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The Athletic / With Monahan, Fantilli and Coyle, Blue Jackets have center depth like never before

By Aaron Portzline - September 30, 2025

If Charlie Coyle has his typical season, he'll play his 1,000th game (he's at 950), score his 200th goal (189) and add his 300th assist (296), giving him 500 points (485). He'll also make the Stanley Cup playoffs for the 14th consecutive season, the longest active streak in the NHL.

More than numbers, Coyle gives the Columbus Blue Jackets something they've been wanting for almost their entire existence.

Acquired in a draft-day trade with the Colorado Avalanche, Coyle, 33, will anchor the Blue Jackets' third line, joining Sean Monahan, one of the NHL's top two-way players, and Adam Fantilli, one of the league's rising stars, on the center depth chart. Isac Lundestrom, signed as a free agent, will center the fourth line.

"The nice thing is, we also have other wingers who can play center, too," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "Are we comfortable and confident that the centers we'll start the season with are all quality NHL players? Yes. And that's exciting for us."

The Blue Jackets have become the envy of many NHL clubs at the position after struggling for years to strengthen their offensive spine.

Most recently, they've tried to turn wingers into centers (Max Domi, Patrik Laine, Jack Roslovic), had draft picks that never lived up to expectations (Alexander Wennberg) and had other budding stars force their way out of town (Pierre Dubois).

It's one of the tenets of building a hockey club: be strong down the middle, have a high-quality defensive top four, and a reliable goaltender who can rise and "steal" five or six games over the course of a season. Through this lens, the Blue Jackets' center depth is the strength of the club.

Monahan, 30, played 54 games last season and produced better than a point per game (19-38-57) for the second time in his career. His arrival as a free agent two summers ago has elevated his wingers (Kirill Marchenko and Dmitri Voronkov had breakout seasons in 2024-25). However, he has also been a model for young players on the roster, especially Fantilli.

The 20-year-old Fantilli, who had 31 goals last season, might ascend to the No. 1 line (Monahan's spot) quicker than anybody realizes. The No. 3 overall pick in 2023, Fantilli had his rookie season (2023-24) end halfway through with a lacerated Achilles, and, understandably, he needed time to acclimate again last season.

However, once he awakened in the second half, Fantilli was one of the NHL's top offensive players.

From Jan. 4 to the end of the regular season (43 games), Fantilli scored 24 goals, tying him in that span with the league's leading scorer, Edmonton's Leon Draisaitl. Only Boston's David Pastrnak (30), Washington's Alex Ovechkin (26), Buffalo's Tage Thompson (26), Dallas' Jason Robertson (26) and Boston's Morgan Geekie (25) score more goals.

Fantilli, who turns 21 the day before the home opener, is only getting stronger and wiser. And he constantly deflects praise by mentioning how fortunate he's been to have Monahan in the same dressing room, a resource for advice or to watch.

Now add Coyle to that list.

“Charlie’s a great player, and he’s played with a lot of great players, and that’s invaluable,” Fantilli said. “He’s picked up a lot of things, I’m sure, from playing with (Nathan) MacKinnon and (Cale) Makar (in Colorado), or (Patrice) Bergeron and (Brad) Marchand (in Boston).”

The Blue Jackets have moved captain Boone Jenner and Cole Sillinger from center to wing to make way for Fantilli and Coyle, but those two could easily move back to the middle due to injuries. Jenner, one of the NHL’s top faceoff players, can support Fantilli in that area.

How strong are the Blue Jackets at center?

Luca Del Bel Belluz, 21, had the type of AHL season in 2024-25 (27-26-53 in 61 games) and had an intense enough training camp that he would have almost certainly made the Blue Jackets’ roster in most previous seasons. Instead, he was among a wave of cuts on Sunday, sent back to the AHL’s Cleveland Monsters for more seasoning.

“We know Bel can play in the NHL,” Evason said.

And remember, Cayden Lindstrom — the No. 4 overall pick in the 2024 draft — is expected to be NHL-ready in a year or two. He’s playing this season at Michigan State University before likely turning pro next season.

For Evason and the rest of the coaching staff, creating forward lines and building power-play units is considerably easier when you have enough centers to get creative. Almost every center can play on the wing, but very few wingers can transition to center, where the defensive responsibilities and skating are more intense.

That’s another way center depth can help the Blue Jackets.

Scoring goals is no longer an issue in Columbus. The Jackets were seventh in the NHL last season (tied with Toronto) with 267 goals, a franchise record. However, once again, they struggled defensively, allowing the eighth-most goals in the league (also 267).

A big part of that is goaltending, sure. However, the Blue Jackets can also improve their defense.

“We have, what, six or seven guys who are natural center men?” Fantilli said. “It’s special to have that. It not only changes the way we can play as a team, but how these guys play if they’re on the wing. With guys like that on your line, you don’t, as the centerman, always have to be the first guy back.

“If I’m playing with Jenner, and he’s beating me back up ice, all we have to do is make eye contact and I’m playing wing, just like that. It makes the game more seamless. I can also cheat a little bit more on faceoffs because Jens is there or Coyle is there.”

Coyle, an amiable sort, has fit right in with the Blue Jackets. It has been noted that he bears a striking resemblance to Blue Jackets defenseman Damon Severson, and he has been asked about the 2019 playoff series between Columbus and Boston at least a few times.

At the 2019 trade deadline, the Minnesota Wild traded Coyle to Boston. Six weeks later, he was playing in a second-round series against the Blue Jackets.

“I remember the first game went to OT,” Coyle said, a grin slowly taking over his face. “I remember that one. I scored the OT goal. It was a tough series. We ended up winning (in six games), but it didn’t seem like six. It seemed like it went the distance.

“They were tough to play against, and they were coming in sky-high with confidence after sweeping Tampa Bay in the first round.”

In that playoff series, the Blue Jackets played with Pierre-Luc Dubois, Matt Duchene and Brandon Dubinsky at center, with Boone Jenner and Riley Nash slotting in on occasion. That's the best the Blue Jackets have ever been at center ice, a mixture of youth, toughness and experience.

