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1st Ohio Battery / Meet Your New Jackets: Introducing The New Defensemen Looking To Earn Their Spot

By Will Chase – September 4, 2025

It's nearly that time.

With preseason getting underway for the Blue Jackets on Sept. 21 against the Blues and the prospects tournament starting next week in Buffalo, we've been getting you set as we introduce the new players looking to make an impact for the Jackets this season as they make a playoff push.

In part one of our series, our Ed Francis previewed the forwards the Blue Jackets have brought in.

Now it's time to take a look at the defensemen who could play pivotal roles on the Blue Jackets' blue line this year.

President and general manager Don Waddell might not have made the big, bold, flashy moves over the offseason, but he did address the blue line by bringing in depth moves who could come up huge, namely re-signing Ivan Provorov and Dante Fabbro.

Remember, Fabbro parlayed an opportunity as a waiver pickup into a four-year, \$16.5 million contract over the summer after finding success with Zach Werenski on the first pair. Similar success might not play out the same way with the names we dive into, but there is always a cast of characters who can become unsung heroes in more ways than one, whether in the NHL or the AHL.

Christian Jaros

Christian Jaros signed a one-year, two-way contract with the Blue Jackets on July 1. A 29-year-old, 6-foot-3, 222 lb, right-shot defenseman with 94 games of NHL experience under his belt, Jaros hasn't played in the league since 2021-22 with the Devils. He has 14 career points (one goal, 13 assists), including stops with the Senators and Sharks. Over the last three years, Jaros played in the KHL with Omsk Avangard, CSKA Moscow, and Cherepovets Severstal, and back with CSKA Moscow last season.

Though it's been a while since Jaros laced up the skates in the NHL, he checks the boxes of what Waddell and head coach Dean Evason have quickly worked to assemble when it comes to the Blue Jackets roster: Size and strength. Particularly on the defensive side, with a size comparable to Erik Gudbranson's 6-foot-5, 222 lb frame. Throughout his KHL stint, including regular season and playoffs, Jaros registered 108 hits and 238 blocked shots.

Dysin Mayo

Dysin Mayo signed a one-year, two-way contract with Columbus on July 16. Mayo played with the Coyotes from 2021-23, scoring 12 points (four goals, eight assists) in 82 career games. A 29-year-old, right-shot defenseman, Mayo checks in at 6-feet, 190 lb. He's also played in the AHL with the Tucson Roadrunners and the Henderson Silverknights.

Last season for Henderson, Mayo had 19 points (eight goals, 11 assists) in 58 games. He was third on the club with 86 penalty minutes. Overall, across 426 career regular-season games in the AHL, Mayo has 97 points (29 goals, 68 assists) with 344 penalty minutes.

With the Coyotes in 2021-22, Mayo was second among all NHL rookies with a single-season high of 133 blocked shots. His 129 hits were 11th among rookies.

Mayo will play in Cleveland this season and is sure to see some NHL time, depending on how the injury front affects the rotation.

Brendan Smith

Brendan Smith signed a pro tryout contract with the Blue Jackets on Aug. 19. Smith, a 36-year-old left-handed shot coming in at 6-foot-2, 200 lb, broke into the league in 2011-12 with the Red Wings, and also played for the Rangers, Hurricanes, Devils, and Stars. Smith has 144 career points (39 goals, 105 assists) in 726 career games.

Looking to make good on his tryout opportunity, Smith is competing for a lower depth spot on the Jackets' back end, last occupied by Jack Johnson, who signed a PTO with the Wild.

The Athletic / Updates on Blue Jackets' Yegor Chinakhov and Adam Fantilli as training camp nears

By Aaron Portzline – September 8, 2025

Yegor Chinakhov hasn't rescinded the trade request that became public earlier this summer, and Blue Jackets GM Don Waddell is still open to making a deal for his 24-year-old winger if he gets an acceptable offer.

But this situation, aside from some comments by Chinakhov's agent, has not reached a point of no return, and it certainly hasn't become as acrimonious as some previous trade requests, like that of Pierre-Luc Dubois and, most recently, Patrik Laine.

There are good signs here, too.

Among the Russian-born players who return home for the offseason, Chinakhov was the first to return to Columbus. He arrived late last month, has been skating and working out at Nationwide Arena, and is said to be in excellent shape, including his nagging back injury.

"Him being here early ... it's a very positive sign," Waddell told *The Athletic*.

Waddell said he and Chinakhov have exchanged pleasantries around the rink in recent days — "How was your summer, welcome back, that kind of stuff," he said — but they haven't discussed his trade request or outlook. Those discussions would happen only between Waddell and Chinakhov's agent, Shumi Babaev.

But there would need to be a heart-to-heart talk between Chinakhov and coach Dean Evason before training camp starts Sept. 18. Chinakhov cited "misunderstandings" with Evason as the reason he wished to be traded.

"If he stays, we'd have to sit down and make sure everybody's on the same page," Waddell said.

"Regardless of where he plays, he's going to be a restricted free agent, and I know he wants to stay over here (in North America) and make an NHL salary."

