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## Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets' comeback win over Buffalo Sabres preserves playoff hopes

**By Brian Hedger – April 11, 2025**

They still need a lot of help, but the Blue Jackets and rookie goalie Jet Greaves avoided elimination from the playoff race in the NHL's Eastern Conference on Thursday night at Nationwide Arena.

Overcoming a 2-1 deficit starting the third period, they made Greaves' 39 saves stand up for a big 3-2 win against the Buffalo Sabres in front of 16,406, preserving their slim hopes in a playoff chase for the East's final wild card with four games remaining. The Blue Jackets (36-33-9) can be eliminated while idle Friday if the Montreal Canadiens win in regulation, but they did their part to keep the season viable another day longer.

"We have to be desperate, right?" Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "We're more worried about what we're doing. We played well enough and hard enough here tonight to get two points. We need to continue to do that in the last four games."

Buffalo took a 2-0 lead in the first period on goals by JJ Peterka and Rasmus Dahlin before Blue Jackets forward James van Riemsdyk cut it to 2-1 with 8.1 seconds left in the period on a breakaway.

Neither team scored in the second, when the Sabres outshot Columbus 18-7, but the Jackets surged into the lead in the third on goals by Zach Aston-Reese at 4:00 to tie it 2-2 and go ahead 3-2 at 6:42 on captain Boone Jenner's power-play goal.

"The spot we're in, we need these points," Jenner said. "We talked about it before the third. No matter what happened that first 40 (minutes), we had to go out and win a period, and I liked our (resilience) to do that. We just stuck to it, tried to win a shift and go on to the next. Big goal by 'Reese to get it tied and we just kept going from there."

Greaves, meanwhile, was outstanding in the Blue Jackets' net, allowing two goals on the first seven shots he faced before stopping 34 more in a row after joining the team in the afternoon as an emergency recall from the AHL's Cleveland Monsters.

"Very impressive," Jenner said. "Plays last night, he comes up here, drives today, comes in ... that's not easy playing back-to-back in two different cities and two different leagues. He comes in here, and we know him very well. He works extremely hard every day, he's a great teammate, so I'm happy to see him in there and get rewarded with that effort today. He battled all night for us."

Greaves, who played for Cleveland on Wednesday, was recalled after Elvis Merzlikins was ruled out with an undisclosed injury following the morning skate. James Reimer (27 saves) started in net for the Sabres, who'd won five straight games and eight of their past nine.

"I'm happy anytime I get to play," Greaves said, smiling. "It's OK, but it's part of it. Once you're in the game, you settle in, and it's just about competing and trying to win a hockey game. So, it was fun to be out there, and the guys did a great job helping me get into the game. They did a great job all night."

## Columbus Dispatch / Elvis Merzlikins out for Columbus Blue Jackets vs Buffalo Sabres, Jet Greaves recalled

**By Brian Hedger – April 11, 2025**

Elvis Merzlikins will miss the Blue Jackets' game Thursday night against the Buffalo Sabres with an undisclosed injury.

Rookie goalie Jet Greaves, who played Wednesday night for the AHL's Cleveland Monsters, was added to the roster with an emergency recall on Thursday afternoon. Merzlikins began the Jackets' morning skate at Nationwide Arena, but left the ice earlier than normal. It's unknown whether his injury occurred at the skate or is something that has lingered for a while.

Merzlikins played in the Blue Jackets' 5-2 victory over the Ottawa Senators on Tuesday night at Nationwide Arena but didn't participate in the team's optional practice Wednesday.

Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason didn't reveal which goalie he'll start against the Sabres, who are making their second-and-final visit to Nationwide Arena this season. Columbus is eight points behind the Montreal Canadiens for the second wild-card spot in the Eastern Conference with five games remaining.

The Jackets are also tied in points with the New York Rangers and Detroit Red Wings, who all need the Canadiens to stumble in at least three of their remaining four games.

Daniil Tarasov, Merzlikins' main backup, started Sunday in Ottawa and was quickly replaced by Merzlikins after allowing two goals on the first six shots he faced. Greaves is 2-2-2 with 2.83 goals-against average and .905 save percentage in six starts this season for the Blue Jackets.

## The Athletic / Jet Greaves powers Blue Jackets in must-win over Sabres: What took so long?

By Aaron Portzline – April 11, 2025

COLUMBUS, Ohio — One question has lingered over the Columbus Blue Jackets for a few weeks now.

The Blue Jackets' goaltending — between starter Elvis Merzlikins and backup Daniil Tarasov — has been a weak spot on the roster all season, and it's been especially turbulent and underwhelming in recent weeks as the Jackets have faded in the Eastern Conference playoff race.

All the while, Jet Greaves, who has never seemed out of place in NHL spot starts over the past three seasons, has been dominating the AHL up in Cleveland, putting up a .949 save percentage since Feb. 15 to almost single-handedly keep the Monsters in the playoff picture.

### **The question: Why didn't Greaves get to Columbus sooner?**

Greaves made 33 of his 41 saves in the final two periods, holding off the Buffalo Sabres long enough for the Blue Jackets to score three unanswered goals — including two in three minutes early in the third period — to win 3-2 before 16,406 in Nationwide Arena.

The question, for now, does not have a clear answer.

After Thursday's game, Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason was asked why the organization was reluctant to call up Greaves before this point in the season, when the Blue Jackets are on the brink of being mathematically eliminated from the postseason.

"That's a Don Waddell question," Evason said, curiously.

James van Riemsdyk, Zach Aston-Reese and Boone Jenner each scored for the Blue Jackets, but it was Jenner's power-play goal, scored off his own rebound while getting pummeled to the ice at 6:42 of the third, that put Columbus in the lead for the first time.

It's a game the Blue Jackets had to have. If they'd lost in regulation, they would have been eliminated from the playoffs with four games remaining in the season. It could still happen Friday if the Montreal Canadiens win in regulation in Ottawa.

All the Blue Jackets can control now is what's in front of them, but even that took some unpredictable turns on Thursday morning.

Merzlikins, who was scheduled to be the starter on Thursday, took part in a morning skate and was the first goaltender off the ice, perhaps leaving early with an injury. The Blue Jackets announced later in the morning that Merzlikins was in fact injured and Greaves was on his way down from Cleveland.

Greaves, by the way, had played for Cleveland on Wednesday, making 19 saves in a 4-3 win over Grand Rapids. He didn't seem to mind the late change of plans.

"I'm happy any time I get a chance to play," Greaves said. "(I got the call this morning) and I got here as soon as I could. It's all part of it. Once you're in the game, you settle in and it's about competing and trying to win hockey games. It was fun to be out there and the guys did a great job the whole night."

Greaves made two strong stops late in the second period to keep the Sabres' lead at 2-1. The highlight was a stop on Buffalo's JJ Peterka, who was denied on a breakaway with 1:25 remaining.

“Very impressive,” Jenner said. “He plays last night, drives today, comes in here ... that’s not easy, playing back-to-back games in two different cities and two different leagues.

“We know (Jet) extremely well. He works extremely hard every day. He’s a great teammate. I was happy to see him in there and get rewarded with that effort.”

Evason said he did not know how long Merzlikins would be sidelined. Greaves, after the game, was asked if the Blue Jackets had told him how long he’d stay in Columbus.

“I’m day to day,” Greaves said, with a smile.

It will be fascinating to see where this goes.

Merzlikins has been celebrated by Evason all season for being a “great teammate,” and he’s even gone so far as to say he’s been a leader in the dressing room. But it’s been a struggle for Merzlikins lately, not just in his play but in controlling his temper.

The numbers aren’t good: Merzlikins has an .865 save percentage and 4.24 goals-against average in his last eight outings, seven of them starts.

But the numbers aren’t the only issue.

Last Thursday, he was pulled from a start for the first time this season after smashing his stick on the goal and then on the ice after giving up a soft goal. One night later, according to FanDuel Sports Network’s Jody Shelley, Merzlikins apologized to teammates and coaches during a team dinner in Toronto.

But then, on Saturday against the Maple Leafs, Merzlikins began shouting at Blue Jackets defenseman Erik Gudbranson during the run of play in the third period of a 5-0 loss to Toronto. The shouting match carried over near the Blue Jackets’ bench during a TV timeout later in the period.

On Sunday, when the Blue Jackets played in Ottawa, Tarasov was pulled after allowing two goals in the first 4:26 of the game. Merzlikins came on and played well, but the Blue Jackets lost 4-0. Merzlikins started against Ottawa on Tuesday and played fairly well.

Waddell, in a text exchange with the Blue Jackets earlier in the day, confirmed that Merzlikins was injured.

It’s a small sample size, sure. But Greaves’ numbers this season — he’s 3-2-2 despite a .914 save percentage and 2.71 goals against — are dramatically better than Merzlikins’ (.892/3.18) and Tarasov’s (.881/3.54).

“Every time he’s come up here and played, he’s really made a strong showing for himself,” van Riemsdyk said. “He’s been really steady back there for us. It was impressive. We hung him out to dry in the first, but he shut the door and kept us in it with a lot of big saves as the game went along.”

## The Athletic / How Blue Jackets' Sean Monahan found joy again after the death of best friend Johnny Gaudreau

**By Aaron Portzline – April 11, 2025**

COLUMBUS, Ohio — The car was packed and ready to go. It was late in the evening on Aug. 29, 2024, and Sean Monahan and his wife, Brittany, were set to leave Oakville, Ont., a Toronto suburb, and drive through the night so that 3-month-old Leo could spend the six hours sleeping.

It was a family affair. Monahan's parents, John and Cathy, had their car packed to the gills, too, but with enough room for their son's dog, Winston. They were headed to Columbus, where the Monahans were excited to start a new adventure.

"That's when I got the call," Monahan said. "That's how I found out Johnny had passed."

Johnny Gaudreau and his brother, Matthew, were struck and killed while riding bicycles in Oldmans Township, N.J., the evening before their sister Katie was to be married, and just a few weeks before Monahan and Gaudreau — best of friends since playing together as Calgary Flames — were to start training camp and be reunited as Columbus Blue Jackets.

