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FOX 28 / Columbus Blue Jackets unveil 22-man roster for season opener against Nashville

By Adam Dell – October 7, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets have announced their 22-man roster for the start of the 2025-26 NHL season, as confirmed by club President of Hockey Operations and General Manager Don Waddell.

The roster includes 13 forwards, seven defensemen, and two goaltenders.

Dean Evason is entering his second year as head coach after nearly leading the Blue Jackets to the NHL playoffs last season. Boone Jenner will be back to start the season after missing the first 56 games last year due to an injury suffered during training camp. Jenner was very productive in his 26 games, however, scoring 7 goals and earning 19 points.

One of the biggest question marks heading into the season will be between the pipes. Towards the end of last season, Jet Greaves soared into the spotlight, helping propel the Jackets into a late playoff push. He was named the NHL's First Star for the week ending on April 13 after having a .968 SV% and only allowing one goal per game, including a shutout, over the three straight wins.

Zach Werenski leads the defense after one of the best seasons in club history, becoming the first defenseman ever to lead the team in scoring. He broke his own records for defensemen goals (23), assists (59), and points (82). He ranked second among NHL Defensemen in goals and points (Cale Makar - Colorado) and finished as a finalist for the Norris Trophy, which is awarded to the NHL's top defenseman.

Forwards:

#3 Charlie Coyle
#4 Cole Sillinger
#10 Dmitri Voronkov
#11 Miles Wood
#19 Adam Fantilli
#21 Isac Lundestrom
#23 Sean Monahan
#24 Mathieu Olivier
#26 Zach Aston-Reese
#38 Boone Jenner
#59 Yegor Chinakhov
#86 Kirill Marchenko
#91 Kent Johnson

Defensemen:

#2 Jake Christiansen

#5 Denton Mateychuk
#8 Zach Werenski
\$9 Ivan Provorov
#15 Dante Fabbro
#44 Erik Gudbranson
#78 Damon Severson

Goalies:

#73 Jet Greaves
#90 Elvis Merzlikins

The Blue Jackets will kick off their 25th Anniversary season on Thursday, Oct. 9, against Nashville at Bridgestone Arena, with the game starting at 8 p.m. ET. Fans can catch live coverage on FanDuel Sports Network Ohio and the FanDuel Sports Network app, with the pre-game show beginning at 7:30 p.m. ET.

The game will also be broadcast on the Blue Jackets Radio Network, and in Columbus on 97.1 The Fan.

Bob McElligott returns to the radio booth this season, along with Dylan Tyrer.

Steve Mears and Jody Shelley will return to the Fanduel broadcasts this season.

Cleveland.com / Why Columbus can be better on defense with the same group of defensemen: Blue Jackets season preview 2025-26

By Tim Bielik – October 8, 2025

The Blue Jackets appeared poised to make big moves in the offseason with more than \$35 million in cap space coming off a season in which they missed the playoffs by two points.

But the surge of the cap across the NHL up to \$95.5 million threw a wrench in Columbus' plans to bolster its defense among other positions. Numerous players re-signed with their respective teams, including Aaron Ekblad with the Panthers, and other top defensemen like Noah Dobson and Vladislav Gavrikov went elsewhere.

Ultimately, team president and general manager Don Waddell re-signed Dante Fabbro (four years, \$4.125M AAV) and Ivan Provorov (seven years, \$8.5M AAV), essentially running it back on the blue line for 2025-26.

Defense was a big reason the Blue Jackets came up two points short of the playoffs last season. The Blue Jackets were 25th in the NHL in goals against (3.26).

So how can Columbus be better defensively despite bringing back the same blueliners who were part of a team that gave up as many goals as it scored?

Here are three reasons why.

1. The full-time addition of Jet Greaves

In hockey, the most important part of your defense sometimes is the man between the pipes. Goaltending has been an issue for the Blue Jackets the past couple of seasons. According to Money puck, only three times since 2022-23 have the CBJ had a goaltender play at least eight games with a goals saved above expected per 60 minutes, which indicates how often a goalie prevents a goal compared to the average player at his position, of a 0.000 or better.

Jet Greaves has two of those three seasons and was the only player above a 0.000. Although he has a limited sample size compared to Elvis Merzlikins, it means Greaves has performed better than expected.

Merzlikins' play has declined the last four years, not recording a sub-3.00 goals against average since 2020-21. Greaves has a career GAA of 2.62 in 21 NHL games.

How he does in a full-time role will ultimately be the biggest X-factor for this hockey team. But his past play suggests he should continue to do well in the NHL full time. His play could also provide a push for Merzlikins to find his past form.

Ultimately, the best thing for the Blue Jackets defensively will be to have reliable goaltending. Greaves' presence should help make that better.

2. Improved depth at center

Part of defense isn't just about the defensemen themselves, but also forwards pitching in.

Arguably the most significant additions Waddell made were to bolster the Blue Jackets' bottom six, particularly with the acquisition of Charlie Coyle as part of a trade with the Colorado Avalanche.

The 6-3 Coyle has been known as a solid two-way center throughout his career, including in a long stint with the Bruins. He has been reliable on both ends of the ice and he gives the Blue Jackets not only another option for a penalty kill that was 22nd in the league (77.0%), but a right-handed center which they lacked last season.

Coyle also ranked 17th in the NHL last season in takeaways with 42, which was fifth best among forwards according to Hockey Reference.

They also signed Isac Lundestrom to a one-year deal. He won't provide much on offense with only 35 goals and 84 points in 337 NHL games. But his role will be on the fourth line and on the PK to provide more defense from the center-ice position.

With the two of them behind Sean Monahan, Adam Fantilli and a pair of wingers who could also play center when needed in Cole Sillinger and Boone Jenner, the Blue Jackets may be as deep as ever down the middle. That kind of depth should only make them better defensively.

3. Year 2 of Denton Mateychuk

Denton Mateychuk was the second of two defensemen the Blue Jackets drafted in the first round of the 2022 NHL Draft behind sixth overall pick David Jiricek. While Jiricek struggled to make an NHL impact and was traded to the Minnesota Wild during the season, Mateychuk wasted no time fitting in when he made his NHL debut on Dec. 23, 2024.

His presence clearly made the Blue Jackets better as they went 26-16-3 in the 45 games Mateychuk played in the NHL. They won 14 of their 37 games before Mateychuk was promoted, so he clearly had an impact on winning.

Mateychuk's rookie numbers weren't elite offensively, recording four goals and 13 points in those games. He also showed some promising numbers defensively.

For example, according to Natural Stat Trick, Mateychuk was a plus-0.09 differential of expected goals against per 60 minutes, meaning when he was on the ice, the Blue Jackets gave up 0.09 fewer goals per 60 minutes than expected when Mateychuk was on the ice. While it's not always an indicator of how good a defenseman is, it shows that he was a positive influence on his end of the ice.

But it's clear the Blue Jackets were better with him than without him last season, and there's no reason to think he can't continue to ascend in his first full NHL season.

The Athletic / Breaking down the Blue Jackets' high-powered forward lines: Skill, speed, size

By Aaron Portzline – October 8, 2025

For so long, it was so hard for the Columbus Blue Jackets to score goals. The lack of a singular talent. The dearth of high-end skill. A disengaged, half-hearted approach when it was clear that seasons were becoming lost causes.

That's part of what made last season so shocking in Columbus. Even after the tragedy involving Johnny Gaudreau and even after the trade of Patrik Laine, the Blue Jackets were one of the NHL's most offensively dangerous clubs, finishing tied for seventh (with the Toronto Maple Leafs) in goals.

They scored a franchise-record 267, to be exact. They had two 30-goal scorers (Adam Fantilli, Kirill Marchenko) for the first time since 2015-16 (Brandon Saad, Boone Jenner). The Jackets also scored six or more goals in 16 games, or one in every five outings, also a franchise high.

The Blue Jackets can score. That's not only a good thing; it's probably necessary, as the most predictable path back to the Stanley Cup playoffs — after a five-year hiatus — is to score even more than they did a year ago.

The defensive corps is reshuffled but completely unchanged from a year ago. Jet Greaves will be a first-time NHL goaltender, sharing duties with Elvis Merzlikins, who has struggled mightily the last three seasons.

With the season opener looming Thursday in Nashville, *The Athletic* wanted to take a closer look at the lines Dean Evason is expected to trot out against the Predators, with a word from each line's center as to what they expect from their trio.

Here goes ...

First line

Dmitri Voronkov – Sean Monahan – Kirill Marchenko

Strengths: This was one of the NHL's best lines last season. Monahan played a point-per-game pace (19 goals, 38 assists and 57 points in 54 games) for the second time in his career, Marchenko tied for the club high and set a personal mark with 31 goals, and Voronkov broke out with career highs across the board (23 goals, 24 assists and 47 points).

Together, their work was even more impressive. They had a 3.58 expected goals per 60 minutes of play, which, according to MoneyPuck.com, made them the second-best line in the NHL (among lines that played 250-plus minutes together). The only better line was the Edmonton Oilers' top line with Connor McDavid, Leon Draisaitl and Zach Hyman.

Their most effective way of defending is by possessing the puck in the offensive end, but Marchenko's dramatic improvement defensively last season — he competed much harder for loose pucks — made them a solid two-way line.

Concerns: Monahan has battled injuries throughout his career, and he's not getting younger. He turns 31 on Sunday and is coming off a season in which he missed 28 games with a wrist injury. The Blue Jackets went on a 4-11-1 tailspin when Monahan was out of the lineup last season, and it cost them the playoffs.

Voronkov was challenged to improve his conditioning over the offseason, and coaches have been pleased. But we'll really know when the season hits the second half if Voronkov can keep the pace. He has lagged noticeably the past two seasons.

Don't think Evason would hesitate to swap in somebody else for Voronkov if he fades. Kent Johnson and Yegor Chinakhov would be candidates.

In Monahan's words: "We just have to up our 'compete' on hockey pucks. That's going to be the big thing. We talk about it quite a bit, especially in the offensive zone. If there are loose pucks, it's us hounding those pucks and not letting guys get out (of the zone) easy. We want to get the puck and hang on to it. Put it in the net, too, of course. But we really want to play on the right side of the puck and keep hounding it. That's going to be the key. It's so much fun playing with those guys. Ronny is super motivated. Marchy is unbelievable, and I think he's just scratching the surface."