Chinakhov had 7-8-15 in 30 games last season, a campaign that was really a play in three acts. He was one of the Blue Jackets' best players over the first month of the season, starting the season on the No. 1 line with center Sean Monahan and winger Kirill Marchenko and totaling 7-7-14 in the first 21 games.

Then he missed all of December, January and February with a back injury. During the 4 Nations Face-Off, Chinakhov returned to Russia to have a procedure done on his back that, according to Chinakhov, the Blue Jackets' medical staff would not approve as a remedy.

When he returned to the lineup, he wasn't the same player. He had 0-1-1 and a minus-8 rating over nine games in March and early April, and Evason made him a healthy scratch at the end of the season when the Blue Jackets made a desperate push for the playoffs.

Chinakhov's trade request surfaced in an interview with a Russian newspaper in the middle of July. It's not the first time he'd hinted at wanting a change of scenery.

Stay tuned.

Fantilli extension will wait

The Blue Jackets were planning to negotiate a contract extension with 20-year-old center Adam Fantilli this summer, with an outside shot of signing him to a multi-year extension before he plays the third and final year of his entry-level contract.

But that's off the table now.

"We've had no negotiations at all," Waddell said. "I spoke with (Fantilli's agent Pat) Brisson last week, and they're in no hurry from their end.

"I won't get done before the season."

None of this should be a concern to Blue Jackets fans.

Fantilli had a breakout sophomore season, scoring 31 goals and playing in all 82 games. He did not look out of place as the Blue Jackets' No. 1 center when Monahan went down with a wrist injury.

"(Brisson) is probably thinking, 'If he has back-to-back good years, we'd have more of a history to know where he's going to fall in line from a salary standpoint,'" Waddell said.

"Right now, we'd have a hard time."

Put another way: If Fantilli continues to ascend as a highly competitive, highly proficient two-way player capable of hanging impressive offensive numbers, he's going to move himself into a different stratosphere. He could quickly become the Blue Jackets' highest-paid player.

The NHL's salary cap is soaring. It's \$95.5 million for this coming season, but will be \$104 million in 2026-27 and \$113.5 million in 2027-28. The next batch of contracts for standout and superstar players is going to look much different than deals signed during the years of salary cap stagnancy.

Also, with most aspects of the NHL's new collective bargaining agreement not taking effect until this time next year, the Blue Jackets and Fantilli will have all summer to negotiate his next deal. By then, Connor Bedard's second contract with the Chicago Blackhawks could provide a guidepost.

And with two strong seasons on his resume, both parties could be more open to signing the kind of long-term contract that would put the Blue Jackets (and a majority of their fan base) at ease. If he's signed before the new CBA kicks in, he could sign an eight-year contract with Columbus.

The most likely scenario is that Fantilli plays well fairly deep into the season and the Blue Jackets and Brisson start talking in the spring. The Blue Jackets would prefer that Fantilli's next contract have not one ounce of drama attached to it, of course.

With waiting comes risk. As of July 1, 2026, Fantilli will be a restricted free agent, and he'd be subject to signing an offer sheet with another club.

Those don't happen very often. But in an NHL suddenly flush with salary cap space, a 21-year-old No. 1 center would be the type of player teams would target.

Prospect Marrelli out until December

At some point in the next few days, the Blue Jackets will announce their roster for the NHL prospects showcase in Buffalo this weekend.

These rookie tournaments have taken a big hit due to the NCAA rule change that allows players from the Canadian Major Junior ranks to attend U.S. colleges.

For the Blue Jackets, that means neither of their top picks in the last two drafts will attend. Center Cayden Lindstrom, the fourth selection in 2024, is at Michigan State. Defenseman Jackson Smith, selected at No. 14 this June, is at Penn State.

Another top prospect who won't be there is defenseman Luca Marrelli, a third-round pick (No. 86) in 2024, who had a breakout season with Oshawa of the Ontario Hockey League last season, totaling 19-55-74 in only 67 games. He added 6-30-36 in 21 playoff games.

Marrelli, who turns 20 early next month, won't play until the middle of December, Waddell said, following offseason shoulder surgery to repair a labrum tear.

The Hockey Writers / Questions Regarding Blue Jackets' Captain Jenner Will Be Answered in 2025-26

By Nicholas Arnold – September 6, 2025

It's hard to imagine the Columbus Blue Jackets without Boone Jenner. He's been with the organization since 2011, four years longer than the second-most tenured Blue Jacket, Zach Werenski. Jenner is the all-time leader in games played for the team (by a lot) and has become their heart-and-soul captain. However, the question is: Will he be available this season?

At 32 years old and with a significant injury history – a byproduct of his physical game – it's impossible to predict how many games he will play this season. He's also entering the final year of his contract and could be a heck of a trade chip heading into the deadline.

Will Jenner Stay Healthy in 2025-26?

Jenner's extensive list of injuries that have sidelined him over the past several seasons has added up. Since being named captain in 2021, he has missed 117 of 328 possible games. That's a dismal 64.3% availability rate over the last four seasons.

