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Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets haunted by Devils in New Jersey: 5 takeaways

By Brian Hedger- March 13, 2025

The Blue Jackets have gotten the NHL's full attention by pushing for a playoff spot against long odds, but they're finding out why it's so difficult to earn a postseason ticket.

There are no free passes to the Stanley Cup Playoffs, even for heartwarming stories, and the Jackets must fare better in their final 18 games than they did during a four-game road trip that concluded Tuesday night with a 5-3 loss to the New Jersey Devils.

After winning four straight coming out of the league's break for the 4 Nations Face-Off in February, they've gone 1-3-0 since defeating the Detroit Red Wings at Ohio Stadium. The only win was a 7-3 blowout of the New York Rangers on Sunday at Madison Square Garden, where the playoff-chasing hosts forgot to play defense.

The Tampa Bay Lightning, Florida Panthers and Devils didn't have that issue against the Blue Jackets.

Here are four takeaways from a frustrating night in New Jersey:

Devils goaltender Jacob Markstrom makes a save on Blue Jackets center Boone Jenner on Tuesday.

Thanks to the Winnipeg Jets' 2-1 victory over the Rangers on Tuesday night in Winnipeg, the Blue Jackets retained the second wild card spot in the Eastern Conference.

Had the Rangers won, they would've tied the Jackets at 70 points and bumped them out of a playoff spot based on the NHL's standings tiebreaker rules. Instead, the Montreal Canadiens and Rangers are now tied at 68 points and trail Columbus by two points.

The Blue Jackets, meanwhile, lost ground to both the Devils within the Metropolitan Division and Ottawa Senators in the East's wild card hunt. Ottawa's victory over the Philadelphia Flyers on Tuesday pushed them three points ahead of the Jackets for the first wild card spot.

The Devils are playing without injured stars Jack Hughes and Dougie Hamilton, but they're still capable of putting together dominant stretches of puck possession. They did it sporadically against the Blue Jackets, including a three-goal first period aided by a power play and two fortunate bounces.

New Jersey scored two opportunistic goals to build a 3-0 lead after Nico Hischier's early goal to cap a power play, but luck had nothing to do with the Devils' defensive pressure making life miserable for the overwhelmed Blue Jackets. Just like it was for the Jackets in Tampa and Sunrise, Florida, they could barely complete a pass for most of the first period in New Jersey.

The neutral zone was a minefield, the offensive zone was mostly closed for business and the Devils literally skated circles around the Blue Jackets' zone. It was a different story in the second period, but not enough for a full comeback.

The Blue Jackets were outshot for the seventh time in the past eight games (25-20) and have been outshot in 15 of the past 20. Their 10-8-2 record in that span is remarkable and, most likely, not sustainable for much longer.

Blue Jackets forward Mathieu Olivier (24) celebrates a goal against the Devils on Tuesday.

Mathieu Olivier has scored the bulk of his 15 goals this season in two stretches. The first solidified his bump up to the third line for most of the season, while the second may keep the Jackets' popular power forward in a top-six role.

After adding two points on a goal and assist Sunday against the Rangers, Olivier added two goals in New Jersey to push his career-high for a single season to 15.

That's 10 more than his prior career-high of five goals each of the past two years with the Blue Jackets, who will gladly take the production while continuing to depend on Olivier's size, strength and fists to keep opposing players honest.

The Blue Jackets' success on power plays has nose-dived since losing Sean Monahan to a wrist injury Jan. 7. They're clicking at just 10% in 23 games since Monahan left the lineup, which ranks 31st out of 32 teams in that span.

Monahan is the bumper who typically lines up between the circles in a 1-3-1 power play setup. He also took key faceoffs to start power plays and kept the puck inside the offensive zone by supporting teammates along the walls. Prior to his injury, Monahan helped boost the Blue Jackets' power play into the 11th best in the league at 23.9% through the first 41 games.

After going 0 for 3 and struggling to get set up inside the Devils' zone, the Blue Jackets went 0 for 10 on their road trip.

Prudential Center is a building that Blue Jackets goalie Elvis Merzlikins probably wouldn't mind skipping.

Most of the five goals he allowed Tuesday weren't primarily his fault, but getting tagged with five goals on 25 shots had to sting. That arena was also the site of a 7-1 loss to the Devils on Oct. 30, 2022.

Merzlikins has solid career numbers overall against New Jersey at 4-4-2 with a 3.16 goals-against average and .911 save percentage, but dropped to 1-2-2 in Newark, New Jersey with a 4.06 GAA and .897 save percentage at Prudential Center.

The Athletic / Why the Blue Jackets' odds-defying season signals a bright future

By Dom Luszczyszyn- March 13, 2025

Before the season started, the Columbus Blue Jackets looked very unlikely to make the playoffs this season. Look at them now.

No one could've imagined that the Blue Jackets would comfortably be in a playoff spot after the trade deadline. After Sunday's incredible win against the Rangers, the Blue Jackets now sit two points ahead of the Rangers with a game in hand. Even after Tuesday's loss against the Devils, they still hold a 55 percent chance of making the playoffs thanks to a Rangers regulation loss.

That is a massive climb from where I had them to start the season, which was, uhh, 0.3 percent. Woof. (Note to self: Use decimal points from now on.)

That means out of the 50,000 simulations I ran, just 150 featured the Blue Jackets making the playoffs. In what seemed like a competitive Eastern Conference with what seemed like one of the league's weakest rosters, it felt almost impossible to envision the Blue Jackets being a playoff team.

I gave them next to no shot to jump all the teams above them with the roster they had, given what those players had shown to date — and boy was I wrong. Here they are, right in the thick of it with 18 games to go. It is not just the best story in hockey this season but one of the greatest underdog sports stories in recent memory. It's an incredible triumph over tragedy, one no one saw coming.

The Blue Jackets were supposed to be one of the worst teams in the league and they might make the playoffs instead. Amazing is an understatement.

If they make the playoffs, the Blue Jackets would be the least likely playoff team I've ever modeled.

The previous record is held by the 2017-18 New Jersey Devils, who I had at 4 percent, one of two teams I've had below 10 percent to start the season that has made the playoffs. The other is last year's Washington Capitals at 6 percent. Since 2017-18, that's two of 37 teams, or 5.4 percent. Roughly what you'd expect given the odds.

Columbus, at 0.3 percent, is not at all what you'd expect. It's not what I expected, naturally, but it's also not what anyone expected. Everyone was wrong about Columbus going into this season.

Because I put an extremely low playoff probability on their chances, I was the most wrong, no question about that. There was far too much certainty on that outcome and the Blue Jackets' shocking surge has served as an important lesson in certainty at the extremes, one that will be fixed for next season.

What's funny is that when I ran a preseason challenge asking fans to "bet" against the model, Columbus at 69 points was somehow one of the teams that the majority of people believed was actually too high. The Blue Jackets had the third most fake money bet against them with 67 percent of people taking the under and 17 percent taking the over. And I doubt those betting the over expected a 90-point team.

That brings us to the betting market, which has a longer history of handicapping the field. Using Sports Odds History, I went all the way back to 2010-11 to see how teams were rated going into the season using their point totals. (Playoff odds only go back to 2014-15 and are a lot less consistent with their certainty levels at the extremes from season to season).

In that time, there have been 65 teams projected to finish the season with 80 points or fewer (or pace for 80 or less in shortened seasons). Just six of those teams have made the playoffs and none have since

2017-18 where somehow three (!) such teams made it. Only two were projected for fewer than 70 points:

Ottawa Senators, 2011-12: 74.5

Calgary Flames, 2014-15: 72.5

Toronto Maple Leafs, 2016-17: 79.0

New Jersey Devils, 2017-18: 75.5

Colorado Avalanche, 2017-18: 69.5

Vegas Golden Knights, 2017-18: 68.5

There's a reason teams below that threshold usually hold minuscule odds. With hockey modeling improving significantly since that season, there's also a reason that no team in that range has made the playoffs over the past six seasons, going 0-for-35.

The Blue Jackets could have something to say about that, and what they've done this season is even more impressive than those other six given where they started.

