidify their game and make an impact, Harris has played parts of three NHL seasons with the Canadiens, including 56 games last season, scoring 14 points (three goals, 11 assists).

Jordan Harris	Games	Goals	Assists	Points
2021-22	10	1	0	1
2022-23	65	4	13	17
2023-24	56	3	11	14

The left-shot defenseman averages 17:58 of ice time in his career and was fourth on the Habs with 86 blocked shots last season — Harris learned a lot about former Blue Jacket David Savard's shot-blocking ability as he mentioned in his first media availability after the trade last month. Harris also knew Blue Jacket Sean Monahan from their days together just last season with the Canadiens.

Per Natural Stat Trick, Harris was first among Canadiens' defensemen with 2.67 xGA/60 last season.

Jordan Harris	CA/60	SA/60	GA/60	xGA/60
2021-22	58.51	29.84	1.96	2.68
2022-23	58.65	32.33	2.63	2.76
2023-24	59.57	28.83	2.33	2.67

As players gather for the first days of training camp, hitting the ice and looking to make good first impressions, what can Harris do to make this Blue Jackets team out of camp?

"Just be myself, honestly," Harris said. "And show what I can do. I take a lot of pride in the work I put in this summer and preparing so just trusting in my preparation, just being myself."

Harris detailed what he worked on this summer.

"Getting back to my skating details, you play so many games and your body gets beat down a little bit. And then focus on little things like making sure you know what you want to do with the puck before you get it, scanning the ice a little bit better, practicing both sides when scrimmaging, and everything."

What are his impressions from working with the coaching staff and new head coach Dean Evason?

"I thought he was great out there, they were all great out there," Harris said. "A lot of energy."

"But I also think, especially with Dean, he knows how to enjoy what he's doing. As well as getting in really good work. You see him out there cracking jokes and ribbing guys a little bit and that's great because it's such a long year, right?"

"You can tell he really loves what he's doing and everyone feeds off that energy."

As he told Blue Jackets radio play-by-play announcer Bob McElligott right after last month's trade, he loves the roster competition.

"That's exactly what I want," Harris said. "I wouldn't want to come to a situation with anything promised or given. And that's how I've been throughout my career. Started in prep school. I was a good player but had to work my way up. Third-round pick. Decently high pick but had to work my way up."

"You get to this level and nothing's given to you. And that's exactly how I expect it and excited to earn whatever's given at the end of the day."

During Harris' first media availability with the Blue Jackets media last month, he talked about his attributes on the ice and where he looks to take the next steps in his career.

"The first couple years, you think of starting to play professional hockey and you think of just the hockey aspect," Harris said. "And there's so much more that goes into it. It's the travel, coming from college, I was now playing double the games I played in college."

"The social aspect's a little different. Guys are older. Not everyone lives with each other in dorms. Everyone has families or lives in apartments, except for maybe the very young guys."

"I think now, that I have a better feeling and understanding of how things go, and I have some games under my belt, I really feel like the next step and what I want to do is showcase what I work on this summer. What I can do as a player."

"I'm not the biggest defenseman but there are a lot of tools I can use to defend hard and join the rush. I think there's some offensive stuff I want to continue to add to my game while not taking away from my strengths as a defender."

"I definitely feel like there's more that I can give and I'm excited to show it."

Even though Harris might be a natural left-shot defenseman, he has familiarity playing on the right side which he did in college and the World Juniors.

Harris scored his second career goal in 2022 at Nationwide Arena, a 6-4 Blue Jackets win. Now Harris hopes to score a few more and hear that cannon go off for his team.

1st Ohio Battery / Blue Jackets Promote Rick Nash To Director Of Hockey Operations

By Ed Francis on September 21, 2024

The Columbus Blue Jackets have promoted Rick Nash from the director of player development to the director of hockey operations.

Training camp has started, but the big news today within the Columbus Blue Jackets organization is taking place off the ice.

President of Hockey Operations and General Manager Don Waddell announced Friday that Rick Nash has been named the director of hockey operations for the team.

This is a significant promotion for Nash, who had previously served as the director of player development since 2021. In his new role, Nash will be involved in all aspects of the team's hockey operations department. He will also continue to direct the development of players throughout the organization.

"Rick Nash is an extremely bright guy who has become an important part of our hockey operations leadership group," said Waddell. "He is very passionate about the Columbus Blue Jackets and this community and has been a great resource for me since I arrived here in late-May."

"Rick made a significant impact on this organization as a player and will continue to do so in his role as director of hockey operations."

Nash spent nine seasons with the Blue Jackets and is Columbus' only first overall pick in franchise history. He scored 289 goals and added 258 assists (547 points) while with Columbus; both are franchise records.

The former captain also had a taste of head leadership earlier this year when he served as the general manager for Team Canada at the 2024 IIHF World Championships in Czechia.

In a pair of related moves, the team also announced the hiring of Zach Abdou as senior manager of hockey operations and that Basil McRae will now serve as director of pro scouting.

Abdou had served as the manager of hockey and business operations for the Carolina Hurricanes under Waddell.

McRae has been with Columbus as a scout since 2013, spent three seasons as the club's director of player personnel between 2016-19 and has served as an assistant general manager since 2019.

The Athletic / NHL futures best bets, win totals: Ride the Leafs, Oilers; fade Red Wings, Blues

By Dom Luszczyszyn- September 21, 2024

Our season preview series kicks off in a couple of weeks and we've got you covered with each team's projected point total, their chances of winning the Stanley Cup and everything in between.

For those that want to bet, though, that's not soon enough. Don't worry, we've got you covered with the best bets to make based on our projections. They've done pretty well in each of the last two seasons (2022, 2023) with back-to-back Presidents' Trophy hits. Let's hope for the same luck this year.

While we won't be unveiling each team's specific projections and probabilities, we will be discussing which teams make a good bet based on their current lines.

It's always important to bet responsibly and only wager what you're comfortable with — and that's especially true with futures, where your money will be tied up for the whole season. The key to betting is managing a bankroll: betting small percentages based on edges and not dipping into money that isn't designated for betting. With futures, what I usually do is designate a percentage of my bankroll for futures only to create a "futures bankroll." Maybe that's 10 percent, maybe that's 25 percent — the idea is to not tie up too much money, especially if you're betting on games throughout the season.

The best bets for this year are separated into two sections: point totals and playoffs, plus futures (division, conference, Cup props). I've added a stake size based on allocating a percentage of our entire futures bank roll — so it adds up to 100 percent if you were to bet all of them. For perspective, an eight percent bet is massive; but if you've devoted 25 percent of your total bankroll to futures, it essentially makes it a two-percent bet.

Point Totals and Playoffs

Detroit Red Wings

UNDER 90.5 points, -120 (Stake: 7.5 percent)

NO playoffs, -162 (7 percent)

The Red Wings are easily my biggest fade this year. A 90.5-point total feels extremely generous for a team that felt fortunate to land at 91 last season. The Red Wings had the seventh worst expected goals percentage last season, but survived off hot shooting. They allowed the second most chances on the penalty kill, but countered that with unsustainably good goaltending.

All that would be fine if the team was relatively young (they're not), made meaningful improvements in the offseason (they didn't), or could count on declines from teams around them (not likely). Unless Simon Edvinsson is the missing a piece and a day-one god, it's difficult to envision a playoff path for the Red Wings this season — or matching last year's 91 point total.

Vancouver Canucks

OVER 97.5 points, -111 (7 percent)

It's interesting that the market seems fine with Detroit's mirage season but won't extend the same courtesy for Vancouver. Yes, the Canucks had a high PDO and that should regress — but 97.5 points is a big dip from 109 last season.

The difference here is that the Canucks actually have the shooting and goaltending talent to warrant belief. There are legit superstars on this team that can move the needle from a percentage perspective making them a much easier team to back. Combine that with the team's growing ability to control the puck at five-on-five during the season and Vancouver's price at 97.5 points is appetizing.

There's also reason to believe Vancouver got better in the offseason. The defense group may not look great past the top pair, but Jake DeBrusk, Danton Heinen and Daniel Sprong help give the Canucks one of the deepest forward groups in the league.

This is an elite team somehow ranked 13th in the league and tied for sixth in the West. I'm taking the over.

St. Louis Blues (65)

UNDER 86.5 points, -113 (4.5 percent)

NO playoffs, -215 (6 percent)

Death, taxes and my model doubting the Blues. St. Louis was a bit of a surprise last year, earning 92 points and I'm not totally convinced it can repeat that.

St. Louis had an average penalty kill last season, but was bottom three at five-on-five expected goals (worse than the Anaheim Ducks and Columbus Blue Jackets!) and had a pretty wretched power play. If not for an out-of-nowhere renaissance from Jordan Binnington, things would've been a lot worse for the Blues last year.

The Blues did make some intriguing additions during the summer that might shake things up. But it feels like last season was closer to a false bounce than anything real.

New York Islanders

OVER 91.5 points, -113 (4.5 percent)

YES playoffs, +100 (4.5 percent)

No, hell has not frozen over. The Islanders are indeed a team worth betting according to The Model that Islanders fan love to hate.

The model's confidence derives from an underrated core that features Mathew Barzal, Bo Horvat, Brock Nelson, Noah Dobson and Ilya Sorokin. The emergence of Dobson in particular last season is a big deal, one that ups the immediate ceiling of this team and veers them away from the downward trajectory they were on two years ago.

While I don't think the Islanders are world-beaters by any means, they should be a much safer playoff bet than the odds suggest, especially relative to Detroit whose total is somehow only one point lower. There's a lot more to like in Long Island, especially with the Anthony Duclair addition and a few additions by subtraction. There's also a new-ish coach behind the bench in Patrick Roy, who is notably not Lane Lambert.

Last season the Islanders made the playoffs and earned 94 points despite their best player, Sorokin, having a down year. Expect a bounce-back there and expect the Islanders to land higher than 92 points.

Toronto Maple Leafs

OVER 101.5 points, -125 (6 percent)

It's interesting to see the market so light on the Leafs. Last year was a low-point for the current core, sure, but that was still a 102-point season. There's plenty of reason to believe this year's group has more to offer.

The core four remain intact and while some may be disappointed in that fact, it remains Toronto's biggest advantage. The support around them could be better, but if Ryan Reaves is used more sparingly that's already a big win. Either way, it's more of the same from a group that was second in the league in scoring last season.

We know the Leafs can score. It's the defensive ability getting back on track that should lead to significantly more optimism going into next season. I was lower on the Leafs going into last year partly because they made a lot of defensive concessions for the sake of offense. This season they've cleaned things up, namely with the addition of Chris Tanev on the blue line. He's a big deal for the top four and a massive improvement over what was previously there.

On top of that, the Leafs should have much better goaltending this year. They had the 24th best save percentage last season, but I imagine Anthony Stolarz is a big upgrade over Ilya Samsonov — and that Joseph Woll can surprise as a full-time starter.

The Leafs are still an elite team and should be priced much higher than they are.

Edmonton Oilers

OVER 106.5 points, -111 (6 percent)

The Oilers are the league favorite at 106.5 points and it's usually not wise to bet the over on the best team. Usually, Edmonton's line doesn't go far enough and should be closer to 110 points — the Oilers are that good going into this season.

