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Upcoming stretch of games crucial

By Brian Hedger, Columbus Dispatch – March 10, 2019

The Blue Jackets played the Pittsburgh Penguins on Saturday with a desperation they hadn't shown yet.

They reached a new level of effort in a 4-1 win that ended an eight-game losing streak to Pittsburgh, and there was a good reason.

"Looking at the standings, you understand how important a game like that is," said defenseman Seth Jones, who logged a whopping 28:57 for his fourth-highest non-overtime ice time. "That can make or break a season. I know it's not going to come down to just one game, but you put yourself in a tough spot if you lose important games, divisional games, especially."

Columbus moved back into a playoff spot by winning, supplanting the Montreal Canadiens for the second wild card in the Eastern Conference based on the NHL's regulation/overtime wins (ROW) tiebreaker. Prior to the game, the Blue Jackets were two points back of Montreal on the outside of the playoff picture.

They're now tied with the Canadiens at 79 points apiece, in one less game, and trail both Pittsburgh and Carolina by two points.

That's how thin the margin is for bubble teams in the East's postseason race with 14 or fewer games left for the top 10 teams in the conference — and it only gets tougher for the Jackets this week.

After an optional practice Sunday, the Blue Jackets flew to New York for a game Monday against the New York Islanders — the start of two key back-to-backs this week.

The Islanders are second in the Metropolitan Division, three spots ahead of Columbus — which will then host the Boston Bruins on Tuesday, the Atlantic Division's second-place team. The Jackets will then be idle until Friday, when they play a back-to-back that starts Friday against the Hurricanes and concludes Saturday in Boston.

All four games are against teams currently in playoff spots, which could go a long way in determining the Jackets' postseason fate.

"It's massive," said forward Josh Anderson, who was feeling the effects of his seven hits Saturday against the Penguins. "We've got, really, no space to lose games here. So, every game, we're going to treat it like a playoff game and play our hearts out. ... Hopefully, we can build on (Saturday) night's win and keep it going."

It was an impressive victory against the Penguins, who hosted the Bruins on Sunday.

The Blue Jackets played with an emotional edge because of their losing streak against Pittsburgh, which extended to Feb. 17, 2017, but also because time is running out on the regular season.

They also have one of the toughest remaining schedules among teams vying for the postseason — with nine out of the final 14 games against teams holding playoff spots.

“We’ve got to start getting into a playoff mindset right now,” Jones said. “That’s what I would say about it. We play some pretty good teams coming up here. ... We’re just going to control what we can control, though, which is our work ethic, the way we prepare and our mindset before every game.”

The Blue Jackets have dropped the first two games against the Islanders, losing 3-2 Dec. 1 in New York and again Feb. 14 in Columbus, getting shut out 3-0 on Valentine’s Day.

They’ve gone 1-2-0 in the first three games against Carolina — splitting the two road matchups — and Columbus will play its entire three-game series against the Bruins in the next three weeks.

“We all have to be in a playoff mindset at this point,” Jones said. “We have no room to start games slow or not be ready to play individually or as a team, because at the end of the day, you don’t want to be that team on the outside.”

Blue Jackets 4, Penguins 1: Five takeaways

By Brian Hedger, Columbus Dispatch – March 10, 2019

It was something that, apparently, the Blue Jackets had never even thought about.

An eight-game losing streak to the same, hated team that dated back two years? What? No, of course not. How could a stretch of ineptitude that long possibly nest in anybody's mind, let alone the mind of a headstrong hockey player?

Or hockey team? Or entire fanbase?

"It's a mental hurdle for you guys," coach John Tortorella said to reporters Saturday night, after his Blue Jackets cleared their Pittsburgh Penguins mental hurdle without tipping it over, halting the aforementioned eight-game losing skid with a rousing 4-1 victory at sold out Nationwide Arena. "You guys talk about it all the time. I don't think (players) think about that much."

Maybe he's right.

Maybe each of those eight straight losses to Pittsburgh since the Jackets' last win Feb. 17, 2017 – along with four other losses in a five-game, first-round playoff series that year – just dissipated into thin air. Maybe they didn't compound, time after time after time, stacking on top of each other like black-and-gold bricks until they were encased in a depressing fortress of Penguins woe.

It's just kind of hard to believe, in the same way that it's hard to believe Charlie Brown never sees it coming whenever Lucy tees up the football.

"It doesn't really matter, actually, what's been in the past," said goalie Sergei Bobrovsky, who refuses to admit he's probably the most tortured Blue Jacket of the bunch against Pittsburgh. "You prepare yourself for one game at a time and it doesn't matter what's the score, what's the last time we played or stuff like that. It doesn't really matter. Statistics live in the past, you know? So, you go out there and create the history actually. That's it."

He's absolutely right, too, while being completely wrong at the same time.

See, this happens in sports at all levels, including the NHL.

One team beats up on another, regardless of the reasons, and over time the team that's losing needs to prove – mainly to itself – that another, better outcome is possible. That's what happened Saturday night at Nationwide Arena.

It was beyond time the Blue Jackets bloodied the Penguins' beak, finally, after losing and losing in various forms of heartbreak.

They still lost the season series, going 1-3-0 against Pittsburgh. The Jackets are still behind the Penguins in the playoff chase, sitting two points back in the Eastern Conference's second wild card. But they left their own arena victorious against "that team," in front of their own fans – who've seen them trot out some stinkers this season.

This was only one regular-season game, yes, that's true. But some games mean more than others. They just do, and this was one.

"There's always going to be that team, wherever you play," said Ryan Dzingel, who went to Ohio State but is a newbie to this rivalry. "There's always going to be that team that you don't like or that rivalry team that seems to get you once in a while, and we're going to have to get over that right now."

He said that before the Blue Jackets did exactly that, helping them polish it off with a slick dish to Oliver Bjorkstrand to put the Blue Jackets up 3-1 and break the Penguins' chokehold on this rivalry.

Even if it was just for a night, Columbus forced Pittsburgh to cry uncle. Happier history was created, by the Blue Jackets, and now they can spring forward into the remaining 14 games on their schedule.

Before they do, here are five takeaways from HNIC (Hockey Night in Columbus):

1) What it means

The Blue Jackets (79 points) reclaimed the second wild card in the East with the win, moving two points back of Pittsburgh (81 points) – which holds the first wild card.

The Penguins began the day in third place of the Metropolitan Division, but dropped into the wild card after the Carolina Hurricanes won 5-3 in Nashville to take over third. The Hurricanes (81 points) won the standings tie-breaker by having one more regulation/overtime win (36-35).

Columbus now has 37 regulation/overtime wins (ROW), which could come in handy if the race comes right down to the wire. In fact, the Blue Jackets leaped past the idle Montreal Canadiens (79 points) because they have more ROW (37-34).

The Blue Jackets will now get ready for a brutal four-game schedule this week that will be played in two back-to-back sets.

The first starts Monday at the Metro-leading New York Islanders and concludes Tuesday at home against the Boston Bruins – who are second in the Atlantic Division. The second back-to-back starts Friday at home against the Hurricanes and wraps up Saturday in Boston – which kicks off a four-game, 10-day road trip that includes three games in western Canada.

