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The Athletic / Blue Jackets Sunday Gathering: Search for goaltending depth pieces is on

By Aaron Portzline – July 13, 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: Net questions

By now, most of the NHL is in offseason mode. Most executives and veteran players are settled in their offseason, up-north cabins for the next month or so. But some general managers are still working the phones, and that includes Blue Jackets GM Don Waddell.

Waddell is looking for a goaltender. He may be looking for two. If you think the Blue Jackets' goaltending depth chart is shaky at the top — Jet Greaves and Elvis Merzlikins, in some order, are set to be the one-two punch — try looking just below the surface.

"It's not becoming clearer yet," Waddell told The Athletic this week. "But I've got a lot of irons in the fire."

The Blue Jackets are looking for a No. 3, meaning a goaltender who has AHL experience but also doesn't look out of place in the NHL. In other words, they're looking for somebody who can play the role that Greaves played the last two seasons.

But, aside from his mostly stellar play, a big benefit to having Greaves on the roster was that he could go up and down from Columbus to Cleveland — which he did many times — without needing to be exposed to the rest of the league on waivers.

Waddell's first attempt this offseason was to trade for a goaltender who is talented enough to have had AHL success, but still young enough not to require waivers. Having a goaltender like that allows teams to know who their top AHL goaltender is and who they'll turn to in the event of injuries.

The problem?

"They're very valuable guys," Waddell said. "I've talked to all of the teams who have those guys, and nobody wants to give those guys up. You can understand why."

If something doesn't break, Waddell said he is fully prepared to wait out the waiver wire during training camp. A rough count, using PuckPedia, reveals that up to 30 goaltenders (of varying ability) will likely hit the waiver wire at some point in late September or early October.

Another problem: If the Blue Jackets, who would be 13th in the waivers pecking order through the end of October, claim a player on waivers, they'd have to keep them on the NHL roster, or expose them to waivers again in order to clear them through to AHL Cleveland.

"We might be forced to carry three goalies, which I'm not against," Waddell said. "It's not ideal, but I'm not against it if that's the best way to get our third goalie."

However, it wouldn't help AHL Cleveland to have the organization's three best goaltenders playing in Columbus, which is how yet another waiver claim could come into play. The Blue Jackets do not want to leave their top affiliate high and dry, after all.

Among the more recognizable names expected to hit the waiver wire this fall are, listed alphabetically: Laurent Brossoit (Chicago), Pheonix Copley (Los Angeles), Ivan Fedotov (Philadelphia), Marcus Hogberg

(New York Islanders), Ville Husso (Anaheim), Matt Murray (Seattle), Cal Petersen (Minnesota) and Cayden Primeau (Carolina).

For now, the Blue Jackets have Greaves and Merzlikins at the top. They have Zach Sawchenko set to play in Cleveland, and while he's had intermittent AHL success, he's viewed as an organizational No. 4 (AHL backup) at this point in his career.

Nolan Lalonde, who signed an entry-level deal as an undrafted free agent on Oct. 3, 2022, has aged out of major junior. He's turning pro, but with an .876 save percentage in 167 OHL games, he'll likely start with an ECHL club this season.

The Blue Jackets have drafted a goaltender in each of the last four drafts, so help may be on the way as soon as next season.

2026-27

Evan Gardner — The 19-year-old, selected with a second-round pick (No. 60) in the 2024 draft, is headed back to the Saskatoon Blades of the Western Hockey League, but he'll be able to turn pro in 2026-27, or whenever this coming season ends for the Blades. He got a one-start taste of the AHL late last season.

Sergei Ivanov — He has played on some bad teams in the KHL, but Ivanov has shone, with a cumulative .921 save percentage in 79 games across four seasons and four different clubs. The 21-year-old, selected in the fifth round (No. 138) in 2022, is expected to play this season with SKA St. Petersburg, a very competitive club. His contract with Russia expires at the end of May, and the Blue Jackets are hopeful he'll come to North America next season.

2027-28 or 2028-29

Melvin Strahl — After making the leap from Sweden to the USHL last season, Strahl is on the move again. He'll attend Michigan State beginning this fall — he will be a teammate of Jackets top prospect Cayden Lindstrom — and could be there for at least a couple of seasons. The 20-year-old, drafted in the fifth round (No. 156) in 2023, played well in his lone season with USHL Youngstown.

2030-31

Pyotr Andreyanov — Less than an hour after the Blue Jackets spent a first-round pick (No. 20) on Andreyanov, Waddell acknowledged he'd likely spend the next four or five years in Russia. In other words, the announcement this week that he'd signed a five-year contract was not a surprise. Andreyanov is set to be the starter for his KHL club (CSKA), and the hope is he'll be NHL-ready when his contract expires.

Item No. 2: Nice office

Back in April, at the end of the Blue Jackets' season, coach Dean Evason let it be known he wasn't planning to meet with every player on their way out the door.

There would be meetings with players who weren't likely to return in 2025-26, but he didn't want to cram a season's worth of events and developments into a five-minute meeting. The lengthier chats with veteran players and significant returnees would be handled in due time during the offseason.

But why meet in the bowels of Nationwide Arena when you can play Double Eagle Club, the exclusive golf course owned by the McConnell family, the majority owners of the Blue Jackets? Evason has spent many days this offseason on the course, often with a player.

“When I played with (Erik) Gudbranson, we were walking down the fairway, and he said, ‘Dean, I’ve played 800 or so hockey games (in the NHL) and I’ve never played golf with my coach.’

