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## Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets sign forward Zach Aston-Reese to one-year extension

**By Brian Hedger – January 14, 2025**

Zach Aston-Reese is sticking around for another year.

During a practice that he didn't participate in Monday due to maintenance for an upper-body injury, the Blue Jackets announced Monday that Aston-Reese, a versatile depth forward, agreed to a one-year contract extension worth \$775,000 for next season. That's one pending free agent down, 13 remaining (eight unrestricted, five restricted) for Blue Jackets president of hockey operations/general manager Don Waddell to sort out prior to the July 1 arrival of NHL free agency.

"Zach has been a great addition to the Blue Jackets on the ice and in the dressing room," Waddell said in a statement. "He brings speed, grit and versatility to our forward group, and we are excited that he will continue to be a part of our club."

Aston-Reese, 30, has played 42 games for the Blue Jackets since being claimed off waivers from the Vegas Golden Knights in the preseason and has 11 points on four goals and seven assists. After starting the season on the fourth forward line, he's settled into a spot at left wing on the third line, skating opposite power forward Mathieu Olivier on the right. Aston-Reese's ability to do play a predictably solid style in all three zones is what has impressed the Blue Jackets' coaching staff most.

"It's been a great waiver claim," assistant coach Mike Haviland said. "He's a professional, so we know what we're getting. His work ethic is there, his details and structure are there, and he's done a good job (penalty-killing). I think he's a guy that can maybe go up in the lineup and play, too, but he's a guy who coaches trust because he plays the right way. You know what you're getting, and coaches love that in a player."

Aston-Reese and Olivier are skating with rookie center Luca Del Bel Belluz currently, but they've spent most of the season flanking center Cole Sillinger, who's now centering the second line while Adam Fantilli fills the top center role while Sean Monahan is out with a wrist injury.

Aston-Reese sustained an upper-body injury early in the third period of the Blue Jackets' 2-1 victory Saturday at the St. Louis Blues, which is why he didn't skate Monday. He was struck in chest by the puck, didn't return to the game and his status for a game Tuesday against the Philadelphia Flyers is unknown. Defenseman Zach Werenski also missed practice for "maintenance" reasons, but is expected to play.

Head coach Dean Evason also missed practice Monday due to an appointment, but will return Tuesday to coach against John Tortorella and the Flyers. The Jackets have won four straight games and will look to make it five when the puck drops at Nationwide Arena.

## The Athletic / Weekend NHL rankings: The Blue Jackets are the league's best story and it's not close

By Sean McIndoe – January 14, 2025

We're past the midway mark of the season, which means we can't just hand-wave away any surprises with a dismissive "too early." That's bad news for people like me who make preseason predictions because it means we might have to accept we were wrong. Key word: might.

For example, back before opening night, I grouped the league into four divisions, including one for the true contenders. Of those eight teams, only three — Edmonton, Vegas and Florida — have appeared in the top five since early December. That's partly because we've had teams like Washington and Winnipeg force themselves into weekly spots. But it's also because five of my so-called sure things have been varying degrees of disappointments.

Today, let's run through those five teams I believed in back in October and rank them based on how close they are to reclaiming a spot in my top five.

### **Bonus five: Sure-thing contenders who haven't been**

**5. New York Rangers** — I wrote: "Even if you forecast a step back from last year, which you probably should, they've still got enough star power to waltz into the playoffs." They looked like they've been waltzing alright, but not toward the postseason. They've been better lately, but at this point, the second half is about making the playoffs, not being among the best of the best.

**4. Tampa Bay Lightning** — I wrote: "It's felt like the clock was ticking on the Lightning for a few years now, and in the last two seasons they haven't made it to 100 points or won a round ... but there's enough history here that I'd rather be a year too late on ruling them out than too soon." I guess that holds up OK. The Lightning seemed to be emerging as legitimate threats a few weeks ago, at which point I wrote about them playing well and then they immediately lost four straight. What can I tell you, I have that effect on teams. At this point, they look like a safe playoff bet, but one that will probably start on the road against the Panthers or Leafs.

**3. Carolina Hurricanes** — I wrote: "I think they're safe enough that they can spend 60 games or so figuring out where the weaknesses are and then aggressively addressing them at the deadline." Yep, that would be the optimist's view right now. The Hurricanes actually briefly held the one-spot in the rankings back in November, right around the time their record peaked at 16-5-1, but they have won just 10 of 22 since then. Your view of them as a serious contender might be tied to how seriously you take the Capitals as a Metro heavyweight. For now, eventually getting Freddie Andersen back could have an impact.