Gaudreau, who had played two seasons in Columbus, was the main reason Monahan, one of the NHL's top two-way centers, would even consider signing as a free agent with the Jackets. Frankly, Monahan joked, Gaudreau's recruiting pitch was a little intense.

"I'd get 40 (texts) a day from him some days, I swear," Monahan smiled. "He was so excited. I was so excited. Our families were excited."

"We were looking forward to playing together again, of course. But we were both really excited to raise our kids together."

But right before they could get started, it was taken away.

"It was obviously devastating," Monahan said. "We didn't leave. We couldn't leave. We took a couple of days, and then we drove down and got Leo situated in Columbus, and then a couple of days later, we went to Philadelphia to see Mere (Gaudreau's wife, Meredith) and the kids."

"Life went upside down."

In the days that followed, Monahan wasn't sure if it was going to work in Columbus, he said. The car sat packed in the driveway for a couple of days.

When grief makes every hour seem interminable, it's hard to even consider the future. Did he even want to be in Columbus without Gaudreau? Could he even care about hockey?

"I wasn't sure, to be honest," Monahan said. "I didn't know what was going to happen. I was in Columbus for a while and I couldn't bring myself to the rink. It was hard."

"I was pushed to come to the rink by a few of the people around me, and once I got here, it really helped me out to be there. I had a lot of support from Mere. She's a very strong person, and that's something that helped me get by."

As the Blue Jackets play out the final days of the season, there has been a clutch of superlative performances that helped make the Jackets one of the NHL's best stories: Zach Werenski's stellar all-around play, Kirill Marchenko's goal scoring, Mathieu Olivier's mix of power and production, 20-year-old Adam Fantilli's capacity to play as a No. 1 center, etc.

Nobody has been more impressive, though, than Monahan, who has centered one of the top lines in the NHL, served as a mentor to the Blue Jackets' bevy of young players, and stood as an inspiration to every player in the dressing room.

Every player in the dressing room has grieved Gaudreau's death, but he and Monahan were best friends and kindred spirits. Even the veteran players, even those who have lived with grief in their own lives, have been awed by Monahan's ability to play at a high level while modeling grace and vulnerability.

Monahan, 30, has been nominated by the Columbus chapter of the Professional Hockey Writers Association for the Bill Masterton Memorial Trophy, awarded annually to the NHL player who best exemplifies "perseverance, sportsmanship and dedication to hockey."

"When Johnny was here, he'd talk about Monny all the time," Blue Jackets center Boone Jenner said. "Just the way Monny has persevered through really, really hard times. It's been inspiring to me and to the whole group. The way he's handled himself, just stepping in here under those circumstances.

"He's been a leader in the room and a leader on the ice. He's a true pro. Everyone can learn from him."

Monahan's power-play goal on Tuesday in the Blue Jackets' 5-2 win over the Ottawa Senators kept him above a point a game for what would be the second time in his 12-year NHL career. With 18-32-50 in 49 games, he's fourth on the club in points despite missing 28 games following wrist surgery in January.

Anybody who has followed or played in the NHL knows that Monahan is one of the league's best two-way centers, but what the Blue Jackets have witnessed up close has been eye-opening.

Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason has marveled at the small plays he makes that can often go unnoticed. The stick lifts on opponents. The small touch passes that act as a relief valve when the puck is trapped in the defensive zone. The tactics he uses — subtle, surgical — to excel in the faceoff circle.

And also the way he's helped the young players, especially the centers, enhance their games. It's one of Fantilli's favorite topics, especially the way Monahan has shown him how patience in the defensive zone can be beneficial.

"Oh my gosh, he's been a huge help for me," Fantilli told The Athletic earlier this year. "Part of it is being able to talk with a player like him, just pick his brain. And he's been so receptive to that, so helpful. But a lot of it, too, is just watching him. So smart.

"I knew he was a really good player, obviously. He's been in the league. I watched him growing up, right? But to be up close to him ... I can absolutely learn something every day."

Monahan's least favorite topic, it seems, is Sean Monahan. He's a bit shy in front of cameras anyway, but when asked flattering questions about his own game or performance, you can almost feel him cringe. These days, he'd rather talk about the supporting cast around him, and how they've lifted him this season.

It starts at home, he said, with Brittany and Leo.

"Leo is my world," Monahan said of his now 11-month-old son. "It's my favorite thing in the world, being a dad. He distracts me from hockey, for sure, when I'm home. He keeps me busy, keeps me on my toes. When I come to the rink ... I think about him all the time.

"He's a big reason why I'm having the success I am this year. I'm playing for a bunch of different reasons, but my son is a big reason. I want to make him proud. It's a blessing being a father."

Monahan laughed at what's coming. Leo turns 1 next month, so he'll be walking soon. He'll also start picking up on the world around him, which means games at Nationwide Arena could be quite hysterical.

For many years, Blue Jackets fans have shouted “Leo!” in unison just before anthem singer Leo Welsh steps to the microphone.

“I love how the fans scream the name,” Monahan said. “Once (Leo) gets a little bit older and understands it, he’s going to love that, too.”

The other big part of Monahan’s support staff has been Meredith Gaudreau.

Many days this season after practice, Monahan has raced home to get Leo together to play with Gaudreau’s daughter, Noa, and son, Johnny Jr. In September, the entire Blue Jackets team attended Noa’s birthday party. In February, they did the same for Johnny Jr.

“Leo is a tank,” Monahan said. “Johnny is a tank. When they start to move, they’ll shed some weight. (They’ll be skating) as soon as possible. Are you kidding? Guy Gaudreau (Johnny’s father) will get the little guys up and moving.”

Just last week, Monahan was full of emotion during the Blue Jackets’ 8-4 rout of Nashville in Nationwide Arena. It’s been a rough end to the season for the Blue Jackets, but this was a triumphant night that felt like many of their wins from earlier in the season.

Monahan had two goals, two assists and a plus-3 rating, one of his more productive nights on the season. He felt like there was a higher power at work, too.

When Meredith eulogized her husband at the funeral in Media, Pa., in early September, she made it public that she was pregnant. Carter Michael Gaudreau was born in the early hours of April 1.

“It was a pretty emotional day,” Monahan said. “Another part of John lives on. Everyone was hoping it was a little boy. He already looks like John, too. Before I left for the rink, I was on a FaceTime with my wife and Meredith. When I left, Mere said, ‘Go get Carter a couple of goals.’

“You get these signs, right? It’s been a crazy year.”

You wonder if all of this — the Blue Jackets and Monahan finding joy playing hockey, Monahan and others playing at a high level this season, etc. — would be happening if not for the strength and grace shown by Meredith.

During the eulogy, Meredith made a point of speaking directly to the Blue Jackets players, who were assembled together at the service.

By imploring them to honor Johnny Gaudreau by having fun at the rink, having fun playing hockey and having fun bonding as a team, she gave them emotional permission to go forth into the season with energy and passion. It was hard to care about hockey after the tragedy, but Gaudreau gave the players a purpose.

“That’s fair, for sure,” Monahan said. “She’s still at every game. She’s still being a great mom. It’s impressive that she does what she does. It would be so easy to stay isolated.

“I look at it this way: She’s one of the leaders on this team.”

‘Feels like home’

Gaudreau wasn’t Monahan’s only pull toward Columbus. It probably hasn’t been understood enough that Monahan has known Jenner for years, too. They’ve played against each other scores of times, way back into their Ontario Hockey League days, but they’ve also hung out together in the offseason with their mutual friend, Scott Laughton, who now plays for Toronto.



Monahan was also looking for a family-friendly city — big, but not too big, and close to his family in Ontario — to establish roots. Long before the free-agency bell rang on July 1, it was understood that Monahan was heading to Columbus.

“I had no idea what to expect signing here,” Monahan said. “It was my first time being a free agent. I talked to Boone and Johnny a ton, but I wasn’t sure what the situation was going to be or how the city was going to be. ... I only knew that Johnny loved it. And Boone loves it, obviously.

“To be honest, the second I got here, it kind of felt like home right away. Great group of guys. Unbelievable coaches. Management really cares about the players. My parents have been here a bunch, and they’ve said the same thing. It’s home.”

The Jenners, the Monahans and the Gaudreaus all live on the same street — it’s a loop, really — in the tiny suburb of New Albany.

“I live 10 steps from Boone. It’s 30 steps to Meredith,” Monahan said, chuckling. “It’s a very tight community we live in. It’s a special place. When you’re home, you feel safe.”

Jenner and Monahan are wired similarly. Both are famously hard workers and players who would rather do the work than talk about it. They are publicly introverted — willing, but not excited by cameras and fanfare — but apparently quite different in their comfort zones.

Veteran defenseman Erik Gudbranson has said that Monahan, who he’s played with in Calgary and now Columbus, is one of the funniest guys he’s met in the game. The humor is dry and sly, such that many may miss it, Gudbranson said.

Earlier this week, Monahan pulled one of his favorite gags.

On a whiteboard in the Blue Jackets dressing room, members of the public relations staff write the sweater numbers of the players who have been requested for interviews. That way, they don’t shower and slip out the back door without answering questions.

Monahan, who moves quietly about the room, grabbed the pen and added Gudbranson’s No. 44 to the list on Tuesday. After showering and dressing, Gudbranson came out to chat and found no takers.

“Was anybody looking for me?” Gudbranson asked, looking around the room. Reporters stared back blankly, and Gudbranson quickly put it together. “F— Monny,” he said, with a smile.

Monahan has been enthralled with Marchenko — who has scored a career-high 31 goals playing mostly with Monahan this season — and not just because he has one of the best shots in the NHL.

It’s Marchenko’s boundless enthusiasm and passion.

“I don’t think I’ve ever talked between shifts with somebody as much as Marchy,” Monahan said. “He’s always looking for adjustments, things we can do better. I love that about him. His personality, as everybody knows, is just great. He lifts people.

“We have these great conversations where ... (laughs) honestly, I don’t know what he’s saying half the time, ‘cause it’s like half Russian and half English. But I always (laughs) think I know what he means. Does that even make sense?”

For those who know Monahan well, it’s been delightful to see him in this mode again. Gaudreau’s sweater still hangs in the stall right beside Monahan’s, and when he does step forward for interviews, he also steps to the side so that Gaudreau’s No. 13 sweater is right behind him.

