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## The Athletic / Bowness bump: Blue Jackets lock down drama-free win behind 'calm' Merzlikins

**By Aaron Portzline – January 16, 2026**

COLUMBUS, Ohio — A mid-season coaching change can provide individual players and an entire club with a clean slate and a new attitude. It's commonly called a "coach bump," but the Columbus Blue Jackets might call it a "Bowness bump."

On Thursday, the Blue Jackets never trailed in a 4-1 win over the Vancouver Canucks before 14,918 in Nationwide Arena. Two immediate benefits from the hiring of veteran coach Rick Bowness were on display.

First, the Blue Jackets played the third period like they played the first and second. It wasn't always perfect, and there's plenty of room for improvement. But they didn't melt into a puddle of their own nerves. In fact, they turned a 3-1 lead into the 4-1 final margin on Kent Johnson's goal midway through the third period, and the rest of the period was played with a sense of authority and poise. There was no drama.

Bowness knows about the Blue Jackets' third-period collapses this season — let's be honest, that's why he's here — but he wasn't willing to give that nasty habit any headspace after Thursday's game, his second straight win with his new club.

"I don't even worry about it," Bowness said. "It was before I got here. I'm just not worried about it. I just addressed (in the second intermission) how I want us to play. I don't worry about that. That's in the past. I know how I want us to play, so that's the bottom line. And we're building on that."

Bowness gave Blue Jackets starting goaltender Jet Greaves the nod in his coaching debut on Tuesday, but he turned to Elvis Merzlikins on Thursday. Yes, the goaltenders get a shot at defining new roles, too.

Merzlikins may have had his best start of the season. He made 30 saves, earned his first win since Dec. 4 and allowed fewer than three goals in a game for only the second time this season, the first coming on Oct. 21.

Ready for this? Bowness used the word "calm" to describe Merzlikins' performance, and if you've watched him play through the years — his emotional outbursts, his frantic play, etc. — that's just not a word that's been used to describe him.

But it applied.

"He was mad at the goal that went in (in the second period), but he made some big saves," Bowness said. "Again, one of those turnovers we gave up in the first period ... he saved our butt, right? He did. I thought he was very calm. I thought he was outstanding tonight."

On the Blue Jackets' bench after the game, Merzlikins, the game's first star, joined FanDuel Ohio analyst Jody Shelley for an interview in front of the crowd.

When Shelley asked Merzlikins what's changed, he had a simple answer: "The coach."

Under Evason, Merzlikins had played his way out of a timeshare with Greaves, and then he settled into a stretch where he barely got any action at all, much like Daniil Tarasov (now a Florida Panther) last season in Columbus.

Bowness has not made public his ideas on a goaltending rotation, but it has to be better than Merzlikins had under Evason. Twice, Merzlikins said he was using his practice time to get ready for the Olympics next month, where he'll represent Latvia.

"I'm really excited," Merzlikins said. "I mean, nothing against (Evason). His decisions were his decisions. I'm mature enough, but I'm obviously happy that we have a new coach, because it's a new energy right now."

"We are just trying to learn. And it's not easy to jump in on a game day and change, you know? I'm glad the guys were smart enough to understand what the new coach wants from us, and now we are just gonna get used to it to the new system and just keep working on it."

Charlie Coyle, Kirill Marchenko, Zach Werenski and Kent Johnson scored for the Blue Jackets, who have won three straight games overall and two straight since Bowness took over behind the bench.

Coyle now has four goals in his last three games, charging hard at two major milestones. He's played 997 games — at this pace, he'll play No. 1,000 next Thursday against the Dallas Stars — and has 199 goals. On Thursday, he led all skaters and tied a career high with eight shots on goal.

Charlie Coyle and Adam Fantilli celebrate a Blue Jackets goal with a Canucks player skating behind them.

Johnson, who had a goal and an assist for just his third multi-point game this season, continued to excel under Bowness. He played 17:36 and has been part of a second line, with center Sean Monahan and left winger Boone Jenner, that has been dormant most of the season.