Don't get me wrong. When Jenner is in the lineup, he's a difference-maker. He's consistently a 20-30 goal scorer, is always digging in the corners, and is one of the better faceoff takers in the league. Over his career, he's averaged 54% on draws, which is a really important skill to have when most of the other Jackets centers are younger and still learning how to outsmart the best in the world. With his team on the upswing, they're going to need him on the ice more often than not to push for a playoff spot, and his style of play lends itself most to postseason play. They could use him, and they need him to be healthy.

How Will Jenner Handle His Expiring Contract?

It seems like yesterday that Jenner signed his four-year contract extension to stay in Columbus. Another four-year contract would expire when he's 37 years old. But his injury history makes it seem unlikely his career will last that long. So, both sides will have a decision to make.

Jenner has been a loyal foot soldier through the tough times, and he has consistently put his body on the line for the team. However, if he's looking for term and money on what will likely be his last chance to cash in on his career, he might have to do it elsewhere. More so, if he's chasing a Stanley Cup, which he's only once had a small taste of, he will also have to look elsewhere. The Blue Jackets' window of contention with this core group is a couple of seasons from opening.

He's been eligible for a contract extension since July 1, and I would expect that the two sides have been in contact to get an idea of what each side is looking for. In an exclusive conversation with *The Hockey Writers'* Mark Scheig earlier this summer, Jenner said:

"I've been a Blue Jacket my whole career. It means so much to me. I love being a Blue Jacket. I love playing in front of our fans and being a part of what we're building here. (I've thought) a lot to stay here and be here my whole career. I've been fortunate thus far. (I) want to keep building. At the end of the day, I want to win here."

Blue Jackets' captain Boone Jenner on his future in an interview with Mark Scheig of The Hockey Writers.

General manager Don Waddell will have to weigh his options because Jenner's value at the trade deadline is likely to be very high. However, he already has one of the most tenured Blue Jackets in

franchise history, who has reaffirmed his desire to stay in Ohio. These questions will need to be answered heading into 2025-26.

The Hockey Writers / 3 Under-the-Radar Blue Jackets Prospects to Watch in 2025-26

By Matthew Buhrmann – September 3, 2025

Yes, the Columbus Blue Jackets have big first-round prospects like Cayden Lindstrom, Jackson Smith, and Pyotr Andreyanov. But some of the organization's most intriguing talent comes from mid to later-round picks who could play a big role in the team's future.

Here are three under-the-radar prospects to keep an eye on and how you can follow their development this season.

Sergei Ivanov

Sergei Ivanov, one of the best goaltending prospects in the Blue Jackets' system, hasn't received nearly enough attention. Drafted in the fifth round (138th overall) in the 2022 NHL Draft by former GM Jarmo Kekäläinen, he has already outperformed his draft spot and is impressing GM Don Waddell.

At just 20 years old, Ivanov spent the full 2023-24 season on loan to HC Sochi in Russia's top league, the Kontinental Hockey League (KHL), where he posted a .911 save percentage (SV%) and a 3.00 goals-against average (GAA) in 38 games. Although his record was a disappointing 11-21-3, the team overall finished dead last in their division. He is now under contract with SKA St. Petersburg through the 2025-26 season, and they finished second in their division last season.

Earlier this offseason, my colleague Mark Scheig reported that Waddell "confirmed their belief in Ivanov coming over, saying that his agent has advised the team he will be ready to come over after the 2025-26 season."

That alone was enough to bump him up my list of Blue Jackets prospects to watch this season, especially given the goaltending situation in Columbus. Whether Elvis Merzlikins and Jet Greaves are the long-term duo or not, having another option, like Ivanov, is important.

He would likely join the Cleveland Monsters of the American Hockey League (AHL) first, to adjust to the smaller rinks and faster pace of the North American game before earning an NHL role. The question is whether he will make the jump for the 2026-27 season, but all signs point to yes as of now.

With 2025 first-round pick Pyotr Andreyanov (20th overall) likely still four or five years away from coming to North America, Ivanov is the clear answer among Columbus goalie prospects. Compared to the older names in the system, Evan Gardner, Nolan Lalonde, and Melvin Strahl, Ivanov stands out in that category.

The one thing to note is his size. At 6-feet and 157 pounds, he is not as big as many modern goaltenders, but there are plenty of smaller goalies performing well in the NHL. 2025 Calder Trophy finalist Dustin Wolf of the Calgary Flames, for example, is also 6-feet.

Ivanov relies heavily on his athleticism, similar to Greaves, who is also considered undersized at 6-feet. When a goalie is undersized, certain parts of their game must be elite to earn a full-time role, and that is the standard Ivanov will need to meet.

Dobber Prospects noted this offseason: "Consistently putting up above a .900 SV% wherever he plays, Ivanov continues making the case he should get an opportunity in North America soon. Columbus is supportive of undersized goalies as well, so Ivanov's chance to show he can be impactful at the NHL level is likely coming when his KHL contract expires at the end of the 2025-26 season. It will be

interesting to see who gets the starting role for SKA St. Petersburg in 2025-26, as two taller and very talented goalies, Moysevich and Zavrugin, compete for playing time alongside Ivanov.”

