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Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets catch a break, edge New York Islanders 4-3 in shootout victory

By Brian Hedger – March 25, 2025

Don't count the Blue Jackets out of the NHL's Eastern Conference playoff race yet.

It took a late tying goal, a nerve-wracking video review and key performances during overtime and shootout by Elvis Merzlikins and Adam Fantilli, but the Blue Jackets finally got the win they desperately needed Monday night at UBS Arena.

Kirill Marchenko's tying goal with 7:04 left in the third, Fantilli's goal in the second round of a three-round shootout and Merzlikins' 31-save performance lifted the Jackets to a 4-3 victory over the New York Islanders to end a six-game winless skid plus a six-game losing streak in Elmont, New York — where they'd never won at UBS Arena since it opened in 2021, going 0-5-1.

"We didn't play particularly well in some areas, and we haven't gotten the breaks that we did," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason told reporters during a postgame interview shown by FanDuel Sports Network. "We got some breaks, we got some bounces, but we also worked to create some of them, as well."

Before an exciting five minutes of 3-on-3 overtime that forced both goalies to make clutch saves, the Blue Jackets caught a major break with 8.9 seconds left in regulation. The Islanders' Kyle Palmieri was denied a goal that would've won the game and dealt a devastating loss to the Blue Jackets, but referee Michael Markovic immediately waved it off due to Palmieri's bump with Blue Jackets goalie Elvis Merzlikins before tipping a shot from the blue line into the Columbus net.

A review by the NHL's situation room in Toronto upheld the call, sending the game to OT. Earlier, Evason lost a coach's challenge for goaltender interference on Anders Lee's goal to put the Islanders up 3-2 late in the second.

"I guess what it says is that we've got to be very careful that the call on the ice is probably where it's going to go," Evason said. "You have to have such great ... clear ... like, super clear evidence or lopsided the other way to overturn it. So, both were called on the ice and that's how they stayed. So, we'll be mindful of that next time."

Merzlikins earned the win after making 31 saves, including two in OT plus one in the shootout that doesn't officially count in his final stat line. Fantilli, Boone Jenner and Marchenko scored in regulation for the Jackets, who also got two assists from center Sean Monahan in his return to the Jackets' top line following wrist surgery.

Blue Jackets star defenseman Zach Werenski was kept off the stat sheet, but skated a career-high 33:44 that's now the highest ice time in the NHL this season. Palmieri, Lee and Pierre Engvall scored goals for the Islanders (32-28-10), who got 29 saves from goalie Ilya Sorokin.

Columbus climbed to 73 points with 12 games left, while New York added a point to hop over the New York Rangers via tiebreaker separating both teams deadlocked at 74 points. The Rangers and Islanders are one point ahead of the Blue Jackets, who are now two points back of the Montreal Canadiens (75 points) for control of the second wild card in the Eastern Conference.

"We grinded," Monahan said. "We weren't good in the first. We obviously knew that, and we tried to keep pushing. We did that, found ways to get some goals and Elvis stood on his head and kept us in there."

Had the Blue Jackets lost, it would've been their ninth winless effort in 10 games since defeating the Detroit Red Wings on March 1 at Ohio Stadium for control of the East's first wild card. Instead, they flew home after notching an exhilarating comeback victory.

Engvall and Palmieri gave the Islanders a 2-0 lead with goals late in the first, capping a dominant stretch against the overwhelmed Blue Jackets. Fantilli and Jenner scored to tie it 2-2 in the second, but Jenner's shorthanded goal with 2:47 left was quickly countered 1:59 later by Lee's go-ahead goal that put New York up, 3-2, starting the third.

Sorokin made several big saves to start the third, but Marchenko finally got one past him to tie it 3-3 with 7:04 left. Marchenko's team-leading 26th goal was scored from long range with a shot that traveled past screens set up in front of Sorokin by Dante Fabbro and Dmitri Voronkov.

The Blue Jackets continued to push, looking for a go-ahead goal that could've prevented the Islanders from adding a point in overtime or a shootout, but Sorokin turned away everything sent at him. That's what led to Palmieri's controversial "no goal" to end regulation.

"They're a good hockey team over there, and they've got a good goalie between the pipes," Fantilli said. "(Sorokin) made some big saves, even when we were pressing at the end. Things went great for us tonight, we're really happy to get one, and we'll try and start a push now."

Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets will add Sean Monahan, Erik Gudbranson to playoff push

By Brian Hedger – March 25, 2025

Sean Monahan and Erik Gudbranson are ready to rejoin the Blue Jackets' lineup with 13 games left and a playoff spot within grasp despite a six-game losing skid.

After skating through a full practice Sunday, the veteran stalwarts will suit up Monday against the New York Islanders at UBS Arena in Elmont, New York.

Monahan, who's been out since Jan. 7 with a wrist injury, will reunite with Dmitri Voronkov and Kirill Marchenko on the top line. Gudbranson, who underwent shoulder surgery in October, skated with rookie Denton Mateychuk as the third defensive pairing in practice.

"We've had plenty of opportunities to win hockey games and we just believe that it's going to turn around, and it has to do that (Monday) night, but to have those two guys in there will be great," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "If they're ready to play, they're ready to play. Otherwise, they're not going to play. So, both are ready to go. No restrictions."

Their returns couldn't come at a better time for the Blue Jackets (31-29-9), who've stumbled to eight losses in their past nine games coming off a stirring outdoor victory over the Detroit Red Wings on March 1 at Ohio Stadium. They've dropped six in a row (0-5-1) and sit four points back of the Montreal Canadiens for the second wild-card spot in the NHL's Eastern Conference.

The Jackets also have the Islanders two points ahead of them and New York Rangers three points up, all vying for the East's last playoff spot. They're still in the race, though, which gives Monahan and Gudbranson another chance to rejoin the Blue Jackets' effort to honor teammate Johnny Gaudreau's memory.

"The range of emotions we've had this year, for sure, has been probably on the high end," Gudbranson said. "At this point right now, you just feel overwhelmingly proud of what the guys have accomplished so far, and there's a lot to accomplish still. There's a lot of belief in this (locker) room and a lot of opportunity ahead of us. So, to be a part of it in a real way, I feel very fortunate to be back."

This isn't either player's first time returning from a long-term injury midseason in the NHL, so the hope is that it won't take long for either to contribute positively. Gudbranson could add defensive stability to a third pairing that's been a rotating mix of defensemen since he left the lineup in the season's third game. Monahan, meanwhile, adds another veteran to take key faceoffs and help the Blue Jackets' top line gain more offensive possession time.

Monahan is also one of the NHL's best at playing the "bumper" role on the power play, a vital position in the 1-3-1 system that's deployed in variations across the league. Prior to his injury, the Blue Jackets ranked ninth in the NHL with a 23.9% success rate on power plays. They've since dropped to 24th overall at 18.8% and were dead last at 7.8% in the 29 games Monahan has missed.

"It's not easy, for sure, but I worked on it quite a bit while I wasn't playing, just kind of visualizing it and getting into spots that I'm going to need to get in," Monahan said. "I've played enough games with those guys where we have some chemistry and I can make some reads, but it's still going to take some communication and reading off each other."

Monahan and Gudbranson were officially activated off injured reserve Monday morning, and no corresponding roster moves are required because the 23-man roster limit doesn't apply following the NHL's trade deadline that passed March 7. Lineup spots, however, are a different story.

Two need to be opened for Monahan and Gudbranson to play, and the two most likely candidates to sit against the Islanders on Monday are forward Yegor Chinakhov and defenseman Jack Johnson.

"Everybody wants to play, right?" Evason said. "It's going to be tough, but we've got a lot of bodies, and thankfully now we're healthy, so some guys are going to have to sit and we'll explain why. They don't have to be happy, but they have to be non-disruptive when they're out of the lineup."

Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets playoff tracker: Odds remain low amid six-game winless skid

By Brian Hedger – March 25, 2025

A six-game winless skid and losses in eight of their past nine games have dropped the Blue Jackets into tough spot going into their final 13 games.

Their odds of qualifying for a playoff spot have plummeted since March 1, when an exciting 5-3 outdoor victory over the Detroit Red Wings in front of 94,751 in attendance at Ohio Stadium gave them control of the first wild-card spot in the NHL's Eastern Conference.

After falling for the sixth straight time in a 6-3 loss Friday to the Pittsburgh Penguins at PPG Paints Arena, the Jackets have won only once since winning the NHL Stadium Series matchup. The final three-plus weeks starts Monday against the New York Islanders in Elmont, New York, where veterans Sean Monahan and Erik Gudbranson will return to the lineup after long-term injuries.

They'll help Blue Jackets (31-29-9, 71 points) match up against one of three teams standing between them and the East's final playoff spot. The Islanders (32-28-9, 73 points) have a two-point cushion over Columbus with the same number of games left to play, as both chase the Montreal Canadiens (33-27-9, 75 points) for what's currently the conference's only viable wild-card spot left.

It's a tightly packed race that includes the New York Rangers (34-31-6) the closest to catching Montreal despite the Canadiens, Islanders and Blue Jackets all having two more games left to play.

Columbus Blue Jackets' odds of qualifying for the playoffs drop again

The Athletic used a predictive stat-based model in October to project the Blue Jackets with a 0.3% chance of qualifying for the playoffs and finishing with 69 points — 68.6 to be exact.

Going into Monday's game, they've already surpassed it at 71 points. The Jackets remain in the playoff hunt.

That's the bright side. Those in the business of forecasting NHL games and generating better odds, who already didn't put much faith in the Blue Jackets, have more pessimistic take. DraftKings and BetMGM list the Jackets' odds of qualifying for the postseason at +600 to make it and -900 to miss, while FanDuel puts the odds at +680 to make it and -1400 to miss.

Adding a point with a 1-0 overtime loss Thursday to the Florida Panthers helped their cause, according to MoneyPuck, but not much. MoneyPuck uses percentages, giving the Blue Jackets a 6.3% chance of qualifying for the playoffs that slightly increased from 5.7% a week ago. They also have a 4.5% chance of earning the Eastern Conference's second wild-card spot, down from 4.6% last week, while their chance of landing the first wild-card has increased from 0.5% last Tuesday to 0.6% Monday.

The Blue Jackets' chances of finishing third in the Metropolitan Division also increased marginally from 0.5% a week ago to 1.1% starting this week.