Until now.

The Columbus Dispatch / 3 takeaways from 'sloppy' Columbus Blue Jackets preseason loss

By Brian Hedger – September 30, 2025

The Blue Jackets' preseason is winding down, but they've got some ramping up to do.

Despite facing a team that dressed only a handful of NHL veterans, the Blue Jackets struggled defensively in a 4-3 loss to the Washington Capitals on Sept. 30 at Nationwide Arena and iced a lineup that may closely resemble what they'll start the regular season with Oct. 9 in Nashville.

"There were times tonight where we had some good minutes, but obviously there's some things we want to work on," captain Boone Jenner said. "I think we're giving up a little too much right now, more than we'd like."

The Capitals scored two goals in each of the first two periods and led 4-2 starting the third, when Mathieu Olivier cut it to 4-3 for the Blue Jackets with 7:37 left. Jenner scored the first two Columbus goals on power plays in the second period.

Jet Greaves made 35 saves in net for the Blue Jackets (2-4-0), who have one exhibition game left Oct. 4 in Washington.

Here are three takeaways:

Columbus Blue Jackets 'sloppy' against Washington Capitals

Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason wanted to see his team 'dialed-in' with most of the team's NHL regulars in the lineup, but they looked the opposite for much of the first two periods. Two costly turnovers became easy goals for the Capitals, who didn't have most of their NHL veterans with them.

The top defensive pairing in particular, Zach Werenski and Dante Fabbro, had a tough night bobbling pucks and making ill-advised decisions in their own end. Damon Severson, another defenseman, also had an attempted pass deflect into the net off his stick as he slid backward while defending a 2-on-1 rush.

"What we wanted to see was not playing 'shinny' hockey, and we didn't play 'shinny' hockey ... but we did play sloppy," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "We basically scored three goals in our net, right? It was just our execution tonight wasn't there. It was just a little bit sloppy (and) we need to clean (it) up."

Columbus Blue Jackets sharp on power plays vs. Washington Capitals

One of the good things the Blue Jackets can take from the loss is going 2-for-4 on power plays, leading to both Jenner goals in the second.

Werenski, operating in his role as quarterback of the top power-play unit, earned two points in the game by assisting on each of Jenner's goals. Kent Johnson and Adam Fantilli also picked up assists on those tallies, as the Blue Jackets generated seven of their 38 shots on man-advantage situations.

"We want (our power play) to be a difference maker," Jenner said. "When you get opportunities, you want to give your team some juice and some life, and I think with the personnel we've got on it, we can be a really good power play."

Columbus Blue Jackets forward Kirill Marchenko 'banged up'

Kirill Marchenko was the only key Blue Jackets skater who didn't play against the Capitals. Evason said he's 'banged up,' but the issue isn't something that's thought to be a long-term concern. That's good news for the Blue Jackets, whose top line would have a big void without him.

Yegor Chinakhov skated in Marchenko's spot on that line with center Sean Monahan and power forward Dmitri Voronkov, and they generated a combined 13 shots between them. Chinakhov and Monahan each finished with -2 plus/minus ratings and were on the ice for the Capitals' first and fourth goals.

Chinakhov, who requested a trade in the summer, is trying to earn a regular role in a lineup that appears largely set in stone without him as one of the top 12 forwards.

The Columbus Dispatch / Blue Jackets captain Boone Jenner calls son's birth 'best blessing' after prior stillbirth

By Bethany Bruner – September 30, 2025

Blue Jackets captain Boone Jenner and his wife, Maggie, have welcomed a new addition to their family nearly a year and a half after the couple's devastating stillbirth of their firstborn son.

Tommy Pavol Jenner was born on Sept. 21 and became what his dad called the "best thing in the world."

Maggie Jenner announced Tommy's birth on her Instagram page, posting a carousel of photographs. The carousel also features a video of the couple's dog, Harley, meeting Tommy as he lies in a crib.

No, Tommy doesn't have his own pair of skates quite yet, but that will come in a few years, Jenner said.

Tommy's birth comes about 17 months after the couple announced the loss of their firstborn son, Dawson, who was stillborn on March 31, 2024, about eight and a half months into Maggie's pregnancy.

Following Dawson's loss, Jenner spent time away from the Blue Jackets before rejoining the team in mid-April 2024 for the end of the season.

Several of the photos included in Tommy's birth announcement include him being swaddled in a blanket embroidered with a message honoring Dawson.

Jenner said he and his wife tried to stay positive and excited through her pregnancy but the thoughts of what could happen were in the back of their minds.

"To actually have him here is surreal for both of us, trying to soak in every moment," Jenner said.

"Families don't always get that. For us not being able to go home with your son, for this one to be able to bring him home is special."

Jenner said his wife has been a "rock star" through her pregnancy and birth and called the experience of becoming a father surreal. He said Tommy looks more like Maggie in his view, but it depends on who is asked who he looks like at less than two weeks old.

"It's the greatest blessing I've ever experienced," he said.

Jenner played for the Blue Jackets three days after his son's arrival on Sept. 24, logging 19:47 of ice time, two shots on goal, a +1 rating and a 100% faceoff win percentage in a 4-1 preseason in over the Pittsburgh Penguins. He has not traveled with the team during the preseason.

The Blue Jackets drafted Jenner in 2011 and he has spent his entire career in Columbus. He was named captain in 2021.

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets' Comeback Falls Short in Preseason Loss to Capitals

By Mark Scheig – September 30, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets were hoping to use Tuesday night to start ramping things up before their regular season opens nine days from today. It was a mixed bag against the Washington Capitals.

Connor McMichael and Tom Wilson each had a goal and an assist while Logan Thompson made 36 saves to help the Capitals to a 4-3 preseason win over the Blue Jackets. Boone Jenner scored twice for the home team.

The story of this game was a combination of good moments and some sloppy play. The Capitals took advantage of their opportunities.

Game Recap

The Capitals built a 2-0 lead in the first period thanks to some puck management issues from the Blue Jackets. McMichael deflected the first goal past Jet Greaves off a point shot from David Gucciardi. Seconds before that, the Blue Jackets had possession but were unable to clear the zone.