**2. Colorado Avalanche** — I wrote: "We don't need to overthink things ... The Central is a tough path, but Colorado is clearly one of the league's eight best teams." I was more right than I knew about the Central being tough, and that, along with some early-season injuries, has led to the Avs being absent from the top five outside from Week 1. A six-game win streak over the holidays suggested they were back, but they've lost three of five since. Still, with Nathan MacKinnon and Cale Makar both looking fantastic and Mackenzie Blackwood appearing to solve the goaltending problem, I'd bet on the Avalanche being back in the top five at some point in the second half.

**1. Dallas Stars** — I wrote: "The Stars figure to go back and forth with the Avalanche for top spot in the Central, and probably meet them in the second round for the right to face the Oilers." Again, I was

sleeping on the Jets and Wild as Central threats. But with a seven-game win streak before last night's loss, the Stars have been rolling and could absolutely take a spot in this week's list. They didn't, barely, but at this rate let's go ahead and pencil them in for next week.

### **On to this week's top five ...**

#### **Road to the Cup**

The five teams with the best chances of winning the Stanley Cup.

It's prospect ranking time, as Scott is counting down every team's list heading into 2025. If you're a fan of a team that regularly appears in this section, here's a quick reminder: "Prospects" are young players in your organization you will never see play because they'll be traded at the deadline for an old guy who isn't good anymore. But don't let that stop you from showing up in the comments to loudly accuse Scott, who does this for a living, of having never watched a random AHL guy that you yourself saw get nine minutes in one preseason game three years ago.

**5. Florida Panthers (25-15-3, +8 true goals differential\*)** — They're the only team that's been in the top five all season long, but they're hanging by a thread. As always, we're trying to do the long-term view here, so record isn't everything for a team that's proven over the years that they're a serious playoff threat. Still, with other teams knocking at the door and just seven wins in their last 14, this spot is probably up for grabs next week.

**4. Winnipeg Jets (29-12-3, +48)** — Not only is he the runaway leader for the Vezina, you have to respect Connor Hellebuyck's efficiency in packing all his milestones into one night.

**3. Edmonton Oilers (26-13-3, +22)** — Narrator voice: It did not actually remain to be seen.

Kane said that when he's 100 percent healthy, he'll make himself available to play again.

So yeah, sounds like we can pencil in Evander Kane for early in the playoffs. One more weapon for a team that already has plenty. Daniel has more on what it could mean for the Oilers' hopes. (In related news, did you know Kane has led the NHL in postseason penalty minutes three times since 2019? I'm not sure what to do with this information but I thought it was neat.)

**2. Washington Capitals (28-10-5, +45)** — Is the first half's biggest surprise starting to wobble? Maybe a bit, as the Capitals haven't won consecutive games since before the holiday break. They even lost to the Sabres this week, although it was in a shootout so it's not real. All those early points mean they still have a solid cushion on top of the Metro, and it's not like the Devils or Hurricanes are red-hot themselves. Still, it will be worth watching them this week as they face the Ducks, Senators and Penguins, three very winnable games.

#### **Also worth keeping in mind:**

**1. Vegas Golden Knights 29-11-3, +34)** — (Checks headline on most recent edition of Other Ratings.) "A new No. 1," you say. Well, not sure I'd call them "new," but congratulations on coming around to where we've already been for a month and counting.

Meanwhile, Pierre sat down with Kelly McCrimmon for a look ahead at the deadline.

\*Goals differential without counting shootout decisions like the NHL does for some reason.

**Not ranked: Boston Bruins** — If you somehow missed the drama in Boston heading into the weekend, let's get you caught up. On Friday, a Boston radio station broadcast a report that the Bruins' room is "a disaster" and a feud between Brad Marchand and David Pastrnak was at the center of it. That sounded

far-fetched, but since we've already been through this same basic storyline in Vancouver, you wondered if it would have any legs.

That lasted all of a few hours before Marchand seemed to put the idea to rest:

Players have been known to be less-than-honest about this sort of thing — again, see Vancouver — but that's a pretty emphatic denial, and one that was echoed by Pastrnak later on. So apparently, nothing to see here.

What else, what else ... oh right, the results on the ice. They've been, shall we say, not great lately, although Saturday's flukey OT win in Florida snapped a six-game losing streak. That was worse than the stretch that got Jim Montgomery fired, and it's fair to say any new-coach bounce under Joe Sacco has now abated. The streak dropped the Bruins out of a playoff spot by points percentage, although they're still right in the wild-card mix alongside (checks standings) pretty much the entire conference.

Still, it's bad. The question is how bad — is this the sort of midseason slump a team can still recover from, or are we headed for a Rangers-level disaster? That might be up to Don Sweeney, who's already played his coach card and is now firmly on the hot seat to figure this out. Fluto asked what Sweeney could do, and his answer won't please Boston fans, because it boils down to "not much." His big offseason move, the signing of Elias Lindholm to a seven-year deal, hasn't done as much as hoped to fix their weakness down the middle. Pastrnak's been merely good instead of great, Marchand is starting to look like a guy who's 36 and there isn't enough supporting firepower to cover up for a surprisingly weak season from Jeremy Swayman.