For fans looking to follow his development, the KHL season begins this week. SKA St. Petersburg’s season opens on Sep. 6 against the Shanghai Dragons, giving everyone a (hopeful) early chance to watch the 21-year-old continue his career.

Malte Vass

Vass is a stay-at-home, reliable shutdown left-handed defenseman at 6-foot-2, 194 pounds who will suit up for the Boston University Terriers (Hockey East) for his sophomore season come October. He was selected by the Blue Jackets in the third round of the 2025 NHL Draft, at 76th overall.

The Terriers are projected to land inside the top five in most preseason college rankings after a loss to the Denver Pioneers in last season’s Frozen Four Semifinal, so there will be no shortage of competition for Vass on the back end.

Vass isn’t going to put up a ton of points. He’s the type of player you have to watch closely to appreciate, with strengths that show up in defensive details. He shuts down the rush effectively, plays a physical game, and is efficient at moving pucks out of the defensive zone.

My colleague Peter Baracchini shared his thoughts on Vass’s NHL potential before this summer’s draft: “Vass definitely fits the bill of a strong third-pairing defender, but a player that could move up in the lineup and be a complementary player to an offensive-minded player. He’s smart, mean, and does a lot of the little things right. He’s a player that you can rely on to defend a lead and kill a penalty off. His play is very reminiscent of Tampa Bay Lightning defender Erik Cernak with his defensive mindset, intensity, and physicality to his game.”

As for his role on the Terriers’ blue line, Hannah Connors of the Boston Hockey Blog noted, “In terms of areas of improvement, he may need to polish his puck management. However, if he is placed on a line alongside fellow Swede Boumedienne, we could see productivity that mirrors that of the Boumedienne-Tom Willander line last season.”

He’ll be part of a deep defensive core that includes Aiden Celebrini, Sascha Boumedienne, Carter Amico, Charlie Trethewey, and Haoxi “Simon” Wang, all of whom are high-profile draft picks. This is arguably one of the best defensive cores in the NCAA, and definitely the best in Hockey East.

It’s an ideal setting for Vass to develop, given the competitiveness of Hockey East against top programs like Boston College, Maine, Providence, and UConn, and for those who want to see him play, most of Boston University’s games will be available to watch on ESPN+ this season.

Oiva Keskinen

In May of 2025, the Blue Jackets signed Finnish center Oiva Keskinen to a three-year entry-level contract (ELC). He was selected in the seventh round, 194th overall, in the 2023 NHL Draft, when Kekäläinen was still at the helm.

In his first Liiga season, Finland’s top professional league, Keskinen put up 36 points over 70 games with Tappara between the regular season and playoffs. His strong play earned him a nomination for the Wasama Award, given to Liiga’s Rookie of the Year, and he played a big role in helping Tappara capture the championship. That season, he also represented Team Finland at the 2023-24 World Junior Championships, recording two goals and five points in seven games.

Keskinen built on that momentum in 2024-25, taking a significant step forward in his development. After scoring seven goals in his rookie season, his total jumped to 15 goals and 20 assists in 59 games, once again helping the club reach the postseason.

Those numbers impressed Waddell enough to sign him earlier this offseason, which is rare for a seventh-round pick and especially one he did not draft himself. Now set to join the Monsters for the 2025-26 season, Keskinen will have a valuable opportunity to adjust to the North American game while continuing his development.

At 6-feet and 181 pounds, he projects as a potential depth piece for the Blue Jackets in the coming years, depending on how well he progresses in Cleveland. Given the organization's recent success in developing players through the AHL, there is plenty of reason to be optimistic. Keskinen has the makings of a late-round steal at center with the potential to grow into a reliable bottom-six NHL contributor.

This season, he should slot into the middle-six for Trent Vogelhuber's Monsters, a lineup filled with young, hungry forwards ready to prove themselves. Fans can follow his progress all season long by watching the Monsters on FloHockey and keeping up with the team's social media for updates.

The biggest names will always get the most attention, but players like Vass, Ivanov, and Keskinen are just as important to the Blue Jackets' future. Even if we don't hear much about them right now, they're worth watching closely as they continue to grow within the organization.

[NHL.com / Players signed to professional tryouts for NHL training camps](#)

September 8, 2025

Unsigned veteran players can earn a contract with an NHL team by impressing enough during training camp on a professional tryout contract (PTO). Training camps open Sept. 17, and the regular season begins Oct. 7.

The following notable players (listed alphabetically) will be in an NHL camp on a PTO:

Luke Glendening, F, New Jersey Devils

The 36-year-old had seven points (four goals, three assists) in 77 games with the Tampa Bay Lightning last season. An undrafted free agent, Glendening has 166 points (83 goals, 83 assists) in 864 regular-season games for the Detroit Red Wings, Dallas Stars and Lightning and 10 points (six goals, four assists) in 50 Stanley Cup Playoff games.

Jack Johnson, D, Minnesota Wild

The 38-year-old had six assists in 41 games with the Columbus Blue Jackets last season. The No. 3 pick of the 2005 NHL Draft by the Carolina Hurricanes, Johnson has 342 points (77 goals, 265 assists) in 1,228 games for the Los Angeles Kings, Blue Jackets, Pittsburgh Penguins, New York Rangers, Colorado Avalanche and Chicago Blackhawks. He has 21 points (five goals, 16 assists) in 57 playoff games and won the Cup with the Avalanche in 2022.