Second line

Boone Jenner — Adam Fantilli — Cole Sillinger

Strengths: All three are among the most competitive players on the roster, which should make this a challenging line to face physically.

Fantilli broke out last season with 31 goals and was one of the NHL's most productive players in the second half of the season when his goal production skyrocketed. Nobody has ever questioned his offensive skill, but he has made large strides defensively, which is how he earned a top-six job at such a young age.

Jenner is, well, Jenner: Sturdy. Immovable. Relentless. There's no glam in his game, but his work ethic and strength down low allow him to score goals off rebounds and redirections. If he's healthy, he's a lock for 20-plus goals. Meanwhile, Sillinger was pegged for a third-line role this season but played his way onto this line in training camp.

Concerns: This line only came together near the end of camp. It doesn't feel permanent. Chinakhov could land here, as could Johnson, most likely in Sillinger's spot.

The one aspect of hockey that has challenged Fantilli the most is faceoffs. He was only 41.2 percent last season, which is why Jenner's placement on this line is key. If Fantilli is struggling on the dot, Jenner can easily take over in a game. But it also allows Fantilli to time the linesman's drop and be aggressive. If he gets tossed from the circle, no big deal.

Jenner has missed double-digit games in each of the past six seasons, including 56 last season with a shoulder injury just before the start of the regular season.

In Fantilli's words: "We're going to work hard. We're going to be physical. We're going to do the little things right. When we're in the offensive zone, we're really creative players, and we're going to get things done. We're going to score a lot of goals together. Silly and Boone are leaders on this team. I'm excited to be around them. They're both open to collaboration, anything that's going to help. Silly's not afraid to tell me when I did something wrong, and I feel comfortable telling Boone and Sully things I think we could change to be better."

Third line

Kent Johnson – Charlie Coyle – Mathieu Olivier

Strengths: Coyle, acquired in a trade with the Colorado Avalanche in June, gives the Blue Jackets depth down the middle like the franchise has never seen. He's a smart, positionally sound center who has been strong on faceoffs throughout his career. But there's some offensive pop there, too.

Johnson, maybe the best playmaker on the roster, is an odd fit on the third line. But Evason, noting Johnson's tendency to get creative, said the idea was for straight-ahead players such as Coyle and Olivier to force Johnson into simplifying and going north-south.

What can you say about Olivier? He led the NHL in fighting majors and set a personal high with 18 goals. The last player with 139 penalty minutes and 18-plus goals was Evander Kane in 2018-19. He won't let Blue Jackets coaches play him on the fourth line.

Concerns: Like the second line, this feels like it could be reworked quickly. Is this the checking line? It feels like a top-six player (Johnson) with a third-line center (Coyle) and a fourth-line tough guy, although Olivier proved to be much more than that last season.

We understand wanting Johnson to play a more direct style — it seemed like he did last season — but he's a creative player who needs to play with finishers. Don't be surprised if he moves up in the lineup to inject some playmaking, especially on the second line.

In Coyle's words: "It doesn't matter who we're playing against; we have to make it tough on them. Let's play down in their end, make them defend against us. That's where I take pride in my game: being down low with the puck, protecting it. Olivier, same thing. He can be a menace down there. And we all know what Johnson brings with his skill set. KJ put up numbers (24 goals, 33 assists and 57 points) last year. Olivier (18 goals) had a great year. We have a line that can contribute (offensively), but we have to make sure that we're first stable in our defensive game."

Fourth line

Miles Wood – Isac Lundestrom – Zach Aston-Reese

Strengths: Wood came to the Blue Jackets along with Coyle in the trade with Colorado, and Evason is hoping he can inject some disruption and physicality into a forecheck that was quick enough most of last season but didn't rattle bones.

Lundestrom is a mystery to most of the Eastern Conference, but he has played 337 games over the past six seasons with the Anaheim Ducks. He is a reliable defensive player and penalty killer. There is sneaky skill in Lundstrom's stick, but this is going to be a no-nonsense, nothing-flashy line.

Aston-Reese is locked into the same role he had last season, when he scored six goals and played about 13 1/2 minutes per night. This should be a smart, veteran line that counts leaving the puck in the offensive end of the ice as a good shift.

Concerns: Chinakhov, who requested a trade during the summer and changed agents earlier this month, has landed in the spot he did not want. Unless something changes, he's set to be the extra forward when the Blue Jackets play in Nashville on Thursday.

Wood has had back and hip surgeries in recent years and remains one of the game's strong skaters, especially for a guy with size. After playing just 37 games last season with the Avs, Wood said during training camp that he has felt healthy and rejuvenated.

In Lundestrom's words: "We can all skate and move, so we want to be a line that can be hard to play against, gets the puck deep and tries to circle around down there with it. The big thing is just to be really solid and structured in the defensive zone. So far, it's been great with those guys. Everyone wants to be on the scoresheet. If we get pucks to the net and keep it simple, we might be able to create some chances."

The Athletic / ‘More than a hockey game’: 25 years later, the Blue Jackets’ debut sill resonates

By Aaron Portzline – October 7, 2025

It was only a six-ounce chunk of vulcanized rubber that hit Nationwide Arena’s ice on Oct. 7, 2000, but it landed like a meteor.

The initial blast was at 7:56 p.m. At that moment, the Columbus Blue Jackets joined the NHL, and the city of Columbus stepped into a different cultural stratosphere after years of ignominy as the country’s largest city without major-league sports.

Most of the aftershocks are still being felt today.

The Blue Jackets, despite only sporadic bursts of moderate success and no Stanley Cup playoff runs beyond the second round, have built one of the most loyal and passionate fan bases in the league. The neighborhood anchored by Nationwide Arena has become more than the architects ever imagined. Youth and recreational hockey in central Ohio is the envy of other U.S. regions.

There has been professional hockey in Columbus since the 1960s. But the Blue Jackets have established a place in the local landscape that has, to many, transformed the city, and it began 25 years ago Tuesday, when Robert Kron moved slowly into the faceoff circle with 18,136-plus fans standing in anticipation.

The Blue Jackets have had better seasons than their inaugural campaign, certainly, but the club that president and general manager Doug MacLean assembled played with a spirit, a ferocity and a togetherness that not only endeared them to fans immediately but sparked a love affair between hockey and a sprawling city that has never stopped growing.

“It was an amazing moment,” inaugural Blue Jackets coach Dave King told *The Athletic* last week. “I can remember it clear as a bell. Everybody was standing. You could hardly wait for the puck to hit the ice. I remember being on the bench there thinking, ‘Let’s get going.’”

“Columbus was happy to have us, but we were the lucky ones. A lot of our fans didn’t have a background in hockey, but they could recognize effort, and that was a key to us getting really good support. The guys worked their tails off.”

The buildup

MacLean and his staff — assistant GM Jim Clark, pro scout Bob Strumm, and amateur scout Don Boyd — spent the previous season scouring the world, literally, for players.

This was the third wave of expansion in three seasons, so NHL rosters were fairly picked over, and the rules of expansion back then made it dramatically more difficult to build competitive teams than, say, Vegas or Seattle faced in recent years.

The Jackets spent on two free agents: defenseman Lyle Odelein, who was named captain, and goaltender Ron Tugnutt, who became the franchise’s first folk hero. They mined the expansion draft for

players who became significant pieces, such as Geoff Sanderson, Tyler Wright, Steve Heinze, Mattias Timander and Kron. And they lured players back from Europe who hadn't found success in their first North American attempts. They spent the organization's first draft pick on Rostislav Klesla, an 18-year-old from Czechia.

They had a whopping 72 players at training camp, and on the first day, morning practice stopped several times to either break up fights or let them play out. At one point, MacLean marched down from his seat in the stands, grabbed a stick on the bench and began banging it on the boards until the fight stopped.

"There was a lot of energy in that rink," said right wing Kevin Dineen.

King, the coach, was professorial in every way. He may have been more of a teacher than a motivator, but the Blue Jackets didn't need a push.

"A lot of these guys had been in pro hockey for eight or nine years and had never had a shot," King said. "Some of them had a cup of coffee. But this was their chance. They knew it and we (as coaches) knew it, so we really didn't have to play those cards too much. These guys were driven."

Blue Jackets players had been in town a few weeks ahead of training camp, but they really didn't know Columbus as a city or a hockey market. Training camp was like most others in the NHL, but as the night of the franchise opener drew near, the mood changed among the players.

Strangely, it felt like pressure, Tugnut said.

"There was excitement, but there was also a little bit of ... 'How's this going to go?'" Tugnut said.

"What's it going to be like that first time you walk out in front of the fans? We really didn't know what to expect, but that went away pretty fast that first night.

"The crowd was so excited. We could tell it in warmups, and then we got back into the room before the game and that's how we were talking. This was our first impression. Let's show them what they're going to see all year, and hopefully they're going to like it."

King said telling the healthy scratches they weren't going to play was especially difficult. That included defenseman Jean-Luc Grand-Pierre, now a broadcaster with the club. Meanwhile, Espen Knutsen, who became their top center, was out with a fractured finger.

"It's never easy," King said. "Everybody wanted in on this game, right?"

What a night

Puck drop between the Blue Jackets and Chicago Blackhawks was set for 7:30 p.m., a half hour later than typical. The pregame ceremonies, hosted by legendary broadcaster Mike "Doc" Emrick, went long, too. It was nearly 8 p.m. when the centers lined up.

Kron took the draw, flanked by Sanderson on his left and Heinze to his right. The top defensive pair was Odelein and Timander, with Tugnut the backstop. Kron won the puck back to Odelein, who swatted it over Timander. The Blue Jackets were born.

Many in the arena that night never expected to see major-league sports in Columbus. Cell phones were fairly rare back then, but the building sparkled with flashes going off as play got started.

“The volume in that building leading up to the faceoff ... I mean, it was every bit like a playoff game,” Tugnut said. “We were all excited, but the crowd, the sound of it, just had this different feel to it, like this was something more than a hockey game to a lot of people.

“I remember taking a second to look up and look around and go, ‘Well, geez. This is going to be something, isn’t it? What a building.’”