Oh, and there's little in the way of prospect help on the horizon. Other than all that, going great.

So, are they cooked? That still feels premature, but might not in another week or two. They've got Tampa next, then a stretch in which they play the Senators twice in a week, so the wild-card implications are huge. It's not impossible to imagine the Bruins getting back into this. It's also not all that hard to see them as sellers by the time the deadline arrives.

**So here's my question to Bruins fans:** What do you actually want at this point? Do you still view this team as a Cup contender, or at least worth a playoff run? Or are you getting close to the point where you'd rather close the book on a lost season, focus on moves that would build that underwhelming pipeline back up, and then figure out whether Sweeney should get a chance to fix the mess? Let me know where you're at in the comments.

### **The bottom five**

The five teams that are headed toward dead last and the best lottery odds for James Hagens, or maybe someone else.

If your team tends to show up in this section, I'd strongly recommend our group effort at naming each team's biggest disappointment so far this season, if only because it's a reminder that everybody has regrets. Do they have them as bad as your favorite team? They do not, your team stinks.

**5. Seattle Kraken (18-23-3, -15)** — With teams like the Habs and Red Wings heating up, we have room for a new entrant in the bottom five. Welcome Seattle, who staked an emphatic claim on a spot by getting their doors kicked in by Detroit yesterday. Granted, Todd McLellan has the Wings looking like the 1996 version these days, but giving up four goals in the first eight minutes is embarrassing. The Kraken have won just three of their last 13 and now find themselves looking up at teams like the Flyers, Blues and Ducks.

**4. Nashville Predators (13-22-7, -31)** — Tuesday's loss to the Jets snapped a two-game win streak, which doesn't sound like much until you remember they haven't won three in a row since October. Meanwhile, Elliotte Friedman had an interesting update on Ryan O'Reilly and his lack of trade protection.

**3. Buffalo Sabres (16-22-5, -15)** — Well, things went well for two games and maybe a period or two before it all fell apart against Seattle. That's progress, I guess. Anyway, go Bills.

**2. San Jose Sharks (13-26-6, -40)** — They've lost 14 of their last 17 games. And maybe more importantly for lottery purposes, all but one of those losses came in regulation. Hey, don't let the loser point screw up the tank, right?

**1. Chicago Blackhawks (14-27-2, -37)** — They beat the Avalanche and nearly upset the Oilers, so not a bad week. We also got some interesting insight from Patrick Kane on Connor Bedard.

**Not ranked: Columbus Blue Jackets** — They're actually doing this. The Columbus Blue Jackets, a last-place team that lost their best forward to an unimaginable tragedy before the season started, are hanging around the playoff hunt. Not in that fake way of being five points back with six teams to pass, but right there, close enough to hold down a spot heading into the week.

This is a problem for me.

You see, every year when the playoffs start, I write a post ranking every team based on how easy they are to bandwagon. It's all in good fun, and one of my favorite pieces to write each year. But this year? If the Blue Jackets make the playoffs, what's even the point? If Columbus makes it to the postseason after everything it's been through, it might be the most bandwagon-able team in the history of pro sports.

The Johnny Gaudreau tragedy would be enough to ensure that, but it's only part of the story. Remember, this is a franchise that's been around for 25 seasons and has only made the playoffs six times. They've only won one seven-game series — one! It took the Seattle Kraken two whole years to tie them on the all-time list. Their most iconic franchise player lasted nine seasons before heading off to chase relevance with bigger markets. Their biggest contribution to playoff glory was that stint in which they kept sending star forwards to the Kings.

They've been the league's most forgettable team for decades. And if you're not rooting for them right now, I'm not even sure what to tell you. As an added bonus, the Blue Jackets have one of the few fan bases that probably wouldn't even object to some bandwagon love. It would be better than the sneers and eye-rolls they've had from the rest of the league for most of their existence.

Honestly, I'm hesitant to even write this sort of stuff, because I'm worried I'll jinx what's happening in Columbus right now. They've won eight of their last 11, including wins over contenders like the Devils and Hurricanes. A roster built by Jarmo Kekäläinen and supplemented with some smart adds by Don Waddell is rolling. This week serves up the Flyers, Sharks, Rangers and Islanders, all teams looking up at them in the standings. This could actually happen.

Sure, it's too early, absolutely. The East is crowded and while a lot of us may have been sleeping on this team's potential, they're underdogs for a reason. For what it's worth, Dom's model has them at just 24 percent odds to make it.

But if they do? Give Dean Evason the Jack Adams. Make Zach Werenski a Norris finalist. And hell, would it be completely crazy to drop a point-per-game Sean Monahan on a few Hart ballots? I don't know that it would be.