"When we play like that, we're a dangerous team and it can't be a one and done," said Cam Atkinson, whose 37th and 38th goals led the way against the Penguins. "We need to continue to play like that and get better every day, and there's no reason we can't play like that."

2) Superb start

The Blue Jackets have really yawned their way into some big home games this season, but this was not one of them. Energized by a packed house and a pregame buzz circulating around the arena, they came out with fire in their pupils for this game.

Ten seconds into the game, captain Nick Foligno put a hit on former Blue Jackets teammate Jack Johnson, who signed with the Penguins as a free agent last summer. Six seconds after that, Josh Anderson stapled forward Dominik Simon into the half wall with a thud, sounding an alarm that Columbus wasn't going to snooze through the start of this one.

It progressed from there, with Boone Jenner getting penalized for a slashing call 20 seconds into the game and then making it 1-0 just 11 seconds after he was set free – taking a pass from Anderson and rifling a wrist shot past Penguins goalie Matt Murray.

“I thought guys had great energy,” Bobrovsky said. “(The) stands gave us great energy, too, and it was fun to be part of it and even more fun to get two points.”

3) Bigtime ‘Bob’

Speaking of Bobrovsky, he was in peak form from start to finish. After Tortorella scratched him Thursday in a 3-0 loss to the Penguins at PPG Paints Arena – a wink-wink, nod-nod “rest” maneuver – Bobrovsky was as confident and sharp as he’s been all season.

And he did it against a team – the team – that has, as mentioned earlier, tortured him for two-plus seasons including playoffs. Bobrovsky made nine saves in the first period, eight in the second and 11 in the third to slam the door on the Penguins.

“Bob has told me he’s mentally good, he’s physically good – even if I played him in Pittsburgh (on Thursday), he’s good,” Tortorella said. “There were a lot of people around the net, as Pittsburgh’s always around that net (and) I thought Bob fought to see the puck and made some saves that were harder saves than they looked like, after he finished his business. He did a really good job there. I just thought he was really confident in how he played.”

4) ‘It’s who we are’

Once again, the Blue Jackets’ top checking line was their best line.

Foligno, Jenner and Anderson started the game as heat-seeking missiles and set the tone right away. They didn’t let down, either. Anderson led the way with seven hits, while Jenner and Foligno racked up three each.

The Penguins looked a little stunned by the Jackets’ physicality right off the opening face-off, which led into Jenner’s goal. Columbus had 70 percent of all 5-on-5 shot attempts in the first period (14-6) and a lot of that was earned with those three on the ice.

“They scored an early goal, Andy’s banging everything in sight ... it’s who we are,” Tortorella said. “And I think they have to keep reminding us how we have to play. I heard them on the bench reminding guys, ‘This is how you have to play,’ and they certainly lead by example that way.

“We don’t expect (Matt Duchene) and (Artemi Panarin) and Cam to be banging like that, but they can take lessons from that line, as far as how straight ahead they are. It’s a line that’s really done some good things for us and just set the tone for us, and tonight was a very important one.”

5) Murray was fantastic

The Blue Jackets broke the game open late in the third period, but it could’ve been a full-on rout had it not been for the guy in the Penguins’ net.

Murray was beat clean by Jenner for the first goal and again by Atkinson in the second, but he made a number of great saves to keep the Penguins close.

The first was against an open look for Jenner at 6:16 in the first period, when Murray lunged to his right to stop the puck mid-flight with the blade of his goalie stick.

In the second, 7:16 into the period, he came up with another highlight-worthy stop – just getting the inside of his blocker on a puck tipped in front of the net by Markus Nutivaara. Murray also robbed Anderson of a goal late in the third, sprawling into a prone position to get his right pad on a one-timer from the left face-off circle.

Islanders 2, Blue Jackets 0 | Jackets can't find offense

By Bill Rabinowitz, Columbus Dispatch – March 11, 2019

UNIONDALE, N.Y. — The answers are as elusive as goals have become.

The Blue Jackets have a deep lineup, with three lines perfectly capable of scoring. And Columbus did control play for most of Monday night's game against the New York Islanders.

Coach John Tortorella said that his Blue Jackets had at least 65 shot attempts, 31 of which went on goal. But for the third time in their last six games, none of them went in.

So after the 2-0 loss at Nassau Veterans Memorial Coliseum, the Blue Jackets were grasping for explanations.

"We do everything but score," captain Nick Foligno said. "The teams that in the thick of it are finding ways to score. It's not a knock on us. We just have to find a way to get the puck in the net."

Center Matt Duchene was expected to give the offense a jolt with his acquisition before the trade deadline. He has only one goal in 10 games with Columbus.

"I think there are times on the rush we can create a little more," he said. "I think we're maybe a little tight sometimes with the puck instead of maybe taking a chance to create something."

Scoring against the Islanders figured to be a challenge. They have allowed the fewest goals in the NHL while becoming one of the league's surprise teams. After the morning skate, Tortorella said a quick start was essential if his team was to avoid losing for the third time in as many games to New York.

That didn't happen. The Islanders scored the only goal they would need 6:11 into the game. Defenseman Ryan Pulock unleashed a slap shot that beat Sergei Bobrovsky high to the stick side after a shot by Cal Clutterbuck deflected off Markus Nutivaara.

After that, Bobrovsky was superb. He had to stop only 18 shots, but several of them were prime chances.

Unfortunately for the Blue Jackets, his teammates couldn't answer. Cam Atkinson twice hit the post. Zach Werenski couldn't convert from close. Artemi Panarin didn't have a shot on goal.

The Blue Jackets pulled Bobrovsky with about two minutes left. Anders Lee scored on a 2-on-1 with 1:30 left to make it 2-0.

"I think you have to give their goaltender some props, but on some of our main chances, we didn't get to the net," Tortorella said. "We're a team that has been able to score goals this year. Since the (trade) deadline, it's been inconsistent.

"It's frustrating, but I liked the way we played. ... We just did not finish."

The Blue Jackets remained above the line for the playoffs in the second wild-card spot by virtue of having more regulation wins than Montreal. But with 13 games left, this was an opportunity lost.

“We’re in playoffs (mode) right now,” Foligno said. “It is hard to score. You’ve got to really bear down on your opportunities because they’re few and far between. We seem to get tons still. We just have to find a way to either breathe or bear down and put it in the net.”

[Matt Duchene, Ryan Dzingel settling in](#)

By Bill Rabinowitz, Columbus Dispatch – March 11, 2019

UNIONDALE, N.Y. — One game does not necessarily mean a turning point, though for Matt Duchene and Ryan Dzingel, they hope it does.

Against Pittsburgh on Saturday, Duchene and Dzingel played what Blue Jackets coach John Tortorella described as their best game since they arrived in separate trades with Ottawa before the Feb. 25 deadline.

“You can see the chemistry beginning to work there,” Tortorella said after Monday’s morning skate preceding Columbus’ game against the New York Islanders. “Hopefully, they’ll take off.”

It would provide a major boost if they did. In nine games with the Blue Jackets entering Monday’s game, Duchene has only one goal and three assists. Dzingel, an Ohio State product, has three assists but has yet to score a goal in seven games.

