



**Columbus Blue Jackets News Clips  
December 27, 2024**

**Columbus Blue Jackets**

- PAGE 02: The Columbus Dispatch: Columbus Blue Jackets 2024 in review: heartbreak, turbulence and progress
- PAGE 06: The Columbus Dispatch: Marchenko's late goal lifts Columbus Blue Jackets over Montreal Canadiens
- PAGE 08: The Columbus Dispatch: Patrik Laine says some Columbus Blue Jackets were 'too comfortable' losing
- PAGE 10: The Columbus Dispatch: 5 takeaways from irate Columbus Blue Jackets' win over Canadiens: 'What's he thinking?'
- PAGE 13: The Athletic: Blue Jackets respond angrily to Patrik Laine's criticism, earn comeback win over Canadiens
- PAGE 15: The Athletic: Patrik Laine on Blue Jackets trade request: 'I was tired of losing and just giving up'

**Cleveland Monsters/Prospects**

**NHL/ Websites**

- PAGE 17: ESPN: Top players, teams to watch at 2025 World Junior Championship
- PAGE 24: The Athletic: Weekend NHL rankings: Canucks drama, Stars dropping and holiday wishes for all

**[The Columbus Dispatch / Columbus Blue Jackets 2024 in review: heartbreak, turbulence and progress](#)**

**By Brian Hedger – December 27, 2024**

The past year for the Blue Jackets was defined by turbulence, shocking tragedy, emotional strain and evidence of growth.

There were firings and hirings, multiple trades, major injuries, contract extensions, another high draft pick, summer additions, trauma and incredible sadness tied to an offseason tragedy plus encouragement after the first three months of a new season.

The Blue Jackets will always remember 2024 as the year Johnny Gaudreau and his brother, Matthew, were killed during an offseason tragedy — riding bikes in New Jersey — but the past 12 months might be viewed in the future as the year Columbus started to gain traction in its rebuild despite immeasurable loss.

Here's a month-by-month glimpse of the Blue Jackets in 2024:

**January: Elvis Merzlikins wants 'new scenario,' Patrik Laine enters NHL/NHLPA program and Adam Fantilli's rookie season ends**

While continuing to flounder outside the playoff chase, the Blue Jackets dealt with three big plot twists. Goalie Elvis Merzlikins, frustrated after being demoted to third-string behind Daniil Tarasov and Spencer Martin, told reporters Jan. 12 that it was "time for a new scenario," and left what that meant open to interpretation.

Bigger news awaited during the Jackets' swing through Western Canada and Seattle. Rookie defenseman David Jiricek was abruptly assigned to AHL Cleveland, coach Pascal Vincent was got caught lying to protect Patrik Laine — who'd entered the NHL/NHL Players' Association assistance program — and rookie Adam Fantilli's season ended with a severe calf laceration in Seattle.

General manager Jarmo Kekalainen and the Blue Jackets' front office are studying the protocols the NHL has put into place to resume the season. No more than 52 staff and personnel per team, including 31 players, will be allowed inside each hub location.

**February: Columbus Blue Jackets fire Jarmo Kekalainen, announce first outdoor game and lose Kent Johnson**

Things didn't get easier in February. A two-week break to start the month was followed by losses to the Tampa Bay Lightning and Ottawa Senators, which preceded an announcement Feb. 15 that general manager Jarmo Kekalainen was fired.

More bad news arrived at the end of a 4-1 loss to the New York Rangers on Feb. 25 at Madison Square Garden, when Kent Johnson tore a shoulder labrum taking a face-off.

**March: John Davidson handles trade deadline, Columbus Blue Jackets plummet to another rough finish**

Following Kekalainen's dismissal, John Davidson added the title of interim GM to his main role as president of hockey operations. He presided over three trades, including deals to send Jack Roslovic to the Rangers and defenseman Andrew Peeke to the Boston Bruins.

The trades, combined with injuries, prompted another downward spiral to the finish line that saddled the Blue Jackets with the NHL's fourth-worst record.

**April: Jeff Rimer retires as TV voice, Zach Werenski ties a franchise scoring record**

Two uplifting stories powered the Blue Jackets in the final two weeks of the season, as long-time television broadcaster Jeff Rimer was honored during his final games before retirement and Werenski chased a franchise record.

He tied that record in Rimer's final game, equaling his former defense partner, Seth Jones, at 57 points for the highest-scoring season by a Blue Jackets defenseman in franchise history. Werenski led the Jackets to victory over the Carolina Hurricanes with two goals, two assists and four points.

#### **May: Columbus Blue Jackets hire Don Waddell to lead hockey operations department**

Following the season finale, the Blue Jackets turned up the heat on their hunt for a new GM. They ended a three-month process by landing Don Waddell, whose contract with the Hurricanes was up.

Waddell was hired in late May as president of hockey operations and GM, making him the replacement for Kekalainen and Davidson, who shifted into a senior advisor role. Waddell went from the disappointment of a playoff ouster with the Hurricanes straight into an offseason whirlwind in Columbus.

#### **June: Columbus Blue Jackets president of hockey operations/GM Don Waddell makes sweeping changes, key draft pick**

Within five weeks of joining the Blue Jackets, Waddell had already done a ton of work. He bought out the final year of Adam Boqvist's contract, walked away from expiring contracts with young players, fired coach Pascal Vincent, traded forward Alexandre Texier, selected center Cayden Lindstrom fourth overall at the draft in Las Vegas and listened to trade interest on Laine, who'd requested a deal.

He also narrowed a coaching search to a handful of names while keeping the July 1 start of free agency in sight.

#### **July: Columbus Blue Jackets sign Sean Monahan and Jack Johnson, get contract extensions done and hire Dean Evason**

Despite not having a head coach, Waddell signed unrestricted free agent center Sean Monahan to a five-year deal that was helped by the veteran's close friendship with Johnny Gaudreau. Jack Johnson, a veteran defenseman, was also granted his second stint with the Blue Jackets on a one-year contract, while restricted free agents Kirill Marchenko and Kent Johnson agreed to bridge deals.

Todd McLellan, whom the Blue Jackets had atop their coaching wish list, backed out of talks, so Waddell pivoted to Dean Evason. McLellan was just hired Thursday by the Detroit Red Wings, so he'll coach against Evason on March 1, 2025, in the Blue Jackets' first taste of outdoor hockey at Ohio Stadium.

#### **August: Laine traded, Sillinger re-signed and tragedy strikes**

August is usually a month when NHL executives get a breather, but Waddell and the Blue Jackets didn't have the luxury. Laine, who was released from the NHL/NHLPA program in late July, still wanted a trade and RFA center Cole Sillinger remained unsigned. Those situations were resolved within days of each other but were quickly forgotten after the Gaudreaus' stunning offseason deaths shook the NHL to its core.

The Blue Jackets were devastated along with the Gaudreau family, the Calgary Flames and many others in hockey. Just three weeks later, NHL training camps opened.

#### **September: Columbus Blue Jackets mourn Gaudreaus, bond during emotional camp**

Less than two weeks after attending the Gaudreaus' funeral, the Blue Jackets opened camp with an emotional sense of togetherness. They've since leaned on each other quite a bit, which has brought them closer together during the start of a challenging season.