It got louder at 7:34 of the first period.

Kevyn Adams carried the puck high around the right circle, then sent a backhand pass across to Krzysztof Oliwa in the left circle. Oliwa shoveled the puck on net and Bruce Gardiner — forever the answer to a Columbus trivia question — put it behind Blackhawks goaltender Jocelyn Thibault.

The place went delirious when the Jackets scored two more goals in less than two minutes to make it 3-0. David Vyborny scored with helpers from Sergei Aubin and Wright, while Heinze made it 3-0 at 9:20 with assists from Sanderson and Odelein.

One fan in the upper reaches of the arena stood backward on his chair to bark at members of the media who had predicted a long year of struggles and droughts for the first-year Blue Jackets. There was no cannon then in Nationwide Arena, but you couldn’t have heard it anyway.

“That was something,” Tugnut said. “Can only imagine what Chicago was thinking, but they got it together, right?”

The Blackhawks, who had lost their season opener two days earlier, did manage to rally. They tied the score with three goals in the second period and won going away with two goals in the third. Reto Von Arx, another trivia answer, scored the first goal against the Blue Jackets at 6:10 of the second period.

Tugnut stopped 20 of 25 shots. Jamie Pushor and Oliwa had fighting majors, while Wright — on his way to being the Blue Jackets’ first crowd favorite — had a minor for roughing.

The Blue Jackets fan who was chirping the press box earlier in the night? He turned around at the final buzzer for a handshake and an apology. He was carried away by the moment, which was entirely understandable.

“To see a town embrace a team like that, and to be on the ground floor with it, was a pretty cool thing,” Dineen said.

A rousing campaign

The Blue Jackets sold more than 12,000 season tickets before their first season, but they sold thousands of fans on their game that night and for the rest of the season.

They finished 28-39-15, a 71-point season that at the time was the second-highest point total for an expansion club in league history. They finished tied with Chicago and ahead of Minnesota and Anaheim in the Western Conference, and ahead of Montreal, Florida, Atlanta, Tampa Bay and the New York Islanders in the overall standings.

And they got better as the season moved along and an identity formed, as they went 21-21-8-5 in the final 45 games, including a 4-0-2-2 stretch in January and February. Tellingly, they sold out 26 of their 41 home games, including the final 14.

"We realized what we were," Tugnut said. "We had to change our mindset — it's all about winning and it has to be low-scoring for us to have success. We tried to win games 2-1, and it was a complete turnaround.

"There were games where I'd say, 'We're going to be outmatched tonight, and I have to be at my best to give us a chance. But I also knew these guys had my back. We got a lot closer as a team as we went along, and Kinger ... he was the perfect coach for that team."

Sanderson became the club's top scorer and just the third player in the modern wave of expansion (since 1991-92) to score 30 goals. Knutsen, a sublime playmaker, finished with 42 assists. Wright became the embodiment of the Blue Jackets' playing style: scrappy, fearless, indefatigable.

King could talk about those players and that Blue Jackets' season for hours. Columbus had a payroll of just \$18.6 million that first season. This was before the NHL adopted a salary cap, so big-market teams such as Chicago, Detroit, Toronto, New York and Los Angeles were routinely close to \$100 million or more.

But the Blue Jackets held their own.

"There's a tendency to always remember the teams that won championships or went a long way in the playoffs," King said. "But I have to be honest with you, working with those players ... to watch them play so hard, every night, taking really good teams to the brink... As a coach, you remember the teams that gave you the most. And that team ... I've had a lot of teams, but that one gave an awful lot."

It was distinct in another way, too.

"Every season there's a point where you have to bottom-line it with guys," King said. "You have to ask for more, you have to scold them a bit because they're not giving you as much as they can.

"That never happened with the Blue Jackets of 2000-01. Not once were we forced, as a coaching staff, to hold court and say, 'What's going on here?' It never happened. And that was a special situation for a coach."

The Blue Jackets picked up their first victory on Oct. 12 in Calgary, against King's former club. The first home win didn't occur until Oct. 27 vs. Washington.

There were moments that changed the course of the franchise, too.

Tugnut struggled in the first two months of the season before suffering a broken bone in one of his hands. He was out of the lineup for two weeks, and King put him to work while he was too injured to play. "A two-week boot camp," Tugnut called it. "I hated it."

But when he came back...

"I was on fire," Tugnut said. "I came out of that feeling like the fastest goalie in the world. I told myself, 'I have to stay on top of this.' My conditioning went through the roof after that."

By late January, Oliwa had fallen out of favor with the Blue Jackets and was traded to the Pittsburgh Penguins. Needing a tough guy, the Jackets reached into their minor leagues to sign Jody Shelley to an NHL contract. Shelley became one of the most popular players in franchise history, and still works for the club as an ambassador and broadcaster.

Memories linger

Tugnutt's contract included three bonuses should he win 20 or more games, have a save percentage above .915 and a goals-against average below 2.50. When the regular-season finale arrived, he had achieved all three, and some wondered if he'd risk the final two playing that last game.

"That was the conversation. 'If we get blown out or if I get pulled early, those bonuses ... ya know,'" Tugnutt said. "But I definitely wanted to play in that game. For sure. It wasn't even a thought. And then (public relations VP) Todd Sharrock told me that I was one win away from the expansion record (22) for a goalie. Well, let's go."

Tugnutt finished 22-25-5 with a .917 and 2.44. MacLean came into the dressing room the day after the season to make a delivery to Tugnutt.

"It was my bonuses check," Tugnutt said. "He was (like), 'I don't say this often, but you earned it.' Classic Doug, right? It felt like a great achievement for me, and for him to do that meant a lot."

The Blue Jackets won the final game of the season 4-3 in overtime on Wright's goal. After starting the season with a loss to the Blackhawks, they ended it with a win over Chicago to tie them in the standings.

At the trade deadline, MacLean made a series of trades, as was always the plan. Adams was traded to Florida for Ray Whitney. Heinze was traded to Buffalo and František Kučera to Pittsburgh for draft picks. Already, the inaugural team was breaking up.

Adams is now the GM in Buffalo. Sanderson (New Jersey), Wright (Carolina), Kron (Seattle) and Pushor (Tampa Bay) are all working for NHL clubs, too. Heinze owns and operates a doggy daycare in Santa Barbara, Calif. Backup goaltender Marc Denis is a national broadcaster in Canada. Gardiner was a longtime police constable in Barrie, Ontario. Knutsen, Aubin and defenseman Petteri Nummelin have all had coaching careers in Europe.

"Every once in a while something will pop up and I'll see one of those guys," Tugnutt said. "And I smile, ya know. I just smile."

"We knew the second year was going to be harder. Expectations were higher. There'd be changes. The first year is always special. I felt like Columbus was more of a hockey town, and I loved it. It seemed like the right fit and the right place to be for hockey."

The Blue Jackets are celebrating 25 years on the ice this season, and they'll be celebrating the inaugural team throughout the campaign. On Oct. 18, King, Tugnutt, Dineen, Klesla and Grand-Pierre will be honored before the Jackets play the Tampa Bay Lightning.

"Kinger's gonna be bossing us all around again, isn't he?" said Dineen, who has been coach of two NHL clubs (Florida, Chicago) and three AHL clubs since he retired as a player. On the night he decided to retire after a game early in the 2002-03 season, he came back onto the ice, his daughter in his arms, to take one last lap around an empty rink.

"Nobody knew what to expect there in Columbus," he said. "I'd done my homework, so I probably knew a little more than some of the guys. But ... we were all blown away, right?"

“Special place. I still go back. There’s been a lot of years now for all of us. But yeah, special year. A real bond was formed with the fans there, and I still get reminded of that today. It meant a lot to people. And that’s why it meant a lot to us, too, as players. Great times.”

The Columbus Dispatch / Nationwide Arena chefs unveil 13 new concessions for the Blue Jackets' 2025-26 season

By Bob Vitale – October 8, 2025

It remains to be seen how many wins the Columbus Blue Jackets will serve up this season at Nationwide Arena.

But fans sure won't go hungry in the literal sense. With more than a dozen new items at stands, carts, suites, clubs and lounges, Executive Chef Sean Barger promises "everything you'd want from concessions food" in 2025-26.

Continuing a long-term trend of chef-driven meals and snacks at the nation's sports venues, arena chefs said they worked over the five-month off-season to elevate the basics.

You can still get hot dogs and bratwurst off roller grills, nachos with pickled jalapenos and a pump of cheese, peanuts by the bag and popcorn by the box. Now, though, you'll also have options of hot dogs wrapped in croissant, pita-chip nachos with Mediterranean toppings, and fries with beef brisket and yumyum sauce.

"We've taken things as a base and just added as much as we can without overdoing it," said Barger, who oversees arena concessions for Delaware North.

Well, maybe overdoing it a little. He described the croissant-wrapped hot dog, which will come in foot-long and 2-foot versions, as "gluttonous and beautiful."

Here are 13 new items for hockey fans this season.

Croissant Dog

The Columbus Blue Jackets and Delaware North have unveiled a fresh lineup of innovative food options for the team's 25th National Hockey League season at Nationwide Arena. Fans can look forward to bold flavors, creative combinations, and local favorites across the arena. Photo of Croissant Dog.

New to the lineup of hot dogs and bratwurst is a footlong all-beef hot dog, wrapped end to end in flaky croissant dough and topped with everything seasoning. As if that's not enough, Barger said a two-foot, two-pound croissant-wrapped hot dog is on its way, too. Why?

"Instagram," he said. They'll be sold at the Jet's pizza stand on the lower concourse and the concession stand outside Section 217. Cost: \$12.99.

Mediterranean Nachos

Wedges of za'atar-spiced pita bread are topped with shawarma chicken, harissa yogurt, pickled red onion, lettuce, tomato, cucumber, feta and preserved lemon. They're part of a new Mediterranean menu at the Wild Turkey Hat Trick Bar on the lower concourse. Cost: \$13.99.

61 Stack Burger

A smash-burger patty on a buttered bun comes with caramelized onion, white American cheese and a creamy, tangy bistro sauce. The burger named for the number worn by Blue Jackets legend Rick Nash will be available at concession stands and club-level stands. Cost: \$13.99, with additional patties for \$4.99 each.