Before the season, the Blue Jackets were projected to finish with 65.5 points, tied with the 2022-23 Arizona Coyotes for the fourth lowest on record. It's not just that the Blue Jackets were expected to be bad this season — they were expected to be almost uniquely bad. Out of 462 teams, they were rated better than only the 2015-16 Coyotes (64.5 points), the 2020-21 Red Wings (63.7 projected points) and this year's Sharks (63.5 points). That's it.

What the Blue Jackets have done this year is basically unheard of. Their implied odds according to the betting market weren't as low as mine, but still as low as you'll see from oddsmakers at 6.4 percent (and they obviously have a financial incentive not to go too low). That's the fifth lowest since 2014-15 and the 20th instance below 10 percent. Only the 2017-18 Golden Knights at 9.8 percent made the playoffs among that group.

What you'll also notice above: Of the 23 teams projected for fewer than 72 points, just two even eclipsed 80. The Blue Jackets need just 10 points over their final 18 games to get there and are currently projected to hit 90. Even if they fall short of the playoffs, this season will still have been a massive success.

Columbus is doing what almost no bottom-feeder has been able to do and it's extremely notable that the two that did find similar levels of unexpected success — Colorado and Vegas — followed it up with a long era of contention afterward. And one Stanley Cup apiece.

If there's one big takeaway from this season, it stems from the potential promise of that comparison. Defying the odds to this degree could be a signal of what's to come in Columbus' future. From this vantage point, the future looks extremely bright.

It was impossible to know how the Blue Jackets would respond to the tragedy of Johnny Gaudreau's death, and this year's rally toward the playoffs has been beyond commendable.

Coach Dean Evason deserves a whole lot of credit for turning the ship around, as do a number of players who have simultaneously broken out as difference-makers. Zach Werenski, Kirill Marchenko, Dmitri Voronkov, Kent Johnson ... the list goes on of players who look a whole lot more valuable than they did back in September. Even a player who struggled early, like Adam Fantilli, looks like a rockstar lately thanks to a promotion to the top line. Almost everyone leveled up in a significant way, which bodes

extremely well for the team's future. For maybe the first time in franchise history, Columbus' core looks extremely exciting.

I'm not saying the Blue Jackets are guaranteed contenders, but we've seen a lot of bottom-feeder teams struggle to take the next step. Seeing the Blue Jackets level up this much in one fell swoop feels significant. There's still a lot of work to do ahead of them — just look at how much Colorado and Vegas had to change after their own shocking success story — and it's important for the team not to get too far ahead of themselves either. Given there are some unsustainable elements to their success this season, some caution is warranted. But with the pieces Columbus now has in place, the team's road to contention looks a lot clearer now than it did six months ago.

For this season though, it's hard to understate how much I did not see many of these breakouts coming. I would guess I'm not alone. Werenski is a top three defenseman in the world? Marchenko and Voronkov combining to create one of the best top lines in hockey? Sean Monahan with a career year before injury? All happening at the same time? All those things happening at once would've been met with plenty of raised eyebrows back in September.

It happened, though, and it's led to some sizeable model adjustments. There's still some caution being exhibited with some of the breakouts, but it's led to a seismic shift across the board. Werenski is now the third-highest rated defender. Marchenko, Monahan and Voronkov are all legit top-line talents.

This team has shown real progress. And while there may be some red flags in the underlying numbers, it's become apparent that there was a lot more skill and talent on this roster than initially thought — talent that Evason helped to flourish. A good coach works wonders.

From top to bottom, the Blue Jackets look better than anyone could've imagined. They've already beat the odds and in doing so, helped show the utility of measuring those odds in the first place.

It's those odds that add context to how special this season has been. It adds to the narrative and helps explain what an incredible achievement it would be for the Blue Jackets to reach the postseason this year. It adds an awesome factor to making the playoffs because it shows exactly how far they've come to get to that point. By defying the odds so greatly, it also shows how special this team could be down the road.

Everyone loves an underdog story and the Blue Jackets were the ultimate one going into the year, a team no one believed in. Making the playoffs would be a fairy tale ending, one that now has a very real chance of happening. One that fans of a long-suffering franchise truly deserve.

Whether it's 300-to-1, 100-to-1, 20-to-1 or anything in between — the Blue Jackets weren't supposed to make it this far. The odds were significantly stacked against them.

Yet here they are, doing the almost unthinkable and making it feel like this fairy tale is just beginning. It's impossible not to root for. And learn from.

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BlueJackets.com / For Blue Jackets, playoff race is their only focus

By Jeff Svoboda- March 13, 2025

When the Blue Jackets spend time this summer updating their record book, Zach Werenski has made sure it will be no easy task.

He already holds – well, has already reset, as he was the previous owner of all of these marks, too – the Blue Jackets record for assists (48) and points (68) in a season for a defenseman. He's tied his own franchise record for goals in a season for a blueliner with 20, broke Rick Nash's CBJ record of career assists, and will threaten overall team records for assists and points in a season before it's all said and done, as well.

He's almost certain to finish in the top two of the Norris Trophy voting, if not win it, and it's hard to imagine a defenseman having a more impactful season.

But only one thing matters to Werenski as the Blue Jackets battle down the stretch.

Making the playoffs.

"It's one of those things where I love the records and points and all that stuff because it means I'm doing my job," Werenski said. "The best part about it is it means I'm helping the team win, and that's all I really care about. It's one of those things where it's been an overwhelming year in that sense with all this stuff that's happened for me. I don't really like it that much, but at the end of the day, when the puck drops, I go out there and try to help the team win in any way I can.

"Postseason means more to me than any of those records – any points, any goals, whatever it is. You play this game to win, and we haven't done that in a long time, and I haven't had a chance to. I'm in my prime now and I feel like I'm ready for the postseason, and I feel like this team is ready for it. I would feel much more satisfaction if I played this way in the playoffs and the team is having the success. I just want to get there and show them what I can do and show them what this team can do."

Indeed, for the Blue Jackets players who have played out the string enough the past few seasons, the playoff race is the opportunity they've been waiting for. In the second wild card spot right now through 64 games, the Blue Jackets control their own destiny to make it to the postseason, especially with 11 home games out of the 18 left.

It would be the franchise's first playoff appearance since they skated in the bubble postseason of 2019-20, and the first with games played at Nationwide Arena since the stunning upset of Tampa Bay in the 2018-19 season netted the franchise's first series win in Stanley Cup Playoffs history.

Only Werenski and Boone Jenner remain with the Blue Jackets from that 2018-19 postseason run, and it's felt like a long and arduous journey for Columbus to get back to this point. That would make it extra sweet for those CBJ players to return to the postseason, and Jenner confirmed there's a little extra bounce in his step now that he's back on the ice and contributing to the cause while playing in meaningful games.

"It's way better," Jenner said. "It's where you want to be as a team right now in this fight for the playoffs, and every game, it just keeps getting bigger and it's more fun. That's why you play the game. You watch these kids battle all year and have us in this spot, for me to come back into it, it's awesome. I just want to help them out. It's been fun."

One of the biggest keys to the Blue Jackets' success has been the team buy-in, as evidenced by Werenski's focus on wins over any individual accolades. That's music to the ears of head coach Dean Evason, who has preached focus on one game to the next and turning in consistent efforts throughout the season.

There have been bumps in the road throughout the season, as there are for all teams, but for a young squad that is largely experiencing playoff pressure for the first time, the Blue Jackets have done a good job of focusing on the task at hand.

"I think every coach strives to have consistency," Evason said. "It's just a build that you start from day one, and you just try to continually talk about the team and putting the team first and all that, and our guys have done a fantastic job of that and not worrying about outside distractions or stuff that we have no influence over. We're trying to be as consistent as we can this time of year. Obviously we want to be playing really well and continue to get better, and hopefully we can do that."

Despite losing three out of the last four, all on the road, the Blue Jackets haven't withered under the glare of the postseason spotlight. Since Dec. 19, the team is tied for seventh in the NHL with 19 wins and tied for fifth in points percentage at .641, including an impressive 13-2-1 mark in Nationwide Arena.

Sure, the games are getting bigger and there's more pressure to get the job done, but that's no surprise to a CBJ team that has been in important contests for months now.