“Honestly, that makes no sense to me. You could go for a coffee or go for lunch, but why wouldn’t you want to be in this setting for four or five hours and just talk? And as we’re going down the fairway, I was able to have little talks with him: ‘What happened in that situation?’ or ‘What about this guy?’

“It’s a very open opportunity for the player to feel comfortable talking. All we talk about as coaches now is building relationships with players. To me, it’s perfect. And you get to know them on a competitive level, too. They’re competing their ass off to beat you. And I want that. I love that.”

Two more tidbits that relate to Evason and Double Eagle ...

Evason said he had “no idea” that a membership to Double Eagle was part of the package when he took the Blue Jackets job last summer.

“We had finished the interview process, I signed my contract and (Waddell) said, ‘Oh, by the way, we both have a membership at Double Eagle.’ That sounded good, sure, but I really had no idea what that fully meant.

“After I saw the place, I joked to Don that if he would have led with that in our negotiations, it would probably have gone a lot faster. I pinch myself every time I drive out there, just in realizing that I have a chance to be a member and play at this course because of what I do in the hockey world.”

Evason must be a pretty good golfer. How’d he play the day he and Gudbranson hooked up?

“I played like s—, but I actually scored OK,” he said. “I ended up shooting 77, but I didn’t play very well.”

Item No. 3: Snacks

- The NHL is tentatively expected to release the 2025-26 regular-season schedule on Wednesday. This will be the last season of an 82-game slate. As part of the new collective bargaining agreement, the schedule will include 84 regular-season games beginning in 2026-27.
- So far, Waddell and the Blue Jackets have not started talking contract extensions, he said. That’s on the list beginning later this month. Many eyes will be watching center Adam Fantilli, who is entering the final year of his entry-level contract with restricted free-agent status looming next summer. Cole Sillinger signed a two-year contract in 2024, so he’s set for RFA status next summer, too. And there’s one veteran to consider in this conversation: Captain Boone Jenner is entering the final year of his contract, and Waddell and the Blue Jackets would like him to spend his entire career in Columbus.
- There have been reports that Andreyanov’s just-signed KHL contract has an “out” clause for the player after four seasons, but his agent, Dan Milstein, shot down that idea. “It’s a five-year contract,” Milstein said. “KHL contracts have no ‘out’ clause.”
- If the timeline for Andreyanov to arrive in the NHL seems unnecessarily long, well, you’re not wrong. Some of the NHL’s Russian goalies spent two years after their draft years playing in the KHL before making the leap, including Tampa Bay’s Andrei Vasilevskiy, Carolina’s Pyotr Kochetkov and San Jose’s Yaroslav Askarov. Others took at least as long as Andreyanov likely will. The New York Rangers’ Igor Shesterkin was drafted in 2014 and spent five additional seasons in the KHL before splitting the 2019-20 season between the NHL and AHL. The New York Islanders’ Ilya Sorokin was drafted in 2014 and spent the following six seasons in the KHL before arriving in Long Island in 2020. And what team did Sorokin play for? CSKA, same as Andreyanov.
- Example No. 2,988 that it’s a small world, especially in hockey: Andreyanov has spent the past two seasons playing for CSKA’s junior team, but he’ll be on the top club beginning this season. That will make

him a teammate of former NHLer Cole Cassels, who is also a former Ohio AAA Blue Jackets player and the son of former Blue Jackets center Andrew Cassels. Andreyanov will have two other Blue Jackets draft picks around him, too, in towering forward Kirill Dolzhenkov (fourth round, No. 109, in 2002) and defenseman Nikolai Makarov (fifth round, No. 132, in 2021). Also in the room is long-ago Blue Jackets draft pick Vitaly Abramov (third round, No. 65, in 2016), who was traded to Ottawa at the 2019 trade deadline (in the Matt Duchene deal) and hasn't played in the NHL since 2020-21. Another CSKA player from this past season, defenseman Christian Jaros, signed a two-way deal with Columbus this summer.

- Forward Luca Del Bel Belluz has a shot to make the Blue Jackets out of training camp, but it won't surprise anybody if he starts this coming season with AHL Cleveland. Forward Luca Pinelli, after a brief taste late last season, will be a Cleveland lineup regular. Defenseman Luca Marrelli, after four years of major junior, is ready for his pro debut this fall. That's three Lucases in one lineup. Cleveland coach Trent Vogelhuber got (somewhat) used to keeping them straight when Pinelli joined Cleveland late last season. "(Del Bel Belluz) is either Del Bel or Beller," Vogelhuber explained. "(Pinelli) is Pins. And I don't know what Marrelli goes by yet, so TBD on that one."

- The Blue Jackets have two remaining restricted free agents who need contracts for next season: forward Mikael Pyyhtiä and defenseman Daemon Hunt. Waddell said talks continue with both.

- The NHL's new CBA includes changes to the rules regarding emergency goaltenders, requiring clubs to employ their own amateur goaltender rather than have an unaffiliated amateur at the rink who would go in for either club. There are still some rules to settle on, Waddell said, but the likely candidate to fill this role for the Blue Jackets is Reid Robertson, who played at Manhattanville College, a Division III school in Harrison, N.Y. He's worked as a hockey operations assistant the last few seasons and has stepped in a few times each season as a practice goalie.

- This week's Blue Jackets trivia question: With Andreyanov contractually bound to Russia for five years, the soonest he will make his NHL debut is the fall of 2030. And that got us thinking: Which player has waited the longest between the day he was drafted and the day he made his NHL debut? (This is a tough one, so pat yourself on the back if you get any of the top five correct.)