It’s proof that you don’t move beyond grief as much as you learn to carry it.

"It's really fun to come to the rink," Monahan said. "Everybody loves being around each other. You're just laughing all day, and it's natural. You come to the rink, do your work and have fun. Nobody's ever really slacking off. Everybody wants to win.

"I look at some of the teams I've played on, and you have friends for life. This team feels the same way. There are guys on the team who are 10 or 11 years younger than me, and it doesn't matter. I enjoy being a hockey player with these guys, and I enjoy being a teammate with every guy here. It's a joy."

Blue Jackets fans sang Happy Birthday to Johnny Gaudreau Jr. during the TV timeout in Columbus.

The Blue Jackets' first star player was Rick Nash, who observed in his early days that he could move about Columbus — a restaurant, the grocery store, etc. — without drawing attention or creating a scene. No way that would have been possible in Toronto or anywhere in Canada.

But as Nash spent more time in Columbus, he picked up on something. Plenty of people noticed him in public — the smiles, the nods, the whispers said as much — but he was mostly given space, other than a few young fans who approached.

Monahan has witnessed the same, he said.

"Everybody has so much respect," Monahan said. "People are looking at you, and they give you a little wave or a smile. But there's a small-town feel here in a decently sized city. I love that. I didn't expect that, but I've found that. It's cool.

"Playing in that building for those fans ... there's nothing like it for me."

Last fall, when the tragedy was still raw and the calendar kept ticking closer to hockey season, it was only fair to wonder if Monahan could ever get to this point.

Everything is different now, of course. Some days are better than others. But there are good days, Monahan said. Hockey is once again a happy place. There is joy at home, too, watching his kids and the Gaudreau kids grow, learn, laugh and play.

"I came here for a reason, and that was taken away," Monahan said. "It's been a whirlwind. But I feel like I've played here in Columbus for more than a year, to be honest. It feels like I've been a part of it here for a long time."

Then he paused and smiled.

"And it feels like I'm supposed to be here."

## [BlueJackets.com / Greaves stops 39, Blue Jackets rally past Sabres](#)

**By Craig Merz – April 11, 2025**

COLUMBUS -- Jet Greaves made 39 saves for the Columbus Blue Jackets, who rallied for a 3-2 win against the Buffalo Sabres at Nationwide Arena on Thursday.

Greaves was an emergency recall from Cleveland of the American Hockey League after Elvis Merzlikins left practice Thursday morning with an undisclosed injury.

Columbus, which would have been eliminated from Stanley Cup Playoff contention with a regulation loss, pulled to within six points of the Montreal Canadiens for the second wild card in the Eastern Conference. Each team has four games remaining.

Boone Jenner scored the go-ahead goal early in the third period, and Zach Aston-Reese also scored for the Blue Jackets (36-33-9), who have won two in a row.

"The spot we're in, we need these points," Jenner said. "We talked about it before the third. No matter what happened that first 40, we had to go out and win a period. I liked our resiliency to do that. We just stuck to it, try to win a shift and go on to the next."

Rasmus Dahlin had a goal and an assist, and JJ Peterka also scored for the Sabres (35-37-6), who had won five straight and eight of nine. James Reimer made 27 saves.

"I thought it was a winnable game; we had our chances," Dahlin said. "They scored one more goal than us. That's how it feels now, after we created a lot, and I think we could have scored a couple more."

Greaves limited Buffalo with 18 saves in the second period and 15 in the third.

"We hung him out to dry a little bit in the first, but he definitely shut the door and kept us in there and made us a lot of big saves as the game went on," Blue Jackets forward James van Riemsdyk said.

Greaves made 19 saves in a 4-3 home win against Grand Rapids on Wednesday. He got the call to report to Columbus around midday Thursday and made the approximately two-hour drive south to Columbus.

"Once you're in the game you kind of settle in and it's just about competing and trying to win hockey games," Greaves said. "Was fun to be out there and the guys did a great job and helped me get into the game. They did a great job the whole night."

Peterka gave the Sabres a 1-0 lead at 11:54 of the first period with his 25th goal of the season when his wrist shot from the left circle went in off the crossbar.

Dahlin extended it to 2-0 at 14:39 after a setup in front by Zach Benson. Dahlin was low in the left circle and drew the puck back to create space between him and Dante Fabbro before scoring on a wrist shot.

Van Riemsdyk cut it to 2-1 at 19:51, scoring on a breakaway with a backhand through Reimer's pads. He ended a 14-game goal drought dating back to Feb. 27 against the Detroit Red Wings.

"Obviously getting one late in the period like that, I don't think we were executing as well as we could have been for a good portion of the game, but it kind of kept it within striking distance," van Riemsdyk said. "Again, we've shown we're a team that'll just keep playing until the very end and obviously we're able to do what we needed to do tonight to stay alive."

Aston-Reese tied it 2-2 at 4:00 of the third period, scoring glove side on a wrist shot from the point.

Jenner then gave Columbus a 3-2 lead with a power-play goal at 6:42 near the right post, knocking in a rebound of Kirill Marchenko's shot from in front.

"In the second period we had all kinds of opportunities to lengthen the lead, but didn't take advantage of it and third period we brought a couple of pucks back," Buffalo coach Lindy Ruff said. "We didn't get puck out on both goals, and it ended up costing us in both situations."

**NOTES:** Columbus defenseman Zach Werenski had an assist to record his 76th point (20 goals, 56 assists) of 2024-25, tying Ray Whitney (2002-03) for the fourth-most points by a Blue Jackets player in a single season. ... Columbus defenseman Jake Christiansen left the game at 12:42 of the first period with an upper-body injury and did not return. Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason did not have an update on him or Merzlikins.

## [BlueJackets.com / Winning Thoughts: Greaves shines as Jackets rally past Sabres](#)

By Garrison McDaniel – April 11, 2025

### **BLUE JACKETS 3, SABRES 2**

#### **1. Jet Greaves comes from Cleveland in the afternoon, stops 39 of 41 shots at night.**

In a game where the Blue Jackets could not lose in regulation or their playoff hopes were gone, Greaves saved the day.

The goaltender earned the win last night for the Cleveland Monsters with a 4-3 victory over Grand Rapids, and after news broke this morning that Elvis Merzlikins would not be available against the Sabres, Greaves drove straight to Columbus.

“Got here as soon as I could,” Greaves said. “Once you're in the game, you kind of settle in and you're just about competing and trying to win hockey games. It was fun to be out there.”

The highlight of the 24-year-old goaltender's play was an 18-save second period that kept the Blue Jackets within one at 2-1 going into the final frame.

“It was 10-2 in chances in the second period, and he held us in a position where we were able to get to the third and sort some things out in between, and we got to our game,” head coach Dean Evason said.

Greaves, who seems to impress each time he is called upon by the organization, was applauded by his teammates after he posted a season high in saves.

“It's definitely tough. I mean, I know he played last night and made the drive up here,” James van Riemsdyk said. “He's really made a strong showing for himself, and he's been really steady back there for us. It was impressive.”

Greaves now has a 3-2-2 record this season with a .914 save percentage and 2.71 goals-against average.

#### **2. van Riemsdyk's goal with 8.1 seconds left in the first period sparked a three-goal comeback.**

The Blue Jackets went down 2-0 in the first period, not the start they were looking for as a regulation loss would have eliminated them from playoff contention.

However, van Riemsdyk's 15th goal of the campaign helped give them some energy going into the first intermission, as he corralled a long breakout pass from Kent Johnson and scored on a breakaway to give the Jackets momentum going forward.

“Getting one late in a period like that, I don't think we're executing as well as we could have been for a good portion of the game, but that kind of kept it within striking distance,” van Riemsdyk said. “We've shown we're a team that will keep playing until the very end, and we were able to do what we needed to do tonight to stay alive.”

Going into the third down 2-1 set up for the Blue Jackets to continue their desperate style of hockey, which is what Evason wants to see from his team the rest of the way.

“We have to be desperate, right?” Evason said. “We played well enough and hard enough here tonight to get two points. We need to continue to do that in the last four games.”

van Riemsdyk's goal was backed by Zach Aston-Resse's second in the past four games early in the third period, and then the comeback was completed by Jenner's game-winning goal on the power play.

### **3. The Blue Jackets battled through the game and especially the third period down important defensemen.**

Jake Christiansen played just four minutes of hockey before heading down the tunnel with an upper-body injury in the first period, and he did not return. That forced the Blue Jackets to play with five defensemen for much of the game – until Zach Werenski headed down the tunnel in the third period with an apparent hand injury.

The series of unfortunate events was capped off by Denton Mateychuk earning a two-minute minor for delay of game, leaving the Blue Jackets to kill a crucial penalty with 7:23 left in a 3-2 hockey game with just three defensemen.

The lack of bodies led to a buy-in from all players on the ice in front of the aforementioned Greaves.

"It's so tough for those guys when they get down to five or four or three or whatever it is," the goalie said. "They were battling all night, laying their body on the line and just playing really hard, all the defense and the forwards helping them out too. It was great to see everyone definitely bought in tonight."

Werenski returned to the ice after missing about eight minutes of action, helping continue to keep the Sabres at bay. The play of the few defensemen on the ice in what could be argued as the most critical part of the game is even more impressive considering the Sabres came into this game firing on all cylinders in the offensive zone. They had recorded 43 goals in their previous nine games while going 8-1-0.

"The defense did their job for sure in that situation," Evason said of having to deal with the injuries.

"They also need help from at least one of the forwards to help and to back them up and make sure that we're secure back there. And our forwards did that. They reloaded extremely hard. They're in position to protect the D that might be a little bit tired. So I thought the entire group did a really good job of managing that situation."

## The Hockey News / Zach Werenski Continues To Solidify Himself As Best Defenseman Ever For Columbus

**By Jason Newland – April 11, 2025**

Another game, another milestone for Zach Werenski.

This season has been spectacular for the young defenseman from Gross Pointe, Michigan. Werenski has smashed personal and team records on his way to becoming the best defenseman in CBJ history.

Last night, with an assist, he passed the late, great Johnny Gaudreau(75) for the fifth most points in a single season in Jackets history.

