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The Athletic / Blue Jackets Sunday Gathering: First-round picks Lindstrom, Smith settle into campus life

By Aaron Portzline – September 21, 2025

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

Item No. 1: Back to school

It's been more than two years since Cayden Lindstrom and Jackson Smith sat in a classroom or stayed up late doing homework. At age 16, when they started to define themselves as elite-level players, the classes went online and the focus switched to hockey.

But late last month, instead of heading to Columbus ahead of Blue Jackets training camp, the two recent first-round picks packed their book bags and filed into lecture halls. Lindstrom, the No. 4 overall pick in 2024, attends Michigan State, while Smith, the No. 14 overall pick in June, is at Penn State.

"Once I got drafted by the Western Hockey League (in 2022) and signed that agreement," Smith said. "I thought school was never going to happen for me."

Last November, when the NCAA cleared the way for major-junior players in Canada to be eligible for U.S. colleges — they had previously been deemed to be pro athletes by the NCAA — Lindstrom and Smith were part of a wave of top young talents who made the jump.

And so this week, while the Blue Jackets started training camp in Nationwide Arena, their two top prospects were hundreds of miles away juggling classes and hockey, rather than taking part in their first NHL training camps and trying to stick around as long as possible before returning to their junior clubs.

The Athletic caught up with Lindstrom and Smith last week, about one month after classes began and two weeks before their Big Ten seasons get started.

"The transition back (to school) wasn't too hard," said Lindstrom, who last attended school in 2022-23 when he played for the Medicine Hat Tigers of the WHL and attended a nearby high school. In his second season in Medicine Hat, he took online classes.

"Coming to university, I knew I'd have to go to classes. I was prepared for it. So, actually that first day of class was pretty cool, just to interact with so many people."

Lindstrom, 19, is taking six classes: personal finance, advertising, two kinesiology classes, math and creative writing. Those classes, coupled with daily workouts and hockey practice six days a week (Sundays are off), make for a busy schedule.

"That's the part I really like," Lindstrom said. "I like being busy and doing stuff and meeting people throughout the day instead of just sitting at home."

Smith, 18, said he's taking recreation, park and tourism management, criminology, organizational leadership, and geological sciences. He'll add another course in November.

The last time he attended a school was the first half of his first season (2023-24) with the Tri-City Americans of the WHL. He attended a high school about two miles from the Americans' rink, but moved to online courses in the second half of the year so that the class credits would count toward a Canadian high-school diploma.

Smith was fully planning to return to Tri-City for a third full season, but the NCAA ruling gave him new options. He took one visit to Penn State and signed up immediately due to the school's impressive hockey facilities. Weeks later, Gavin McKenna, the presumed No. 1 overall pick next summer, joined the Nittany Lions, too.

"It was a great experience playing in the WHL, an unbelievable two years there," Smith said. "But it's pretty cool to do both hockey and school. Nobody who's ever played in the (WHL) before has ever been able to do this, so to be here now — someplace I never thought I'd be until a year ago — it's surreal."

Lindstrom said he grew up wanting to attend a U.S. college, most likely the University of North Dakota.

"I'm not sure a lot of people know that," he said. "Before the WHL draft, I was telling teams that I wanted to play college. Honestly, there were a lot of things up in the air for me."

"It changed when I got drafted by Medicine Hat, and I thought it was a good spot for me. I ended up liking it. The first game I saw them play when I visited was in (Calgary's) Saddledome, and I thought that was pretty sick because an NHL team (the Flames) plays there. And I loved Willie Desjardins. He's a great coach."

Lindstrom was drawn to college because of the lighter schedule. His surgically repaired back is doing very well, he said, but neither Lindstrom's agent nor the Blue Jackets thought it was prudent for him to play 80-plus games just one season after he missed almost all of the season. NCAA clubs play a maximum of 34 regular-season games.

At Michigan State, he's also under the watchful eye of a top-notch strength and conditioning program and a health sciences staff.

Smith, meanwhile, immediately fell in love with Penn State's facilities, which are considered to be among the best in college hockey. He also believed, he said, that playing against 22-, 23- and 24-year-olds would better prepare him physically for stepping into the professional ranks as soon as next season.

While they're away at college, Blue Jackets training camp has seemed different than previous years without top prospects around.

But the Blue Jackets plan to stay connected with Lindstrom, Smith and the eight other organizational prospects who are playing in the NCAA this season. Also at Michigan State with Lindstrom is goaltender Melvin Strahl, a fifth-round pick (No. 156 overall) in 2023.

Dates to keep in mind:

- Penn State plays Ohio State in Columbus on Oct. 30 and Oct. 31.
- Michigan State plays in Columbus on Jan. 9 and Jan. 10.
- Lindstrom and Smith play against each other four times this season, including an outdoor game in Penn State's Beaver Stadium on Jan. 31.

Item No. 2: Line changes

After only three days of training camp, the Blue Jackets open the preseason at 5 p.m. on Sunday against the St. Louis Blues in Nationwide Arena. It's the first of four games in four days, a rather exhausting schedule that will give most of the 56 players in camp a chance to play at least one game.

Evason said the first three days of camp were each focused on a single zone: Defensive zone on Thursday, neutral on Friday and offensive zone on Saturday, just hammering home the details to the returning players and giving a crash course to the new players.

"It's been very productive, just the attention to detail ... it's fantastic," Evason said. "The players know how we play. It's so nice to watch the players teach the players. When there was a correction to be made, it was made prior to a coach getting over to a player (on the ice)."

"The work ethic, the compete was real good. That's obviously a good step."

Remember the six-game winning streak at the end of last season? Evason said his video coaches have clipped all of the "systems clips" from those games for film instruction during this camp. "That's how freaking dialed in we were," he said. "It's all right there."

On Saturday, Evason, as promised, scrambled his forward lines.

In the morning session, Captain Boone Jenner replaced Dmitry Voronkov on the first line with center Sean Monahan and right winger Kirill Marchenko, while Voronkov slid back to a line with center Charlie Coyle and right winger Yegor Chinakhov.

The second group had Adam Fantilli centering a line with winger Miles Wood and Kent Johnson, and Isac Lundestrom centering wingers Cole Sillinger and Mathieu Olivier.

Caution: don't read too much into these lines, as Evason acknowledged he's going to look at different forward trios and defensive pairs throughout camp. He knows what will work based on last season, but he wants some flexibility this coming season.

"We've got a thought process of who we think is going to start Game 1 of the regular season," Evason said, "but it's nice to see some combinations. After practice (on Friday), we flipped some lines because we thought some people stepped up in practice and we wanted to see them in different roles."

"Last season, we just kind of stayed with the same lines, if I remember correctly. This year we have a little more depth with NHL players. It's nice to have that flexibility and move some people around."