"Johnson ... I love his hockey," Bowness said. "He's got great hockey IQ. And Monny's been great with him. I really like the way they look. You can put them out there against the lines and they're still creating offense. So, Kent Johnson the last couple of games ... I've been thrilled with how he's played."

Not that the Blue Jackets can take any two points for granted given their standings predicament, but it's worth noting the Canucks, coached by former Blue Jackets captain Adam Foote, are the worst team in the NHL this season. The Blue Jackets also lost 4-3 in Vancouver on Nov. 8, when the Canucks scored with 5:15 remaining to take the lead for good.

The Blue Jackets did well on Thursday to not energize Vancouver with any amount of hope in the third period. They allowed only eight shots on goal in the third, and only two of them were from less than 15 feet from the net.

"You've got to play the right way," Bowness said. "If you're down or you're up, just play the right way. You know who told me that? Al Arbour: 'Don't worry about the score, play the game the right way.' I've always remembered that, and that's right. You just keep pushing. This is the league. You take your foot off the gas, you're in trouble. I don't care who you play. There are too many talented players on every team."

## The Athletic / Young Blue Jackets praise Rick Bowness' communication style: 'Really grabbed the room today'

By Aaron Portzline - January 15, 2026

COLUMBUS, Ohio — The numbers are staggering, expressing an almost worst-case scenario when it comes to nurturing and developing young talent in the NHL.

Columbus Blue Jackets winger Kent Johnson, who just turned 23, and center/winger Cole Sillinger, 22, have already had five NHL coaches, and they haven't yet completed their fifth season in the league.

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Center Adam Fantilli, 21, is on his fourth coach, and he's barely halfway through his third season with the Jackets.

The young players' latest coach walked through the doors of Nationwide Arena earlier this week, when Rick Bowness was hired to replace Dean Evason, who was fired Monday after barely 1 1/2 seasons on the job.

Bowness, who is 70 years old, may be old enough to be these players' grandfathers, as he joked Wednesday. (True story, he also coached Sillinger's father, Mike, during the 2003-04 season with the Phoenix Coyotes.)

Bowness' reputation as a master communicator could be very important as these young players — the centerpieces of the Blue Jackets' most recent roster overhaul — are entering the peak production seasons of their careers.

"I've been here for (177) games and I've had four coaches, and every coach brings something different," Fantilli said. "Coach (Bowness) brings a different energy, and I love what he's bringing already to our locker room, just really positive vibes.

"He's very vocal on the bench, which I love. You know exactly what he's thinking, what he wants from you. He talks to you. That's something I've always respected from a coach when he tells you what he wants and what he expects. And he's been pretty clear."

Bowness said he plans to have frequent meetings or conversations with all of his players, not just the younger ones, because communication is key.

He's already moved the pre-practice "here's what we're doing today" meeting from the dressing room — "too spread out," he said — to the video room down the hall, which has theater seating so players are side by side and right on top of the film clips.

Asked if he's noticed a difference already, Fantilli smiled.

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"Oh, 100 percent," he said. "That's not something I've had a ton of with head coaches during my time here, so it's exciting."

There was the debacle in 2023, when the Blue Jackets hired coach Mike Babcock, despite numerous complaints from players at two of his previous stops, the Detroit Red Wings and Toronto Maple Leafs. Babcock was hired in July, but never made it to the bench after it was revealed he had searched through players' private cellphone pictures and messages during their offseason meetings. He was fired four days before training camp.

Pascal Vincent was hired on short notice to replace Babcock, but he only lasted one season behind the bench. One of the complaints during his time in Columbus is that Vincent barely communicated directly with players, even rookies.

Evason was hired to replace Vincent and had an excellent first season in Columbus — he finished fifth in Jack Adams Trophy voting — but the Blue Jackets seemed to lose their verve in his second season. That's why Bowness is here, to bring back the passion and confidence to a club that hopes it can make a second-half run up the standings. After Tuesday's 5-3 win over Calgary, the Blue Jackets climbed out of last place in the Eastern Conference for the first time since Dec. 22.