"Every game's been big, right?" Evason said. "Every game we've started, it's like, jeez, this is a big game. Of course, they're all big games. I mean, three months ago they're big games. So our message to the group is one game at a time. We've done a good job of focusing on that. We're not scoreboard watching or standings watching. If we look after what we have to do in order to give ourselves a chance every night, then we'll be happy with the results."

President of hockey operations and general manager Don Waddell recognized how far his team has come and made the decision to not trade any unrestricted free agents-to-be at the trade deadline, in part because of the close nature of the locker room but also because he feels this team deserves a chance to make these games count down the stretch.

While Waddell didn't break the bank at the deadline, he did add a pair of experienced forwards in Luke Kunin (trade) and Christian Fischer (waivers) last week. It's a good mix, as the team's veterans appreciated Waddell's decision to keep the group together, and someone like Kunin is excited to come in and help out after spending the first three-quarters of the season with a rebuilding San Jose team.

"It means a lot," Kunin said. "That's why you play. You want to make the playoffs, you want to win the Stanley Cup. That's been missing for me the past few years in San Jose, so I'm very excited for this opportunity to chase for a spot and hopefully play playoff hockey."

NHL.com / Trophy Tracker: Werenski of Blue Jackets choice for Norris as best defenseman

By David Satriano- March 13, 2025

To mark the three-quarter point of the 2024-25 regular season, NHL.com is running its third installment of the Trophy Tracker series this week. Today, we look at the race for the Norris Trophy, awarded annually to the top defenseman in the NHL as selected in a vote by the Professional Hockey Writers Association.

The Columbus Blue Jackets have been one of the surprise teams in the NHL this season, and defenseman Zach Werenski is a big reason why.

The 27-year-old has already set career highs in assists (49), points (69), time on ice per game (26:56) and shots on goal (223), and has tied his high in goals (20), power-play goals (five), power-play points (21) and game-winning goals (four). He's helped the Blue Jackets (31-25-8) currently sit in a wild-card spot in the Eastern Conference after the team finished 29th in the NHL standings last season (27-43-12) and 31st in 2022-23 (25-48-9).

"I think he's been unbelievable carrying the load the whole season," Columbus defenseman Jake Christiansen said Monday. "He's been so consistent. ... He's been great in the locker room. With and Erik Gudbranson going down early, [Werenski] had to step up and improve his leadership role."

Werenski leads the NHL in ice time per game and is second among defenseman in points. In his eight previous seasons, he never finished higher than eighth in voting for the Norris Trophy, which is awarded to the best defenseman in the NHL. That should change this season.

"You don't realize how good he is until you're actually watching him on a day-to-day basis," defense partner Dante Fabbro told the Blue Jackets website last month. "He is that elite of a defenseman. I see it every single day with just the way he goes about his business and how he leads the team. He leads off the ice, obviously, but on the ice is a huge attribute to his hard work and his dedication to the game."

"He doesn't cheat the game at all. He plays the right way every single game. For myself and my teammates, (his impact) doesn't shock us at all. He's easily one of the best defensemen in this league and he's definitely in that Norris conversation."

Werenski received 73 points, including nine first-place votes from NHL.com's 16-person panel to edge out Cale Makar of the Colorado Avalanche (70 points; seven first-place votes) as the pick for the Norris at the three-quarter point of the season. Quinn Hughes of the Vancouver Canucks was third (48 points).

"I think (of him) as a Norris contender," Christiansen said. "Obviously, we're all rooting for him in our room. He's been so amazing. He's done so much this season with maybe less help than other guys."

"He's up and down the ice. He's unbelievable offensively, but at the same time, he's probably the guy you run out there in the last minute defensively, so we rely on him in all situations. He plays 30 minutes a night. so pretty much half the game he's out there contributing on both ends of the rink."

For his part, all that matters for Werenski is winning and helping the Blue Jackets qualify for the postseason, where it hasn't been since 2020. After he had two assists in a 7-3 win against the New York Rangers on Sunday to become Columbus' all-time leader in assists, he was unimpressed.

"Trying to enjoy the year, enjoy the moment, enjoy the spot we are in as a team and just keep going and play my game," Werenski said. "It's one of those things where I really don't care. As bad as that might sound, I just want to keep helping this team win."

Werenski, who recently had his 22-game home point streak end, also led all scorers at the 4 Nations Face-Off last month, when he had six points (all assists) for the United States.

"You look at the way Zach just took his game to another level, it seems like he should be in the conversation for an MVP for that team," said Winnipeg Jets forward Kyle Connor, who played minor hockey with Werenski (2008-12), one season with him at the University of Michigan (2015-16), and was his teammate at the 4 Nations Face-Off. "That's just the type of player he is."

Voting totals (points awarded on a 5-4-3-2-1-basis): Zach Werenski, Columbus Blue Jackets, 73 points (nine first-place votes); Cale Makar, Colorado Avalanche, 70 points (seven first-place votes) ; Quinn Hughes, Vancouver Canucks, 48; Josh Morrissey, Winnipeg Jets, 13; Victor Hedman, Tampa Bay Lightning, 11; Shea Theodore, Vegas Golden Knights, 7; Jaccob Slavin, Carolina Hurricanes, 5; Ryan McDonagh, Tampa Bay Lightning, 3; Thomas Harley, Dallas Stars, 3; Rasmus Dahlin, Buffalo Sabres, 3; Moritz Seider, Detroit Red Wings, 1; Lane Hutson, Montreal Canadiens, 1; Brock Faber, Minnesota Wild, 1; Adam Fox, New York Rangers, 1

1st Ohio Battery / Three Things: Bad Start, Olivier And Marchenko Start Comeback Bid, Overall, Just Not Enough

By Will Chase- March 13, 2025

A tough loss wraps up a 1-3-0 road trip.

Jesper Bratt had a three-point night and the New Jersey Devils scored three first-period goals to dismantle the Columbus Blue Jackets 5-3 on Tuesday night at Prudential Center.

Jakob Markstrom made 17 saves on 20 shots while Elvis Merzlikins made 23 saves on 28 shots.

Bad Start

Looking to pick up where things left off with Sunday's 7-3 win at the New York Rangers, the Jackets didn't get off to such a swell start Tuesday night in New Jersey.

Three first-period goals by Nick Hischier, Paul Cotter, and Bratt gave the Devils a 3-0 lead through the first 20 minutes. Hischier had his 27th on the power play at 6:37 with Bratt getting his team-leading 54th assist and Luke Hughes his 25th. Cotter's 14th at 10:49 was unassisted. Bratt's (18) tally came at 18:51 with recent trade deadline acquisition Cody Glass getting his 12th helper.

Comeback Bid

The Blue Jackets came into the night sixth in the league with 73 second-period goals while the Devils came in fourth with 78.

Columbus did their part to start the comeback with Mathieu Olivier's 14th at 3:30 of the second period. Denton Mateychuk (3) and Kent Johnson (24) assisted. Johnson has points in eight of his last nine games (five goals, five assists). Since Jan. 20, he's gone just two games without a point and has 24 points (11 goals, 13 assists) since Jan. 1.

Kirill Marchenko (25) pulled the Jackets to within one goal to make it 3-2 at 7:16 with Adam Fantilli (21) and Zach Werenski (49) getting the assists. Fantilli is second on the team with 27 points (14 goals, 13 assists) since Jan. 1, three points ahead of Kent Johnson and two points behind Zach Werenski (nine goals, 20 assists) in that span.

New Jersey would get one back with Timo Meier's 18th at 16:49, from Stefan Noesen (15) and Brian Dumoulin (15), to break up the momentum.

After that second period, Columbus is tied for fifth with 75 goals in the second period along with New Jersey and the Florida Panthers.

Just not Enough

It was not meant to be.

Obviously, the Jackets simply needed a better performance as the 3-0 hole made the climb back that much tougher, even though they had things within a goal in the second period.

Down two entering the third period, and still with a chance, Luke Hughes all but ended that with his sixth goal 26 seconds in. Glass picked up his second assist (13) and Bratt completed his three-point night in getting his third assist (55).

The red-hot Olivier did make things a tad more interesting with his second of the evening and fifth in the last seven games at 10:29. Boone Jenner picked up his ninth assist.

Oliver's previous career high in goals was five in 2022-23 and 2023-24. With 15 goals on the season and 18 games remaining, he has a shot to be the sixth member of the team with at least 20 goals. The Jackets have already set a franchise record with five skaters at the 20-goal mark.