Their inability to clear the zone also led to the second goal by Andrew Cristall. Outside of those two moments, the Blue Jackets played a good period generating 17 shots on goal. Thompson was good throughout.

In the second, the Blue Jackets cut it to 2-1 thanks to Jenner's first power-play goal of the night. He was behind the goal line and was able to chip the puck off Thompson and over the goal line.

Ilya Protas made it 3-1 shortly thereafter on a 2-on-1 rush. He tried to play the puck across and it hit Damon Severson's stick before going in.

Jenner responded with another power-play goal to make it 3-2 just 46 seconds after Protas' goal. Off a faceoff win, Zach Werenski's shot hit Jenner before beating Thompson.

Wilson then scored the game-winning goal by poking the puck away from Dante Fabbro. That poke was enough to beat Greaves to make it 4-2.

Mathieu Olivier finished the scoring with just over eight minutes left in the game. The Blue Jackets had chances at the end but were not able to tie it.

The Blue Jackets were able to score two power play goals to help them stay in this game. Given the talent and familiarity of this unit, they could be a difference maker in close games.

"We want to be a difference maker," Jenner said. "When you get opportunities, you want to give your team some juice and some life. I think with the personnel we got on it, I think we can be a really good power play."

"I thought we were sustaining from O-zone time there," Werenski said of the power play. "Had some chances, scored some goals. Won off the faceoff which is what we wanted to do is attack right away. Our entries were good. It's a huge thing for our group and hopefully we can just keep it rolling into the season."

Up next for the Blue Jackets is a rematch with the Capitals on Saturday night this time in Washington. Before the Capitals get there, they host the Boston Bruins on Thursday night in their second to last preseason game.

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets News & Rumors: Chinakhov, Calm Camp & More

By Mark Scheig – September 30, 2025

Five down. Just two more preseason games to go this week. Then we can finally get to the real stuff. For the Columbus Blue Jackets, their focus is making sure they're ready for Game 1 in Nashville.

The team has a set of games this week against the Washington Capitals in their final tune up prior to the start of the regular season. Given the wave of cuts that just took place, expect to see a heavier NHL lineup as the players continue to get their legs under them.

We start this week's News & Rumors by re-visiting a situation that was one of the top stories coming into camp. There seems to be another twist in the story.

Chinakhov Latest

At Monday's practice, Yegor Chinakhov was skating on the Blue Jackets' fourth line. He alternated line rushes with Zach Aston-Reese on the left wing. Isac Lundestrom and Miles Wood were also on that line.

But what makes this a significant development is that Chinakhov took the second rotation meaning unless the Blue Jackets have an injury or they change their mind about lines, he could project to be a healthy scratch on opening night. He also wasn't on either power play unit.

Chinakhov's trade request was never rescinded. But he and the team including GM Don Waddell and head coach Dean Evason spoke to him preseason to clear the air.

Chinakhov has appeared in three of the five preseason games and has 1-2-3 in those games. He's been noticeable in a good way. That's what makes him on the fourth line and a potential healthy scratch notable.

Here's what Evason said on Monday when asked about Chinakhov being "demoted."

"We've got one extra forward so we have to put four on a line obviously. We can't build another line." Evason said. "So we're still evaluating, talking. I don't know, did he play three games? He scored. He's competed. He's worked. He's done all the right things. We're going to have a tough choice. If this is the forward group that we go into the season with, we're going to have a difficult, which would be good because we think all 13 that are here right now can play."

When asked how long Chinakhov would be happy given the request, Evason referred the media to talk to the player.

"You'll have to ask him. I don't know. Like I said, he's done all the right things to deserve to be here. The same as the other (forwards.) We're going to have to make a decision when it comes to that time."

The Blue Jackets' top nine skated like this on Monday.

- Dmitri Voronkov – Sean Monahan – Kirill Marchenko
- Boone Jenner – Adam Fantilli – Kent Johnson
- Cole Sillinger – Charlie Coyle – Mathieu Olivier

This is the decision the Blue Jackets are facing. If Chinakhov goes into the top-nine, who among this group comes out?

If time goes on and Chinakhov remains at the bottom of the lineup, the trade request murmurs will start to pick up again. Stay tuned on this one.

Camp Calm?

The Blue Jackets needed a calm training camp. Given what has happened to them over the last few seasons with being in the news for not the best reasons, a drama-free camp would be welcomed at all levels of the organization.

Outside of the Chinakhov trade request, which hasn't been a complete distraction, the Blue Jackets have enjoyed a calm camp.

Why? A little bit of stability. Waddell and Evason were back. Players knew what to expect going into the offseason and then knew what to expect when they returned to camp.

On top of those things, most roster spots were settled before camp even began. Zach Werenski said it best in a simple way.

"It just feels like camp," Werenski said. "I haven't really thought too much about it. I kind of know what to expect with Dean this year and the coaches. Everyone kind of knows what their team is going to be in a sense. Maybe one spot here or there (up for grabs.) I feel like we knew and it's nice to get down to our group now. It's just fun to be back around the guys."

Cole Sillinger echoed the thoughts about camp being calmer.

"The business as usual. I think that it kind of feels like that," Sillinger said. "We know coming in here that basically if you look at guys on paper, it's who our roster was plus or minus a couple of guys. But a lot of familiar faces within this locker room right (throughout) the whole entire staff. I love the chemistry in the locker room and just really excited to be back and happy for the year."

The players have been able to come in and focus on their task without a lot of outside noise. That could prove huge for a team like the Blue Jackets. They feel ready to take the next step. They haven't had to worry about being on the wrong side of news that could serve as a distraction.

Camp calm might not seem like much of a story. But given how camps of the recent past have gone, it's a big deal.