Umami Fries

French fries come loaded with braised beef and yumyum sauce and a sprinkling of green onion and sesame seeds. Fans can get them at the Club Grill, at the top of the escalator to the club level. Cost: \$10.99.

CBJ vs. East Coast Nachos

The Columbus Blue Jackets and Delaware North have unveiled a fresh lineup of innovative food options for the team's 25th National Hockey League season at Nationwide Arena. Fans can look forward to bold flavors, creative combinations, and local favorites across the arena. Photo of CBJ vs. East Coast Nacho.

An update of last year's 2-foot box of rotating, opponent-focused nachos will be sold at concessions stands outside Sections 110 and 217. CBJ nachos in one half of the box are blue and red tortilla chips topped with queso, roasted corn, cotija cheese and cilantro. East Coast opponents are represented in the other half with chips, pastrami, queso, lime slaw, tomato and cilantro. Cost: \$19.99.

Sloppy No

A vegan sloppy joe starts with kimchi-flavored textured vegetable protein and is served on a gluten-free bun with Asian slaw and shoyu onions. It will be available at the concessions stand outside Section 106. Cost: \$12.99. Nationwide Arena also sells plant-based Beyond Burgers (Section 113) and Beyond Bratwurst (Section 206 and club level).

Stix Tacos

The Stix concessions cart on the lower concourse will sell three different tacos, including a new version with poke-style tuna. There also will be chicken tacos and dessert tacos. Cost: \$4.99 for tuna, \$3.99 for chicken and \$3.49 for dessert.

Puck Luck Pretzels

The Fanatic Sportsbook has added fried pretzel bites topped with queso blanco and pico de gallo. Cost: \$8.99.

CBJ Cream Puffs

The Schmidt's Sausage Haus stand in the main concourse has created a Jackets-inspired cream puff in team colors. The filling is strawberry cheesecake, and it's topped with blue icing sugar. Cost: \$7.99.

In the suites

The Columbus Blue Jackets and Delaware North have unveiled a fresh lineup of innovative food options for the team's 25th National Hockey League season at Nationwide Arena. Fans can look forward to bold flavors, creative combinations, and local favorites across the arena. Photo of 5th Line Salad.

Fans in Nationwide Arena suites have three new menu options this season. The 5th Line Salad (\$80) includes field greens, Manchego cheese, Marcona almonds, strawberries and a blueberry vinaigrette. Smoked turkey sandwiches (\$105) come with cheddar, baby spinach, red onion and barbecue mayonnaise on ciabatta bread. Dessert nachos (\$75) are a platter of cinnamon-sugar tortilla chips, blueberries, strawberries and banana drizzled with chocolate sauce.

Warm chocolate chip cookies

They're coming fresh out of the oven at arena concessions stands this year. Cost: \$4.99.

The Columbus Dispatch / 'Nothing separating' Columbus Blue Jackets goalies Elvis Merzlikins, Jet Greaves

By Brian Hedger – October 8, 2025

The talks are ongoing.

As the season opener approaches Oct. 9 in Nashville, Blue Jackets head coach Dean Evason and his assistants are trying to decide which goalie will start against the Predators. Will Elvis Merzlikins get top billing in Music City, or will Jet Greaves be cleared for takeoff at Bridgestone Arena?

“We’re having serious discussions on who should start,” Evason said Oct. 7 at Nationwide Arena. “We think that regardless of the choice we make, it’ll be a good one because both played extremely well in all the (preseason games they played), and not only that, but in practice, as well ... their work ethic. There’s nothing separating (them).”

That’s a good sign for a team that needs improvement from its goaltenders to make a run at qualifying for the playoffs for the first time since 2019-20. Evason said whichever one doesn’t start in Nashville is likely to start the second game Oct. 11 at the Minnesota Wild.

It could be the start of a balanced tandem approach, which Evason anticipates being a necessity with a packed schedule on both sides of the NHL’s Winter Olympics break in February. Merzlikins bristled early in training camp at the suggestion that Greaves could take over as the Jackets’ lead goalie, but he’s sounding more serene with the season looming.

“I think we are in a great position,” Merzlikins said. “The next 16 days, we might have one or two days off, so I need him, he needs me, and we’re doing this together for the team and our organization, and I’m excited for it.”

Merzlikins has prior experience splitting time with Joonas Korpisalo in Columbus, so reinstituting that approach with Greaves shouldn’t be an issue.

For his part, Greaves is excited to break camp with the Blue Jackets for the first time. He’s got his own place in Columbus now, is expected to play his first full NHL season and is beaming at the opportunity in front of him.

It’s been a challenging journey as an undrafted goalie who’s considered small for the position at 6 feet tall.

“When you’re growing up as a kid, you dream about playing in the NHL,” Greaves said. “I think all of us in this room recognize how much of a privilege it is to play this game for a living, and to do it in this league is something that’s super special. I’m excited about that, and in the same sense, there’s a lot of things that are similar. At the end of the day, it’s about stopping pucks and trying to win hockey games.”

Greaves stopped a few more in his preseason action, but Merzlikins handled some tough assignments while starting a couple of road games in Pittsburgh and Washington without having the Blue Jackets’ full NHL lineup dressed. Greaves went 1-1-0 with a 2.44 goals-against average and .917 save percentage in 147:25, while Merzlikins went 0-3-0 with a 2.88 GAA and .896 in 145:53.

Greaves finished last season scorching hot as an emergency replacement for Merzlikins, who missed the final five games with a concussion. Greaves almost backstopped the Blue Jackets to an unlikely postseason appearance with five straight wins and looked unflappable while doing it.

Merzlikins struggled with consistency for a third straight season, but he was razor sharp last year when he was at his best. Should he play that way more consistently and the Blue Jackets continue to get solid goaltending from Greaves, their biggest question mark could become one of their biggest strengths.

"It might be a situation where we need both guys, so at the end of the day, it's always about the Blue Jackets winning hockey games," Greaves said. "If it's him in the net, I'm cheering for him and I'm his biggest supporter, and if I'm in the net, he's mine. It's nice to have that relationship with each other and support for each other, because whoever's in the net is going to do whatever they can to help the team win."

The Columbus Dispatch / Breaking down the Columbus Blue Jackets' opening roster for 2025-26 season

By Brian Hedger – October 6, 2025

Training camp for the Columbus Blue Jackets this season was exactly what they'd hoped it would be.

Boring.

No major injuries have jeopardized the lineup, no rookies stole roster spots, even though Luca Del Bel Belluz made a solid case, and the only position battle was at goaltender. Elvis Merzlikins and Jet Greaves made their cases to start the season opener Oct. 9 in Nashville, but they're expected to split the net either way.

It's been a real snoozer thus far, including a 2-5-0 preseason record, but that's often the case for teams expecting to be good. The Blue Jackets' opening roster is what it was projected to be in the summer.

Goaltending is the biggest question mark, a core group of veterans is eager to provide leadership, and a younger core of rising stars is ready to push even harder. There's skill, size, toughness and an identity of being relentless that the Blue Jackets spent last season building.

Now, it's almost time to drop the puck for keeps and they're ready to go. Here's a closer look at the Blue Jackets' 22-man opening roster and how they might line up against the Predators:

Columbus Blue Jackets forwards

Del Bel Belluz made an argument to stick around to start the season in Columbus, but he'd have started out as the last forward in a group of 14, and that would have meant sitting out as a healthy scratch too often for a guy who's 21 and needs to play every game in a key top-six role as a center.

He'll get that opportunity with AHL Cleveland again, centering the Monsters' top line while waiting to see if an NHL need for him arises in Columbus. As for the 13 forwards who made the Blue Jackets' opening roster, it looks like Yegor Chinakhov might be the odd guy out among top 12 who'll start out.

The Jackets should be strong down the middle with Sean Monahan, Adam Fantilli, Charlie Coyle and Isac Lundestrom as the top four centers with additional options at the pivot in Boone Jenner, Cole Sillinger and Dmitri Voronkov. Chinakhov, who requested a trade in the summer, could force his way into the lineup.

Here's how the Jackets may look up front in Nashville:

First line: Dmitri Voronkov – Sean Monahan – Kirill Marchenko

Second line: Boone Jenner – Adam Fantilli – Cole Sillinger

Third line: Kent Johnson – Charlie Coyle – Mathieu Olivier

Fourth line: Zach Aston-Reese – Isac Lundestrom – Miles Wood

Extra: Yegor Chinakhov

Columbus Blue Jackets defensemen

After signing Dante Fabbro and Ivan Provorov to contract extensions, nothing has changed with the composition of the Blue Jackets' defensive group. They'll carry seven defensemen after losing Daemon Hunt to the Minnesota Wild via waivers, so determining the main three pairings is the only question to answer.

Zach Werenski and Fabbro have the top spot locked up, while it looks like Ivan Provorov and Damon Severson will get a chance to skate together on the second pairing. That leaves either Jake Christiansen or Denton Mateychuk to skate on the third pairing with veteran Erik Gudbranson.

Christiansen, coming off his first full NHL season, is expected to start out in a depth role as the seventh defenseman after putting together a solid training camp to cement his roster spot in the preseason. Here's how the Blue Jackets could line up defensively in Nashville:

First pairing: Zach Werenski – Dante Dabbro

Second pairing: Ivan Provorov – Damon Severson

Third pairing: Denton Mateychuk – Erik Gudbranson

Extra: Jake Christiansen

Columbus Blue Jackets goalies

Merzlikins bristled when asked at the start of camp whether he felt pressured to outplay Greaves for the top goaltending role, which he's owned the past three years.

Greaves has built a better argument to start for the Blue Jackets if you go by their preseason numbers, but Merzlikins made two tough road starts in Pittsburgh and Washington. Greaves finished last season hot in the final five games of the Blue Jackets' six-game winning streak to end last season, so the team is comfortable with either one.

No matter which is tabbed to start first, expect both to play a lot during a compressed schedule before and after the NHL's break in February for the 2026 Winter Olympics in Italy.

Columbus Blue Jackets coaching staff

Don Waddell, the Blue Jackets' president/general manager, made several offseason changes to his team's support staff, including a new strength and conditioning coach and new head equipment manager. The coaching staff, however, wasn't touched.