One of the Blue Jackets' daily practices began in camp with the "Johnny skate," when they concluded each workout with a chosen player shooting the length of the ice at the other net. Hit the net, and the entire team skates one conditioning lap. Miss and the team skates three laps: 1-3, Gaudreau's number.

### **October: Columbus Blue Jackets endure tear-filled opener, four shoulder injuries and replace the kepi hat**

A new season opened with games in Minnesota and Colorado, where the Blue Jackets earned a split against the Wild and Avalanche. Werenski handed Monahan a new postgame "player of the game" award in Colorado, a gray and white donkey hat, which has replaced the Jackets' prior Civil War era kepi hat. The reason was tied to Johnny Gaudreau, who often called friends "a donkey," as a joke.

The origin of the hat switch was revealed on the morning of the Jackets' home opener against the Panthers, which started with an emotional ceremony at Nationwide Arena that included Johnny Gaudreau's No. 13 being lifted to the rafters on a banner. The game also began with 13 seconds running off the clock while the Blue Jackets' left wing was left vacant for Gaudreau.

The Jackets also dealt with on-ice adversity due to early shoulder injuries that sidelined Boone Jenner, Erik Gudbranson, Dmitri Voronkov and Kent Johnson. Jenner and Gudbranson required surgeries, while the latter two are back.

### **November: A frustrating skid, encouraging heater, Lindstrom has surgery and Jiricek gets traded**

Through the season's first two months, the Blue Jackets proved they're able to score goals in bunches. Even without Gaudreau, one of the NHL's elite talents, they ripped off six-goal games to start the season before hitting a six-game winless slide to start November.

They followed it with five wins in seven games before the calendar flipped to December, while Werenski rose toward the top of NHL defensemen scorers. Lindstrom underwent back surgery to relieve pain from a herniated disc, while Jiricek was granted a change-of-scenery trade that currently has him skating with the Wild's AHL affiliate.

Montreal Canadiens right wing Patrik Laine (92) is checked into the glass by Columbus Blue Jackets center Sean Monahan (23) during the first period of the Montreal Canadiens at Columbus Blue Jackets game December 23, 2024 in Nationwide Arena. Helping on the ice is Columbus Blue Jackets right wing Kirill Marchenko (86) and Columbus Blue Jackets defenseman Dante Fabbro (15).

### **December: Gaudreau memorials, a goaltending conundrum and Laine's comments**

December was just as busy for the Jackets, who honored Gaudreau twice more in Calgary and Philadelphia. They also added a third goalie in rookie Jet Greaves, who was recalled on two separate occasions to spark questions about the pecking order between him, Merzlikins and Tarasov.

Meanwhile, Laine's return Monday to Columbus ended with fireworks after he roasted his former team for being "too comfortable with losing," the past couple years. Laine played just one period in the Blue Jackets' 5-4 victory over the Montreal Canadiens due to an undisclosed upper-body injury, and Werenski fired back with heated comments following the game.

Rookie Denton Mateychuk also made his NHL debut for the Blue Jackets, who moved just two spots back of the final wildcard spot in the Eastern Conference and could use that renewed fire starting a new year.

## The Columbus Dispatch / Marchenko's late goal lifts Columbus Blue Jackets over Montreal Canadiens

**By Brian Hedger – December 24, 2024**

The Blue Jackets foiled Patrik Laine's plan to spoil their holiday break in his contentious return to Nationwide Arena on Thursday with the Montreal Canadiens.

After listening to their former teammate say they're "too comfortable with losing," and that it would be "awesome" for the Canadiens "jump 'em ... and leave 'em behind," in the Eastern Conference, the Blue Jackets got the final say thanks to Kirill Marchenko's goal to snap a tie with 2:12 left in their 5-4 victory that ended with Laine missing the final two periods with an upper-body injury.

"It's unfortunate," Blue Jackets defenseman Zach Werenski said. "As guys here and a guy who's been here, we were nothing but good teammates to him, nothing but good friends to him and for him to bash us like that, I think it's just unacceptable. I hope he's alright with whatever he's dealing with tonight, but he didn't finish the game. ... For him to come here and say that, it's (insulting). I'm definitely not happy about it, and none of us in this room are happy about it. I think that speaks more about him than it does about us, so it is what it is."

Marchenko's goal with 2:12 left in the third period broke a 4-4 tie for his third point of the game on a goal and two assists. Sean Monahan and Werenski assisted on it to give each three assists in the game.

Kent Johnson and Jordan Harris scored the other two goals for the Blue Jackets (14-15-6), who started Jet Greaves in net. Former Blue Jackets defenseman David Savard finished with two points on a goal and assist for the Canadiens (14-17-3), whose other goals were scored by Lane Hutson, Jake Evans and Joel Armia. Blue Jackets rookie Denton Mateychuk, meanwhile, made his NHL debut as part of a seven-man defensive group that didn't include Damon Severson, who was a healthy scratch for the first time since coming to Columbus in a June 9, 2023 trade with the New Jersey Devils.

Laine played just one period due to an upper-body injury after slamming his former team. He took four hits from the Blue Jackets in 6:15 during the first, which didn't include a counter-hit from Voronkov that flattened Laine in a corner of the Columbus zone. Laine was credited with the hit. He was also booed every time he touched the puck.

"I didn't even know that went down," Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason said of Laine's morning commentary. "But I definitely heard the players talking about it, and I thought our group handled it appropriately. They probably weren't happy with it and rightfully so, but they did it the right way. I was happy and proud of our guys, how they conducted themselves ... and the fans."

The Blue Jackets led 2-0 after the first on goals by Voronkov and Johnson.

Voronkov netted his ninth goal of the season off a slick pass from Monahan to open the scoring and Johnson batted a puck out of mid-air off Werenski's rebound for his 10th goal. Montreal pulled even in the second by outscoring Columbus 3-1 on goals by Savard, Hutson and Evans. Harris mixed in a goal for the Blue Jackets to give his team a brief 3-1 lead after Savard scored, but Hutson and Evans scored seven minutes apart to get the Canadiens even starting the third.

Early in the third, Armia and Voronkov exchanged goals to make it 4-4 in a game that started to seesaw, but Marchenko decided it late with his 13th goal of the season.

**[The Columbus Dispatch / Patrik Laine says some Columbus Blue Jackets were 'too comfortable' losing](#)**

**By Brian Hedger – December 24, 2024**

Patrik Laine returned to Nationwide Arena on Monday for the first time since his requested offseason trade sent him to the Montreal Canadiens.

The former Blue Jackets forward, who was named the NHL's third star of the week for a hat trick and five goals last week, has rebounded from a preseason knee injury and returned to Columbus with a few strong opinions about the past four years.

"It's like I said in interviews when I signed (a contract extension in Columbus), that, you know, I love being here and it's going great and I don't want to leave, and, obviously, things happened and that was kind of it for me," Laine said Monday. "I feel like we were just doing the same thing year after year, you know? I was just tired of losing and just giving up when it's December and we'll start focusing on next year. It's like, 'I'm not going to do that,' you know?"