Side Dishes

- The Blue Jackets cut their roster down to 25 on Sunday. The only true bubble guy that remains is Daemon Hunt. All of the bubble forwards were either sent to Cleveland or placed on waivers for assignment to Cleveland.
- Here's Evason on Hunt: "I've seen him. He was in Minnesota with us as well. He's a big, strong guy that has a skill set that moves the puck very well. (He) does a lot of really good things, plays the game firm all over the place. So for the guys to look at him through camp has been great. He's earned the right to still be here and he has a chance to stay with our hockey club."
- Now here's Evason on Luca Del Bel Belluz, a player many thought deserved to stay: "We know Bel can play in the National Hockey League. So does he have a place in our organization? Absolutely. I'm not saying he's the first call-up guy. We've got lots of call-up guys up front. He's disappointed obviously to not be here still. But he's done all the right things. He's got bigger, stronger in the summer. Ans his awareness. He's a very intelligent player at both ends of the ice as well. He's got a bright future."

- Elvis Merzlikins didn't skate on Monday. Evason said it was just maintenance more than anything. The he said it was "nothing long-term." He didn't elaborate further.
- Denton Mateychuk has been skating with the Blue Jackets the last few days. Evason confirmed he will make his preseason debut Tuesday against the Washington Capitals.
- Sillinger admitted the game in Pittsburgh Saturday night was one of the loudest crowds he's ever been a part of. "It was crazy. I've never played in a playoff NHL game. And that was honestly probably one of the loudest games I can remember in my career. Just every time (Marc-Andre Fleury) made a save and then chanting one more year, certainly didn't feel like a preseason game and it was just very fun to be a part of."

The Hockey Writers / Columbus Blue Jackets' Milestones to Watch in 2025-26 Season

By William Espy – September 30, 2025

As the 2025-26 season nears its official start, the Columbus Blue Jackets are going to have quite a bit to look forward to this coming season. The goal on the ice is clear: they want to improve on last season and make a run for the playoffs. During that long 82-game journey, there will be quite a few player milestones along the way.

Games Played Milestones

There are multiple players who are going to hit substantial games played milestones over the course of the season. First off, Christian Jaros and Denton Mateychuk are both closing in on the 100 games played mark. Jaros needs just six more games at the NHL level to hit the milestone, while Mateychuk needs 55, which is certainly doable if he stays healthy. Kent Johnson is just two games away from the 200-game mark, and Yegor Chinakhov is 25 away from the same milestone.

On the blue line, three veteran players are aiming for substantial milestones in this category. Zach Werenski is 33 games away from his 600th career appearance, while the player drafted one spot ahead of him in 2015, Ivan Provorov, is four games away from 700. Damon Severson is currently just 16 away from the 800 mark as well.

The most notable games-played milestone, however, will be for a newcomer to Columbus. Charlie Coyle is just 50 games away from hitting the massively impressive 1,000 career games played milestone.

Total Points Milestones

There are currently six players on the Blue Jackets who are on the verge of recording their 100th career point. Dante Fabbro is two points away from the milestone, and Zach Aston-Reese needs three points to achieve it. The other four are a bit further away, as Isac Lundestrom is 16 points away from the mark. Dmitri Voronkov and Adam Fantilli both need 19. Last but not least, Chinakhov is currently 29 points away from the milestone, meaning he'd have to match his career-high in points to achieve it during the 2025-26 season.

The aforementioned Provorov is 18 points away from 300 for his career. Meanwhile, Werenski is sitting 16 points away from 400 points. Team captain Boone Jenner is closing in on the same milestone as Werenski, but needs a single point more than his teammate to achieve that goal. Coyle is currently sitting at 485 career points, needing just 15 more to reach 500. Lastly, Sean Monahan is closing in on 600 career points, needing just five more to reach the milestone.

Other Statistics

In terms of playmaking, there are quite a few players on the verge of hitting assist milestones this coming season. Damon Severson is currently sitting seven assists away from 250. Meanwhile, both Werenski and Coyle are closing in on the 300 mark, with Werenski needing 29 more assists, and Coyle requiring just four more helpers.

Miles Wood is entering the season in a very unique position, as he needs nine goals and nine assists to reach 100 of each statistic. If he's able to achieve it at that exact pace, he'll reach 200 points with an even split between goals and assists.

The closest to any milestone entering the season is undoubtedly Jenner. Heading into the 2025-26 season, he is currently sitting at 199 career NHL goals, needing just one more to eclipse 200.

Kirill Marchenko has a bit of a gap to overcome in order to reach 100 goals; however, it's certainly within reach. He currently needs 25 more to reach that milestone, which is less than the 31 he recorded in 2024-25, but more than he's scored in any other season in the NHL.

Lastly, Gudbranson is on the verge of hitting 900 career penalty minutes, needing just 55 more to achieve that milestone.

For the majority of players suiting up for the Blue Jackets this season, there's a legitimate milestone within reach. As a result, there will certainly be small things to celebrate over the coming months.

The Athletic / Predicting the 2025-26 NHL season, from Stanley Cup contenders to bottom-feeders

By Sean McIndoe - October 1, 2025

We're less than one week from meaningful hockey, and yes, you've seen a million previews. But what if I told you this one was going to be accurate?

It won't be, for the record. Probably not even close. But what if I *told* you that? Let's pretend that I just did.

It's time for the annual four-division gimmick, one that's so old it stretches back to a time when the NHL having four divisions was considered news. The rules have stayed consistent ever since. I get four divisions: the bottom-feeders, the middle-of-the-pack, the legitimate Stanley Cup contenders and then the teams I just have no idea about. And because I enjoy making my own life difficult, that eight-teams-per-division rule is mandatory.

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Sounds simple enough. And in theory, it is ... as long as we pretend that an NHL season is ever predictable. Let's start from the bottom and work our way up.

The bottom-feeder division

Last season, one of the eight bottom-feeders made the playoffs. Also, another one of them had five more points than the playoff team but missed out on the postseason, because the NHL makes sense.

San Jose Sharks

Last season: 20-50-12, -102 goals differential, finished dead last

Their offseason in six words: Lots of churn, another top prospect.

Why they're here: Dom's model says they improved more than any other team in the offseason. That's good news; the not-so-good is that they've got a mile to go to be competitive. You can see the long-term vision, but right now the emphasis is still on the "long."