Coach Dean Evason's staff returns intact after Waddell re-signed assistant Steve McCarthy, so there shouldn't be any lapses caused by players adjusting to new coaches. McCarthy will again coordinate the penalty kill, Mike Haviland will head up the power play and Evason will oversee a staff of four assistants that Scott Ford, Jared Boll and goaltending coach Niklas Backstrom.

The Blue Jackets are banking on coaching continuity helping them bring last season's finish into this season's start.

The Hockey Writers / 3 Blue Jackets' Takeaways From Their 2025 Preseason

By Mark Scheig – October 6, 2025

The Columbus Blue Jackets have wrapped up their 2025 preseason. Although they finished with a record of 2-5-0, the record doesn't even come close to telling the full story.

In one sense, this training camp and preseason for the Blue Jackets was a little unusual. That's because for the most part, roster spots were accounted for.

With most of their main core of players back in 2025-26, this preseason was more about getting their timing and rhythm back than anything else. Towards the end, you could tell that the team was more than ready to get the regular season going.

There were still plenty of storylines to follow throughout this preseason. What were three things that stood out to us? Let's discuss them.

Offensive Concern?

The Blue Jackets finished the preseason scoring just 14 goals in their seven games. Mathieu Olivier led the way with three goals.

The only other Blue Jackets who scored more than once were Boone Jenner and Luca Del Bel Belluz with two goals each. Del Bel Belluz was cut from camp and assigned to the Cleveland Monsters despite being one of their most noticeable players.

Scoring two goals per game on average would normally be concerning. But this is why we have to consider the nature of the preseason.

At no point in the seven preseason games did the Blue Jackets ice their actual projected lineup. Even in the last two games against the Capitals that would be considered a dress rehearsal, key players were missing. Kirill Marchenko didn't play Tuesday night while Zach Werenski and Sean Monahan didn't play Saturday night.

If we get 10 games into the season and the Blue Jackets are at two goals per game, then it's fair to raise a concern. The team accomplished what they wanted to despite their poor record. The players got their feet under them. And more importantly, they came out of the preseason relatively healthy, something they couldn't say last season.

Then consider coach Dean Evason tweaked with some of the lines in an effort to get different looks. Despite not getting production, it answered a few questions for Evason in terms of what to try once the season gets going.

Evason was asked prior to the Saturday Capitals' game if he felt his team was better this year than last. He said yes.

The offense still has the same upside and potential despite the cold preseason. Coming out of it healthy was a bigger win than scoring a few more goals that ultimately don't count.

Defense/Goaltending

Let's look at the other side of the story. The Blue Jackets allowed 18 goals in their seven preseason games. At 2.57 goals against per game, that's a marked improvement for a team in which many are wondering how their defense and goaltending will do.

Like the offense, these numbers must be taken with a grain of salt with various lineups and other factors in play.

How did the goaltenders do? Below are their preseason stats.

- Jet Greaves: 1-1-0, 6 GA in 147:25, 2.44 GAA and .917 save percentage.
- Elvis Merzlikins: 0-3-0, 7 GA in 145:53, 2.88 GAA and .896 save percentage.

Ivan Fedotov, who was assigned to the Cleveland Monsters on Monday, allowed just two goals in 80 minutes of preseason action.

Evason has not said who will start the opener on Thursday in Nashville. If the decision comes down to straight numbers, Greaves outperformed Merzlikins. It will be curious to see what conclusion the Blue Jackets make based on what they saw.

The Blue Jackets used this preseason to focus on and refine their forecheck. After the way last season went, don't be surprised if the team emphasizes the need to play better in their own zone. At least by their preseason numbers, they were a stingier team. Will they be able to keep that up?

A Focused & Urgent Team

This last one isn't going to be seen on the TV screen or even in the stands. There was one thing I noticed throughout camp and the preseason that I just couldn't shake.

There is a new level of urgency for these Blue Jackets.

That shouldn't come as any surprise given the way last season ended. Had a couple games gone in their favor, the Blue Jackets could have tasted the playoffs.

The Blue Jackets haven't been in the playoffs since they were ousted by the Tampa Bay Lightning in the 2020 Bubble. That's five consecutive seasons of not tasting the postseason.

I asked Erik Gudbranson if he felt that urgency throughout the room. He didn't hesitate when providing a response.

"Yeah," Gudbranson said. "(We) finish not the way we expected last year. It's been at least on my end three years of no playoffs here. There's been a few guys who are a little bit longer. They haven't made the playoffs in a while and it's time to make something happen."

The one player in which you could tell that has an extra level of urgency is Zach Werenski. Coming off a monster season individually, he's looking to help the Blue Jackets get to the next level.

On Media Day, Werenski admitted that being at the Worlds reminded him how much fun it is to win. Even in just his tone of voice throughout camp, you could tell he's feeling that urgency to get back to the playoffs. He's as focused as I've ever seen him now entering his 10th NHL season.

“Definitely makes me hungrier in areas like that where I kind of have missed that feeling of winning, haven’t had enough of it,” Werenski said. “(I) just want to bring that here and be part of the solution here and be part of the reason why we bring a Cup to Columbus.”

The Blue Jackets’ leadership is feeling that same urgency. It’s spread to the rest of the team. They know what’s at stake in 2025-26. GM Don Waddell added a few players and kept the same core. There is a belief.

It’s now on the Blue Jackets to payoff that belief. If their play on the ice matches the urgency felt off the ice, they could be in for a good season.

The Athletic / Every NHL team's forwards ranked: Lightning, Golden Knights top the 2025-26 list

By James Mirtle and Harman Dayal – October 8, 2025

Yesterday, we ranked the defenses of every NHL team. Today, we turn our attention to the forwards.

Part of the challenge with analyzing all 32 groups of centers and wingers is figuring out what to prioritize. If a team has a lone superstar up front but not much support around him, is that better or worse than a team without a franchise face that nonetheless has key contributors on the second and third lines?

And how much do you prioritize evaluating goal production and offensive ability over considering two-way play, especially in cases where a team does only one of those things well?

This is the first time we've ranked forwards, so a few caveats with this list.

First, line combinations are obviously fluid, so we attempted to use the latest available as of our publishing deadline.

Second, injuries are a big factor, so we tried to account for how long a player will be out in determining how it will impact their team's ranking.

And three, this is based entirely on the 2025-26 season, so a team heavy on prospects with upside wasn't given an edge.

Tier 1: Best in class

Tampa Bay Lightning

Jake Guentzel – Brayden Point – Nikita Kucherov

Brandon Hagel – Anthony Cirelli – Gage Goncalves

Oliver Bjorkstrand – Yanni Gourde – Mitchell Chaffee

Zemgus Girgensons – Jack Finley – Pontus Holmberg

Extras: Nick Paul (IR), Conor Geekie, Curtis Douglas

While the other Florida team appropriately gets plenty of credit for its deep forward cast, a run of injuries there allows the Lightning to sneak into top spot of this season's rankings.

Part of what elevates this group is that they're both offensively and defensively excellent, ranking second in both categories by our model and boasting four elite scorers (Kucherov, Guentzel, Hagel and Point) complemented by a regular Selke candidate in Cirelli.

A full season with deadline adds Gourde and Bjorkstrand — the latter of whom was a nearly 60-point player in Seattle — on the third line will give them better depth than a year ago once Paul is healthy, which is impressive given the team led the NHL in scoring and placed second in goal differential without them for much of the 2024-25 season.

The only real flag with this group is that they're starting to get a little older, overall, and their last Cup win is now four years in the rearview. But a step forward for Geekie could inject some more youth into the top nine, and Goncalves and Finley add a little more under-25 upside, too. If the Panthers falter, this is a team to watch in the East.

Vegas Golden Knights

Ivan Barbashev – Jack Eichel – Mitch Marner

Reilly Smith – William Karlsson – Mark Stone

Brandon Saad – Tomas Hertl – Pavel Dorofeyev

Brett Howden – Colton Sissons – Keegan Kolesar

Extra: Cole Reinhardt, Alexander Holtz

Vegas' forward group is ridiculously stacked from top to bottom. Eichel and Marner both finished among the NHL's top 10 in scoring last year — they should form a deadly duo, giving the Golden Knights one of the best first lines in the league.

Between Eichel, Karlsson, Hertl and Sissons, Vegas has arguably the NHL's best center depth. Stone is still an elite player when healthy, and what a luxury it is to have Dorofeyev, who led Vegas with 35 goals, currently penciled in on the third line.

Even Vegas' fourth line is high-end — Howden scored 23 goals last year, Sissons would be a 3C on many teams, and Kolesar is a heavy, physical winger coming off a 30-point campaign.

Dallas Stars

Sam Steel – Roope Hintz – Mikko Rantanen

Jason Robertson – Wyatt Johnston – Mavrik Bourque

Colin Blackwell – Matt Duchene – Tyler Seguin

Adam Erne – Radek Faksa – Nathan Bastian

Extras: Jamie Benn (IR), Justin Hryckowian, Oskar Back

Dallas was already icing one of hockey's deepest top-nine forward groups over the last couple of years. Now, with Rantanen in the fold for his first full season, they finally have a superstar who can singlehandedly take games over, too. Rantanen started slow in Dallas, but he erupted in the playoffs with nine goals and 22 points in 18 games.

Add Robertson, Johnston (who should take another step this year), and Hintz to the fold and you've got four high-end first-line caliber players. And that doesn't even include Matt Duchene, who's coming off an 82-point season.

The Stars lost some valuable secondary forwards in Mikael Granlund, Mason Marchment, and Evgenii Dadanov, but a healthy Tyler Seguin — he missed all but 20 regular-season games — should be a huge difference-maker in the middle six and Bourque, who is a year removed from leading the AHL in points, should break out with a consistent top-nine opportunity, too.

Too many of Dallas' forwards went quiet in last year's playoffs — Rantanen and Hintz were the only forwards to score 0.6 points-per-game during last year's run, despite nine of their forwards producing at

that rate or better in the regular season — but we're betting that they'll figure things out in the postseason.