The assist, his 55th, also tied Artemi Panarin(17-18) for the third most assists in a single season. With five games left, Werenski sits one assist behind Jake Voráček(56) and four assists behind Panarin(59) for the all-time assist mark in a single season.

Werenski also became the first U.S.-born defenseman to score 20 goals and total 75 points in a season since Brian Leetch did it for the New York Rangers in 2000-01. Leetch ended the season with 79 points.

This season, Werenski tied the franchise record for most goals by a defenseman in a season, set the record for most assists by a defenseman in a season, most points by a defenseman in a game, most assists in a career by ANY Blue Jacket, moved into 4th all-time in points, 1st all-time in 2+ assist games, 1st all-time in 3+ assist games, and by next season, he should be second or third in all-time points behind Rick Nash and Boone Jenner.

If he can get four assists in the last five games, he will be tied for #1 all-time in assists by any player in a single season. Five assists will put him atop all players.

We are witnessing the birth of a great career.

## **The Hockey News / Blue Jackets Battle Back From 2-0 To Win 3-2; Stave Off Elimination**

**By Jason Newland – April 11, 2025**

James van Riemsdyk(15), Zach Aston-Reese(6), and Boone Jenner(7-PP-GWG) powered the Columbus comeback, and Jet Greaves was phenomenal, making 39 saves on the night for a 3-2 Columbus win.

Jet Greaves played last night for the Cleveland Monsters. Today, he made the trip down U.S. Highway 71 to Columbus after being called up due to an Elvis Merzljikins injury. He was unreal on Thursday night, making 39 saves on 41 Buffalo shots.

The Jackets battled back after going down 2-0 in the first period, scoring two early third-period goals to seal a comeback victory for the desperate Blue Jackets. They knew they had to win to give themselves at least another 24 hours in the playoff race. Tomorrow, if Montréal wins, the Blue Jackets will be eliminated with only four games left in the season.

This was a good, gritty win for Columbus.

The Jackets lost Jake Christiansen to an injury after playing just four shifts. HC Dean Evason couldn't give an update on his condition. Zach Werenski also took a slash to the hand. He would leave the game bloody but would come back a few minutes later.

### **Quotes**

Dean Evason after the game: "We played well enough and hard enough here to get two points. We need to continue to do that in the last four games."

Jet Greaves on playing last night and then driving to Columbus today: "Once you're in the game, you settle in, and it's just about competing and trying to win a hockey game. It's fun to be out there, and the guys did a great job, and I felt like it helped me get into the game."

James van Riemsdyk: "We knew what was at stake. Obviously, our season is on the brink and on the line, and we know obviously where we're at. Just empty the tank as much as we can and do what we can to keep our season alive."

### **Special Notes**

- Kirill Marchenko and Zach Werenski became the 5th set of CBJ teammates to record 40 assists each in a season.
- Zach Werenski tied Ray Whitney for the 4th most points in a single season by a Blue Jacket(76), and tied Jake Voráček for the 2nd most assists in a season in CBJ history with 56.
- Boone Jenner now has 199 goals for his career, which is third best in team history. He also scored his 43rd power play goal, which is good enough for second in team history, passing Cam Atkinson.

### **Player Stats**

- James van Riemsdyk scored his 15th goal of the season.
- Zach Aston-Reese scored his 6th goal.
- Boone Jenner scored his 7th goal of the season on the power play. he also had 6 shots on goal.



- Zach Werenski recorded his 56th assist. That assist tied him for the second most assists in a season.
- Kent Johnson got his 31st assist of the season.
- Erik Gudbranson tallied his 3rrd assist.
- Kirill Marchenko got his 40th assist of the season. He had 5 shots on goal as well.
- Sean Monahan recorded his 33rd assist.
- Jet Greaves made 39 saves.

**Team Stats**

- The Jackets power play went 1/1 on the night.
- The Columbus PK stopped the lone Buffalo power play.
- Columbus won 50% of the faceoffs.

**Up Next:** The Blue Jackets welcome the Washington Capitals into Columbus on Saturday.

## The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets News & Rumors: Merzlikins, Monahan, Monsters & More

By Mark Scheig – April 11, 2025

We are down to the final five games of the regular season for the Columbus Blue Jackets. As of this writing, Thursday afternoon, they are mathematically alive for a playoff spot. That can be seen as both good and bad depending on the lens you view it through.

While missing the playoffs means falling short of the goal, the Blue Jackets still have a lot to be proud of this season when they are able to look back on it. For now though, they're going to empty the tank with just those five games left.

We start this week's edition of Blue Jackets' News & Rumors with an injury update.

### **Merzlikins Injured**

The morning skate started as you might expect coming off a win on Tuesday night. The same skaters did line rushes. Elvis Merzlikins went through his normal routine as if he was starting Thursday night.

But then things took a turn.

First, Merzlikins did leave the ice early. That's not entirely unusual though. Normally, the first goalie off is an indicator of who will start in net. Reid Robertson came on after Merzlikins left.

Then when Dean Evason was asked about the lineup, he didn't want to disclose it. When asked if Merzlikins would start, he paused and then said "maybe."

Turns out the maybe is a 'no' in this case. Merzlikins has an undisclosed injury and is out Thursday night against the Sabres, GM Don Waddell confirmed to the Hockey Writers. Nothing was observed out of the ordinary during the morning skate. He is considered day-to-day until there is further clarification from the team.

Meanwhile, the Blue Jackets did call Jet Greaves up on an emergency basis. With Greaves playing for the Monsters Wednesday night, conventional wisdom would suggest Daniil Tarasov would start Thursday. But we will have to wait for warmups for the official indication.

The rest of the lineup appears to be the same from Tuesday night's win against the Senators. The one line Evason did confirm would stay together was the line of Dmitri Voronkov, Cole Sillinger and Mathieu Olivier.

### **Monahan's Masterton Nomination**

On Wednesday, it was announced that Sean Monahan was the Blue Jackets' nominee for the Bill Masterton Memorial Trophy. In case you missed our write up, you can see that [here](#).

On Thursday morning, we caught up with both Sillinger and Erik Gudbranson to get their reaction to Monahan's nomination.

"The praise from John last year. We were talking to him about Mony. John always had amazing things to say," Sillinger said. "That got me fired up when we signed him last summer. He's a great leader. And obviously, the circumstances he came in losing his best friend and still being able to open up to us and be who he is off the ice and be that leader to everyone. And with his play on the ice too, he is a huge part of our team and our success this year. I can't say enough good things about Mony. We're blessed to be his teammate."

"It's the right call for sure," Gudbranson said. "He's a very, very high-end individual. I knew him from afar for a number of years before we played together in Calgary. Knew he was an awesome guy and played with him in Calgary and everything he dealt with there. He was pretty much bone-on-bone in his hip the whole year. Didn't say a word and literally no one knew about it. A season-ending surgery and it was just water off his back. You knew he was going to come back and then for years, we tried to get him here. Now that he's here, he's exactly what everybody expects and more."

"He's just a quality individual. Lots of character. Really, really funny and a tremendous hockey player. He goes about his business the right way. He takes care of the details. He's had so many injuries and his protocol's a little bit different. The way he warms up and the way he has to take care of himself and he doesn't miss any details on any given day. He's prepared every single night and then you look at him on the ice and his compete level, his competitiveness, his drive and passion for the game is something that everybody pays attention to on a daily basis."

It's abundantly clear not only what Monahan has had to overcome in his career, but just how impactful he is to everyone he comes into contact with.

### **Monsters Add Two ATO's**

With junior seasons coming to an end, the Cleveland Monsters took the opportunity to sign a pair of Blue Jackets' prospects to ATO's.

Defenseman Charlie Elick and goaltender Evan Gardner each signed ATO's Thursday. With just five games remaining in the regular season, it remains to be seen if either will get into a game. But to have the chance to be around the team will certainly benefit both players.

The Monsters have a magic number of five to clinch a spot in the AHL Playoffs. Any combination of points they gained coupled with points lost by Belleville will do the trick.

The big question coming down the stretch especially if the Blue Jackets miss the playoffs is if Denton Mateychuk will play in the AHL Playoffs. He was papered to the Monsters before the deadline and then recalled. Once Game 82 ends, we should learn quick what will happen in that regard.

### **Side Dishes**

- Evason liked what he saw from Voronkov, Sillinger and Olivier Tuesday night. Here's why he went to that trio as a line. "We were hoping to have just a physicality, a line that can keep the puck out of the net but play with that physicality as far as getting in on the forecheck and being big and strong. Voronkov made an unbelievable block at the end too and commitment to defense but they also scored. It was a good line."
- The Blue Jackets have 244 goals this season going into Thursday. That's a franchise record for 77 games, surpassing the 243 they scored in 77 games during the 2021-22 season. Their 3.17 goals per game average is their highest in franchise history.
- Boone Jenner needs just two goals to reach 200 in his NHL career.

## The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Defeat Sabres to Remain in East Playoff Race

**By Mark Scheig – April 11, 2025**

The Columbus Blue Jackets entered Thursday night's game against the Buffalo Sabres holding on to the slimmest of hopes to make the NHL Playoffs. They ultimately did their job to keep themselves in it for at least another night.

Jet Greaves, who was called up on an emergency basis Thursday, drove down to Columbus and made 39 saves to help lift the Blue Jackets to a 3-2 win over the Sabres. Boone Jenner scored the game-winning goal on the power play in the third period to cap a two-goal comeback. James van Riemsdyk and Zach Aston-Reese added a goal each. Rasmus Dahlin paced the Sabres with a goal and an assist.

The story of this game was what Greaves did for his team.

### **Game Recap**

The game started with both teams looking to get their footing. After feeling each other out for half the first period, it was the Sabres that built an early lead.

First it was J.J. Peterka who beat Greaves on the rush from the left wing. His snipe was his 25th goal of the season to make it 1-0. Then Dahlin scored a beauty on a patient play. He outwaited the defender and then scored to make it 2-0 less than three minutes later.

Greaves from there took over the game. He allowed the Blue Jackets a chance to get back into the game.