The Oilers aren't just "running back" a Stanley Cup finalist, they have arguably improved on last year's team, which was only one goal away from winning it all. Jeff Skinner and Viktor Arvidsson are upgrades up front, plus they'll have a full season of Adam Henrique. It's the league's best forward group.

On defense, the Oilers may be better off with Ty Emberson over both Cody Ceci and Philip Broberg. He's a sneaky good shutdown type that may be exactly what Edmonton needs in its top four.

Since hiring Kris Knoblauch, the Oilers were basically unstoppable last season. I'd expect more of the same this season.

Montreal Canadiens

OVER 75.5 points, -120 (4.5 percent)

The Canadiens are a team on the rise that added Patrik Laine to an improving lineup. It's hard not to like them to hit over 75.5 points, a total they bested last season.

The team's core is getting better each year with Juraj Slafkovsky's full season progression being the most notable. That group is getting Kirby Dach back after he missed almost all of last season with injury, and adding the electric Lane Hutson to the backend. The Canadiens are on the upswing and it feels like this is the season the show it.

Utah HC

OVER 87.5 points, -125 (4.5 percent)

YES playoffs, +164 (2 percent)

If you want a playoff long shot, there's a lot of value in Utah at +164 who I believe to be closer to a 50-50 proposition. While Utah is not among the projected top eight teams in the West right now, the newly relocated club is right on the cusp with not much significant competition behind them.

The additions of Mikhail Sergachev, John Marino and Ian Cole greatly strengthen the team's blue line which was a massive weakness last season. That group should be able to get the puck up to the team's underrated forward group, which has some of the best winger depth in the league.

There's a lot of young talent on this roster and I think they're ready to compete this season.

Carolina Hurricanes

OVER 101.5 points, -104 (3.5 percent)

The Hurricanes have been above a 110-point pace for four straight seasons now — a 101.5 point total feels like a gift.

While Carolina did lose a lot of significant talent this offseason, the Hurricanes did a decent job replacing that talent either internally or externally. This is still an elite defensive team that will be a pain to score on, which is aided by the growing development of Pyotr Kochetkov between the pipes.

Carolina is still a safe bet for the top of the league until proven otherwise.

Washington Capitals

NO playoffs, -220 (3.5 percent)

This is a really chalky bet, but there's a tendency for oddsmakers to not bake in enough certainty at the extreme ends of the playoff race spectrum. While it's generally not the wisest proposition to leave betting money tied up for months just to make back less than 30 percent of your investment — value is value.

I capped the plays listed here at -250, but there were also edges on several teams fairly close to "lock" territory. There's no such thing as a guarantee, but if you're able to find a book willing to parlay playoff picks then there's a probably a worthy combination to be made. I like Edmonton, Vancouver, Dallas, Florida, Toronto, Rangers, Carolina to make the playoffs and Calgary, Philadelphia to miss.

Back to Washington; while I like what the Capitals did to stay competitive this season, there are just too many teams I like a lot more in the East. I'm closer to -438 on this one, making -220 a relative value.

Vegas Golden Knights

UNDER 99.5 points, -115 (3.5 percent)

I'm not sure enough people are aware just how barren Vegas's winger situation is going into the season. After Mark Stone — who has averaged 45 games over the last three seasons — the Golden Knights have Ivan Barbashev, Pavel Dorofeyev, Alex Holtz, Brendan Brisson, Victor Olofsson, Brett Howden and Keegan Kolesar. There may not be a weaker collection in the league.

They can potentially fix that by shifting any of their stacked centers to the wing and the defense is still loaded with talent, too. But in all, there are just significantly more holes in the lineup than years past. A 99.5-point total suggests that Vegas is a fairly safe playoff bet, but the Golden Knights look vulnerable right now. (For what it's worth, my model would price the Golden Knights missing the playoffs at +221, so there might be value there depending on your book's price).

Winnipeg Jets

OVER 94.5 points, -120 (2 percent)

YES playoffs, -172 (2.5 percent)

I don't love the Jets roster, but they still have one of the best goalies in the world in Connor Hellebuyck. Everything else can be mid and it doesn't matter too much — Winnipeg should still be a playoff team. I think they're a safer bet than their odds indicate.

Philadelphia Flyers

UNDER 85.5 points, -106 (2.5 percent)

The Flyers were a nice surprise last season, but even with Matvei Michkov in town, it's difficult to buy them as a team that will be this competitive. A lot went right for a roster without much talent last season — I'd expect a market correction this season.

Futures

Edmonton Oilers

Division, +115 (3 percent)

Conference, +400 (1 percent)

Stanley Cup, +850 (1 percent)

Presidents' Trophy, +700 (1.5 percent)

The Oilers are the team to beat this year and across the board their odds feel light for that distinction.

With the division in particular, only the Canucks feel like a real threat in the Pacific. A +115 line doesn't go far enough.

Toronto Maple Leafs

Division, +290 (3 percent)

Conference, +650 (1 percent)

Stanley Cup, +1500 (0.5 percent)

Presidents' Trophy, +1100 (1.5 percent)

The Leafs are the favorites in the Atlantic Division — at least they should be according to the model. The Panthers lost a lot of talent on their blue line, the Bruins are ageing and the Lightning still have some significant depth holes up front. Toronto is far from a perfect team, but on paper the Leafs currently grade out as the best the Atlantic has to offer.

That means there's value on each future here with a division win being the most appetizing. After finishing second or third in the Atlantic in every season of the Core Four era, it's time for this "regular season" team to actually win something in the regular season, too.

Vancouver Canucks

Division, +460 (1 percent)

Conference, +1100 (0.5 percent)

Stanley Cup, +2300 (0.5 percent)

Presidents' Trophy, +2500 (0.5 percent)

Regression be damned — the Canucks should still be a force next season. While they may not be the division favorite, I have their combined chances with the Oilers close to 90 percent, partially because I

don't think the Golden Knights are much of a threat this season. The duo is being priced around 74 percent instead.

Aside from that, it does feel like the Canucks are being disrespected far too much in other markets. That 13 teams rank above them in Stanley Cup odds is absolutely wild to me. They have a good shot at being a top five team this season.

Carolina Hurricanes

Division, +270 (1.5 percent)

Conference, +650 (0.5 percent)

The Devils are getting a ton of love this offseason and the Rangers beat a better version of the Hurricanes in last year's playoffs. That leaves the Hurricanes as the third team in the Metro. Given their recent regular season resume, their core, their pipeline and their system, I'm inclined to think that's short. I still believe the Metro goes through Carolina.

Dallas Stars

Division, +230 (1.5 percent)

Odds makers are giving Colorado the slight edge in the Central. I think the split should go to the Stars and am a bit more decisive about it, giving the Stars a 43 percent chance at the division compared to Colorado's 26 percent. Dallas has a more balanced and well-rounded team, one with depth up front and defensive ability throughout. Add some progression from the team's bevy of young studs and the Stars should be a more considerable Central favorite going into the season.

The Athletic / Tragedy in the locker room: How 2 teams coped with the deaths of beloved teammates

By Aaron Portzline- September 21, 2024

COLUMBUS, Ohio — In March 1993, the morning after two of his relief pitchers died in a boating crash, then-Cleveland Indians manager Mike Hargrove arrived at the team's spring-training facility at approximately 6 a.m. to find the parking lot full and most of the players already in the clubhouse.

The team leaders thought it was important that everybody be together as soon as possible after the deaths of Steve Olin and Tim Crews, and the task of convening a team meeting fell to Hargrove, a 43-year-old third-year manager.

"I had no clue what I was going to say or do. Where do you begin?" Hargrove said. "I said a prayer to myself that God would help and put words in my mouth to at least help us start the process of understanding and grieving.

"We went into the clubhouse and made a huge circle with chairs and I sat in the middle and started talking. When I ran out of things to say or couldn't talk anymore, one of the players would stand up and they'd talk until they couldn't talk. We did that for I don't know how long, maybe two hours. It was not easy, but I think it was helpful."

Thankfully, very few professional athletes have experienced what the Columbus Blue Jackets have been going through since the evening of Aug. 29, when Johnny Gaudreau and his brother, Matthew, died after being struck by a car while cycling — or the challenges the team will confront as the 2024-25 season is played.

But the Blue Jackets, who opened training camp this week, less than three weeks after the brothers' deaths, aren't alone, either, when it comes to facing tragedy this close to the start of a season.

The 1993 crash that took the lives of the two Cleveland pitchers and severely injured a third, Bob Ojeda, happened just two weeks before the start of the season. In 2001, Minnesota Vikings Pro Bowl offensive tackle Korey Stringer died on the second day of training camp in Mankato, Minn., after extreme heatstroke led to major organ failure. The Vikings' preseason opener was just 10 days later.

Like the Gaudreaus' death, the sudden deaths of Stringer, Crews and Olin rocked the sporting world. The aftershocks are still felt within the organizations decades later.

The Athletic spoke with players and coaches who were on those teams in Cleveland and Minnesota. They were asked about the challenges of getting back to work, the difficulty in finding motivation amid the grief, and the best way to deal with grief on the days when it seems overwhelming.

"When I heard about the (Gaudreaus), I thought first about their families," said former Vikings tight end Byron Chamberlain, a teammate of Stringer. "I was sad for all those guys in Columbus, his teammates, but I know what they're going through.

"That's the kind of pain that I wouldn't wish on anybody."

'The darkest day'

March 22 was Cleveland's only off day during the entire 1993 spring training. Olin, Crews and Ojeda traveled approximately 45 minutes north of their spring training facility in Winter Haven, Fla, to enjoy the day at Crews' ranch on Little Lake Nellie.

That evening, Crews was driving the boat with Olin and Ojeda aboard when he gunned the engine in the dark and misjudged a pier that extended 185 feet into the lake. When the boat slammed into the pier, Olin was killed instantly. Crews, whose blood-alcohol level was above Florida's legal limit, died several hours later at a nearby hospital. Ojeda was treated for massive head injuries and spent multiple days in the hospital.

Longtime Cleveland broadcaster Jim Donovan called it "the darkest day in Cleveland sports history." Olin, who had 29 saves the previous season, was expected to be the team's closer. Crews was signed as a free agent away from the Los Angeles Dodgers.

The last time an active major leaguer was killed was in 1979, when Thurman Munson of the New York Yankees died in a plane crash.

"We had like 50 or 60 guys in camp," Hargrove said. "Seeing the majority of them crying — these are grown men — was really sobering in itself. As the manager, I didn't know what to do or what to say. It was just such a shock."

Carlos Baerga, then an All-Star infielder, is now a Spanish-language broadcaster for the team — now known as the Guardians. When he heard about the Gaudreau tragedy, he said it immediately conjured memories of Olin and Crews' deaths. He discussed it during his next broadcast.

"Our jobs as professional athletes, they aren't like most jobs," Baerga said. "We are a family. We spend more time with each other in pro sports than we do with most of the people in our lives. You get so close. I just pray for their families and for the players and the fans in Columbus."

Hargrove said the team kept the lockers of Olin and Crews intact for several weeks after the tragedy, even traveling with their jerseys to set up lockers when they played on the road. Baerga said there were frequent reminders, too.