Tier 2: Above-average

Edmonton Oilers

Leon Draisaitl – Connor McDavid – Trent Frederic

Andrew Mangiapane – Ryan Nugent-Hopkins – Matt Savoie

Vasily Podkolzin – Noah Philp – Kasper Kapanen

Isaac Howard – Adam Henrique – David Tomasek

Extras: Zach Hyman (IR), Mattias Janmark, Curtis Lazar, James Hamblin

It feels strange to slot a forward group with McDavid and Draisaitl outside of Tier 1.

McDavid is the best player in the league, and Draisaitl, on the back of an impressive two-way glow-up, was the 2024-25 Hart Trophy runner-up. Those two are a cheat code in the playoffs — forget taking over games, these two can take over entire series. That, coupled with some timely bottom-six scoring, allowed them to comfortably eliminate Vegas and Dallas (for a second consecutive year) in the playoffs, two deeper teams on paper.

However, it was abundantly clear in the Stanley Cup Final that the Oilers, without Hyman because of injury, simply didn't have enough high-end top-nine drivers to help McDavid and Draisaitl, especially compared to the Panthers' embarrassment of riches.

Since then, Edmonton's forward depth has only gotten worse, with Corey Perry, Connor Brown, and Evander Kane departing this offseason, and Mangiapane the only established top-nine replacement.

With McDavid and Draisaitl loaded together because of Hyman's injury, you can see how lackluster the middle six looks on paper. Yes, there's some upside if Savoie, Howard, and SHL scoring leader Tomasek break out. But there are way too many question marks outside of the McDavid, Draisaitl, Hyman, and RNH foursome to justify having them in Tier 1.

Carolina Hurricanes

Nikolaj Ehlers – Sebastian Aho – Seth Jarvis

Andrei Svechnikov – Logan Stankoven – Jackson Blake

Jordan Martinook – Jordan Staal – William Carrier

Taylor Hall – Jesperi Kotkaniemi – Eric Robinson

Extra: Mark Jankowski

With Mikko Rantanen saying "thanks but no thanks" to life in Raleigh, the Canes are once again a team with an incredibly deep forward cast but without a true superstar No. 1 option.

That said, Jarvis is on his way to getting there, after back-to-back 30-goal seasons and with a very impressive two-way game at just 23 years old.

You add in Ehlers as a UFA and what's likely to be further growth from youngsters Stankoven and Blake, and this group should be able to produce more than last season's 3.24 goals per game (ninth overall).

The fact that Staal, Hall and Kotkaniemi are likely their eighth, ninth and 10th most impactful forwards, respectively, says it all: Few cap-era teams can match that down the lineup.

Colorado Avalanche

Artturi Lehkonen – Nathan MacKinnon – Martin Necas

Gabriel Landeskog – Brock Nelson – Valeri Nichushkin

Ross Colton – Jack Drury – Victor Olofsson

Joel Kiviranta – Parker Kelly – Gavin Brindley

Extras: Logan O'Connor (IR), Gavin Brindley, Nikita Prishchepov, Ivan Ivan

In terms of pure talent, this is a deadly top six on paper, even without Rantanen.

MacKinnon is an undisputed top-five player and may be the best forward in the league not named McDavid. Necas is coming off a career-best 83-point season in which he and MacKinnon controlled a dominant 65 percent of expected goals and outscored opponents 16-9 over nearly 300 five-on-five minutes together. Landeskog is back, and Nichushkin, Lehkonen and Nelson are great pieces to round out the top two lines.

There are still some question marks, though.

Nichushkin's availability has been a problem — he hasn't hit 55 games played in three consecutive years and abruptly left the team in both the 2023 and 2024 playoffs. Necas can be a streaky player and has historically underperformed in the playoffs (35 points in 66 career games). We know Landeskog will be a difference-maker, but he turns 33 in November and hasn't played a regular-season game since 2021-22 — will he still be a top-line caliber driver?

Colorado's bottom six should be respectable once O'Connor returns, but it isn't as deep as some of the other teams ahead of them.

Florida Panthers

Carter Verhaeghe – Sam Bennett – Sam Reinhart

Eetu Luostarinen – Anton Lundell – Brad Marchand

Jesper Boqvist – Evan Rodrigues – Mackie Samoskevich

Jonah Gadjovich – Luke Kunin – A.J. Greer

Extras: Matthew Tkachuk (LTIR), Aleksander Barkov (LTIR), Tomas Nosek, Cole Schwindt

This is a tough one to evaluate with Barkov out for, potentially, the entire season and with Tkachuk sidelined for close to half of it. It'll be interesting to see how the two-time champs compensate, with the third line getting a chance to become the second to start.

That said, Reinhart is more than capable of being a contender's top forward, and Tkachuk (when healthy) and Verhaeghe are a very dangerous 2-3.

Another step from both Lundell, who only just turned 24, and Samkoskevich (22) would go a long way to filling the gap. Rodrigues may also have more to give, as he's flashed 50-point potential in the past.

Still, we have a hard time putting this group of 12 above the other contenders here, even with their playoff pedigree. But maybe GM Bill Zito finds a way to add using Barkov's cap space?

Toronto Maple Leafs

Matthew Knies – Auston Matthews – Matias Maccelli

Bobby McMann – John Tavares – William Nylander

Steven Lorentz – Nicolas Roy – Calle Jarnkrok

Dakota Joshua – Max Domi – Nicholas Robertson

Extras: Scott Laughton (IR), Sammy Blais, Easton Cowan, David Kampf

With "You Know Who" off to Vegas, the big two questions will be 1) can this group replace his offensive contributions with better depth and 2) will Matthews be healthy enough to pile up 60 goals and get Hart votes again?

The emergence of Knies into a top-line and PP1 beast at just 22 last year gives this forward group a new-look Core Four (or is it Key Three). But the biggest shift will be getting more goals from a bottom-six group that includes more legitimate 40-ish points threats in Roy, Maccelli, Laughton and Cowan.

The Leafs have enough quality pieces here that they should still be a top offensive team; where they could take a step back as a forward group is by simply not being as strong defensively, as bigger top-six minutes for Domi and McMann aren't ideal from that perspective.

Los Angeles Kings

Andrei Kuzmenko – Anze Kopitar – Adrian Kempe

Kevin Fiala – Quinton Byfield – Alex Laferriere

Warren Foegele – Phillip Danault – Trevor Moore

Jeff Malott – Alex Turcotte – Joel Armia

Extras: Corey Perry (IR), Samuel Helenius

L.A.'s forward group may not boast the most star power, but it's very deep, and the top six has underrated upside.

The Kings' first line, led by Kempe and Kopitar, was above-average last year, with those two driving a plus-25 goal differential at five-on-five. Kuzmenko was a perfect fit for them as a deadline acquisition — that trio controlled 56 percent of scoring chances and outscored opponents by a whopping 16-5 margin.

L.A. also found something special with Byfield and Fiala as a duo in the second half. Byfield scored 31 points in his last 32 games, while Fiala potted 19 goals in his final 33 games (a 47-goal pace); their underlying numbers were elite together. If that chemistry continues, Byfield will emerge as a star this season, and the Kings will have a true 1A/1B situation with their top-two lines.

L.A.'s third line is one of the league's best on paper. Danault is still elite defensively, Foegele was top-20 in the NHL for five-on-five goals last year, and Moore is a year removed from a 31-goal campaign.

New Jersey Devils

Evgenii Dadonov – Jack Hughes – Jesper Bratt
Timo Meier – Nico Hischier – Dawson Mercer
Ondrej Palat – Cody Glass – Connor Brown
Paul Cotter – Luke Glendening – Arseny Gritsyuk

Extras: Stefan Noesen (IR), Juho Lammikko (IR), Thomas Bordeleau

Hughes, Hischier and Bratt are a terrific 1-2-3 punch, and Meier rounds out a top four that's one of the best in the league.

The challenge for this group comes in terms of depth, as the Devils are outclassed in the middle of their forward group by the top-end contenders. New additions Dadonov and Brown offer some optimism, but New Jersey could really use a surprise showing from rookie Gritsyuk and a rebound to 50-point form from Mercer to give the big guns more help.

Palat's bloated \$6 million cap hit hurts right now, as this team is well-stocked on D and in net and could do some damage if the stars align this season.

St. Louis Blues

Pavel Buchnevich – Robert Thomas – Jimmy Snuggerud
Dylan Holloway – Brayden Schenn – Jordan Kyrou
Jake Neighbours – Pius Suter – Mathieu Joseph
Alexey Toropchenko – Nick Bjugstad – Alexandre Texier

Extras: Oskar Sundqvist (IR) Nathan Walker, Dalibor Dvorsky

St. Louis may not have the elite superstars that some of the league's top contenders boast, but this is a dynamic, talented, deep top-nine forward group. They were excellent under Jim Montgomery last year, and there are strong reasons to believe that momentum will continue.

Thomas is one of the league's most underrated No. 1 centers. Holloway and Kyrou were electric together — they were the backbone for one of the league's best second lines, controlling more than 56 percent of scoring chances and 71 percent of goals.

Snuggerud, who was among the top NCAA scorers last year, is a new arrival and could be a Calder Trophy candidate. Suter is a savvy middle-six pickup as well; he and Schenn are interchangeable. It speaks to the Blues' depth that they'll be able to roll Neighbours, who's coming off a 22-goal, 46-point season, and one of Schenn/Suter as the foundation for their third line.

Tier 3: Middle of the pack

Columbus Blue Jackets

Dmitri Voronkov – Sean Monahan – Kirill Marchenko
Boone Jenner – Adam Fantilli – Kent Johnson
Cole Sillinger – Charlie Coyle – Mathieu Olivier
Yegor Chinakhov – Isac Lundestrom – Miles Wood

Extra: Zach Aston-Reese

Quietly, this has become one of the most fun forward groups to watch in the league. Voronkov, Marchenko, Fantilli, Johnson, Sillinger and Chinakhov are all 25 and under and seemed to progress more and more as last year's charmed season went on.

If that group can take another collective step, the Blue Jackets could really surprise. But what they need is a couple of players in that fivesome to become high-end, top-line-caliber contributors. As it stands, they're outgunned at the top by the best teams in the league, and some of the newcomers further down don't look like they're going to help the cause.