And yeah, go ahead and make this year's playoff rooting guide rankings three words long. Or maybe scrap it all together. I'll take that one for the team, as long as you save me a good seat on the bandwagon.

## [BlueJackets.com / Fantilli, Del Bel Belluz stepping up in Monahan's absence](#)

By Jeff Svoboda – January 14, 2025

He might not be the most indispensable player on the Blue Jackets roster because Zach Werenski exists, but Sean Monahan is on the list of players the team could most ill-afford to lose.

The veteran center has been a versatile Swiss Army knife of effectiveness for the Blue Jackets, centering a dominant top line, anchoring a resurgent power play, and providing a much-appreciated dose of veteran leadership in his first season in Columbus.

So when Monahan took a hit into the boards from Pittsburgh's Kris Letang on Tuesday and landed on injured reserve with an upper body injury, you knew it wouldn't be easy to replace him. But the NHL stops for no man, and the Blue Jackets are likely to have to continue on without the alternate captain for the foreseeable future.

The good news? Head coach Dean Evason said the team's depth – including centers Adam Fantilli and Luca Del Bel Belluz – should help the Blue Jackets mitigate that loss.

"(The depth) will be tested," Evason said. "Organizations take pride in depth at all positions clearly, but I think there's a lot more talk in our game that you need depth up the middle. It's hard to find centermen that are NHL players. We think we've got a few."

Those two youngsters – Fantilli is just 20, while Del Bel Belluz is 21 – have certainly stepped up to the table as the Blue Jackets have won their first two games without Monahan. Fantilli extended his career-best point streak to five games in the victories over Seattle and St. Louis, while Del Bel Belluz has become just the second player in CBJ history after Werenski to begin his NHL career with points in his first three career games.

Perhaps most importantly, the Blue Jackets have turned in strong defensive efforts and turned third-period leads into victories in both of those games, which might be an area you'd expect the team to struggle without a calming veteran like Monahan. Seattle was held to just two goals in the Jackets' 6-2 win at home Thursday, while the Blues didn't score until the final minute as Columbus took a 2-1 road triumph Saturday.

Fantilli had the opening goal in that contest, and he's more than held his own since moving up to Monahan's place on the top line with Kirill Marchenko and Dmitri Voronkov as well as the veteran's bumper spot on the No. 1 power play.

Since finding himself in Monahan's real estate, Fantilli has knotted the game at Pittsburgh on the power play Tuesday, set up Werenski for a crucial goal Thursday and completed a perfect passing play with Voronkov and Marchenko to get the Jackets on the board against the Blues.

And while Monahan hasn't been on the ice with Fantilli the past two-plus games, his impact is still felt. The No. 3 pick in the 2023 draft said he's learned a ton just by watching Monahan this season and is starting to put those lessons into play.

"His details are so good," Fantilli said. "I don't know what his stats are (on faceoffs), but someone said he's top five in the league since he came into the league. His D-zone details are unreal, where he is in the O-zone. He doesn't even have to skate much. He just finds himself in the right spots. Watching him, I think that's something I can add to my game, just slowing down sometimes and making sure that I'm in the right spots. I'm learning a lot from him. It's been great."



Evason has consistently said Fantilli has been playing some excellent hockey even though his offensive production hadn't taken a leap forward until recently, and he confirmed he can see pieces of Monahan's game being added to the youngsters play as the season has gone on.

"For sure," Evason said. "His stopping, his stick, his positioning, faceoffs, how he competes, how he stops on pucks, how he is underneath pucks and doesn't cheat the game, yeah, he's getting closer and closer to doing that on a consistent basis."

While Fantilli is in his second season at the NHL level, Del Bel Belluz was recalled from AHL Cleveland after Monahan's injury to play in just his second NHL game. The second-round pick in the 2022 draft certainly deserved the opportunity, though, as his 17-20-37 line allowed him to lead the AHL in scoring in his sophomore pro season.

The Blue Jackets chose Del Bel Belluz because of an excellent all-around game including the ability to put the puck in the net, and the Ontario native said his increased production this year has come from a renewed dedication to getting to the hard areas on the ice.

"I think one thing I've been focusing on offensively is just trying to get to the inside a lot more," Del Bel Belluz said. "I feel like last year I was a little more of a perimeter guy, you know, carrying it on the outside, but this year I've been able to get to the netfront a lot more. I've scored some ugly ones for sure, ones that have just hit my body and gone in."

"So I'm just trying to focus on getting into the dirty areas a little more. You might get a couple cross-checks in the back that might hurt after the game, but it's all worth it for a goal at the end of the night."

He proved that when he tipped in a pass from the top of the crease against Seattle to give him two goals in two NHL games – he tallied in his debut last year in the season finale – and become the first player in CBJ history to score in each of his first pair of contests.