Oliver Kylington, D, Carolina Hurricanes

The 28-year-old had five points (one goal, three assists) in 19 games with the Avalanche and Anaheim Ducks last season. Selected by the Calgary Flames in the second round (No. 60) of the 2015 NHL Draft, Kylington has 60 points (18 goals, 42 assists) in 220 regular season games with the Flames, Avalanche and Ducks, and three points (one goal, two assists) in 12 playoff games.

Kevin Labanc, Carolina Hurricanes

The 29-year-old played 34 games for the Blue Jackets last season and had 12 points (two goals, 10 assists). A sixth-round pick (No. 171) by the San Jose Sharks at the 2014 NHL Draft, Labanc has 237 points (84 goals, 153 assists) in 512 regular-season games with San Jose and Columbus and 14 points (five goals, nine assists) in 30 playoff games.

Brett Leason, F, Minnesota Wild

The 26-year-old had 17 points (five goals, 12 assists) in 62 games for the Ducks last season. Selected by the Washington Capitals in the second round (No. 56) of the 2019 NHL Draft, Leason has 54 points (25 goals, 29 assists) in 220 regular-season games with the Capitals and Ducks, and no points in one playoff game.

Milan Lucic, F, St. Louis Blues

The 37-year-old did not play last season after taking a leave of absence from the Boston Bruins in November 2023 and later entering the NHL/NHLPA Player Assistance Program. He had two assists in four games in 2023-24. Boston's second-round pick (No. 50) in the 2006 NHL Draft, Lucic has 586 points (233 goals, 353 assists) in 1,177 regular-season games for the Bruins, Kings, Edmonton Oilers and Flames, and 77 points (29 goals, 48 assists) in 136 playoff games. He won the Cup with the Bruins in 2011.

Kevin Rooney, C, New Jersey Devils

The 32-year-old had 10 points (five goals, five assists) in 70 games for the Calgary Flames last season. An undrafted free agent, he has 60 points (32 goals, 28 assists) in 330 regular-season games for the Devils, New York Rangers and Flames and two assists in 15 playoff games.

Conor Sheary, F, New York Rangers

The 33-year-old had no points in five games with the Lightning last season. An undrafted free agent, he has 267 points (124 goals, 143 assists) in 593 regular-season games for the Penguins, Buffalo Sabres, Capitals and Lightning and 23 points (seven goals, 16 assists) in 72 playoff games. Sheary won the Cup with Pittsburgh in 2016 and 2017.

Brendan Smith, D, Columbus Blue Jackets

The 36-year-old had six points (one goal, five assists) in 32 games with the Dallas Stars last season. A first-round pick (No. 27) by the Detroit Red Wings in the 2007 NHL Draft, Smith has 144 points (39 goals, 105 assists) in 726 regular-season games for the Red Wings, Rangers, Hurricanes, New Jersey Devils and Stars and 15 points (three goals, 12 assists) in 59 playoff games.

Givani Smith, F, Carolina Hurricanes

The 27-year-old did not have a point in 13 games with the Sharks and Avalanche last season. He was traded to the Philadelphia Flyers on March 7 and had two points (one goal, one assist) in 10 games with Lehigh Valley, their American Hockey League affiliate. Selected by the Red Wings in the second round (No. 46) of the 2016 NHL Draft, Smith has 22 points (nine goals, 13 assists) in 168 games with the Red Wings, Florida Panthers, Sharks and Avalanche.

NHL.com / NCAA hockey could be major pathway to NHL after rule change

By Adam Kimelman – September 05, 2025

It was a moment the hockey world was waiting for, and it was there for the entire sports world to see.

At 6:30 p.m. ET on July 8, Gavin McKenna appeared on ESPN's "SportsCenter" from his home in Whitehorse, Yukon, Canada, and gave a 45-word statement that would change the face of NCAA hockey forever.

"It was a super-tough decision," he said on the national broadcast. "Obviously there's a lot of great options out there, but I think me, my family and everyone that was kind of part of my circle, we all decided the best spot for me next year will be Penn State University."

The decision by McKenna, the projected No. 1 pick in the 2026 NHL Draft who is considered by many to be a generational talent, was clearly a boon for Penn State, but it also represented a sea change that will impact the NHL and the Quebec Maritimes Junior Hockey League, Ontario Hockey League and Western Hockey League, the three leagues that comprise the Canadian Hockey League.

After finishing second in the WHL last season with 129 points (41 goals, 88 assists) in 56 games with Medicine Hat and being named the player of the year in the WHL and the CHL, the 17-year-old forward became a pioneer of CHL migration to the NCAA ranks.

"I always want to pave my own path," McKenna said. "I don't want to be a follower. I want to do my own thing and go with my own heart. From the start, I had people telling me that Penn State was a new and upcoming school and might not get you pro-ready. But I want to stick with my gut and go with what I want to do, and kind of block out whatever everyone else says, and just go with my heart."