Chicago Blackhawks

Last season: 25-46-11, -68 goals differential, missed playoffs

Their offseason in six words: Jeff Blashill is new, roster isn't.

Why they're here: Because it's clearly where they want to be, at least for one more year. Kyle Davidson's rebuild hasn't been subtle and we're still waiting to find out if it's ultimately effective. It's doubtful that we'll get that answer this year, as the Hawks seem content to punt the last season of Connor Bedard's rookie deal on yet another lottery season.

Seattle Kraken

Last season: 35-41-6, -17 goals differential, missed playoffs

Their offseason in six words: New coach. New GM. New era?

Why they're here: They're on their third coach in the last three years, and Ron Francis is out as GM (but still involved). Lane Lambert and Jason Botterill both had tough first NHL stints, and both probably need

this to go well if it's not going to be their last shot. They might find that success in Seattle, but I don't see a path to it this season.

Nashville Predators

Last season: 30-44-8, -62 goals differential, missed playoffs

Their offseason in six words: No "offseason champions" banner this time.

Why they're here: I'll admit I didn't see last year's disaster coming, so maybe there's rebound potential here that I'm missing, too. But the gap they have to make up is large, and Barry Trotz didn't do a ton to start bridging it. Andrew Brunette sure feels like a guy who'll either be a Jack Adams finalist or looking for work by the holidays.

Buffalo Sabres

Last season: 36-39-7, -22 goals differential, missed the playoffs for an NHL-record 14th consecutive season

Their offseason in six words: Traded Peterka, didn't do much else.

Why they're here: Because they're the Sabres. Look, if you're a Buffalo fan and you're looking for optimism, I'll direct you to last week's post, in which Dom made the case for several Sabres having a shot at major awards. I'd love to see it happen. But even my inner contrarian has given up on expecting the Sabres to finally look like a real team. Instead, I'll believe it when I see it. And at this point, maybe not even then.

Pittsburgh Penguins

Last season: 34-36-12, -45 goals differential, missed playoffs

Their offseason in six words: All Crosby rumors, all the time.

Why they're here: Because they're a classic "window slamming shut" team, but they can't truly rebuild because they're in the final days of the Sidney Crosby era. Up until a few months ago, that meant they were doomed to stay the course, which would mean hoping against hope that everything would go just right and they could limp into the playoffs. But now, it seems like a Crosby trade could at least be a realistic possibility, even if it still feels unlikely. And if it happened, the Penguins could move on to openly chasing lottery odds. Either way, the Penguins will be bad – either intentionally or otherwise.

Philadelphia Flyers

Last season: 33-39-10, -51 goals differential, missed playoffs

Their offseason in six words: Fixed the goaltending with Dan Vladar.

Why they're here: I feel like that offseason sentence pretty much sums it up. Look, the Flyers are starting a youth movement, and rolling the dice on Trevor Zegras makes perfect sense in that context. They were bad but not awful last season, and we've seen the new coach bounce work elsewhere. But this team will go as far as their goaltending can carry them, and even with some regression away from "historically awful," it's still hard to see Vladar, Samuel Ersson and friends being enough to keep them in the playoff race for long.

New York Islanders

Last season: 35-35-12, -25 goals differential, missed playoffs

Their offseason in six words: Lou is gone. Stubble for everyone!

Why they're here: Mathieu Darche hasn't promised a full-scale rebuild and maybe he doesn't need one. The Islanders are the only fake .500 team in this section, which means they're at least starting off closer to the playoffs than anyone else. But I'm betting they're not quite good enough, and if so I'm waiting on Darche to get aggressive on setting the table for the future.

The middle-of-the-pack division

This is the least interesting division of this exercise, and you should feel free to skip it. Then again, if you'd done that last year, you'd have missed the eventual Presidents' Trophy winners.

Calgary Flames

Last season: 41-27-14, -16 goals differential, missed playoffs on a tiebreaker (despite having five more points than two Eastern teams that made it)

Their offseason in six words: We're fine, thanks, no changes here.

Why they're here: Because it's where they seem to want to be. Dustin Wolf is a stud and could win multiple Vezinas over the next decade, but beyond that I'm not sure I see the plan in Calgary. The rest of the roster is OK. The prospect pipeline is OK. They're not rebuilding, but also not going for it. For now, at least, the Flames seem perfectly content to hang around the playoff mix, hoping they can sneak in without ever really scaring anyone once they're there.

Ottawa Senators

Last season: 45-30-7, +10 goals differential, lost in first round

Their offseason in six words: Lars Eller? Sure, fine, why not.

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Why they're here: Because it's pretty clear that the Senators are on the path to better things, but we're still not sure just how high the ceiling is going to be. For now, a return to the playoffs feels like it should be the floor, and cracking the Atlantic's big three is certainly in play.

Minnesota Wild

Last season: 45-30-7, -11 goals differential, lost in first round

Their offseason in six words: Kaprizov has signed! Wait, how much?

Why they're here: I could make a joke about how "They're the Wild" here, which would be tired and cliched and hackneyed and also kind of true. The reality is, after a 97-point season, they're a lot closer to the next division than the last one. I'm just not quite sold yet, especially in the Central, even though they got rid of the Kirill Kaprizov distraction just in time.

Utah Mammoth

Last season: 38-31-13, -7 goals differential, missed playoffs

Their offseason in six words: We have a name! (And Peterka.)

Why they're here: The Mammoth landed one of the biggest prizes of the trade market in JJ Peterka, which should be enough to at least nudge them into the playoff mix. It's hard to see a path to much more than that, though, especially in a top-heavy Central. Our previews have them as the league's 17th best team, and you can't get much more middle-of-the-pack than that.

Detroit Red Wings

Last season: 39-35-8, -24 goals differential, missed playoffs

Their offseason in six words: The Yzerplan now includes John Gibson.

Why they're here: It's been slow and steady progress in Detroit, and you can choose which of those two words you think applies the best. With Gibson in place, a full season from Todd McLellan and continued development from the youth, this team should be better than last season's edition. Is that enough to get them into the playoffs? I'm not sure it is, but it should definitely keep them in the middle.