Instead of being within two points of the Devils and third place in the Metropolitan Division, they're six points back and holding onto the second Eastern Conference wild-card spot by a narrow two-point margin over the Montreal Canadiens, Rangers, and Boston Bruins.

Columbus was 0-for-3 on the power play while the Devils were 1-for-5.

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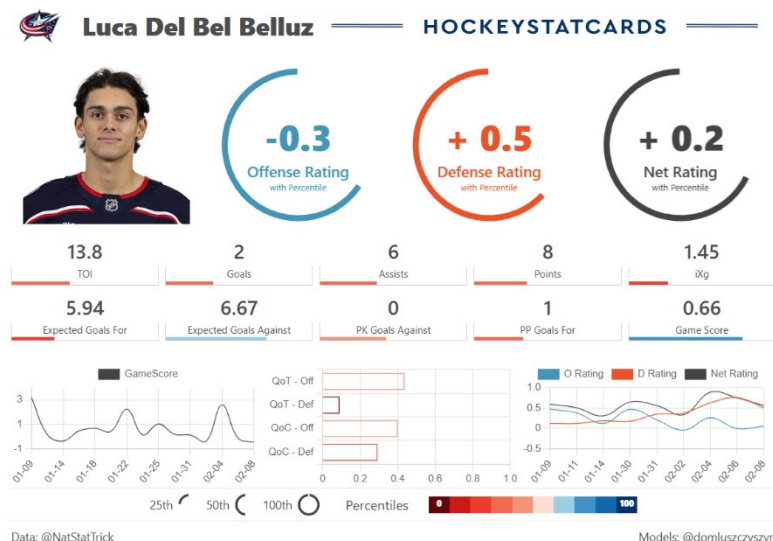
The Blue Jackets return home to entertain the Vegas Golden Knights on Thursday, Mar. 13, at 7 p.m. ET.

By Matthew Burhmann- March 13, 2025

Del Bel Belluz's Immediate NHL Impact

This season, Del Bel Belluz was called up in January to fill in after injuries sidelined centers Sean Monahan and captain Boone Jenner. In 15 games with Columbus, he racked up two goals and six assists for eight points while logging 18 shots on goal, putting up a plus-2 rating.

More importantly, his time in Columbus has given him the chance to grow as a young player. His defensive game has come a long way this season, which was evident during his 15-game NHL stint. According to HockeyStatcards.com, he earned an improved +0.5 defensive rating over those games when slotted around in the lineup, showing that he's putting in the work to become a reliable two-way forward. You could tell he was playing with more confidence each night, and it's that confidence he's now brought back to Cleveland, giving them a massive boost as they push for a playoff spot.



A big part of his growth this season can be traced back to Blue Jackets head coach Dean Evason and the confidence he showed in the young center. Rather than limiting Del Bel Belluz to safe, low-pressure minutes, Evason trusted him to handle big moments and tough assignments. A perfect example of this came on Jan. 22 against the Toronto Maple Leafs. The second year-pro played a career-high 15:49 of ice

time in that game—above his 13:08 average during his 15-game stint—and he delivered a standout performance, notching a goal and an assist for a two-point night. It was arguably his best showing as a Blue Jacket and just a glimpse of the high-end impact he's capable of.

What sets Evason apart is his willingness to rely on young players, even during important stretches of the season. With the Blue Jackets in the middle of a playoff race, he still gave Del Bel Belluz meaningful minutes across the lineup, allowing him to prove himself in his systems. That kind of trust goes a long way in building a player's confidence, and it's clear he carried those lessons with him back to Cleveland. It's coaching decisions like these that show why Evason is so widely respected in Columbus.

Del Bel Belluz's Continued Success in Cleveland

Since returning to the Monsters just before the 4-Nations Face-Off break early in February, Del Bel Belluz has continued to shine. Just last Saturday (March 8), he scored twice against the Hershey Bears, hitting 20 goals on the season and solidifying his spot as Cleveland's third-highest scorer with 41 points (20 goals, 21 assists). Even though the Monsters fell short in a tough 4-3 loss, his consistency has been crucial as the team tries to clinch a playoff berth.

Paired with linemates Rocco Grimaldi and Trey Fix-Wolansky—two players also having standout seasons—Del Bel Belluz has been the driving force on Cleveland's top line in the center role. He's a playmaker with quick hands and sharp transition play to create chances for himself and his teammates. His ability to read the game and time his attacks are what make him such a dangerous player, especially in Cleveland's somewhat simple offensive/defensive systems.

He's also had some well-earned recognition this season, being named to the 2025 AHL All-Star roster for the North Division. That's no small achievement for a 21-year-old and it's yet another sign that his game is heading in the right direction.

Another Tight Playoff Race

As the regular season winds down, the playoff race in the AHL North Division is also tight. Cleveland currently holds fourth place with a 28-18-5-5 record, but the Syracuse Crunch and Belleville Senators are just six points behind—breathing right down their necks. There's no room for error, and the Monsters will need to hold separation if they want to secure a postseason berth down the stretch. As of March 11, the Monsters' magic number is four more wins to clinch a berth, (five teams in the North Division will make the postseason.)

Blue Jackets general manager Don Waddell made some smart moves to give the team a better shot. Sending down players like Joseph LaBate and Denton Mateychuk also bolstered Cleveland's roster, ensuring their AHL playoff eligibility while keeping them available for depth purposes.

However, the Monsters are no strangers to big moments. Last season, they were the second-best team in the Eastern Conference and made a memorable run to the Eastern Conference Final. After clawing their way back from a 3-0 deficit against the Hershey Bears, they suffered a heartbreaking overtime loss in Game 7. That bitter ending is still likely in the back of their minds, and it's surely a huge motivator for this group.

What's Next for Del Bel Belluz?

While Del Bel Belluz will probably finish the season in Cleveland, you can't rule out the possibility of him getting another call-up if Columbus runs into injuries up front—especially during a deep playoff run, where those things tend to happen every season. Just look back at the 2023 Western Conference Final, when former Edmonton Oiler Dylan Holloway made his NHL debut in Game 4 against the Colorado Avalanche.

For Del Bel Belluz, the same opportunity could come at any time. He's already shown he can handle himself in the NHL, and if the Jackets need reinforcements, he could be called upon to make an impact.

With his AHL All-Star season, improved two-way game, and confidence gained from his NHL stint, Del Bel Belluz is well on his way to becoming a full-time NHLer. Whether it's helping Cleveland make a playoff run or stepping up for the Blue Jackets in the near future, the future is bright for this rising star.

ESPN / NHL Awards WATCH: Who's leading for Hart, Norris, Calder?

By Greg Wyshynski- March 13, 2025

While the Stanley Cup playoffs races remain tight and delightfully chaotic, the races for the NHL Awards have also seen some major shifts since last month: There's a new leader for MVP and for the league's best defenseman.

Welcome to the NHL Awards Watch for March. We've polled a wide selection of Professional Hockey Writers Association voters anonymously to get a sense of where the wind is blowing for the current leaders. We've made sure it's a cross section from the entire league, trying to gain as many perspectives as possible.

Bear in mind that the PHWA votes for the Hart, Norris, Calder, Selke and Lady Byng finalists, broadcasters vote for the Jack Adams, and general managers handle the Vezina.

All stats are from Hockey-Reference.com, Natural Stat Trick and Evolving Hockey.

Jump ahead:

Ross | Richard | Hart

Norris | Selke | Vezina

Calder | Byng | Adams

Art Ross Trophy (points leader)

[Click here for the updated point-scoring standings.](#)

Maurice 'Rocket' Richard Trophy

[Click here for the updated goal-scoring standings.](#)

Hart Trophy (MVP)

Leader: Nathan MacKinnon, Colorado Avalanche

Finalists: Leon Draisaitl, Edmonton Oilers; Connor Hellebuyck, Winnipeg Jets

Nathan MacKinnon takes the MVP lead back from Connor Hellebuyck, who had a tenuous grasp on the top spot last month.