Next up is a home game Thursday against the Vancouver Canucks, who have lost five consecutive games in regulation and have lost eight games in a row overall (0-6-2). The Canucks' last regulation win came Dec. 19.

Of the Blue Jackets' cluster of young talent, Bowness said, "We're gonna spend a lot of time with them, work with them, do a little video with them, talk to them, get to know them. I have to know what makes them tick.

"I need to spend time with them. These things, they do take time. But I'm gonna watch them play, see what they do well, and let's get started."

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If Tuesday's game is an indication, Fantilli and Johnson may be looking at more ice time and more prominent roles.

Johnson played a season-high 20:55 on a line with center Sean Monahan and left winger Boone Jenner, and he had the puck on his stick all game. Though he wasn't credited with any points, it was Johnson's defensive effort that forced a turnover and led to Jenner's go-ahead goal with 1:34 remaining.

In his last 14 games under Evason, Johnson played under 10 minutes per game five times. On the season, he was averaging 13:38 per game, more than a 3:30 drop per game from last season, when he broke out with 24-33-57 in 68 games.

Put another way: Luca Pinelli (13:46) averaged more ice time in his three-game call-up from AHL Cleveland.

"We're all excited," Johnson said. "(Bowness) really grabbed the room today. You guys saw it on the ice."

Fantilli, meanwhile, played 20:17, the most he's played all month. We'll be watching for more subtle changes with Fantilli, as Evason relied heavily on him, moving him to the top line early in the season when Monahan struggled as he was fighting through injuries.

When the Blue Jackets hired veteran coach Ken Hitchcock in the middle of the 2006-07 season, his first move was to put Rick Nash on the penalty kill. Bowness has hinted that a penalty-kill role for Fantilli, who has averaged just 11 seconds per game on the kill, could be in the offing.

For most of the season, Fantilli has been part of either the second or third pair of forwards used during 3-on-3 overtime, although he was out first in each of the last two Blue Jackets' games that went beyond regulation.

Fantilli, who is currently riding a 13-game goal drought, matching the longest of his career, said he's craving heavy minutes and a more prominent role in key situations.

"That's the number (20 minutes) I want to get to all the time," Fantilli said. "I'm conditioned enough to play that amount and in the style Bones has us playing. It's very fast and it cuts down on shift lengths. You go hard, you get off, and he gets us right back out there."

## The Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets make a lead stand up for 3rd straight win

**By Brian Hedger – January 15, 2026**

Yes, it was against the struggling Vancouver Canucks, but the Blue Jackets finally upheld a lead in a third period with confidence to win their third straight game.

Paced by an impressive line featuring captain Boone Jenner, center Sean Monahan and right wing Kent Johnson, the Jackets took care of business with a tidy 4-1 victory in a game they won, handily, in front of 14,918 on Jan. 15 at Nationwide Arena.

"I didn't like the first period at all," Blue Jackets coach Rick Bowness said. "I didn't like our puck management. Five-on-five, we gave up eight (scoring) chances in the first, and then we gave up six the rest of the game, because we started playing the right way."

Charlie Coyle, Zach Werenski, Kirill Marchenko and Kent Johnson scored goals for the Blue Jackets (21-19-7), who got 30 saves from goalie Elvis Merzlikins in his first win since Dec. 4.

Coyle capped a power play for a 1-0 lead late in the first period for his 10th goal of the season, Marchenko and Werenski made it 3-0 with goals in the second, and Johnson scored the Jackets' fourth goal with 9:47 left in the third for the final score.

Brock Boeser scored the lone goal for the Canucks (16-26-5), cutting it to 3-1 on a power play late in the second, but it wasn't to prevent Vancouver from dropping its ninth straight game and falling to 1-9-2 in the Canucks' past 12 games. Vancouver goalie Kevin Lankinen stopped 32 of 36 shots to keep it respectable.