- When former Blue Jackets center Sean Kuraly left Columbus to sign a free-agent contract with Boston, he walked into a room with many familiar faces. Kuraly, whose career started in Boston, was gone for four years, but there are still some Bruins around from that era. And there's Andrew Peeke, a former Blue Jackets defenseman who spent three years as Kuraly's teammate in Columbus. That friendship may be tested, though. Peeke has worn No. 52 since he was traded to the Bruins by the Jackets on March 8, 2024. Kuraly wore No. 52 during his four-plus-year run with the Bruins. He can't go back to No. 7, which he wore in Columbus, because that's been retired in Boston (Phil Esposito); one of 12 sweaters taken out of circulation. So either Peeke is going to have a strong net-front presence in protecting his kit, or his wallet will get fatter. Stay tuned.

- The Athletic published a story on Friday that detailed the many Blue Jackets prospects who will be playing college hockey this season. None of them are attending Ohio State, but that doesn't mean the Buckeyes aren't welcoming their own players from the Canadian major-junior ranks. They are: forwards Niall Crocker (Prince Alberta, WHL) and Jake Karabela (Guelph, Ontario Hockey League), defenseman Sam McGinley (Swift Current, WHL) and goaltender Sam Hillebrandt (Barrie, OHL). Another player, defenseman Maddox Labre, will play for Victoriaville of the Quebec Maritimes Junior Hockey League this coming season, with plans to join OSU for the 2026-27 season.

- Former Ohio State and Blue Jackets player Zac Dalpe announced his retirement last week after a 15-year pro career that included NHL stops with Carolina, Vancouver, Buffalo, Minnesota, Columbus and Florida. He played 574 of his 742 pro games in the AHL and spent parts of five seasons in the Columbus

organization. Dalpe told The Athletic he's hoping to stay in the game, perhaps by joining an NHL club's player development department.

- Trivia answer: The Blue Jackets drafted forward Andrew Murray in the eighth round (No. 242) of the 2001 draft, and he made his NHL debut on Dec. 27, 2007, a span of 2,377 days — the longest span between draft and debut. The next four on the list are T.J. Tynan (2,082), Grant Clitsome (2,075), Lukas Sedlak (1,945) and Merzlikins (1,925).

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Are Starting to Make Progress Against the Hurricanes

By Mark Scheig – July 11, 2025

We're now 10 days into 2025 Free Agency around the NHL. Most of the action around the league has quieted down as most everyone is getting into full summer and offseason mode.

There will still be plenty of news to go around. Signings and some trades will take place. But most of the huge news will take a back seat until September when things will start to get ramped up for the start of the new season.

For us, that means it's time for another Columbus Blue Jackets' Summer Series. Given how close the team came to the playoffs last season, we're going to spend the months of July and August comparing the Blue Jackets to the rest of the Eastern Conference.

We'll consider a bevy of questions along the way. What are the Blue Jackets better at compared to the team in question? What areas do they need the most improvement in? What will it take to close the gap?

To kick things off this summer, we will compare the Blue Jackets to the Carolina Hurricanes. As you will see, progress in catching up to this perennial powerhouse is being made.

Carolina Hurricanes

The Hurricanes finished second in the Metropolitan Division in 2024-25 with 99 points. With the Washington Capitals running away with the division, the Hurricanes were able to mostly cruise to their second-place finish. This earned them home ice advantage in the first round.

The Hurricanes took care of business against the New Jersey Devils knocking them out in five games in the opening round. Then against the Capitals, Carolina imposed their will winning in five games despite not having home-ice advantage.

Then it was time for the big test. Against the defending Stanley Cup Champion Florida Panthers, the Hurricanes got taught a major lesson. They were outscored by the Panthers 16-4 in going down 3-0 in the series.

Thanks to a 3-0 shutout in Game 4, the series was extended to five games before the Panthers drove the final nail in the Hurricanes' coffin. Florida won Game 5 in Raleigh 5-3 to send them to the Final.

For the Hurricanes, it was another season of making a run in the playoffs only to fall short in the Conference Finals. Meanwhile, their path to the playoffs was certainly one to remember. But now, they have to figure out the ultimate question. How can they finally break through and get to the Stanley Cup Final?

Overcoming Rantanen Saga

The Hurricanes made a major move in 2024-25 when they acquired Mikko Rantanen from the Colorado Avalanche. Martin Necas went the other way. You don't see trades like this often between two contenders.

The Hurricanes had a clear message. They wanted everyone to know how serious they were to finally break through. They were willing to try big things in the process.

Unfortunately for them, Rantanen was not the fit they'd hope he'd be. Knowing another trade was needed, GM Eric Tulskey went to work.

The Hurricanes eventually traded Rantanen to the Dallas Stars. Logan Stankoven was the big piece that came to Carolina. While Stankoven is not Rantanen, he's an important part of where the Hurricanes are going in future seasons.

Tulskey took a lot of heat when it was known that the fit for Rantanen wasn't there. But instead of trying to prolong it, he immediately made a trade so that they got something useful out of it. It could have been much worse than landing Stankoven.

When discussing the Hurricanes, their approach is an important part of the discussion. They have shown they are not afraid of making the biggest moves if it means getting closer to winning a Stanley Cup.

How Do Blue Jackets Forwards Stack Up?