After a while, though, they decided it was best to not have the constant reminder, so they stopped a couple of months into the season.

Cleveland finished 10 games below .500 for a second consecutive season.

"We went through a tough time with it," Baerga said.

Sandy Alomar, an All-Star catcher for Cleveland, still works for the club as the first-base coach and catching instructor. Even though the Guardians hold spring training in Goodyear, Ariz., now, there's not a spring when Alomar doesn't think about his former teammates.

"It's a constant thought in your head that first season, at least it was in mine," Alomar said. "You have to move forward, sure, but you just lost two brothers. It was a difficult season."

After the tragedy, Hargrove made himself available to whoever wanted to speak. The team had a mental coach who was hired to help players with performance issues but was called into a different duty. Hargrove also leaned hard, he said, on veteran relievers Ted Power and Derek Lilliquist to help guide the rest of the players.

"It's tough getting back to work, it really is," Hargrove said. "But after a while, when we worked out or played a game, it was almost your time away from constantly thinking about what happened. So for some, it was a relief to get back to work or play."

"We made it our goal to play for Tim and Steve. You know that's what they would have wanted, so that's how we found some motivation and inspiration to play. That was genuine."

Hargrove ended his conversation with The Athletic by asking that his cell number be shared with anybody on the Blue Jackets' management or coaching staff who wanted to talk about the difficult process of moving forward. He was fighting emotions as he said it.

"You tell those coaches if they need anything ... I don't know if I can help, but I've been where they are," Hargrove said.

'This was different. This was forever'

The Vikings had made sweeping changes to their offensive line during the offseason, leaving Stringer — a first-round pick out of Ohio State — to anchor the line from his all-important left tackle spot. He was in the best shape of his career, and he was trying to stake his claim as a leader by toughing out early practices.

Stringer had issues on the first two days of camp, though, amid sweltering late-summer heat in Minnesota. On the second day, he tried to push through, but once again needed to leave practice early to head to the air-conditioned trainer's tent. It was there where he soon lost consciousness.

Many Vikings players saw Stringer leave practice, but many of them were gone when he was taken by ambulance to a nearby hospital. They had no idea of the seriousness of the situation. Stringer died at approximately 2 a.m., with teammates Cris Carter, Daunte Culpepper, Randy Moss and others holding a vigil in the waiting area.

"They woke us up at 5 in the morning and brought us down to the (lobby) to tell us," said wide receiver Chris Walsh, one of the locker-room leaders.

"It shook up our whole team," Chamberlain said. "We were lost. We didn't know where to go, where to look, what to do. ... There's no protocol for those moments.

"Dennis Green was our coach at the time, and he was a players' coach, so he had a really great relationship with Korey, and he was grieving right along with us. When he spoke in front of the whole team and told us that we'd lost Big K — that's what we called Korey, Big K — you could see in his eyes that he didn't know what to do, either.

"And, man, when the leader is shook, when the leader is lost ... it was pretty overwhelming."

The Vikings held a memorial service for Stringer in Mankato before his body was flown to Warren, Ohio, his hometown, for a service for family and friends.

"In the NFL, you get used to saying goodbye to teammates," Walsh said. "Every week, every season guys are coming and going, that's just the business. But this was different. This was forever."

The Vikings were given the next day off from practice and then returned to action. Both Walsh and Chamberlain said it was hard to concentrate and even more difficult to find motivation. It was also much quieter than usual, the whistles and the shouts a bit muted.

Chamberlain remembered that the weather, after several sweltering days in a row, finally broke in the days after Stringer's death. The coolness felt almost eerie.

On Aug. 11, only 10 days after Stringer died, the Vikings flew to New Orleans to play their first preseason game.

"I can tell you this, there were a lot of guys who didn't want to get on that plane," Chamberlain said. "A lot of guys were close to Korey, close to his family, and they were still mourning. I remember watching Randy Moss come out for that game with tears in his eyes on the sidelines."

The Vikings had played in the NFC Championship Game in two of the previous three seasons. They were two seasons removed from finishing 15-1 in the regular season.

In 2001, they plummeted to 5-11, the third-worst record in the NFC. Green was fired with one game left in the season, replaced by offensive line coach Mike Tice, who had been Stringer's position coach.

"I don't think we ever got over it," Chamberlain said.

The Vikings played that season with Stringer's No. 77 displayed on a patch on their jerseys. His jersey hung in his locker the entire season. In late November, the Vikings held a special night practice in front of fans in Minneapolis, retiring Stringer's jersey into the club's ring of honor.

"I'm sure the (Blue Jackets) are going through this, too, but you don't even really think about the football for a very long time after you hear the news," Walsh said. "You just think about his family, his young son. It's when you get back to work that you notice the football impact, too.

"We were a vertical team. We had Randy Moss and Cris Carter, but we couldn't protect long enough to go vertical. We had weapons that couldn't be used, and everybody could see that. It was like this season-long reminder of what happened."

Chamberlain was asked if he had any advice for Blue Jackets players as to how to handle the next few weeks, the following months and years. He didn't need much time to think.

"I wish I didn't have experience with this kind of thing," Chamberlain said. "But I would tell them to not be afraid of going through the emotions of grieving, whatever that might be. Crying, thinking about (Gaudreau), praying, being angry ... whatever it might be. Go through those emotions, don't fight them.

"And what I would encourage everybody to do, if you need help or just want somebody to talk to, or if you're feeling like it's too big, that you can't deal with it ... go get help. Don't be ashamed. Don't be too big. Don't let your ego or your pride stop that.

"We're big tough professional athletes, but we're also vulnerable human beings with emotions, just like everybody else in the world. Talk it out with each other, and talk it out with people who can help you. It's only going to help you."

The next steps

Soon after the Blue Jackets learned of Gaudreau's death, general manager Don Waddell and captain Boone Jenner tried to set aside their grief long enough to discuss what first steps the organization should take.

It was decided, mostly at Jenner's urging, that all of the Blue Jackets players who weren't already in Columbus be asked to return to the city as soon as possible. Much like the Indians and Vikings decades earlier, Jenner wanted all of the players together, not just for the weekday morning "captain's skates," but to be present for each other as they grieved.

On Wednesday of this week, Waddell and new coach Dean Evason met with the media, as did veteran players Zach Werenski, Sean Monahan and Jenner. The Blue Jackets opened training camp on Thursday. They play their preseason opener on Monday in Buffalo. The regular season is just three weeks away.

"These last few weeks, I'm not going to lie, hockey's not really on your mind," Jenner said. "But being here all together, coming into day 1 of camp, we're excited to get things rolling here.

"What happened with John and Matt is not something that's going to magically go away. It's going to be with us. It's just kind of the new reality for us as a team. We're not trying to park (our feelings), and say, 'Well, now it's the season.' Those emotions are going to be there for a long, long time.

“Realizing that, and helping each other out when there are bad days or bad moments — there’s gonna be a lot of them — but we’re in it together.”

The Blue Jackets on Wednesday announced plans to honor the Gaudreau brothers throughout the season. They’ll wear a sticker on their helmets and a No. 13 patch — Johnny Gaudreau’s number — on their jerseys, both home and away. The first home game of the season, Oct. 15 vs. Florida, will be dedicated to the Gaudreaus’ honor.

“We have to play hockey,” Waddell said. “We’re not going to forget about Johnny and his family, the Gaudreau family. Everybody knows that Johnny wants them to play hockey. Meredith (Gaudreau’s widow) said it at the funeral, and everybody is rallying behind that.

“Do I think there are going to be some dark days? I won’t be surprised. But it’s our job as management, along with Dean (Evason) and the coaches, to stay on top of that and manage that.”

The Athletic / How NHL expansion to 36 teams could increase league-wide scoring

By Dom Luszczyszyn- September 21, 2024

The NHL is expanding, again. Probably.

That was the rumor that dropped on the first day of camp from Kevin Weekes with Andy Strickland saying NHL owners would be meeting to approve the opening of expansion. The 34-36 team era is (probably) coming.

While there will be plenty of worthy debates stemming from potential expansion, the big question will be how it affects the on-ice product. In that vein, there's one major selling point that usually comes with expansion: more offense.

The NHL is in a very good place with its current offensive product with an average of 6.22 goals per game last year. The stars are shining as bright as ever, scoring 60-plus-goals, 100-plus assists and 140-plus points. Those are figures many of us couldn't fathom during the lows of the dead-puck era or post-salary-cap boom, but they're here and they make the league more exciting.

Part of that is a byproduct of expansion. When the Vegas Golden Knights were introduced in 2017-18, goals per game jumped from 5.54 to 5.94. When the Seattle Kraken were introduced in 2021-22, goals per game jumped from 5.88 to 6.28. In both cases, it was a 0.4 goal-per-game jump.

Now, that jump obviously isn't entirely due to expansion. The NHL did notably shrink goalie equipment before the 2017-18 season and has made some minor tweaks and adjustments since. But it's no coincidence league scoring rates rose a significant level in each of those two seasons; it's something that's happened throughout the league's history.

While things didn't notably change from the Original Six era to the expansion era when the league went to 12 teams, each subsequent jump — from 14 to 16 to 18 — featured a jump of just over 0.4 goals on average. And while there wasn't a notable increase in the first year of the WHA merger, the climb from seven goals per game in the late 70s to well over 7.5 during the first half of the 80s can't be ignored. A shift from 21 to 24 teams in the early 90s provided a momentary bump of 0.34 goals per game, while a shift from 26 to 30 teams offered momentary relief from the dead-puck era with a jump of 0.24 goals per game.

There is one season that serves as an exception to the rule: 1993-94, where the addition of two teams coincided with a 0.78 goals-per-game drop. Given that season triggered the start of the dead-puck era, it probably has more to do with a tactical shift. Even with that season bringing things down, the average per-year jump in goals per game during years where the league expands is 0.16 goals. On a per-team basis, it's closer to 0.12 goals per game.

The reason for that is obvious: talent dilution. A new team means 20 more roster spots which usually means 20 more replacement-level players added to the league's pool. That shifts the league's baseline where stars move further ahead of the pack, the average player gets a little worse and there's a new pool of weaker players to exploit at the bottom. It's a subtle shift, but one that does seem to correlate with league-wide scoring.

To measure that, I compared league-wide goals per game to the average per-game value (Net Rating) of every above-average player in the league in a given season. The thinking there is a combined look at the league's top half can inform the league's current level of dilution and overall talent distribution. The

higher the number, the more spread out the talent is. For simplicity's sake, we'll call that number "talent spread."

Unsurprisingly, there was a substantial jump in talent spread in both 2017-18 and 2021-22 and unsurprisingly, there was a fairly solid relationship between the two in every season since 2007-08. More goals scored usually means more value being created by players and value generally comes from the league's top half. It's a "duh" moment, but it's a helpful one for one simple reason: estimating the effect further increases in talent spread from jumping to 34-36 teams might have on league-wide scoring.

Based on the correlation between scoring and talent spread, there's roughly a 0.43-goal jump per game for every one-goal increase in talent spread. For every two teams added, there's a 20-player shift in the league's average baseline. Apply that shift to last season's totals and you get the following: a 0.4 shift in talent spread for 34 teams and a 0.65 shift in talent spread for 36 teams.