Laine's four seasons with the Blue Jackets were riddled with injuries that hampered his output and the Blue Jackets' success. He wasn't available for large parts of each season for various reasons, and it culminated with a fractured collarbone last December that led to Laine missing the rest of the season after entering the NHL/NHL Players Association's player assistance program.

Prior to being cleared in the offseason, he requested that new Blue Jackets president of hockey operations/general manager Don Waddell grant him a trade. It wasn't easy, but Waddell found a deal that met his requirements in August. He sent Laine and the full amount of his final two contract years (\$18.2 million in salary, \$8.7 million annual salary cap charge) to Montreal for defenseman Jordan Harris.

Laine, acquired along with Jack Roslovic in a trade that sent Pierre-Luc Dubois to the Winnipeg Jets in January 2021, had no interest in seeing what might happen with a new Blue Jackets GM plus a new head coach in Dean Evason. Without stating specifics, he shared more about his logic after the Canadiens' morning skate Monday.

It came down to unnamed people within the Blue Jackets who are "too comfortable," losing.

"That's just frustrating as a player, when you're trying to win and some people are not like that and they're a little too satisfied and a little too comfortable with where they're at," Laine said. "So that really wasn't a fit for me anymore. But here (in Montreal), it doesn't matter if we're winning or losing. We're always trying our best ... so, that's kind of how I felt about it."

Laine declined to specify whether his issues were mainly with teammates, coaches, staff, members of the front office or all of the above.

"I'll leave that for everybody's imagination," he said, "but there were certainly people like that, that were a little too comfortable and fine with losing and just doing the same thing year after year. So, I'm going to leave that up for discussion for everybody else."

That wasn't all he said about the Blue Jackets.

Shortly after entering the NHL/NHLPA program last season, Laine's absence became the subject of distasteful comments made on a podcast that drew a response from the forward on social media. Judging from his comments when told that a segment of Blue Jackets fans appear happy to see him doing well, Laine clearly hasn't forgiven or forgotten those who aren't as thrilled.

“It’s great to see some of the fan base (sees) me happy, but the other ones, I don’t really care what you guys think,” he said. “It’s great to be back to playing and obviously winning as a team. That’s fun. That’s why we do this, and I’m just, overall, enjoying playing and that’s about it.”

That was the general theme of his commentary. Montreal and scoring goals is wonderful, unlike Columbus.

“I had some ups and downs (with the Blue Jackets),” Laine said. “I don’t want to get into that too much, but, yeah, some things probably could’ve been handled better. Some things were great, and some were not so great, but I’m having the time of my life here (in Montreal), so I don’t really want to get into that too much.”

As for whether he thinks booing awaits?

“No clue,” Laine said. “I mean, not that I’ve lost any sleep over it, you know? Hopefully, it’s positive. If it’s not, I don’t really care. If guys are going to be (ticked) off and bitter about something, then that’s your issue. I’m having a great time regardless, and I don’t really care what other people are saying. We’ll see. It’ll be interesting.

“I don’t think I have been (booed) but it’ll be cool. It’ll be cool to shut ‘em down. There’s always idiots who do that, but hopefully not the entire building with everything I did here that was good for the community and for the team. If somebody feels like they want to boo, then I feel like they’ve got bigger issues going on than me coming back here.”

The Blue Jackets (13-15-6, 32 points) are one point ahead of the Canadiens (14-16-3, 31 points) in the Eastern Conference standings. Laine hopes to flip that around in a town he’s trying to forget.

“It’s always fun to pay attention to friends and how they’re doing, but overall, as a team, I don’t think I’ve watched a (Blue Jackets) game,” Laine said. “You still pay attention to how they’re doing, but I know if we win, we’re going to jump ‘em, so that’d be awesome ... and leave ‘em behind.”

## [The Columbus Dispatch / 5 takeaways from irate Columbus Blue Jackets' win over Canadiens: 'What's he thinking?'](#)

**By Brian Hedger – December 24, 2024**

It takes a lot to make Zach Werenski fume.

The Blue Jackets’ star defenseman is usually a model of calm, but Werenski reached his boiling point Monday at Nationwide Arena, where his three assists helped the Blue Jackets stop a seven-game losing streak to the Montreal Canadiens.

Asked if he’d seen comments made earlier in the day by former teammate Patrik Laine, who slammed the Blue Jackets for a perceived tolerance of losing, Werenski’s water bubbled.

“It’s unfortunate,” he said, shaking. “I think, as guys here and a guy who’s been here, we were nothing but good teammates to him, nothing but good friends to him, and for him to bash us like that, I think it’s



just unacceptable. I hope he's alright with whatever he's dealing with tonight, but he didn't finish the game."

An emotionally charged game was also played before the NHL's three-day holiday, and it wasn't decided until Kirill Marchenko scored late in the third period to break a 4-4 deadlock. Sean Monahan and Werenski assisted, giving each three points on three assists.

Here are five takeaways:

### **Patrik Laine draws Columbus Blue Jackets' ire**

Blunt honesty is one of Laine's personality traits that makes him unique in a world where people often talk in cliches. It can be refreshing for fans and reporters, but Laine learned the hard way Monday that it can also blow up spectacularly.

The Jackets put four hits on Laine, not including Dmitri Voronkov's counter hit that flattened him, and a segment of fans booed every time he touched the puck. He wasn't welcomed back with a video commemorating his four seasons in Columbus, either, and the Canadiens announced in the second period that Laine was "questionable" to return with an upper-body injury.

He didn't play another shift while the team that was essentially labeled quitters overcame their blown 2-0 lead plus a 4-3 deficit in the third to move three points ahead of Montreal in the Eastern Conference standings. Werenski spoke for himself and the Blue Jackets as a whole when asked about Laine saying he wanted a trade because they had too many "people" he felt were, "a little too comfortable and fine with losing," every season.

"For him to come here and say that ... it's (insulting)," Werenski said. "So, I'm definitely not happy about it and none of us in this room are happy about it. I think that speaks more about him than it does about us, so it is what it is."

Asked if Laine's comments added "juice" to the game, Werenski nodded.

"Yeah, 100%," he said. "I mean, what's he thinking saying that? It's just incredible. I've got no more time for that. I don't want to talk about 'Patty' anymore. I just thought that was pretty ridiculous to be honest."

### **Denton Mateychuk impresses in NHL debut for Columbus Blue Jackets**

Rookie Denton Mateychuk's NHL debut was one of the worst kept "secrets" of the season. He was recalled from AHL Cleveland on Sunday, his family made a long trek to be there on short notice and Mateychuk left the ice at the Blue Jackets' morning skate with a group of a lineup certainties.

Mateychuk also took his traditional rookie solo laps to start warmup before standing on the blue line for both anthems, but the 12th overall pick of the 2022 NHL draft didn't officially learn that he'd play until arriving for the game in the afternoon.

Columbus Blue Jackets defenseman Denton Mateychuk (5) skates in his first NHL game during the second period of the Montreal Canadiens at Columbus Blue Jackets game December 23, 2024 in Nationwide Arena.

"It was unbelievable," Mateychuk said. "Everything you dream of as a kid finally coming to fruition was an awesome moment. You're kind of riding a high starting the game, so once I got a couple (shifts) under me, I was a little more settled down."