Item No. 3: Take 5, Dante Fabbro

"Take 5" is our weekly, brief, and (mostly) non-hockey conversation with a Blue Jackets players, coach, broadcaster or staffer. This week, it's defenseman Dante Fabbro, who signed a four-year, \$16.5 million contract this summer:

Where in our city do you live?

German Village. We found a nice little spot there to rent. It's a great area. Easy walking and a lot of great restaurants. We're slowly starting to figure out where to go and all of the hot spots, but it's less than 10 minutes to the rink and the airport and it's really charming.

Favorite vacation spot?

We have a place in the Okanagan (region of British Columbia). It's about three hours northeast of Vancouver, and my grandparents about it about 40 or 50 years ago, and all of my aunts and uncles and cousins meet up there in the summertime. It's right on the water, so we go boating all day. I don't think anything will ever beat that for me. It feels like home and it feels like a vacation. It's a pretty big family, so there could be 30 people up there at a time. We do the big Sunday dinners. My Nono (grandfather) and grandma built that family tradition and it's stuck for this long. They're still a big part of my life and I get to see them all the time.

What's your most irrational fear?

(laughs) Probably being stuck out in the ocean, stranded. Whatever is below me, that I can see, I don't like it. If you can swim to the coast — like on a lake — that's fine, but when you're out so far that you can't see anything. I'm gonna call it quits.

Favorite sandwich?

OK, this is good. Start with rosemary sourdough bread, with burrata, pesto, prosciutto, a little arugula, and some balsamic and olive oil. Depending on the day, if I'm feeling fancy, you could do a roasted red pepper or sun-dried tomatoes, sure.

Guilty pleasure ... song and snack?

Favorite song is "Let Me Down Easy," by Billy Currington. It's an all-time country classic, one of the first songs I learned on the guitar. The snack ... it would have to be chicken wings or ice cream. Honestly, ice cream is kind of my kryptonite, so I stay away from that aisle in the grocery store. I'm a big Marble Slab guy. I'd go birthday cake ice cream with Snickers and peanuts. It's just ... I'd get like a pint of that and I could eat the whole thing.

Item No. 4: Snacks

- Goaltender Ivan Fedotov, acquired in a trade with Philadelphia last weekend, will start Sunday's preseason game vs. St. Louis and likely play two periods, Evason said. Prospect Evan Gardner, who will play this season the WHL's Saskatoon Blades, will play the third period. For Gardner, a second-round pick (No. 60 overall) in 2024, it'll be his second NHL preseason outing.
- The first significant wave of training camp cuts may wait until an off day on Thursday, after the Blue Jackets have played four games in four days. But one date to keep in mind is Sept. 29, a week from Monday. That's when AHL Cleveland opens camp in Strongsville, Ohio, so a good chunk of players will be on the Monsters roster by then.
- Prospect Jordan Dumais pulled himself out of the final game of the Buffalo prospects showcase and has not been seen on the ice yet during training camp. Waddell said Dumais, who has played just 44 games the past two seasons due to injury, is day to day with a hip flexor injury. He had hip surgery in January 2024.
- New sweater numbers for the new Blue Jackets: Charlie Coyle (3), Miles Wood (11), Isac Lundestrom (21), and Ivan Fedotov (28).

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- Spotted in Nationwide Arena about a week before training camp was former Blue Jackets forward Gus Nyquist, catching a skate with the NHL players — Blue Jackets and beyond — who call Columbus their offseason home. Add Nyquist to that list now. The Blue Jackets traded him to Minnesota at the 2022-23 trade deadline, and he's played for the Wild and the Nashville Predators the past two seasons. But this summer, even though Nyquist signed with Winnipeg, he and his family moved back to New Albany. "We really loved it here, and we wanted to get back," Nyquist said.
- Former Blue Jackets captain Nick Foligno remains one of Columbus' best ambassadors. Charlie Coyle relayed a funny story about Foligno that happened shortly after Coyle and Miles Wood were traded from Colorado to the Blue Jackets early this summer:
- A curious sight at the end of the Blue Jackets' afternoon session on Friday: goaltender Nolan LaLonde, who is turning pro this season after four seasons in the OHL, skated alone to the end of the ice while the rest of the 20-plus players headed to the bench to watch. LaLonde, it seems, lost track of time and was talking to a coach on Thursday when he was supposed to be in a goaltending meeting. After sprinting through the dressing room, he was a minute late, and veteran players — especially Erik Gudbranson — took notice. The "punishment?" He had to mimic Jeremy Roenick's infamous dance to the Bee Gees' hit "You Should Be Dancing." For not having much time to rehearse, LaLonde did quite all right and was

greeted with high-fives and stick taps at the bench. Was the message sent? LaLonde had a meeting after his “dance” on Friday. “I was six or seven minutes early,” he said. “First guy in the room.”

- Hard to believe that Columbus native Jack Roslovic, who had 22-17-39 in 81 games with the Carolina Hurricanes last season, is still on the market as an unrestricted free agent. The 22 goals matched a career high and was third on the Hurricanes. *The Athletic’s* Pierre LeBrun reported last week that the 28-year-old Roslovic, who changed agents earlier this summer, turned down a contract offer from the Edmonton Oilers.
- The week’s Blue Jackets trivia question: Mathieu Olivier finished second in the NHL last season with 139 penalty minutes, becoming the sixth different Columbus player to finish a season ranked in the NHL’s top 10 in PIMs. How many of the other five can you name?
- FanDuel Sports Network will be the Blue Jackets’ local TV broadcaster again in 2025-26, with the entire cast of broadcasters returning. What’s new this year, however, is that FanDuel will air two preseason games: Monday vs. Buffalo and Sept. 30 vs. Washington.
- Last season, FanDuel began simulcasting its game broadcasts on two over-the-air stations in Columbus, ABC6 and The CW. Team sources have told *The Athletic* that the agreement is back in place this season, but could include even more games.

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- Trivia answer: The six Blue Jackets players who have finished an NHL season among the top 10 in penalty minutes are: Jared Boll (five times), Jody Shelley (four), Derek Dorsett (two), Max Domi, Olivier and Alexander Svitov (once each). Remarkably, the Blue Jackets have had a player finish in the league’s top 10 in 13 of their 24 seasons.
- Raise a glass or tip your hat to Columbus hockey legend Glenn Wright, who passed away last week at 93 years old. For more than 40 years, Wright was a fixture at local rinks, teaching thousands of kids how to skate — including future NHL players — and, later, scores of local hockey players how to become better coaches. As former Columbus Chill GM and Blue Jackets executive David Paitson once said of Wright, “He was preaching hockey before there was a choir” in Columbus. Wright used to have regular lunches with former Blue Jackets coach Gerard Gallant and player Jody Shelley, and counted legendary Detroit Red Wing Ted Lindsay among his friends. He worked Saturday mornings at the Chiller North ice rink in suburban Delaware well into his 80s, and beamed with pride — fought back tears, even — when he talked about the growth of the sport in central Ohio. “The rinks are packed now,” Wright told *The Columbus Dispatch* in 2014. “There’s an energy in the hockey community that I’ve never seen here, and that makes me proud.”

The Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets open preseason with 4-1 victory over St. Louis Blues: 3 takeaways

By Brian Hedger – September 21, 2025

The Blue Jackets got their preseason started on a good note with a 4-1 victory over the St. Louis Blues on Sept. 21 at Nationwide Arena.

Brendan Gaunce, Luca Del Bel Belluz, Dmitri Voronkov and Mathieu Olivier scored goals, Ivan Fedotov started in net and made 14 saves, and rookie Evan Gardner polished it off with six saves in the third to close the night out.

Voronkov finished with three points on a goal and two assists while skating at left wing on a top forward line centered by Del Bel Belluz. Olivier scored the game's final goal into an empty net with 23 seconds left to complete the scoring.

Here are three takeaways:

Ivan Fedotov impresses in preseason debut for Columbus Blue Jackets

It was only two periods at the start of the Blue Jackets' preseason, but Fedotov looked solid in his first action since being acquired in a Sept. 14 trade with the Philadelphia Flyers.

Fedotov was added to handle the third goaltending spot on the organizational depth chart. He's expected to be AHL Cleveland's top goalie and NHL injury replacement for the Blue Jackets. Standing 6 feet 7, 214 pounds, Fedotov is even taller than 6-5 Daniil Tarasov, whom the Blue Jackets traded to the Florida Panthers prior to this summer's NHL draft.

Fedotov, who struggled in the NHL level with the Flyers, used his large frame effectively while stopping 14 of 15 shots through the first two periods. Rookie Evan Gardner, a 2024 second-round pick, played the third and stopped all six shots he faced.

Dmitri Voronkov wastes no time making offensive impact

Dmitri Voronkov was challenged to drop weight and add strength during the summer, and the early returns look good. Voronkov, who's 6-5, appears to have slimmed down from his listed weight of 227 pounds last season and the hope is that he'll make gains from it in speed and quickness.

Voronkov's offensive production took a slide in the second half of last season, which the Blue Jackets would like him to avoid this time around. He's already off to another great start offensively, even though it's just the preseason. After assisting the Jackets' first two goals, he scored the third one late in the game for a three-point effort. The only criticism was an egregious turnover that led directly to the Blues' only goal, but coach Dean Evason said that was addressed and corrected on the bench.

"The first time he came into the room, as soon as he got here, we asked him, 'Are you in shape?' before he even did a thing, and he's like, 'Yeah,' and you can tell," Evason said. "I'll be honest with you. We told him, 'You're not going to play if you come in not in good shape,' and he did. He's committed."

Luca Del Bel Belluz starts strong on bid to make Columbus Blue Jackets NHL roster

Del Bel Belluz has a tough task in this camp after impressing in 15 NHL games last season. Despite the departures of forwards James van Riemsdyk, Sean Kuraly, Justin Danforth, Luke Kunin and Christian Fischer, the rookie center still has tough competition to earn an NHL roster spot.

The Blue Jackets added three NHL veteran forwards with a trade to acquire Charlie Coyle and Miles Wood prior to the draft followed by signing free agent center Isac Lundestrom away from the Anaheim Ducks. Those three all have one-way NHL contracts, so they're almost assured of making the roster. That leaves Del Bel Belluz, a 2022 second-round pick, competing with the likes of Mikael Pyhtia, James Malatesta and others for a possible 14th forward spot on the roster.

He got off to a good start against the Blues, centering the top line and scoring what turned out to be the winning goal off a rebound in the second period. Del Bel Belluz also assisted on Voronkov's goal late in the third for a 3-1 cushion.

"I'm just trying to go out there and show what I can do," Del Bel Belluz said. "They want to see me play hard on pucks and win battles, skate hard and play with pace, so I'm just trying to do that. If the offense comes, great."

The Columbus Dispatch / Yegor Chinakhov out to prove himself at Columbus Blue Jackets training camp

By Brian Hedger – September 21, 2025

Yegor Chinakhov is still a Blue Jacket.

After making a trade request public July 17 in comments a Russian media outlet followed by his agent posting it on social media, the injury-plagued left wing is back for another training camp in Columbus. Barring a suitable trade offer, he's expected to begin the season with the Blue Jackets and could even stick around the whole year if not longer.

Blue Jackets president/general manager Don Waddell has made it clear he's not interested in making trades simply to appease a disgruntled player, especially one with Chinakhov's potential. That means the proverbial puck is on Chinakhov's stick.

"I told Chinny he's an asset to us," Waddell said. "It's not the first time a player has asked me, in my career of more than 20 years, about being traded. This one just became more public. I (told him), 'If there's true value out there and it's something we feel makes sense for our hockey club, I certainly will look at it.'"

If not, Chinakhov will stick around.

He's in the final year of a contract that pays \$2.1 million per season, will still be a restricted free agent when it expires and won't gain unrestricted status until July 1, 2028. The Blue Jackets could keep him all three years if they want, so the best shot to gain a fresh start — if that's still Chinakhov's preference — is tied to his own performance and health.

"I told him (in the summer), when we talked, 'If it doesn't happen, you've got to come here and prove to the coaches and your teammates that you're capable of being a good player for our hockey club,'" Waddell said. "I've told him and his agent that right now we're considering him a Blue Jacket, and to make the best of it."

That's what Chinakhov is doing.

His biggest gripe leading up to the trade request was about usage in coach Dean Evason's first season running the Blue Jackets' bench. After starting out with a hot streak in a top-six role, a slump bumped Chinakhov to the third line before a nagging back issue sidelined him for 39 games (Nov. 29, 2024 to March 4, 2025).

After undergoing a back procedure in Russia during a two-week break for the NHL's 4 Nations Face Off in February, Chinakhov made a brief and ineffective return to the Jackets' lineup before sitting as a healthy scratch in 11 of the final 12 games.

That's ultimately what prompted his wish to join a new team, which led to offseason meetings with Waddell and Evason. Now, with a new season starting, Chinakhov's fresh start happened in familiar surroundings. He skated with Adam Fantilli and captain Boone Jenner on the first day of practice as a possible peek at the Jackets' second line, and Chinakhov will play in the first preseason game Sept. 21 at Nationwide Arena.

A new opportunity has arrived.

"I just want to show on the ice what I can do," Chinakhov said. "That's it. I just try to be my best."