With just under nine seconds left in the first, van Riemsdyk scored his 15th goal of the season on a breakaway. Kent Johnson's clearing attempt landed perfectly for van Riemsdyk who beat James Reimer between the pads.

The Blue Jackets lost defenseman Jake Christiansen in the first period. He suffered an upper-body injury and was unable to return. Dean Evason said postgame he was being evaluated but didn't have a status.

The second period was sloppy on both sides. The puck bounced a lot. Plays were tough to make. There ultimately was no scoring in the second. The Sabres fired 18 shots at Greaves. He stopped them all.

Greaves then shut the Sabres down in the third too stopping all 15 shots he faced. This allowed the Blue Jackets a chance to make their comeback.

Aston-Reese fired from the slot to tie the game four minutes into the third. Then with Sam Lafferty in the box for slashing, Jenner scored the game winner on the power play to make it 3-2.

Greaves got help from his defensemen throughout the night, especially when they were missing guys. Christiansen out meant the Blue Jackets played most of the night with five defensemen. Then Zach Werenski had to leave for a bit when he was slashed in the hand. He was able to return.

Denton Mateychuk took a delay of game penalty in the third which meant the Blue Jackets played those two minutes with just three defensemen. Everyone stepped up to preserve the win.

Evason indicated postgame he was not sure how long Elvis Merzlikins would miss due to his injury. When asked why they didn't call Greaves up sooner given his season, Evason deferred to GM Don Waddell.

Daniil Tarasov was the backup to Greaves on Thursday.

While the Blue Jackets remained in the race Thursday night, they can be eliminated by the Montreal Canadiens Friday if they defeat the Ottawa Senators in regulation. Any other result and the Blue Jackets will enter Saturday's home game against the Washington Capitals still alive for the playoffs.

The Sabres now head to Florida for a Saturday evening game against the Panthers as they continue on their last road trip of the season.

## 1<sup>st</sup> Ohio Battery / CBJ 3, BUF 2: Greaves Stops 39 Shots, Blue Jackets Rally To Stay Alive In Playoff Race

By Ed Francis – April 11, 2025

Jet Greaves stopped 39 shots, and the Columbus Blue Jackets scored two goals 2:42 apart in the third to keep their playoff hopes alive, defeating Buffalo 3-2 on Thursday night and ending the Sabres' five-game winning streak.

Things looked bleak early, with Buffalo scoring twice on their first seven shots and going up 2-0 on a pair of goals that came less than three minutes apart.

Columbus' first bit of momentum came late in the period, when James van Riemsdyk scored on a breakaway in the final ten seconds to make it a 2-1 game heading into the first intermission.

The Blue Jackets couldn't generate much offense in the second — they had just seven shots on goal — but Greaves continued to swing momentum in Columbus' direction, stopping all 18 of Buffalo's shots and invigorating the Nationwide Arena crowd. Included in those 18 saves was a JJ Peterka breakaway attempt with just over a minute left in the period that would have given the Sabres a two-goal lead through two.

Instead, it was only still a one-goal game early in the third when Zach Aston-Reese tied the game at 2-2 four minutes into the period with his sixth goal of the season.

Boone Jenner then gave the Blue Jackets a 3-2 lead less than three minutes later with a power-play goal that put Columbus ahead for good.

As the Blue Jackets' offense found its way, Greaves continued to keep the puck out of the net, stopping every one of Buffalo's 15 shots in the final frame.

Greaves was named the First Star of the night. In what is becoming the norm for the 24-year-old netminder, he deferred on taking any credit for the outstanding night.

"I think the guys did a great job and put a lot of pressure on them," said Greaves. "I thought we got better as the night went on."

The victory puts Columbus six points behind the Montreal Canadiens for the final wild card spot in the East. Both teams now have four games remaining on their schedule.

### **Here's how the Blue Jackets kept their season alive:**

#### **1st Period:**

**(11:54 — BUF Goal):** Buffalo strikes first with Peterka finding the back of the net after an absolute snipe from near the faceoff dot after breaking free on a rush.

**(14:39 — BUF Goal):** After assisting on the Peterka goal, Rasmus Dahlin gets his 16th goal of the season to make it 2-0 Buffalo. He shakes Monahan at the blueline and skates into the slot,, briefly giving the puck up before getting it back and firing it past Greaves.

**(19:51 — CBJ Goal):** van Riemsdyk gets the goal, but it's Kent Johnson who makes it all happen. He flips the puck into the neutral zone using his backhand, and it drops perfectly to JVR near center ice, who then uses a backhand of his own to slip it past Buffalo goalie James Reimer and give the Blue Jackets a much-needed goal in the waning seconds of the opening frame.

#### **2nd Period:**

Neither team found the back of the net — but Buffalo probably should have. Greaves was phenomenal throughout the middle frame, including a save on a Peterka breakaway with just over a minute left. The Sabres led 18-7 in shots on goal and had all seven of the high-danger chances. Expected goals for the period were 1.68 to 0.38 per *Natural Stat Trick*.

### **3rd Period:**

**(4:00 — CBJ Goal):** After going 57 games without a goal, Aston-Reese gets his second in four games — and it's a big one, tying the game at 2-2. He absorbs a big hit a few feet inside of the blueline and keeps possession of the puck with a spin, then fires through traffic from the point, and it gets past Reimer.

**(6:42 — CBJ Goal):** Jenner gives the Blue Jackets their first lead of the night and picks up the eventual game-winning goal on the power play. The sequence starts with a good keep-in from Sean Monahan. He pushes it forward to Kirill Marchenko, who skates into the slot and fires on Reimer, who gives up a rebound that bounces around in front of the net just long enough for Jenner to scoop it up and score to put Columbus ahead 3-2.

### **Stat Chat:**

- Greaves stopped the last 34 Buffalo shots on the night.
- The assists from Marchenko and Werenski made them only the fifth set of Blue Jackets to each post 40-plus assists in a single season.
- Erik Gudbranson picked up an assist on the Aston-Reese goal, his second consecutive game with a helper.

### **Up Next:**

The final week of the season starts with an early, 12:30 p.m. puck-drop Saturday against the Washington Capitals at Nationwide Arena. It's the first half of a weekend home-and-home against the team with the NHL's all-time leading goal scorer.

## The Athletic / Why NHL Western Conference playoff teams have reason to hope — and panic

By Shayna Goldman and Harman Dayal – April 11, 2025

No playoff contender is perfect. Every single team has a reason to be hopeful this spring. But all 16 teams have red flags casting doubt over their chances — whether it's due to their roster strength, recent play, injuries or path forward.

After looking at the Eastern Conference on Tuesday, it's time to shift West.

The playoff picture is almost set. The Blues essentially ended the wild-card race with an 11-game win streak. As teams jostle for position within those eight seeds, let's take a look at what is working for these Stanley Cup hopefuls and what might hold them back.

### **Central Division**

#### **Winnipeg Jets**

**Reason for hope:** Connor Hellebuyck is playing on another level this season. Through 60 games, he has saved a league-leading 45 goals above expected (third in the analytics era). The Jets are still leaning on him heavily, but his workload within those games has been eased. Hellebuyck is facing fewer shots (41 unblocked per 60 minutes of play, the lowest since his rookie season) and scoring chances (2.77 expected goals against, the lowest rate since 2017-18) thanks to improved team defense.

The Jets are one of the best defensive teams in the league. They are super stingy in shots and chances against and do a great job breaking out of their own zone.

Pair that stout defense with a solid offense, and the Jets are a contender to watch. At the top of the lineup, there is a lot of balance between Mark Scheifele and Kyle Connor, who are both top 10 in goal scoring. The impending returns of Gabriel Vilardi and Nikolaj Ehlers will help spread the wealth across the top six.

**Reason for concern:** The Jets unraveled last year in Round 1. This group has to prove it has the chops to improve when it matters most. That is especially true for a couple of players, like Ehlers, whose regular-season success hasn't translated into the playoffs.

As for Hellebuyck, the question is whether the pressure or his workload has gotten to him — the latter seems to be the best explanation at this point. So, while the team's defensive efforts have eased his workload within games, he has still played 77 percent of the Jets' games this year.

The other concerning element is the Stars are creeping up the standings behind Winnipeg, which makes Thursday's matchup all the more important. If the Stars steal the top seed, the Jets will have to face the Avs for the second straight year.

#### **Dallas Stars**

**Reason for hope:** The Stars had one of the deepest forward groups before adding Mikko Rantanen; now, this group is stacked with three scoring lines that make this a top-five offensive team at five-on-five.

Rantanen helps take some of the pressure off Jason Robertson. Wyatt Johnston is a rising star who adds a lot of versatility to the top nine. And Tyler Seguin is getting closer to returning, which would reunite a second line with Mason Marchment and Matt Duchene, who crushed it in his minutes earlier this season with a 61.6 percent expected goal rate and a 14-6 scoring edge.



On the back end, Thomas Harley has stepped up in Miro Heiskanen's absence. Jake Oettinger has rebounded to form as a true No. 1 goalie with a 0.91 save percentage and 26 goals above expected.

While the Stars are currently slated to face the Avalanche in Round 1, there is a path to the top seed. Then, Dallas would instead play either St. Louis or Minnesota, which would be a more favorable path.

**Reason for concern:** The right side of the Stars' blue line is completely exposed without Heiskanen. Cody Ceci is out of his depth playing matchup minutes. Ilya Lyubushkin is unfittingly on the top pair. And at least one of Matt Dumba or Brendan Smith has to be deployed on the third pair. It is a key reason why the Stars have dropped to second last in the league in expected goals against at five-on-five since the 4 Nations Face-Off. While this team is still winning despite some of its underlying numbers, it could burn in the playoffs.

Heiskanen is expected to return this postseason (depending on how deep the Stars go), but there isn't any certainty on whether he will be available for Round 1. That could be a back-breaker because a Heiskanen-less blue line may not be able to contain Colorado's speed.

### **Colorado Avalanche**

**Reason for hope:** Nathan MacKinnon and Cale Makar are game-breakers. MacKinnon is in the midst of another MVP-caliber season; he is a force that few manage to contain, let alone shut down. Makar is on his way to another Norris Trophy thanks to his elite all-around game.