Mateychuk skated 18:36 that included 1:06 on power plays and played almost exclusively with Ivan Provorov on the second pairing. He made a good impression before being loaned back to Cleveland after the game with goalie Jet Greaves and forward Mikael Pyyhtia.

### **Columbus Blue Jackets' top line sizzles against Montreal Canadiens**

Monahan's line with Voronkov and Marchenko combined for eight points on three goals and five assists while giving Montreal lots of problems.

Voronkov provided a 1-0 lead in the first period and tied it 4-4 early in the third to counter Joel Armia's quick go-ahead goal for the Canadiens. Monahan assisted on goals by Voronkov, Harris and Marchenko, while Marchenko capped a three-point night with his winning goal late in the game.

He extended his personal point streak to six games, Voronkov moved his point streak to five straight games and Monahan now has 31 points on 11 goals and 20 assists as the Jackets' top center. Combined, they've become quite a weapon for Evason and his staff to deploy.

### **Columbus Blue Jackets fortunate with Werenski, Fabbro injuries**

Dante Fabbro only missed two games following an ugly hit that knocked him out of a game last week and Werenski missed just a couple shifts after his left knee slammed into the boards Saturday in Philadelphia.

Both could've been out for longer had their injuries been as bad as they looked, but the Jackets got their top defensive pairing back against the Canadiens. Fabbro, who sustained a "charley horse" to his right knee/thigh, played 23:28 on 24 shifts while Werenski skated a game-high 28:44 on 26 shifts — assisting on goals by Kent Johnson, Dmitri Voronkov and Marchenko.

### **Columbus Blue Jackets send message to Damon Severson**

The Blue Jackets dressed seven of eight defensemen at their morning skate, and Damon Severson was the one who didn't play.

Severson, who's got six more years remaining on a \$50 million contract, was scratched as a "coach's decision," according to coach Dean Evason. Former coach Pascal Vincent benched him for a full period early last season, but this was the first time he was a healthy scratch since joining the Blue Jackets in a June 2023 trade with the New Jersey Devils.

Severson has contributed six goals and 11 assists while playing mostly top-four minutes, but defensive inconsistencies are what likely prompted him sitting out against Montreal.

## The Athletic / Blue Jackets respond angrily to Patrik Laine's criticism, earn comeback win over Canadiens

**By Aaron Portzline – December 24, 2024**

After Monday's morning skate in Nationwide Arena, Patrik Laine of the Montreal Canadiens sounded off on his former club, the Columbus Blue Jackets, saying the organization wasn't committed to winning and was caught in a vicious cycle of losing during his four seasons in Columbus.

That is why, Laine said, he requested the trade that landed him in Montreal in August.

Laine's words made it down the hallway to the Blue Jackets dressing room and eventually up to the suite level, where the Blue Jackets front office is housed. Nobody was happy, and both groups took action.

There were several superlatives in the Blue Jackets 5-4 win before 17,875 in Nationwide. Dmitri Voronkov had two goals. Kirill Marchenko (goal, two assists), Sean Monahan (three assists) and Zach Werenski (three assists) each had three-point nights. Top prospect Denton Mateychuk looked steady and calm in his NHL debut.

But it was Laine's comments, and the friction they created, that provided the drama. He was booed every time he touched the puck. He was targeted for hits (hard, but clean) by his former teammates. He left the game after the first period with an upper-body injury and did not return.

Werenski stepped forward in the post-game dressing room to speak for the rest of the Blue Jackets.

"It's unfortunate," he said. "As guys in here, and as a guy who's been here, we were nothing but good teammates to him, nothing but good friends to him. For him to bash us like that, I think it's just unacceptable. I hope he's all right with whatever he's dealing with tonight, but he didn't finish the game. A couple hits and ... yeah, I don't know what happened, but it's unfortunate.

"We were nothing but good teammates to him. For him to come in here and say all that, that's bulls—. I'm definitely not happy about it and none of us in this room are happy about it. That speaks more about him than it does us."

James van Riemsdyk, Cole Sillinger, Dante Fabbro and Adam Fantilli each landed hits on Laine, but it was a run-in with the 6-foot-5 Voronkov in the corner — Laine was actually credited with a hit on that one — that brought the biggest roar from the crowd. Laine ended up on his back.

Asked if the Blue Jackets were motivated by it, Werenski didn't flinch.

“Yeah, 100 percent,” Werenski said. “What’s he thinking saying all that? It’s just incredible. I’ve got no more time for that. I don’t want to talk about Patty anymore. I hope he’s all right. I just thought that was pretty ridiculous, to be honest.”

The front office didn’t appreciate it, either.

The Blue Jackets had a “welcome back” video ready to play for Laine during a TV timeout in the first period, but by afternoon they’d decided against showing it. The last time that happened was when Ryan Johansen returned to Columbus after being traded to the Nashville Predators midway through the 2015-16 season.

Blue Jackets coach Dean Evason, who was hired this past summer, said he could tell his players were riled up by the time they returned to the rink before the game.

“I didn’t even know that went down (Laine’s comments),” he said. “I don’t hear it, but I definitely heard players talking about it, and I thought our guys handled it appropriately. They probably weren’t happy about it and rightfully so, but they did it the right way.

“I was happy and proud of our guys for how they conducted themselves. And the fans.”

One of the biggest cheers of the night came in the third period when the scoreboard zoomed on a fan with the words “Where is Laine?” typed on her cellphone. Montreal coach Martin St. Louis said after the game that he didn’t have an update on Laine’s status.

That’s a lot of animosity to carry into the NHL’s holiday break, but there was much to celebrate, too.

Jordan Harris, acquired in the deal that sent Laine to Montreal, scored his first goal with the Blue Jackets at 3:34 of the second period to put Columbus ahead 3-1. Nothing has come easy lately for the Blue Jackets, and that continued on Monday.

The Canadiens took a 4-3 lead only 20 seconds into the third. The Jackets tied it just three minutes later when Voronkov scored a power-play goal off a tic-tac-toe passing sequence that ended with Voronkov ripping a one-timer from the slot.

With 2:12 remaining, Marchenko scored off a nasty release from the left circle, snapping off a shot that beat Canadiens goaltender Sam Montembeault over his glove and under the crossbar.

The Blue Jackets’ top line — Monahan centering Voronkov and Marchenko — combined for three goals and five assists. They each played over 20 minutes.

“They were unreal,” Werenski said. “Money (Monahan) was making plays all over the ice. Marchy and Voro ... they were huge for us. They’re the line that drives our team, so for them to play like that was awesome.”

**[The Athletic / Patrik Laine on Blue Jackets trade request: ‘I was tired of losing and just giving up’](#)**

**By Aaron Portzline – December 23, 2024**

Patrik Laine said on Monday that he requested a trade from the Columbus Blue Jackets last season because others in the organization weren't as committed to winning as he was and it felt like the club was in an endless cycle of losing.

Laine, who was traded by the Blue Jackets to the Montreal Canadiens over the summer, will face his former club for the first time since the trade on Monday night in Nationwide Arena.

"When I signed (a contract) here, I made it clear that I loved being here, that it was going great, and I didn't want to leave," Laine said after the Canadiens' morning skate. "Obviously, things happened, and that was kind of it for me.