MacKinnon is trying to become the first back-to-back league MVP since Alex Ovechkin from 2007-08 to 2008-09. Since 1980, only three players have captured the Hart in consecutive seasons: Ovechkin, Dominik Hasek (1996-97, 1997-98) and Wayne Gretzky, who went on a run of eight straight league MVPs from 1979 through 1987. That's the level of feat MacKinnon is trying to accomplish here.

He's also trying to do something for the first time in his career: win the Art Ross Trophy as the NHL's leading points producer. He was second to Nikita Kucherov (144 points) last season despite a career-high 140 points. That MacKinnon is threatening the scoring lead after the Avalanche traded Mikko Rantanen in January has bolstered his MVP credentials. So has the fact that he has turned Martin Necas into a more than acceptable replacement.

"Incredibly consistent and so crucial to Colorado's success this season," one voter said.

"Colorado doesn't get enough credit for being where they are despite having brutal depth and terrible goaltending for the first eight weeks of the season," another voter explained.

MacKinnon had 33% of the first-place votes on the ballots we surveyed. It's not a runaway by any means.

Right behind him with around 26% of the first-place votes is Leon Draisaitl. The Edmonton star has had a comfortable lead in the NHL goal-scoring race all season -- while he led the NHL in points back in 2019-20, he has never won the Rocket Richard Trophy for goals. The season Draisaitl won the Art Ross is also the only time he captured the Hart Trophy, though that's understandable when Connor McDavid -- three-time MVP, six-time finalist -- is on your team.

"MacKinnon is on pace to win his second Hart Trophy in a row but Leon Draisaitl isn't far behind," a MacKinnon voter said.

"This award still seems very much up for grabs. I keep flip flopping here," a Draisaitl voter quipped.

What Draisaitl has going for him: a strong analytics case, leading the NHL in goals scored above replacement, per Evolving Hockey.

Hellebuyck, last month's leader, still has a ton of support, with 22% of the first-place votes. He has led the NHL in traditional goalie stats all season. Money Puck has him leading in goals saved above expected, while Stathletes has him in the top three.

The NHL hasn't had a goalie win MVP since Montreal's Carey Price in 2014-15.

"There is a zero percent chance Winnipeg is the best team in the league right now if not for Hellebuyck. That's undeniable," a Hellebuyck voter declared.

That's the top three, but there are two other players who received first-place votes as well.

One of them is Zach Werenski of the Columbus Blue Jackets, a team with perhaps the most uplifting story of the playoff race. He leads his team in scoring and has played nearly 27 minutes per game this season, doing everything to elevate the Jackets to an unlikely postseason push.

A defenseman hasn't won the Hart since Chris Pronger captured the MVP with the St. Louis Blues in 1999-2000.

The other player in the mix is Kucherov of the Tampa Bay Lightning, who has a points-per-game argument against MacKinnon's point totals this season. Kucherov also has a sizable lead in his own team's scoring race, with a gap that was recently more than 20 points ahead of Brandon Hagel and Brayden Point.

"There's enough racetrack left for Tampa's dark horse to give voters little choice but to at least consider him a legitimate race finalist," a Kucherov backer noted.

Norris Trophy (top defenseman)

Leader: Zach Werenski, Columbus Blue Jackets

Finalists: Quinn Hughes, Vancouver Canucks; Cale Makar, Colorado Avalanche

For the first time this season, Zach Werenski is the leader for the Norris Trophy. Quinn Hughes had been the established leader for the award throughout the season, earning 45% of the first-place votes last month. But Hughes has played only three games since Jan. 31, and his limited games played vs. the other Norris candidates has dropped him down the rankings.

"Hughes had it locked up before his injury," a voter concluded.

Werenski, meanwhile, is having his moment. Whether it's the Jackets' incredible story, the Stadium Series spotlight or his play in the 4 Nations Face-Off, Werenski's star is rising at the right time, and he has the stats to back up his case.

"I'm on the Zach Werenski train. He's a big, big reason for why the Blue Jackets are still in this thing," a voter noted

"The Blue Jackets? A playoff team? Not without Werenski playing the way he has," another voter said.

"Werenski has been incredible, but it's a three-horse race between him, Quinn Hughes and Cale Makar," another voter offered.

Werenski earned 48% of the first-place votes from the ballots we surveyed. This is easily the most awards buzz Werenski has gotten, as he has previously placed only as high as eighth in the Norris voting.

Someone who is used to awards buzz is Makar, who has been a Norris finalist four straight seasons and won the award in 2021-22. The Colorado blueliner snatched the scoring lead among defensemen and hasn't looked back, skating over 25 minutes per game. Makar had 41% of the first-place votes.

"Makar is as good as it gets on the blue line," a voter declared.

"Makar has been excellent all season," another voter offered.

That said, some Makar voters acknowledge there are mitigating circumstances here. "It's Makar, but only because injuries have hurt Quinn Hughes' season," a voter suggested.

Others are glancing over their shoulders at what Werenski is doing.

"A late push from Zach Werenski and the Blue Jackets could sway this voter," they said.

"Werenski is now No. 2 with a bullet for me," a Makar voter confirmed.

Hughes still has some true believers in his corner, earning the rest of the first-place votes. Before his injury, Hughes was building a case for the Hart Trophy as well as his second straight Norris Trophy.

Calder Trophy (top rookie)

Leader: Macklin Celebrini, San Jose Sharks

Finalists: Lane Hutson, Montreal Canadiens; Dustin Wolf, Calgary Flames

The same top three as last month's Awards Watch, and with the same ranking: Macklin Celebrini leads, with Dustin Wolf next and Lane Hutson behind him. But the race continues to tighten.

Celebrini, 18, has seen his first-place vote share go from 90% to 60% to now 48% this month -- still a sizable advantage, but other rookies are clearly invited to the party. Celebrini has been around the rookie lead in goals and points, and has steadily led in points per game after having missed some time earlier this season.

"This is Macklin Celebrini's to lose and I don't think he will," a voter proposed.

"Celebrini's all-around impact on the game is undeniable. Every time I watch a Sharks game, I'm amazed by how polished his game is," another voter admitted. "He's a borderline elite NHL player at 18 years old."

"The race may be tightening, but I still lean toward the most dynamic presence playing on the worst team," another voter revealed.

Wolf has solidified his case as the best rookie goaltender -- there's not really anyone else in the conversation at this point -- but also as the MVP of the Flames' playoff push. His traditional stats are strong, and he's just outside the top 10 in goals saved above expected. The last rookie goalie to win the Calder was Steve Mason of the Columbus Blue Jackets in 2008-09.

"If the Flames make the playoffs, there's a legit chance," a voter noted.

"If we're talking about who has truly been the best performing rookie over the balance of the season, it has to be Dustin Wolf," another voter argued. "What he's done in Calgary is remarkable and he's the only rookie in the discussion who's been consistently at the top of his game all year."

Like Wolf with goalies, Hutson is lapping the field among rookie defensemen. He's also a serious threat to lead all rookies in scoring as a defenseman, something Quinn Hughes did in 2019-20 -- although he finished second in the Calder race to Makar that season.

Hutson has been a highlight-generating blueliner for the Canadiens. He earned 11% of the first-place votes.

"Hutson's just been an absolute force," a voter quipped.

"He's been a big part of Montreal's surprising season," another voter pointed out.

The rest of the first-place votes went to Matvei Michkov, who dropped out of the top three for the Calder last month. He's still very much in the race for most points and goals. But the "tough love" from coach John Tortorella this season, which has included a healthy scratch and benchings, might have created the perception that there are holes in his game.

"I have time for all of these rookies. Michkov is a strong No. 4 guy," a voter offered.

Vezina Trophy (top goaltender)

Note: The NHL's general managers vote for this award.

Leader: Connor Hellebuyck, Winnipeg Jets

Finalists: Logan Thompson, Washington Capitals; Andrei Vasilevskiy, Tampa Bay Lightning

It's Connor Hellebuyck for the Vezina. It's unanimous (at least if the PHWA voted on this one).

Every voter we surveyed had Hellebuyck atop their ballots, citing his dominating statistical season and his importance to the Jets' push for the conference title. Hellebuyck won the Vezina for the second time in his career last season. The last goalie to win at least three Vezina trophies was Hall of Famer Martin Brodeur, who was also the last goalie to win back-to-back Vezinas.