How does the NHL determine its opening playoff field?

Conference standings: The top eight teams in the NHL's Eastern and Western conferences earn playoff spots. Starting this week off with a tough road matchup against the Islanders, the Blue Jackets are likely vying for the second wild-card spot in the East.

Playoff cutoff: The cutoff mark Monday is 75 points for the Canadiens, who currently control the East's second wild card with the same number of games remaining (13) as Columbus. The Blue Jackets are 11th in the conference standings at 71 points, but the Islanders, Rangers and Canadiens all hold standings tiebreakers over them in regulation wins. Columbus is also being pursued by the Detroit Red Wings (70 points), Boston Bruins (69 points) and Penguins (69 points).

Columbus Blue Jackets playoff outlook

Remaining points possible: The Blue Jackets can earn up to 26 more points in their remaining 13 games. Using their current .514 points percentage through 69 games, their season total would climb to 84 at the end of the NHL's 82-game season.

That's almost certainly not enough to earn a playoff spot despite the East's logjam of teams chasing the second wild card. The Jackets probably need 90-plus points to make it, so igniting a hot streak this week is critical.

Here is how the Columbus Blue Jackets have fared recently

Last 10 Games: The Blue Jackets are 2-7-1 in their last 10 games, including regulation losses in five of their past six games and four shutout defeats.

Notable wins/losses: Winning four straight games after the NHL's pause for the 4 Nations Face-Off tournament in February was a high point that included the Jackets' exciting 5-3 victory over the Red Wings at Ohio Stadium.

The excitement, however, was doused with consecutive losses to the Tampa Bay Lightning and Florida Panthers to open a four-game road trip that followed. They've since dropped six in a row since routing the Rangers, 7-3, on March 9 at Madison Square Garden.

Columbus Blue Jackets upcoming schedule

Here are the Blue Jackets' remaining games in March with start time and TV/radio broadcast information:

Monday, March 24 — At New York Islanders (29-28-7), 7:30 p.m./97.1 FM The Fan

Friday, March 28 — Vancouver Canucks (29-24-11), 7 p.m. FanDuel Sports Network/97.1 FM The Fan

Saturday, March 29 — At Ottawa Senators (34-25-5), 7 p.m. FanDuel Sports Network/97.1 FM The Fan

Columbus Blue Jackets home/road splits

The Blue Jackets continue to struggle on the road. Their season splits between home and road games are striking, and they've also dropped four in a row on home ice:

Home Record: 20-9-5 (45 points)

Away Record: 11-20-4 (26 points)

Summary: Teams that make the playoffs tend to break even on the road while making hay at home. The Blue Jackets had the home success part down before their current skid, but still haven't shaken their season-long road struggles.

Columbus Blue Jackets key players

The top scoring leaders for the Blue Jackets are:

D Zach Werenski — 20 goals, 49 assists, 69 points

RW Kirill Marchenko — 25 goals, 37 assists, 62 points

F Kent Johnson — 22 goals, 24 assists, 46 points

C Adam Fantilli — 21 goals, 21 assists, 42 points

LW Dmitri Voronkov — 20 goals, 22 assists, 42 points

Breakdown: These five players are critical to the Blue Jackets' playoff hopes, but Monahan's return Monday against the Islanders could provide a big offensive boost. The Jackets are still missing center Cole Sillinger, who's been out since injuring a shoulder Feb. 28 in Detroit.

Here's a look at the Blue Jackets' top two goalies:

No. 1 starter — Elvis Merzlikins is 22-19-5 with a 3.04 goals against average (GAA), .896 save percentage (SV%) and one shutout.

Backup — Danill Tarasov is 7-8-2 with a 3.51 GAA, .882 SV% and one shutout.

Breakdown: After struggling with consistency, Merzlikins has provided solid goaltending for an extended stretch. He was the main reason the Blue Jackets took a game last Thursday against the Panthers to overtime with a 0-0 score before taking an OT loss, and Merzlikins wasn't the issue in a 6-3 loss Friday in Pittsburgh. Tarasov has also rebounded from a slump in the season's first half to provide a dependable backup option.

The Athletic / NHL weekend rankings: A lot can change in 2 weeks, but I still believe in the Blue Jackets

By Sean McIndoe – March 25, 2025

Welcome back to the rankings, which took a week off last week. That gives us more recency bias to chew on than a typical week, and that means a minor shakeup in the Top 5 that features a new number one and the return of an old friend.

But first, let's do a quick reset on how much things have changed in two weeks, if only to remind us of how much this league and its storylines can pivot in a short time.

Bonus Five: Important things we missed by taking a week off

1. The Eastern wild-card bubble is now for one spot, not two, and it's a turtle derby – This isn't mathematically official, of course, but we're close enough that we can at least pencil in the Senators for one of those spots. That's largely because the Senators are finishing strong. But it's also because the race for that last spot is a turtle derby. If we're being generous, there are still as many as seven teams in the running for that last spot. Here's the full list of those teams that have managed to win more than half of their last ten games: (tumbleweed blows by). So the Senators got hot enough to pull away, but everyone else is just jostling around, looking like they don't especially want to bother.

2. The Western bubble turned out to be way better – We all but wrote off the West months ago, with it looking like it would be a two-team dance between the overachieving Flames and the broken Canucks. But now it looks a lot more like a four-team race, with Utah hanging around and the Blues looking strong down the stretch to hold the hammer. If this keeps up, a few of us Eastern writers might even have to stay up past 9:45 some nights to watch a few of these games.

3. The Presidents' Trophy is down to two teams – It's the Capitals and Jets fighting it out. For the Caps, it would be their fourth, which would move them into a tie for the second most in the trophy's history. For the Jets, it would be the very first for both the franchise and the market. Does anyone care? Not really, especially since the Presidents' Trophy winner hasn't won the Cup since 2013, and not in a full season since 2008. But we should celebrate regular-season success more than we do, so let's at least pretend to be interested.

In related news:

4. Only two divisions are still in play – The Jets and Caps will win the Central and Metro unless something really goes sideways. That leaves the Pacific up for grabs, with the Oilers and Knights battling for top spot. But it's tough to know what to make of Los Angeles, who have a game in hand but have been up and down all year, and may or may not be a tougher out than the wild-card Wild. Meanwhile, the Atlantic is pretty simple: three good teams in the Panthers, Lightning and Leafs, and two will be forced to face off in round one while the winner probably gets the Senators.

5. We might get an Art Ross race – This one is still TBD, with Nathan MacKinnon opening up a four-point lead over the injured Leon Draisaitl in what's probably a two-man race unless Nikita Kucherov goes nuts down the stretch again. MacKinnon and Draisaitl also seem like the front-runners for the Hart Trophy, even though it should go to Connor Hellebuyck. And Draisaitl has already locked up the Rocket Richard, and is one goal away from 50 in a season where he'll be the only one to hit that milestone. (And yes, that does mean a whole lot of you are screwed in the prediction contest. Don't think I've forgotten.)

Road to the Cup

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

Game of the weekend honors go to the Canadiens and Avalanche:

5. Carolina Hurricanes (43-23-4, +37 true goals differential*) – Their eight-game win streak was snapped on Saturday in a big way in Los Angeles, but they’ve looked good and that first-round matchup with the Devils seems more winnable with each week that goes by. They’re back in the Top 5 for the first time since early February.

4. Vegas Golden Knights (42-20-8, +49) – The Oilers still can’t get going, although that’s largely due to some big injuries that should heal up by the postseason. Still, with those three Atlantic teams refusing to sort anything out, we’ve got room for a Pacific team in our mix.

3. Dallas Stars (44-21-4, +52) – After a brief boost up to the top spot in the wake of the Mikko Rantanen deal, they drop down after just one regulation win in their last eight. Of far bigger concern, with a first-round meeting with the Avalanche looming, is this:

Pete DeBoer says there is a real possibility Dallas might have to play a first round series without Miro Heiskanen.

2. Washington Capitals (47-15-8, +78) – Congrats to the Caps on becoming the first team to get the “X” on the standings page, clinching the league’s first playoff spot on Thursday. Meanwhile, we’re down to seven goals to go for Alex Ovechkin’s goal-scoring record chase, which is a bad thing.

1. Winnipeg Jets (48-19-4, +76) – This feature from Murat on Chris Driedger’s roller hockey documentary was a lot of fun. Meanwhile, we’re not too worried about a loss to the Sabres because the Jets still tilted the ice and any loss that comes without Hellebuyck in net doesn’t really count.

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

Not ranked: New York Islanders – Let’s assume you have no dog in the Eastern wild-card fight. Your favorite team isn’t involved, so you’re just watching as a neutral party. If so, you should be rooting for the Blue Jackets, but those hopes have been fading badly since the break. That means you may have shifted your underdog energy towards the Canadiens. Or maybe you figure that Red Wings fans have suffered enough. You might be the sort of fan who wants the star-studded Rangers to find their way in, if only to keep their up-and-down drama going for a few extra weeks. You could even be holding out hope that Sidney Crosby and the Penguins can pull off a miracle.

One thing I’m willing to bet on: You’re not rooting for the Islanders.

You’re not exactly rooting against them, either. If we’re being honest, sometimes you forget they’re even in the race. They can’t really blame you, since they were deadline sellers who seemed to throw in the towel on the season. And that’s fine, because it’s the sort of thing teams do when their best forward is probably out for the year. Even the fan base has given up, with a huge chunk looking for a total tear-down rebuild.

And yet...

Every time you look at those Eastern standings, you get to the Islanders and have that “oh right” moment. They’re coming off a strong week that included wins over the top-tier Panthers, plus an OT win over the Habs team they’re chasing and a point on Saturday against the Flames. They’re right in this thing.

And in a twisted way, you kind of have to love it. Building up to a big dramatic finale only to have the one team nobody’s rooting for emerge with the wild-card spot would be kind of amazing. Maybe it all just leads to another early exit, although at least they’ll miss the Hurricanes in round one this time. Or

maybe we all do that thing we did a few years ago, counting the Islanders out and then watching them mow through supposedly better teams once the playoffs start.

If so, they'll need a little more from Ilya Sorokin, and some consistent offense from forwards who've yet to produce a 50-point player. As much as you hate to say it, they probably also need a few more loser points; last week's OT losses to the Alberta teams were their first single points since the first week in December, ending a streak of 18 losses all coming in regulation, which feels like it should be impossible.