"I feel like we were just doing the same thing year after year. I was tired of losing and just giving up when it's December to start focusing on next year. I'm not going to do that. That's frustrating as a player when you're trying to win and some people are, you know, not like that.

"They're a little too satisfied and too comfortable where they're at. It wasn't really a fit for me anymore. But here (in Montreal), it doesn't matter if we're winning or losing, we're always trying our best. That's what I felt about it (in Columbus)."

Laine was pressed by reporters to clarify if he was referring to his Blue Jackets teammates or the club's management.

"I'll leave that for everybody's imagination," Laine said. "But there were certainly, certainly people like that who were a little too comfortable and fine with losing and just doing the same thing year after year. I'm going to leave that up for discussion for everybody else."

Former GM Jarmo Kekäläinen was fired late last season and president of hockey operations John Davidson stepped into an advisory board after the Blue Jackets hired president and GM Don Waddell over the summer.

It was Waddell who traded Laine and a second-round pick in 2026 to Montreal for defenseman Jordan Harris.

After missing the first part of the season with a leg injury, including two games against the Blue Jackets, Laine returned to the lineup in early December. In nine games, he has scored eight goals — all on the power play — and has a minus-7 rating. He was named the NHL's third star of the week earlier on Monday.

Laine played in only 18 games last season for the Blue Jackets, missing time early in the season for a concussion. In December, when he was on the verge of being cleared to return to the lineup, Laine entered the NHL/NHLPA player assistance program. He explained later on social media that he stepped aside due to mental health concerns.

"I had some ups and downs (in Columbus)," Laine said. "I don't want to get into that too much, but ... some things probably could have been handled better. Some things were great, some things were not so great.

"I'm having the time of my life here (in Montreal), so I probably don't want to get into that too much."

Laine received an outpouring of support from Blue Jackets fans and fans across the NHL when he entered the player assistance program.

As for what type of reception he'll get in Nationwide Arena tonight ... that's another question.

"It's great to see some of the fan base happy to see me happy," Laine said. "For the other ones, I don't really care what you think.

"(I have) no clue. It's not that I've lost any sleep over it. Hopefully it's positive. If it's not, I really don't care. If guys are going to be pissed off and bitter about something, that's your issue. I'm having a great time regardless, and I don't care what other people are saying.

"It'll be cool. It'll be cool to shut 'em down. There's always idiots who do that. Hopefully not the entire building, with everything I did here for the community and for the team. If somebody feels like they want to boo, I feel like they've got bigger issues going on than me coming back here."

The bigger motivation, Laine said, is laid out in the NHL standings. The Blue Jackets, at 13-15-6 (32 points), are one point ahead of Montreal (14-16-3, 31 points). A win by the Canadiens tonight would move them ahead of Columbus in the Eastern Conference standings.

"If we win, we're going to jump them," Laine said. "That'd be awesome to leave them behind."

## [ESPN / Top players, teams to watch at 2025 World Junior Championship](#)

**By Rachel Doerrie – December 23, 2024**

The holidays are here, and for hockey fans, that means it is time to settle in on the couch and make sweeping judgments about prospects based on their performance at the World Junior Hockey Championship.

Taking place in Ottawa, Canada, this year, the tournament is sure to be a good one. Without the likes of Connor Bedard or Macklin Celebrini -- who are still eligible to play but are sticking with their NHL teams for obvious reasons -- this is an opportunity for other prospects to shine.

Every team has medal hopes, and five or six teams have legitimate shots at gold. Canada and the United States always have golden expectations, Sweden and Finland will be in the hunt, and Czechia and Slovakia are, as always, upset threats.

The tournament is loaded with first-round picks and players expected to be drafted in the top five of upcoming drafts. There will be no shortage of highlight-reels plays, mistakes, heartbreak and jubilant moments.

Trying to predict a highly unpredictable tournament is always a fool's errand, that's why we've never had a perfect March Madness bracket. Every year, there is a Cinderella, a team that disappoints and players who announce themselves as potential stars of their sport.

That is no different this year, as many hockey fans will be introduced to the likes of James Hagens (U.S., 2025 draft-eligible), Matthew Schaefer (Canada, 2025) and Gavin McKenna (Canada, 2026). They will be reacquainted with drafted players such as Dalibor Dvorsky, Ryan Leonard, Zeev Buium, Konsta Helenius and Brayden Yager.

Group A in this year's tournament includes Canada, Finland, Germany, Latvia and the United States. Group B is Czechia, Kazakhstan, Slovakia, Sweden and Switzerland.

Here's a look at what each team is bringing to the ice, presented in reverse order of each team's competitiveness:

### **Kazakhstan**

The Kazakhs will be in a tough spot at this tournament and are likely to find themselves in the relegation round.

Kazakhstan has plenty of continuity, as many of its players are centralized on one team for the season. Asanali Sarkenov is the lone Canadian Hockey League (CHL) player for Kazakhstan, playing for the Spokane Chiefs of the WHL.

### **Latvia**

Latvia brings two NHL draftees to the tournament, Darels Uljanskis (Anaheim) and Eriks Mateiko (Washington) and nine returnees from last year's team in Sweden. The Latvians have continuity in their lineup with the returnees but lack a true standout talent. However, they are always a scrappy, hard-working team capable of shocking a traditional power.

Latvia's most important game will come against Germany and will likely determine which team makes the quarterfinal and which plays in the relegation round.

### **Germany**

Germany brings a very young team to the tournament and lacks the eye-popping talent it has enjoyed in recent years with Tim Stutzle, JJ Peterka and Florian Elias. Germany's only NHL draftee, Norwin Panocha (Buffalo), will be relied upon to play big minutes in a shutdown role on the blue line.

In fact, the strength of the team is on the blue line with Paul Mayer and Lua Niehus returning, and while they are undrafted, they have talent and could play themselves into a development camp invite next summer.

The Germans are missing their most dangerous forward in Kevin Bicker (Detroit), a major loss to the offense. The Germans will have to rely on David Lewandowski (2025), Julius Sumpf and Lenny Boos to drive the offensive engine. The game against Latvia should determine whether the Germans qualify for the medal round, and they have a few more offensive weapons than the Latvians do.

A solid showing in a quarterfinal, with a young team that can return many of its players next year, would be considered a success.

### **Switzerland**

Every year, one team goes on a Cinderella run. This year, the candidate to do that is Switzerland on the back of Ewan Huet, son of Stanley Cup champion Cristobal Huet.

On paper, the Swiss lack the talent to get past the quarterfinal, but that hasn't stopped them in the past. Huet has struggled to find consistent playing time in the WHL this season, but this is likely his net, and we all know what Huets are capable of when they feel confident in their game. This is the perfect opportunity for Huet to showcase his abilities and backstop Switzerland on a Cinderella run.

Leon Muggli (Washington) and Ludvig Johnson will play key roles on the Swiss blue line, with Muggli expected to play in all situations and log big minutes. The Swiss blue line has capable defenders who skate well and cause turnovers in games where flashiness gets the best of some players. They will be physical, block shots and make life difficult at the net front.