Along with their disjointed first period, the Blue Jackets' penalty killing remains shaky despite Bowness replacing Dean Evason on Jan. 12 in a surprising desperation coaching switch. They went 1-for-2 killing penalties against the Canucks after going 0-for-3 in a 5-3 victory Jan. 13 over the Calgary Flames.

## The Columbus Dispatch / Gudbranson, Severson to play for Columbus Blue Jackets: Skate report

**Brian Hedger – January 15, 2026**

Erik Gudbranson is set to return to the Columbus Blue Jackets lineup after missing 38 games with a hip injury.

Defenseman Damon Severson will also return from a one-game absence due to illness.

New head coach Rick Bowness wants the team to play a "nastier," more physical style of hockey.

Elvis Merzlikins will start in goal against the Vancouver Canucks.

It's been another challenging season for Erik Gudbranson, who's missed much of the past two seasons with injuries.

Last season, a shoulder injury in the first week required surgery that kept him out until March. This season, after being placed on injured reserve Oct. 27 for a hip issue, he's watched the past 38 games while putting in rehab work as the Blue Jackets (20-19-7) dropped to the bottom of the Eastern Conference.

That's about to change Jan. 15 at Nationwide Arena, where Gudbranson will play against the Vancouver Canucks in new head coach Rick Bowness' second game since replacing Dean Evason.

"There was a lot that went into this one," Gudbranson said. "Anytime you're hurt, it always takes work to come back in. This particular time was a little longer than I would've liked it to be, but then it just becomes your job. You shift your focus and place it where it needs to be, where you can see games, and you try to stick with those and find positivity with that. It's not always the easiest thing to do, but we're here now."

The Blue Jackets will also get defenseman Damon Severson (illness) back from a one-game absence in the Jackets' 5-3 victory over the Calgary Flames on Jan. 13 in Bowness' debut. Egor Zamula will be a healthy scratch to make room for Severson, while Dysin Mayo headed back to AHL Cleveland after the Blue Jackets activated Gudbranson from IR.

Elvis Merzlikins gets the goaltending start for Columbus after Jet Greaves earned the win over Calgary. Keifer Sherwood, who's from New Albany, will miss his third straight game for the Canucks (16-25-5).

Bowness has used the word "nastier" often to describe how he'd like to see the Blue Jackets improve, especially on defense, and getting Gudbranson back should help. Standing 6 feet 5, 222 pounds with a chiseled physique and ornery disposition, Gudbranson patrols the ice like an Old West sheriff.

He's issued fight challenges to entire NHL teams before and not gotten a single taker, and he's not even the Jackets' top scrapper. Mathieu Olivier (6-1, 232) handles that role now as a thudding power forward and, arguably, the league's top heavyweight combatant.

"There's the perfect description, the way (Gudbranson) plays," Bowness said. "As coaches, we always talk about the 'grit' and everything else. Well, go watch the Florida Panthers play. They're nasty. And that's why they won Stanley Cups. They play hard, but they play nasty, and if you want to win the

Stanley Cup in this league? You've got to have that edge, and they do, and they've shown me why. We've talked for years about 'grit,' and they've taken it to a new level."

The Blue Jackets have plenty of size, but physical 'grit' doesn't apply to the entire roster. Dmitri Voronkov (6-5, 234), Boone Jenner (6-2, 204), Charlie Coyle (6-3, 221) and Ivan Provorov (6-1, 224) can play the "heavy" style Bowness wants, but others are expected to join the fray.

The first signs showed up against the Flames, and Bowness be looking for more 'nastiness' in the next 11 games leading into the NHL's pause for the Olympics in February.

"I'm going to keep pushing them, and then I'll let you know (what I think) in a couple weeks," he said. "You'll know what your eyes tell you when you watch us play."

## The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Face Unique Challenge of Learning New Coach During Playoff Race

By Mark Scheig – January 15, 2026

Most NHL teams find their groove as the season goes on. Chemistry is developed. Systems are in place. Unless there's a sudden change, most coaching staffs are in order.