For now, they've got the Blue Jackets tonight in a crucial showdown (and a preview of the final game of the season, but that's getting ahead of ourselves). Then it's the Canucks and a tough stretch of Tampa/Carolina/Tampa that's going to be tough to extract too many points from. For now, they're still on the outside. But if you're looking for a late-season bandwagon that's got some potential, not to mention plenty of good seats available, this just might be the team for you.

The bottom five

The five teams headed towards dead last and the best lottery odds for a top pick that could be James Hagens, Matthew Schaefer or someone else.

Quinn Hughes one-on-one against Matt Rempe is just unfair.

(The Rangers still won the game, with help from a late goal from J.T. Miller.)

5. Philadelphia Flyers (28-35-9, -49) – Honestly, you could do worse on a lazy Sunday afternoon than watching two bad teams trade goals in a sloppy, meaningless game. Hey, at least the Flyers scored a few times for a change.

4. Buffalo Sabres (28-35-6, -29) – We're at that point on the calendar where everyone is completely sick of March-themed brackets, but this one featuring 64 moments from the Sabres' playoff drought includes entries like "Butt goal," "Konopka's rabbit" and "Tim Murray 'smacking pee pee' quote," so we'll allow it.

And yes, this play from last week is there too:

3. Nashville Predators (26-36-8, -50) – One underrated fun part of rooting for a terrible team: Sending better teams into existential crisis every time you beat them.

2. Chicago Blackhawks (21-41-9, -60) – Hockey gods bless Laz, who is still at least trying to find something positive to say about these guys.

1. San Jose Sharks (19-42-9, -74) – Wait, why didn't we make Mark Giordano follow Marc-Edouard Vlasic around until he broke his all-time shots blocked record?

Not ranked: Columbus Blue Jackets – Well, it was fun while it lasted.

The Blue Jackets have been the league's best story all season long, going from trendy pick for dead last to an impossible playoff push in the wake of unimaginable tragedy. It was impossible not to root for them. A four-game win streak after the 4 Nations break seemed to cement them as legitimate contenders. This was really happening.

But now they've lost six in a row, including a tough loss in Pittsburgh over the weekend. The Blue Jackets have just a paltry three points in their last nine games. That's dropped them down to 11 percent in Dom's projections yesterday, trailing three teams with only one spot up for grabs. It's over.

But... is it?

Stay with me here. Yes, this is more of an exercise in coping than anything else, but let's see if we can find a path for Columbus over the final 13 games. It goes without saying that they'll need to catch fire over that stretch, with hot goaltending and strong special teams and timely scoring and all of the things that go into a hot streak. There's no world where a 7-5-1 finish gets them in. We know that.

But when you look at their remaining schedule, you start to wonder. They've got a few games against bad teams that will just be playing out the string, like Buffalo, Nashville and Philadelphia. On the flip side, they've got first-place Washington twice, but the Caps will already be locked into their spot and might not even have the Ovechkin chase to play for by then. They've also got Ottawa three times, which once felt like a wild-card showdown but not any longer because the Sens are basically in. But if they are, and moving up in the Atlantic is off the table, will the Senators be at their best or merely in playoff prep mode?

All of those games feel winnable, for various reasons. That leaves just three games against teams who could still be playing games that matter: Vancouver, Colorado and Toronto. Three good teams, sure, but the Leafs and Canucks haven't exactly been unbeatable lately.

I mean, if you squint hard enough, you can find some wins in there. Maybe a lot.

It probably won't be enough. That's the problem when you're chasing multiple teams – if even one of them gets hot, it really doesn't matter what you do. The model's pessimistic view of the Blue Jackets' chances seems about right. But 11 percent isn't zero, and this team has been defying the odds all season long. What's one more miracle for the team nobody believes in but everyone is rooting for?

We'll find out, with tonight's showdown against the Islanders probably qualifying as a must-win. Win it, and let's see where this goes.

[BlueJackets.com / Returns of Monahan, Gudbranson should bolster the CBJ lineup](#)

By Jeff Svoboda – March 25, 2025

During his last visit to have his surgically repaired shoulder checked out by doctors in Vail, Colo., Erik Gudbranson came prepared.

“I literally brought a calendar into the medical room with me and said (to the surgeon), ‘Hey, circle the date you can let me play,’ and he circled this one,” Gudbranson said. “I’ve known for a while.”

Thankfully for Gudbranson, there were no setbacks, and tonight is the night. Both Gudbranson and Sean Monahan were activated from injured reserve this morning and are expected to play for the Blue Jackets in tonight’s game at the New York Islanders.

For Gudbranson, it’s been 66 games and 160 days since he last took the ice for the Jackets; for Monahan, it’s been 28 games on the shelf and 76 days since he put on the gear and suited up for Columbus.

Somehow, the Blue Jackets have survived those losses and stuck in the playoff race without a pair of players who are not just veteran leaders but key parts of the team. Monahan was excelling as the Jackets’ No. 1 center, posting a point per game at the time of his injury, while Gudbranson is a physical presence and emotional leader whose game seems built for this time of year.

Together, they hope to provide a jolt to a CBJ team that has just one point in the last six games but remains in the thick of the playoff race. Columbus enters tonight’s game against the Islanders four points out of the second wild card spot in the Eastern Conference but with 13 games to go to erase that deficit.

“You just feel overwhelmingly proud of what the guys have accomplished so far,” Gudbranson said. “There’s a lot to accomplish still. There’s a lot of belief in this room and lot of opportunity ahead of us, so to be able to be a part of it in a real way, I feel very fortunate to be back.”

Added Monahan: “It’s a special group of guys, really fun to be a part of. We believe in this group to move on and play those important games that mean something.”

For head coach Dean Evason, the hope is their returns can bolster the CBJ lineup not just with production but presence.

“It’s nice to have both of them back in our lineup here tonight,” he said. “They’re both veteran guys that play a sound, simple, professional game. Do we need a boost at this point? Sure. So hopefully both of them provide that for us here tonight.”

Bringing Monahan back into the mix should be a huge addition. Not only is he an experienced player who excels in all game situations, he’s the team’s top-line center and had one of the most impactful starts of any player ever in a CBJ uniform, becoming the first player in union blue history to notch more than 40 points in his first 41 games with 14 goals and 27 assists.

He’ll go right back on the top line flanked by Kirill Marchenko and Dmitri Voronkov – that trio has outscored opposing squads 22-5 this season at 5-on-5 – and the No. 1 power-play unit.

“I’m just going to try to play my game,” he said. “I’m not going to try to change anything. I’ve played in the league long enough, I know there’s very limited time and space this time of year. It’s not easy to get

around the net, so I'm just going to try to work and help my linemates out and do whatever I can do to get the job done."

For Gudbranson, the season nearly ended before it began as the rugged blueliner was injured in a collision in the third game of the season. Gudbranson will add size, physicality and battle level to the unit on the back end, not to mention a booming shot when he has time to unleash it in the offensive zone.

It's been an arduous road to get back, but Gudbranson said he can lean into his experience at returning from injuries to help make his transition as seamless as possible.

"I've been in this position before," Gudbranson said. "That's not to say I won't feel it, but I know how to manage the game in those instances. I've done it well in the past, I've done it wrong in the past, and I am just going to try to keep it really simple and use my partner to my advantage and lean on my teammates.

"You have to go out there and play simple, play solid, stay on the D side of the puck and don't try to force anything. Just keep it as simple as possible, keep it moving north and give it to the guys when they're available."

[BlueJackets.com / Blue Jackets rally past Islanders for shootout win](#)

By Stefen Rosner – March 25, 2025

ELMONT, N.Y. -- The Columbus Blue Jackets ended a six-game losing streak by rallying for a 4-3 shootout win against the New York Islanders at UBS Arena on Monday.

Adam Fantilli, Kirill Marchenko and Boone Jenner scored, and Elvis Merzlikins made 30 saves for the Blue Jackets (32-29-9), who were 0-5-1 during their skid. Sean Monahan had two assists in his return after missing 28 games because of a wrist injury.

"We grinded. We weren't good in the first, and we obviously knew that," Monahan said. "We tried to keep pushing, and we did that. We found ways to get some goals. I mean, Elvis stood on his head and kept us in there."

Kyle Palmieri, Anders Lee and Pierre Engvall scored for the Islanders (32-28-10), who extended their point streak to six games (3-0-3) but blew a lead in the third period for the third straight game. Ilya Sorokin made 27 saves.

Columbus moved within two points of the Montreal Canadiens for the second wild card into the Stanley Cup Playoffs from the Eastern Conference. New York is one point back of Montreal, which has a game in hand on each team.

"We didn't play well in the third. We were outstanding in the first," Islanders coach Patrick Roy said. "We were good in the second. We didn't give much. They scored those two goals, that tip on (Noah) Dobson, but other than this, I thought we had a strong game. But in the third period, we stopped playing in their zone. We stopped playing simple. [We weren't] quick on the wall, bringing the puck [up]. We lost a lot of battles. We had a power play to start (the period), and I didn't think we competed hard enough to get those pucks, and I thought that was the difference in the game. But overall, we played well enough. We should have won that game."

Engvall gave the Islanders a 1-0 lead at 13:16 of the first period. Skating in on a rush, Engvall slowed up at the top of the right circle and cut toward the slot, where he beat Merzlikins glove side with a wrist shot.

Palmieri made it 2-0 at 18:41. He received a pass from Bo Horvat, who was in the left corner, as he was cutting down the slot and scored glove side on Merzlikins.

Fantilli cut the lead to 2-1 at 5:31 of the second period. He used Dobson as a screen on a rush and beat Sorokin over his glove from the top of the left circle.

Jenner tied it 2-2 with a short-handed goal at 17:13, scoring with a wrist shot from above the right circle that deflected off Dobson's leg and fluttered past Sorokin's blocker.

Lee put the Islanders back in front 3-2 at 19:12 after Mike Reilly's slap shot from the left boards deflected off his leg at the top of the crease. Columbus challenged the play for goaltender interference, but the call stood after a video review.

New York outshot Columbus 27-11 through two periods before being outshot 17-4 in the third.