But what excites Evason the most is Del Bel Belluz's all-around game, which Cleveland head coach Trent Vogelhuber emphasized before the prospect's recall.

"The reports that we got on Bel are extremely positive with his development," Evason said. "Clearly you can just look at the stat sheet and see that he's doing the right things or he's doing good things offensively, but by all accounts he's doing all the right things to develop both his defensive game and his offensive game. Trent speaks very highly of him, and again, we've talked about that earned culture. He's earned the right to be here."

## [BlueJackets.com / Blue Jackets help the community at Player Day of Service](#)

By Jeff Svoboda – January 14, 2025

The Blue Jackets are good with a hockey stick in their hands, but what about a paintbrush, drill or hammer?

The team got a chance to find out Monday during its Player Day of Service, splitting up to help two Central Ohio organizations that make a big impact in the community. Half of the team headed to the Furniture Bank of Central Ohio to help build dressers, while the rest of the squad went to the Mid-Ohio Food Collective to sort food.

At the former location, captain Boone Jenner found that some teammates know their way around the tools of a different trade, while others, not so much.

“It definitely is a good team-building exercise,” the CBJ forward said. “You can see who can find their way around a workshop – a wood shop, in particular – and who can’t, so we’re having fun with it. It’s always a good time to come out, and we enjoy doing this.”

At the end of the day, the most important thing is that the Blue Jackets gave back as a team. The annual Player Day of Service is always a chance to contribute to the community and make a direct impact with organizations that do so much for Central Ohio, and this year was no different.

“What’s so important is we are in position to be there for people when they need us,” said Mike Hochron, senior vice president of communications and public affairs for the Mid-Ohio Food Collective. “The work of the Blue Jackets and volunteers like them every day to have the right food in the right place at the right time is essential. Our whole community is counting on us.”

On Monday, Blue Jackets players at the Mid-Ohio Food Collective helped package and store blocks of cheese that will be distributed through the Commodity Supplemental Food Program, a federal initiative that delivers about 5,000 boxes of food each month to seniors in the community.

The Mid-Ohio Food Collective helped feed more than a half a million people last year over its 20-county service area, and the backbone of those efforts is a volunteer network that exceeds more than 1,000 people per week. To have the Blue Jackets join those ranks meant a lot to the volunteers on hand.

“It’s not every day we have a professional sports team and some of the best hockey players in the land come out to be part of that work, so we’re always really excited when the Blue Jackets come down,” Hochron said. “To have so many of the players we recognize and see on the ice and in the highlight reels come and be a part of our work is really a highlight for us.”

Meanwhile, at the Furniture Bank of Central Ohio, players got to show off their handyman skills – or lack thereof – as they painted and assembled dressers that will soon be in homes across the area of individuals and families moving from difficult situations. The organization not only accepts donations of used furniture, it builds and distributes its own, helping fill thousands of living rooms, dining rooms and bedrooms each year.

“It’s a great partnership (with the Blue Jackets),” said Phil Washburn, president and CEO of the Furniture Bank of Central Ohio. “It means a lot to us. We do this day in and day out, and to be able to have an organization like the Blue Jackets and players come out and join us, having that support is just so encouraging to me and my team to know that the community is behind us and they have our back.”

In the Central Ohio community, everyone is in this together, whether they're scoring goals on the ice or helping those in need off of it.

"The support we receive is second to none," said CBJ defenseman Damon Severson, who attended the Mid-Ohio Food Collective. "The least we can do is get out here and show our face in the community and support it any way we can because we receive that support like no other."

## The Hockey News / Blue Jackets Sign Aston-Reese To One-Year Extension

By Spencer Lazary – January 14, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets announced they have signed Zach Aston-Reese to a one-year extension.

The deal carries an AAV of \$775,000 and will run through the 2025-26 season.

Aston-Reese, 30, was originally signed by the Vegas Golden Knights. However, before playing a game with them, he was claimed off waivers by the Blue Jackets.

In 42 games with the Blue Jackets, he has four goals and seven assists for a total of 11 points.

GM Don Waddell had this to say about the Aston-Reese extension:

"Zach has been a great addition to the Blue Jackets on the ice and in the dressing room. He brings speed, grit, and versatility to our forward group, and we are excited that he will continue to be a part of our club."

Aston-Reese has played eight seasons in the NHL. He has suited up for the Pittsburgh Penguins, Anaheim Ducks, Toronto Maple Leafs, Detroit Red Wings, and the aforementioned Blue Jackets.

He has scored 46 goals and 45 assists for 91 points in 352 NHL games. His career high came in 2018-19 when he scored 17 points with the Penguins.

**What's Next** - The Philadelphia Flyers visit Nationwide on Tuesday night.

## The Hockey News / Blue Jackets Who Are Eligible For An Extension

**By Spencer Lazary – January 14, 2025**

Now that Jan. 1 has passed, the Columbus Blue Jackets have three players who can sign an extension.