But they were major factors against Pittsburgh. Duchene, who is skilled at making effective, subtle plays in tight spaces, passed to Dzingel, who fed Oliver Bjorkstrand for a nifty goal to make it 3-1 late and allow an anxious Nationwide Arena crowd to exhale.

“We’re getting more comfortable every day,” Dzingel said. “We’re trying to make an impact, and last game we finally did that.”

He acknowledged that the transition from Ottawa has been difficult.

“It’s harder than you think,” Dzingel said. “You’re a human being and you’re trying to fit in with the group right away.”

That the Blue Jackets went into a slump after their arrival added to their burden.

“I think when new players come in and the team starts losing some games and isn’t as consistent as it would like to be, I think they feel the pressure,” Tortorella said. “They want to make a difference and sometimes try to do a little too much.

“But (Saturday was) the best I’ve seen Zinger play since he’s been here. Duchy has made plays throughout.”

Duchene said he was encouraged by the way he and Dzingel played in the 3-0 loss at Pittsburgh on Thursday.

“People seem to just focus on the results sometimes,” he said. “We probably had the puck more in Pittsburgh than we did in Columbus, but we did some good things. Obviously, it’s still a process where we’re trying to feel comfortable and keep progressing.”

Duchene said he has been guilty of overthinking at times and being overly concerned about making mistakes. Each day, he said, he feels more comfortable and is confident the scoring will come with it.

“I hit a crossbar last game,” Duchene said. “I’ve hit the knobs of sticks. I’m getting chances and they’re just not quite going yet, but I know it’s right around the corner.”

Dubinsky in for Jenner

The Blue Jackets were without center Boone Jenner on Monday. He did not participate in the morning skate because of illness, and Tortorella ruled him out.

Brandon Dubinsky started in his place on a line with Nick Foligno and Josh Anderson, with Foligno moving to wing. Rookie Eric Robinson took Dubinsky’s spot on the fourth line.

Robinson was scoreless in 11 games this season entering the game and hadn’t played since March 3. But Tortorella likes his speed and believes the scoring will come.

“Though he has goose eggs across the board, he has had a lot of scoring chances,” Tortorella said.

Blue Jackets: Eric Robinson will replace ill Boone Jenner against Islanders

By Bill Rabinowitz, The Columbus Dispatch – March 11, 2019

UNIONDALE, N.Y. — The Blue Jackets will be without center Boone Jenner against the New York Islanders on Monday night.

Coach John Tortorella said after the morning skate that Jenner is sick. Tortorella said rookie Eric Robinson will start at wing on a line with Nick Foligno and Josh Anderson.

Foligno will play center. The Jenner-Foligno-Anderson line provides a physical dimension and has been perhaps the Blue Jackets' most consistent lately.

Robinson has not had a goal or an assist in 11 games this season. He hasn't played since March 3. But the 6-foot-2, 200-pound Robinson has size and speed. Tortorella believes the scoring will come.

"Though he has goose eggs across the board, he has had a lot of scoring chances," Tortorella said.

Robinson, 23, is from nearby New Jersey and was signed as a free agent out of Princeton last year.

"It's still pretty close to home, so it'll be nice to get in and have my parents here," Robinson said of Monday's game.

He said he understands his role on the line with Foligno and Anderson.

"It's a high-energy line," Robinson said. "You could see the other night (against Pittsburgh) they were banging bodies and bringing a lot of energy. That's something I need to look to do tonight as well as playing a responsible defensive game because that's something that line is pretty good at, too."

Sergei Bobrovsky will start in goal against the Islanders, who are in second place in the Metropolitan Division, six points ahead of fifth-place Columbus.

Blue Jackets out of answers, excuses on another night when the offense sputters

By Aaron Portzline, The Athletic – March 11, 2019

UNIONDALE, N.Y. — Blue Jackets captain Nick Foligno will stand by his locker stall and field all manner of questions until the last camera is turned off and the last notebook put away. In times good and times tough, he always faces the music.

On Monday, in an almost empty visitors room, Foligno apologized when his answer to the first question was shorter than usual.

“I don’t know how quotable I’m going to be tonight guys, honestly,” Foligno said after a frustrating 2-0 loss to the Islanders. “I’ve said everything I need to say the past couple of weeks here.”

There’s really not much more to say than this: The Blue Jackets have begun to steady their play over the past three games, but unless they figure out a way to start finishing more of their scoring chances, the offseason is going to arrive early in Columbus.

The Blue Jackets, one of the NHL’s top 10 scoring clubs most of the season, were shut out for the sixth time this season, the second time in three games, and for the third time in their past six games.

“You have to give their goaltender a little bit of props,” Blue Jackets coach John Tortorella said. “But I think some of our main chances ... we don’t get (pucks) to the net. (Zach Werenski) has a chance right down the pipe in the slot (second period) and shoots in wide.

“It’s a team that has been able to score goals this year. But since the (NHL trade) deadline, it’s been inconsistent. It’s frustrating, but I like the way we played. I like the way we forechecked. I like a lot of things about our game, but we just did not finish.”

Cam Atkinson hit a post (early first) and the crossbar (early second). Oliver Bjorkstrand, one of the few Blue Jackets who drove hard to the net, also hit a post (second).

On the attempt Tortorella referenced, Werenski was found alone streaking through the right circle, but his one-timer was off target, sailing far wide of the goal and off the end boards.

The Blue Jackets had 62 shot attempts compared with 33 for the Islanders. (When you isolate the third period, those numbers are 23-10.) But 16 shots were blocked by the Islanders and 15 more were shot off the mark by Columbus.

Didn’t Jimmy Breslin write a book about this group?

“We’re doing everything but score,” Foligno said. “The teams that are in the thick of it, they’re finding ways to score. We have to find a way to get the puck in the net.

“We have to stop with the ‘We did this well, and we did that well.’ We have to get serious about putting some goals in there. We’ve been shut out a couple of times now this week, and we have to get some run support for our goalie.”

The Islanders scored at 6:11 of the first period when Ryan Pulock — making it look easy — sailed a puck through traffic from above the right circle to make it 1-0.

That was the only puck to get behind Sergei Bobrovsky, who had 18 saves and barely broke a sweat in the third period. He was riding the exercise bike for extra work as Tortorella handled his postgame media scrum just a few feet away.

Meanwhile, Islanders' goaltender Thomas Greiss continues to devour the Blue Jackets this season.

He had 17 consecutive saves to close out a 3-2 win over the Blue Jackets here Dec. 1, then pitched a 31-save shutout in Columbus (3-0 Islanders win) on Feb. 14.

Put another way: Greiss has stopped 79 consecutive shots by the Blue Jackets, a staggering figure. He's 3-0 with a .978 save percentage and 0.66 goals-against average versus Columbus.

"We have to find a way ... either breathe, or bear down," Foligno said. "But put them in the net."