That means a 34-team league would likely see a rise to 6.48 goals per game while a rise to 36 teams would equate to 6.58 goals per game. That's a healthy increase that pushes the league closer to the ideal range between 6.5 and 7 — where the league was between 1990 and 1994. At 36 teams, it's an increase of 0.09 goals per game per team added; not far off from the per-team average past expansions through history have seen. It's always nice when the math works out.

This is all back-of-the-envelope math and there's a chance that expansion has an even bigger effect — like what we saw with Vegas and Seattle. There's also a chance it has no effect at all. At each point in hockey history where scoring went up, a strategic shift came forward to reel it in and the same may happen after a move to 36 teams.

Still, it's an interesting thought experiment — one that has potential to resonate particularly with the current rise in superstar scoring rates.

Nikita Kucherov scoring 144 points last season? That would've been closer to 152 points with a rise to 6.6 goals per game. Connor McDavid's 153 the year prior would've been two points shy of 160.

Auston Matthews' 69 goals last season would've been closer to 73 goals instead. McDavid's 100 assists would've been 106 assists (and a 114-assist pace).

The totals those players already earned are obviously cool, but they could be even bigger and better with a rise in scoring, something expansion almost always brings to the table. Stars putting numbers on the board is always more fun and makes games more exciting. They're what put fans in seats and expansion can help bring the game's current golden era up to historic levels.

Still, there are plenty of reasons to believe expanding isn't good for the league's overall health. There are plenty of other ways to create more scoring, too. But for a league that wants to be in more American markets and add more revenue via meaty expansion fees, the likely increase in scoring is a nice side effect that comes along with it.

You want more goals? More teams might be the answer.

ESPN / How the Blue Jackets are leaning on each other after Gaudreau tragedy

By Emily Kaplan- September 21, 2024

WHEN SIDNEY CROSBY remembers Johnny Gaudreau, he thinks of the 2023 All-Star Game in Florida, sitting in gridlock traffic heading from their hotel in Fort Lauderdale.

"It was myself, Johnny and [Kevin Hayes] in the back of the bus," Crosby said. "Haysey was basically running the back of the bus there. I think he talked for 40 minutes. I don't think Johnny said anything, but he laughed for the entire 40 minutes."

For Nathan MacKinnon, it's one of his personal hockey highlights, scoring the overtime winner for Team North America against Sweden at the 2016 World Cup of Hockey. MacKinnon still rewatches the clip on YouTube "quite a bit."

"Johnny was the one that passed it to me," MacKinnon said. "We became pretty tight at that tournament and had great chemistry on the ice. He was also such a great person. He was never that serious. Just an easygoing guy, gentle with a big heart."

Jack Eichel loved being in Europe at the World Championships with Gaudreau, laughing as he struggled to read a non-English menu.

"He'd be trying to explain to the waiter or waitress that he just wanted a steak, a filet with potatoes. He didn't want anything else on it," Eichel said. "John was just a really pure human. He didn't care about nice things. The things that mattered to him were his family, his friends."

Connor McDavid's mind goes to epic matchups in the Battles of Alberta.

"He went at everybody and had such a big heart and played hard, despite his size," McDavid said. "I think he was an inspiration to a lot of guys that feel like they're undersized. But he was so fun to watch too, so skilled, and so good on his edges."

Auston Matthews thinks of the way everyone spoke about Gaudreau.

"He's so beloved by all of his friends, his teammates, his family and the people that knew him," Matthews said. "It's kind of hard to just comprehend that Johnny and his brother are no longer with us."

IT'S BEEN LESS than a month since Columbus Blue Jackets forward Johnny Gaudreau and his brother, Matthew, were killed by a suspected drunken driver while riding bicycles in their native New Jersey. The tragedy's impact is both personal and far-reaching. The Gaudreaus value family above anything else, but they've shared their grief with the hockey community, which also defines itself as a family.

"Being in hockey for a long time, I think that's one thing that we're proud of," Crosby said. "Our ability to rally around people and help each other in situations like this."

That support was visible at the funeral in Pennsylvania, where hundreds of NHL players, coaches and executives showed up.

As NHL training camps opened this week, emotions were still raw, especially in Columbus. The Blue Jackets, NHL and NHLPA have stayed in touch with the Gaudreau family, monitoring their needs while also seeking input on memorial plans.

"We're not doing anything with Johnny or Matty's name without the family signing off on it," GM Don Waddell said. The team will wear helmet decals all season featuring two doves; the idea for the doves came directly from pins handed out at the funeral.

Players have been reminded that free counseling is available. There are resources all around them, provided by the team, the players association and the league. But when Blue Jackets players arrived for medical testing on Wednesday, there was still an uneasiness of how exactly to go forward.

"To say we know exactly what to do, I don't think that's fair," captain Boone Jenner said. "I don't think there's a playbook out there for this situation and what has happened. And that's OK. I think we're going to learn and lean on each other as we go on."

As a guiding principle, the Blue Jackets adopted a mantra: "What would Johnny want us to do?" Columbus coach Dean Evason asked that the night before the funeral, as his leadership group was just sitting around. They decided Gaudreau would have wanted them to watch football and have a couple of beers. Gaudreau was known for his simplicity. He loved his Eagles so much, he often signed texts with "Go Birds."

The players agreed early on that it would be a disservice to Gaudreau if they spent an entire season dwelling.

"He'd want us to enjoy coming to the rink," defenseman Zach Werenski said. "Being around our teammates and being together."

ABOVE THE FAN entrance of Nationwide Arena, there's a large mural of four Blue Jackets players. Featured prominently is Gaudreau, shooting the puck. That's going to stay. Other logistical questions followed. As the staff prepared video for training camp, one of the coaches asked, is it appropriate to include Gaudreau in the clips? Should we edit him out? Evason was absolute. "Johnny is going to teach," Evason said. "Good and bad. If he didn't backcheck, we'll show it. He's going to be with us. He's going to be a presence."

The team is keeping Gaudreau's locker stall intact. They will travel with his No. 13 jersey on the road. Sean Monahan, one of Gaudreau's best friends, will get dressed next to the empty stall all season. Monahan was the Blue Jacket's biggest free agent addition this summer, signing a five-year deal on July 1.

"We all know," Waddell said. "The reason Sean decided to come here was because of Johnny."

Gaudreau shocked the NHL when he chose to sign with Columbus in 2022. He was the league's top free agent, having played his first nine years in Calgary and coming off a 115-point season. Then he signed a long-term deal in Columbus at a time not many other players would. But Gaudreau was considering where he and his wife, Meredith, wanted to start a family. Gaudreau often told people, "Columbus is just my cup of tea."

Two years later, Monahan followed him from Calgary. At the funeral, Meredith said her husband copied everything Monahan did. Now, it was the other way around. Monahan bought a house three doors down from the Gaudreaus.

Monahan wasn't yet ready to speak when the team held a candlelight vigil for Gaudreau earlier this month. And when training camp opened on Wednesday, he wasn't quite ready either, but knew he wanted to say something. Wearing a shirt with a picture of Gaudreau and the No. 13, Monahan told the media: "I still don't know the exact words to even say."

"There's a lot of weight on our shoulders right now," Monahan said. "There's a huge loss, a special person who's not here. Like I said, it's on my mind every day, every second. We want to obviously put our best foot forward and put our best effort out there for Johnny."

The first on-ice session on Thursday ended with players shooting the length of the ice on an empty net. Monahan went first and made it. Hugs and stick taps followed. Monahan signed to reunite with Gaudreau, but also to be a mentor to young Blue Jackets centers like Adam Fantilli and Cole Sillinger -- while shielding them from tougher first-line minutes. It's a role Monahan said he's excited to embrace.

"[Monahan] walked into a tough situation, meeting the guys for the first time after this happened," Werenski said. "I give him a lot of credit. Obviously, we know John is a big reason why he signed here. It goes back to that point of being together. We're there for him and I think it speeds things up a little bit, the relationships. It's one of the worst times in his life, and he's been awesome to be around. So that speaks volumes to what type of person he is. As a group, we're here for him. We're going to get through this thing together."

MOST PLAYERS RETURNED to Columbus over the past several weeks, gathering for informal skates before training camp. Every morning, Waddell made a point to walk around the locker room. He became encouraged when he witnessed some normal conversations, laughs, even chirps.

"The guys are handling it much better than I thought they would," Waddell said. "But we know there are going to be some tough nights throughout the year. Some dark times. And we're going to have to get through them as a group."

Waddell has already had to tackle uncomfortable tasks. He's still communicating with the league and players association on how the Blue Jackets will manage the salary cap; they're below the cap floor. Last week, Columbus signed veteran James van Riemsdyk to a one-year deal. Van Riemsdyk had other opportunities, but his reputation over 1,000-plus games in the league is as a good person and good teammate. For Columbus, this season is about making progress on the ice, but it's also about developing the right culture.

So the team continues to try to strike the right tone. It is remembering Gaudreau, but also understanding the importance of moving forward. Evason was already preaching a clean slate before the tragedy. He was hired as coach this summer, and one of his big focuses was to let players earn their spots. He told his staff not to tell him anything about the players -- their personalities, how they played last year, how they conducted themselves. Everyone is getting a fresh start on the ice.

The team postponed traditional festivities for their home opener, including player blue carpet arrivals and a fan festival, to the second game. "It just didn't feel right," Waddell said.

The Oct. 15 opener at Nationwide Arena will be focused on honoring the Gaudreau brothers. Everyone is prepared for another wave of emotions and know it's another step in the grieving process.

Said Monahan: "I'll miss him the rest of my life."

ESPN / Summer additions who will rule the 2025 NHL trade deadline

By Greg Wyshynski- September 21, 2024

The NHL offseason is a time when teams bolster their rosters through signings and trades. Sometimes that's for the long haul, but often the player is a stopgap whose eventual fate is pulling on another team's jersey at the next trade deadline.

Look at Jason Zucker last season. He signed a one-year deal for a good amount of money with the Arizona Coyotes after four seasons in Pittsburgh. Arizona knew it would get some solid veteran play from the 32-year-old. Zucker knew his pedigree and pending free agent status meant he'd probably be flipped at the deadline. Sure enough, the Coyotes traded Zucker to the Nashville Predators, whom he helped reach the Western Conference playoffs.

Here are 10 players who signed deals or were acquired in the 2024 offseason who could end up on the move by the 2025 trade deadline -- some of them by design; others out of necessity because conditions changed.

Cody Ceci

D, San Jose Sharks

Cap hit: \$3.25 million

When the Edmonton Oilers moved Ceci, the assumption was that it was meant to create financial flexibility to match the St. Louis Blues' offer sheets tendered to Philip Broberg and Dylan Holloway. Getting Ceci's \$3.25 million cap hit off the books did give the Oilers some breathing room, although it ended up not being in service of matching either offer sheet. Instead, general manager Stan Bowman was just trying to get younger, having acquired 24-year-old Ty Emberson from the Sharks in the Ceci trade.