On the surface, the Hurricanes are a better and deeper team than the Blue Jackets. The standings bear that out. But a closer examination does reveal the gap between the Metropolitan rivals isn't as far as some might think.

For example, without looking at the numbers, did you know the Blue Jackets scored more goals this season than the Hurricanes? The final total was 273-266. While that's certainly not a wide gap, it puts into perspective just how good Columbus' offense was.

The Blue Jackets didn't lose any of their big offensive weapons. Their losses came in free agency lower in the lineup. That potentially sets them up well for another good season up front.

The Hurricanes added important players all over the ice. Most notably up front was the free-agent signing of Nikolaj Ehlers from the Winnipeg Jets. He slots perfectly into their top line alongside Sebastian Aho and Seth Jarvis. The Blue Jackets had one of the best top lines in the NHL in Dmitri Voronkov, Sean Monahan and Kirill Marchenko.

The Hurricanes' second line is projected to consist of Andrei Svechnikov, Jesperi Kotkaniemi and Jackson Blake. The Blue Jackets are expected to run a second line centered by Adam Fantilli. From a center ice perspective, Columbus holds the edge. One must wonder if the Hurricanes will explore their options to upgrade at 2C.

The Blue Jackets made a trade to improve their bottom six. They acquired Charlie Coyle and Miles Wood from the Avalanche while signing free-agent Isac Lundestrom to center their fourth line.

Compared to the Hurricanes, the Blue Jackets are in better position to compete although the third line of Jordan Martinook, Jordan Staal and Stankoven is a tough third line to compete against. Carolina can also run Taylor Hall on their fourth line if their top-three lines hold.

In all, comparing the forwards is actually very close. Both first lines are great in their own right. Fantilli gives the Blue Jackets an edge on the second line. The Hurricanes get the edge in the bottom six given what their third line brings. With Coyle in the fold, Columbus will get every opportunity to show even that gap isn't too far off.

How Wide is Defensive Gap?

While the forwards are close, the defense and goaltending is not. This is clearly an edge to the Hurricanes. Last season, Carolina allowed 233 goals. Meanwhile, the Blue Jackets allowed 268. Just under half a goal per game over an 82-game season is a big deal.

If you want one of the biggest reasons why the Hurricanes finished 10 points higher in the standings, look no further than goals against.

The Hurricanes were able to improve their blue line by acquiring K'Andre Miller from the New York Rangers. He'll slot in their top-four on the left side. Although they lost Brent Burns and Dmitri Orlov to free agency, this still appears to be an area of strength.

Jacob Slavin is starting to get more deserved attention as a Norris candidate despite not having the offensive numbers. Alexander Nikishin has hype around him and could take the Hurricanes to a new level.

Then in goal, the Hurricanes will run Frederik Andersen and Pyotr Kochetkov back. Many fans outside Carolina might not be aware that both goaltenders finished with a save percentage under .900 last season. Andersen was .899 after returning from injury and Kochetkov was .898.

The Blue Jackets will run with Elvis Merzlikins (.892) and Jet Greaves (.938). The obvious question will be if Greaves can replicate any of last season's success over a longer sample size. He's not going to have a save percentage that high but can he at least turn in .910 or higher over more games earlier in the season?

The Blue Jackets also re-signed Dante Fabbro and Ivan Provorov. While the team is running it back mostly on the blue line, what doesn't get enough attention was how much better they were when everyone was available. Injuries were a factor in some of the lopsided goals-against numbers. Having another year together should benefit them for chemistry purposes.

Still, the Hurricanes have the edge here for now. Slavin and Zach Werenski are a wash as two of the best defenders in the game. The Blue Jackets have to prove over a longer stretch that their blue line and goaltending are up to task. It's the biggest question the team will face in 2025-26. The Hurricanes have demonstrated to this point they are better on defense and have the execution to back that up until otherwise proven.

Final Thoughts

I think the Blue Jackets and Hurricanes are a lot closer than many people think. The Hurricanes have the edge given what they've been able to accomplish while the Blue Jackets still have to break through the playoff line.

The gap between these two teams will shrink if the Blue Jackets show tangible evidence of improvement with their defense and goaltending. Their forwards are plenty good enough.

The Hurricanes are still among the best in the East. Their offseason moves proved that. Their formula for regular-season success works. Their job is to get that formula to work later in the playoffs.

The Blue Jackets also need to bridge the gap in becoming a destination for players. Players are coming in and staying now more than in the recent past. But compared to what the Hurricanes have going, there is still much work to be done. That's the power of winning.

Teams are also not going to look past the Blue Jackets. How will they handle bigger games against true powerhouses? That stretch in March against Florida and Tampa Bay last season all but ruined their chances of making the playoffs.

The Hurricanes are the better team. The Blue Jackets have a lot to prove and questions to answer. But the gap isn't as big as many will think it is. Remember each team won twice in their season series in 2024-25.

The Blue Jackets have made noticeable progress against the Hurricanes. Stay tuned for Part 2 of the summer series when we compare the Blue Jackets to the New Jersey Devils.

The Athletic / Blue Jackets' top prospects Cayden Lindstrom, Jackson Smith among those jumping to NCAA

By Aaron Portzline – July 11, 2025

It wasn't until last March, when top-notch defenseman Jackson Smith and the Tri-City Americans were nearing the end of the regular season, that Smith started to consider a different path for his future.

Five months earlier, the NCAA changed its long-held rule that players who compete in any of the Canadian Hockey League's three branches — the Ontario Hockey League, the Western Hockey League, and the Quebec Maritimes Junior Hockey League — were ineligible to play college hockey.