Notebook

- The Blue Jackets (79 points) remained in the second wild-card spot despite the loss. Carolina's 3-0 win in Colorado pushed the Hurricanes (83) ahead of Pittsburgh (83) into third place in the Metro. The Jackets have a tie-breaker lead on Montreal (79) for the second wild-card and only a three-point lead over 10th-place Philadelphia (76).
- Center Boone Jenner missed the game with an illness. Brandon Dubinsky moved into his spot on the third line between Foligno and Josh Anderson at the start of the game, with Eric Robinson taking Dubinsky's left wing spot on the fourth line. Tortorella started mixing up his lines in the second period in an attempt to jump-start the Blue Jackets' offense. No word yet whether Jenner will be available for Tuesday's game versus Boston at Nationwide.
- Of course, the Blue Jackets missed Jenner, especially on the dot. Jenner has taken more draws (1,006) and won more draws (547) than any other Jackets player, and his 54.4 percent success rate is second only to Dubinsky's (56.1). The Jackets went 12 of 36 (33 percent) on the night, and nobody was better than 50-50.
- Greiss' numbers versus the Blue Jackets before this season: 5-6-3, 3.36 goals-against average, .885 save percentage.
- Blue Jackets forward prospect Alexandre Texier, a second-round pick (No. 45 overall) in 2017, will see his season in Finland come to an end Thursday. His club, KalPa Kuopio, is not going to make the postseason. That means Texier, 19, could join AHL Cleveland over the weekend or early next week. He has 12-25-37 in 53 games this season.
- The Blue Jackets play Boston twice this week, and it'll be on the second half of a back-to-back set both times. The Blue Jackets flew home to Columbus after last night's game while Boston rested comfortably (one presumes) in hotel beds. On Thursday, the Blue Jackets will play Carolina at Nationwide Arena, then fly to Boston for a game Friday. The Bruins get the worst of it on this occasion, though. They play in Winnipeg on Thursday.

Analytically speaking

The Athletic's hockey data dynamo Alison Lukan provided these insights into the Blue Jackets' loss:

- The Blue Jackets didn't get their desired results, but their play against the Islanders wasn't as concerning as, say, a week ago in New Jersey. For the entire game, according to NaturalStatTrick.com, the Jackets had 63.86 percent of five-on-five shot attempts, 57.14 percent of scoring chances and 58.33 percent of high-danger attempts. Based on shot quality alone, MoneyPuck.com had the expected-goal total at 2.44 to 1.9 in favor of Columbus.
- But where the Jackets failed to control play was converting all that offense to goals. The team's shooting percentage (obviously) was zero, which falls in stark contrast to its season shooting percentage of 9.48 (15th in the league).
- There were three shots that drew iron Monday, including two from Cam Atkinson and one from Oliver Bjorkstrand. The Jackets led the league in those measures earlier this season. Do they still? Currently, the team sits third in shots off the post (48) and 12th in shots off the crossbar (9).
- In a game in which there was a struggle to find offensive finish, the Jackets' strongest performance arguably came from the goaltender when it came to keeping the team in the game. According to evolving-hockey.com, Bobrovsky ended up with a save percentage that was 3.57 percent higher than it was expected to be based on the shots he faced. That translates to one goal saved above and beyond what was expected.
- Unfortunately, Bobrovsky's opponent at the other end of the ice was stronger. Thomas Greiss' final save percentage was 5.61 percent above expectations. That equates to 2.47 goals that should have gone in that did not.

[Blue Jackets have an 'identity' line, and Josh Anderson might be its lynchpin](#)

By Aaron Portzline, The Athletic – March 11, 2019

UNIONDALE, N.Y. — We hesitate to say that Blue Jackets coach John Tortorella has settled on lines, because, well, he is an NHL coach and because lines in the world's best league don't stay together very long. Put another way: Read this quickly.

When Matt Duchene was acquired from Ottawa in advance of the trade deadline, he was installed as the No. 1 center, bumping Pierre-Luc Dubois out of his season-long perch and sending the Jackets' forward lines into disarray.

Nothing made sense. Duchene struggled between Artemi Panarin and Cam Atkinson, Dubois struggled in his new role, and former 59-point scorer Alexander Wennberg ended up a healthy scratch.

Then came a trade for Ryan Dzingel, also from Ottawa, and more switching and scrambling. The Blue Jackets' goal-scoring went through the floor, either the result of the line changes or the cause of it.

In the past two games — a 3-0 loss in Pittsburgh and a 4-1 win versus the Penguins in Columbus — the Blue Jackets' forward configuration has taken shape in a way that now seems so obvious.

Dubois is back between Panarin and Atkinson. Duchene and Dzingel, who played together extensively with the Senators, are on a line together with Oliver Bjorkstrand on the right.

And the tried and true "identity" line — Boone Jenner between Nick Foligno and Josh Anderson — is in full force, tasked with setting the tone each night.

"I'm pretty comfortable with the line," Tortorella said. "But I'm not going to sit here and tell you — 'cause you guys always worry about me changing the lines — that they'll stay there forever.

"But in order to try to settle ourselves down, especially when a team doesn't have a lot of offensive confidence, I have to respect that."

The Duchene and Dubois lines are full of high-end skill, obviously. Five of the six players have 20-plus goals, four have 50-plus points and the one player with fewer than 20 goals — Bjorkstrand, 14 — is third on the Blue Jackets in scoring (11 goals) since Dec. 23.

But Jenner's line has a massive impact on the Blue Jackets beyond the scoresheet, and the wild card on the line is Anderson, one of the emerging power forwards in the NHL.

Last Wednesday, Tortorella had one of his frequent meetings with Anderson, who has asked the veteran coach to give him one-on-one updates throughout the season. (As if Tortorella needs to be asked, of course.)

This was more than just a check-in, though.

"He said, 'You've been in the league a couple of years now, you have to take a little bit more of a role here,'" Anderson said. "When things aren't going well (for the team) sometimes you have to step up to the occasion. He just reminded me that I'm a big part of the team."

It might seem silly that Anderson would need to be reminded or encouraged. He's 6-foot-3, 225 pounds, skates like the wind and checks like a load of wet cement.

But look around the Blue Jackets' dressing room these days — Atkinson, Panarin, Duchene, Seth Jones, etc., a collection of star players like never before accumulated in Columbus — and it's easy to understand how a player like Anderson could settle into a back seat.

"(Anderson) has the ability, the speed and the season to do that, (to) say, 'Follow me,'" Tortorella said.

Anderson got the message.

"I thought that's what I had to do in Pittsburgh, give our bench some juice," he said. "I thought our line did that, for the most part. We were banging.

"When I'm not banging, there are a couple of guys who come up to me and remind me of that, what I need to do."

One of those guys is obviously Blue Jackets fourth-line center Brandon Dubinsky, right?

"Oh, yeah, absolutely," Anderson grinned. "He came up to me right before the game (Thursday in Pittsburgh): 'Make sure you're hitting tonight. Make sure you're hitting tonight.' "

In the 3-0 loss Thursday to the Penguins, Anderson tied for the team high with four shots on goal and led the way with seven hits.

In the 4-1 win Saturday, he had a monster game: seven shots on goal and seven hits, including two thunderous checks in the opening 15 seconds of the game — poor Dominik Simon — that set the tone for the evening.

Tortorella has started Jenner's line in each of the past two games, hoping to set a physical tone from the start. He could very well do the same Monday night against the New York Islanders.