As a result of several in-season moves, the duo has the support to round out this roster. That was a clear weakness to open the season, which was further strained by key injuries to/absences from Artturi Lehkonen, Jonathan Drouin and Valeri Nichushkin.

Martin Necas is a zone-entry machine who fits seamlessly in Colorado. Brock Nelson's two-way game elevates the 2C position. Charlie Coyle and Jack Drury strengthen the bottom six and the penalty kill. Ryan Lindgren adds some sandpaper to the third pair. Mackenzie Blackwood and Scott Wedgewood have stabilized the goaltending.

And there could still be another boost on the way if Gabriel Landeskog can make his return to play. He is currently on a conditioning stint with the Eagles, a positive sign on his long road back.

**Reason for concern:** The Avs haven't been able to ice a completely healthy lineup often this season. Necas, Drouin, Ross Colton, Sam Girard and Josh Manson are all sidelined. Landeskog is still a wild card for the playoffs, and even if he does return, it's not clear what his level will be after missing two full seasons.

The most concerning is that the Avs are locked into a tough matchup no matter how the playoff picture shakes out and will likely be without home-ice advantage. For all their flaws, the Stars are still one of the best teams in the league. Dallas could end Colorado's season for the second straight year, just one round earlier. That would be a serious disappointment for a team that invested a lot in this season's roster.

### **Pacific Division**

#### **Vegas Golden Knights**

**Reason for hope:** This is a deep, well-rounded team with a lot of strengths.

Vegas' blue line, led by Alex Pietrangelo, Shea Theodore, Noah Hanifin and Brayden McNabb, is one of the best in the NHL. Collectively, the six-man defensive unit boasts a tantalizing combination of size, defensive IQ, mobility and offensive talent.

The Golden Knights should be a very tough team to score against in the playoffs when you couple that high-end blue line with Bruce Cassidy's stout defensive system and structure.

Vegas is also an upper-echelon team offensively. Jack Eichel is having the best year of his career and can go toe-to-toe with any superstar in the league. The Golden Knights' power play ranks second-best in the NHL this season.

Their forward depth is excellent; Vegas is projected to finish the year with six 20-goal scorers and 12 forwards who will hit at least 12 goals.

The Golden Knights are more dynamic offensively than last year — they rank fourth-best at generating shots and seventh-best at generating expected goals at five-on-five, compared to 12th and 15th in those respective categories in 2023-24. And the key is they've done it without sacrificing their elite defensive chops. By the eye, they look faster in transition and more dangerous attacking off the rush.

**Reason for concern:** There honestly aren't a lot of flaws here, but Vegas' penalty kill stands out as a key area that needs to be fixed.

The Golden Knights' PK ranks in the bottom third of the league and has been especially woeful down the stretch, killing off just 71.2 percent of power plays since Feb. 1, which ranks 30th in the NHL.

The PK is a worry in a potential Round 1 matchup with the Blues, who have one of the hottest power plays in the NHL. And even if Vegas advances past St. Louis, it doesn't get any easier because Edmonton could be waiting in Round 2, and we all know what kind of damage the Oilers' power play can do.

## Los Angeles Kings

**Reason for hope:** The Kings have been elite defensively for years and this season is no different, but the big question has always been whether they have enough offensive oomph to get past the Round 1 hurdle against Edmonton.

There's genuine reason to believe this year could be different, and a lot of it comes down to Quinton Byfield's recent surge. Byfield has taken off with 25 points in his last 28 games. He's elevated Kevin Fiala, who has caught fire with 14 goals in his last 28 games after a mostly underwhelming campaign.

That new dynamic top-six duo has catapulted the Kings' offense to 3.25 goals per game since Feb. 1, which ranks top 10 in the NHL. L.A. has the best record in the Pacific Division in that timeframe.

Darcy Kuemper's excellent play in net is another potential X-factor. The 34-year-old has saved 29.3 goals above expected this season, which ranks third-best among all goaltenders, behind only Hellebuyck and Andrei Vasilevskiy. This could be a game-changer for the Kings, who've mostly had mediocre goaltending in the post-Jonathan Quick era.

Between Byfield's breakout/the surging offensive attack, the sizable goaltending edge and potential home-ice advantage (L.A. has the best home record in the NHL), the Kings have a fighting chance against an Oilers team that isn't exactly firing on all cylinders heading into the playoffs.

**Reason for concern:** They've lost to the Oilers three consecutive times in the first round and are staring at another rematch. Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl have consistently proven they can pick L.A.'s typically stingy defensive structure apart.

Edmonton's special teams advantage, in particular, is massive. The Oilers' power play dominated last year's series, despite the Kings owning the second-best PK during the 2023-24 regular season. L.A.'s power play is clicking at just 15.9 percent this season, too, which ranks bottom five in the NHL.

And even with Byfield's recent breakout, the Kings have fewer game-breaking offensive stars than most contenders in the West.

### **Edmonton Oilers**

**Reason for hope:** No matter how many question marks this roster might have, the fact remains that Nos. 97 and 29 can single-handedly win playoff series on their own.

McDavid has a ludicrous 95 points in 53 games over his last three postseason runs, and Draisaitl isn't far behind with 81 points.

No other contender has a cheat code like this.

Jake Walman has been an excellent fit in the Oilers' top four (eight points in 15 games and dominant underlying numbers). With him, Evan Bouchard, Mattias Ekholm (once he returns to the lineup), Darnell Nurse (who's had a bounce-back season) and Brett Kulak, Edmonton's blue line looks much stronger than last year.

Overall, the Oilers are one of the best play-driving teams in the NHL, ranking top five among all teams at controlling five-on-five shot attempts and expected goals this year. Couple that even-strength success with the sky-high ceiling of their special teams and you've got a dangerous formula.

**Reason for concern:** Edmonton proved last year that it could make a Cup run with average goaltending, but will Stuart Skinner even give them "average" this year? The streaky 26-year-old has slumped to an .894 save percentage, the worst of his NHL career, in 2024-25.

The Oilers have been inconsistent over the last couple of months, sporting a 12-13-1 record since Feb 1. That's tied with Minnesota for the worst points percentage among playoff teams in that time frame.

McDavid, Draisaitl and Ekholm have missed chunks of games in March. They'll surely return to the lineup for the playoffs (and McDavid already returned on Wednesday against the Blues), but the bigger question is whether they will feel 100 percent healthy and can perform to the absolute peak of their potential, or whether it'll hinder their performance. McDavid, in particular, has logged a lot of hard miles between last June's Cup run and the 4 Nations Face-Off, and strangely hasn't performed at an MVP level this year.

Up front, Edmonton's secondary scoring beyond McDavid and Draisaitl isn't very deep, either.

### **Wild card**

#### **St. Louis Blues**

**Reason for hope:** St. Louis has the best record in the NHL since Feb 1. It's helped that the club has had a favorable second-half schedule, but it has also beaten legit contenders. Since the 4 Nations break, the Blues have played the red-hot Avalanche three times and have beaten them in regulation on all three occasions. They played the Kings three times in early March and collected five of six possible points.

Up front, the Blues' top six is firing on all cylinders. Everybody is contributing, but Robert Thomas is especially playing at a superstar level, with 40 points in his last 27 games. The power play has been clicking at an elite rate over the last couple of months.

Since Jim Montgomery was hired in late November, St. Louis has become an excellent defensive team with sparkling underlying numbers. Montgomery's group has gone on a heater despite missing Colton Parayko for the last month (shout out to Cam Fowler). Parayko will likely be back by the playoffs, giving the club a massive boost.

Jordan Binnington is heating up at the perfect time, too, as he's recorded a .917 save percentage since 4 Nations.

**Reason for concern:** Will Dylan Holloway be healthy and productive for the playoffs? The 23-year-old breakout star got injured last week against the Penguins and is considered week to week. The 20-year-old Jimmy Snuggerud has arrived after lighting up the NCAA, so perhaps he can mitigate some of the offensive loss. Holloway missing part of the first round or playing far below 100 percent health would be a huge blow because he's arguably been the Blues' second-best forward this year.

Like every other Western contender, the Blues' path to a deep run won't be easy. St. Louis will likely face off against an elite Vegas side in Round 1. The Golden Knights will be a very tough out for any team.

### **Minnesota Wild**

**Reason for hope:** The Wild's reinforcements could not have come at a better time. On Wednesday against San Jose, Minnesota got back its No. 1 winger, Kirill Kaprizov, and top center, Joel Eriksson Ek.

Kaprizov has played just three games since the holiday break in late December. Before his injury, he was electric and a front-runner in the Hart Trophy conversation. Eriksson Ek has been out for about two months; his frustrating two-way game was missed in all situations.

Having those two back helps reset the depth chart; everyone moves back into more fitting capacities and roles below Kaprizov and Eriksson Ek. And they should have support behind them. Boldy has been excelling, with 10 points in his last 10 games. Marcus Foligno has been providing steady depth in the middle six, too.

The Wild may have slipped down to eighth for a few days but are back up in seventh place. Plus, the fact that they stayed in playoff position despite key injuries is encouraging. And no matter what happens from here, this team is well-positioned for next season.

**Reason for concern:** Kaprizov's and Eriksson Ek's returns may not be able to stave off another Round 1 exit.

Outside of a gusty overtime win over the Stars last Sunday, the Wild have had some concerning outings lately. The Stars and Golden Knights crushed them in late March, and the Devils handed them another two losses. The New York swing against two subpar teams was another red flag. Brock Faber and Jonas Brodin weren't at their best, and the team's offense disappointed. The latter has been a trend since 4 Nations; the Wild are bottom four in five-on-five expected goal generation since the break and are dead last in scoring with just 1.4 goals per 60. And while Minnesota did pick up the pace offensively against the Sharks on Wednesday night, the team was leaky in its own zone in a matchup that, on paper, should not have been this close.

## **ESPN / NHL playoff standings: Which games matter most Thursday**

**By ESPN Staff – April 11, 2025**

Hockey fans are close to knowing the identities of the 16 Stanley Cup playoff teams for 2025. But the battles for seeding continue to rage -- as does the jockeying for position in the draft lottery order.

Here's what to monitor during Thursday's 10-game slate -- and we hope you can watch on multiple devices!