As for the possibility of changing his tune about a trade, he's staying open minded.

"I know everything here," Chinakhov said. "I love the city, and my wife knows everything about Columbus, so I like this city and I love the fans here."

He just hasn't loved his role thus far. Evason is a strict adherent to ice time and roles being earned, though, so it's up to Chinakhov now to change his situation, trade or no trade.

"When a player doesn't play, he should always be upset, right?" Evason said. "If he isn't, then we don't want that player. Should he be upset that he didn't play? Absolutely, and it's fine to voice your opinion, but at the end of the day there's some responsibility from us as an organization and there's some responsibility (on) the player, as well. Hopefully, it's a fresh start, it's a fresh season, and we'll just see where it lands here."

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Open Preseason With 4-1 Win Over Blues

By Mark Scheig – September 21, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets opened their 2025-26 preseason on Sunday night with the first of four games in four nights. They were able to find a good result.

Dmitri Voronkov recorded a goal and two assists. Ivan Fedotov made his Blue Jackets' debut stopping 14 of 15 in 40 minutes of action.

The Blue Jackets defeated the St. Louis Blues 4-1 on Sunday night. Voronkov made his presence felt early and often in this one.

Game Recap

The Blues and Blue Jackets got off to a bit of a sloppy start as you might expect for two teams shaking off the rust. Although the Blues outshot the Blue Jackets 6-3 in the period, it was the Blue Jackets who had the better of the chances. They were unable to solve Joel Hofer.

Then just after coming out of the penalty box, Voronkov won a board battle. He was able to get the puck to a streaking Brendan Gaunce. On a 2-on-0 rush, Gaunce took the shot and beat Hofer between the pads for a 1-0 lead.

Later on in the second, Voronkov earned his second assist of the night when Jake Christiansen setup Luca Del Belluz to make it 2-0. Voronkov showed through his play the kind of work he put in this summer.

Here's Dean Evason on Voronkov postgame: "We asked him, are you in shape? Like before he even did a thing and he's like yeah. And you can tell, right? We told him and I'll be honest with you. We told him you're not going to play if you come not in good shape and he did. He's committed and obviously you could see. It's early. It's the first game but his pace is real good not only in the game here tonight but throughout practice."

The Blues got one near the end of the second when Nikita Alexandrov deflected Justin Carbonneau's shot past Fedotov to make it 2-1. That's all the Blues could get on the night.

Evan Gardner stopped all six shots faced in the third period. Voronkov scored with 2:29 left to extend it to 3-1 before Mathieu Olivier hit the bullseye to make it 4-1.

The Blues now get six days off before playing their next preseason game against the Dallas Stars. They lost to the Stars 2-1 in a shootout on Saturday night.

The Blue Jackets are right back at it Monday night when they host the Buffalo Sabres in the first of a home and home series. They will play in Buffalo on Tuesday night.

1st Ohio Battery / Three Things: Big Boss, Bel Belluz Have Big Nights, Fedotov Looks Sharp In 4-1 Exhibition Win Over Blues

By Ed Francis – September 22, 2025

Dmitri Voronkov and Luca Del Bel Belluz combined for five points as the Columbus Blue Jackets kicked off their preseason with a 4-1 win over the St. Louis Blues at Nationwide Arena.

Brendan Gaunce got the scoring started for the Blue Jackets with a goal at 2:41 of the second period. Later in the middle frame, Del Bel Belluz made it 2-0 before the Blues would chip into the lead and make it a 2-1 game entering the third period.

Voronkov would extend the Columbus lead to 3-1 with just 2:29 left in the game. It was Voronkov's third point of the night and the second for Del Bel Belluz, who picked up the primary assist.

Mathieu Olivier added an empty-net goal.

Here are three things from Columbus' first action of the 2025-26 campaign:

Thing 1: New-Look Voronkov Shines

Head coach Dean Evason challenged Voronkov to get into better shape this summer. If Sunday was any indication, the Big Boss has accepted Evason's challenge.

"I'll be honest with you, we told him 'you're not going to play if you come in not in good shape' and he did, and he's committed," said Evason. "His pace is real good, not only in the game here tonight but throughout practice."

Voronkov assisted on Gaunce's opening goal and Del Bel Belluz' tally later in the period before sealing the game with a goal in the final minutes of what had been a one-goal game at the time. He was on ice for a total of 17:43, leading the team in power-play time on ice with 2:41 and seeing an additional 1:28 on the penalty kill.

"He's conducting himself extremely well, setting himself up for the season," said Evason.

Voronkov was named the game's First Star of the night.

Thing 2: Luca Del Bel Belluz Pushing For Roster Spot

Voronkov wasn't the only one challenged by Evason this summer. Del Bel Belluz, who played 15 games with the Blue Jackets last season and had eight points but was eventually sent back to the AHL's Cleveland Monsters, worked on bulking up during the offseason in an effort to make the club out of camp this season.

Did it pay off?

"I definitely feel stronger on my feet and a little faster," said Del Bel Belluz.

Del Bel Belluz scored with just under five minutes left in the second period and added an assist on Voronkov's goal, but the 21-year-old knows that making the roster will require more than getting into the scoring column.

"I'm just trying to go out there and show what I can do," said Del Bel Belluz. "They want to see me play hard on pucks and win battles and skate hard and play with pace."

"I'm trying to do that and then obviously if the offense comes, great."

Thing 3: Newly-Acquired Fedotov Looks Sharp In Columbus Debut

Ivan Fedotov, acquired just over a week ago from the Philadelphia Flyers, stopped 14 of 15 shots faced in 40 minutes of action in Sunday's win. The Blue Jackets made no secret this summer that they wanted an insurance policy between the pipes with NHL experience, which Fedotov offers. Seeing him look comfortable in the union blue sweater had to feel good for Columbus, with Fedotov expected to fill the roll of the organization's third goalie.

"Felt pretty good," said Fedotov of his Blue Jackets' debut, before deferring credit to the rest of the team.

"The guys played well in front of me."

Up Next:

There's a lot of preseason hockey coming up — the Blue Jackets will host the Buffalo Sabres at 7:00 p.m. Monday before traveling to Buffalo for a Tuesday night contest, and that's followed by a third game in four nights at Nationwide Arena on Wednesday when the Pittsburgh Penguins are in town.

1st Ohio Battery / Five Storylines to Watch As the Columbus Blue Jackets Open Preseason

By Dan Dukart – September 21, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets enter the 2025-26 season with a rare sense of stability, absent the major offseason headlines that have defined recent years.

Instead, the organization is looking forward to building upon a strong 2024-25 campaign that had them finish just two points out of a playoff spot. Here are five storylines worth monitoring as the team goes through the preseason:

Can Zach Werenski Sustain Norris Trophy-Level Play?