"They score an early goal (by Jenner on Saturday), and Andy's banging everything in sight," Tortorella said. "It's who we are. I think they have to keep reminding us how to play. I heard them on the bench reminding guys that this is how you have to play.

"They certainly lead by example that way. We don't expect Dutchie and Cam and Bread to be banging like that, but they can take lessons from that line as far as how straight ahead they are. It's a line that's really done some really good things for us."

Notebook

- D Ryan Murray (upper body) has been out since Feb. 18 with an injury. He hasn't yet begun skating, and GM Jarmo Kekalainen said it's unclear whether Murray will be able to return before the end of the regular season.
- With Murray out indefinitely, and with the late-season games taking on more importance, look for Seth Jones' ice time to skyrocket. He played 28:57 on Saturday, his sixth-highest total of the season. (Two for the top-five performances were in overtime games.) Tortorella had a blunt response to the matter: "Yep, it's part of the game. That's going to be part of his game."

- Jones is third in the NHL, averaging 25:57 per game. Only Minnesota's Ryan Suter (26:54) and Los Angeles' Drew Doughty (26:50) are ahead for him.
- Duchene and Dzingel played major roles in the Blue Jackets' 3-1 goal scored by Oliver Bjorkstrand on Saturday versus Pittsburgh, perhaps a good sign that the Ottawa transplants are starting to gain traction in Columbus. The biggest adjustment might belong to Dzingel, who is averaging a whopping five minutes less ice time with the Blue Jackets (12:43) than he did in Ottawa (17:45). The biggest difference is on the power play — Dzingel played on it for the Senators but he's not for the Blue Jackets.
- Here's Tortorella on Duchene and Dzingel: "They made a couple plays. It was the first time we've kind of seen them work together. I thought Zinger made some good plays in tight coming off the wall. Made a really good play to Andy (but the puck) went on edge and he shot it wide. I think Dutchie and Zinger found one another more last night than the other games."
- Duchene has mentioned a few times that he took a while to get acclimated in Ottawa when he was traded there by Colorado early last season. His memory is sound. In his first 12 games with the Senators, Duchene had 1-1-2 with a minus-11 rating. So far he has 1-3-4 and a minus-2 rating in nine games with Columbus.

[Hall of Famer Howell, Rangers' games leader, dies at 86](#)

By Staff, Associated Press – March 10, 2019

NEW YORK (AP) — Harry Howell, the Hall of Fame defenseman who played the most games in New York Rangers' history, has died. He was 86.

Howell died Saturday night. He had been living at an assisted care facility near his hometown of Hamilton, Ontario.

A seven-time All-Star, Howell played 1,160 games for the Rangers from 1952-69 and had his No. 3 retired by the team.

"One of the most iconic players in franchise history, Harry's Hall of Fame accomplishments on the ice were exceeded only by the tremendous gentleman he was off the ice," Rangers President Glen Sather said in a statement. "I was privileged to have worked with Harry for over a decade in both Edmonton and New York and treasure our memories together."

Howell also played in the NHL for the Oakland/California Golden Seals and Los Angeles before finishing in the World Hockey Association with single seasons with New York/New Jersey, San Diego and Calgary.

Known for his smart, steady play, "Harry the Horse" won the Norris Trophy as the league's top defenseman in 1966-67. He finished with 94 goals and 324 assists in the NHL and was elected to the Hall of Fame in 1979. He had seven goals and 36 assists in 170 games in the WHA.

Howell was a player-coach with New York-New Jersey and San Diego in the WHA and had an 11-game stint behind the bench in the NHL with the Minnesota North Stars. He also scouted for Edmonton.

"The National Hockey League mourns the passing of legendary defenseman, consummate professional, and Hockey Hall of Famer Harry Howell," NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman said in a statement.

Howell helped the Guelph Biltmores win the 1952 Memorial Cup junior championship.

The NHL said Howell's wife, Marilyn, died last month.

[NHL Seattle to open season-ticket and suites preview center by honoring longtime Totems star Guyle Fielder](#)

By Geoff Baker, Seattle Times – March 11, 2019

Inside the NHL

Longtime Seattle Totems legend Guyle Fielder is to be honored by this city's incoming NHL franchise sooner than he or anyone else initially thought.

Now 88 and living in Arizona, Fielder, who captained the Totems to three Western Hockey League minor professional championships in the 1950s and 1960s, had already expressed hope of attending the NHL team's opening game at KeyArena in October 2021. But now, with the NHL Seattle season-ticket and suites preview center set to officially open in three weeks, a replica of Fielder's former locker stall is being built as one of the attractions within the showroom.

Not only that, but "Golden Guyle" himself has been invited by NHL Seattle to appear at the Pacific Science Center-based showroom. Details are being finalized, but Fielder said he's picked out some of his Totems memorabilia – his original game jersey and a customized stick among them – to be used for the locker stall and has been told to expect to travel up here for a few days next month.

"I'd heard for the last month or two that they wanted to plan something, but I didn't think it would ever come about because I was never really involved in the National Hockey League," said Fielder, who played only 15 NHL regular-season and playoff games for the Detroit Red Wings, Chicago Blackhawks and Boston Bruins over 22 professional seasons. "But I was involved in hockey in Seattle for 15, or 16 years, whatever it was. And we had some great years there successfully as a team, and I'm very proud to have been a part of it. So you're darned right I'm happy about this."

Idaho-born, Saskatchewan-raised Fielder finished with 2,037 combined goals and assists for the fourth-highest point total in pro hockey history. His longtime friend, British Columbia-based lawyer Douglas Buchanan, typically handles Fielder's business affairs and has been his go-between with NHL Seattle.

"Everything is still being worked out, but they've told me they want him there," Buchanan said.

The countdown to opening the preview showroom – for now to potential buyers of luxury suites and club-level seating, with season-ticket sales starting in the fall – is part of a busy month for NHL Seattle. On Tuesday, the group holds its quarterly business meeting at which time NHL Seattle president and CEO Tod Leiweke and senior hockey adviser Dave Tippett will ask ownership for approval to hire the new team's general manager this summer rather than next year.

Interviews of candidates would begin early during the NHL playoffs and continue into June. Some potential candidates, such as Vegas Golden Knights assistant GM Kelly McCrimmon, are with playoff-bound squads and won't be interviewed until their clubs are eliminated.

Despite recent rumors, the NHL Seattle group also won't finalize plans for an American Hockey League farm-team location until after its next quarterly business meeting in June.

For now, the group's limited opening of the preview showroom follows the one-year March 1 anniversary of it collecting nearly 33,000 season-ticket deposits from fans. That stunning tally paved the way for the NHL team's official approval in December, though deposit holders have been kept in the dark since then about pricing and seat locations.

And they'll still be largely without those answers until the fall, attributable partly to the NHL-imposed one-year delay from the team's initially intended 2020 franchise launch. The delay means NHL Seattle and the Oak View Group (OVG) arena developer have had to revise the envisioned price point on season-ticket packages due to inflation and other considerations.

Already, the cost of completely remaking what both groups call the "New Arena at Seattle Center" has shot up by \$150 million from their \$700 million estimates last fall. Some of that will inevitably be recouped through season-ticket pricing once OVG gets a firmer grasp on the venue's final cost.