An NCAA rule change in November made CHL players eligible this season to play NCAA hockey for the first time. They previously were barred and considered professionals because they were competing against players who had signed NHL entry-level contracts.

That change was another in a string of adjustments redefining the model of NCAA sports, including college players being allowed to monetize their name, image and likeness, either by colleges themselves or third-party collectives. But it's also the largest change to the junior hockey development model in decades.

"With the rule change, all of a sudden you've got 1,500 more players that are eligible to play college hockey now," Michigan State coach Adam Nightingale said.

Does college hockey now become the preeminent path to the NHL? Can the CHL maintain its place as the best route to an NHL roster spot?

Can they work on parallel paths to reach the same goal?

"I would honestly say the dust is still settling," CHL president Dan MacKenzie said. "I think from where we sit, we've seen some things, but I think we really need to see what's going to happen this year."

What's already happening is several prominent players making the move from the CHL to the NCAA. McKenna may be the biggest name, but he's not alone.

Joining him at Penn State will be defenseman Jackson Smith, who was selected by the Columbus Blue Jackets in the first round (No. 14) of the 2025 NHL Draft and spent the past three seasons with Tri-City of

the WHL; and forward Luke Misa, a fifth-round pick (No. 150) by the Calgary Flames in the 2024 NHL Draft who played four seasons with Brampton of the OHL.

Forward Cayden Lindstrom, selected by the Blue Jackets with the No. 4 pick of the 2024 draft, is at Michigan State after playing three seasons with Medicine Hat. Joining him this fall will be forward Porter Martone, who was taken by the Philadelphia Flyers with the No. 6 pick of the 2025 draft and is leaving Brampton, where he was captain last season.

Flames forward prospect Cole Reschny, a first-round pick (No. 18) in the 2025 draft, will attend the University of North Dakota along with defenseman Keaton Verhoeff, one of the top prospects for the 2026 draft, after each played last season with Victoria of the WHL.

Forward Roger McQueen, selected No. 10 by the Anaheim Ducks in the 2025 draft, will attend Providence College after playing with Brandon of the WHL the past four seasons.

Then there are forward Malcolm Spence (New York Rangers), defenseman Henry Mews (Flames) and goalie Jack Ivankovic (Nashville Predators), who are leaving their CHL teams to play at the University of Michigan. Spence (No. 43) and Ivankovic (No. 58) were second-round picks in the 2025 draft, and Mews was a third-round selection (No. 74) in the 2024 draft.

Thirteen of the first 15 picks of the 2025 draft were CHL players. Of that group, seven have signed NHL deals and three have chosen the NCAA route.

Now all eyes are on 18-year-old forward Michael Misa (Saginaw, OHL), who was selected by the San Jose Sharks with the No. 2 pick this year. Could he decide to follow older brother Luke, 19, and play NCAA hockey this season?

Also unsigned are forward Caleb Desnoyers (Moncton, QMJHL), chosen No. 4 by the Utah Mammoth, and forward Jack Nesbitt (Windsor, OHL), selected by the Flyers at No. 12.

Could some or all of them sign before training camps open next month and stay in the CHL, if they're not in the NHL? Or could more choose the NCAA option?

"It's definitely something I've got to figure out with my agent, what San Jose wants me to do," Michael Misa said during the World Junior Summer Showcase in July. "It's kind of up to them and up to me to make that decision."

McKenna said he made his not long after Medicine Hat lost in the championship game of the Memorial Cup on June 1, and it was based on what would be best for his long-term success in the NHL.

"My agency, they were talking to me, and honestly, it all kind of excited me," he said. "I think it's the best route for me to go to be a pro next year.

"I think [college] honestly just makes the jump [to the NHL] easier. Going against older, heavier, stronger guys, I think it really prepares you. I think even in the locker room, hanging around older guys and being around more mature guys, I think that will help me a lot in my first season. Obviously, the [WHL] was a great spot, and I'm very grateful for what it did for me and my family. I think both options are great, but I just think that going to college and being in such a great conference, it'll really challenge me and prepare me."

Martone waited until July 21 to make his decision after attending Flyers development camp. But his reasons echoed those of McKenna.

"For me, the decision ended up coming down to what's going to make me the best hockey player in 5-10 years to help Philly capture the Stanley Cup," he said. "I sat down with my camp and Philly, and they

were supporting my decision either way. I think I'm going to a great organization in Michigan State and I can't wait to be a Flyer when it does come to that time."

Though college is the right choice for some players, it's not always the best path for others.

Matthew Schaefer, selected by the New York Islanders with the No. 1 pick of the 2025 draft, signed his entry-level contract Aug. 4, saying college hockey didn't interest him. Because of his age, the options for the defenseman, who turned 18 on Friday, now will be playing for the Islanders or returning to Erie of the OHL.

"I want to play in the NHL," Schaefer said. "And obviously, other people would always ask me, 'You know, where do you want to go?' But for me, I was so dialed in on wanting to play in the NHL. And when I set goals for myself, I work as hard as I can so I can get to that point."