"It's still Connor Hellebuyck's world and we're all just trying not to look silly attempting to score in it," a voter explained.

"Best goaltender in the world and I don't think it's particularly close," another voter declared.

Logan Thompson made the top three last month and even syphoned off support from Hellebuyck, earning 15% of the first-place votes. He has been outstanding for the Capitals, who have traded the league lead in points with Hellebuyck's Jets for most of the season. Thompson received the most down-ballot support, if not a first-place vote.

"Hellebuyck is the only option here. Thompson has been great, but he's just not in the same realm," a voter concluded.

Dustin Wolf was the third choice last month, but it's clear that Andrei Vasilevskiy has entered the chat. The Lightning goalie, who won the Vezina in 2018-19, has steadily gotten better as the season has gone on for Tampa Bay. He was 18-7-2 from December through February.

Selke Trophy (best defensive forward)

Leader: Aleksander Barkov, Florida Panthers

Finalists: Mitch Marner, Toronto Maple Leafs; Sam Reinhart, Florida Panthers

Right now, it appears that Aleksander Barkov will continue his Patrice Bergeron-like run as the best defensive forward in the NHL. The Panthers star earned 56% of the first-place votes, which was only slightly down from last month's 60%.

"Selke Sasha. I think we've found a new nickname for Barkov," one voter joked. "It's his award now, right?"

Barkov won the Selke for the second time last season. He has won the award twice in the past four seasons, broken up by Bergeron's back-to-back Selke wins from 2021-22 to 2022-23.

But he's not the only Panthers player in the mix for the Selke. Sam Reinhart has impressive underlying numbers, some better than teammate Barkov's.

"Reinhart has better on-ice impacts on expected goals and goals against rate. He was excellent when Barkov was out. He deserves the nod this year over his teammate," a voter explained.

Another Reinhart voter declared: "Give it to a winger!"

That's a worthy goal in Selke voting, provided there's a worthy candidate. Centers have won the Selke every season since 2002-03, when right wing Jere Lehtinen of the Dallas Stars captured the award. But Reinhart isn't the only winger with some support. Mitch Marner received the next-most first-place votes.

"I'm tempted to put Marner here," a Barkov voter revealed.

"He somehow manages to be underrated, outside of Toronto," a Marner voter noted.

The other three players to receive first-place votes were center Jordan Staal, the Carolina Hurricanes captain who has been searching for his first Selke win for 15 years and finished second for the award last season; Tampa Bay Lightning center Anthony Cirelli; and, somewhat surprisingly, Washington Capitals center Pierre-Luc Dubois.

"He's a sleeper that could get some votes. Really playing a shutdown, two-way game," a voter offered.

Also receiving some love down the ballots: New Jersey Devils center Nico Hischier, Vegas Golden Knights center Jack Eichel and winger Mark Stone, and Flyers winger Noah Cates. Hischier was in the top three last month.

Lady Byng Trophy (gentlemanly play)

This is the part where I mention that the Lady Byng Trophy for gentlemanly play should be voted on by the league's on-ice officials or by the NHL Players' Association instead of the PHWA.

Traditionally, this award goes to a player with a top-20 point total and the lowest penalty minutes among those players.

Brayden Point of the Lightning had just two penalty minutes in his first 58 games of the season. Jack Eichel of the Golden Knights has a shot, having amassed only six penalty minutes through his first 61 games.

Jack Adams Award (best coach)

Note: The NHL Broadcasters' Association votes on this award.

Leader: Spencer Carbery, Washington Capitals

Finalists: Scott Arniel, Winnipeg Jets; Dean Evason, Columbus Blue Jackets

The top three of last month's NHL Awards Watch remain the top three this month.

Spencer Carbery received 63% of the first-place votes, getting the majority of the credit for the Capitals' ascent from bubble team last season to top of the NHL this season.

"Carbery, and it's not even close," a voter concluded.

"Every time the Capitals hint at wobbling a bit, they quickly veer back on track," another voter explained. "Carbery deserves a great deal of credit for keeping his team focused on never losing their momentum from season's start."

"Carbery is having a masterful year and is pressing all the right buttons," another voter proposed.

"Washington has been able to sustain their play all season and Carbery's system has clearly brought the best out of many players," another voter offered.

But a handful of Carbery voters said that if there's one coach that could pass him in the Jack Adams race, it would be Dean Evason, who has led the Blue Jackets from the unthinkable tragedy of Johnny Gaudreau's death to a potential playoff berth.

"It feels like Dean Evason is Carbery's only competition," a voter noted.

"It's still difficult not to give the edge to Carbery, but at what point do we need to start acknowledging the job Dean Evason has done in Columbus?" another voter pondered. "Losing arguably their best player to a horrific tragedy before a season that was already viewed as a playoff longshot and look at them now."

Evason earned 15% of the first-place votes.

Ranking third was Scott Arniel. Like Evason, he's in his first season as head coach of his current team, although he had previous NHL experience. The Jets have been near the top of the NHL all season. While Hellebuyck deserves a lot of credit for that, the Jets' offense has also been tremendous.

Also receiving a first-place vote: Jon Cooper of the Lightning, who has never won the Jack Adams in his successful career in Tampa Bay. "I know Carbery is the likely front-runner here because Washington's success has been unexpected, but did anybody truly expect the Lightning to be one of the top defensive teams after how last year went?" one voter asked.

The home stretch is here for all of these awards contenders. There's still plenty of time for these races to shift.

ESPN / NHL playoff standings: Canucks or Flames for last wild card?

By ESPN staff- March 13, 2025

The Vancouver Canucks were the regular-season champions of the Pacific Division in 2023-24, and won their first-round playoff matchup against the Nashville Predators. The Calgary Flames finished 17 points out of a wild-card spot last season, and during last season and the offseason, traded away Jacob Markstrom, Noah Hanifin, Elias Lindholm, Nikita Zadorov and Chris Tanev.

One might say that expectations were different for the two clubs before the season, which is backed up by the preseason point total over/unders from ESPN BET: the Canucks were listed at 99.5, with the Flames at 81.5

Nevertheless, the two Western Canadian teams are battling for the final Western Conference wild-card spot with a little over a month left in the season. On Wednesday night, they'll face off in Calgary (9 p.m. ET, ESPN+). Heading into the game, Calgary has 70 points and 24 regulation wins in 63 games, and Vancouver has 69 and 23 through 63. This will be the final head-to-head matchup between the clubs.

Of the Flames' remaining games beyond Wednesday, 10 out of 18 are against teams in a playoff position. For the Canucks, it's nine out of the final 17.

Stathletes projects the Flames to finish in that coveted wild-card position, with 89.6 points. Vancouver is projected at 88.1 points, behind Calgary and also the St. Louis Blues and Utah Hockey Club.

Given the tight margins, every game counts, particularly one against a fellow wild-card bubble team.

There is a lot of runway left until the final day of the season April 17, and we'll help you keep track of it all on the NHL playoff watch. As we traverse the final stretch, we'll provide details on all the playoff races -- along with the teams jockeying for position in the 2025 NHL draft lottery.

Note: Playoff chances are via Stathletes.

Jump ahead:

Current playoff matchups

Today's schedule

Yesterday's scores

Expanded standings

Race for No. 1 pick

Current playoff matchups

Eastern Conference

A1 Florida Panthers vs. WC1 Ottawa Senators

A2 Toronto Maple Leafs vs. A3 Tampa Bay Lightning

M1 Washington Capitals vs. WC2 Columbus Blue Jackets

M2 Carolina Hurricanes vs. M3 New Jersey Devils

Western Conference

C1 Winnipeg Jets vs. WC2 Calgary Flames

C2 Dallas Stars vs. C3 Colorado Avalanche

P1 Vegas Golden Knights vs. WC1 Minnesota Wild

P2 Edmonton Oilers vs. P3 Los Angeles Kings

Wednesday's games

Note: All times ET. All games not on TNT or NHL Network are available to stream on ESPN+ (local blackout restrictions apply).

Buffalo Sabres at Detroit Red Wings, 7:30 p.m. (TNT)

Vancouver Canucks at Calgary Flames, 9 p.m.

Anaheim Ducks at Utah Hockey Club, 10 p.m. (TNT)

Montreal Canadiens at Seattle Kraken, 10:30 p.m.