The vast showroom inside the ticket-preview center, with laser lights and video wall displays, will feature a motorized, high-tech model of the completed arena with its roof lifting off to provide a peek at the new features inside.

Full-sized replica luxury suites for sale have also been built. Future corporate sponsors already have been taken through the showroom to view the suites, even as construction was ongoing.

The Fielder locker replica is one of two planned. His will be permanent, while the other will be interchangeable and honor former NHL greats making appearances at the showroom from time to time.

The showroom contains photographs and information on players and moments in Seattle's hockey past. But Fielder will be the first former player honored in person.

The new team is expected to also honor Fielder in some permanent way at the arena once it reopens.

For now, Fielder, who hates flying and hasn't been on a plane since retiring in 1973, plans to have his longtime companion, Betty, drive them up from Arizona.

"Betty and I like to drive and we go everywhere," he said. "We've been to Alaska – we went out there for a month and drove both ways – and to Minnesota I don't know how many times. We've been back to Saskatchewan as well. We were thinking of what we're going to do this summer because it gets so hot out here in Arizona, so now with this situation it will help some. We'll go to Seattle for some time and have a little visit up there."

And begin their latest journey with a long-awaited commemoration of another that ended decades ago.

[The Athletic / Should the NHL limit draft lottery wins? GMs weigh in on need for a rule change](#)

By Craig Custance, The Athletic - Mar 11, 2019

First, let's start off with a little exercise. An exercise we know the occasional NHL general manager does when killing time. Let's head on over to tankathon.com, the great lottery simulator and time waster.

On Saturday, the Maple Leafs beat the Oilers to end a nice little four-game win streak for Edmonton. The loss meant that the Oilers woke up on Monday with the eighth-best shot at winning the 2019 NHL Draft lottery and the shot at drafting Jack Hughes, the game's next star forward.

That loss, according to tankathon, gave them a six percent chance at the No. 1 pick. So hold on, let's see how many clicks of the simulator it takes to get the Oilers the No. 1 overall pick.

Be right back.

Two.

Honestly. It took two simulations to land the Oilers the No. 1 pick. And really, should we expect anything less this spring when it comes time for the NHL to select the draft order?

Screenshot proof of an Oilers lottery win from Tankathon:

Now, this doesn't take into account the free fall of the Devils. Or just how bad the Red Wings are playing right now. Or that the most chaotic (and likely?) outcome is an Ottawa win and the pick immediately being shipped off to Colorado as part of the (first) Matt Duchene trade. All those factors are going to change the dynamic of the lottery this year.

But we also have to come to the realization that it's quite possible the Oilers are back in this conversation when it comes time to pick ping pong balls. When presented with this suggestion at their annual GMs meetings in Boca Raton, Florida, last week, general managers typically had two reactions: They laughed, which is completely appropriate. Because what else are you going to do? Or they shook their head with a bit of a pained expression that suggested what many fans of other cities feel – It just wouldn't seem fair.

Since 2010, there have been nine draft lotteries. The Oilers won four of them (2010, 2011, 2012 and 2015). No other team has won it twice.

Their success already contributed to one change in the lottery. In 2014, the NHL announced a two-year transition to the draft lottery system that is currently in place. Starting in the 2015 draft, the odds of landing the top pick were spread more evenly amongst the 14 teams in the lottery. For instance, the chances of the worst team in the league winning the lottery dropped from 25 percent to 20 percent. That change didn't slow the Oilers, with Edmonton landing Connor McDavid in the 2015 draft with the top pick.

In 2016, the current format played out for the first time. There are now three lotteries for each of the top three picks. That means the team that finishes last in the league could, in theory, drop to No. 4

overall. Part of the motivation is to discourage tanking and this lottery change is often cited by general managers as one of the reasons they'd rather not strip their roster down like rebuilding teams in the past. There's even less of a guarantee of a top pick now.

That said, the No. 30 overall team has picked first in the current system in two of the three years since it was implemented (Maple Leafs and Sabres).

So, it's working. There's been an assortment of teams at the top. Some big jumps from teams, like the Stars and Hurricanes getting lucky. It makes for a fun event.

And in some ways, it works to the Oilers' advantage. They probably won't be a No. 31 team as long as McDavid and Leon Draisaitl are around. So there's definitely an appetite among some teams to add one more wrinkle to the process: A cap on how many times a team can win the No. 1 overall pick in a short period of time.

This was on the agenda at the 2016 NHL GM meetings, when it was proposed by Nashville GM David Poile that a rule be made that prevents teams that don't finish last from picking first multiple years in a short window of time. The caveat in this proposal was that the team that finished dead last would always have the same shot at No. 1 overall, regardless of how many times they'd won the lottery.

Did it get a lot of support?

"No," Poile said last week, laughing.

But it's fair to say it's an issue that will be monitored as the current lottery system ages and results start to add up – especially if Hughes is playing in Edmonton at this point next year.

Poile, for one, is in favor of exploring change.

"I'd love to bring that up again," he said. "You actually could get some inequity in the conferences, if the first two or three players, franchise players, end up in the same conference or specifically with the same team. If that topic got brought up, I'd like to discuss that again."

He's not alone among his colleagues who would at least be interested in having the debate.

"I think there's definitely logic behind not having the same teams over and over winning the lottery," said Rangers GM Jeff Gorton. "Maybe if you won a couple times, you can only go to a certain spot in the next few years. Yeah, I think it's definitely something worth talking about."

"I think it should be limited," said an Eastern Conference GM who asked to not be identified. "You shouldn't keep rewarding teams for constantly being there. There should be some kind of timeframe where you have to show progress ... maybe the odds should change for a team that's been there a certain amount of times."

A few GMs asked about the NBA's system and whether or not that's worth copying. In 2017, the NBA tweaked its lottery system with the changes beginning this year. The NBA's lottery system was similar to the NHL's but will now level the odds at the bottom of the standings so that the teams that finish with the three worst records all have a 14 percent chance of winning the lottery. That eliminates any race to the bottom. There will be lottery drawings for the first four NBA picks and then the remaining picks will

be an inverse of the standings. Theoretically, a team could finish last this year in the NBA and still pick fifth. There is no cap on the number of lottery wins in the NBA.

The no-cap system is one that still has plenty of support amongst NHL GMs.

“I think, right now, it’s a fair system we have,” Sabres GM Jason Botterill said. “I like the balance to it now. You’ve seen in the last few years teams jumping up.”

A Western Conference GM pointed out that the idea of the lottery is to help teams at the bottom of the standings get back to being competitive. So if a team is consistently in the lottery mix, it still needs that assistance.

“If the players they were selecting were helping a team win, they wouldn’t be in that lottery,” he said. “Something must be happening ... it’s an unusual circumstance for a team to have multiple lottery picks – maybe it means the players haven’t turned out or they’ve done something. I don’t know if that’s a big problem that needs to be solved.”

That’s the other part of the equation. Sure, there are years in which a generational talent is sitting at the No. 1 pick. But that’s not always the case.