St. Louis Blues

Last season: 44-30-8, +19 goals differential, lost in first round in the most agonizing way possible

Their offseason in six words: Trying to forget how it ended.

Why they're here: When a 90ish-point team has a mostly quiet summer, the easy thing to do is pencil them in for roughly the same outcome. The easy way isn't always the smart way, but I think it probably is here. The X-factor could be Jim Montgomery, who gets his first full season to mold this team. He's one of the best, but I don't think he's good enough to get this roster into legitimate contention.

Toronto Maple Leafs

Last season: 52-26-4, +38 goals differential, lost in second round

Their offseason in six words: Core Four era ends. Bye, Mitch.

Why they're here: With 108 points, the Leafs had the best 2024-25 record of any team in this section. But it's not 2024-25 anymore, and this feels like a transition year in Toronto. It's certainly going to be an interesting test of the whole "addition by subtraction" concept, and it's possible it all leads to something that feels like an improvement by playoff time ... which, of course, is all that will matter in Toronto.

Montreal Canadiens

Last season: 40-31-11, -18 goals differential, lost in first round

Their offseason in six words: Made some big "win-now" deals.

Why they're here: After shocking the league with last season's playoff appearance, the Canadiens have shifted into the next phase of the rebuild. Adding Noah Dobson and Zack Bolduc cost them picks and prospects, but that's the price you pay to make sure you don't get stuck spinning your wheels in the mushy middle. Between the reinforcements and the ascendance of Ivan Demidov, the Habs should be nicely set up to prove that last season was no fluke. They're not true contenders yet, but they're on the way.

The Cup contenders division

For a league that loves to brag about its parity, the NHL hasn't seen much change at the top in recent years. Case in point: Seven of these eight teams were in this same division last year, and six made the cut the year before that.

Florida Panthers

Last season: 47-31-4, +23 goals differential, won Stanley Cup

Their offseason in six words: Everyone re-signed, but Barkov is hurt.

Why they're here: Because I'm not going to get cute and start doubting the two-time champs, even with Aleksander Barkov likely out for the regular season and Matthew Tkachuk missing significant time. If you think those injuries put the Panthers in danger of missing the playoffs, fine. But if they make it, even as a

wild card, there won't be a team in the league that wants any part of them once the games actually matter.

Colorado Avalanche

Last season: 49-29-4, +42 goals differential, lost in first round

Their offseason in six words: Run it back? Run it back.

Why they're here: Because nobody should overreact to last season's early exit. Yes, they'll have to beat the Stars to get where they want to be, and ideally they wouldn't have to do it in the first round. This is still a stacked team, and one that probably won't have to spend the first month of the season figuring out its goaltending this time. (Plus they'll have Sidney Crosby after the deadline, so...)

Dallas Stars

Last season: 50-26-6, +53 goals differential, lost in conference final

Their offseason in six words: Round three? Not good enough, coach.

Why they're here: They're arguably the most talented roster in the entire league. No, they haven't been able to get over the conference-final hump, and Glen Gulutzan will be under plenty of pressure to change that. But if we're going to have eight teams in this division, finding a spot for the team that always makes the final four isn't all that tough.

Vegas Golden Knights

Last season: 50-22-10, +60 goals differential, lost in round two

Their offseason in six words: Knights get best player available, yawn.

Why they're here: Because they're a 110-point team that just added Mitch Marner, playing in what should be a weak division with only one major threat. Granted, that threat knocked them out last season in a surprisingly short series, and losing Alex Pietrangelo will hurt. But the Knights don't seem to have any major weaknesses, and if any develop they'll be aggressive in addressing them, as always.

Tampa Bay Lightning

Last season: 47-27-8, +76 goals differential, lost in first round

Their offseason in six words: No cap space equals no blockbusters.

Why they're here: Remember those few days at the start of last season's playoffs when the Lightning had home ice and the best goals differential in the conference and everyone was picking them to beat the Panthers, then they got wrecked in five and we all agreed to never speak of it again? That was weird. But it wasn't all that outlandish, because this is still a very good team that's firmly in "win now, forget the future" mode. Getting past the Panthers will be tough, especially if they're healthy by the spring, but that applies to every team in this section.

Carolina Hurricanes

Last season: 47-30-5, +36 goals differential, lost in conference final

Their offseason in six words: They landed Nikolaj Ehlers, as expected.

Why they're here: Ehlers always seemed like too good a fit, and the Hurricanes had the cap space to go get him. Now we see if he's the missing piece that can boost the playoff scoring. We'll find out, because it's pretty much impossible to imagine this team missing the playoffs in the Metro.

New Jersey Devils

Last season: 42-33-7, +20 goals differential, lost in first round

Their offseason in six words: Everybody please just get healthy again.

Why they're here: At first glance, having a 91-point team that lost in the first round in the contenders division might seem like a stretch. And yeah, it probably is. But two things are behind this pick. First, I need eight teams. And second, I'm willing to mostly write off their underwhelming 2024-25 season as the product of an especially bad run of injury luck. The division should be tougher, but home ice in Round 1 feels like a reasonable goal.

Edmonton Oilers

Last season: 48-29-5, +24 goals differential, lost in Stanley Cup Final

Their offseason in six words: Did we forget to re-sign somebody?

Why they're here: Some of you might have been expecting to see them in the last group. I definitely thought about it. There's certainly an ominous feeling around the Oilers these days, with questions about the goaltending plus Connor McDavid's extension hanging over everything, much to Oilers fans' chagrin. You can come up with plenty of ways it goes south. I'm just not sure it can go south far enough to keep the Oilers out of at least having a solid chance at emerging from the Pacific.

The your-guess-is-as-good-as-mine division

I'm kind of dumb, and I don't know much. But I do know what I don't know, and these are the teams I'm convinced I know the least.

Winnipeg Jets

Last season: 56-22-4, +85 goals differential, first place overall, lost in second round

Their offseason in six words: Ehlers gone, but Toews comes home.