Forward Carter Bear, selected by the Detroit Red Wings with the No. 13 pick of the 2025 draft, signed his entry-level contract July 16 after telling Detroit management he wanted to stay with Everett of the WHL despite NCAA overtures.

"It's up to the player in our view, and Carter was pretty adamant about going back to junior hockey," Red Wings assistant general manager Shawn Horcoff said. "And we're completely fine with that. The player, first off, has to be happy. He's got to want to do it, and I think time will tell if it works out for that individual player."

There are advantages to each path. The CHL has a 68-game schedule, followed by potentially four playoff rounds and then the Memorial Cup, all of which aligns closer to an 82-game NHL season and the Stanley Cup Playoffs. And while school is required for all players in the QMJHL, there are no education requirements for players in the OHL or WHL beyond attending high school.

NCAA players are considered student-athletes, required to attend classes and maintain a certain grade-point average. The college hockey season can range from 35-42 games, including the NCAA Tournament. Most regular-season games are played on the weekend, giving players a greater opportunity to get into the gym or work on their skills during the early part of the week.

"College hockey is beneficial in some ways because of the training," St. Louis Blues general manager Doug Armstrong said. "You get to get bigger, stronger, more days in the gym, less games. ... Junior hockey to me has a lot of benefits too. If you're on a good team, you get seven-game playoff series. In college, it's one and done."

For a player like Ryder Ritchie (6-foot, 175 pounds), the schedule was a selling point when it came to his choice to play at Boston University this season. Selected by the Minnesota Wild in the second round (No. 45) of the 2024 draft, the forward played three seasons in the WHL with Prince Albert and Medicine Hat. But getting stronger is something he feels is a necessity before he turns pro, and in his view it's a lot harder to get in the gym when you're taking 15-hour bus rides around the Canadian prairies.

"The college schedule with only playing on Fridays and Saturdays, it gives you more time for development, especially in the gym Monday through Wednesday," he said. "You're getting those hard lifts in and I think getting bigger and stronger in that scenario. That's where I really need improving."

Several of the players mentioned the NCAA facilities, including more modern weight rooms, recovery areas and shooting rooms, as selling points. Colleges and universities with larger endowments and alumni bases have access to more money and more experience in creating appealing environments for athletes.

Reschny said he was sold on North Dakota after getting a tour of Ralph Engelstad Arena.

"It's as good as it gets," he said. "I've heard some NHL guys that played at the school, and they say it's better than lots of NHL rinks. It's something special there."

McKenna said the facilities in Pegula Ice Arena are a large part of what sold him on Penn State.

"You have all the tools to be at your best with all the recovery stuff they've got, the shooting stuff, and then the biggest thing for me was the amount of ice time they have," he said. "I love being on the ice, and I love working on my stuff, and they give you all the opportunities to do that. So it was just an easy choice."

The one-upmanship when it comes to facilities has led to a bit of an arms race for college programs as they compete for top players.

"We're lucky we just had a \$30 million renovation that just went in," Nightingale said. "Our rink (Munn Ice Arena), we're the sole tenant, so our guys can skate whenever they want. We have a full-time strength coach (Will Morlock) that I brought with me from the [USA Hockey National Team Development Program]. ... Not that we're perfect, we have a lot to keep growing. But that side of it, the momentum of our program, people are excited. The nutrition side, the amount of money we spend on our guys on food to help them make good decisions. It's that holistic approach to their development."

That approach certainly stood out to Martone.

"The facility is unbelievable. They've got everything they need," he said. "But at the end of the day that's not why I chose it. I chose it because [of] the staff they have there, the culture they have there. I think Adam is great for me to really develop me into a pro-style player. The facility and everything is great, but at the end of the day, I think it's the personnel that kind of attracted my decision to go there."

Morlock's reputation is what sold Lindstrom on Michigan State. After Lindstrom missed most of the past two seasons because of back issues, hearing current Columbus players Zach Werenski and Adam Fantilli praise Morlock was just what he needed.

"What separated them is just the way they treated their players," Lindstrom said. "Obviously all the other schools that I talked to treat their players very well, but I thought Michigan State was very, very professional in the way they run their practices. They run them like an NHL team, and they do everything very professionally. And I love the weight room too. So that was really big for me. And also Will Morlock there, he trains the guys really well there, and he helps guys have a long career as well."

MacKenzie said he's spoken with several of the 61 CHL teams about improving what they can offer players, from new buildings to increasing off-ice staffing. He mentioned three new arenas in the works (Ottawa, Brantford and Sudbury in the OHL) and eight others being renovated.

"I think this kind of competition helps raise everyone's level," he said. "If you talk to any of our (league) commissioners about their priorities in the offseason as we go forward in the short term, especially in this area, a lot of it is, you're going to hear a lot about raising of standards. ... When you talk about raising standards that we can do and move a bit more quickly, is on noncapital types of improvements. So that would be staff, that would be things like making sure the teams have strength and conditioning coaches and nutrition and mental performance coaches and all those kinds of things that aren't so capital intensive. I think you'll see a real push from our leagues to raise the standards there so our teams are continuing to be places where these players can get the best training."