The Columbus Blue Jackets just went through what seemed like a sudden change. They became the first team in the NHL in 2025-26 to make a coaching change.

NHL Rumours for Jan. 13: Red Wings Target Andersson, Oilers D Help & Lafreniere Trade Option

The Blue Jackets still have hopes that they can make something out of this season. GM Don Waddell went through a few different options indicating there is still belief. They've made trades. They've signed players. Now they've hired Rick Bowness to replace Dean Evason.

Imagine for a moment if you are a player in that situation. On one hand, it's exciting to know that despite how poor the season has been overall, management still believes in them.

But on the other hand, the Blue Jackets now have to face a reality of striking a fine balance. They need to qualify for the playoffs while learning a new coach and his style on the fly. That's not easy.

The challenge becomes even greater knowing the Blue Jackets have 36 games to do this all in. They have to jump several teams in the standings while consistently winning. They're also going to make important tweaks in the way they play games.

How will the Blue Jackets get the most out of learning a new coach with these constraints in place? We asked that exact question to captain Boone Jenner, Zach Werenski and Erik Gudbranson, who was activated off of injured reserve Thursday and will return to the Blue Jackets' lineup against the Vancouver Canucks.

Here's what they all had to say.

Making Most of the Situation

"I'm sure we'll get to work right away," Jenner said. "We'll talk, watch film, but I think for the most part there will be some changes. We just got to hone in on those details and all be on the same page in the communication part of it. I think from there, guys will understand and we'll just keep building off it."

The other thing the Blue Jackets have to do is move on from the frustration of the early part of the season. While it's a fresh start, they have to avoid the late-game meltdowns that have plagued them throughout the season.

"At the end of the day, we can't do anything about the first (46 games)," Jenner said. "But we have a lot of time and we have a lot of games here to right the ship. We know where we're at but we know we have a lot of belief in this group and a resilient group that we can get out of it."

For Werenski, it's just like what Jenner said. It's going to come down to the details. But Werenski adds another important element into the conversation.

"It's just all business from here on out," Werenski said. "We can't be unsure when we hop over the boards what's going on. We have to, when we get here to the rink and we're here for two, three, four hours, we have to be extremely focused and detailed. We still in a sense control our own destiny. We have (several) home games here to get right back in it. But it's on us now to be as focused as we can be, as dialed in as we can be."

"There's going to be some, I don't want to say tough moments, but moments of learning new systems or whatever he wants and that takes some time. But it's on us to adapt as quickly as we can and play the best that we can. So at the end of the day, it's just on us players."

## The Athletic / NHL trade deadline: Why these 7 teams have big decisions to make

By Harman Dayal - January 16, 2026

The NHL standings are far more compressed compared to most other years.

In the Eastern Conference, the New York Rangers are the only team with a sub .500 points percentage. The Metropolitan Division is especially up for grabs, with the Carolina Hurricanes the only team that has separated itself as a safe bet to make the playoffs. A meager four points is the difference between being in 5th and 12th place in the East. The end result is that every team in the East except for the Rangers is still firmly in the playoff hunt.

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The Western Conference is a bit more stratified. The Vancouver Canucks are already out of the race, with the St. Louis Blues and Calgary Flames not far behind, either. However, the West still has a glut of teams battling in the mushy middle — only four points separate the 6th-place Seattle Kraken and the 11th-place Anaheim Ducks in the conference standings. And that doesn't even include last year's Presidents' Trophy-winning Winnipeg Jets. The Jets are further behind the pack, but with a mini-three-game winning streak and top-of-the-lineup star power, they can't be completely written off yet, either. This uniquely tight standings picture will have a fascinating impact on the trade market in the lead-up to the March 6 deadline. Very few teams are willing to wave the white flag on their season, so there aren't many sellers right now. However, as we get closer to the deadline, several NHL front offices will have to commit to a direction, whether it be buying, selling or standing pat.