Why they're here: We spent all of last year refusing to believe the Jets were legitimate Presidents' Trophy contenders, right up until they actually won it. Well, that's not completely true — it feels like some of us still don't believe that happened, despite what the standings tell us. And if you're in that group, you're expecting a meaningful step back this season, maybe one that involves Connor Hellebuyck not being the best goalie in the world like he usually is. I'm honestly not sure which group I'm in; part of me wants to believe, part of me thinks the most likely outcome here is third place in the Central, followed by another early playoff exit. Luckily, I get to wimp out on eight teams, and I'm playing one of those cards here.

Columbus Blue Jackets

Last season: 40-33-9, even goals differential, missed playoffs

Their offseason in six words: The Columbus Tax is real, Ivan.

Why they're here: Because I don't have the heart to put them back in the bottom-dwellers division, even as I'm not sure they can hang in the middle. I'd love to eat crow here — not many have pumped the Blue Jackets' tires as much as I have [over the years](#) — and they certainly exceeded expectations last season. Let's just say I'm not optimistic, but I'd love to be wrong.

Boston Bruins

Last season: 33-39-10, -49 goals differential, missed playoffs

Their offseason in six words: Surely Tanner Jeannot will fix this.

Why they're here: I had the Bruins in this same confusing group a year ago, but I'll happily admit I never saw their disastrous season coming. At the absolute worst, you could have maybe talked me into a playoff miss. But tied for dead last in the conference? It wouldn't have made sense. I'm still not sure it does. The Bruins need a rebuild, and they started that process at the deadline, so a few years of losing feel inevitable. But if Jeremy Swayman rebounds, is it really that hard to imagine this team being around the postseason hunt reasonably deep into the season?

Washington Capitals

Last season: 51-22-9, +57 goals differential, lost in second round

Their offseason in six words: Pretty quiet. Yep. Pretty, pretty quiet.

Why they're here: Because I've been wrong about them for two years running, so why even pretend I can figure this team out? Caps fans will say it's simple: They're consistently better than I give them credit for, and I should stop doubting and get on board. They were the conference's top seed last season, after all. What are they going to do, go from that to missing the playoffs? I kind of think they might, actually. And given my track record, Washington fans should be thrilled to hear it.

New York Rangers

Last season: 39-36-7, even goals differential, missed playoffs

Their offseason in six words: Fix this mess please, Mike Sullivan.

Why they're here: It feels like there's no way they can be as bad as last year. Then again, they *were* that bad last season, and on paper the roster got worse over the summer. Sullivan will certainly help, even though I don't think Peter Laviolette was the problem. If I had to divide up the odds, I'd say there's about a 70 percent chance the Rangers are back in the playoff mix, and a 30 percent chance they're bad enough that Chris Drury launches a job-saving rebuild attempt that writes off the season.

Los Angeles Kings

Last season: 48-25-9, +46 goals differential, lost to the Oilers in first round like always

Their offseason in six words: We'd rather not talk about it.

Why they're here: They finished sixth overall last year, with a better record and goals differential than both Cup finalists. Then they lost to the Oilers, again, and it cost Rob Blake his job. Nobody liked Ken Holland's offseason work, and it's led to an emerging consensus that the Kings may not even be a playoff team. I can see that playing out, especially if Bad Darcy Kuemper shows up. But I do think we're all forgetting how good they've been over the last few years with essentially this same core.

Vancouver Canucks

Last season: 38-30-14, -18 goals differential, missed playoffs

Their offseason in six words: Seriously, stop tampering with Quinn Hughes.

Why they're here: Because I'm still not sure what to make of last year. Was it just one of those seasons that you write off, because the star goalie was hurt and the stud blueliner missed time, too, and the two best forwards hated each other so much that you had to trade one? It might be, yeah. And if so, do you have to revert your expectations to something closer to 2023-24, when this was a 109-point team? Eh, that seems a bit much for me. I can see the pieces in place, and the coaching change might turn out to

be the right move. But until I'm convinced Elias Pettersson isn't \$11.6 million worth of broken, I'm still a skeptic.

Anaheim Ducks

Last season: 35-37-10, -44 goals differential, missed playoffs

Their offseason in six words: Zegras and Gibson traded, Quenneville back.

Why they're here: Because I kind of sort of think they're making the playoffs this season. It's a pretty wobbly belief, and I retain the right to withdraw it if they start slow. But that early schedule, with just one playoff team in their first seven, gives them a nice chance at some momentum. The path to third place in the Pacific seems reasonably open, and we typically see one young team make a leap each year. This might be the Ducks' time.

The Hockey Writers / Raz's 2025-26 Standings Predictions: Metropolitan Division

By Raz Devraj – September 30, 2025

Going back to the Eastern Conference for the last installment of my standings predictions series for the 2025-26 NHL season, we have the Metropolitan Division. When you take a look at the Metro this season, the first word that comes to mind is mid. The contrast throughout this division is really like no other. The top of the division is really good, while the bottom is very bad. Aside from a couple of teams in the middle that could be fighting for a wild card spot toward the tail end of the season, this division might be the easiest to predict in terms of who makes the playoffs and who doesn't.

Columbus Blue Jackets

The Columbus Blue Jackets took a big step last season, only missing the playoffs by two points, and that was largely due to their ability to score goals and mask a lot of their defensive deficiencies. Not much has changed with their roster, although they did add some center depth with Charlie Coyle. The Blue Jackets are another team that has a lot of young talent, and it's players like Adam Fantilli, Kent Johnson, Dmitri Voronkov, and Kirill Marchenko, who have the ability to put this team in a better position than expected.

The Blue Jackets could very well be in the mix for a wild card spot, but a couple of things need to happen. Their offense needs to continue to produce at a similar rate from last season, and they are going to need a lot more from their goaltenders, especially Elvis Merzlikins, who could very well lose his starting job to Jet Greaves.