We're taking a bit of a leap of faith having them this high — the model ranks Columbus' forward group all the way down in 22nd — but we're believers in the kids after what unfolded last year.

Minnesota Wild

Kirill Kaprizov – Marco Rossi – Matt Boldy
Marcus Foligno – Joel Eriksson Ek – Vladimir Tarasenko
Yakov Trenin – Ryan Hartman – Marcus Johansson
Danila Yurov – Nico Sturm – Liam Ohgren

Extras: Mats Zuccarello (IR), Vincent Hinostroza

Kaprizov, Boldy, Eriksson Ek and Rossi form a pretty nasty 1-2-3-4 combo to anchor a top-six. Kaprizov was in the MVP conversation before getting hurt last year; Boldy is an underrated game-breaker; Eriksson Ek can be a two-way, 60-point stud; and Rossi, despite a diminished role in the playoffs, is coming off a 60-point sophomore campaign.

Right now, Minnesota's lineup appears a bit top-heavy, but when Zuccarello returns from injury, it'll allow Boldy to slide down to drive the second line, which is a huge weapon.

The Wild's bottom-six is weak offensively, but they can hold their own because of their above-average defensive play, and there is some upside if Yurov and Ohgren, a pair of highly touted prospects, can take a step.

Washington Capitals

Alex Ovechkin – Dylan Strome – Aliaksei Protas
Connor McMichael – Pierre-Luc Dubois – Tom Wilson
Anthony Beauvillier – Hendrix Lapierre – Ryan Leonard
Brandon Duhaime – Nic Dowd – Justin Sourdif

Extras: Sonny Milano, Ivan Miroshnichenko

The second best offensive team in the league built around a 40-year-old sniper is something. But how can you bet against Ovechkin, even if this could be his final NHL season?

Washington had an incredibly charmed run last season en route to piling up 111 points in the standings. The big question is how many of the career years here are going to be repeated, and if the incoming youngsters like Leonard (and perhaps at some point Miroshnichenko) are immediate contributors.

By the numbers, this is a cast that's slightly above average offensively and below average defensively, which adds up to a middle-of-the-pack ranking overall. Steps forward for Protas and McMichael were

huge last year; they need that level again if they're going to continue to surprise the Eastern Conference's best.

Winnipeg Jets

Kyle Connor – Mark Scheifele – Gabriel Vilardi

Nikita Chibrikov – Jonathan Toews – Gustav Nyquist

Nino Niederreiter – Vladislav Namestnikov – Alex Iafallo

Tanner Pearson – Morgan Barron – Cole Koepke

Extras: Cole Perfetti (IR), Adam Lowry (IR)

Will the post-Nikolaj Ehlers Jets have enough top-six quality offensive drivers beyond their dynamic top-line?

The Connor, Scheifele, Vilardi trio decisively won its first-line matchups and led the NHL's best power play last year. They'll do a lot of heavy lifting offensively again, but behind them, the second line — even when Perfetti returns from injury — looks vulnerable.

Toews' NHL return to his hometown Jets is a wonderful story, but at 37, and having not played in two full years, it's highly unlikely that he can perform like a legitimate 2C. Perfetti would ideally take another step after a strong 50-point season, but his week-to-week injury is going to put him behind the eight ball.

We like a lot of Winnipeg's bottom-six players — Lowry (when he returns from injury), Niederreiter, Iafallo, and Namestnikov are excellent, playoff-style defensive drivers — but the middle six is a little lacking in dynamic offensive pop.

New York Rangers

Will Cuylle – J.T. Miller – Mika Zibanejad

Artemi Panarin – Vincent Trocheck – Alexis Lafrenière

Conor Sheary – Noah Laba – Taylor Raddysh

Adam Edstrom – Sam Carrick – Matt Rempe

Extras: Juuso Parssinen, Jonny Brodzinski, Brett Berard

Chris Kreider is gone, and the Rangers didn't airlift in any significant replacements up front. They're also not ready to trust the kids like Gabe Perreault, so it's mostly on the incumbents to improve.

This was a team, however, that managed to score quite a bit last year, finishing 12th in goals per game, despite the carnage in the standings. A full season with new captain J.T. Miller should only help on that front, as he remains an elite producer, but the Rangers desperately need more from the likes of Lafrenière and Zibanejad.

The bottom six, as currently constructed, appears as though it's not going to give them a whole lot, which puts a lot of pressure on the top two lines to do pretty much everything offensively. And it's a group short on defensive acumen overall, aside from someone like Trocheck.

Utah Mammoth

*Dylan Guenther – Logan Cooley – JJ Peterka
Clayton Keller – Barrett Hayton – Nick Schmaltz
Lawson Crouse – Jack McBain – Kailer Yamamoto
Michael Carcone – Kevin Stenlund – Brandon Tanev*

Extras: Alex Kerfoot (IR), Andrew Agozzino, Liam O'Brien, Daniil But,

With Peterka arriving as a splashy new acquisition, the Mammoth's top-six forward group is overflowing with electrifying speed and skill.

Keller is coming off a 90-point season. Cooley and Guenther could break out as point-per-game producers this year. Peterka racked up nearly 70 points last year. Schmaltz is a consistent bet for 60-plus points. And Hayton is an underrated two-way center.

If Peterka fits and if Cooley and Guenther pop, Utah will have one of the more dangerous top-six groups in the Western Conference.

With that said, we have some concerns about Utah's bottom six. The Mammoth were often starved for secondary offense last year. This is a mediocre supporting cast even if you assume Crouse bounces back to 20-goal form. If he doesn't rebound, the issues will only magnify.

Ottawa Senators

*Brady Tkachuk – Tim Stützle – Claude Giroux
David Perron – Dylan Cozens – Fabian Zetterlund
Ridly Greig – Shane Pinto – Michael Amadio
Nick Cousins – Lars Eller – Kurtis MacDermid*

Extras: Drake Batherson (IR), Arthur Kaliyev

Without any significant changes (sorry, Lars Eller), Ottawa is going to be hoping for growth from within from this group, although a full season with Cozens and Zetterlund could also pay dividends.

The Senators' depth lines are fine for a playoff team, and Stützle and Tkachuk are capable in the star roles, but this group could really use more from their second line in order to catch some of the better teams ahead of them.

The big questions for the front office are how do they take that next step from the middle of the pack to contention, and do they have the horses to do that organically? It doesn't look like it, barring a big step from someone unexpected.

Tier 4: Below average, but with some potential

Montreal Canadiens

*Cole Caufield – Nick Suzuki – Juraj Slafkovsky
Alex Newhook – Oliver Kapanen – Ivan Demidov
Zachary Bolduc – Kirby Dach – Brendan Gallagher
Patrik Laine – Jake Evans – Josh Anderson*

Extra: Joe Veleno

We heard all offseason about the Canadiens' search for another center, and you can see why looking at this depth chart. Another solid top-six forward would be a big boost, slotting Montreal's depth into better position.

They've added Demidov, which could be huge, and Bolduc will be an important new minute-eater, too, given that this team doesn't have a lot of defensive aces up front.

Overall, however, Montreal is asking an awful lot of Suzuki and Caufield, even with the upgrades on the back end.

Detroit Red Wings

Emmitt Finnie – Dylan Larkin – Lucas Raymond

Alex DeBrincat – Marco Kasper – Patrick Kane

Michael Rasmussen – Andrew Copp – Mason Appleton

James van Riemsdyk – J.T. Compher – Jonatan Berggren

Extras: Elmer Soderblom, Michael Brandsegg-Nygård

Another team looking for growth from within in order to take a step forward, as the additions (Appleton and JVR) were largely on the fringes.

In that sense, Kasper might be the most important name here, as the 21-year-old's development into a second-line threat is absolutely vital this season. Whether Finnie or one of the organization's other young players can provide an additional boost remains to be seen, as the fruits of this prolonged rebuild start to filter in more.

For now, they're leaning heavily on Raymond and Larkin and hoping for something unexpected to push them out of the mushy middle.

Buffalo Sabres

Zach Benson – Joshua Norris – Tage Thompson

Jason Zucker – Ryan McLeod – Alex Tuch

Jack Quinn – Jiri Kulich – Josh Doan

Beck Malenstyn – Peyton Krebs – Justin Danforth

Extra: Jordan Greenway

Our 90-point projection for the hapless Sabres was more based on the strength of the defense over the offense, but there are some nice pieces here up front, too.

Where Buffalo is particularly strong is in its forward depth, especially if young players like Benson, Kulich, Quinn, Doan and Krebs — all 24 and under — can elevate with more experience. Doan, in particular, is a sneakily important addition, as he becomes one of the Sabres' best defensive forwards and should have more to give offensively in more regular minutes than he saw in Utah.

Buffalo was 10th in scoring a year ago, but will need some new heroes with J.J. Peterka's 27 goals out the door. There are plenty of candidates here, if fortune can finally shine on the Sabres for once.

Vancouver Canucks

Jake DeBrusk – Elias Pettersson – Brock Boeser
Arshdeep Bains – Filip Chytil – Conor Garland
Evander Kane – Braeden Cootes – Jonathan Lekkerimäki
Drew O'Connor – Aatu Rätty – Kiefer Sherwood

Extras: Nils Högländer (IR), Teddy Blueger (day-to-day injury), Linus Karlsson

Pettersson is the obvious X-factor here. If he returns to being a 90-point No. 1 center, then Vancouver's forward group should be fine enough to make the playoffs, provided that the team's goaltending and blue line perform somewhere in the high-end-to-elite range.

But if Pettersson is the sub-60-point-pace center that he's been since the 2023-24 All-Star break, then Vancouver's offense could look a lot like last year, when not a single forward hit the 55-point mark.

Vancouver's center depth is a weakness not only because of Pettersson's uncertainty but also because of Chytil's concussion history. The Canucks are one bad hit away from being forced to use one of Blueger, Rätty, or 18-year-old Cootes as their 2C, which would be problematic.

DeBrusk, Boeser and Garland are decent wingers, and Lekkerimäki has breakout potential after scoring more than half a goal per game in the AHL as a 20-year-old and standing out in this year's preseason. But there's a clear lack of true first-line-caliber drivers, even if Pettersson bounces back.