Zach Werenski has consistently been a pivotal player for the organization. Still, last year he took a major step on the national stage by finishing as the runner-up for the Norris Trophy, edging out Quinn Hughes but falling behind Cale Makar. Regardless of his standing among those three, the question is: can he remain in the conversation with those two this year? Even a slight regression to his mean is an all-star level player, and it will be fascinating to see if the 28-year-old can follow up his career-best season with another similar campaign.

What Level Can Adam Fantilli Reach?

Perhaps no player gives the Blue Jackets more optimism in the future than Adam Fantilli, still only 20 years old, who scored 31 goals and played in all 82 games last season. If he can become a more consistent player, it's not out of the question for him to be in the 40-goal range. His size, speed, and tenacity already make him tailor-made for the coveted top-center role that every Stanley Cup-contending team needs. If he can continue to grow, watch out.

Wanted: Consistent Goaltending

Jet Greaves put on a run for the ages to end last season, nearly willing the team to the postseason by going 5-0-0 with two shutouts in just eight calendar days. Elvis Merzlikins has started 244 games over the past six seasons, but hasn't posted above a .900 save percentage since 2021-22. The club added Ivan Fedotov as organizational depth, but he struggled in Philadelphia last season. In a league with razor-thin margins, the team will need to improve upon its 267 goals-against (25th overall). While Greaves is the trendy pick to play a good chunk of games this year, there are fair questions about him: Can he be the guy at the NHL level?

Who Are This Team's Four Centers?

I don't recall a season where the Blue Jackets boasted this much (healthy) center depth. It's conceivable that any/all of: Fantilli, Sean Monahan, Boone Jenner, Cole Sillinger, Charlie Coyle, and Isac Lundestrom (others, too, but you have to cut the list off somewhere) could slot in at center in different slots. I tend to think that Jenner is best served hunting on the wing at this point in his career. Sillinger was likely supplanted as the 3C by Coyle's addition, which I think could be good for the 22-year-old. Lundestrom feels like the team's 4C for now, but all of this is subject to change. Put simply, this level of flexibility is a nice change of pace.

Is 5v5 Goal Scoring Sustainable?

Not to be a Debbie-downer, but I have a hard time understanding how the Blue Jackets led the NHL in 5v5 goals (201) last year. More to the point, it's quite the commentary that a team could lead the league

in such a metric and still miss the playoffs. That doesn't portend well. Can Fantilli, Werenski, Monahan, Kent Johnson, Dmitri Voronkov, Kirill Marchenko, etc., all have repeat-career seasons? That is a fair question. My initial thought is that the team probably outscored expected goals last year as a result of their inability to keep the puck out of their net. This track-meet style of hockey can be fun to watch, but it isn't necessarily ideal playing circumstances. A more well-rounded team may paradoxically score less, but win more. We shall see.

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets' Chris Clark Talks Three Up & Coming Prospects

By Mark Scheig – September 21, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets will open their 2025-26 preseason on Sunday evening with a game at home against the St. Louis Blues. It marks their first of four games played on consecutive days.

The Blue Jackets have completed the first three days of training camp accomplishing what they've wanted to. They focused on defense on Day 1. They addressed the neutral zone on Day 2. Then with fans in the stands, they worked on their offense and power play on Day 3.

Now we get to see the progress of certain prospects. Blue Jackets' Director of Player Personnel and Cleveland Monsters GM Chris Clark stopped by and spoke to the Hockey Writers this week at camp to discuss three prospects that should eventually make an impact on the NHL club.

All three most likely will start the season with the Monsters. Each should have prominent roles there as they continue on their development path.

Clark discussed prospects Luca Del Bel Belluz, Corson Ceulemans and Jordan Dumais. In Del Bel Belluz's case, he got a taste of the NHL in 2024-25 and made an impression in limited time. He will be expected to take on a big work load on the Monsters' top line at center.

Advertisement: 0:30

Here is what Clark had to say about these three important prospects.

Luca Del Bel Belluz

"He's really made some improvement over the first couple of years here. A lot of it with him, he's got a great mind, puck skills, all those things. He was getting stronger. And that wasn't something that was going to happen tomorrow. It was going to happen over time, over a few summers. And he's bigger each year. He's not significantly, but some guys just put it on the way they can put it on. So he's going to get stronger as he gets older and it's just going to take some time."

"That's the one thing you really need because it's one thing to play a few games in the NHL and do well, but it's another thing to play 82 games in the NHL and do well. So you need that body armor. You need to be able to protect yourself. He does a great job of it because he's very elusive, but I think that's just his path. It's going to happen. He's going to be an NHL player. It's just (about) the right time for him."

Corson Ceulemans

"When we saw him in Buffalo last year, there were things we were concerned a bit, holding onto pucks too long, trying to do too many things, turn the puck over. But we sat with him after Buffalo, sat with him after he got sent to Cleveland and we said, if you're gonna make it, you got to do these little things. And from Buffalo to the time he got hurt, I think it was in January, he might have been our best D down there. He made that much progress. He blew it out of the water in our expectations. So it was too bad that he didn't get to play the second half of the season."

"So we're actually really interested in how (he does here.) He's fully healthy. He's come back, no problems, and he looks great. He looks bigger. He looks stronger. So we're really excited to see what he can do here in camp."

Jordan Dumais

“He’s got his first pro season under his belt so that learning curve is gone. He knows what to expect. We just want to see improvement. That’s all we want from our young guys is make sure they’re getting better each year because there’s no set date. We want them to make it at this point. It might be some guys hit it in a year or two, and some guys takes a little bit longer. Whatever their development path, the path is what it is. But we expect him to be more of an offensive factor with us. He’s not a veteran yet, but he knows the expectations.”

The Athletic / The NHL's top 10 breakout candidates: Leo Carlsson, Frank Nazar, Jet Greaves and more

By Harman Dayal – September 20, 2025

Every NHL season marks an opportunity for new stars to shine.

The goal today is to scan around the league in search of hockey's next breakout players. "Breaking out" can mean something different for every player. This could be a highly touted youngster who takes a big step like Dylan Holloway or Kirill Marchenko did last season. Other times, it's an unheralded third-pair defender or bottom-six forward like Ryan Donato who effectively steps into a larger role.

We're looking for notable year-over-year growth, whether that's in the point totals or a player's overall role, responsibility and importance to the team.

How do we identify these candidates? These are some of the most important attributes I look for:

- Age-related growth potential (most players peak in their mid-20s, so if you're younger than that, you've got a natural tailwind to improve).
- A bigger role/increased ice time.
- New opportunities to play with upgraded linemate(s).