Perhaps we'll even see teams take a hybrid approach, buying and selling simultaneously. The Columbus Blue Jackets, for example, paid a second and fourth-round pick to pry Mason Marchment out of Seattle right before the December holiday freeze. Nine days later, they recouped that draft capital by selling young winger Egor Chinakhov to the Pittsburgh Penguins for a second and third-round pick.

With all that in mind, here are some teams that are facing interesting dilemmas ahead of the trade deadline.

### **Columbus Blue Jackets**

Despite sitting in 15th place in the Eastern Conference, the Columbus Blue Jackets aren't ready to give up on their season. Acquiring Marchment was the first sign of that, and the second, more impactful domino fell earlier this week when the club dismissed head coach Dean Evason in favor of Rick Bowness.

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Columbus is seven points behind a playoff spot, which is significant but not insurmountable. The Blue Jackets' internal expectations must be high after a surprisingly promising campaign last year, where they missed the playoffs by just two points. Zach Werenski, on pace to crack 30 goals and nearly 100 points, is having a season for the ages, and the organization probably feels some pressure not to waste it.

GM Don Waddell's challenge will be weighing his team's real but long-shot playoff chances (Dom Luszczyszyn's model gives Columbus a 32 percent chance of making the postseason) against the bounty of assets he could collect for veterans if he decides to sell ahead of the deadline.

The Blue Jackets have a few key pending unrestricted free agents they'll need to make decisions on:

Charlie Coyle, captain Boone Jenner and Marchment. Coyle is having an outstanding season — he leads all Columbus forwards in five-on-five points and has delivered Selke-caliber two-way results (earning 54 percent of expected goals and 60 percent of actual goals) despite handling some of the toughest

matchups of all NHL forwards. He'd be a highly sought-after trade chip if he were made available, especially with how high the demand for quality centers is.

Jenner would also fetch a lucrative return because of his production, versatility (he can play center or wing), and big-bodied, hard-nosed playing style. The Blue Jackets could also recoup most, if not all, of the draft capital they gave up for Marchment if they don't get on a roll and decide to sell.

Of course, Columbus could (and likely will) explore extensions with those three forwards, but can it realistically keep all of them? Alexander Wennberg and Christian Dvorak's recent contract extensions proved that veteran centers are becoming increasingly expensive to retain.

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The notion of acquiring future assets may not sound appealing to a franchise that has missed the playoffs for six consecutive years. However, imagine how valuable those excess draft picks could be this coming summer as trade chips, which the Blue Jackets could use to make more serious upgrades ahead of next season.

It'd be wise to see how the team performs over the next 10-15 games under Bowness before the deadline. If they go on a heater, great, you can justify keeping everyone. If not, the Blue Jackets would be wise to either re-sign or trade their valuable pending UFAs, because missing the playoffs *and* losing them in the offseason for nothing would sting.

#### San Jose Sharks

San Jose, against all odds, is in the hunt for a wild-card spot in the West. There are some red flags to be wary of — the Sharks' goal differential is minus-15, and their five-on-five analytics are poor — but you can't count them out as a playoff contender in this weak West so long as Macklin Celebrini keeps playing at an MVP level.

#### Top League Content

For years, GM Mike Grier has been disciplined about trading veterans for future assets. Will that change now that the club is on the playoff bubble?

The Sharks don't have any headline-worthy rental trade chips on the roster, but five of their defensemen, led by Mario Ferraro and John Klingberg, are pending UFAs. Ferraro is probably worth a second or third-round pick, and Klingberg's trade value is probably in the mid-round pick range. Asset optimizers may argue that the Sharks should sell one (if not both) of Ferraro or Klingberg. Barring a collapse before the deadline, though, San Jose would be justified in keeping Klingberg and Ferraro. Neither one of them is going to fetch a significant trade haul, and for development and good vibes purposes, the Sharks probably want their talented young forwards to have established, NHL-quality defensemen to feed them the puck, plus an opportunity to play meaningful games down the stretch. Trading away Klingberg and Ferraro would leave the club's blue line so depleted that it could hinder their young forwards.