The NCAA route also allows CHL players the opportunity to test themselves against older competition. Brampton, where Martone, Ivankovic and Luke Misa played last season, had a roster with an average age of 18.84, according to EliteProspects.com.

Michigan State's roster had an average age of 21.58 years, Michigan 21.82 years and Penn State 21.96 years.

"Eventually when you play pro one day, it's all against men," said Spence, who played the past three seasons with Erie. "So to kind of have that transition to when you're playing against men [in the NHL], the NCAA, I think the size and kind of that aspect of just the strength allows a smoother runway to play pro one day."

It could be an even bigger benefit to Ivankovic as a goalie.

"I think it's a great opportunity for him," Predators assistant GM Jeff Kealty said. "Kids are a little bit older, little bit stronger, can shoot the puck a little bit better. It's going to be more of a challenge for him and a good step for him."

A potential reorganization of the North American development model could result in players age 16-18 opting for the CHL and then spending their age 19 and 20 seasons playing NCAA hockey. To that point, MacKenzie said the majority of the approximately 220 new players entering the CHL this season are in that 16-18 age range, with a large component coming from the United States because those players now can maintain NCAA eligibility.

However, the age range also could begin to skew older in the CHL as players get squeezed out of NCAA programs prior to their 20th birthday. In previous seasons, NCAA-bound players might spend their age 19 season in the United States Hockey League and then start college at age 20. Now that roster spot might not be there because an 18-year-old from the CHL is coming in as a true freshman, and that older prospect would then go to the CHL at age 20 as an "over-ager."

There's also an additional import player slot, allowing each CHL team to carry three players (up from two) from Europe, including potentially 19- or 20-year-olds who otherwise would have stayed in their domestic leagues.

As for whether the CHL will look younger or older moving forward, MacKenzie said, "I think it's too early to tell. There's so many other parts to this, in terms of what the rules around it are, in terms of player movement. I think we're going to have to wait and see. And I think we've got to be careful we don't make too many assumptions based on six months of data."

The new model also has brought about a new approach to finding players. Each of the three CHL leagues has bantam drafts of 15- and 16-year-olds separated by regions in Canada and the U.S., as well as the CHL import draft.

NCAA teams with an ocean of new players to pick from are devising new ways to find the right players for their systems.

When Dane Jackson took over as coach at North Dakota in April, one of his first moves was to hire Bryn Chyzik as general manager to help oversee recruiting.

"I think there has been some teams that didn't call them a GM, but they had guys more and more on the road, watching more and more," Jackson said. "It is something that we were kind of talking about as a staff, and that just kind of pushed it over the edge when we saw the CHL open up."

"Recruiting is such a big part of building your team in college. You can coach your butt off, but you still need good players to win. I think along the way, we just knew that we had to allocate more time to the pure recruiting. Bryn Chyzik is going to be out there a lot. ... Having Bryn being the main guy out there, and really kind of directing and focusing our approach, is an important element. We knew we had to make that move."

Players say the jump from junior hockey to pro, especially the American Hockey League, can be more difficult than the jump from the AHL to the NHL. Having that NCAA stopover for 18- and 19-year-olds could ease that challenge.

"They're just playing against bigger and stronger players," said Horcoff, who also is GM of Grand Rapids, the Red Wings' AHL affiliate. "The game is faster, playing against older players; there are some 24-year-olds in college. So I just think for some of these kids that aren't quite strong enough for pro hockey yet, it's a nice buffer. It's a nice place to go as kind of a stopover, to play at a level that's a little faster, a little bit bigger and a little stronger."

Though NCAA hockey is in the headlines in part because of the McKenna move, MacKenzie said the future of the CHL remains bright.

Besides McKenna and Verhoeff, most of the top talent for the 2026 NHL Draft will play in the CHL this season, a group that includes Niagara (OHL) forward Ryan Roobroeck, Windsor (OHL) forward Ethan Belchetz, Spokane (WHL) forward Mathis Preston and Vancouver (WHL) defenseman Ryan Lin.

The Hlinka Gretzky Cup, an annual elite international summer under-18 tournament that includes some of the best players entering their NHL draft season, featured 60 CHL players across the eight teams this year. That included all 24 players with Canada and 13 with the U.S., the most since 2000.

"I think our philosophy has been, and will continue to be, the CHL develops players to play professional hockey," MacKenzie said. "That's what we develop for. We're seeing a significant amount come in, and then when they're getting to be older and making decisions on how they think the best way to get to pro hockey is going to be ... I think we have to sort of see where that goes and see how it plays out for those players. I think we feel pretty confident that we have a proven track record of, if you play in your 19-year-old year, your post draft years, with the CHL, that you're going to continue to develop."

There's so much unanswered that could start to come into focus this season.

"It'll be very interesting to see how it shakes out in the next few years, whether [NCAA hockey] will be a normal path for a lot of top players, or if it'll still be kind of mixed," Boston College coach Greg Brown said. "I think with the group that's coming this first year, if there are a lot of success stories, they do well in college and transition right into pro hockey successfully, then I think it'll become a normal path. I'm excited to see how it turns out."