Players who signed a one-year contract this offseason are now eligible to sign a contract extension.

After Zach Aston-Reese signed his contract extension today, that leaves James van Riemsdyk, Kevin Labanc, and Jack Johnson, who can now sign with the Blue Jackets.

Van Riemsdyk, 35, will likely be a trade candidate if the Blue Jackets fall out of the Wild Card race. There will be a handful of contending teams interested in acquiring him if he is made available. However, if they don't fall out of the race and decide to keep him, he still likely won't sign an extension until the offseason.

Labanc, 29, signed at the start of the season after being on a PTO with the New Jersey Devils. He could be the next player to sign an extension with the Blue Jackets. The fit with the roster has been good, especially as a bottom-six forward.

Johnson, 38, is nearing the end of his career. He is another trade candidate and will likely be moved regardless of their playoff positioning. Johnson and the Blue Jackets will probably try to find him a contending team, like the Colorado Avalanche, to give him the best chance to win the Stanley Cup.

## The Hockey News / Blue Jackets Weekly Injury Report: Week 14

By Jason Newland – January 14, 2025

Death, taxes, and Columbus Blue Jackets players getting injured. That's been the storyline of this team for years it seems.

Last week, center Sean Monahan entered his name into the Injured Reserve foray.

Monahan sustained a wrist injury against the Pittsburgh Penguins that will keep him off the ice for an unknown amount of time. GM Don Waddell says that there is no bone damage and that it's just a sprain. So the Jackets hope to get him back sooner rather than later. Monahan was on a PPG pace with 41 points in 41 games and was set to tie his career high with 82, set back in 18-19 when he was with the Calgary Flames.

The rest of the list has stayed the same.

### **Injuries**

- **Boone Jenner** (shoulder) is on Injured Reserve on Oct. 7; (43 Games)
- **Erik Gudbranson** (upper body) is on Injured Reserve on Oct. 16; (40 Games)
- **Yegor Chinakhov** (upper body) is on Injured Reserve (23 Games)
- **Justin Danforth** (lower body) is on Injured Reserve on Dec.10; (17 Games)
- **Sean Monahan** (upper body); is on Injured Reserve retroactive to Dec. 7 (2 Games)

### **TOTAL MAN GAMES LOST: 167**

Boone Jenner and Erik Gudbranson are out long-term with shoulder injuries.

Jenner however, is aiming to come back in February or March. His goal is to be back and play in the Stadium Series game at Ohio Stadium on March 1. He's been skating and getting back into shape.

Gudbranson is in the same boat as Jenner. he's starting to skate, but it sounds like he'll be out for the remainder of the season.

## 1<sup>st</sup> Ohio Battery / Blue Jackets Are A Breath Of Fresh Air, A Fun Change Of Pace

By Will Chase – January 14, 2025

When was the last time you turned on a Columbus Blue Jackets game and it was this fun?

Sometimes you can feel it when a team begins to figure it out. The small stuff starts to add up and the confidence is there.

Players will always talk about what they must do to win games. We've heard it for years from players across all teams in all sports.

But there's essentially delusion versus what's real. This team must feel pretty good because they display what we see. Head coach Dean Evason said it himself. His team has a chance to win every single night.

Columbus has done a lot of that lately.

Occupying the second Eastern Conference wild-card spot and only trailing the Boston Bruins by one point for the top spot, Columbus is the hottest team in the Metropolitan Division with a 7-2-1 record in its last 10. They are on a season-high four-game winning streak following Saturday's season series sweep of the St. Louis Blues 2-1.

Evason has preached 'team' since day one, and any time he's asked about individual performances, he quickly steers the conversation back to a team-first element. That type of game was on full display Saturday night. Columbus had 23 blocked shots, and Jet Greaves nearly came away with his first career shutout before a power-play goal by Colton Parayko spoiled the bid at 19:48.

"It's a team game, right?" Evason said after Saturday's win. "Everybody's buying in to do the right things and keep the puck out of the net. We've talked a lot about our road record and getting out here. We did a lot of things to play a sound defensive hockey game."

Before Saturday's game on FanDuel Sports Network, data scientist and hockey analyst Meghan Chayka of Stathletes talked with Brian Giesenschlag and explained key metrics behind the Blue Jackets' success this season.

"They're playing well under their coach," Chayka said. "There's clearly a lot of structure and a lot of team buy-in. They're fifth most defensive zone turnovers. They're causing turnovers and being able to recover the puck.

"And also fourth most defensive puck recoveries. So they're getting turnovers and getting recoveries. Being able to regroup and really push the neutral zone causing a lot of havoc and a lot of goals."