I'm going to exclude anyone eligible for the Calder Trophy from this exercise to make it more interesting. Simon Edvinsson would have been on this list, but he made last year's breakout candidates story and had a strong season, so I don't want to be redundant by repeating his name.

Without further ado, let's get into our top 10 list.

Leo Carlsson, Anaheim Ducks

Leo Carlsson has a lot of the elite tools you look for in a future face-of-the-franchise centerman: He's got a powerful 6-foot-3 frame, buttery smooth puckhandling, and elite playmaking vision. Age-adjusted, Carlsson's 74 points in 131 career NHL games represent very good production. Last year's 20-goal, 45-point campaign wasn't quite the big breakout many expected, but there are several reasons to believe he'll take that step this time.

Carlsson started slow but went on a 29-points-in-31-games tear to close out the season. Many of Anaheim's young offensive players should benefit from former head coach Greg Cronin's departure. Cronin's ultra-demanding defensive style likely stifled the team's offensive freedom and creativity — none of the club's young players, except for Jackson LaCombe, took a notable step last year. I'd bet that was more of a coaching problem than a talent issue.

The Ducks' 32nd-ranked power-play should improve under new assistant Jay Woodcroft, and with the arrival of Chris Kreider, one of the league's best net-front power-play scorers. As a result, Carlsson, who plays a key role on the first unit, should see a big uptick from the seven power-play points he scored last year.

There should be an opportunity for Carlsson to play more than the 16 minutes of ice time he averaged last season, too.

Carlsson checks every box you look for in a breakout candidate: He's supremely skilled, was near a point-per-game from February onward, should benefit from upgraded coaching, and Year 3 is when many forwards with elite potential break out naturally.

Zach Benson, Buffalo Sabres

On the surface, Zach Benson's NHL production has been modest so far: He's scored 58 points in 146 games, which equates to a 32 points per 82 games pace. However, that production is far more meaningful when you remember that Benson only just turned 20 this offseason. Nobody should be alarmed that he hasn't yet produced at the clip of a top-six forward; if anything, the fact that he was an effective full-time NHL player during his age-18 and 19 seasons points to him having tantalizing upside. Connor Bedard is the only player in Benson's draft class with more games played.

Benson is already an advanced two-way play driver; he drove 55 percent of shots and 54 percent of scoring chances during his five-on-five shifts last season, which was the best mark among all Sabres forwards. He's a puck battle-winning machine because of his relentless, non-stop work rate, and he can make high-end plays because of his puckhandling in traffic and playmaking vision.

Most importantly, the JJ Peterka trade leaves Benson with a golden opportunity to play on the top line with Tage Thompson. Playing with a linemate of Thompson's caliber in a full-time top-six role could do wonders for boosting Benson's production. Benson was an elite point producer in junior, so there's plenty of reason to believe he has untapped offensive growth left, even though he is undersized and doesn't have elite straight-line speed.

Kaedan Korczak, Vegas Golden Knights

One of Vegas' rare homegrown talents, Kaedan Korczak has been on the cusp of establishing himself as an everyday NHL defenseman for the past couple of years. The 24-year-old right-shot was buried behind Vegas' deep defense, but finally has a meaningful opportunity to seize with Alex Pietrangelo and Nic Hague departing.

Korczak isn't a flashy player, but with a sturdy 6-foot-3 frame and fluid skating ability, he profiles as a steady shutdown defender. He closes gaps quickly, disrupts plays, and drove impressive defensive results in 40 games last year, with the Golden Knights surrendering just 2.07 expected goals and 1.53 actual goals against per 60 during his five-on-five shifts. We, of course, have to take those numbers with a grain of salt because his role was pretty sheltered, but Vegas doesn't need him to play high-leverage top-four minutes immediately, anyway.

Vegas is clearly a big believer in Korczak's talent, too, because they signed him to a four-year, \$13 million extension this summer, even though his current deal doesn't expire until the end of this season. Expect Korczak to immediately shine in a third-pair role, with the potential for him to grow into a top-four player over the next two or three years.

Frank Nazar, Chicago Blackhawks

Frank Nazar is a prime example of how rapidly young players can improve in a matter of months.

Last fall, Nazar went pointless in preseason and was assigned to the AHL to start the year. He was called up a couple of months later after tearing up the minors and became a full-time NHLer, but it wasn't until the end of the season that something special appeared to click. The speedy, high-energy 5-foot-10 center scored six goals and four assists in his last 11 games, and most impressively, accomplished that while driving his own line away from Connor Bedard. This summer, Nazar led gold-medal winning Team USA with 12 points in 10 games at the World Championships, outproducing big-name players like Clayton Keller, Tage Thompson, Matty Beniers, Conor Garland, and Will Smith, among others.

Nazar is virtually locked into playing in a full-time top-six role as the Blackhawks' second-line center this year. He's going to get plum even-strength and power-play opportunities, and I fully expect him to seize

them given how quickly he's improved over the last several months. Nazar's offensive toolkit is legitimate — he could easily double the 26 points he scored last year.

Brandt Clarke, Los Angeles Kings

The Kings' blue line was once one of the deepest in the NHL, but it's deteriorated to the point where it looks a bit vulnerable.

Matt Roy, Sean Durzi, and Sean Walker all went elsewhere in previous years. Vladislav Gavrikov's free-agency exit this summer leaves a massive hole (he was arguably their most valuable defenseman last year), Drew Doughty's age is starting to show at 35, and by trading Jordan Spence, the club lost a quality depth puck mover. Tack on Cody Ceci and Brian Dumoulin as dicey free-agent signings on top of that, and there are suddenly some question marks on L.A.'s backend.

That uncertainty should pave the way for Brandt Clarke to step into a higher leverage role. Clarke had a decent rookie campaign with 33 points in 78 games, but his matchups were sheltered, and he averaged only 16:17 per game. The 22-year-old right-shot defender is very gifted with the puck, a skill set that's even more important considering the Kings' other bottom-four defenders — Ceci, Dumoulin, and Joel Edmundson — are big, slow veterans who are limited at making plays.

There are two factors that could limit just how significant a leap Clarke takes. First, is whether the Kings' coaching staff will trust Clarke enough defensively to give him a consistent top-four opportunity. Secondly, the Kings had a lot of success with a five-forward power-play unit at the tail end of last year. If that continues, Clarke won't get a lot of PP1 time, which would put a cap on how many points he can register. However, even with those impediments, I think Clarke is ultimately too skilled not to meaningfully break out this year.