### **Chicago Blackhawks at Boston Bruins**

**7 p.m. (ESPN+)**

These two Original Six franchises will be back in the postseason again at some point, but not this season. Chicago begins the night second in the draft lottery order, three points back of the San Jose Sharks. The Bruins are fourth heading into Thursday night, tied in points with the Philadelphia Flyers.

### **Detroit Red Wings at Florida Panthers**

**7 p.m. (ESPN+)**

The Red Wings begin the evening eight points behind the Canadiens for the final wild-card spot in the East (Tuesday's loss to Montreal certainly didn't help). A regulation loss here eliminates them. After their win Tuesday over the Toronto Maple Leafs, the Panthers are right back in the race atop the Atlantic Division. As play begins Thursday, the Leafs are No. 1 with 100 points and 39 regulation wins, the Tampa Bay Lightning are second (97, 39) and the Panthers are third (94, 36).

### **Buffalo Sabres at Columbus Blue Jackets**

**7 p.m. (ESPN+)**

The Sabres picked a strange time to go on a heater, as they are 8-2-0 in their past 10; maybe there will be some carry-over to start 2025-26? In any event, Buffalo begins the evening eighth in the draft lottery order, three spots (and three points) ahead of Columbus. The Blue Jackets stayed in the playoff race probably longer than anyone outside their dressing room believed they would, but they'll be officially eliminated with another loss.

### **Carolina Hurricanes at Washington Capitals**

**7:30 p.m. (ESPN+/Hulu/Disney+)**

There was some nastiness the last time these two squads played; will we see retribution -- particularly against Carolina's Jalen Chatfield -- on Thursday? As for the long-term impact, Washington is locked in as the No. 1 seed in the Metro, and Carolina needs one point to clinch the No. 2 seed over the New Jersey Devils.

### **New York Rangers at New York Islanders**

**7:30 p.m. (ESPN+)**

From two Metro teams that have clinched a playoff spot to two who are on the cusp of elimination (after qualifying last spring). This rivalry game has a bit less juice than usual given the reality of the mathematics. The Rangers are currently 10th in the draft lottery order, the Isles 12th.

### **Winnipeg Jets at Dallas Stars**

**8 p.m. (ESPN+)**

If the Stars have plans to overtake the Jets for the top overall seed in the West, they'll need to win this one. Winnipeg enters the game four points (and one regulation win) ahead. So it's not completely a must-win for the Stars' quest for the No. 1 spot, but it'd certainly be a lot better for those chances if they won.

**Vancouver Canucks at Colorado Avalanche****9 p.m. (ESPN+)**

The Canucks were officially eliminated Wednesday night, and are currently 15th in the draft lottery order, a point back of the Hockey Club. As for the Avalanche, they are nearly locked into position as the Central's No. 3 seed.

**Nashville Predators at Utah Hockey Club****9 p.m. (ESPN+)**

The HC has been playing inspired hockey as of late, but it was too late to get the final playoff spot, as they were eliminated Wednesday night. Meanwhile, Nashville begins play third in the draft lottery order, 10 points behind Chicago and seven ahead of the No. 4 Flyers.

**Seattle Kraken at Vegas Golden Knights****10 p.m. (ESPN+)**

This wasn't the best season in Seattle Kraken history, though the club will likely get a top-10 draft pick this summer to continue the build; heading into Thursday, the Kraken are sixth in the draft lottery order, one point behind the Flyers and Bruins, and two ahead of the Penguins and Sabres.

**Anaheim Ducks at Los Angeles Kings****10 p.m. (ESPN+/Hulu/Disney+)**

Speaking of the Ducks, a win over their SoCal rivals would diminish the Kings' chances of catching Vegas for the No. 1 seed in the Pacific; L.A. begins the evening six points back.

With the regular season ending April 17, we'll help you track it all with 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.

## [Sportsnet.ca / NHL Power Rankings: Looking at each team's MVP for this season](#)

By Ryan Dixon – April 11, 2025

If you've been watching hockey all year — or making the quality decision to check out Sportsnet.ca a few times already this week — you're well aware that the Hart Trophy talk is as wide open as it gets this season.

Both me, and Sportsnet pal, Sonny Sachdeva, have written about a league MVP race that, with just a week to go in the campaign, could still go to any one of a handful or even half-dozen guys. Three players — Nathan MacKinnon, Leon Draisaitl and Nikita Kucherov — are in search of their second Harts; Jack Eichel is gunning for his first major individual award of any kind; Connor Hellebuyck is trying to become the third goalie this century to win the Hart, while Cale Makar is certainly a worthy candidate to become the first D-man to win MVP since Chris Pronger in 2000.

It's hard to cast a bad ballot with that crew.

While there can only be one Hart Trophy winner each year, all 32 clubs in the league got an internal performance that's worthy of highlighting. So, to close out our final power ranking of the regular season — don't worry, we'll have a playoff version next week — we're identifying each team's MVP for the 2024-25 campaign.

**1. Winnipeg Jets (53-21-4)** Regardless of whether or not Hellebuyck wins the Hart, he's almost sure to claim the Vezina for the second consecutive year and third time overall in his increasingly rare career. The last back-to-back Vezina winner was Martin Brodeur in 2008 and the only goalies to win more than three Vezinas in the Expansion Era are Dominik Hasek (six), Ken Dryden (five) and Brodeur (four).

**2. Dallas Stars (50-22-6)** Thomas Harley has really stepped up in the second half of the year, with Miro Heiskanen largely out of the lineup. Harley has 27 points since Jan. 31, more than every D-man in the league save Cale Makar (35). He's also playing nearly 25 minutes a night for this club during that stretch.

**3. Washington Capitals (49-19-9)** Alex Ovechkin is scoring 0.69 goals per game, which is the second-best mark in the league after Leon Draisaitl (0.73). That's a 57-goal pace for a 39-year-old player. Right now, he's got 10 more goals than any other Capital, despite missing five weeks with a fractured leg.

Had he missed any more time, it might be hard to call him Washington's MVP. As it stands, he's the guy.

**4. Toronto Maple Leafs (48-26-4)** Mitch Marner is three points away from his first 100-point season. Front to back, he's been the Leafs' best player.

**5. Vegas Golden Knights (47-22-9)** Jack Eichel may not wind up a Hart finalist, but — given his extensive injury history and numerous trying seasons in Buffalo — this feels like a statement campaign for a 28-year-old who is eligible to ink a contract extension this summer.

**6. Los Angeles Kings (44-24-9)** Darcy Kuemper's numbers and where he ranks league-wide since Dec. 7: 37 games played (7th); 24 wins (3rd); .927 save percentage (2nd).

**7. Colorado Avalanche (48-27-4)** It's really tempting to cop out and call Nathan MacKinnon and Cale Makar co-winners. You could certainly argue Makar's season is more notable given he's the first 30-goal defenceman since Mike Green in 2009. Still, MacKinnon has a real shot to be the first back-to-back Hart winner since Alex Ovechkin in the same 2008-09 season Green scored 31 for the Caps. We'll give MacKinnon the slightest of nods over his teammate.

**8. Tampa Bay Lightning (45-26-7)** Andrei Vasilevskiy certainly has a case in this comeback season he's put together, but it has to be Nikita Kucherov. He could wind up winning the Art Ross and Hart this year.

**9. Carolina Hurricanes (46-27-4)** Top centre Sebastian Aho plays over 20 minutes per night and sets the tone for the Canes.

**10. Edmonton Oilers (45-28-5)** Leon Draisaitl is going to win the Rocket Richard Trophy with his fourth career 50-goal season. Except for Alex Ovechkin, no other player has more than two 50-goal campaigns this century.

**11. St. Louis Blues (43-30-7)** The real answer is probably in-season hire Jim Montgomery, but we're not handing hardware to coaches here. Since Feb. 2, Robert Thomas leads the NHL in scoring with 42 points in 28 games.

**12. Florida Panthers (45-29-4)** Sam Reinhart has 20 fewer goals than the 57 he notched last year, but he's still a point-per-game, all-situations player who doesn't get hurt. That's enough to make him the Cats' MVP.

**13. Minnesota Wild (43-29-7)** Wednesday was a huge night in Wild land, as both Kirill Kaprizov and Joel Eriksson Ek — who scored a hat trick — returned to the lineup after long absences. Kaprizov hadn't played since Jan. 26 and, since that very same date, Filip Gustavsson has a .918 save percentage in 23 games. Brock Faber's 25 minutes per night notwithstanding, it's just hard to imagine somebody has played a larger role in Minnesota hanging onto a playoff spot with its two most important forwards on the shelf than Gustavsson

**14. Ottawa Senators (42-30-6)** Jake Sanderson is becoming an absolute stud in his third NHL season. He can handle tough defensive assignments and could nudge right up to 60 points this year thanks to a productive second half that's seen him produce 19 points in his past 22 games.

**15. Montreal Canadiens (39-30-9)** Really, this is Colorado light, with Nick Suzuki playing the Nathan MacKinnon role and Lane Hutson Montreal's equivalent to Cale Makar. Coward that I am, I'll pick the centre again, but it cannot be overstated how vital Hutson — especially in the second half — has been to the Canadiens' surprising success.

**16. New Jersey Devils (41-30-7)** Nico Hischier's late push — 11 goals and 24 points in 21 contests since the 4 Nations Face-Off — is impressive, but the nod has to go to 88-point winger Jesper Bratt. On a team annually crushed by injuries, Bratt hasn't missed a game in three years.

**17. Calgary Flames (37-27-14)** Dustin Wolf will surely be a Calder finalist and the goalie is most definitely Calgary's MVP.

**18. Utah Hockey Club (36-30-12)** Mikhail Sergachev is playing over 25 minutes per night during his first year with the franchise. He's an indispensable member of UHC and will be for years to come.

**19. Vancouver Canucks (36-29-13)** Quinn Hughes' 1.16 points per game tops all blue-liners, coming just a tiny sliver ahead of Cale Makar's 1.15. He's far and away Vancouver's most important player.