The Oilers won the 2011 draft lottery but the Winnipeg Jets certainly wouldn’t trade Mark Scheifele, taken at No. 7, for No. 1 pick Ryan Nugent-Hopkins right now. And we all know how the Nail Yakupov picked turned out in 2012. Picking first comes with no guarantees.

Blackhawks GM Stan Bowman agreed that the optics might not look great if the Oilers win the 2019 lottery but resisted the notion that it would be an indictment of the process.

“That doesn’t necessarily mean the system doesn’t work,” he said.

Perhaps it was Kings GM Rob Blake who conveyed the reason why there probably won’t be a change anytime soon. When presented with the question as to whether or not the NHL should put a cap on winning the lottery, he never quite offered an opinion.

Instead, he shared a glimpse of the emotional side of the rebuild. The Kings are just now getting a taste for what Oilers fans and management have been feeling for years. It’s hard. At times, it’s downright miserable.

Maybe it’s not the time to pile on with addition draft lottery restrictions.

“I don’t know,” he said, considering the issue. “Just from my own personal experience in being near the bottom, it’s really hard to do this every year. To sit through it and lose and lose. I can’t speak for other GMs in other organizations, but to me, if this is an ongoing process year after year – it’s not fun.”

[The Athletic / DGB weekend power rankings: Counting down my worst rankings of the season \(so far\)](#)

By Sean McIndoe, The Athletic- Mar 11, 2019

We're getting into that time of year when power rankings start to lock in from week-to-week. A team might still occasionally have an especially good or bad week and move a spot or two, and every now and then a dark horse will make a surprise charge down the homestretch. But generally, once we get past the trade deadline and close in on the 70-game mark, there really isn't much reason to make big changes to what we have. Spoiler alert: The Lightning are in first place again this week.

Before we can start looking at our Stanley Cup and draft lottery hopefuls, let's take a look back with a different kind of top five: My five worst rankings from this season.

I'll pause here so you can all make your "How did you narrow it down?" jokes.

It's true that in one sense, we've got plenty of candidates to choose from. In all, there have been 15 teams that have made at least one appearance in the top five, and 13 that have made an appearance in the bottom (including one team that showed up in both). That's a lot, more than in any previous season I've been doing this. It's been a volatile season. Or maybe some of the picks have just been bad.

To be honest, I don't think anything stands out as an embarrassingly awful call; it's not like there was some week that had Tampa in the bottom five or the Kings as a Cup contender. But that's a low bar and let's just say that some of those picks hold up better than others. Today we're going to take our medicine and own up to five of the worst:

5. Arizona Coyotes ranked No. 1 in the bottom five (Oct. 5) – The Coyotes might end up making the playoffs and at one point I thought they were the odds-on favorite to finish dead last. That's not a great look, although in this case, it comes with a pretty decent excuse: The season was just a few days old. We even called that week's rankings the "way-too-early edition." The Coyotes had started 0-2-0 so they were probably as good a pick as anyone; within a few weeks they'd made their exit from the bottom five to great fanfare, never to return. But for one week at least, I thought they'd be worse than the Senators, Red Wings or Kings. They were not.

4. Colorado Avalanche ranked No. 4 in the top five (Dec. 3) – "I've never fully bought into the Avalanche. I still don't, if I'm being honest." Good for you, past me, but you still let a hot streak mislead you into ranking them as the fourth-best team in the league. This one only lasted a week, but it doesn't hold up well and unlike with the Coyotes, I can't claim the "it was early" excuse.

3. Buffalo Sabres ranked No. 5 in the top five (Nov. 26) – Of all the teams to crack the top five this year, none will finish lower than the Sabres in the final standings. In that sense, no call was more wrong than this one.

If that's the case, why not rank it higher? For one thing, the Sabres only showed up in the top five once, at the tail end of that ten-game winning streak. That stretch had briefly elevated Buffalo to first place overall, and yet I only had them fifth that week. More importantly, my writeup was packed with caveats, like that their top-five case "is far from iron-clad" and that this is "probably the only chance to slide

them into the top five” and “Will it last? Maybe not.” Reading it all these months later, I half-expected to go back and see that the first letter of every line spelled out “I don’t actually believe this ranking.” But I still made it, so I’ll own it. (But do check out the comments that week from furious Sabres fans who insist I’m short-changing them by ranking them below the Lightning.)

2. St. Louis Blues ranked in the bottom five (five weeks total, as late as Dec. 10) – I have to include this one, especially since it lasted over a month. But the funny thing was that at the time, nobody thought I was wrong. If anything, it became a running joke that Blues fans were mad that I was going easy on them (they dipped as low as No. 3 for a few weeks). As I wrote on Dec. 10, “something big has to be coming in St. Louis.” I was right, just not in the way I thought I was.

1. Minnesota Wild in the top five (for three straight weeks beginning on Nov. 12) – The Wild aren’t as bad as the Sabres and might finish ahead of the Avalanche too. But what stands out here is how long I had them listed – three weeks in all, with them drifting as high as third after a big win over the Jets. And I can’t even fall back on hedging my bets when I wrote about them, because I was saying things like “Yeah, it’s probably time to start taking them seriously” and “Honestly, (fifth spot) is probably too low for the Wild.”

They were playing well at the time, going 10-2-0 at one point, but it was a stretch powered largely by red-hot goaltending from Devan Dubnyk. He eventually cooled down and then got hurt to start an extended cold streak. I couldn’t have seen an injury coming, but I was too eager to buy into the Wild as a legitimate Central favorite instead of what they were: a decent team that can sometimes look like more than that when the goalie is hot and they’re getting some breaks.

OK, I feel better. Now onto this week’s ratings, which I assure you are all 100 percent accurate. (Unless they’re not, in which case, uh, it was still too early.)

Road to the Cup

The five teams that look like they’re headed towards a summer of keg stands and fountain pool parties.

One big story to watch in the final month: The Colorado Avalanche are going to have to make their playoff push without Gabriel Landeskog, who’s out four-to-six weeks with an upper-body injury. That timeline means he could be back early in the playoffs and there’s a slight chance he could return before the end of the season. But as Ryan Clark wonders, by that point will it still matter?

5. Washington Capitals (41-21-7, +22 true goals differential*) – Screw it, I’m back on board.

The Capitals showed up in our very first top five, then vanished for two months before reappearing in December. They hung around for five weeks, reaching as high as the two-spot on New Year’s Eve even as I wrote that the ranking “seems a little high.” Now, after two weeks of winning pushed them back into top spot in the Metro, they seem like as good a pick as any out of a crowded top-five field.

Or maybe not. You might prefer the Jets, who have a decent case even though they lost in Washington last night. But the Jets look to have a tougher road out of the Central than what the Caps will have in the Metro and that matters too. For the same reason, I can’t talk myself into Nashville. The post-Stone trade Golden Knights? They’ve looked great at times, but the top of the Pacific is very tough and they’re locked into third. The Islanders are still at least in the mix, but I’d rather know more about the Robin

Lehner injury before I get them back near the top five. And the Leafs somehow haven't shown up here in eight weeks even as they're tied for second in the league in wins.

It's a tough call. But this is about who's going to win the Cup, and when in doubt, deferring to the defending champs doesn't seem like a bad way to break the tie. For this week, at least.