Up front, Lars Steiner is a skilled playmaker who isn't draft-eligible until 2026, but he will surely draw attention from scouts and could produce a few highlight-reel plays. Jamiro Reber and Jan Dorthe are having productive seasons for their respective teams and will be leaned on to produce the bulk of the offense.

If Switzerland is going to ruffle feathers in a weaker Group B, the game against Czechia may be their spot to make noise.

### **Czechia**

Czechia is always an interesting team at this tournament thanks to talented players and inconsistent goaltending (jaw-dropping or devastating). Seemingly always on the verge of an upset, this year feels like it could have more ups and downs than a roller coaster. After shocking Sweden to win bronze last year, many believe the Czechs have the most volatile projection this year.

Michael Hrabal (Utah) is the clear starter in goal, and while he is extremely talented, he has struggled to perform when he wears his nation's colors. He is capable of more than he has shown at the WJC level, and the Czechs are hoping they see that version of him over the next two weeks.

All eyes will be on Adam Jiricek (St. Louis), the 2024 first-rounder who has been riddled with injuries over the past few seasons. The Czechs inexplicably left Dominik Badinka (Carolina) off their roster, making their blue line even thinner. That places the pressure squarely on the shoulders of Jiricek and AHL Ontario's Jakub Dvorak (Los Angeles) to carry the load. Both are capable of impacting the game and will need to keep the best opposing players at bay while producing offense.

Up front, the Czechs lack a true game-breaking talent. Eduard Sale (Seattle), Miroslav Holinka (Toronto) and Adam Jecho (St. Louis) will be relied upon to lead the charge offensively. Sale is on a tear with Coachella Valley in the AHL, while Holinka and Jecho are scoring nearly a point per game with the Edmonton Oil Kings in the WHL. The Czech forward group is bigger and will play a tighter checking style to frustrate teams, while hoping to capitalize on power-play opportunities or turnovers generated from their defensive play.

The bottom line is that if Hrabal is at his best, the Czechs are likely to finish second in Group B, meaning they'd get one of Canada, USA or Finland in the quarterfinal. That's a tough task, but the Czechs have proved they are capable of frustrating more talented teams and getting key saves from their goaltender in an upset.

### **Slovakia**

Slovakia lost a heartbreaker in overtime of last year's quarterfinal after an excellent run of group play. The Slovaks have had outstanding goaltending recently, and that is unlikely to change this year.

The Slovaks return quite a few key players to the tournament. Maxim Strbak (Buffalo), Luka Radivojevic and Dalibor Dvorsky (St. Louis) will play major roles, with Dvorsky expected to be one of the stars of the



tournament. This age group has enjoyed success at the under-18 level, and could send Canada, USA or Finland home in the quarterfinal.

Samuel Urban will tend the goal, and has been a key piece of that recent Slovakian success at the under-18 level. The undrafted goaltender is more than capable of backstopping Slovakia through the medal round, and earn himself some draft consideration as a re-entry in the 2025 draft.

Strbak is playing in his fourth WJC (!) and will be the most important defenseman for the Slovaks. He is capable of producing offensively and shutting down the best players on other teams. Dvorsky joins Strbak returning for his fourth go-round, and should contend for various tournament awards. He will be appointment television at this tournament, capable of producing highlight-reel plays with dazzling skill.

Finally, Radivojevic will draw plenty of attention from scouts at the tournament after last year's performance and a solid first half with the USHL's Muskegon Lumberjacks. The highly skilled defenseman could find himself in the first-round conversation with a standout performance in Ottawa.

Slovakia cannot be considered a Cinderella because of expectations and previous success, but there is reason to believe it could medal with its game-breaking talent and excellent goaltending.

## **Finland**

Finland finds itself in Group A with Canada and the United States after a bitterly disappointing finish at the 2024 WJC. Given the talent in Group A, the Finns will be hard-pressed to finish higher than third, but the proverbial group of death means Finland avoids both Canada and the USA in the quarterfinals and is likely to face Slovakia or Czechia.

In terms of the roster makeup, Finland lacks superstar talent but has excellent depth at every position.

Finland continuously gets excellent goaltending at the tournament, and this year should be no different. Petteri Rimpinen, Kim Saarinen (Seattle) and Noa Vali are all options, with Rimpinen projected to start. None of the three are expected to be NHL stars, but given the goaltending factory that Finland is, it is more likely than not that Finland's goaltending performs well enough to see it through to a semifinal appearance.

Finland has excellent depth on the blue line, with five NHL draftees, led by Aron Kiviharju (Minnesota). The highly skilled defender could be the difference between a medal and not in this tournament. He's capable of taking over games and could find himself in the conversation for tournament's best defender if he plays to his capabilities.

Every one of Finland's defenders can play quality minutes, meaning there is room for error if one of the top six options falters. In an ideal situation, Finland does not have to overplay any of their defenders, and can run Kiviharju out in situations that allow him to showcase his tremendous talent.

Konsta Helenius (Buffalo) is the player to watch up front for the Finns, and he will be expected to play a major offensive and defensive role. He's not Aleksander Barkov, but expect the Finnish coaching staff to deploy him in a similar manner to Paul Maurice's deployment of Barkov in Florida. He'll play in every key situation and be expected to lead the charge offensively.

Jesse Kiiskinen (Detroit) along with the London Knights duo of Jesse Nurmi (New York Islanders) and Kasper Halttunen (San Jose) will be relied upon to perform offensively for Finland against tough competition. Emil Hemming (Dallas) is a quality two-way player whose playmaking ability has developed this season. He will be a key player in the middle six who can forecheck, produce offense and keep top players off the scoresheet.

Given Finland's talent and depth, its special teams should be among the best in the tournament, making it a legitimate threat to medal.

## **Sweden**

Sweden is the prohibitive favorite to top Group B, with anything less seen as a disappointment. After a heartbreaking loss in the gold medal game on home ice at last year's WJC, Sweden returns key players at every position, looking to improve upon its silver medal performance.

It is rare that a team's top defensive pairing returns -- as they are usually 19-year-olds. Axel Sandin-Pellikka (Detroit) and Theo Lindstein (St. Louis) will play huge roles on Sweden's blue line, with slick puck-moving ability and solid two-way play.

Tom Willander (Vancouver) is another puck mover who will log key minutes in a second-pair role for Sweden, balancing the physical depth the Swedes have on the third pair.

Otto Stenberg (St. Louis), David Edstrom (Nashville) and Felix Unger Sorum (Carolina) will feature prominently for the Swedes. Stenberg was outstanding in last year's tournament and is off to great start in the SHL this season. He has a knack for elevating his play when wearing his country's colors and will be a key player in all situations.

Projected top-15 pick Viktor Eklund will draw the attention from scouts and executives, and is expected to play a prominent role in Sweden's top six.

With Sweden's solid depth and returning players, it is a threat to win gold, which would end a drought that has spanned more than a dozen years.

## **United States**

The United States is bringing back a few players to defend its gold medal, a feat it has not been able to accomplish in the tournament through the years. The Americans were perfect in 2024 and they remain among the top gold medal contenders.

Goaltending is locked and loaded, with Trey Augustine (Detroit) returning as the starter for the third consecutive year, and the prohibitive favorite to be the tournament's top goaltender.