**20. Anaheim Ducks (35-35-8)** Jackson LaCombe has been a revelation as an NHL sophomore. The 24-year-old defenceman plays 22 minutes per night on a team where nobody else sees 20 minutes a game. He plays on both special teams, and his 14 goals are more than all but 10 defencemen in the league.

**21. Detroit Red Wings (36-34-7)** Moritz Seider basically plays four minutes a night more than any other Red Wing. With respect to Lucas Raymond and Dylan Larkin, it's hard to believe anybody on the team is more valuable game in, game out than the big German defenceman.



**22. New York Islanders (34-32-11)** Odds are the Islanders will finish the season without a 60-point player. Realistically, their MVP is still Ilya Sorokin in a year where he'll be nowhere near the Vezina conversation.

**23. Buffalo Sabres (35-36-6)** Man, Tage Thompson can be a beast out there. He's got 16 goals in his past 19 outings and is suddenly tied with William Nylander for second place in the NHL goals race with 44.

**24. Columbus Blue Jackets (35-33-9)** Zach Werenski was a fringe Hart candidate at one point this season. He may have fallen out of that conversation, but he's most definitely MVP of CBJ.

**25. New York Rangers (36-35-7)** The less said about this team the better, so let's just give it to Adam Fox and move on with our day.

**26. Pittsburgh Penguins (32-35-12)** Sidney Crosby is far and away the Pens' MVP and it's probably a bad thing for the team to say it's extremely hard to imagine that not being the case again next year, when he's 38 years old.

**27. Seattle Kraken (34-39-6)** Brandon Montour's 17 goals are the fourth-best total by any defenceman in the league. Throw in his 22 minutes per night and, on a club with no real dynamic threat up front, that's enough to make him Seattle's MVP.

**28. Philadelphia Flyers (32-37-9)** Travis Konecny has already established a new career high with 75 points. And the way he's going — with seven assists in his past five games — he might finish as an 80-point guy.

**29. Boston Bruins (32-38-9)** David Pastrnak's 63 points in the 2025 portion of the schedule leads the NHL. Whatever the solution is in Boston, the 28-year-old Czech winger will be a part of it.

**30. Nashville Predators (28-42-8)** In a miserable year, Filip Forsberg has hit the 30-goal mark and is on track to play all 82 games for the second straight year. That's awesome news for a guy two years removed from a frightening concussion in 2023.

**31. Chicago Blackhawks (22-46-10)** What a second half for Ryan Donato. Even after four games without a point, he's notched 35 points in his past 33 contests and needs three goals to double his previous career best of 16.

**32. San Jose Sharks (20-47-11)** Even before his big five-point night on Wednesday, Macklin Celebrini was entrenched as the Sharks' MVP.

## [Sportsnet.ca / Will any player be able to challenge Alex Ovechkin's goals record?](#)

**By David Morassutti – April 11, 2025**

For 31 years, Wayne Gretzky held the crown as the best goal-scorer in the NHL, a mark that was largely viewed as untouchable until Alex Ovechkin made a run and completed the historic chase last weekend.

When Sportsnet's Elliotte Friedman asked Ovechkin about possibly breaking Gretzky's record in 2016, he wouldn't entertain the possibility.

"Impossible to catch Gretzky?" Friedman asked.

"It's impossible," Ovechkin said in response.

However, Friedman was pushing the idea more, "You could challenge him, you might be able to do it—"

"No," Ovechkin interjected. "I have to have six seasons of 50 goals, I don't know if I'm going to be able to skate in six seasons."

At that point, Ovechkin had 525 goals in 839 career games and was coming off his third-straight 50-goal campaign.

As the years went along, Ovechkin's belief started to change, and despite the COVID-19 pandemic putting a pause on hockey and his chase, the Russian star remained determined to get back on track.

This season, Ovechkin is scoring at a 0.69 goals-per-game pace, his best mark since the 2019-20 season, when he had a 0.71 goals-per-game pace. Even more impressive, the 39-year-old didn't let a 16-game absence from a fractured fibula slow him down.

While it's certain that Ovechkin will add to his total with one year left on his contract after this season, it's not clear whether he will try to extend his NHL career beyond that, or decide it's the right time to retire from the NHL.

How high can Ovechkin go from here? And will he reign atop the NHL's all-time goal scoring list for as long as Gretzky did, or will anyone be able to challenge him in the near future?

Let's take a look at whether any of the active goal-scoring leaders in the league will challenge Ovechkin.

Ovechkin has owned the Maurice "Rocket" Richard Trophy during his career with nine goal-scoring titles to his name. However, over the last four years, Matthews has earned three Rockey Richard Trophies.

It didn't take long for many to point to the Toronto Maple Leafs captain as the next challenger for the goal-scoring mark, but he was not willing to put himself in that conversation.

"That's such a long way away or such a long way to go," Matthews said after practice Monday. "And, you know, I don't even think I should be in that conversation."

"I mean, this guy just broke the record. I'm so far away from that, and I don't think that should be a focus on myself. I mean, it should be on Ovi, and rightfully so. It should be on Ovi, and what he's been able to accomplish in his career, and obviously this record being one of them."

It's a respectable comment from Matthews, considering Ovechkin's total will continue to go up as long as he plays.

However, the Leafs' sniper is selling himself short if he doesn't think he can challenge the mark. He is only two goals away from scoring 400 in his career, a mark that Ovechkin took 634 games to accomplish, while Matthews has played in 623 career games.

Matthews has not only been the most productive goal scorer since entering the league in 2016, but his current goal-scoring pace has him among some of the top goal scorers of all time.

There's no denying that Matthews has the ability to challenge Ovechkin thanks to a pair of 60-plus goal scoring seasons, but there is one hurdle that he would have to overcome.

### **Staying healthy**

Durability has been an issue for Matthews throughout his career, missing 71 games spread across nine seasons. That's a significant amount of time missed, considering how many goals Matthews could have had over that time.

If we take his career goals-per-game pace of 0.64 and apply that to the number of games that he has missed, we're looking at about 45 goals that Matthews could have added to his total.

But Ovechkin has also had a bit of luck go against him at points throughout his career. His NHL debut was delayed by a year because of the 2004-05 lockout, the lockout in 2012-13 shortened that season to 48 games, and the pandemic cut the 2019-20 season short and was followed by a 56-game season in 2021.

If Matthews continued to score at the pace he's currently on, he would need roughly 778 more games to reach 896 goals. That means Matthews would need to play at least another 10 seasons before he really gets into this conversation -- and since Ovechkin is still adding to his total, Matthews' climb will have to continue from there.

### **Can the Oilers duo enter the conversation?**

Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl are no strangers to scoring goals, but the route for them doesn't hold the same potential as Matthews'.

Let's start with Draisaitl, who got off to a slow start in his career but has seen a massive uptick in production since the 2018-19 season. Right now, the Oilers forward has scored 399 goals, which puts him 496 goals away from Ovechkin's current mark.

At his 0.51 goals-per-game pace, he'll need to play around 975 more NHL games to reach Ovechkin's current mark. That doesn't consider how many more goals Ovechkin adds to his total, so the more goals he scores, the longer Draisaitl will need to play.

The 29-year-old has played 790 career games and hasn't dealt with many injuries, but he's already behind the pace. However, he has scored at a 0.62 goals-per-game pace since the 2019-20 season, which helps his chances, but unless he plans to play and continue to score at that rate for another 900 games and Ovechkin retires soon, it still might not be enough.

Like Draisaitl, McDavid finds himself in a tough position to challenge Ovechkin because he hasn't scored at the same pace as those top goal-getters, with 361 goals through 708 career games. The Oilers captain has scored at a 0.51 goals-per-game pace during his career, even with his 64-goal season back in 2022-23, but he's followed that up with 32 and 26 goals (currently).

For McDavid, the real question will be about where he finishes on the NHL's all-time points list. Catching Gretzky is probably impossible, but maybe he can get close and finish No. 2 all-time. That's an article for another day, however.

### **Pastrnak faces similar uphill battle**

When you look at David Pastrnak's career he's been a valuable contributor for the Boston Bruins with a respectable 0.52 career goals-per-game average. The 61-goal season that he had in 2022-23 showed his

potential as a top goal scorer in the league but that was the only season where he's scored over 50 in his career.

In 753 career games, he's scored 389 goals which puts Pastrnak off the pace of the other contenders but when his career is over, he should be in a good position unless the Bruins' retool impacts his production.

### **Any contenders down the road**

While there might not be many active players capable of challenging Ovechkin's record, there is always an influx of talent that could one day try to put themselves in the conversation.

When Connor Bedard was coming into the NHL, he was touted as the "Next One" after scoring 71 goals and 143 points in 57 games during his draft year. But it's been a slow start to his career, partly due to the fact he's on a Chicago Blackhawks team that lacks talent to support him. With 42 goals scored through his first 146 NHL games, it's far too early to say if Bedard could one day make a charge or not, but unless he starts to break out with some stellar goal scoring seasons soon, his pace could fall off enough to make it unlikely.

Then you have the potential for players waiting to enter the league.

Let's start with this upcoming draft, where Michael Misa has put himself in the conversation as a top-three pick. The Saginaw forward had an impressive season with 62 goals and 134 points in 65 games, and Central Scouting used Steven Stamkos as an NHL comparable.

Can Misa bring that kind of goal-scoring production to the NHL? There is a reason the Oakville, Ont., native was one of four players in the OHL granted exceptional status.

Then there is the 2026 NHL Draft, where WHL phenom Gavin McKenna is already turning heads. He recorded 41 goals and 129 points through 56 games, but his 45-game point streak had everyone talking.

During that 45-game stretch, he produced 34 goals and 116 points, which put him in rare company. Sportsnet's Jason Bukala broke down McKenna's scoring prowess and how aggressive he is at getting pucks on net between the faceoff circles.

You certainly have to be cautious when looking at production from a player during his junior career and assume that it will translate to success in the NHL, and very few players will ever have a career that could rival Ovechkin's, but there is some exciting talent as part of the next wave of prospects set to make the jump.

Ovechkin is the new record holder and he will hold that for a long time into the future yet, with 900-plus goal on the horizon. Will he one day reach 1,000 goals? Will he retire after next season?

The more goals Ovechkin scores from here, the tougher the math gets for anyone else to catch him in the future.