Chayka also alluded to career years by several Blue Jackets members and the team could have multiple point-per-game players for the first time. Currently, Zach Werenski (1.12), Kirill Marchenko (1.09), and Sean Monahan (1.00) lead the way.

Last week, Ed Francis discussed the Jackets' upcoming schedule. Entering the week of Jan. 6, Columbus was just outside the Eastern Conference playoff picture, one point behind the Pittsburgh Penguins for the final wild-card spot.

Columbus made things easy on themselves, sweeping the week with wins in Pittsburgh, getting a home win against the Seattle Kraken, and getting a road win in St. Louis. Road wins have been hard to come by for this group so getting two in a week, especially that elusive victory in Pittsburgh for the first time since 2015 was a momentum maker.

The Blue Jackets are enjoying their longest winning streak and best stretch of hockey since 2021-22. As Evason said, there's a sense they can truly win every night they take the ice.

Before the season Columbus' playoff odds were minute. Now per [MoneyPuck](#), those odds are up to 9.8%. The ceiling is high and the vibes are higher.

Let's see what this team is made of.



## 1<sup>st</sup> Ohio Battery / Blue Jackets Keep Zach Aston-Reese, Signing Veteran Forward To One-Year, \$775K Contract Extension

By Ed Francis – January 14, 2025

ZAR is stickin' around.

The Blue Jackets signed veteran forward Zach Aston-Reese to a one-year extension worth \$775k, the club announced Monday.

The signing will keep Aston-Reese with the club through the 2025-26 season.

It's an identical contract to his current one. The Blue Jackets acquired Aston-Reese when they claimed him off waivers from the Vegas Golden Knights at the end of the preseason. Vegas had signed him to a one-year, \$775k contract in July.

When Columbus claimed him, President of Hockey Operations and General Manager Don Waddell described the 30-year-old as "a smart and versatile player that can play any of the forward positions."

He's been exactly that for the Blue Jackets. Aston-Reese has played in 42 of the team's 43 games, scoring four goals and adding seven assists for a total of 11 points. He's playing an average of 13:09 per game and has played both sides of the wings in second, third, and fourth-line roles.

With nearly half the season still to go, he's just six points away from tying his career-high of 17. That came in the 2018-19 season with the Pittsburgh Penguins.

In announcing the extension, Waddell said Monday that Aston-Reese "has been a great addition to the Blue Jackets on the ice and in the dressing room."

"He brings speed, grit, and versatility to our forward group," added Waddell. "We are excited that he will continue to be part of our club."

Aston-Reese left Saturday's win over the St. Louis Blues with an upper-body injury, but appears to be healthy and on track to be in the lineup Tuesday night when the Blue Jackets host the Philadelphia Flyers.

### **QUICK THOUGHTS:**

Aston-Reese has done exactly what the Blue Jackets expected of him when they brought him in before the start of the season. This was a team that needed a veteran forward after losing Boone Jenner and Dmitri Voronkov late in the preseason. His addition allowed for players like Luca Del Bel Belluz and (now that he's back from an injury) Gavin Brindley to get valuable experience winning professional hockey games and in the case of Del Bel Belluz, we're starting to see that pay dividends already.

ZAR isn't going to be a 30+ point guy — and that's fine; no one in the organization has that expectation. They wanted, as Waddell said when they brought him in, a guy who was smart, versatile, and had a veteran presence. This is a well-deserved extension and one that will continue to give Columbus stability.

## [TSN.CA / Who wants the final wild-card berth in the Western Conference?](#)

By Travis Yost – January 14, 2025

Who wants the final wild-card berth in the Western Conference playoff race?

Past the halfway part of the regular season, and with the trade deadline approaching, the Western Conference has seen clear separation between the pretenders and the contenders. If you're a playoff purist who wants to watch best-on-best matchups, the West is likely putting it on a platter for you.

In the Central Division, the four super-talented teams you would have expected to separate from the pack — the Winnipeg Jets, Minnesota Wild, Dallas Stars, and Colorado Avalanche — are entrenched in playoff spots, all with at least 53 points accumulated on the year.

The same is true in the Pacific, where the similarly loaded Vegas Golden Knights, Edmonton Oilers, and Los Angeles Kings all have at least 53 points banked. Or said another way: The West has seven teams playing to a 100-point pace or better, and they are the seven teams you would have likely guessed at the start of the year.

But the postseason requires eight entries per conference, and four remaining hopefuls — the Vancouver Canucks, Calgary Flames, St. Louis Blues, and Utah Hockey Club — are all vying for the final spot. The only problem is these four teams have turned this race into a rock fight, losing games left and right and leaving an awful lot to be desired on the ice.

The eighth seed may come down to which team can best address or mitigate their lineup's biggest area of concern. To that end, here is a look at what's holding each of these four teams back right now.