But even that rule change, which was lauded just about everywhere in hockey except the CHL, didn't register with Smith, who was born and raised in Calgary and elevated his play dramatically in 2024-25, his second season in the WHL.

"When the rule first came out, I didn't even look at it," said Smith, a big, two-way defenseman who was selected No. 14 overall by the Columbus Blue Jackets at last month's NHL draft. "It was maybe not until March when my dad brought it up, like, 'We should look into this.'

"I was like, school? I wasn't really thinking about that."

But over the last few months, it's all anybody can talk about at the top levels of developmental hockey. And the Blue Jackets are right in the middle of it. Columbus' top two prospects — Smith and center Cayden Lindstrom, the No. 4 pick in 2024 — have both made the leap from CHL to NCAA this summer.

Smith took only one recruiting visit and decided to play at Penn State in the fall. He was blown away, he said, by the Nittany Lions' facilities, as well as the opportunity to play against older players over the next two seasons. The majority of NCAA players are between 22 and 24 years old.

Lindstrom, who missed most of last season following back surgery, was the target of a fierce recruiting battle and ended up choosing Michigan State. The lighter game schedule in the NCAA — 34 regular-season games vs. 68 in junior hockey — will allow more time for off-ice work and recovery and less time traveling.

"I think it's huge, and I think it's just the beginning," Lindstrom said. "It gives players a chance to develop at a higher level against older guys. Say you're dominating the WHL, that's kind of your next step as a hockey player and a person and, academically as well."

Unless Smith is ready to play in the NHL in 2026-27, which seems unlikely, he'll likely play two years at Penn State before turning pro. On that schedule, he'd be able to play for the Blue Jackets' American Hockey League affiliate in Cleveland before joining the big club.

Lindstrom, a 19-year-old, will likely turn pro after one season at Michigan State.

Lindstrom and Smith are the Blue Jackets' only examples of players leaving the CHL for the NCAA, but the Columbus imprint on college hockey next season will be bigger than ever.

The Blue Jackets will have 10 players in the NCAA this coming season, by far the highest number in the franchise's 25-year history. Ten seasons ago, they had just three players in college hockey, and last season, they had only four.

The others arrived in the NCAA through pipelines that were available before the name change:

Goaltender Melvin Strahl (Michigan State), forward William Whitelaw (Western Michigan), defensemen Andrew Strathmann (North Dakota), Tanner Henricks (St. Cloud State) all played in the United States Hockey League

Forwards James Fisher (Northeastern) and Jeremy Loranger (Nebraska-Omaha), and defenseman Luke Ashton (Cornell) played in the British Columbus Junior Hockey League, at the junior-A level

Defenseman Malte Vass (Boston U.) is a European import

But the moves by Lindstrom and Smith are the ones everybody's watching. Gavin McKenna, who played with Lindstrom at times the last two seasons with Medicine Hat in the WHL, announced to much fanfare on Wednesday that he'll attend Penn State with Smith in the fall.

"As we live in the reality of it, it seems like each case is going to be different," said Blue Jackets director of hockey operations Rick Nash, who has worked extensively on the development side of hockey since he retired as a player in 2018.

"It'll be interesting to see how it all pans out, but right now I think it's exciting that some of these kids get to experience both major junior and the NCAA."

Smith, who turned 18 in May, had 11-43-54 and 48 penalty minutes in 68 games for Tri-City. There are still aspects of the game he could improve at the major-junior level, but nothing could prepare him to play in the NHL quite like playing against older, more developed players.

"The CHL is an unbelievable league," Smith said during Blue Jackets development camp last week. "I loved my two years in Tri-Cities, like I've said a number of times. But having that other option there ... (NCAA) is an older league, stronger guys, and the facilities there are pretty great.

"Getting to use those and getting to play against stronger competition gets you a bit more ready for the NHL, which is, ultimately, every hockey player's dream."

When the Blue Jackets drafted Lindstrom, it was known that he'd had back issues, but the Blue Jackets believed it could be healed with rest and a patient approach. Ultimately, it was learned that Lindstrom needed back surgery last fall, and after a long, arduous recovery, he's back on the ice.

The Blue Jackets didn't sign Lindstrom to an entry-level contract quickly, as many of the other high draft picks typically do, and many wondered if his back injury was the reason.

It wasn't. Lindstrom and his agent, Daren Hermiston, had college hockey on their radar as his best path to the NHL, and the Blue Jackets agreed. That's why he still hasn't signed an ELC — if he had signed a professional contract, he would not be allowed to play in the NCAA.

Two other recent Blue Jackets draft picks could have benefited from this rule change. No longer do parents face a tough decision — CHL or NCAA? — when the player is only 16 years old, because now they can play in both.

Adam Fantilli, the No. 3 by the Jackets in 2023, went to the USHL and later played one year at Michigan rather than play at Saginaw of the OHL. If he had the flexibility to leave after two seasons and still play in college, the decision may have been different.

Denton Mateychuk, the No. 12 pick in 2022, played four full seasons with Moose Jaw of the WHL. The fourth year proved beneficial — Moose Jaw won the WHL and played in the Memorial Cup, and Mateychuk was the captain — but there was concern by the Blue Jackets before the season that he was no longer being challenged at that level.

That's all changed now. And it will likely lead to further changes, though nobody can say what those will be.

"It's early, so it'll settle down and we'll all settle into what it means probably in three to five years," Blue Jackets director of player personnel Chris Clark said. "Right now, everybody's trying to figure it out.