Zeev Buium (Minnesota) returns and will lead the way for the Americans on defense. He started as the seventh defenseman in last year's tournament, and ended as one of their best, scoring a crucial goal in the third period of the gold medal game. He'll log major minutes alongside Drew Fortescue (New York Rangers), another returnee who is excellent in transition and complements Buium's skillset.

Cole Hutson (Washington) is likely to lead the second power-play unit with his excellent puck movement and dynamic skating ability. The ability to pair both Buium and Hutson, two dynamic offensive players, with quality defense-minded partners is a luxury for the Americans, and provides balance to one of the best blue lines in the tournament.

The Americans went with a traditional top-six, bottom-six forward orientation for the tournament: a high-octane, productive top six, and a bottom six with physicality and energy.

Three of the top six come from Boston College, and will be expected to produce the bulk of the scoring output for the U.S. James Hagens, a 2025 top prospect, super sniper Gabe Perreault (New York Rangers) and captain Ryan Leonard (Washington) are more than capable of filling the net, and will be a dangerous trio.

Cole Eiserman (New York Islanders) and Trevor Connelly (Vegas) were hot topics at the 2024 draft, and both possess game-breaking offensive skill. Look for Eiserman to be a power-play triggerman with his excellent shooting ability.

The bottom six features solid two-way players who will be relied upon in matchup roles and to play a heavier style to wear down opponents. The U.S. left some skill off the roster in favor of a more balanced team, but the Americans have a quality roster capable of winning gold.

The U.S. might not be the favorite, but it has quality goaltending and game-breaking talent, which means the team is always dangerous.

## **Canada**

Canada is a team looking to bounce back from a poor showing at last year's WJC that saw it leave without a medal. Anything less than gold will fall short of expectations at every WJC, and even though the Canadians are missing Connor Bedard and Macklin Celebrini, they have the talent depth to win gold at home.

Calum Ritchie (Colorado) and Jett Luchanko (Philadelphia) bring NHL experience to the roster. Those two, along with Brayden Yager (Winnipeg), Bradly Nadeau (Carolina), Berkly Catton (Seattle) and Easton Cowan (Toronto) will be expected to provide speed, skill and a ton of offense.

Gavin McKenna, the favorite to be picked No. 1 in the 2026 NHL draft, possesses incredible talent, and if utilized properly, could be an X factor for Canada.

On defense, Tanner Molendyk (Nashville) and Oliver Bonk (Philadelphia) will play major roles for Canada. Bonk will log key minutes against top lines and on the penalty kill, and Molendyk will be expected to drive and produce offense from the back end. Matthew Schaefer, a projected top-three pick in 2025, possesses elite hockey sense, quality skating and excellent transition play. Even as a draft-eligible player, he'll probably play a key role on Canada's blue line and could be a difference-maker by tournament's end.

Canada will need its special teams to be good to win gold, and much of that will rely on Molendyk's power-play proficiency and a penalty kill that should feature Bonk, Andrew Gibson (Nashville) and Caden Price (Seattle).

Canada's issue has never been talent, it has been getting in its own way. Whether it's undisciplined penalties, shaky goaltending, head-scratching coaching decisions or ill-timed turnovers, Canada will need everyone pulling the rope in the same direction to get back on top of the podium.

The last time that Ottawa hosted this tournament, it produced one of the most iconic Canadian hockey moments: Jordan Eberle's tying goal against Russia with 5.4 seconds to go. The Canadians are hoping that more of that magic still lies within the walls of the Canadian Tire Centre.

Canada and the U.S. enter the tournament with gold medal expectations. There were some rather shocking cuts by both teams, and both should hope that cutting EJ Emery (U.S., New York Rangers) and Zayne Parekh (Canada, Calgary) or Andrew Cristall (Canada, Washington) do not come back to haunt them.

Mark your calendars: the New Year's Eve showdown between the two clubs is likely to determine who tops the group. One can only hope it is a classic like the last time these teams played in Ottawa on New Year's Eve in 2008.

Tournaments with young players are unpredictable because of emotions, highly skilled players trying to do a little too much and the occasional brain cramp. That's what makes this my favorite tournament every year.

We're bound to see plays that make our jaws drop, that makes us pull our hair out and even, laugh. This tournament does not make or break a player's career. After all, these are kids who are still developing physically and emotionally. The one prediction you can take to the bank: We're bound to be entertained.

## [The Athletic / Weekend NHL rankings: Canucks drama, Stars dropping and holiday wishes for all](#)

**By Sean McIndoe – December 23, 2024**

Happy holidays, at least once we get one last night of action out of the way tonight. We've got a busy schedule of 13 games on the slate, at which point everyone gets a few days off to relax and unwind, spend time with family and give thanks that you're not a Sabres fan.

To mark the occasion, here are my five Christmas wishes for all the NHL fans out there.

### **Bonus five: Christmas wishes for all of us**

5. The Jets keep it going — For years, I've argued that the Jets are the only Canadian team nobody hates. But it would be fair to say they're not always the Canadian team that nobody doubts, and after last

year's playoff disaster, expectations seemed muted at best heading into this year. But so far they've been a powerhouse. Look, the league is more fun when Winnipeg works as a market, and we all know it needs a year like this. If you're a fan of a rival Central contender, sure, you're exempt, but the rest of us should be quietly rooting for the Jets to keep this up.

4. Some intriguing playoff matchups stay in play — It's way too early to start thinking about who'll play who in April, but that's never stopped us before. So sure, go ahead and start thinking about realistic matchups like Florida/Boston, Winnipeg/Minnesota, Vegas/Edmonton and even the Battle of Ontario. (Thinks about how that last one would inevitably end.) OK, but the first three would be good, right?

3. A fantastic Eastern playoff race — It's shaping up that way. While we'll need a few surprises in the West to really get cooking, the East is already shaping up as a true battleground. The surging Senators are in control now, but the veteran Penguins are right there, and there's a palpable sense of desperation for the Islanders, Red Wings and (especially) Rangers. The Bruins don't have much ground to give and the Flyers and Blue Jackets are hanging around waiting for the opportunity to write an underdog story.

History tells us that all of those teams won't be there at the end, but let's hope enough of them are that this race goes down to the wire.

2. Coaches having to serve their own bench minors — We can make this happen.

1. One of the Rangers or Sabres remains an entertaining disaster — This one's tricky, because while the NHL is way more fun when there's an ongoing trainwreck for everyone to gawk at, it's never polite to wish misery on a specific fan base. We're not doing that, though, because we're just saying one of these teams needs to keep being a glorious mess. If you're a fan of either team or just someone who's starting to feel some sympathy pangs, then point your bad vibes at the other one. We just need one, we're not picky on which, and I think that gives us just enough moral wriggle room to not risk the wrath of the hockey gods. (Although if both teams want to keep being terrible, that's fine, too.)

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

Speaking of the Rangers, I regret to inform you that we are doing the Matt Rempe discourse again. His high hit from behind on Miro Heiskanen earned him the dreaded in-person hearing; that took place yesterday, and the league quickly dropped an eight-game suspension on him. Remember to get your hot takes in now — you wouldn't want to have to wait a whole month until we get our next chance to do this all over again.