Will Smith, San Jose Sharks

They're somewhat different stylistically, but Will Smith's development trajectory reminds me of Logan Cooley. Both are incredibly skilled, average-sized forwards that were drafted top-five (Cooley in 2022 and Smith in 2023), spent their draft-plus-one season dominating the NCAA, and had similar rookie campaigns. Both players had slow starts as first-time NHLers — Cooley had just eight five-on-five points in his first 38 games, Smith had just nine five-on-five points in his first 34 games — but they each improved tremendously midseason, got hot in the second half, and finished their rookie years with around 45 points.

Cooley, in his sophomore season last year, broke out as one of the most exciting U23 players in the NHL, racking up 65 points in 75 games. There's a good chance that Smith will follow in those footsteps during his own sophomore campaign this season.

Smith turned a dramatic corner in the second half. He scored 30 points in his last 34 games and took massive strides as a play-driver. He was significantly underwater in his matchups in the first half, but by the end of the year, he was decisively winning his even-strength minutes, which is really impressive considering the porous quality of the team around him.

Smith's early shift to the wing was a key catalyst for shaking off his slow start. It'll be fascinating to see how often Smith plays on the wing compared to center this season, but regardless, we should expect him to perform like a rising star.

Cutter Gauthier, Anaheim Ducks

Many of the reasons why I believe Carlsson will breakout also apply to Cutter Gauthier. Like Carlsson, Gauthier should benefit from the club's coaching change and a style of play that should offer a bit more

offensive creativity. Gauthier will likely be a fixture on Anaheim's first-unit power play, which again, should score more with new coaching and Kreider's arrival as a dangerous power-play weapon.

Gauthier had a sluggish first half with just five goals in his first 43 games, but he heated up down the stretch, scoring 11 goals and 22 points in his last 27 games. In fact, Gauthier was top-10 among all NHL players for five-on-five points in that timeframe, tied with Nathan MacKinnon, Sidney Crosby, and Kyle Connor, among others.

While the production didn't come until late in the year, Gauthier was a prolific shot creator all season. He generated 9.5 shots per 60, which ranked in the top 20 among all NHL players. Adam Fantilli had similarly gaudy shot creation numbers as a rookie, and we saw him explode with 31 goals the following year. I think Gauthier can follow in Fantilli's footsteps and hit the 30-goal mark as a sophomore.

Jet Greaves, Columbus Blue Jackets

Making goalie predictions can be a fool's game with how volatile the position is. With that said, you'll be hard-pressed to find another young goaltender (excluding Calder-eligible guys like Yaroslav Askarov) with the AHL track record, ability, and opportunity to break out that Jet Greaves possesses.

Signed as an undrafted netminder from the OHL in 2022, Greaves was one of the best starters in the AHL last season, delivering a .920 save percentage in 40 games. He was called up late in the season and almost single-handedly resuscitated the Blue Jackets' playoff hopes, going 7-2-2 with an outrageous .938 save percentage. He gave Columbus a few quality starts in 2023-24, too, with a .908 save percentage in nine appearances. I obviously don't expect him to replicate last year's ridiculous numbers, but in polling goalie experts, there are believers who think he should excel as a full-time NHL goaltender.

Greaves' exact opportunity this season will hinge on the mercurial Elvis Merzlikins. If Merzlikins stabilizes, Greaves will be looking at a 1B opportunity. But if Merzlikins struggles, Greaves could have an opportunity to seize a 1A role.

Goaltending has ailed the Blue Jackets in recent seasons, with the team's save percentage ranking 29th in the NHL over the last three seasons. Greaves' breakout potential could help remedy some of those woes.

Connor Zary, Calgary Flames

Connor Zary has averaged about half a point per game through the first two years of his NHL career. However, because of multiple injuries last year he hasn't quite had the breakout where he establishes himself as a no-doubt-about-it top-six forward. He has a perfect chance to make a name for himself entering Year 3, though.

Zary has slick hands, heads-up, crafty playmaking ability, and plays hard. He isn't the fastest player, but every other part of his offensive toolkit screams top-six player. The Flames are a weak offensive team, so there will be tons of opportunity for Zary to get the kind of ice-time and power-play role that will allow him to produce at a high clip.

The soon-to-be 24-year-old has strong two-way play-driving numbers, and you could argue that he was a bit snakebitten production-wise. Last year, Zary's line scored on just six percent of their shots, which was one of the lowest marks in the league. That finishing efficiency should improve — Zary's line shot 10 percent in his rookie campaign, for reference — which would juice his point totals.

If he stays healthy, Zary could easily hit 50-plus points while solidifying himself as a key core player for the Flames long-term.

Simon Nemec, New Jersey Devils

Simon Nemec lasted just nine games with the Devils at the start of last season before being demoted to the minors. He had almost zero trust all year from Sheldon Keefe, who heavily sheltered him with just 14:59 of average ice-time per game and very soft matchups. Nemec looked tentative at both ends of the rink and was regularly exposed defensively. The Devils got crushed during Nemec's five-on-five shifts, controlling just 38 percent of expected goals and being outscored 17-8.

However, he's a strong candidate to bounce back and re-emerge as a critical young player for the Devils. For starters, he ended the year with a strong playoff performance in a high-leverage role he was thrust into because of New Jersey's backend injuries. Secondly, it was revealed he was playing through a shoulder injury he sustained at an Olympic qualifier game, for the entire season, which at least partially explains his sophomore slump.

The biggest reason to believe in Nemec's potential, though, is how impressive he looked as a 19-year-old rookie in 2023-24. He was remarkably smooth on breakouts, both with his puck carrying and sharp outlet passes. Nemec's game wasn't very flashy, but he was so polished, mature and efficient with his two-way play, and he did it in a significant role, averaging just shy of 20 minutes per game. I don't think you can accomplish what he did as a 19-year-old rookie defender without being a special player.

Nemec won't be a big point producer because Dougie Hamilton and Luke Hughes will get power-play time ahead of him, but expect him to be a quality two-way minute muncher for New Jersey, and to have the kind of year that makes people excited about his future potential again.

Honorable mentions: Marco Kasper, Michael Kesselring, Quinton Byfield, Connor Bedard, Matvei Michkov, Mavrik Bourque, Mackie Samoskevich, Elias Pettersson (the defenseman), Logan Stankoven, Fedor Svechkov

The Athletic / NHL player poll: What they love in the new CBA (no dress code, fitness testing) and what they don't

By Michael Russo – September 18, 2025

One thing that was clear during our polling of NHL players at the recent player media tours in Las Vegas and Milan is that they feel the NHL is in a great spot and are very satisfied with the job the NHL Players' Association, specifically executive director Marty Walsh and assistant executive director Ron Hainsey, did across the table from NHL commissioner Gary Bettman and deputy commissioner Bill Daly during the latest collective bargaining agreement negotiations.

Things were so harmonious that the NHL and NHLPA extended the agreement well in advance of its expiration for a change.