"I think it's tough for a 15-to-16-year-old kid to make a decision on college or major junior. Well, now you can do both."

The Hockey Writers / Don't Worry About Blue Jackets' Andreyanov's Long-Term KHL Deal

By Nicholas Arnold – July 12, 2025

There was a lot of talk before the 2025 NHL Entry Draft about the Columbus Blue Jackets and what exactly they'd do with their two first-round picks. Despite several discussions of trading them for current assets, the market did not deliver what general manager Don Waddell was hoping for, so they selected prospects with each. With the 14th overall pick, they went with a left-shot defender, Jackson Smith, who had a breakout season with the Western Hockey League's (WHL) Tri-City Americans. With the other pick, they selected a goalie: Pyotr Andreyanov.

He's a goalie who won't be seen in Columbus for at least the next four seasons, as he's signed a long-term contract with CSKA Moscow in Russia's Kontinental Hockey League (KHL). The term of the contract is five years, with an out clause if he chooses to go to North America after the fourth year. Some Blue Jackets fans are concerned about this span of time and wonder if maybe they would have been better off taking someone from North America.

While four or five years sounds like a long time, in terms of development paths for goalies, it isn't completely abnormal, and it could wind up benefitting the player and team in the long run.

The Blue Jackets Are Excited About Andreyanov

Many were surprised to see the Blue Jackets pick Andreyanov so early. The decision drew comparisons to their surprise pick of Yegor Chinakhov at 21st in the 2020 NHL Entry Draft, because it was considered a little bit off the beaten path. Most considered Andreyanov among the better goalies available in the draft, and he was considered the best international goalie by NHL Central Scouting. However, many considered him behind North American goalies Joshua Ravensbergen and Jack Ivankovic, and according to Elite Prospects, most draft lists had him being picked between 58th and 81st – which would place him in the very late second round or third round of the draft.

The Blue Jackets were excited to get the chance to pick him, and based on Waddell's comments, they don't believe they were reaching at all.

"I'm not a goalie expert, but I can interview people," Waddell said in an interview on the Blue Jackets' website. "Our goalie guys, Nick and Brad Thiessen and Jimmy Viers all said, by far, they thought this was the best guy. You know, we came into the draft saying that we'd like to draft a goalie. So when we put our list together, it worked out two ways. It's kind of interesting, because he's our No. 1 goalie, but he was actually our next guy on our list, so we didn't have to debate at all."

Waddell has a history of drafting Russian players when others may shy away due to the current geopolitical state and other externalities involving the KHL. In his last three drafts with his former team, the Carolina Hurricanes, he picked 14 players from Russia in 27 picks. That's 51.85% of his draft picks in the last three years from Russian leagues. While it's too soon to tell on those players if they will pan out or not, it's proof that Waddell bets on talent wherever it's from, he has faith in what his teams' have to offer, and believes that he'll eventually be able to convince these players, in this case Andreyanov, across the pond to Ohio.

Andreyanov's Development Path Comparables

For a top skater prospect to take longer than three or four years to make an impact in the NHL is an eternity. Goalies tend to take a little longer to ripen on the vine. Despite the appearance that

Andreyanov being four or five years away at a minimum seems like a long time, as a goalie he is right on track.

Let's look at the best goalies in the world right now and when they were able to play more than 30 games in an NHL season. I'm using the 30-game mark because that's telling for when a goalie is making an impact in the lineup and considered more than just a backup and is a key part of the tandem. That's what the Blue Jackets want from Andreyanov, to be an impactful and key part of their goaltending scheme. These metrics will give us an idea of how long it generally takes goalies to make that leap.

You'll note a bit longer of an incubation period for the goalies who were drafted out of Russia, like the New York Rangers' Igor Shesterkin and the New York Islanders' Ilya Sorokin, but for the most part, five years is a pretty standard amount of time. The long-term contract paves the developmental path for Andreyanov in a way that is right on track for him to blossom into what the Blue Jackets had hoped in picking him in the first round.

He'll spend at least the next four years in one of the best organizations in the KHL, and he will benefit immensely from getting the chance to play quality minutes against the best quality of competition that the eastern hemisphere has to offer. That type of pressure and competition in his home country and familiar surroundings will help him to become a quality goaltender. Then, once he becomes ready, he can make the jump and not have to grow his game and learn the North American culture at the same time. In a position as mentally taxing as goaltending, any efforts that a team can make to alleviate stress will help them and the player in the long run.

The Hockey News / NHL Prospect Pool Overview '25-26: Columbus Blue Jackets' New Generation Takes Shape

By Tony Ferrari – July 12, 2025

Initial Thoughts

The Blue Jackets are on the rise. They are starting to see the youngest members of the squad make a major impact as they look to return to the post-season for the first time since the 2020 COVID-19 playoffs. Although a few players remain from that team, this is a new generation of Blue Jackets hockey, and Adam Fantilli leads it.

Fantilli reached the 30-goal plateau as a 20-year-old center last year, finishing fifth on the team in scoring. His value as a two-way center has also begun to show itself. As Fantilli enters his third NHL season, there could be a significant step in production this year, bringing him closer to point-per-game production.

The Jackets found their franchise center in Fantilli. Now, it's just about surrounding him with talent.