"The guys were saying all the right things on the bench, between periods, and we just reinforced that it wasn't from a lack of trying," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said. "We were just trying to score, trying to do too much, way too much instead of just simplifying our game and getting after it and doing what we did in the last two periods as far as getting pucks deep, getting after it and doing what we do. It's not

a negative that they're trying their butts off to score goals and to win hockey games and get two points, but you still have to go about it intelligently. They adjusted themselves and played it the right way."

Marchenko tied the game 3-3 at 12:56 of the third period with a slap shot from the top of the right circle that beat Sorokin blocker side through a screen.

Palmieri appeared to score the game-winning goal for New York with 10 seconds remaining in regulation, but the goal was immediately waived off because of goaltender interference. The call stood after a video review initiated by the Situation Room.

Merzlikins then kept the game tied at 1:48 of overtime by diving to deny Ryan Pullock's wrist shot from the low slot.

"They're a good hockey team over there," Fantilli said. "They got a good goalie in between the pipes. He made some big saves when we were pressing at the end. ... We were really happy to get one now and try to start our push now."

NOTES: Blue Jackets defenseman Erik Gudbranson was minus-1 in 16:18 of ice time in his return. He hadn't played since Oct. 15 because of a shoulder injury. ... Marchenko's goal was his first point in six games. ... Horvat extended his point streak to four games (three goals, two assists).

The Hockey News / Columbus Blue Jackets (71 pts) vs. New York Islanders (73 pts) Game Preview

By Jason Newland – March 25, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets and New York Islanders play the third game of the four-game season series tonight at UBS Arena.

The Blue Jackets sit just two points behind the Islanders in the standings, so Monday's game is vital for both teams. Although the playoffs might be a long shot now for the struggling Jackets, just winning could give the team what it needs to have a successful finish at least.

They'll be getting back Sean Monahan and Erik Gudbranson tonight. The importance of Getting Monahan back cannot be overstated.

The Blue Jackets have a huge opportunity to right the ship tonight against the New York Islanders.

Islanders Stats

- Power Play – 12.4% - 32nd in NHL
- Penalty Kill – 71.9% - 30th in NHL
- Goals For - 188 – 26th – 2.72 GPG – 25th
- Goals Against – 204 – 15th – 2.96 GPG – 15th

Series History vs. The Islanders

- Columbus is 8-15-3 on the road and 25-22-8 in 55 all-time games against the Islanders.
- The Jackets are 2-9-1 in the last 12 against NYI and have lost 4 of 5 against New York.

Who To Watch For The Islanders

- Bo Horvat leads the Isles with 48 points.
- Anders Lee leads the team with 25 goals.
- Ilya Sorokin is 27-20-5 with a SV% of .907.

CBJ Player Notes vs. Islanders

- Boone Jenner has 14 points in 30 games against the Islanders.
- Zach Werenski has 13 points in 22 games.
- James van Riemsdyk has 40 points in 56 games vs. NYI.

Injuries

- Kevin Labanc (shoulder) is on Injured Reserve as of Feb. 21 and is out for the season (12 Games)
- Cole Sillinger is on Injured Reserve as of Feb. 28 (9 Games). He's been skating and practicing.
- Jake Christiansen (upper body); (3 Games). He's been skating and practicing.

TOTAL MAN GAMES LOST: 298

How to Watch & Listen: Tonight's game will be on FanDuel Sports Network. Steve Mears will be on the play-by-play. The radio broadcast will be on 97.1 The Fan, with Bob McElligott behind the mic doing the play-by-play.

The Hockey News / Blue Jackets Looking To Keep Playoff Hopes Alive Tonight Against Islanders

By Spencer Lazary – March 25, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets went from fighting to hold onto a wild-card spot to being four points out and trying to keep their playoff hopes alive—all in just two weeks.

It has been a tough stretch for the Blue Jackets, as they have dropped six straight games, including three shutout losses. However, today they activated both Erik Gudbranson and Sean Monahan off IR, giving them some much-needed reinforcements.

Tonight, they face off against the New York Islanders, who currently sit ahead of them in the Eastern Conference wild-card race with 73 points. The Blue Jackets are just two points behind and will look to pull even with a big win.

As the season winds down and the remaining games drop from 13 and counting, every game for the Blue Jackets is a must-win. They need as many victories as possible while hoping the teams ahead of them slip, allowing them to gain ground on the Montreal Canadiens and ultimately pass them for the final wild-card spot.

Columbus can still fight its way into a playoff spot. But it all starts with a win tonight on the road against the Islanders.

The Hockey Writers / Blue Jackets Overcome Multiple Deficits in Shootout Win Over Islanders

By Mark Scheig – March 25, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets went into Monday night hoping to snap a pair of 0-5-1 streaks. Not only was that their streak going into the game against the New York Islanders, they were 0-5-1 at UBS Arena all-time. Thanks to a gutsy effort, both streaks have now been put to bed.

Adam Fantilli scored the only goal of the shootout to lift the Blue Jackets to a 4-3 win over the Islanders. Kirill Marchenko's goal in the third forced overtime. Sean Monahan recorded two assists in his return to the lineup.

Two main stories came from this game. While the Blue Jackets overcame multiple deficits, a pair of goaltender interference situations will be talked about for some time.

Game Recap

The first half of the first period saw both teams get into the flow of the game. Then the Islanders stepped on the gas with their forecheck. They were able to open up a 2-0 lead as a result.

First, Pierre Engvall opened the scoring off a pass from former Blue Jacket Adam Boqvist. Engvall's against the grain shot was a good one that got by Elvis Merzlikins.

The Islanders then scored off a beautiful passing play by Kyle Palmieri. Bo Horvat's pass sent Palmieri in to send them to the room with a two-goal lead.

The Blue Jackets played the rest of the game as though their season was on the line. Fantilli beat Ilya Sorokin early in the second period on a snipe to cut it to 2-1.

The Islanders power play then came back to bite them. Boone Jenner scored shorthanded with under three minutes left in the second to make it 2-2. All the Blue Jackets had to do was kill the last 2:47 to be tied after 40 minutes. It didn't happen that way.

With just 48 seconds left in the second, Anders Lee deflected Mike Reilly's shot to make it 3-2. After some thought, Dean Evason elected to challenge for goalie interference. Although Merzlikins' glove was hit, the goal was allowed to stand. The NHL said they didn't see any goalie interference infractions in the review.

The Blue Jackets needed a goal in the third to get at least a point. Marchenko gave it to them from the right point with 7:04 left in regulation. But then the moment that will be talked about for a while came up.

It appeared the Islanders scored with under 10 seconds left in the game. However, officials ruled Palmieri bumped Merzlikins before the goal and not having ample time to get set. After a long review, the no-goal call was upheld. Overtime was required.

A hectic overtime saw both teams trade chances with each goalie coming up huge. In the shootout, Merzlikins stopped all three Islanders shooters. Fantilli scored the only goal on his backhand to help break the losing streak at six games.

Merzlikins made 30 saves on the night. Sorokin stopped 27.

The Blue Jackets climb to within two points of the last playoff spot in the Eastern Conference. They will have Tuesday off before returning to practice Wednesday. They face the Vancouver Canucks at home on Friday night.

The Islanders meanwhile host the Canucks on Wednesday night. They get a point and are just one point behind Montreal for the last playoff spot.

1st Ohio Battery / Game Day #70: Monahan, Gudbranson Return To Lineup As Blue Jackets Desperately Seek To End Losing Streak

By Ed Francis – March 25, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets lineup got a nice boost Monday in advance of their battle against the New York Islanders.

The club activated center Sean Monahan and defenseman Erik Gudbranson from Injured Reserve, with both players set to return for a key game in the Eastern Conference playoff picture against the Isles.

Gudbranson has missed nearly the entire season, while Monahan has been sidelined since the first week of January. The two returning veterans will look to play their part in ending a six-game losing streak by the Blue Jackets that has watched the club tumble from in a playoff spot by multiple points to critically needing points to not fall completely out of the picture.

The Blue Jackets trail the Islanders by two points in the wild card race and are four points out of the last playoff spot as of Monday afternoon. A win would stabilize the situation, certainly, but a loss — especially in regulation — and a path to the postseason could start to get tricky quick for Columbus.

Monahan, a catalyst on the power play and at the faceoff dot, will be on the top line between Dmitri Voronkov and Kirill Marchenko. Meanwhile, Gudbranson will be paired up defensively with rookie Denton Mateychuk. That pairing will allow head coach Dean Evason to put Ivan Provorov back on the left side, where he'll be in the middle pairing with Damon Severson.

Here's what else to know when the Blue Jackets face the blue and orange Monday night:

- **RE: ISLES**
Ilya Sorokin starts for the Islanders, his second start of the season against Columbus. He stopped 25 of 26 shots in a 3-1 win over the Blue Jackets in late January. Sorokin has been consistently good-but-not-great lately, allowing at least two but not more than three goals in each of his last eight starts. ... New York has four 20 goal scorers on the team this year — but not a single player with 30 assists or with 50 points. ... Columbus' power play has struggled as of late, but the Islanders haven't fared much better: they are 2-for-22 in their last seven games, with both goals coming in the same game, an overtime win last week against Montreal. For the season, the Isles have the league's worst power play at 12.4%.
- **0-FOR-ELMONT**
UBS Arena opened in 2021, and the Blue Jackets luck there has been... not good. Columbus is 0-5-1 in Elmont, located on the west side of Long Island. Tonight would be a good time to change that first number, of course.
- **POWER PLAY TURNAROUND?**
In the 28 games Monahan was away from the team, the Blue Jackets power play converted just four times in 51 chances. With Monahan, they were 26-for-109. That's 23.9% vs 7.9%. With Columbus 0-for-21 in their last nine games on the man-advantage, Monahan's return could be a big boost for the Blue Jackets' special teams.
- **LINEUPS CHANGES & PROJECTIONS:**
With Monahan and Gudbranson back in the lineup, it'll be Yegor Chinakhov and Jack Johnson who sit as healthy scratches.

1st Ohio Battery / CBJ 4, NYI 3 (SO): Adam Fantilli, Elvis Merzlikins Come Up Big Late To Help Jackets End Skid, Pick Up Two Huge Points

By Ed Francis – March 25, 2025

Cinema, as the say.

The Columbus Blue Jackets rallied from down 2-0 after the first and 3-2 with just seven minutes in the third to defeat the New York Islanders 4-3 in a shootout Monday night.