Although Sharks GM Mike Grier called him a "high-character kid," Ceci turns 31 in December. He gives the Sharks a much-needed veteran presence on their blue line and Grier says he believes he will improve their penalty kill. But he's in the last year of his contract, which makes him an obvious rental play for a Sharks team that's still amassing future assets in their rebuild.

Ceci averaged more than 20 minutes per game in his three seasons with the Oilers, rarely sitting out as a stay-at-home defenseman. In the regular season, he was one of those players who was never as bad as his detractors claimed, and never as good as his team would declare. But in the playoffs, the fans' skepticism was validated -- Ceci and Darnell Nurse combined for an atrocious 33.8% expected goals percentage at 5-on-5.

Anthony Mantha

F, Calgary Flames

Cap hit: \$3.5 million

Mantha has some reputation mending to do. His four seasons in Washington were a disappointment after breaking out in his early 20s with the Detroit Red Wings. They traded him to the Vegas Golden Knights at the 2024 NHL deadline, and between the two teams he posted a respectable 23 goals and 21 assists in 74 games. But Mantha was a healthy scratch for the last four games of the Knights' first-round playoff loss to the Dallas Stars.

He found a home with the Flames in the offseason, who gave him a one-year-deal with a \$3.5 million cap hit. The Flames need offense. Mantha needs a chance to play in situations where he can create offense and pump up his numbers. GM Craig Conroy said Mantha was expected to get power-play time. Speculation is that he could end up on a line with Jonathan Huberdeau, speaking of players whose numbers could use inflating.

Given his age (30) and the current state of the Flames, this seems like a classic "pump and dump" scenario if Mantha produces. Some team will want his size (6-foot-5) and shot. Heck, Vegas did. Hopefully Mantha doesn't end up in the postseason press box this time.

Alec Martinez

D, Chicago Blackhawks

Cap hit: \$4 million

Martinez joined the growing list of players who were sent packing from the desert after the Golden Knights either upgraded their position or decided they were too old for the roster. Once 27-year-old Noah Hanifin was signed for the long term, the 37-year-old Martinez had to cash in his chips with the Blackhawks in the offseason.

Martinez had finished a three-year, \$15.75 million deal with Vegas. The Blackhawks landed him on a one-year deal worth \$4 million against the salary cap. It's a great fit for both: Martinez can get oodles of playing time while tutoring the Blackhawks' young defensemen; and GM Kyle Davidson can have a valuable veteran defenseman to dangle at the trade deadline.

Martinez is physical with 131 games of playoff experience and three Stanley Cup rings. That's like catnip for general managers at the trade deadline.

Kaapo Kahkonen

G, Winnipeg Jets

Cap hit: \$1 million

Kahkonen, 28, was a late-season goaltending solution for the New Jersey Devils, who acquired him from the Sharks. He posted a .923 save percentage and a 2.51 goals-against average in six games for that porous defensive team.

He's in an interesting spot with the Jets, where Connor Hellebuyck will get the majority of starts. They figure to be a strong defensive team again, and look no further than Laurent Brossoit's numbers last season (.927 save percentage, 2.00 GAA) to see how that can benefit a backup goaltender.

But Winnipeg also has Eric Comrie back on a two-year contract for his third tour of duty with the Jets. One of them will stick and one of them probably will dip down to the AHL to mentor top prospect Thomas Milic.

Kahkonen counts \$1 million against the cap. Last season was the second time in his career he was moved at the trade deadline, which is where the Sharks acquired him from the Minnesota Wild in 2022. If the right situation presents itself, it could be a deadline trade hat trick for the Finnish goalie.

Robby Fabbri

F, Anaheim Ducks

Cap hit: \$4 million

Fabbri, 28, had 18 goals and 14 assists for the Red Wings last season, his fifth season with the franchise. That was his highest goal total since his rookie season. His 68 games were the most he has played since 2019-20. But GM Steve Yzerman had some things on his to-do list -- re-signing Patrick Kane and signing Vladimir Tarasenko -- that resulted in Fabbri's being dealt to Anaheim.

He's in the last year of his contract, with a cap hit of \$4 million. Fabbri will get a chance to play with some terrifically talented young offensive players in Anaheim. But he turns 29 next January and doesn't really seem to fit into the Ducks' long-term plans.

The trade earned GM Pat Verbeek a fourth-round pick and a tradable player for a minor league goalie and some salary cap space. Fabbri could bolster someone's bottom-six forwards, and Anaheim could retain salary in his contract if necessary.

Kaapo Kakko

F, New York Rangers

Cap hit: \$2.4 million

Another season, another chance for Kakko to deliver on his lofty expectations as the second overall pick in the 2019 NHL draft.

Rangers GM Chris Drury said Kakko was injured last season, contributing to his 19 points in 61 games. Coach Peter Laviolette said Kakko would have the chance to "take hold of what he wants to take hold of" this season.

Kakko, 23, signed a one-year contract worth \$2.4 million last June. He's a restricted free agent next summer. His name has been in the rumor mill for the last year, but the Rangers haven't been compelled to move him. So they took the alternative, which was to run it back with him for a sixth season in hopes that something unlocks with him the same way it did for Alexis Lafrenière.

If it doesn't ... well, potential is still potential, so someone would be willing to take a chance at cracking Kakko. And \$2.4 million in cap space is \$2.4 million in cap space for a Rangers team that has never been shy about being aggressive at the deadline.

Brian Dumoulin

D, Anaheim Ducks

Cap hit: \$3.15 million

Dumoulin is a prototypical trade deadline defenseman: physical, experienced, "rings in the room" thanks to the two Stanley Cups he won with the Pittsburgh Penguins, and an expiring contract with a manageable \$3.15 million cap hit.

He signed with Seattle in 2023 and played 80 games last season, averaging 17 minutes -- down over three minutes from his Penguins days. His pairings with Justin Schultz and Adam Larsson were both north of 53% in expected goals at 5-on-5. But the Portland Press Herald reported Dumoulin had asked the Kraken for a trade, preferably to a team on the East Coast. Instead, they shipped him down the West Coast to Anaheim.

That alone would indicate Dumoulin is making a mere cameo appearance with the Ducks this season. He's exactly the kind of blueliner a contender would covet -- hopefully, for him, one back East.

Radek Faksa

F, St. Louis Blues

Cap hit: \$3.25 million

Faksa seemed like a logical trade candidate this summer. He was 30 years old, entering the final season of his contract and Dallas needed all the cap space it could muster.

The Blues were in the market for a bottom-six center having traded Kevin Hayes and with Oskar Sundqvist on the mend from an ACL injury. Faksa fit the need and the Blues aesthetic: He brings size (6-foot-3) and physicality down the lineup.

Faksa's ice time had declined for three straight seasons in Dallas, but he still mustered his usual blend of blocked shots, faceoff wins and occasional offense (19 points in 74 games). He has 79 career playoff games to his credit, all with the Stars.

If the Blues are contending in the Central Division around the trade deadline, they probably hang onto someone like Faksa. If they aren't, he's an ideal third- or fourth-line center addition for a contending team, if that team can fit his \$3.25 million cap hit. Considering the Blues acquired him for "future considerations," anything they get back is gravy.

Martin Necas

F, Carolina Hurricanes

Cap hit: \$6.5 million

The trade rumors surrounding Necas echoed through Las Vegas at the NHL draft. He was a pending restricted free agent coming off a down season, dropping from 71 points to 53 points. Speculation was the Hurricanes could trade him to address other lineup needs rather than hand him a contract extension. There was also talk Necas might have been moved had it not been for his refusal to sign a new contract with certain suitors.

Necas ended up signing a two-year deal with Carolina worth \$13 million. The 25-year-old center has a world of talent but can be maddeningly inconsistent. He has 243 points in 362 career games, as well as 30 points in 59 playoff games.

There would be a considerable market for him at the deadline with a \$6.5 million cap hit and another year of contractual control. But when GM Eric Tulsky signed Necas, he said the center "will play a key role in the continued success of our franchise." We shall see.

Jakob Chychrun

D, Washington Capitals

Cap hit: \$4.6 million

It wouldn't be an NHL trade deadline if Jakob Chychrun's name wasn't in circulation. The Capitals acquired him from the Ottawa Senators for defenseman Nick Jensen and a third-round pick on July 1, as Washington seeks to add some offensive pop to its blue line.

Chychrun, 26, had 41 points in 82 games for the Senators last season. He spent only 94 games with Ottawa over two seasons after they landed him from the Arizona Coyotes. The Sens were willing to move him rather than extend his contract. Now, the Capitals are facing the same situation, as Chychrun is an unrestricted free agent next summer.

An offensive defenseman like Chychrun will always have a market, and his \$4.6 million cap hit is manageable. He has a 10-team no-trade list, which could complicate things. But if new Capitals GM Chris Patrick decides the defenseman is one-and-done, the Chychrun trade rumors will again become a rite of the deadline.

[Sportsnet.ca / One thing to remember about each NHL team as pre-season begins](#)

By Rory Boylen- September 23, 2024

It was a really short summer in the NHL this season with the Florida Panthers raising the Stanley Cup less than three months ago. In that time, plenty of players have changed teams, coaches have been swapped and of course, as always, new rookies will be added to the fold around the league.

We'll forgive you if you see someone in a pre-season game and forget entirely how he's ended up there.

NHL hockey is back. Three pre-season games set off Saturday and much more is to come on Sunday. And with that, we're sharing one thing to remember about each NHL team -- including some things you'll begin to see in the pre-season.

Anaheim Ducks: You'll probably hear Cam Fowler's name in trade rumours

We're used to hearing goalie John Gibson's name come up in the rumour mill around every deadline and that might happen again in 2025. Trevor Zegras was a newer addition last season and might follow into this one, too. But as the Ducks add more and more young defencemen, Cam Fowler's name is the newest one you'll be hearing about in rumours this season.

"There is something going on here," Eliot Friedman reported on the Sept. 6 edition of 32 Thoughts: The Podcast. "I believe Cam Fowler and the Anaheim Ducks are working on what his future could look like. I don't think this is a negative in any way shape or form, I believe the player and the team are working together on this."

Averaging 24:25 in ice time per game there is some thought that Fowler, who will turn 33 in December, might have to cede some of that responsibility to the fresher faces in the organization. There's no rush here, he has two years remaining on his contract, but if he's not going to be an important piece of the Ducks out of the rebuild, perhaps it's best to find him a place where he can be impactful now.

Fowler has some trade protection, in which he'd allow a move to four teams, but could expand that list.

"What I've heard is Fowler has a willingness to consider more teams than that," Friedman said.

Boston Bruins: As of right now, Joonas Korpisalo is the starting goalie

With two goalies facing contract extensions, the Bruins shook up the position. Linus Ullmark, a year away from unrestricted free agency, was traded to Ottawa before the draft -- and long before any pressure points hit with their other goalie. Jeremy Swayman, an RFA this summer, was not taken to an arbitration case that would have walked him to UFA, but that choice has also left the situation unresolved.

Now, with training camp underway and Boston opening its pre-season schedule Sunday, their preferred No. 1 is not around.

"He has chosen to wait, and rightfully so, until a contract is settled. It's our intention to continue to negotiate a contract," Bruins GM Don Sweeney said as Swayman was absent on Day 1 of training camp. "I'm disappointed, but at the end of the day I'm optimistic we'll find a landing spot before December 1."