4. Boston Bruins (42-18-9, +35) – Figuring out where to rank the Bruins is really getting interesting. On the one hand, you could make a very strong case that they're the second-best team in the NHL. Last night's loss aside, I'm not even sure you'd get much pushback from anyone. That means they should be ranked second, right?

But this isn't a "best teams" list. It's "most likely to win the Cup," and that means that having the best team in the league in your division is bad news. Without going into the whole playoff format debate again, the Bruins' path out of the Atlantic is brutal, and unlike the next two teams on the list, there's no hope of improving it down the stretch.

Where do you rank them? We seem to have stalled out at the four-spot, even as they've been virtually unbeatable for over a month. That feels wrong but less wrong than any of the other options.

3. Calgary Flames (42-20-7, +46) – "Just how much should we worry about the Flames" has been an ongoing question for most of the last two weeks, as they dropped four straight games before finally snapping the streak last night against the Knights. In short, they've gone cold at exactly the time of year when you'd hope a legitimate contender was heating up.

Or have they? The underlying numbers have remained decent, suggesting that the last few weeks has been as much about bad luck as any actual flaws. The goaltending is a question mark, but that's been the case all season long and should already be baked into our impressions of how far the Flames can go. And while the slump gave the Sharks a chance to gain ground, it's not like the Pacific race is anywhere near over.

But it is tight again, as the Flames basically gave back almost all the cushion they'd built up. And it remains crucially important to win the Pacific, since the second seed has to deal with Vegas in round one. We're nudging a hot Sharks team ahead of Calgary this week, but beyond that, we're not going to hit the panic button, especially after they beat the Knights. But let's just say our hand was hovering over it, so check back next week.

2. San Jose Sharks (41-19-8, +39) – Like Calgary, the Sharks should feel like winning the Pacific and avoiding the Knights is crucial. Earlier this week, Kevin Kurz wondered about whether any of the potential wildcard opponents should also worry San Jose fans. His conclusion: maybe the Stars, but probably not the Wild, Coyotes or Avs. That sounds about right to me, and even Dallas hasn't quite entered the scary zone for me yet. The path here is pretty clear: Win the division, take care of business as quickly as possible against an underdog in the opening round, and then hope the Flames and Knights pummel each other into a pulp in the other series.

1. Tampa Bay Lightning (52-13-4, +80) – They had a chance to clinch a playoff spot on Thursday, but a loss against the Wild meant they didn't lock down their spot until Friday. Talk about leaving things to the last minute. Slackers.

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

Not ranked: Montreal Canadiens – We’ve barely mentioned the Habs in this column this year, which is kind of weird. It’s not like they haven’t had a newsworthy season, with the return of Shea Weber, the emergence of Max Domi, Carey Price looking like his old Vezina self at times, and it all adding up to a surprise playoff contender.

The problem is that by design, these rankings focus on the highs and the lows, and the Canadiens have spent most of the year navigating the middle. That’s perfectly fine for some teams, and it’s better than most of us expected from Montreal. But it’s made them one of just four teams who haven’t cracked either the top or bottom five on the season. And other than an extending losing streak in December that was vaguely worrying, they’ve never been all that close.

Still, we’re using this catch-all space as a way to work them in now, because they look like they’re in for a frantic finish in the Eastern wildcard race. The Habs are jostling for one of the final spots with the Penguins, Hurricanes and Blue Jackets, and when the music stops one of those teams is going to be on the outside looking in.

Will it be Montreal? I’ve suggested that it might be, both jokingly and more seriously. Others don’t seem as worried. This certainly wasn’t a good week for that latter group, as the Canadiens followed a Saturday loss to the Penguins with a 1-for-3 California road trip that included Friday’s embarrassing blowout loss in Anaheim. Those west coast swings are tough, but the Ducks are a bad team and Montreal needed those two points. Instead, they got dusted.

The schedule the rest of the way is interesting. The next few weeks look either reasonably good or maybe even very good, depending on your thoughts on an Islander team that the Canadiens get twice. The last week of March brings crucial showdowns with the Hurricanes and Blue Jackets. And then come the last four games of the season, against the Jets, Lightning, Capitals and Leafs. That could be a murderer’s row of Stanley Cup favorites. It could also be a group that’s already clinched their spots and are resting up for the playoffs.

Either way, the Canadiens first job is to make sure those games still matter. The middle isn’t a bad place to spend most of the season, but only when it results in a playoff spot. They went into the weekend holding one down, but left as the outsider. There’s lots of time to get that spot back, but they’ll need to be a lot better than they looked on Friday.

The bottom five

The five teams that look like they’re headed towards hoping the ping-pong balls deliver Jack Hughes.

Hey speaking of Hughes who is going to single-handedly transform a franchise, are we excited for the Quinn Hughes era in Vancouver? Yes. Yes we are. We may see it begin as soon as Wednesday.

5. Anaheim Ducks (27-34-9, -54) – I don’t want to kick a guy while he’s down, but what does it say about Randy Carlyle when he’s fired and replaced by a guy who has literally never done the job before in his life and the team gets better?

4. New Jersey Devils (25-35-9, -38) – You should read the whole post, but I’m not sure I’ve laughed harder all week than when I read this exchange in which Devils GM Ray Shero is asked whether he considered trading Taylor Hall at the deadline and Craig Custance hits him with the follow-up question.

I'm pretty sure he's saying go ahead and put him down for one percent.

3. Detroit Red Wings (24-35-10, -48) – The hockey world spent much of the week honoring the memory of Ted Lindsay, who passed away on Monday at the age of 93. Fans were given the chance to pay their respects at a public visitation on Friday at Little Caesars Arena, while his funeral was held on Saturday. If you haven't yet, be sure to spend some time on this look back on Lindsay's life and legacy.

Meanwhile, the NHL lost another legend with yesterday's passing of Hall-of-Famer Harry Howell.

2. Los Angeles Kings (25-36-8, -55) – The last few weeks saw the Ducks and Hawks nudge the throttle from "bad" all the way up to "passably mediocre" and left the Kings in their dust, all alone as the West's bottom-feeder.

1. Ottawa Senators (23-40-6, -54) – Maybe I missed it, but I don't think anything truly terrible happened to this team this week. In other words, they may have just had their best week of the season.

Not ranked: Edmonton Oilers – I'd make a joke here about a late-season win streak that's too late to get them back in the playoff hunt but just in time to ruin their lottery odds, if we didn't all know they're winning the lottery anyway. Still, progress is progress, even if the wins have been mostly coming against teams like the Senators and Sabres while teams like the Leafs skate circles around them. When you're in Edmonton, you take your hope where you can find it.

The bigger news is the ongoing GM hunt, which has the potential to turn into one of the most fascinating stories of the year. Some of the names that have leaked out are the traditional, experienced picks who'd make for safe choices. Others have been up-and-coming executives who'd likely represent a higher-risk, higher-reward type of path. Other have been, uh, Dave Nonis. So yeah, there are a few ways this could go. Jonathan Willis had some thoughts on the search and why the Oilers may not be casting their net wide enough.

Or, you know, they could just stick with what they already have. No need to mess with a winning formula, I guess.