Columbus allowed the first goal for the seventh consecutive game at the 13:16 mark of the first period and fell behind 2-0 later in the period.

"The first period wasn't us at all, obviously," said captain Boone Jenner. "We weren't playing our game, turning pucks over, losing battles."

"All year we haven't accepted that, so we knew we had better and obviously the second and third were much better efforts."

After starting the second with a successful penalty kill, the Blue Jackets got on the board with Adam Fantilli's 22nd goal of the season. Later in the period, Columbus would tie the game on a short-handed goal from Jenner.

But the Blue Jackets would still enter the third period trailing by one when a deflection by New York's Anders Lee would get past Columbus goalie Elvis Merzlikins with just 48 seconds left in the period.

Down a goal for over half of the third, the Blue Jackets peppered the Isles and goalie Ilya Sorokin with shots and eventually connected when Kirill Marchenko fired a slapper from the top of the right circle that got past Sorokin to tie the game at 3-3 with 7:06 left.

New York nearly regained the lead and all but secured the win when Kyle Palmieri seemingly scored with just under ten seconds left in regulation — but the goal was waved off by officials for goaltender interference. That decision was upheld when sent to the league for what was one of the longer reviews of the season.

"It took so long," said head coach Dean Evason. "It was really gut-wrenching there for a while to look up at the clock and see basically nothing left."

Each team got off just two shots in the overtime period, but both of New York's shots were saved in spectacular fashion by Merzlikins, keeping the game tied through 65 minutes. In the shootout, Fantilli was the lone goal-scorer to give Columbus the win.

The victory ended a six-game losing streak by the Blue Jackets and brought them to within two points of the final wild card spot in the Eastern Conference playoff picture. It was also the team's first win at UBS Arena; they were 0-5-1 entering the game.

Here's how the Blue Jackets got back into the win column:

1st Period:

(13:16 — NYI Goal): The goal-scoring sequence starts when the Blue Jackets have trouble entering their own zone, resulting in a giveaway that springs an Islanders rush. Pierre Engvall fires from just inside the right circle to give New York a 1-0 lead.

(18:41 — NYI Goal): The Islanders double their lead with just over a minute left in the first. Bo Horvat makes a good pass in the corner to Palmieri, who comes into the slot with no one around him and rips one past Merzlikins to make it 2-0.

2nd Period:

(5:31 — CBJ Goal): The Blue Jackets get on the board with a sensational snipe from Fantilli. It starts with a crisp pass from Dante Fabbro through some traffic that finds Fantilli near center ice. He skates into the zone and sees two New York defenders between him and goaltender Ilya Sorokin, opting to quickly fire a snap shot on net. It gets past Sorokin, cutting the Isles lead to 2-1. Merzlikins gets the secondary assist on the goal for his first point of the season.

(17:13 — CBJ Goal): Jenner's short-handed goal ties the game at 2-2. The Islanders win the faceoff in Columbus' zone to start their power play, but Monahan gets the puck less than 10 seconds in and flips it up the ice to Jenner. He enters the New York zone with a one-on-one against defenseman Noah Dobson and fires from a distance. It takes a wild bounce off Dobson, gets past Sorokin, bounces off the post and goes in to tie the game.

(19:12 — NYI Goal): Lee regains the lead for the Islanders after he deflects one in from the doorstep in the final minute. The Blue Jackets challenge this for goaltender interference and it's close, but the call stands and the Islanders take a 3-2 lead into the third period.

3rd Period:

(12:54 — CBJ Goal): Marchenko ties the game with what might be his biggest goal of the season. Monahan wins the faceoff in the Isles zone, Marchenko takes it and gets backhands it to Provorov, who skates down the boards and then throws it in front of the net. It gets all the way through but goes right to Marchenko off the boards. He unloads through tons of traffic and it sees its way through all of it and into the net, tying the game at 3-3.

(19:51 — NYI Goal Waved Off): With less than ten seconds left, the Islanders appear to have scored what would almost certainly be a game-winning goal — but it's waved off immediately by the officials for goaltender interference and sent to the league for an official review. Replay doesn't show much, but in what looked to be a surprise to both sides, the call on the ice was upheld: no goal, keeping the game at 3-3.

Overtime + Shootout:

(1:48 — Magnificent Merzlikins Save): The save of the overtime period, no doubt about it. This leaping save from Merzlikins keeps the game going when it looked to be over.

(Shootout): There is but one goal in the shootout and it's this one from Fantilli, a backhander from just outside the crease that lodges in the net.

Stat Chat:

- The Blue Jackets found their physicality against the Islanders, racking up 34 hits. Monahan and Erik Gudbranson had three apiece in their first games back, while Mathieu Olivier led all players with seven.
- Jenner won seven of eight faceoffs for the Blue Jackets and helped lead Columbus to winning 55% of the draws for the game. Entering the day, the Islanders ranked #1 in the NHL in faceoff percentage, at 54.7%.

- The sense of urgency was certainly there for Columbus and got stronger as the game went on. They had just 33% of shot attempts in the first period, cranked it up to 54% in the second and had 73% (29 of 40) in the final period.

Up Next:

Columbus has three days off before returning to Nationwide Arena on Friday night to face the Vancouver Canucks. Puck-drop is 7 p.m. for what will certainly be a packed house in another big game.

1st Ohio Battery / Reality Check: On The Pulse Of The Blue Jackets And Evolving Expectations

By Will Chase – March 25, 2025

No matter what, the Columbus Blue Jackets have been a fun team this season.

That much, the majority of people can agree on. Hell, if you mentioned before the season that this team would be four points out of a playoff spot on Mar. 24, everyone signs up for that.

From having a less than one percent chance of making the playoffs around training camp to where this team is today, the journey throughout the season has been one word: Fun.

Columbus has defied the odds since day one with how they've rallied and come together even more so around the loss of Johnny Gaudreau.

Head coach Dean Evason, who is absolutely worthy of garnering Jack Adams votes for Coach of the Year consideration, has pushed all the right buttons to get everything he can out of his group. He might not win it, and one can argue Washington Capitals head coach Spencer Carbery already has it wrapped up and should, but Evason's impact is not overlooked.

The Blue Jackets offense, one of the worst last season (2.85 GF/GP, 25th), has been among the best this year (3.14, 11th). Forget for a second the inexplicable scoring drought over the previous few weeks — more on that in a bit.

For just the second time in franchise history, the Blue Jackets have at least five 20-goal scorers, matching the 2018-19 club. That club had seven total players with 20-plus goal campaigns including trade deadline acquisitions Matt Duchene and Ryan Dzingel.

It's still possible for Mathieu Olivier (16) to become the sixth 20-goal scorer this season with 13 games left to play.

Goaltender Elvis Merzlikins has turned in a fine season, making the second-most starts of his career with 46 (56, 2021-22) and having the second-most wins in his career with 22 (27, 2021-22). He has a 3.04 goals against average, improved from 3.45 last season. Questions still loom about the Blue Jackets' net going forward but there's been more stability this season compared to the previous few years.

So, what happens if this team misses the playoffs, whether by one point or 10 points? With the losses piling up — the Jackets have dropped six in a row (0-5-1) — the jarring drop-off might be surprising, especially with how they're losing.

This time of year, the cream begins to rise to the top. The playoffs are still a month away but as any player and coach will tell you, these are all playoff games. All the finer details are even more evident — checking, defense, star goaltending — particularly amongst those deeper teams with Stanley Cup playoff experience and the elite few with Cup aspirations.

The latest slump is not exactly a shock.

On Presidents' Day Weekend, we outlined the remaining schedule with the Blue Jackets having to contend with the likes of the Tampa Bay Lightning, Florida Panthers, and several inner-division matchups.

In March, the Jackets are 2-7-1. They beat the Detroit Red Wings 5-3 at the Stadium Series on Mar. 1 and beat the Rangers 7-3 at Madison Square Garden on Mar. 9.

Columbus hasn't won a game in over two weeks, but they're still in the thick of the Eastern Conference playoff race, albeit with the gap between the last playoff spot and where they sit in the standings increasing.

Since that seven-goal output at the Rangers, the Jackets have been shut out three times including against those same Rangers on Mar. 15.

A top-10 scoring offense at home (3.62, 6th), the Blue Jackets went 0-3-1 on their last homestand, getting shut out in three of them and scoring one goal in a game in which they had 46 shots on goal and outshot the New Jersey Devils 24-3 in the third period.

They scored three against the Pittsburgh Penguins on Friday but played one of their worst games during the stretch, losing 6-3, as accentuated by Evason in the postgame.

It could be a blend of the moment getting a little too big for one of the youngest clubs in the NHL and it can also be that the team peaked a little early. They still have a chance to get off the schneid and crack the tournament, too.

Looking through the lens of the previous Blue Jackets seasons, we've all heard the talk about how these games matter for the future. That the future is bright and that's especially true in this sense. The frustration of losses piling up is not lost on anyone, especially the team itself. How these losses have compiled is oddly reminiscent of their Nov. 1-12 stretch in which they also suffered through an 0-5-1 slump, not scoring more than two goals in any game during that stretch.

The frustration of losses piling up all at once and during this time in the schedule is understandable as it feels like their grasp on a playoff spot is becoming ever more unlikely. But would it be any better if the team was mixing in wins with more regularity and still missing out?

The optics of missing out are noticeable either way, but it doesn't have to paint the picture of the season as a whole. It'll primarily be up to what the organization does this offseason and how everyone performs next season with raised expectations, no matter what happens in the final 13 regular-season games.

But it certainly would be a victory for everyone — especially *this* group — to be among the final 16 teams with a chance, if for no reason other than experience and getting a taste of hopefully more that awaits.

Columbus gets a boost for Monday's matchup against the Islanders as Sean Monahan (wrist) and Erik Gudbranson (shoulder) are expected to return to the lineup.

Since losing Monahan in January, the Blue Jackets power play is dead-last in the league and just 4-for-51 (7.8%).

From the start of the season until that Jan. 7 game in which Monahan was injured and left the game at Pittsburgh — the Jackets were 2-for-2 on the power play in that game — the power play was 10th in the league (23.9%). They could also use Cole Sillinger who hasn't played since Feb. 28 when he left with an upper-body injury.

Columbus has fought through a lot this season. The final 13 games with a fighter's punch?

It should be fun.