That date is the deadline to get a contract in place, or else Swayman would not be eligible to play in the NHL this season. Recall back to William Nylander's last RFA contract negotiation with the Maple Leafs, which he signed right on Dec. 1.

So, for now, the Bruins are running with Korpisalo as their No. 1. A year ago the Senators gave him a five-year, \$20 million contract they wanted to get out of after he struggled with a .890 save percentage. As for a backup, Boston has mid-20s netminders Brandon Bussi (zero NHL games) and Michael DiPietro (three NHL games) at the ready.

Buffalo Sabres: Don't overlook rookie Jiri Kulich

The 28th overall pick in 2022, Kulich is coming off a very impressive rookie tournament, in which he scored five goals and two assists in three games.

"I thought he dominated. I thought he was the best player on the ice," Sabres GM Kevyn Adams said.

The reality in Buffalo is that this is another massive season in which playoffs are the goal. They missed by seven points last season after finishing just one point short in 2022-23, but another fallback cannot be in the cards. Lindy Ruff was brought back behind the bench to get this long, long-term rebuild in.

Tage Thompson and Dylan Cozens, both already signed to lengthy, lucrative contracts, need a bounce back from last season's dips in production. Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen showed the potential of being a No. 1 in spurts and now needs to put it all together, while Devon Levi also should play a key role in the crease. Trade deadline pickup Bowen Byram flashed brightly after arriving at the deadline from Colorado and needs to be a critical player on the back end.

Rasmus Dahlin needs to lead the way, though, and possibly even be at least on the fringes of Norris talk. His training camp started on an alarming note, however, leaving the first day with a mid-section injury.

Those are all the most important factors to this season going well for Buffalo, competing in the best, deepest division where each team has playoffs in mind. A rookie shouldn't make or break their fortunes in 2024-25 but, still, keep an eye on Kulich, perhaps a dark horse Calder candidate should he crack the team out of camp and stay there. He recorded an assist on Saturday.

"Work ethic alone I thought was really good," Ruff said of the 20-year-old. "He's got a bullet for a shot, which you can't teach -- you have it or you don't and he's got it. But a player at this level, can you play away from the puck? Can you skate with him? His skating has impressed me. I was impressed with his level of strength in one-on-one battles and keeping guys at bay, too. Very impressive young man."

Calgary Flames: Dustin Wolf has chance to emerge as league's next great young goalie

Without Jacob Markstrom, and after trading several other players through last season, the Flames are slowly moving towards a new era. What the final form of that looks like when the new arena opens in 2027 remains to be seen, but, if all goes to plan, Wolf will squarely be in the starter's seat by then.

Still just 23 years old, and behind this year's Flames, we can't expect too much, too fast from Wolf. Goalies often take time to fully round into form. In 17 NHL games last season Wolf had a few good showings but ultimately finished with a .893 SV% and 3.16 GAA.

Dan Vladar, fully healthy, will play a factor this season and 27-year-old Devin Cooley will be motivated to earn a look. GM Craig Conroy told Sportsnet's Eric Francis that the goalie battle would be the most intriguing one for him at training camp.

Wolf has the pedigree. After winning the WHL's Goalie of the Year award in 2020 and 2021, he earned the AHL's Goalie of the Year honours in both 2022 and 2023. The 6-foot, 174-pound netminder has made the long climb from 2019 seventh-round pick.

Carolina Hurricanes: One of the league's best defence groups for years has taken a hit

The Canes have long been regarded as having one of the best blue lines in the NHL, but over the summer lost two of their four 20-plus minute eaters from last season. Brady Skjei is a Nashville Predator, Brett Pesce a New Jersey Devil, and that's left the Hurricanes with some questions on how their pairings will come together in 2024-25.

And, heck, if it falls right, they may still have a pretty solid corps. Jaccob Slavin is still a shutdown specialist and top-pair blueliner, while Brent Burns can still flash the offence. He's entering his age 39 season, however, so there's got to be some wonder how much he has left to give.

Jalen Chatfield has stepped up two years in a row now and Dmitry Orlov has been sound defensively for a while -- coveted by the Bruins at the 2023 deadline and acquired by Carolina last summer. Sean Walker was a Philadelphia Flyers breakout player last season at 29 years old and is one of the replacements for the outgoing two.

It's the changeover from what had become so comfortable and familiar that brings uncertainty.

Chicago Blackhawks: Connor Bedard is on Team Canada watch

The reigning Rookie of the Year in the NHL, Connor Bedard did a lot with not much last season, scoring 22 goals and 61 points in 68 games. The Blackhawks tore the roster down and the one scorer Bedard was expected to play with, Taylor Hall, lasted just 10 games until a season-ending injury.

The Blackhawks are trying to find some improvement this season, but with playoffs still likely in the distance, we're seeing if Bedard can do enough to work his way onto Team Canada's 4 Nations Faceoff roster. In two more years, NHL players are expected to be back at the Olympics, and by then Bedard should be a lock for the team. but can he do it at 19 years old?

The always-stacked Canadian roster tends to go with older players most of the time and anyone in the running who would be chosen over Bedard wouldn't be a bad pick. But oh how we'd love to see the coming together of Sidney Crosby, Connor McDavid and Bedard on one team now -- and hopefully again in two years.

'He's a special player': Bertuzzi excited about fit next to Bedard

Colorado Avalanche: Captain Gabriel Landeskog and Valeri Nichushkin should return this season, but Nikolai Kovalenko is an intriguing rookie to watch

Early signs are positive that captain Landeskog is finally on track to return after missing two full seasons with a knee injury. When he does, a spot back in the top six awaits.

We also wait on the return of Valeri Nichushkin, suspended until mid-November, but who the team indicated was still part of their plan when he was eligible to return. Head coach Jared Bednar said when Nichushkin is ready, he would be welcomed back "with open arms."

In the meantime, opportunities abound in the top-six. Miles Wood could be a factor, as could Oskar Olausson on the right side, the 28th overall pick from 2021 who has two NHL games played the past two years.

Then there's Nikolai Kovalenko, the 24-year-old son of former Norqidue Andrei and a sixth-round pick in 2018. Kovalenko led his KHL team in scoring two years ago, and in assists last season, before coming to North America late. He had three points in four AHL games, then a goal in two Calder Cup Playoff games. He got a small taste of Stanley Cup Playoff hockey too, getting in two games with the Avs in limited minutes.

Considering Nathan MacKinnon, Mikko Rantanen, Casey Mittelstadt and likely Jonathan Drouin have top-six spots locked in, when Landeskog and Nichushkin return these opportunities may dry up. But for

now, they're there for the taking -- fantasy owners may want to take note, and take a flyer on Kovalenko.

Columbus Blue Jackets: Two goalies are pushing Elvis Merzlikins for the No. 1 job

The past two seasons have been rather miserable for Merzlikins, finishing with .876 and .897 save percentages. Sure, some of that blame could be shared by the team in front of the goalie -- Columbus ranked 31st in shots against per game both years -- but a \$5.4 million backstop should be able to patch some of those holes. Instead, Merzlikins finished 83rd among 98 goalies on MoneyPuck's Goals Saved Above Expected metric.

So speculation kicked up in the off-season, could he be traded or bought out? There was a new GM in town after all, and Don Waddell wasn't as tied to the player as the regime that signed him.

"Let's be honest, nobody is going to trade for that contract. Nobody," Waddell said in June. "People say, 'Well, why don't you buy out the contract?' It's a six-year buyout, and there are years three, four, five and six, when you might need that cap space."

Merzlikins is back, for now. How long he'll continue to be the No. 1 for, however, is an open question.

Daniil Tarasov is first in line to take over the position. The 25-year-old missed the start of 2023-24 with an injury but got better every month after he returned in December. By the time the season was ending, Tarasov had posted a .933 save percentage over his last 13 games. He has one season left on his contract, after which he'll become an arbitration-eligible RFA.

And don't sleep on 23-year-old Jet Greaves. The undrafted netminder has been steadily improving over his past three years as a pro, finishing with a .910 save percentage in 46 AHL games last season and even getting in nine NHL games, most of which came in April. Interestingly, the two-year contract Greaves signed this past summer is a two-way deal in 2024-25 -- so he can be sent down and up without waivers -- but becomes a one-way deal in 2025-26.

Dallas Stars: A couple of big contract years could change the picture going forward

Wyatt Johnston was probably the best story to come out of Dallas' hockey team last season, the 21-year-old busting out with 32 goals and 65 points. Another jump could see him hit 40 goals, or become a point-per-game player, especially if he sits on the top line all season.

Jake Oettinger, as we pointed out a couple of weeks ago, is a critical player who needs to step up for these Stars if they are to hit their full potential, especially with questions on the depth of the defence. Oettinger is still one of the brightest young players at his position but is coming off a soft and inconsistent regular season.

Both of these players are up for new contracts and could re-shape Dallas' cap picture for years to come. Oettinger is a pending RFA, but with just one more year until he'd hit UFA status, a contract with decent term would be expected. Johnston is just wrapping up his entry-level deal but, with the cap rising, another strong season would leave the Stars eyeing a long-term extension to get him in at a decent rate. Veteran Jamie Benn is a pending UFA and, if he stays, would surely take a pay cut. But that money, and more, goes directly to Johnston. Could he push up against being Dallas' highest-paid player? How will Oettinger's extension stack up against the other top goalies in the league?

Their performances this season will go a long way to answering those questions.

How Stars reinvigorated their roster in the 2017 Draft

Detroit Red Wings: They missed last season's playoffs only by the tiebreaker

It's been a long time coming for the "Yzerplan" as Steve Yzerman begins his sixth year as GM of the Red Wings. Point totals have been climbing, and the team finished with 91 last season -- their most since the last time they made the playoffs in 2015-16.

But that point total and a good finish weren't enough to claim the East's second wild card spot. Detroit got points in each of its last four games, and won the last three, which was enough to tie the Capitals in points. However, they needed to leap over the Caps (who also won their last three games) since Washington finished with five more regulation wins (the first tiebreaker) than the Wings.

Two critical games down the stretch turned out to be the difference, with Washington beating Detroit 4-3 in OT on home ice in late March, and then 2-1 on the road in the second last game of the regular season. One bounce really could have got Detroit in.

But now everyone starts back at zero and the Atlantic Division itself is going to be a heck of a competition to outlast. Are the Red Wings the favourites to claim a wild card spot, or even leap over one of the Big Four out front? Ottawa, Buffalo and even Montreal will all have something to say about that.

Edmonton Oilers: Stuart Skinner has to be on Team Canada's radar

Building out a Team Canada roster for a best-on-best tournament is always a fun exercise to see what fantastic line combinations you can come up with, marvel at how skilled the defence looks, and this season, wonder if three generations can join together with Sidney Crosby (lock), Connor McDavid (lock) and Connor Bedard (oh please, oh please, oh please).

The toughest questions, for the most part, have been in net, where there largely hasn't been an obvious stud. Martin Brodeur and Carey Price made way for no one in particular, but this hasn't been tested since there haven't been any real best-on-bests since the 2016 World Cup of Hockey.