Washington Capitals

Not many expected the Washington Capitals to be as good as they were last season, winning the Metro Division with 111 points. A lot of their success was due to players having better seasons and producing more than expected. Logan Thompson was phenomenal in between the pipes, giving the Capitals their best goaltending, really, since Braden Holtby. Dylan Strome decided to tally a career high 82 points, and of course, Alex Ovechkin did what he does best with 44 goals. Not much has changed with the Capitals this offseason, who are essentially running it back with the same roster, minus Andrew Mangiapane and Lars Eller. Unless they are able to garner the same amount of production as they got last season, they are bound to show some regression. That being said, they still should be in the playoff conversation.

New Jersey Devils

Right now, the biggest concern for the New Jersey Devils is the fact that defenseman Luke Hughes is still not signed. With merely days away from opening night, the Devils and Hughes have still not come to an agreement, which raises questions about how long each side is willing to hold out. Aside from that, the Devils are looking good heading into the 2025-26 season and should be competing for a top-three spot in the Metro.

Their offseason wasn't big by any means, but a couple of solid additions in Evgenii Dadonov and Connor Brown should improve their bottom six and secondary scoring. Consistency might be the Devils' biggest flaw, and part of that has to do with injuries. Both Timo Meier and Jack Hughes are crucial pieces of the Devils' offense and have a history of long-term injuries. In a relatively weak-to-mid Metro Division, they shouldn't have any issues securing a playoff spot, barring any unforeseen injuries.

Philadelphia Flyers

Hockey in Pennsylvania has been rough as of late, and that doesn't look like it's changing anytime soon. The Philadelphia Flyers are likely heading into another season where they will most likely not be anywhere near the playoff conversation, and they aren't expected to be, as they continue to navigate their rebuild. They are trending in the right direction, though, and should take that next step after a couple more seasons, and a lot of that has to do with the young, promising core they are trying to develop. The Flyers had a decently active offseason, landing the highlight-reel-filled forward Trevor Zegras. They also signed Christian Dvorak, who will give them some much-needed center depth, especially if Zegras moves to the wing again for any reason.

The Flyers have had some major goaltending issues, and while adding Dan Vladar should improve that area, it's most likely not going to be by a significant margin. This season is nothing but development for the Flyers, and I'm sure they will be a fun group to watch, especially with the potential Matvei Michkov and Zegras magic.

Carolina Hurricanes

In terms of having the busiest and most impactful offseason, the Carolina Hurricanes are near the top of the list. After continuing to fail at keeping game-changing talent around (i.e., Jake Guentzel and Mikko Rantanen), the Hurricanes made one of the splashes of the offseason, landing Nikolaj Ehlers. Not only that, but they also acquired K'Andre Miller from the New York Rangers, which adds to an already stellar defensive group. The Hurricanes are by far the best team in the Metro and should be the clear favorites to win the division. They are built to make the playoffs and show no signs of struggling during the regular season. It's taking that next step in the playoffs that has been the big question for the Hurricanes over the last few seasons, but in terms of getting there, they have that formula down pat.

The only area that could slightly hinder the Hurricanes' chances of winning the division is their goaltending and the possible regression of an injury-prone, 35-year-old Frederik Andersen. It's why they are rumored to be in on goaltender Carter Hart, because I don't think anyone is quite sold on Pyotr Kochetkov being the starter. Aside from goaltending, they are one of the most solid teams up and down the roster, and that will translate to the standings.

New York Islanders

The New York Islanders got better this offseason, but not for the 2025-26 season. They had a phenomenal draft, which saw them with three first-round picks, which included selecting Matthew Schaefer with the first overall pick, and following up on that with both Victor Eklund and Kashawn Aitchison. While the future is starting to look pretty good for the Islanders, the same can't really be said about the present. The contrast throughout the roster is very interesting. Their forward group is super light and has nowhere near enough talent to fight for a playoff spot. Outside of Mat Barzal and Bo Horvat, this group looks rough.

That being said, their defensive group and goaltending with Ilya Sorokin is what is going to keep the Islanders mediocre. They don't look like a team that's going to be punishing offensively, but they're also going to be a tough team to score on. If Sorokin doesn't have the season that's expected of him, the Islanders could quickly fall near the bottom of the standings.

Pittsburgh Penguins

Lost, confused, identity crisis, no man's land, are just a few ways you could describe the current state of the Pittsburgh Penguins, who can't seem to pick a direction. This team is in no position to compete for a playoff spot, and they need to start accepting that in order to start improving for the future. Trading their veteran talent for picks and "tanking" for Gavin McKenna should be priority number one for the

Penguins. While it sucks to not see Sidney Crosby competing where it matters most, they need to start planning for what their franchise looks like post-Crosby.

Arturs Silovs was a nice offseason addition and could step into a bigger role right away, depending on which version of Tristan Jarry decides to show up. Anthony Mantha was another solid add on paper, but who knows how he's going to look after missing pretty much all of last season with a torn ACL. Anything can happen, but it's most likely going to be a pretty brutal season in Pittsburgh.

New York Rangers

What happened to the New York Rangers last season? With all that talent and skill, they had to be the most disappointing team of the 2024-25 season. A bounce-back year is likely in the cards, and for a few reasons. Change is the biggest one, both on the ice and on the bench. J.T. Miller was named captain, and you can bet his competitiveness is going to be felt throughout that entire roster. They also hired Mike Sullivan as their new head coach, who should be able to provide some much-needed direction and stability that this group just didn't seem to have last season. Landing Vladislav Gavrikov was huge and will undoubtedly be a defensive upgrade from K'Andre Miller.

The Rangers might have the most talented roster in the Metro on paper, but they need to put it all together. With a group like this, plus a goaltender like Igor Shesterkin, there are no excuses for the Rangers, who should finish third or higher in the Metro.

Final Rank

1. Carolina Hurricanes – X
2. New York Rangers – X
3. New Jersey Devils – X
4. Washington Capitals – X
5. Columbus Blue Jackets
6. New York Islanders
7. Philadelphia Flyers
8. Pittsburgh Penguins

X = clinched playoff spot

The top is very strong in the Metro, and the bottom is very weak. It's most likely going to be teams like the Capitals and Blue Jackets who make the wild card race in the Eastern Conference interesting, even with a stacked Atlantic Division.