Kent Johnson helps bring that talent. This past year seemed like the first time an NHL coach embraced that Johnson is one of the most purely skilled players in the NHL. Johnson blossomed because of it with 57 points in 68 games. Johnson is capable of things most players could only dream of. He's a video game in real life. He and Fantilli showed some amazing chemistry at times. Going into his age-23 season, Johnson is primed for a true breakout.

Fantilli and Johnson don't qualify as prospects, but the Blue Jackets do have quite a few very solid prospects.

Headlining the group is Cayden Lindstrom, the fourth overall pick from the 2024 NHL draft. The big, physical forward has a fantastic blend of power and skill to his game. He will crush a player along the boards as they look to break out of their defensive zone, steal the puck and power his way to the net and get a shot off with a defender on his back. After missing most of this past season recovering from his back injury, Lindstrom is headed to Michigan State University, where he will get to test his skill against bigger, faster competition.

James Malatesta and Luca Del Bel Belluz got into a few NHL games but spent most of this past season in the AHL. Malatesta had a slightly more challenging season than his rookie campaign, but his intelligence and tactical play remained. Del Bel Belluz, meanwhile, took a major step up at the AHL level, which earned him an extended call up, getting into 15 NHL games. He put up eight points in his NHL stint, which is probably good enough to keep him in a roster spot going into next season.

Luca Pinelli finished his OHL career with a solid season in Ottawa despite the team missing the playoffs. Pinelli plays with his heart on his sleeve. He was a two-year captain for the 67's and gave his all on every shift. Pinelli has a great shot, some wicked vision and tenacity that helps mute the concerns about his 5-foot-9 size. He must prove he can handle the physical nature of pro hockey. He had a brief stint in the AHL at the end of this past season and played well.

After an incredibly high-scoring QMJHL career, Jordan Dumais was injured for the first half of the year before jumping into the AHL. He had 11 points in 21 games, but he never really got up to speed. The 21-year-old will aim to return to his high-end offensive production. Dumais' most effective play has always been in the offensive zone, using his passing and vision to open up chances for teammates.

On the back end, the Blue Jackets have a few notable players, highlighted by Charlie Elick. He is a big, mobile defensive blueliner who shows some flashes of puck-moving ability, but he's not ever going to be mistaken for a high-end producer. His value comes from shutting play down and getting involved physically.

Stanislav Svozil is a two-way defender who has been solid in each of his two years with the Cleveland Monsters. He skates well and uses that to his advantage at both ends of the ice. He mirrors attackers, closes out at one end of the ice, evades pressure and makes crisp passes at the other. He doesn't have much high-end skill, but he should be able to play a decent depth role with solid breakout passing and good defensive play at the NHL one day.

Corson Ceulemans has had an interesting development path. He has all the physical tools, including skating, size, strength, puckhandling and passing, but he hasn't put it all together just yet. He went from the BCHL to the NCAA to the AHL, and each level put him to the test. This will be a big season for the 22-year-old, as he will look to finally start building and providing steady value in the AHL in hopes of earning an NHL call-up.

Key U-23 Players Likely To Play NHL Games This Season

Adam Fantilli (C), Denton Mateychuk (D), Cole Sillinger (C/W), Kent Johnson (LW/C), Luca Del Bel Belluz (C)

2025 NHL Draft Class

Round 1, 14th overall - Jackson Smith, D, Tri-City (WHL)

Round 1, 20th overall - Pyotr Andreyanov, G, Krasnaya Armiya Moscow Jr. (Rus)

Round 3, 76th overall - Malte Vass, D, Farjestad Jr. (Swe.)

Round 5, 160th overall - Owen Griffin, C, Oshawa (OHL)

Round 6, 173rd overall - Victor Raftheim Hedin, D, Brynas Jr. (Swe.)

Round 7, 198th overall - Jeremy Loranger, C, Sherwood Park (BCHL)

The Blue Jackets hope the 2025 NHL draft is the last where they pick in a non-playoff position for a while.

Big right-shot defender Jackson Smith is arguably the second-best defender in the class. He is incredibly mobile and has some of the most enticing physical tools. He's shown flashes of puck-rushing ability and offensive creation. His most valuable trait is his transition defense, where he mirrors opposing players, steps up and either takes the puck off their stick or finishes with the body. Smith must find some consistency, but he has the tools to become a very solid No. 2 or No. 3 defenseman.

A few picks later, Columbus selected the first goalie of the draft, Pyotr Andreyanov. The highly touted Russian is one of the most athletic goalies in the class. His skating is surgical, rarely wasting a movement and consistently finding ways to stay square with the puck. Andreyanov instantly shoots to the top of the Jackets' goalie depth chart, and he could be the goalie of the future for the franchise. In the meantime, he signed a five-year contract extension with CSKA Moscow as he continues to develop.

Malte Vass is a strong defensive player, using intelligent reads and strong skating to ensure he is in a good position to kill plays. The Swede's play on the puck is best when he keeps things simple and doesn't try to do too much. Vass is a simple passer who finds the first outlet and hits it quickly. He's not fun to watch from a skill perspective, but he's effective, and his physicality gets people out of their seats.

Owen Griffin epitomizes a player who excels in many aspects of the game but doesn't have a standout trait. Griffin shows some skill, a steady 200-foot game and a predictability in his play that coaches will love. If he were a bit bigger, teams would likely have seen him as a bottom-six option more easily, but at 5-foot-10, he must prove his worth in the bottom six to get to the NHL level one day.