Heading into this season, Jordan Binnington probably is the favourite to take the job after he bounced back to a solid performance in 2023-24, and his GM Doug Armstrong, though not in charge of the 4 Nations roster, will be involved as the Olympics GM in two years. But what practically no one saw coming until recently was how Edmonton's goalie, Stuart Skinner, could make a charge.

A .914 save percentage season in 2022-23, followed by a trip to Game 7 of the Stanley Cup Final in 2023-24, Skinner is very much in the mix. Over the past two seasons, he's tied for 12th in the league by save percentage among all goalies with a minimum of 60 games. That's good for third among all Canadian goaltenders -- two points behind a couple of guys in Logan Thompson and Adin Hill who have been playing for the Vegas Golden Knights.

It's a big year for the Oilers to come all the way back from surviving until the last day of the NHL season, and also for Skinner to work his way into the conversation for Canada's No. 1 job in February's 4 Nations.

How Skinner has 'taken his game to another level' late in each series

Florida Panthers: Three more big contracts loom over what's ahead for this core

Winning the Stanley Cup always comes at a cost, and in the salary cap era, we've seen several winners struggle (and fail) to keep most of their core pieces together. It won't be any different for the Panthers, who already lost Brandon Montour and Oliver Ekman-Larsson to free agency this past summer after choosing to sign Anton Lundell, Sam Reinhart and Gustav Forsling for the long term.

This season, the biggest pending UFA contracts belong to clutch scorer Carter Verhaeghe, made-for-the-playoffs Sam Bennett, and No. 1 defenceman Aaron Ekblad. Florida comes into the year with less than a million dollars in cap space, so even if the upper limit increases by another \$4 million in 2025-26, it won't be enough space for all three.

Ekblad is likely a priority to shore up big minutes on the back end, but then what? Could any other sacrifices be made? Sergei Bobrovsky still has another year after this one on his big \$10 million AAV, when the Panthers could get a great deal of wiggle room.

Los Angeles Kings: Players wondered aloud about changing last season's 1-3-1 system

Making it to the playoffs and losing to the Edmonton Oilers for a third year in a row -- and in just five games -- the Kings weren't the most exciting team to see. They were mostly about clogging the neutral zone than being creative and opportunistic on offence and when you have players like Kevin Fiala, that is perhaps not always the best course of action.

"It would be fun to try something else," the 73-point winger said.

Jim Hiller, who was promoted from assistant to interim head coach in February, had the interim tag dropped over the summer. A few changes are coming to the roster -- new goalie, new young prospect defenceman, new position for Quinton Byfield -- but perhaps none will affect the full team as much as moving on from the 1-3-1, which can be effective at times but was run over by teams like the Oilers.

The Kings were the third-best team in goals against last season, but 16th in offence. It will be interesting to see how a structure change will impact both sides of those numbers.

Minnesota Wild: It's Marc-Andre Fleury's last spin around the league

Remember that at the end of last season, Fleury said 2024-25 would be his final one in the NHL. Turning 40 in November, Fleury is surely a lock for the Hall of Fame one day. If he plays 20 games this season he'll pass Patrick Roy and Roberto Luongo on the games played list and finish up second to Martin Brodeur (who is still 241 ahead).

Fleury will continue to share Minnesota's net with Filip Gustavsson, so young Jesper Wallstedt could also see some playing time in here, especially if either or both of the veterans continue to post sub-.900 save percentages.

So, enjoy the fan favourite while he's still here. Of note, the Wild make their last pass through Pittsburgh early in the season on Oct. 29, Vegas on Jan. 12, and Montreal on Jan. 30, where Fleury will surely get an appreciative nod despite never playing for his home team.

"I don't want any special treatment. I just want to go, look around, bring back some memories from my time here, but definitely not looking forward to any special treatment. Don't need that. We're good," Fleury said as camp opened this week.

Montreal Canadiens: They basically get a brand new second line they didn't have last season

While the Habs have been patiently building up, and their knowledgeable fans have understood the process, the heat is going to start turning up a little on the team this season. No longer is it OK for Montreal to languish near the bottom of the standings and get a top draft pick. Progress is the new expectation.

The Juraj Slafkosvsky-Nick Suzuki-Cole Caufield line established itself last season and all three players could be explosive in 2024-25. But it's the second line they have that is basically brand new, and something of an X-Factor to how this season will go.

First, there's centre Kirby Dach, a 23-year-old who showed progress in his first year with the team after coming over via trade with Chicago, but then had his last season end after only two games with a torn ACL and MCL. And second, there's right winger Patrik Laine, a wild card of all wild cards, who is six years removed from his last 30-goal season and seven removed from his last 40-goal campaign. However,

Laine has scored at a 0.42 goal per game pace in the 129 games he's played the past three seasons, which is about a 34-goal pace.

If all works out, the Canadiens could have a heck of a unit on their hands. But with one player coming back from a huge injury and missed season, and another on to his third team and durability questions, it remains to be seen just what they get from Line 2. And it might take time for both of these players to settle in again.

Nashville Predators: As important as Jonathan Marchessault and Steven Stamkos are, playoff hopes rest on Juuse Saros returning to form

Wanting to play an exciting offensive style under head coach Andrew Brunette, the Predators were among the splashiest teams in the free agent market and landed two 40-goal scorers quickly. That right there is an upgrade to bring hope.

But while the 10th best offence from last season looks to take another step up in that department, it's even more important to their success that their No. 1 goalie finds his groove again. Since taking over for Pekka Rinne, Juuse Saros has been one of the league's most reliable goalies. His play in 2021-22 was really the only reason Nashville squeaked into the playoffs and he got a Vezina Trophy finalist nod for his efforts.

From 2018-19 through 2022-23, and among all goalies with a minimum of 100 games played, Saros had the NHL's third-best save percentage, tied with Andrei Vasilevskiy and Linus Ullmark. So it was quite out of character last season to see him slip to a .906 save percentage and have a Goals Saved Above Expected mark in the negative.

New Jersey Devils: Their biggest weakness should be fixed

No team took a bigger fall last season than the Devils, who went from Stanley Cup contender to missing the playoffs by 10 points. There were some injuries -- notably Dougie Hamilton played just 20 games -- but the goaltending was once again atrocious. A sore spot that had been following the team for some time.

Rather than step up at the trade deadline to get Jacob Markstrom, GM Tom Fitzgerald got the deal done in the off-season and now has a proven veteran backstopper behind a still-young team seeking its sustained breakthrough.

We can wonder how long it will be until the Devils need to fix the position all over again -- Markstrom will turn 35 during the season and has just two years left on his contract -- but for now, this piece should be solved in a way that relaunches the Devils as a truly dangerous team.

Devils GM Fitzgerald details framework to acquire Markstrom

New York Islanders: Ilya Sorokin's concerning back injury

As soon as he was eligible to sign an extension, the Islanders locked in goalie Ilya Sorokin for eight years with an \$8.25 million cap hit on July 1, 2023. This season is set to be the first of that long-term extension and it's not off to the best of starts.

First is the fact that Sorokin struggled last season, his final of a previous three-year deal. His .908 save percentage was by far the worst of his young career and, by the end of it, had lost the net to Semyon Varlamov, who started four of New York's five playoff games. The one Sorokin did start, he was pulled less than halfway through.

And now Sorokin starts training camp on the shelf. GM Lou Lamoriello originally downplayed Sorokin's speculated injury, saying the ailment was minor and that would force him to miss a few days, but earlier this week head coach Patrick Roy let it out that Sorokin had back surgery this off-season.

Now we wait to see how this plays out. There is no telling yet just how serious or concerning the back injury is for Sorokin's season -- if he does indeed miss only a small chunk of training camp, is ready for the start of the season and returns to form, it won't be a big deal at all.

But if this injury lingers, if Sorokin starts missing pre-season games, the story grows larger. Back injuries are no joke and, even when Sorokin does return, the focus will be on how he looks following the surgery. A big investment has been made in this player to be a leading contributor to the Islanders, but Year 1 of the deal is off to an ominous start.

New York Rangers: Why this is probably the last ride for the captain...and maybe some others

With two appearances in the Eastern Conference Final over the past three years, these Rangers have been close, but without a cigar. The same team that dropped last year's Round 3 series in six games to Florida largely returns, though it won't be surprising if greater change comes to the roster next summer...win or lose.

"In all likelihood, it'll probably be the last crack for this core, I don't think that's a secret by any means," said captain Jacob Trouba. "We have something we want to accomplish."

Trouba is atop the list of candidates who could be a moveable asset by the time the puck drops on the 2025-26 season. His seven-year contract signed back in 2019 still has two seasons left on it, but this is the first year where his full no-movement clause converts to a 15-team no-trade list. Slowly declining minutes, impact and importance to the roster all contribute to these rumours, but a few other important pending contracts do as well.

"The other thing I do believe, my opinion based on what Trouba said, is that the Rangers and him had a conversation and I think everybody understands this is going to be his last year there," Elliotte Friedman said on Friday's 32 Thoughts Podcast. "I think one of the reasons everybody knows it is because the Rangers are going to sign (Igor) Shesterkin to whatever they have to sign him to, to get this done."

Shesterkin, on a countdown to unrestricted free agency, is one of the more consequential contracts in the league now that Leon Draisaitl is locked in with Edmonton. At \$5.66 million he's vastly underpaid at the moment and will get a raise that could be large enough to surpass Sergei Bobrovsky's \$10 million as the league's highest-paid netminder. That alone tightens New York's cap picture but isn't the only contract for them to do.

Alexis Lafreniere broke out four years after being the first overall pick and will look to grow his payoff through a bridge contract. K'Andre Miller, one of the young defencemen supplanting Trouba, is another RFA coming off a bridge and due a hefty increase. Kaapo Kakko faces a do-or-die season in New York after taking a step back this season and having no clear path to a top-six role.

All to say that the Rangers will have some decisions to make next summer, meaning this could be the last run for parts of this core, and perhaps more if the season doesn't go as well.

Ottawa Senators: Everything hinges on Linus Ullmark

The Jakob Chychrun trade rumours followed the team all of last season and finally came to an inevitable end over the summer when they sent him to Washington for Nick Jensen. That should in theory help improve the defence in front of the crease.

But Ottawa's biggest move was to send out failed free agent signing Joonas Korpisalo and a first-round pick to division rival Boston, in exchange for 2023 Vezina Trophy winner Linus Ullmark. A pending UFA at the end of the season, a lot is on the line after that move for both the team and the player.

For the player, it's about maximizing his next earnings. Ullmark is 32 and perhaps playing for the last big payday of his career. He also needs to prove he can handle the workload of a No. 1 NHL goalie since his best years have been spent in tandem with Jeremy Swayman behind a strong team in Boston. Even in Buffalo, where he also posted strong numbers, Ullmark never played even half the games.

For the team, this is the second summer in a row they made a big investment in a netminder to back a young team aching to take the next step. If it works this time, the Senators could find themselves back in the playoffs, and confidently try to re-sign Ullmark for a few more years and lock in the position.

If it doesn't work, however, it likely means an eighth consecutive year outside of the playoffs and questions about how to proceed not just in net, but with the roster core in general.