5. Edmonton Oilers (21-11-2, +16 true goals differential\*) — Letting a third-period lead slip away in the big rematch with the Panthers stung, but to their credit, the Oilers battled back with three straight wins and would now hold home ice if the playoffs started today. (Note: They do not.)

4. Washington Capitals (23-8-2, +39) — This week saw them drop their first two-game losing streak since mid-November, which was wiped out quickly by impressive wins over the Hurricanes and Kings.

In other news, it sounds like it may not be much longer for Alexander Ovechkin, who could return to the lineup as soon as Saturday in Toronto.

3. Winnipeg Jets (24-10-1, +41) — That 5-0 win over Minnesota was enough to convince me to move them back into the top five, taking the spot from the suddenly slumping Wild. In a way, the mark of a good team is playing .700 hockey and still knowing you can be better.

2. Florida Panthers (22-11-2, +16) — Four straight wins have moved them back into top spot in the Atlantic. They've got a rematch with the Lightning tonight, this time on home ice.

1. Vegas Golden Knights (22-8-3, +22) — With three straight wins and seven of eight, they've moved past Winnipeg into top spot in the West by points percentage. The wins should keep coming, as they've got the Ducks and Sharks up next.

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

Not ranked: Dallas Stars — The Stars were my preseason Stanley Cup pick. I wasn't alone, because we could all see they were stacked with talent at all of the key positions, with a nice mix of stars in their prime and aging veterans who still had something to give.

As you'd expect, they started the season at the top of my rankings and stayed there for three weeks. They eventually lost the spot to the Panthers but stayed in the top five for another month. I quietly dropped them out at the start of December, and this is the third week they've been missing. And I'm not sure anyone, even die-hard Stars fans, would have an issue with it.

So let's just ask the question: Are the Dallas Stars still an elite Stanley Cup-contending team?

They're still good. Nobody's questioning that. And they're almost certainly going to make the playoffs, where like any other team they'll be a hot goalie and some good bounces away from a long run. The answer to whether they could win the Cup is still an obvious yes. But are they one of the first teams we should be talking about?

I'm not sure they are, although I do think there's still a case to be made. After all, these are the long-term rankings, where we don't overreact to a few games here and there. Yes, they lost to the Rangers on Friday, and nobody does that anymore. They also beat the Capitals this week. The Dallas Stars contain multitudes.

And just about all the factors that made the Stars a trendy preseason pick are still in play. They've lost Tyler Seguin, who was putting together a nice comeback story, but there's a chance he could be back by the playoffs and his absence frees up cap space they could use at the deadline. Jason Robertson is into Year 2 of being less than the ascendant superstar he seemed to be at 23, but it's not like he's been awful. And the rest of the core is basically a bunch of guys performing at the slightly lower end of expectations.

Add it all up, and the Stars have spent most of the season motoring along playing .600 hockey, a mark they dropped just below with Friday's loss. That's a playoff pace, most years. And the Stars are winning games at about the same rate as the other contenders — their record is just deceptively weak because they're one of only two teams left with enough integrity not to be banking loser points.

But ... I mean, the story of the Central has been the Jets' historically great start and the relentless, Terminator-style pursuit of them by a Wild team that only recently has looked beatable. Meanwhile, the Avalanche had their early crisis, swapped out both goaltenders, got healthy and now mostly look like their old selves, even passing Dallas in the standings in points (but not points percentage, yet).

Are the Stars the fourth-best team in the Central? Or maybe more importantly, are there four really good teams in the Central, which would make it the league's toughest playoff bracket? Even if Seguin comes back and Robertson heats up and Jake Oettinger recovers psychologically from getting shelled by Canada at the 4 Nations, if the Stars' path out of the Central goes through, say, Minnesota and Colorado, it's hard to love their odds.

Dallas fans, let's do a temperature check. Are you still setting aside time to watch hockey in May and June? Is this just the slow build to a season-long story? Is it possible I'm actually wrong the other way, and this team actually could miss the playoffs?

## The bottom five

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

If you're expecting your team to show up in this section, you're probably more interested in prospects than whoever's on the roster now. With the World Juniors almost here, Corey and Scott have you covered with their top 25 prospects to watch in the tournament.

5. Montreal Canadiens (14-16-3, -21) — They've won three straight and have actually passed the Red Wings, so this may be our last week with them on the list for a while. Arpon lays out what's been going right.

4. Nashville Predators (10-17-7, -26) — If you missed it, Pierre talked to Barry Trotz, who insists there's no teardown coming. They did swing a deal for Montreal's Justin Barron, but bigger blockbusters are not on the way, if we believe Trotz.

3. Chicago Blackhawks (12-20-2, -21) — Speaking of deals, the updated trade board dropped last week, which means it was time for my semi-monthly "Oh right, Chicago still has Taylor Hall" moment. He did have two points on Saturday, his fourth multi-point game of the year.

2. San Jose Sharks (11-19-6, -27) — We had our first Macklin Celebrini vs. Connor McDavid matchup on Saturday, and we'll give McDavid the narrow decision. The Sharks have now lost seven of eight after a three-game win streak, although the future still looks bright.

1. Buffalo Sabres (11-19-4, -22) — They're just out here catching strays from everyone these days.

I don't even know what to say anymore, as the streak has hit 13 and counting. They've got the Islanders tonight, and we're firmly into "nobody wants to be the team that loses to the Sabres" territory.

Not ranked: Vancouver Canucks — First things first: Putting the Canucks in the bottom section isn't meant as some sort of insult. I just wanted to mention them and the Stars in the same column, so one of those teams had to get dropped down into this spot. I am, of course, not saying the Canucks are one of the worst teams in the league.

Yet.

But yikes, we sure do have a ton of drama emanating from Vancouver. The big question revolves around whether Elias Pettersson and J.T. Miller can co-exist long enough for this team to make the run it otherwise seemed lined up for. The team is no longer even trying to deny there's an issue, with Quinn Hughes and Rick Tocchet both addressing it on Saturday. That seemed like a positive step — you can't deal with a problem when you're pretending it doesn't exist. Then Pettersson decided to claim the whole thing was made up before stomping off.

"I don't know why people still try and make s\*\*t up."

Awkward. And Miller pulled more or less the same act.

As Elliotte Friedman reported on Saturday, there will come a point when the front office has to take action, but we're not there yet, as much as other fan bases might be trying to will things toward a dramatic blowup. That said, the Canucks sure seem like a team that's looking to do something. Jim Rutherford appeared on Hockey Night in Canada last weekend and basically hung out the "Open for Business" sign, an impression later confirmed by Pierre.

With all this going on, the Canucks have cooled off in December, losing three straight and six of eight. They at least took the red-hot Senators to overtime to bank a point, and they're still holding down a

playoff spot while playing at a 97-point pace, so this is hardly a disaster. Except, as the Rangers have shown us, every disaster starts with what seems like a minor wobble. That doesn't mean it's happening in Vancouver, but it does make the situation worth watching.

They've got the Sharks at home tonight, which is either an easy get-right game heading into the break or the sort of matchup that can ruin a holiday if it goes bad. From there, we'll see. Here's hoping somebody in the dressing room at least rigged the Secret Santa draw to make sure Miller and Pettersson have each other. If you can't win, you can at least give the rest of us a few laughs.