Tuesday's scoreboard

Boston Bruins 3, Florida Panthers 2

New Jersey Devils 5, Columbus Blue Jackets 3

Ottawa Senators 5, Philadelphia Flyers 2

Pittsburgh Penguins 3, Vegas Golden Knights 2 (OT)

Carolina Hurricanes 4, Tampa Bay Lightning 1

Minnesota Wild 2, Colorado Avalanche 1 (SO)

Winnipeg Jets 2, New York Rangers 1

Montreal Canadiens 4, Vancouver Canucks 2

Washington Capitals 7, Anaheim Ducks 4

Los Angeles Kings 4, New York Islanders 1

Nashville Predators 3, San Jose Sharks 2

Expanded standings

Atlantic Division

Florida Panthers

Points: 83

Regulation wins: 34

Playoff position: A1

Games left: 17

Points pace: 104.7

Next game: @ TOR (Thursday)

Playoff chances: 99.9%

Tragic number: N/A

Toronto Maple Leafs

Points: 81

Regulation wins: 31

Playoff position: A2

Games left: 18

Points pace: 103.8

Next game: vs. FLA (Thursday)

Playoff chances: 99.9%

Tragic number: N/A

Tampa Bay Lightning

Points: 78

Regulation wins: 32

Playoff position: A3

Games left: 18

Points pace: 99.9

Next game: @ PHI (Thursday)

Playoff chances: 99.9%

Tragic number: N/A

Ottawa Senators

Points: 73

Regulation wins: 25

Playoff position: WC1

Games left: 18

Points pace: 93.5

Next game: vs. BOS (Thursday)

Playoff chances: 95.2%

Tragic number: N/A

Montreal Canadiens

Points: 68

Regulation wins: 22

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 18

Points pace: 87.1

Next game: @ SEA (Wednesday)

Playoff chances: 9.9%

Tragic number: 35

Boston Bruins

Points: 68

Regulation wins: 23

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 16

Points pace: 84.5

Next game: @ OTT (Thursday)

Playoff chances: 5.7%

Tragic number: 31

Detroit Red Wings

Points: 66

Regulation wins: 22

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 18

Points pace: 84.6

Next game: vs. BUF (Wednesday)

Playoff chances: 6.7%

Tragic number: 33

Buffalo Sabres

Points: 56

Regulation wins: 21

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 19

Points pace: 72.9

Next game: @ DET (Wednesday)

Playoff chances: 0.1%

Tragic number: 25

Metro Division

Washington Capitals

Points: 94

Regulation wins: 36
Playoff position: M1
Games left: 17
Points pace: 118.6
Next game: @ LA (Thursday)
Playoff chances: 99.9%
Tragic number: N/A
Carolina Hurricanes
Points: 82
Regulation wins: 34
Playoff position: M2
Games left: 17
Points pace: 103.5
Next game: vs. DET (Friday)
Playoff chances: 99.9%
Tragic number: N/A
New Jersey Devils
Points: 76
Regulation wins: 31
Playoff position: M3
Games left: 16
Points pace: 94.4
Next game: vs. EDM (Thursday)
Playoff chances: 94%
Tragic number: N/A
Columbus Blue Jackets
Points: 70
Regulation wins: 23
Playoff position: WC2
Games left: 18
Points pace: 89.7
Next game: vs. VGK (Thursday)
Playoff chances: 41.6%

Tragic number: N/A

New York Rangers

Points: 68

Regulation wins: 29

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 17

Points pace: 85.8

Next game: @ MIN (Thursday)

Playoff chances: 29.9%

Tragic number: 33

New York Islanders

Points: 65

Regulation wins: 23

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 18

Points pace: 83.3

Next game: vs. EDM (Friday)

Playoff chances: 14.5%

Tragic number: 32

Philadelphia Flyers

Points: 62

Regulation wins: 17

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 16

Points pace: 77.0

Next game: vs. TB (Thursday)

Playoff chances: 2.3%

Tragic number: 25

Pittsburgh Penguins

Points: 62

Regulation wins: 17

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 15

Points pace: 75.9

Next game: vs. STL (Thursday)

Playoff chances: 0.3%

Tragic number: 23

Central Division

Winnipeg Jets

Points: 94

Regulation wins: 37

Playoff position: C1

Games left: 16

Points pace: 116.8

Next game: vs. DAL (Friday)

Playoff chances: 99.9%

Tragic number: N/A

Dallas Stars

Points: 86

Regulation wins: 35

Playoff position: C2

Games left: 18

Points pace: 110.2

Next game: @ WPG (Friday)

Playoff chances: 99.9%

Tragic number: N/A

Colorado Avalanche

Points: 81

Regulation wins: 34

Playoff position: C3

Games left: 16

Points pace: 100.6

Next game: @ CGY (Friday)

Playoff chances: 99.9%

Tragic number: N/A

Minnesota Wild

Points: 78

Regulation wins: 29

Playoff position: WC1

Games left: 17

Points pace: 98.4

Next game: vs. NYR (Thursday)

Playoff chances: 91%

Tragic number: N/A

St. Louis Blues

Points: 69

Regulation wins: 22

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 17

Points pace: 87.1

Next game: @ PIT (Thursday)

Playoff chances: 29.8%

Tragic number: 34

Utah Hockey Club

Points: 67

Regulation wins: 20

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 18

Points pace: 85.8

Next game: vs. ANA (Wednesday)

Playoff chances: 25.9%

Tragic number: 34

Nashville Predators

Points: 57

Regulation wins: 21

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 18

Points pace: 73.0

Next game: @ ANA (Friday)

Playoff chances: 0.1%

Tragic number: 24

Chicago Blackhawks

Points: 49

Regulation wins: 17

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 17

Points pace: 61.8

Next game: @ SJ (Thursday)

Playoff chances: ~0%

Tragic number: 14

Pacific Division

Vegas Golden Knights

Points: 83

Regulation wins: 35

Playoff position: P1

Games left: 18

Points pace: 106.3

Next game: @ CBJ (Thursday)

Playoff chances: 99.9%

Tragic number: N/A

Edmonton Oilers

Points: 78

Regulation wins: 27

Playoff position: P2

Games left: 18

Points pace: 99.9

Next game: @ NJ (Thursday)

Playoff chances: 99.6%

Tragic number: N/A

Los Angeles Kings

Points: 77

Regulation wins: 30

Playoff position: P3
Games left: 19
Points pace: 100.2
Next game: vs. WSH (Thursday)
Playoff chances: 97.2%
Tragic number: N/A
Calgary Flames
Points: 70
Regulation wins: 24
Playoff position: WC2
Games left: 19
Points pace: 91.1
Next game: vs. VAN (Wednesday)
Playoff chances: 35.9%
Tragic number: N/A
Vancouver Canucks
Points: 69
Regulation wins: 23
Playoff position: N/A
Games left: 18
Points pace: 88.4
Next game: @ CGY (Wednesday)
Playoff chances: 20.3%
Tragic number: 36
Anaheim Ducks
Points: 63
Regulation wins: 20
Playoff position: N/A
Games left: 18
Points pace: 80.7
Next game: @ UTA (Wednesday)
Playoff chances: 0.3%
Tragic number: 30

Seattle Kraken

Points: 58

Regulation wins: 22

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 17

Points pace: 73.2

Next game: vs. MTL (Wednesday)

Playoff chances: ~0%

Tragic number: 23

San Jose Sharks

Points: 43

Regulation wins: 12

Playoff position: N/A

Games left: 16

Points pace: 53.4

Next game: vs. CHI (Thursday)

Playoff chances: ~0%

Tragic number: 6

Race for the No. 1 pick

The NHL uses a draft lottery to determine the order of the first round, so the team that finishes in last place is not guaranteed the No. 1 selection. As of 2021, a team can move up a maximum of 10 spots if it wins the lottery, so only 11 teams are eligible for the No. 1 pick. Full details on the process are [here](#). Matthew Schaefer, a defenseman for the OHL's Erie Otters, is No. 1 on the draft board.