The Athletic / ‘Double Vision’: How an NHL goalie inspired Foreigner’s arena-rock megahit

By Aaron Portzline – March 25, 2025

The lyrics to both verses were finished, and the first line of the chorus — Fill my eyes — was in place. Lou Gramm and Mick Jones, the driving forces behind Foreigner, one of the best-selling rock bands in history, had worked through the melody enough to know they had another hit on their hands.

It was the fall of 1977, and the band was in a New York City studio working through songs for the follow-up album to the self-titled “Foreigner,” which launched them to fame a year earlier. The new record didn’t have a title, and the song they were most excited about had everything, as Gramm put it, “except a hook and a name.”

“It was quite frustrating,” Gramm told The Athletic. “I could not find the words or a phrase that would culminate what I was singing about in the verses. I wasn’t even wrestling with words, really. I was just drawing a blank.”

Artists and athletes have always mingled, and the 1970s and ’80s were particularly wild times in New York City, where Studio 54 became the celebrity haven. Gramm and Jones became friends with several actors and pro athletes, Gramm said, but they got along best with members of the New York Rangers, including goaltender John Davidson.

There’s no way Gramm could have expected his passion for hockey, and his friendship with Davidson, to pay such dividends as he waited for inspiration to strike so he could complete his favorite track. Then, one evening at the Atlantic Recording Studios in New York City, approximately 1 1/2 miles north of Madison Square Garden, it struck in the form of vulcanized rubber.

“I was inside my vocal booth, this little two-by-three cubby hole,” said Gramm, now 74. “They put you in a soundproof booth so that the music of the band doesn’t leak into your vocal tracks. I had a little eight-inch TV taped to the upper left-hand corner of this little booth, and I would turn it on ever-so-quietly so I could watch the Rangers between my takes.

“John Davidson came out of the net to play a puck and one of the other (opposing) guys conked him. He went down hard. There was a fight, and a couple of the (Rangers) stood around (Davidson) to protect him while he was down. I remember the trainers came out to help him to the bench so he could get checked out.”

In today’s NHL, Davidson would almost certainly have been removed from the game. Back then, it was largely the player’s decision. “I got dinged and stayed in,” Davidson said. “That’s what we did in those days.”

On the Rangers’ TV broadcast, it was announced — likely by then play-by-play voice Jim Gordon or commentator Bill Chadwick — that Davidson had complained of “double vision” on the bench before he re-entered the game.

Gramm, hearing that, immediately reached for his pen and paper.

“I’ve told John this a number of times,” Gramm said. “When he got hit, as frightening as it was, as terrible as it was, it triggered something in my imagination that set off the chorus.

“I knew we had something with that song already. I just knew it, but this was the final piece. I’m in the vocal booth, where I’m supposed to be singing, but instead I’m writing these lyrics as fast as I can. The

words started flowing like water. It came out of me quick, faster than I could write, which is how it'd go sometimes.

"I finished, stepped out of the booth, and said, 'Guys, guys, guys. I've got this. I've got the chorus.' And when we finally put it all together, it was unbelievable."

Fill my eyes with that double vision,

No disguise for that double vision,

Ooh, when it gets through to me,

It's always new to me,

My double vision gets the best of me

The album was released in June 1978, peaked at No. 3 on the Billboard charts, and sold over 7 million copies, making it the band's best-selling record. The song "Double Vision" was released three months later, in September, and peaked at No. 2 on the charts, then the highest-charting single for Foreigner.

Pretty wild, considering it almost didn't get finished in time to make the album.

"It's a great combination of words," Jones, now 80, wrote in an email exchange with The Athletic. "It came together pretty quickly. It was such a great song and such a great title that it spurred us on to record the song and name the album after it.

"There are times where the lyrics come first, then the music. Sometimes it's the music, then the words."

But this time was different. Call it divine intervention by the hockey gods.

J.D. ... a storied career

Davidson has had an almost unrivaled 50-year career in pro hockey as a player (St. Louis Blues and Rangers), a Hall of Fame broadcaster both with the Rangers, "Hockey Night In Canada" and other national outlets, and as an executive who has served as club president for three franchises: the Blues, Rangers and Columbus Blue Jackets.

Last summer, when the Blue Jackets hired president and GM Don Waddell, Davidson stepped down to become senior advisor, and he's filled in this season when Blue Jackets TV analyst Jody Shelley is on the road broadcasting games for Amazon Prime Video. Davidson's next game is Monday, when the Jackets play the Islanders in New York.

It's no surprise, given his broadcasting chops, that Davidson is a master storyteller. It helps, of course, when you have some incredible stories to tell.

Davidson and the Rangers were still weeks away from training camp when "Double Vision" was released. The song was impossible to miss in the U.S., but also in Canada, where it reached No. 3 on the charts. Davidson, a Canadian, remembered hearing and liking the song when he heard it almost hourly on the radio.

But he had no idea he had a role in it until he arrived back in New York before the season.

"All I knew is that it was a great rock and roll song," Davidson said. "I had somebody with the Rangers come up to me and say, 'You have to see this.' It was a review of the song or the record — somebody had written about it — and it mentioned the whole deal about me getting hit and hurt and how Lou took that and used it.

“Pretty incredible. After that, Lou and I talked about it quite a bit. He was around a lot, and we became pretty friendly. He’d play in some charity games, sing the national anthem before Rangers games. We goofed around a little bit. Really good guy.”

The season after “Double Vision” came out, Davidson helped carry the Rangers to the Stanley Cup Final, where they lost to the Montreal Canadiens in five games. They became the toast of the town that spring, and Davidson could be called the toastmaster. He loved music, and musicians loved him.

To his knowledge, Davidson joked, “Double Vision” is the only song that he inspired. But the stories are staggering.

“We went out after games all the time to see musicians playing,” Davidson said. “I went with Diana (his wife) to a place called the Lone Star Cafe to see a group called The Byrds. They were great, and the venue was so small it was like they were playing in your living room.

“After they played a bunch of songs, they called out for somebody to join them, and the guy sitting next to us gets up and goes down to join the band. It was Jerry Garcia.”

Davidson became especially close with Glenn Frey of the Eagles, with whom he shared an agent (Irving Azoff). They’d frequently end up back at Azoff’s house, but one night something special happened.

“Irving has a cassette in his hands — that’s how long ago this was, right, a cassette! — and he wants to play us this song he’d recorded earlier in the day that he thinks is going to be huge,” Davidson said. “He puts it in, presses play, and it was Jimmy Buffett’s ‘Cheeseburger in Paradise.’ Nobody had heard it yet. How wild is that?”

Davidson once got a 6 a.m. wake-up call during a Rangers road trip in Vancouver. It was from Frey, who was partying with Buffett and others in Aspen, Colo., and lost track of time.

Davidson was so close with Frey that in the summer of 1978, when the Eagles were touring to promote “Hotel California,” they allowed Davidson and his crew to sit on the stage one summer night in Calgary, just out of view of the crowd in old McMahon Stadium, which sat roughly 30,000.

“We were 20 feet from the band,” Davidson said. “I’d played in front of crowds before, but that many people so into that band ... the wave of energy that comes up to the stage feels like a wind.”

And there was another memorable night that was quite a bit calmer.

“I got a call from (New York author) Larry ‘Ratso’ Sloman. It was around Christmas,” Davidson said. “He said ‘Come into the city with Diana, we’re going to go over to Joni Mitchell’s condo and we’re going to have dinner at her place.’ So we did.

“She, truly, was one of the nicest ladies we’d ever met. Just wonderful. Just like you’d expect, right? We spent half the night making homemade decorations for her Christmas tree.”

Davidson’s fame extended way beyond the rink. He did Miller Lite ads in Canada just after his career ended. He was the voice of EA Sports’ NHL ’97. He was the announcer in the 1999 movie “Mystery, Alaska,” and even appeared a few years earlier in an episode of the sitcom, “The Nanny.”

Where does “Double Vision” rank? Hard to say, Davidson said. But the song, nearly 50 years after it was released, is still played on classic rock radio stations. It’s been streamed nearly 40 million times on Spotify, which says Foreigner averages 17.9 million monthly listeners. The “Double Vision” video has been watched more than 5 million times on YouTube.

“My relatives — the cousins, nieces and nephews especially — they think it’s pretty cool,” Davidson said. “They probably don’t believe me at first. I tell them I’m famous because I got hit in the head with the puck.”

Faded memories

It’s been almost 50 years since “Double Vision” was written and recorded. Davidson was part of the story, sure, but he wasn’t present when Gramm got his burst of creativity and finished the song. Gramm remembers the moment he heard the words “double vision,” but the rest of the details are foggy.

Gramm has said repeatedly that the Rangers were playing the Philadelphia Flyers, which makes sense, because that was the heyday of the Broad Street Bullies. Those Flyers, who loved to fight and intimidate, would run an opposing goalie just out of sheer boredom. He’s also been certain that Davidson left the game for the second-string goalie.

But Davidson played only three of the Rangers’ six games against the Flyers during the 1977-78 season: a 3-3 tie on Dec. 7 and a 2-2 tie on March 15, both in the Garden, and a 3-0 loss at The Spectrum on April 6. But Davidson started and finished all three of those games for the Rangers, meaning he couldn’t have left the game with an injury.

The April 6 game in Philadelphia is the type of game that would make sense. At 15:38 of the second period, all hell broke loose between the Flyers and Rangers, resulting in 88 penalty minutes. Davidson and his Flyers counterpart, Bernie Parent, were each penalized for “goalie leaving the crease” and Davidson got an extra two minutes for roughing.

But Davidson never left that game, either. Plus, “Double Vision” — the album and the song — had already been recorded at a studio in Los Angeles, ready for release just two months later.

Jones has heard Gramm’s account, but he remembers it differently. “I recall that Lou and I were at a Rangers playoff game,” he said. That would jibe with the New York Rangers’ account.

The Rangers played the Buffalo Sabres in a qualifying series, but Davidson played only in Game 2 of that series — the Sabres won in three games — and he never left the ice.

Others have suggested it occurred in a game vs. Montreal. Davidson tells the story that he was struck in the mask by a puck (which matches the Rangers’ account) but Gramm insists it was an elbow or a collision when Davidson came out to play the puck.

The NHL, at the request of The Athletic, found 22 games in which Davidson started a game but didn’t finish. In only one of those, according to Stuart McComish, the league’s senior manager of statistics and research, did Davidson return to finish the game. That occurred on April 3, 1976 — two years earlier — against the New York Islanders.