"We don't want that hanging over our head as players, as a league, as fans," Vegas Golden Knights center Jack Eichel said. "The league's in a really good place right now."

After playing two years in the NHL, Jordan Eberle was assigned to AHL Oklahoma City during the NHL's last work stoppage in 2012. He still remembers how unsettled things were back then and the uncertainty of not knowing, *Are we coming back? What's going on?*

"The league's in a great state right now," the now-Seattle Kraken captain said.

Players are so happy with where the league's at, in fact, that in asking them "What's one thing the new CBA doesn't address that you wish it did?" the most common response was some version of "nothing."

"I think most of the players are happy with how everything rolled out this year," Montreal Canadiens captain Nick Suzuki said. "Obviously, we don't want to go into any kind of type of lockout again, but our PA is really good. They do a lot of work for us and give us all the information that we need to make the final call in the end. ... I think overall, both sides came to a good agreement and we're happy that we can keep playing with little hiccups."

Sure, some things could always be better.

Some players said that they wished the playoff format had been changed and that there was a play-in like the NBA.

"But I know Gary's totally against it," one Western Conference center said. (Players' answers were anonymous so they could speak freely, although many did agree to go on the record with specific responses.)

A handful of players weren't ecstatic about the extended 84-game seasons that will begin in 2026-27, with one Eastern Conference forward saying, "I think 82 is plenty."

And half a dozen players wished there was some way to address the perceived advantage teams like the Florida Panthers, Tampa Bay Lightning, Nashville Predators, Dallas Stars, Vegas Golden Knights and Seattle Kraken have because they play in states where no income tax is removed from paychecks beyond federal income taxes.

This is something Hainsey himself doesn't see as a problem yet, and as one Eastern Conference goalie said, "While I think it's an issue, I don't know how you make it work or fix it. What if a guy is traded from a no-state-tax state to a state-tax state or vice versa?"

There were plenty of things players do like about the new CBA. They don't have to wear suits to games anymore — though they must dress in a manner consistent with "contemporary fashion norms" for games and travel. Also, starting next year, the NHL is eliminating training camp fitness tests and reducing training camp to 13 days for players who played 50 games the previous season and 18 days for others, and also going to a maximum of four preseason games — or two for players with 100 games of service.

Some players are also pleased that the CBA closes the LTIR loophole by introducing a playoff salary cap.

"I thought they did a really good job," Detroit Red Wings forward Lucas Raymond said.

Here are further thoughts from players on each of those topics.

No dress code

As one Western Conference forward said, "I'm still wearing suits. It's part of your routine. What am I going to do with them? Just keep them in closet?"

Added another Western Conference forward, "It's a nice feeling on a game day. Not a lot of other times you can wear a suit. Maybe a wedding?"

Another Western Conference forward concurred: "I don't agree with the dress code. I like to wear suits. We're professionals. It's not that hard."

But a number of players like the fact that the league and union will now allow players to express themselves more.

"Comparing to other leagues, you see a lot of players showcase themselves and fashion out," said an Eastern Conference defenseman. "A lot of players built that into a brand. Shai (Gilgeous-Alexander) on OKC is like a walking fashion show for high-fashion brands. You don't see that with hockey players."

Many players said they'd keep suits in the rotation but, especially on the road, will have days they dress more casually or stylish.

"For the road, it's so much easier when you don't have to carry the suits around," an Eastern Conference defenseman said.

Youngster Macklin Celebrini of the San Jose Sharks is one who enjoys wearing a suit and tie, saying, "It's just business. You're coming to work. But at the same time, I think it's good to kind of show your style if you have any."

Added New Jersey Devils forward Jack Hughes, "It's up to the individual, right? I'd say you'll see a lot of suits, though, just because guys probably spent so much money on suits over the years. Some guys have been playing 15 years. They probably have 50 suits. And that's crazy. ... But, yeah, that would be great, just going to the rink and wearing whatever you want to wear."

Nashville Predators veteran Brady Skjei said, "We have some guys who have some pretty good style, so it'll be fun to let them loose a little bit. But I won't be one of those guys."

Added Carolina Hurricanes forward Seth Jarvis, "I don't know where I'm going to take it. If they start letting sweats into the rink, then I'm gonna be all over that."

No fitness testing

The same player who feels it's professional to wear suits to games is bothered by the elimination of fitness testing starting next season.

"I mean, we're professional athletes. We should be testing," he said.

Another Eastern Conference defenseman agreed, saying, "There should be fitness testing, just standardized for all teams."

And that's what another Western Conference forward said it all comes down to: "Testing right now is team-based. It doesn't affect us too much, but some teams have horrible testing."

A player who plays for one of those teams said, "Those tests are always a grind. None of us look forward to the start of camp."

Jarvis is a fan of the change. "No fitness testing, when that kicks off, I'm gonna be a happy camper," he said. "That would alleviate a lot of stress in my life."

Vancouver Canucks captain Quinn Hughes thinks the tests make no sense.

"I need to prove that I'm in shape? Like, I play the most minutes in the league," he said.

Hughes' brother, Jack, joked, "They're gonna find their way around it. There won't be a skate test, though. It'll just be a 'fitness drill' instead."

Eberle joked that he's excited about the elimination of fitness tests but wishes it had happened "10 years ago."

Shorter training camp, fewer preseason games

In our player poll that ran Wednesday, going to an 84-game season and shortening training camp received positive reviews from 32 of 39 responders.

As Quinn Hughes said, "I train my ass off all the time," so having a long camp that tires players out "is so archaic to me."

"Camp just drags on and on and on, and it used to be much longer in the old days," said a Western Conference forward. "To me, this is the change that every player loved even though it means two more games. But I'd rather play two more games that mean something than exhibition games."

Playoff salary cap

Adding a salary cap for teams during the playoffs, Boston Bruins defenseman Charlie McAvoy said, "just makes sense to everybody. Like, you shouldn't be able to field a roster that's \$20 million over the cap. And I think everybody sort of understood that."

Added the New York Rangers' Will Cuyllé, "I think it just makes for a more fair, even playing field in the playoffs."

Tampa Bay Lightning captain Victor Hedman played on a Cup champion that benefited from the LTIR loophole in 2021. He said, "That's going to be tough for GMs. But on the other hand, you have to follow the rule just like you've followed the rules before."

Post-career health care

Thanks to the hard work of Glenn Healy, the head of the NHL Alumni Association, the NHL and NHLPA established a \$4 million fund to ensure post-career health care for players — whether they've played one shift or 1,000 games — and their families.

One player was really touched by that.

"There's so many guys that did so much for the league and the players in the past, and trying to continue to make that a number-one priority moving forward is something that a lot of players feel really good about," St. Louis Blues center Robert Thomas said.