#### Buffalo Sabres

Winners of 14 of their last 16 games, the red-hot Sabres have charged into a playoff spot, though they're hanging on by a razor-thin margin. That makes them an intriguing wild card ahead of the trade deadline, especially with new GM Jarmo Kekäläinen, who's never afraid to make bold moves, now at the helm.

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On the one hand, with the team desperate to end a 14-year playoff drought, management could justify buying. This isn't to say the Sabres should chase expensive rentals, but you can make a case for them to shop for win-now additions with contract term beyond this season and/or second-tier, inexpensive rental options.

Then there's the Alex Tuch dilemma.

At first glance, it might seem like a no-brainer for the Sabres to re-sign Tuch, who's second on the team in points, given the team's playoff push. What happens, though, if Tuch wants an extension that looks similar to Adrian Kempe's recent eight-year, \$10.625 million AAV deal? A contract like that for a 29-year-old winger would likely age poorly over the long term. And it's not like the Sabres have unlimited cap space because several of their core players are already locked up to long-term deals, not to mention that breakout wingers Josh Doan and Zach Benson need new RFA deals this summer as well.

If Buffalo decides that extending Tuch isn't worth it, would it keep him as its own rental? Or is he too valuable an asset to lose for nothing? Remember that Kekäläinen kept Artemi Panarin and Sergei Bobrovsky for Columbus' playoff push in 2018-19 (and ended up being an aggressive deadline buyer by trading for Matt Duchene and Ryan Dzingel). Kekäläinen ultimately lost Panarin and Bobrovsky in free agency, but it also led to the Blue Jackets' first playoff series victory in franchise history. That situation was different because the Blue Jackets were a more established team with a higher ceiling than this current Sabres squad, but it is still a relevant scenario to keep in mind.

Perhaps there's even a creative hybrid scenario where the Sabres are simultaneously buyers and sellers. If a reasonable Tuch extension isn't possible, could you trade him and then immediately flip those assets for non-rental win-now players ahead of the deadline? An example is the 2023 Canucks trading former captain Bo Horvat to the Islanders and, a month later, leveraging those future assets to acquire Filip Hronek.

The overall point is that the Sabres have many options, starting with the difficult Tuch dilemma.

### **Nashville Predators**

Just five weeks ago, the Predators were 10-14-4, sitting dead-last in the NHL. A deadline sell-off seemed inevitable; the only question was how deep they would go.

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Erik Haula, Michael Bunting and Michael McCarron, all on expiring contracts, seemed overwhelmingly likely to be dealt. Every contending team in search of a center, meanwhile, was probably circling Ryan O'Reilly, who's signed through 2026-27 at a bargain \$4.5 million cap hit, as their dream target. Perhaps GM Barry Trotz was even going to consider moving Steven Stamkos and Jonathan Marchessault, two of the club's highest-profile veterans, who haven't quite been an optimal fit.

Remarkably, the Predators have caught fire in recent weeks and are only one point behind a playoff spot in a flawed Western Conference. Will this run change Nashville's status as a presumed seller? It very well could, assuming they stay in the playoff race.

Haula, Bunting and McCarron probably wouldn't command more than mid-round picks on the trade market. The Predators, who own two second-round picks, two fourth-round picks, and three fifth-round picks this year (and four third-round picks in 2027), may value keeping these veterans for an end-of-season push rather than adding more mid-round draft capital. Nashville also doesn't have to rush to move O'Reilly, Stamkos, or Marchessault, as Trotz can deal them for a significant return in the offseason. While this gives the Predators a sensible case to stand pat at the deadline, it'd behoove them to stay open-minded. For example, if a buyer, enticed by the possibility of owning O'Reilly for two playoff runs rather than just one, blows the Preds away with an offer, it's still worth making that deal for the long-term sake of the franchise. The Predators can justify either approach (standing pat or selling), giving them leverage whenever a buyer calls ahead of the deadline.