At this point, the mystery only adds to the story.

“There were two or three games in my career where I got clunked in the head, when you get rattled a bit,” Davidson said. “It was probably one of those, right?”

“To be honest, though, I’m not sure it really matters. It’s a hell of a song and a hell of a story.”

Foreigner, which sold 80 million records worldwide, was inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland last October. Gramm and Kelly Clarkson made a duet out of the band’s biggest hit, “I Want to Know What Love Is,” but Jones was not able to attend because of declining health.

Davidson said he watched the induction ceremony. When a medley of Foreigner's hits were played, he smiled at one song in particular. That's how it goes every time he hears "Double Vision" on the radio, in a hockey rink, a shopping mall, etc.

Gramm and Davidson spend their winters in Florida. Gramm is in Sarasota, Davidson is in Naples, approximately 115 miles apart. They're hoping to meet up for lunch someday.

"It'd be awesome to see my old friend again, wouldn't it? Tell him I'll buy lunch," Gramm said with a chuckle. "That's the least I can do."

Sportsnet.ca / Weekend Takeaways: Golden opportunity for contenders in wide-open Eastern Conference

By Ryan Dixon – March 25, 2025

“Why not us?” is the type of playoff-season slogan we see printed on T-shirts across all sports. This year, if you happen to be the one in charge of ordering post-season swag for an Eastern Conference contender, you might consider expanding the phrase a little: “No, really, why not us?”

In hockey — with its wild bounces, hot goalies and star players only on the ice for 33 per cent of the game — upsets are a feature, not a bug. The Minnesota North Stars made the 1991 Cup final after going 27-39-14 in the regular season; the 2012 Kings not only won the Stanley Cup as the West’s eighth seed, but stormed their way to it with a 16-4 post-season record; just six years ago, the St. Louis Blues took the title after occupying the league basement halfway through the regular season.

The idea anything — good or bad — can happen is part of hockey’s DNA, especially come spring.

Usually that notion surfaces in the wake of some crazy underdog achievement, but it sure feels like absolutely anything is in play come playoff time for the handful of teams at the top of the Eastern Conference. While acknowledging the perils of ignoring lower seeds, it sure feels like five clubs — Washington, Carolina, Toronto, Tampa Bay and Florida — are the serious contenders to win the conference. Hold each of them up to the light and you see the potential for glory. But, more so than their counterparts in the West, the warts are there, too.

The Metropolitan’s top two teams are scorching right now, with Carolina and Washington having both won nine of their past 10 games. Carolina, however, just got crushed 7-2 on Saturday by the Kings. The Hurricanes obviously made an all-in move for Mikko Rantanen this year that wound up going sideways, with the player ultimately landing in Dallas. And though they’re doing just fine right now in both categories, goaltending and goal-scoring will still be large question marks come spring for this smothering club that just hasn’t been able to get over the hump.

Admittedly, the ding on the Caps — basically, “Can this be real?” — is flimsy and abstract. Still, bang my line when you can name the team that came completely out of the blue to finish first overall in the conference, then steamrolled their way to the Cup. On one hand, Washington — with some big bodies up front — actually seems perfectly built for the post-season; on the other, goalies Logan Thompson and Charlie Lindgren each have four career playoff games to their name and the Caps haven’t won a post-season round since claiming the 2018 championship.

Over in the Atlantic, the top three clubs are all having a bit of a wobble right now. The Leafs lost 5-2 to lowly Nashville on Saturday and are 4-5-1 in their past 10. Tampa was beaten twice on the weekend — Saturday in Utah, Sunday in Vegas — and is 3-4-1 in its past eight. Meanwhile, Florida required a shootout to defeat the Penguins at home on Sunday and surrendered six goals to Washington in D.C. 24 hours earlier before the game was even half over. The Cats are 3-4-0 in their past seven, so it’s a bit of a turtle race right now for that Atlantic crown.

Obviously, if anyone is worthy of “Big Bad” status in the East, it’s still the defending-champion Panthers. That said, they’ve got to be on fumes after two straight trips to the final — the first of which started from the last wild card spot — and we still don’t know for sure how things will play out with Matthew Tkachuk’s injury. Tampa has done a nice reset with Jake Guentzel in and Steven Stamkos out, but the Bolts haven’t advanced past the first round in two years. As for Toronto, nobody needs a reminder of

the baggage the Leafs will carry into the playoffs. Maybe a remodelled defence corps and goalie battery will change all that, maybe it won't.

Bottom line — even by hockey standards — it's hard to place a huge amount of faith in any of the Eastern Conference contenders. On the other side of that coin, though, a golden opportunity is just sitting there for whichever one of those five clubs that can put it all together at the right time.

Weekend Takeaways

- Obviously, the Rantanen double-swap dominated trade season talk not just in Raleigh but around the entire league. Lost in the shuffle, though, is how well Taylor Hall — who landed from Chicago in late January in the same transaction that originally delivered Rantanen from Colorado — has been playing lately for Carolina. The 2010 first-overall pick had a hat trick in the Canes' bounce-back 5-2 win in Anaheim on Sunday and Hall — after producing just two points in his first dozen games with Carolina — has nine in his past eight.
- As noted, the Canes got ruffed up 7-2 by the Kings on Saturday and L.A. kept it rolling 24 hours later with, wait for it, a 7-2 stomping of the Bruins. Hopefully, you didn't drop Quinton Byfield from your fantasy team by the start of March, when he had just 11 goals in 59 outings. Byfield scored in both Kings wins on the weekend to give him goals in eight of his past 10 games and tallies in seven straight home contests. (The Kings record for goals in consecutive home outings is 12, set by Luc Robitaille in 1989). Meanwhile, L.A. now has an incredible (and league-best) 25-3-4 domestic record and hasn't lost a 60-minute home game in 14 outings, dating back to Jan. 20. Even better, the Kings play nine of their remaining 13 games at Crypto and may yet erase the five-point gap between them and Vegas for top spot in the Pacific.

The Week Ahead

- The Capitals could deliver a big blow in the Presidents' Trophy race on Tuesday, as they visit the Jets in Manitoba. Washington — which has already locked down a playoff spot — leads Winnipeg by two points with a game in hand in the race for first overall in the NHL. Believe it or not, these two clubs are tied for the best goal-differential in the league with identical plus-76 marks. The Caps scored six times versus the Panthers on Saturday, but somehow, none of those goals came from the stick of Alex Ovechkin, who is seven goals away from establishing a new all-time goals record of 895.

Also on Tuesday, Brady Skjei — who played over 300 games with the Hurricanes — will visit Carolina for the first time as a member of the Nashville Predators.

- Two-time Cup-winner Ryan McDonagh is slated to play his 1,000th NHL game on Thursday when the Bolts host Utah. Do the Canadiens still regret trading the guy they drafted 12th overall in 2007 to the Rangers before he played his first NHL contest?
- The Avs and Blues have been the best teams in the West in March. They'll clash on Saturday in Denver. Also that night, we'll get our final "Battle of Alberta" of the season when the Flames visit Edmonton.

Red and White Power Rankings

1. Winnipeg Jets (48-19-4) Gabe Vilardi is in the midst of quite a cold snap, with just one goal in his past 14 outings.

2. Toronto Maple Leafs (42-25-3) The Leafs really need to grab two extremely gettable points at home versus Philly on Tuesday as they scrap it out for first place in the Atlantic. After that, Toronto heads out for its California roadie starting Thursday in San Jose.

3. Edmonton Oilers (41-24-5) No Connor McDavid or Leon Draisaitl? No problem, so far, as the Oilers won their first game with both nukes out of the lineup on Saturday 5-4 over the Kraken. Jeff Skinner scored for the second straight game and now has three tallies in his past two outings.

4. Ottawa Senators (37-27-5) Ottawa's next five games are against clubs currently outside the playoffs. In fact, of the Sens' 13 remaining games, only four are against squads presently holding down a post-season seat.

5. Calgary Flames (33-25-11) Standing ovation for this Calgary club, which could have fallen out of the playoff picture during a three-game trip through the New York area that began with the team on a three-game losing streak. Instead, the Flames finished off a New York/New Jersey sweep on Saturday when Jonathan Huberdeau scored a late equalizer versus the Islanders and Nazem Kadri won it in OT. Of course, Long Island guy Matt Coronato bagged a pair in the contest to register his first 20-goal season in the NHL.

6. Montreal Canadiens (33-27-9) The Habs are living dangerously — they've trailed heading into the third frame in each of their past three games — but there's no quit in this club. Montreal scored three times in just over four minutes to erase a 4-1 third-period deficit versus Colorado on Saturday before falling in a shootout.

7. Vancouver Canucks (32-26-12) Just as Elias Pettersson was heating up, he left Saturday's loss to the Rangers with an injury. We'll see what the update is as the Canucks, who are in Jersey on Monday, still have four games to go on a six-game roadie that's begun with an OTL and a regulation-time defeat.

[Sportsnet.ca / NHL Playoff Push: Ranking contenders' remaining strength of schedule](#)

By Emily Sadler – March 25, 2025

We're well into the stretch run of the season, with most nights now bringing clinching and elimination scenarios to the forefront.

After a busy weekend of NHL action, the Washington Capitals are the lone team to have officially clinched a post-season berth. And while several teams sit comfortably in playoff position, there's still a lot of movement — nowhere more so than in the Atlantic Division, where just two points separate each of the Florida Panthers, Toronto Maple Leafs, and Tampa Bay Lightning while the Ottawa Senators and Montreal Canadiens have taken over the wild-card race and still have plenty of opportunity to climb.

At the bottom of the standings, meanwhile, we're starting to see non-contenders officially eliminated. Fans of the San Jose Sharks and Chicago Blackhawks can now officially turn their attention to the lottery odds.

With just over three weeks to go in the regular season, and with a major assist from Tankathon, we're looking at the remaining strength of schedule for every club currently in or just outside the playoff picture and highlighting some intriguing matchups on the horizon for each squad.

New York Islanders, .573 (13 games left): Just two points separate the Islanders, on the outside of the playoff picture, and the Canadiens, in the second wild card spot, but those are a tough pair of points. Of New York's league-high 13 games remaining, seven are against opponents currently in a playoff spot — including two dates with the powerhouse Capitals. That makes games like Monday night's date against the Columbus Blue Jackets, sitting just two points behind New York in the wild-card race, all the more crucial.