1. San Jose Sharks

Points: 43

Regulation wins: 12

2. Chicago Blackhawks

Points: 49

Regulation wins: 17

3. Buffalo Sabres

Points: 56

Regulation wins: 21

4. Nashville Predators

Points: 57

Regulation wins: 21
5. Seattle Kraken
Points: 58
Regulation wins: 22
6. Pittsburgh Penguins
Points: 62
Regulation wins: 17
7. Philadelphia Flyers
Points: 62
Regulation wins: 17
8. Anaheim Ducks
Points: 63
Regulation wins: 20
9. New York Islanders
Points: 65
Regulation wins: 23
10. Detroit Red Wings
Points: 66
Regulation wins: 22
11. Utah Hockey Club
Points: 67
Regulation wins: 20
12. Montreal Canadiens
Points: 68
Regulation wins: 21
13. Boston Bruins
Points: 68
Regulation wins: 23
14. New York Rangers
Points: 68
Regulation wins: 29
15. St. Louis Blues
Points: 69

Regulation wins: 22

16. Vancouver Canucks

Points: 69

Regulation wins: 23

Sportsnet.ca / Analyzing who has the best schedule in final month for the Eastern Conference

By Justin Bourne- March 13, 2025

TORONTO — As the ponies round the bend and fly past the quarter pole, I'm pleased to report we have some legitimately good playoff races, which include some teams that nobody gave a chance to back in October (myself included).

Today's piece looks at the Eastern Conference race. We'll talk about all the teams' chances, their remaining schedules and how I expect it will all shake out.

ATLANTIC

Florida, Tampa Bay and Toronto?

These three sit in a different tier than the rest of the division, with the Senators a full five points back of Tampa with 18 games left. That's not insurmountable, unfortunately for the Sens, though, Tampa Bay is just about as good as any team in the league.

So, two of these three are likely to play a first-round 2-3 seed matchup, which looks like fun for everyone not playing in the games. And unfortunately for the Leafs, it feels like they're statistically the weakest of the three, despite being in a position to still control their destiny.

NHL on Sportsnet

NHL on Sportsnet

Livestream Hockey Night in Canada, Scotiabank Wednesday Night Hockey, the Oilers, Flames, Canucks, out-of-market matchups, the Stanley Cup Playoffs and the NHL Draft.

Broadcast schedule

Florida is plus-40 in goal differential, and Tampa Bay is plus-51. Toronto is plus-16.

In checking expected goals for and against graphs, both Florida and Tampa sit in the "good-good" quadrant. The Leafs don't (they give up too many).

So for Toronto to go deep in playoffs, it would sure like to draw ... anyone but these two teams, at least out of the gate. And the Leafs would like for those two to play each other, ideally beating the hell out of one another in a seven-game bloodbath.

What do the Leafs have going for them? Both Florida and Tampa Bay play more road than home games down the stretch, while the Leafs see a 50/50 split. You don't want to sleep on the Tampa Bay climbing up the standings, as the Bolts play 13 non-playoff teams in their final 18 games (both the Leafs and Panthers play 10), but the Leafs do have a three-point head start.

If you're coveting the division's top spot, Florida has the hardest remaining schedule of the three teams. The Leafs' is middling-to-easy, while the Bolts' is the easiest.

In the end, it comes down to this: Toronto plays Florida THREE more times, starting Thursday night, and Tampa Bay once. If the Leafs win the bulk of those games, they'll have a very legitimate shot at winning the Atlantic. Tampa Bay and Florida also play very late in the year, which could end being a big swing too.

METROPOLITAN

Washington, Carolina, New Jersey

What a weird year in the Metro. The “rebuilding” Capitals might win the Presidents' Trophy, the Hurricanes have traded for a top NHL forward and flipped him, and the Devils have had more success than anticipated, mixed with awful luck.

This is another clear divisional top three, as the Blue Jackets aren't catching the Devils: They're six points back with two games in hand, but they have a top-five hardest NHL schedule remaining. Just eight of their remaining 18 opponents aren't in the playoffs, and even then it's the Rangers, Islanders and Canucks, hardly pushovers.

On the Devils: Imagine this team healthy? They've barely had their six best D in the lineup at the same time, and when they did (before Christmas), they played seven straight games giving up under 20 shots, which I don't believe has ever been done in the NHL before.

They're second in the league in goals against, have good special teams and good underlying numbers, while they haven't lost in regulation when leading after two. Buuut they lost Jack Hughes and Jonas Siegenthaler for the year, plus Dougie Hamilton for an extended period, and I'm not sure what team could handle losing their 1C and 1D and have playoff success.

The best thing they have going for them is that in the 2-3 Metro matchup, the Canes don't look quite as deadly as they have in past years, and they also didn't end up solving the problem of their lack of top-end talent in the short term.

But I'll back that up and give the Canes some love too — they create more than any team in the NHL in terms of expected goals for, they defend well and play hard, and, given their quality team depth, if they just get some saves they'll be hard to beat.

The Caps? Well, they're going to win the division for sure, and from there, it's anyone's guess. They're good, but not without some holes. Fortunately for them, that's a weakness shared by other teams in the Metro.

WILD-CARD RACE

Ottawa, Columbus, Montreal, Rangers, Boston, Detroit

We've got four Original Six teams on the outside looking in, with Ottawa and Columbus holding the cards. What a world.

Games Left

Points

% Odds

Ottawa

73

92

Columbus

18

70

50

Montreal

18

68

19

Rangers

17

68

24

Boston

16

68

7

Detroit

18

66

5

If we wanted, we could include the Islanders here, who Dom's model actually gives a 10 per cent chance of making playoffs. They have 18 games left and 65 points. They'd need to go about 14-4 down the stretch, so I feel fairly comfortable calling them cooked, but it's not like teams can't get that hot, particularly ones with goaltending like the Isles have.

Ottawa: Those are strong odds for a team just five points up on so many chasing teams, but: According to strength of schedule, I've got them with one of (if not the) softest remaining schedules in the NHL. Eleven home games, evenly split between playoff and non-playoff opponents. They probably need at most 20 points to get in (could be fewer), meaning something like 10-8, or 8-8-2 seals the deal. It's never a lock, but hey, you've gotta win games to make the playoffs, and they're in a good spot.

Columbus: This is the story of the hockey season by a good margin. If you asked someone whether the Jackets would get fewer than 70 or over 90 points this season, 99 out of 100 take under 70. That said, they've got a tough schedule remaining, a top-five shooting percentage (without top-five talent) and don't have elite goaltending. It's OK to still be skeptical that they'll get in. But it's become a realistic possibility.

Montreal: Habs are not far behind CBJ on the "didn't see this coming" scale. They've got the most neutral schedule coming possible: nine home, nine away, nine playoff, nine non-playoff opponents. Neither bought nor sold at deadline. They're exactly where a team should be that's about to turn the page from "rebuilding" to "competing" with some consistency.

Rangers: They really should get in the playoffs, no? They won the Presidents' Trophy last year. They have top-end talent. They have the best goalie in the world (or at least one of the best few). But they have a game fewer than the teams they're chasing, more road games than away and more playoff opponents than non-playoff. Can they grab a dozen wins in their final 17 games? You'd certainly think so. But they've defied the odds (in a bad way) all season long.

Boston: Sometimes when you prune a plant, new blooms grow quickly. Perhaps the Bruins, after a major shakeup, will find some new "They didn't believe in us!" energy and rally. They've still got a handful of top-end talents, and it just takes a hot goalie for a good run, which Jeremy Swayman can certainly provide. But their management gave up on the group, and they're running out of games. Getting a dozen wins in just 16 tries feels like a long shot, and still wouldn't guarantee playoff games.

Detroit: The Red Wings have lost some massive hockey games lately to direct competition for the final playoff spots. They're going to need 13 wins in their final 18 games, and I'm seeing them with one of the hardest (OK, probably the hardest) remaining schedule. After Buffalo on Wednesday, they play Carolina, Vegas, Washington, Vegas, Utah, Colorado. Of their final 18, 11 are on the road. They've got enough games to get there, but the games are all hard. For them, the playoffs start now.

And so, the stage is set. Ottawa and Columbus are in great spots, while the Atlantic is going to be a dogfight to avoid what looks like a nastier battle in Round 1.

For some fans who just wanted to play meaningful games late in the year, this is fun. For those with loftier expectations, the work is only just beginning.