### **Toronto Maple Leafs**

The Leafs' recent run has catapulted them back to the playoff bubble. From the outside, though, it seems very difficult for Toronto to justify going all in as deadline buyers. Yes, the team's performance has improved, especially with Auston Matthews bouncing back lately, but they don't profile as a true Stanley Cup contender.

Toronto's underlying metrics are sketchy (rank 31st and 26th in five-on-five shot attempt and expected goal share, respectively), the blue line is a question mark (especially given Chris Tanev's uncertain long-term injury status), and the team is clearly missing Mitch Marner's elite two-way impact. Moreover, because the Leafs have pushed their chips into the middle in so many previous years, they're asset-poor. They're already missing their first and second-round picks this year (and only have three 2026 draft picks total), and have also traded away their 2027 first and third-round picks. Their prospect pool is also below average.

I'd argue the Leafs should stand pat (or make a cheap, depth acquisition at most) because they aren't one piece away from winning a Stanley Cup. The Leafs shouldn't mortgage the future by trading away an Easton Cowan or Ben Danford.

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We'll see if Toronto's front office can actually stomach standing pat, though. GM Brad Treliving may feel pressure to avoid a playoff miss for the sake of his own job security, which could incentivize him to make a significant addition or two.

### **Seattle Kraken**

In late December, the Kraken traded Marchment to the Blue Jackets. Many expected it to be the start of a bigger sell-off in Seattle, with the team having lost eight of its last 10 games at the time, and sitting in 29th place in the league standings.

Ironically, the Kraken have gone on a tear since then, which has thrust them back into a playoff spot. Not only that, but with the Kings struggling and the Ducks spiraling, there's a chance they could even finish third-place in the Pacific.

With Jaden Schwartz, Jordan Eberle, Eeli Tolvanen and Jamie Oleksiak all on expiring contracts, the Kraken have valuable trade chips if they decide to sell. Will management actually make future-focused moves with the team in a playoff position, though? It would probably be in the franchise's best long-term interests to sell some pieces off because they aren't a realistic threat to advance far in the postseason, and because their underlying analytics (including Dom's model, which gives them only a 16 percent chance of making the postseason) suggest regression could be coming.

However, the longer this winning continues, the harder it will be to justify subtracting from a team that has only made the playoffs once since 2021-22. And if their strong play continues, could they even emerge as dark-horse buyers, especially if there are non-rentals that fit their core long-term? Seattle has a ton of draft picks it could leverage as trade chips (four first-round picks over the next two years and four second-round picks in that same timeframe) and a surplus of cap space.

### **Boston Bruins**

The Bruins emerged as one of the most aggressive deadline sellers last year, shipping Brad Marchand, Brandon Carlo, Coyle, and Trent Frederic to teams for significant future assets. It was a clear signal that Boston is in a transitional phase where the future matters more than the present. That's helped replenish the club's pool of young players and armed them with four first-round picks over the next two years.

This season is different, though, because Boston has been flirting with a playoff spot all year. It probably still makes sense to prioritize the future and trade pending UFAs Viktor Arvidsson, who's having a

resurgent year with 23 points in 35 games, and Andrew Peeke. Maybe the Bruins even look to capitalize on Casey Mittelstadt's improved play on the wing and see if there's a taker for his contract. Beyond that, Pavel Zacha's future is an important dilemma the franchise faces. Zacha, who has a year and a half left on a bargain \$4.75 million cap hit, would be an enormously valuable trade commodity if the Bruins made him available. On the other hand, though, Boston is probably in more of a retool rather than a rebuild, and may want to execute a turnaround quick enough to still capitalize on David Pastrnak, Charlie McAvoy and Jeremy Swayman's remaining prime years. And if that's the plan, then the 28-year-old Zacha could still be young enough to fit that, in which case the move may be to offer him a new contract when he's extension-eligible in the summer rather than move him.