Carolina Hurricanes, .554 (12 games left): Sitting 12 points behind Washington for top spot in the Metropolitan Division, and 10 ahead of third-place New Jersey, the Hurricanes are all but officially locked into second place. A pair of games against Washington next month are the toughest dates on the remaining slate, but those feel like pre-playoff tune-ups more than anything as we await a likely first-round bout between the Hurricanes and Devils.

New York Rangers, .553 (11 games left): Seven of the Rangers' 11 games remaining are against teams currently in the playoffs. If they're to have any hopes of making one last push for the post-season, New York needs to make good on some winnable games out west against Anaheim and San Jose later this week before diving into a final stretch that includes dates with Tampa Bay (twice), Carolina, and Florida.

Florida Panthers, .548 (11 games left): If you're the reigning Cup champs looking to map out a third straight Cup Final run, who do you want to face in Round 1? With a home-and-home versus Montreal starting Sunday, a pair of matchups against the Maple Leafs, and one game left against both the Senators and the Lightning, Florida's test-filled stretch run looks like a road map of a top contender trying opponents on for size. No lead is safe in the East, which should make for a thrilling finish in the Atlantic standings.

Washington Capitals, .537 (12 games left): If not for the Gr8 Chase, the Capitals would be facing a bit of a meaningless stretch considering their playoff ticket has been punched and their lead atop the Eastern Conference is looking pretty healthy. Tuesday's heavyweight clash against Winnipeg should be fun, though, regardless of whether Alex Ovechkin lights the lamp.

Montreal Canadiens, .536 (13 games left): The league's most exciting team down the stretch, the Canadiens have suffered just a single regulation loss since NHL play resumed post-4 Nations. A home-and-home against the Panthers starting Sunday is the team's toughest remaining test, while back-to-back Ontario dates against the Senators April 11 and Maple Leafs April 12 should feel like early playoff games. This is going to be a fun stretch run.

Toronto Maple Leafs, .535 (12 games left): It feels like every game is a measuring-stick matchup for the Maple Leafs right now as they look to steady the ship after a rough stretch through early March. Plenty of tests remain, including two matchups against the Atlantic-leading Panthers and one against both the Lightning and Canadiens, all of which could be first-round previews.

Tampa Bay Lightning, .529 (12 games left): With just three of their final 12 games coming against teams currently in the post-season, the Lightning have a real chance to leapfrog the Maple Leafs and Panthers for the top spot in the Atlantic. Next week's trip to Ottawa could offer up a first-round preview, while a home date against the Panthers could wind up being for all the Atlantic Division marbles.

New Jersey Devils, .528 (11 games left): With franchise cornerstones Jack Hughes and Dougie Hamilton both out with injuries, the silver lining in New Jersey is a comfortable cushion in the standings and a winnable schedule. After Friday's trip to Winnipeg, followed by a home-and-home with the Wild, New Jersey closes out the campaign with a team-friendly six-game stretch in the East.

Ottawa Senators, .512 (13 games left): Tied for the most games remaining, and with the most winnable slate in the league, the Senators should be fun to watch down the stretch. A stretch of five games against non-playoff opponents could put them in position to make waves in the Atlantic's top three when they host the Lightning and Panthers next week. Circle April 11 on your calendars, too, with the Canadiens coming to town.

Winnipeg Jets, .577 (11 games left): The Jets have been making winning look easy all year long, but they'll be tested plenty down the stretch, starting with a battle atop the league when the Capitals come to town on Tuesday. The next three weeks are all about lineup tweaks and tune-ups, and with dates against playoff teams like New Jersey, L.A., Vegas, Dallas, St. Louis, and Edmonton, head coach Scott Arniel will have plenty of runway before the post-season.

Minnesota Wild, .568 (12 games left): Last week's trio of wins couldn't have come at a better time considering the stretch ahead — starting Monday night in Dallas, the Wild play five games in eight days to close out March, all against playoff-bound teams. They host Vegas on Tuesday after a long flight home from Dallas, then the Capitals on Thursday followed by a home-and-home against the Devils. Yikes.

Vancouver Canucks, .567 (12 games left): After falling off pace in the wild-card race, Vancouver cannot afford another loss like the one suffered Saturday against the Rangers. If April bouts against heavyweights like Vegas, Dallas, and Colorado are to hold any sway in the standings, the Canucks will first have to make good on a winnable trio of Eastern Conference matchups against the Devils, Islanders, and Blue Jackets.

St. Louis Blues, .553 (10 games left): That's six straight wins for St. Louis, and 12 victories in 16 games since the NHL resumed following the 4 Nations Face-Off. Sure, they've benefited from a fairly friendly slate of opponents within this run, but the Blues face some important tests down the stretch. Following Tuesday's matchup against the also-red-hot Canadiens, St. Louis' remaining schedule includes two dates against Colorado as well as one each versus the Central-topping Jets and an Oilers squad that could be hungry to stay above the wild-card fold.

Los Angeles Kings, .552 (13 games left): The Avalanche, Maple Leafs, and Jets present good challenges for L.A., but we all know the real tests come against Edmonton — the Kings are once again on a collision course with Edmonton in the Pacific Division's 2-3 matchup, which has us circling a pair of April dates against the Oilers.

Calgary Flames, .546 (13 games left): Three straight wins to close out their final Eastern swing has the Flames still afloat in the wild-card race as they enter the most important weeklong stretch of the season. After hosting the Kraken on Tuesday night, the Flames go up against the Stars, Oilers, and Avalanche to close out March.

Colorado Avalanche, .546 (11 games left): With a first-round date with Dallas looking like it'll be a reality, the Avalanche feel like a measuring stick for other teams down the stretch. A pair of games against the red-hot Blues brings a little intrigue, though.

Vegas Golden Knights, .536 (12 games left): If the playoffs started today, the Golden Knights would be hosting the Wild. That should bring plenty of eyeballs to Tuesday's matchup in Minnesota. Games against the Oilers, Jets and Avalanche are the club's toughest remaining tests.

Dallas Stars, .533 (13 games left): A western road trip that takes them through Alberta and into Seattle provides some good tests for Dallas, but we'd be lying if we said we weren't ready to just skip ahead to Game 1 of the playoffs.

Edmonton Oilers, .530 (12 games left): A trio of games against San Jose brings down the Oilers' SOS score significantly, but don't be fooled — there are some tough matchups in here, including Wednesday against Dallas, a late-season test against the Jets, and a trio of Pacific bouts (one night in Vegas, plus two dates against a familiar foe in L.A.) that could decide the division and offer up a first-round preview. Mix in some uncertainties around injuries to Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl, and we've got an interesting few weeks ahead for Edmonton.

TSN.CA / Special teams say a lot about this year's Cup contenders

By Travis Yost – March 25, 2025

When you are evaluating each team's viability as a Stanley Cup contender, you must overweight two components: the sustained ability of a team to win at even strength (where the lion's share of game minutes are played), and the efficacy of the goaltending.

If a team cannot reasonably check both boxes, they are ripe for an early exit in the Stanley Cup playoffs.

Beyond that, we know the importance of special teams – a team can smooth over average even-strength play or mediocre goaltending if they possess a dominant power play or penalty kill. On the surface, it may seem that these two special-teams units should be equally weighted, but in the NHL's heightened scoring environment, the mathematics have certainly changed.

A nearly two-decade NHL trend I continue to find fascinating is the increasing importance of a high-calibre power play, and the reduced importance of an elite penalty kill. In the defensive era of hockey 10 or 15 years back, most Stanley Cup champions possessed a penalty kill that ranged from good to great.

But over the past decade (a decade that's seen both a surge of offensive skill enter the league, coupled with changes in tactics and deployment strategies intended to juice scoring), that relationship has flipped. Most eventual champions now carry a higher-end power play, while the ability to kill penalties is of lesser value.

Consider the ranking of each Stanley Cup champion since the 2007-08 season, and notice the trend materially shifted starting with the 2017-18 season. That season, I emphasize, is the first year we saw a sharp rise in scoring leaguewide – a shift that has sustained itself through 2025:

With the exception of the Vegas Golden Knights in the 2023-24 season, every recent champion has maintained a power play varying from good to electric; their penalty-kill units, meanwhile, were right around league average over teams' respective regular seasons. It certainly is a far cry from the days of the Los Angeles Kings and Pittsburgh Penguins routinely winning tight-checking games en route to their titles.

Setting aside the heightened importance of a quality power play, it's also clear a champion cannot maintain an untenable special-teams unit on either side of the aisle. In the few instances in which a team did have an underperforming unit, they frequently offset it through strength elsewhere – the 2012-13 Chicago Blackhawks couldn't find a goal on the power play but were dominant when killing penalties, whereas the 2016-17 Pittsburgh Penguins couldn't kill penalties but had the fourth-best power play in the league.

To that end, it made me curious if any of this season's credible contenders should be concerned. The short answer to that question is yes.

Of the teams we are sure are going to be playing beyond game 82, the Carolina Hurricanes and Los Angeles Kings should be wildly concerned about their success rates on the man advantage. It's not lost on me that both contenders are scoring at a rate comparable to the lottery-bound San Jose Sharks, managing just six goals per 60 minutes played. For context, the league-leading Winnipeg Jets are averaging nearly 12 goals per 60 minutes played on the power play. Double!

And though the penalty kill may be waning in relative importance, the penalty kills in Vegas and Minnesota leave a lot to be desired. Vegas has been able to offset the pain here through the league's

second-best power play, but Minnesota has struggled there too, and it's a key reason the Wild are still fighting to secure a wild-card slot in late March.

Lastly, I would be remiss to not acknowledge the New York Islanders. They simply possess one of the worst special teams combinations in recent memory. In their case, it's going to be the reason if they miss the playoffs outright – their even-strength play is on par with the Edmonton Oilers (+16) and Colorado Avalanche (+12), and it still won't be enough to cross the playoff cut-line.

Just look at their shot profiles on the year courtesy HockeyViz:

A power play that only can generate pressure from the perimeter, coupled with a penalty kill that concedes shots left and right from the net-mouth area and between the circles when down a man? That's a recipe for catastrophic failure, and surely is already atop head coach Patrick Roy's focus list this off-season.