In the sixth round, Columbus swung on a toolsy, raw defender with some size, Victor Raftheim Hedin. The 6-foot-4 blueliner tries to get involved in plays, whether that's jumping up to join the rush, creeping down off the point in the offensive zone or cheating over to help in the defensive zone. Raftheim Hedin must play a more structured game and learn to refine the little things, but his mobility, tools and athleticism are all interesting traits to build on.

The Blue Jackets' last pick was a massive swing on a scoring forward from the BCHL, Jeremy Loranger. His 105 points led the league with an 18-point margin over the second-place scorer. Loranger is small, and he plays accordingly, avoiding physical play whenever possible. This was a major concern for teams, as you need some sort of ability to handle physical play. Loranger is a creative passer who weaves through traffic with the puck and fires off passes. In the seventh round, this is exactly the kind of swing you want to take.

Strengths

For a team that struggled for so long down the middle, center has become a bit of a strength in its pipeline.

Fantilli and Cole Sillinger are U-22 players already on the roster and playing center. You can add Del Bel Belluz to that list this year, in all likelihood.

Their top prospect, Lindstrom, could be the center the Jackets pair with Fantilli to form a dangerous one-two punch on the top two lines. Griffin was a nice addition in the draft. Pinelli and William Whitelaw are potential wingers at the next level, but they still have a chance to play down the middle. That's an impressive group.

Weaknesses

The Jackets have a pretty solid prospect pool all around, but the left wing lacks some talent. Malatesta is a solid prospect, but he wouldn't be considered a high-end player. Oiva Keskinen is a fine prospect who could be a depth scoring option, and he'll play his first AHL season this upcoming year after a couple of solid campaigns in the Liiga. Beyond that, Columbus could use a forward or two on the left side.

Hidden Gem: Luca Marrelli, D

The activation in Marrelli's game has always been there, but in his final OHL season, he took full advantage of it. The Oshawa defender consistently joined the rush or jumped into the fray off the blueline. It allowed him to take advantage of his ever-improving shot and continue to impact the game as a facilitator. Marrelli was second in playoff scoring as he helped lead his team to the final, where they lost for a second straight year to the London Knights. He will take his talents to Cleveland in the AHL next season.

Next Man Up: Luca Del Bel Belluz, C/W

For all the high-quality prospects the Jackets have, many of them are already in the NHL, or they are a year or two away. Del Bel Belluz is next up, and although he's less exciting than some of their other youngsters, he's still a solid prospect. He's a tactical scorer who finds ways to connect plays with effective passing and intelligent positioning. He's not a star, but he will be a solid contributor.

Prospect Depth Chart Notables

LW: James Malatesta, Oiva Keksinen

C: Cayden Lindstrom, Luca Del Bel Belluz, Luca Pinelli, William Whitelaw, Owen Griffin

RW: Jordan Dumais, Kirill Dolzhenkov, James Fisher

LD: Jackson Smith, Stanislav Svozil, Malte Vass, Andrew Strathmann, Aidan Hreschuk, Daemon Hunt

RD: Charlie Elick, Corson Ceulemans, Luca Marrelli

G: Pyotr Andreyonov, Sergei Ivanov, Evan Gardner, Melvin Strahl, Nolan Lalonde

Sports Illustrated / Three Teams that Could Level Up in 2026

By Jon Alfano – July 10, 2025

In the NHL, or any sport really, there are always at least a few new teams to make the playoffs each year. With the movement around the league this summer, and more to come in the near future, that's sure to hold true this year.

With that said, here's three teams who missed the playoffs in 2025, but could make the jump in 2026.

3. Columbus Blue Jackets

Columbus was one of the feel-good stories of last season. After the tragic death of star forward Johnny Gaudreau in the summer, the Blue Jackets defied all expectations by staying in the playoff picture until the very last day of the season. Even though they fell just short of the promised land, they still had a season to be incredibly proud of.

Admittedly, the Blue Jackets haven't had the best offseason, and some of their moves - such as signing Ivan Provorov to a seven-year extension and trading for Charlie Coyle and Miles Wood - have been outright head-scratchers. However, the core of the team is still intact and fairly young. If they can play with the same fire they did last year, the Blue Jackets will be in good shape.

2. New York Rangers

The Rangers' 2024-25 season was a disaster, plain and simple. Not only did they miss the playoffs just one year after winning the Presidents' Trophy, but they constantly dealt with drama on and off the ice. There were times where they better resembled a soap opera than a hockey team.

That said, this roster is too talented to fall short again. The Rangers still have one of the best goalies and defensemen in the league in Igor Shesterkin and Adam Fox, and their forward core still features the likes of Artemi Panarin, Mika Zibanejad, J.T. Miller, Alexis LaFreniere and more. With Mike Sullivan now behind the bench to whip these stars back into shape, the Rangers should make a return trip to the postseason.

1. Utah Mammoth

Utah had a pretty solid showing in its first season, finishing with 89 points and remaining in the playoff picture until the last week or so of the season. For comparison, its .543 save percentage was better than anything the Arizona Coyotes posted in its final decade of existence (Utah is basically Arizona reincarnated, however the league treats them as separate franchises).

After a year to get settled in Salt Lake City, the newly-renamed Mammoth have a chance to make some serious noise this season. They have an excellent core of young forwards with Clayton Keller, Dylan Guenther, Barrett Hayton, Logan Cooley and the newly-acquired J.J. Peterka - all of whom are 26 or younger. Karel Vejmelka and Connor Ingram also form a pretty solid goalie tandem when at their best.

If the right players can take a step forward, the Mammoth could bring playoff hockey to Salt Lake City for the very first time.