Anaheim Ducks

Chris Kreider – Leo Carlsson – Troy Terry
Cutter Gauthier – Mason McTavish – Mikael Granlund
Frank Vatrano – Ryan Strome – Alex Killorn
Ross Johnston – Ryan Poehling – Beckett Sennecke

Extras: Sam Colangelo, Nikita Nesterenko

This could be the year that Anaheim's young forwards take a massive step forward.

The Ducks' young guns went on a tear down the stretch last year — Carlsson and McTavish were borderline point-per-game producers after the 4 Nations break and Gauthier was top-10 among all NHL players for five-on-five points in the final 27 games — and they should benefit enormously from the coaching change, as Greg Cronin's ultra-demanding defensive style stifled the group's offensive freedom and creativity.

Kreider's elite net-front skill (along with the coaching change) should boost Anaheim's 32nd-ranked power play. A Vatrano-Strome-Killorn trio is a surprisingly solid third line, too.

If everything breaks right, the Ducks could emerge as dark horses in the wild-card race, on the back of this up-and-coming forward group.

However, we have to balance potential and promise with recent results, and we couldn't rate Anaheim's forwards higher than Tier 4 when the team didn't have a single 25-goal scorer last year.

Philadelphia Flyers

Owen Tippett – Trevor Zegras – Travis Konecny
Christian Dvorak – Sean Couturier – Matvei Michkov
Tyson Foerster – Noah Cates – Bobby Brink
Nicolas Deslauriers – Rodrigo Abols – Garnet Hathaway

Extras: Nikita Grebenkin

Trevor Zegras, first-line center, is quite a bet for this organization. But with middlemen in short supply and contention out of the question, taking a gamble on his talent for a low price makes a lot of sense.

The Flyers were 24th in goal production a year ago, something that doesn't appear likely to change given this cast. But the group is also high on defensive acumen, something of which new coach Rick Tocchet is likely to take full advantage.

Maybe Philadelphia wins a lot of 2-1 games thanks to heroics from Michkov and Konecny, but given the roster's other holes, the most likely outcome is another high pick and another step forward for a prospect pool that could use a few more high-end pieces.

New York Islanders

Jonathan Drouin – Bo Horvat – Emil Heineman
Anders Lee – Mathew Barzal – Kyle Palmieri
Maxim Shabanov – Jean-Gabriel Pageau – Simon Holmstrom
Anthony Duclair – Casey Cizikas – Maxim Tsyplakov

Extras: Calum Ritchie (IR), Pierre Engvall (IR), Marc Gatcomb, Kyle MacLean

The Islanders had so many injuries last season, including Barzal playing just 30 games, that basing too much on those results feels foolish. This should be a group that can finish higher than 27th in goals per game, simply from bringing in Drouin, Heineman and Shabanov and losing not all that much up front.

This is a group of 12 NHL-caliber forwards, but where they're overmatched by the teams above them is in that second-tier depth after Barzal and Horvat. Some of their forwards who will get big minutes are, frankly, just getting old, with Lee now 35 and a handful of others on the wrong side of 30.

There are a couple of wild cards here, however, including Ritchie, whom they landed in the Brock Nelson trade. If nothing else, the Islanders should be more interesting to watch now, and not just because of the new kid on D they took first overall.

San Jose Sharks

Philipp Kurashev – Macklin Celebrini – Will Smith
William Eklund – Michael Misa – Tyler Toffoli
Jeff Skinner – Alexander Wennberg – Collin Graff
Barclay Goodrow – Adam Gaudette – Ty Dellandrea

Extras: Ryan Reaves, Ethan Cardwell

San Jose's top six could be a lot better than people expect this year.

Celebrini is already a two-way star. Would anyone be surprised if he takes another step and establishes himself as a top-10 NHL center by the end of this season?

Smith, who had 30 points in his last 34 games, should have a Logan Cooley-like sophomore breakout. Eklund, 22, is coming off a 58-point season, Toffoli scored 30 goals as a first-year Shark, and 18-year-old Michael Misa, who led the OHL with 134 points, could make some noise, too (assuming he sticks with the team)

The Sharks' bottom-six is weak, and we should expect some overall ups and downs with such a young group. But the top two lines are loaded with dynamic, fun skill.

Tier 5: Rebuilding/needs improvement

Pittsburgh Penguins

Rickard Rakell – Sidney Crosby – Bryan Rust

Ville Koivunen – Evgeni Malkin – Anthony Mantha

Filip Hallander – Thomas Novak – Philip Tomasino

Connor Dewar – Blake Lizotte – Justin Brazeau

Extras: Kevin Hayes (IR), Rutger McGroarty, Benjamin Kindel, Noel Acciari

You can sort of see why there are all those stories about Crosby finding a new home.

Sid The Old Kid singlehandedly elevates this group above the few teams behind them, but his few helpers (Rakell and Rust) provide Pittsburgh with a cromulent first-line option – at least until GM Kyle Dubas holds a pre-deadline firesale.

Where things get shaky is just about everywhere else, as Malkin's game at 39 has dramatically fallen off, and the rest of the veterans are going to be underwater against most teams.

The Penguins will need some help from unexpected sources like Koivunen, Hallander and McGroarty if they're going to be anything but a basement-dweller. Although, honestly, that would probably be for the best right now.

Seattle Kraken

Jared McCann – Matty Beniers – Jordan Eberle

Jaden Schwartz – Shane Wright – Eeli Tolvanen

Mason Marchment – Chandler Stephenson – Ryan Winterton

Tye Kartye – Frederick Gaudreau – Jani Nyman

Extras: Kaapo Kakko (IR), Berkly Catton, Oscar Fisker Molgaard

This Kraken forward group has a similar story to years past: A serious lack of star power, mixed in with above-average depth.

Seattle's first line looks more like a second line, their second line looks more like a good third line, and the bottom-six is strong, but not enough to make up for the lack of offensive game-breakers. McCann is the only forward on this roster who's had a 55-point-or-better season over the last two years.

There is an upside scenario where the Kraken could exceed expectations on the backs of their young talent Wright — could take another step after breaking out last year, Beniers and Kakko (when he returns from injury) had intriguing chemistry last year, and maybe Catton, the No. 8 pick in 2024, becomes an instant difference-maker.

Overall, though, we feel pretty comfortable projecting that Seattle's forward group will be a weakness relative to the rest of the teams in the West.

Calgary Flames

Joel Farabee – Nazem Kadri – Adam Klapka

Matvei Gridin – Morgan Frost – Matt Coronato

Connor Zary – Mikael Backlund – Blake Coleman

Ryan Lomberg – Justin Kirkland – Yegor Sharangovich

Extras: Jonathan Huberdeau (day-to-day), Samuel Honzek, Martin Pospisil

The Flames have a scrappy, hardworking forward group that delivers responsible defensive hockey.

All four lines can play; Zary, Backlund, and Coleman form an above-average third line, and it's a luxury having Sharangovich on the fourth line. But similar to Seattle, Calgary desperately lacks dynamic star power in the top six.

Kadri and Huberdeau are coming off better-than-expected seasons; Coronato has 30-goal potential; and Gridin, 19, is an exciting piece of the future. But it's hard to see the Flames forward crew scoring more than they did last year, when they were bottom-five in the league in goals scored per game.

Boston Bruins

Morgan Geekie – Elias Lindholm – David Pastrnak

Pavel Zacha – Casey Mittelstadt – Viktor Arvidsson

Tanner Jeannot – Fraser Minten – Marat Khushnutdinov

Michael Eyssimont – Sean Kuraly – Mark Kastelic

Extras: Matej Blumel, Matthew Poitras, John Beecher

How the mighty have fallen. Yikes.

We lamented above who Crosby had to play with, but pour one out here for Pastrnak, too, as he's perhaps further behind — even with Geekie's nice evolution into a 60-point threat. Lindholm and friends just haven't shown the ability to slot where the Bruins have them in the top six, which likely means another lean year on offense.

This group is extremely grim further down the depth chart, with basically every player overmatched in the role they're in right now — barring something unexpected from one of the kids

Is there any way Patrice Bergeron might want to make a comeback?

Nashville Predators

Filip Forsberg – Brady Martin – Ryan O'Reilly
Steven Stamkos – Fedor Svechkov – Luke Evangelista
Michael Bunting – Erik Haula – Jonathan Marchessault
Cole Smith – Michael McCarron – Ozzy Wiesblatt

Extras: Tyson Jost, Joakim Kemell, Matthew Wood, Zachary L'Heureux

Martin (or O'Reilly), Svechkov and Haula are the NHL's least-established/threatening 1-2-3 center punch. That's not meant to be a shot at Martin, the No. 5 pick from last summer's draft who we expect to eventually become a franchise pillar, or at Svechkov, who also has a bright future. It's likely just too early, however, to expect them to be bona fide top-six NHL centers.

Nashville's veteran scorers underperformed last year in some part because they didn't have speedy, dynamic, playmaking centers who could transport pucks through the neutral zone and make dangerous passes to set them up. Unless Martin or Svechkov exceed all reasonable expectations, that's going to be a problem again.

There is obviously still some talent within Nashville's forward ranks — Forsberg, Stamkos, O'Reilly, and Marchessault are big-name players and Evangelista is a fun, young winger — but the pieces fit in pretty awkwardly and they're arguably less than the sum of their parts because of that.

Chicago Blackhawks

Andre Burakovsky – Connor Bedard – Ryan Donato
Tyler Bertuzzi – Frank Nazar – Teuvo Teräväinen
Ilya Mikheyev – Jason Dickinson – Colton Dach
Nick Foligno – Ryan Greene – Sam Lafferty

Extras: Lukas Reichel, Landon Slaggert (IR), Joey Anderson (IR)

Bedard is entering Year 3 and his projected wingers are Burakovsky, a sub-40-point producer, and Donato. It's flat-out unacceptable — neither one of them would be first-line wingers on any other team in the NHL.

The good news is that Nazar should be primed for a monster breakout year, but he and Bedard are kind of on an island.

Yes, Donato unexpectedly broke out with 31 goals last year and Teräväinen is a serviceable second-line forward, but this team is desperately short on true, high-end, top-six drivers. It also doesn't help, of course, that Bedard stagnated a bit as a sophomore last year.