Philadelphia Flyers: In a stacked year of rookies, they might have the Calder favourite

You have the first overall pick, Macklin Celebrini, playing in San Jose. You have one heck of an exciting, flashy young defenceman in Lane Hutson making headlines in Montreal. You have last year's Hobey Baker Finalist and WJC Best Forward in Cutter Gauthier set to break in with Anaheim. And heck, the Dallas Stars have two more youngsters in Logan Stankoven and Mavrik Bourque, who were carving up the AHL last season, stepping into a deep lineup where they'll be surrounded by plenty of talent.

So there are tons of good options for the NHL's Rookie of the Year this season, but Matvei Michkov might be the most interesting of them all. 'The Russian Factor' saw him fall to seventh overall in the 2023 draft, but the Flyers had little trouble getting him to North America fairly quickly.

As a teenager, Michkov led his KHL Sochi team in goal scoring last season, a rare and difficult task for such a young player, after scoring 20 points in 27 games with them in his draft year.

Adding to the theatre is that this young, dynamic, creative player will have John Tortorella as his first NHL coach. The potential for 'special' moments in the media abound.

'We don't see him as saviour': Flyers' GM Briere welcomes Michkov

Pittsburgh Penguins: Sidney Crosby, newly extended, is still a potential Hart Trophy candidate

It would take some things falling just right, but overlook "The Kid" as an MVP player at your peril. There was a time during last season when he was on the fringes of the conversation.

But think about it: at 5-on-5, Crosby was fifth in the league in primary assists and just outside the top 10 in goals. He finished 27 points ahead of the next most productive Penguin Evgeni Malkin, who also played 82 games, and carried the team into a playoff race late in the season.

What if he puts together a performance like that again and the Penguins get in? What if he gets back to 100 points and pulls the Penguins in?

Crosby recently extended with Pittsburgh through his age 39 season for an extreme-bargain \$8.7 million contract. He may not challenge Connor McDavid for the Art Ross Trophy these days, but few players are as important to their team's success and one more Hart isn't completely out of the question for the 37-year-old yet.

San Jose Sharks: Don't forget about that other rookie they have

We mentioned a bit earlier that Celebrini, the first overall draft pick this summer, will be in contention for the Calder Trophy. But, in fact, the Sharks have two legitimate candidates.

Will Smith stepped out of the USNTDP third in all-time scoring behind Jack Hughes and Cole Eiserman (just ahead of Clayton Keller) and then as a freshman with Boston College last season, led all NCAA players in scoring. Second in the nation? Why Celebrini of course, seven points behind.

Seattle Kraken: Joey Daccord took the net from Philipp Grubauer last season

Philipp Grubauer was building a good track record in Washington and then Colorado, where he had become the No. 1 netminder for a rising Stanley Cup contender at the time. Shortly after landing with the Seattle Kraken ahead of their inaugural season, Grubauer signed a six-year deal with a \$5.9 million cap hit -- but has not delivered at all since.

In three years, Grubauer's best save percentage is .899 and best GAA is 2.85, but his appearances have dropped every season. Then, last year, Joey Daccord seemed to take over the top job from him, making 50 appearances and sporting .916 and 2.46 numbers.

Grubauer still has the salary and term commitment but Daccord, who had just 19 NHL games across four seasons before last year, is a pending UFA making just \$1.2 million. With that sort of background, Daccord's going to have to prove he can do it all over again. And the Kraken might be depending on it if they are to jump back into the playoffs in Year 4.

St. Louis Blues: Pavel Buchnevich is probably going to try making the switch to centre

One of the Blues' most reliable goal and point-getters, Buchnevich could be an X-Factor for more reasons than that in 2024-25. While trade speculation followed him at points last season, Buchnevich stayed and instead re-signed a long-term deal with St. Louis for an \$8 million cap hit. Though the Blues haven't made the playoffs since 2022, there has been plenty of commitment to this core, and if the results are to change, they'll have to figure out new ways to go about their business.

One change is behind the bench, which was made last December. Drew Bannister was then transitioned from interim head coach to the permanent leader.

Another is in deployment and that's where Buchnevich comes in. When the team discussed a contract extension with him, they asked about his interest in becoming a centre at age 29 after eight NHL seasons mostly as a winger behind him. And the player was wide open to the idea.

There are risks for sure. Buchnevich's winning percentage in the dot is not great and was below 40 per cent last season. But he's sizeable, highly skilled and, if it works, having a sizeable, skilled and productive centre at \$8 million is a steal in this economic climate.

Tampa Bay Lightning: Change to the power play and captaincy

One decision made in the summer has a few different ripple effects on the roster. Out goes captain and right-shot Steven Stamkos, in comes left-shot Jake Guentzel. Victor Hedman, meanwhile, takes over as the third team captain in the past 15 years.

The biggest on-ice change will be felt on the power play, where a new combination of players will need to be found. It'll be one of the bigger focuses and things to juggle in training camp since Stamkos was the team's leader in power play goals (third overall in the league) and was obviously a key piece of the No. 1 ranked PP in the league.

Toronto Maple Leafs: Their expected starting goalie's heaviest workload ever was 37 games...

...And that was back in 2018-19 with Boston College in the NCAA. Joseph Woll, even with the Marlies, topped out at 32 games played in 2019-20, his first year as a pro, when he posted an .880 save percentage. He's been up and down between the NHL and AHL, dealt with several injuries, and topped out at 28 regular season games since.

The flashes have been there for sure. Woll had a .942 save percentage last October that made it seem like he could take the No. 1 job and run with it, then immediately cooled by allowing 16 goals in his next four starts. An injury followed in December and when the opportunity to take back the job surfaced later in the season, Woll allowed 29 goals in his last nine regular-season appearances.

The playoffs were a different story...sort of. Woll came on for Ilya Samsonov in Game 4 against Boston, then started and won Games 5 and 6, both 2-1 results. Heck, Woll looked like he could steal the comeback and the series from Boston, but then was injured and missed Game 7 again. Toronto lost.

Much depends on Woll again this season, though backup Anthony Stolarz won a Stanley Cup last season and has put up pretty good regular season numbers as a backup in his career. Even Matt Murray lingers in the background. But Toronto's season comes down to Woll, who it feels we've been talking about for a while, but is still pretty green behind the ears.

Stolarz looking forward to competing for starts with Woll in Toronto

Utah Hockey Club: Just like dad, Josh Doan has a chance to start in one city, then move and shine in another

Shane Doan began his career in 1995-96 with the Winnipeg Jets, then moved to Arizona with the team the very next season. Of course, he then went on to become a franchise legend.

Josh Doan has a chance to do something similar. A second-round pick in 2021, Doan scored 46 points in 62 AHL games last season and then was a late call-up to the Coyotes in March. And he made waves right away, scoring five goals and nine points in 11 games.

The Coyotes are gone and the Utah Hockey Club rises in its place, where Doan has a great chance to stay on this team -- improved on paper -- out of camp and continue to do damage. Now, he might not go on as something close to a point-per-game player over 82 games, but he has been a solid prospect for this team and the early returns were highly promising.

What if this is a start to a similar career story?

"He's a smart hockey player, he has great hockey sense, he's in good position, he goes at the net, he goes to dirty areas," Utah coach Andre Tourigny said. "He has an unbelievable feel for the game."

Vancouver Canucks: Arturs Silovs or Kevin Lankinen may play a bigger part in this season than we first realized

Five months on from a mysterious muscle injury in his knee, we don't yet know just how long Thatcher Demko will be out. Sure, he is confident where he's headed, but the facts also are that the Canucks signed Kevin Lankinen to a one-year contract, and brought Dylan Ferguson to camp on a PTO.

Demko, a Vezina contender when healthy and a finalist for the award just last season, is as important to this team as Norris winner Quinn Hughes, or freshly signed Elias Pettersson. "Bubble Demko" is still dreamt about and that version of him behind this team? Well, it has Stanley Cup potential now.

As it is, though, we might get more of Arturs Silovs than expected, even if Demko returns in time to start the season. Because even if the American is healthy enough to go, the team will be careful to manage his workload and best prepare him to be ready for the playoffs. Might we see something close to the games played split the Boston Bruins had been using the past couple of years?

And if it so happens that Lankinen has to factor into this season, it may be a tougher climb than the Canucks had hoped. The bottom line is that the opening to camp hasn't been the most promising, though fingers are crossed that this is the worst it gets.

What does Demko's unprecedented injury mean for his future with Canucks?

Vegas Golden Knights: Ilya Samsonov is the backup to count on in an emergency

This is a team that has been blessed with solid goaltending in its time, from Marc-Andre Fleury, to Robin Lehner, to Logan Thompson and Adin Hill, who backstopped them to their first Stanley Cup. Last season the Golden Knights had both Hill and Thompson on the roster and needed them. When Hill went down to injury, former No. 1 Thompson stepped right in, was great and actually held on to the job into the first round of the playoffs.

Now that backup spot is a little less secure with Thompson traded off to Washington and replaced by UFA signing Ilya Samsonov. The former Capital and Maple Leaf had been given multiple opportunities to assume the No. 1 job in those markets, and though he seized it at times, the consistency just wasn't there. So, if Hill hits a rough patch or goes down to injury again, the confidence level that this year's backup could endure over any lengthy period is lessened.

Washington Capitals: Alex Ovechkin is 42 goals from breaking Wayne Gretzky's record

The start of last season was alarming for Ovechkin's goal scoring pace. Still close enough that we figured he'd extend his career long enough to pass Gretzky, the fact he only scored nine times in the first 44 games was a long enough cold streak to raise an eyebrow. He wound up finishing strong, scored 31 times on the season, but still, for the first time in his career Ovechkin averaged less than .40 goals per game.

Given that, with two years left on his contract, Ovechkin may yet need both of them to get past Gretzky. However, barring injury, it still seems inevitable he'll get there. Ovechkin scored 42 goals exactly just two years ago so even at 39 years old it's not out of reach for him to do it in 2024-25.

If he does get there this season, it may take until the very end of the schedule, which comes with its own interesting setup. Washington's last game of the season is on the road in Pittsburgh.

Dubois stoked for possibility of assisting Ovechkin's record goal

Winnipeg Jets: There's a big question and hole at second line centre

When Sean Monahan was brought in through a trade last season, he filled a key spot in Winnipeg's lineup. They sorely needed a productive centre to better fit the second line centre spot and Monahan delivered with 24 points in 34 regular season games. When the production dried up in the playoffs, the Jets were easily dispatched by the Colorado Avalanche in five games.

But Monahan left via free agency and the Jets weren't otherwise able to fill that hole back up again. Adam Lowry is a better fit on the third line, but could elevate, and Vladislav Namestnikov could be another candidate for it.

There's perhaps an outside shot that Brad Lambert, the 30th overall pick in 2022, earns the spot out of camp after leading the AHL's Manitoba Moose in scoring.

But Cole Perfetti, the still unsigned RFA, is another player who had the chance to be seen in and earn that spot in the lineup with a strong camp. He has the offensive upside Namestnikov and Lowry don't, and possesses the NHL experience Lambert lacks. But the longer he's out of camp without a contract, the more that spot in the lineup gets called into question for when the puck drops for real in October.