### **Vancouver Canucks (19-13-10; 3-3-4 past 10 games)**

Losing a goaltender the quality of a Thatcher Demko for a stretch would sting any team. But a team this talented should not be carrying a negative goal differential at even strength this deep into the regular season.

How much Demko can lift that performance down the stretch remains to be seen, but teams outscored in the most important game state typically do not qualify for the playoffs. It's a textbook statistical red flag.

I also can't ignore this team's home/road splits. While there is a lot of statistical noise in how teams fare over short stretches at home versus on the road, teams typically outperform when playing on home ice, and, as a result, tend to accumulate a higher percentage of points from home games.

The Canucks are currently a team with meaningful April and May hockey aspirations carrying a 7-8-6 (33 per cent win rate) record at Rogers Arena. Consider that in contrast to the rest of the West:

You may be bullish on Vancouver pulling themselves out of their home slump, and additionally, it's fair to acknowledge they have somewhat offset those dropped games by being road warriors (12-5-4 away from Rogers Arena). But a core reason why this team will be fighting for their playoff life the rest of the way is they (along with Utah, notably) have been steamrolled in what should be friendly confines.

### **Calgary Flames (20-14-7; 5-3-2 past 10 games)**

In heightened scoring environments like we've seen in the National Hockey League over the past five years, it's quite difficult to mask or hide an ineffective offence. And while the Flames have shown

themselves comfortable leaning on goaltender Dustin Wolf in grind-it-out games, it may not be enough to offset their scoring woes.

Even with the Flames getting strong netminding this season, the team is running the treadmill of mediocrity, hallmarked by a midseason goal differential of -13. It's in large part because this is one of the most ineffective offences in the league at even strength, averaging just 2.0 goals per 60 minutes played.

That's good for 30th in the league, and compared to the rest of the West, it's a considerable outlier:

There is scoring talent on this lineup – forwards like Jonathan Huberdeau and Nazem Kadri have already scored 10 goals apiece at even strength, but further down the lineup it's been a challenge to find a reliable scoring touch.

#### **St. Louis Blues (20-20-4; 5-4-1 past 10 games)**

No one remembers the conference's ninth-best team for obvious reasons, but that's precisely what the Blues were a season ago – a feisty if undermanned team, but one that leaned on outstanding goaltending from Jordan Binnington and fourth-round draft pick Joel Hofer, hanging around the postseason push until the final hours.

The dominance from Binnington and Hofer surely gave the Blues front office confidence heading into this year as they envisioned their retooling of the rest of the lineup. Halfway into this regular season though, Binnington and Hofer have been shells of themselves relative to what we witnessed a season ago.

More pressing than this lost competitive advantage is that all three competitors here — with Demko in Vancouver, Wolf in Calgary, and Karel Vejmelka in Utah — have an outperforming goaltender of their own.

Consider the Blues goaltenders performance year-over-year decline, and then compare it against what the opposition is bringing to the table in terms of starter quality:

Goaltenders typically experience very cyclical play, and even the most elite puck stoppers are not immune to slumps. Just about every front office in the league would trade an arm and a leg for New York Rangers goalie Igor Shesterkin, who is amidst a season-long slump of his own.

Binnington and Hofer are no exception to this rule. But it's hard to see how this Blues roster can hang around for much longer if they can't elevate their play closer to what we saw a season ago.

#### **Utah Hockey Club (18-17-7; 2-6-2 past 10 games)**

The adverse impact of injuries to a team's overall ability to win is a story as old as sports itself. But the timing of this injury bug arriving at the doorstep of the Utah Hockey Club may meaningfully reshape Utah's trade deadline plans, from possible buyers to sellers in a blink.

It would have been impossible for Utah to have a bad year in the vibes department — a young upstart team in a new home with an ownership group that actually appears to want to win will sound as good in April as it did on opening night. And, notably, this team has been incredibly competitive. The youth movement appears to be firing on all cylinders, and this lineup — in stark contrast with the Canucks above — is outscoring the competition at even strength.

But the injuries have mounted in a hurry. First the cluster injury bug went after the blueline, knocking out veterans Sean Durzi, Robert Bortuzzo, and John Marino in a two-week stretch. And then came the big one: a multi-week lower-body injury to scoring phenom Dylan Guenther, shelving one of the league's best young players and hitting the top of Utah's lineup.

How much the injuries have contributed is debatable, but Utah's been spiralling in this stretch, with a 2-6-2 record in their past 10 games. It does make you wonder if this team, with a crazy amount of cap space and assets already on the balance sheet, looks to act as a seller one last time. Certainly, they would get a pretty penny for Vejmelka, and that's just the start of it.

That may be the right answer organizationally. But I can't blame the fans if they want this front office to hold the line for now, considering how competitive they have been since far.

It's been a spirited year one for Andre Tourigny and Utah in their inaugural season, but it's hard to imagine them rallying late without some injury luck coming back in their direction.