



Columbus Blue Jackets News Clips
Mar. 9 – 10, 2019

Columbus Blue Jackets

- PAGE 02: Columbus Dispatch: Still no timetable for Ryan Murray's return
- PAGE 04: Columbus Dispatch: Blue Jackets try to work through sudden slump on offense
- PAGE 06: Columbus Dispatch: Penguins 3, Blue Jackets 0: Five takeaways
- PAGE 09: The Athletic: 'One dog at a time': John Tortorella's passion for animals can't be leashed on 'Hockey and Hounds'
- PAGE 13: Columbus Dispatch: Victory puts needed charge in Blue Jackets' playoff hopes
- PAGE 15: Columbus Dispatch: Settling in takes time for Matt Duchene, Ryan Dzingel
- PAGE 17: Columbus Dispatch: Blue Jackets 4, Penguins 1: Sweet success for Jackets
- PAGE 19: The Athletic: How a Saturday morning adjustment paid big dividends in Blue Jackets' streak-busting win
- PAGE 22: The Athletic: With so much at stake, Blue Jackets exact a measure of revenge vs. Pens

Cleveland Monsters/Prospects

- PAGE 26: The Athletic: Breaking down Blue Jackets prospect Emil Bemstrom's meteoric rise

NHL/Websites

- PAGE 30: The Athletic: Faceoff tinkering won't significantly increase offence. Getting rid of them would
- PAGE 33: Sportsnet.ca: Truth By Numbers: Is Columbus good enough to make the playoffs?
- PAGE 36: Sportsnet.ca: NHL, NHLPA have continued to meet to find solution to escrow issue
- PAGE 37: Sportsnet.ca: Stanley Cup Playoff Push: Columbus turns back to Bobrovsky for huge game

Still no timetable for Ryan Murray's return

By Brian Hedger, Columbus Dispatch – March 8, 2019

They are questions that get significantly more pressing with each game Ryan Murray misses because of an undisclosed injury.

Will the Blue Jackets' best puck-moving defenseman return this season? If so, when?

All that has been released is that Murray has an "upper-body" injury and will be out on a "week-to-week" basis, a prognosis that was originally termed "out indefinitely" in a news release when Murray was placed on injured reserve.

Asked whether he's hopeful Murray will return this season, general manager Jarmo Kekalainen said: "I am always hopeful."

Murray's agent, Rick Valette, had a similar take after visiting his client this week.

"Hopefully, he gets back in the lineup soon," Valette said.

Whether that's possible is unknown. Murray is expected to miss his 10th straight game on Saturday when the Blue Jackets play the Pittsburgh Penguins at Nationwide Arena.

It's unknown whether the injury is related to a back issue that forced the 25-year-old to miss nearly three months last season. Regardless, Murray's absence is a problem for the Blue Jackets, who have sorely missed his presence on the top pairing with Seth Jones.

Murray's vision, passing and composure — especially in the defensive zone — have been critical in all three zones. He also has helped the Jackets' penalty kill to rise into the top five of the NHL rankings and has a career-high 29 points (one goal, 28 assists) in 56 games.

"He's an important piece," said Jones, who is now working with Zach Werenski but also has worked with Markus Nutivaara and Scott Harrington since Murray's injury. "It's not just his point totals, but how solid he was for us in every part of the game. We feel for him and we see him in the rink every day, so he's still around."

He's just not practicing or playing, and there is no telling when that might change.

"Hopefully, he gets back before the end of the season or as soon as possible," said David Savard, who worked with Werenski before Murray's absence. "It would be a huge plus for us if we can get him back, but we've just got to go game-by-game (until then)."

Dubious streak

The Blue Jackets have one more chance this season to end a losing streak to the Penguins that stretches to the 2016-17 regular season.

After losing 3-0 Thursday at Pittsburgh, they have lost eight straight games to the Penguins, which is the longest streak in the series. Pittsburgh is also 9-0-1 in the past 10 regular-season meetings and has won both first-round playoff series between the two teams (2014 and '17).

Who will start?

The Blue Jackets threw a curveball Thursday in Pittsburgh by starting backup Joonas Korpisalo instead of Sergei Bobrovsky.

Bobrovsky's struggles against the Penguins are well-chronicled, but coach John Tortorella said that wasn't the reason he went with Korpisalo, who made 28 saves in a solid performance.

Korpisalo is 0-2-0 against Pittsburgh this season, but Tortorella's goaltending decision is a story line to watch heading into the morning skate Saturday. The Jackets also have Keith Kinkaid, a trade-deadline acquisition who went 3-1-0 against the Penguins for the New Jersey Devils this season and has a 6-1-1 record against them the past two seasons.

Toasted Bread

The Penguins have thrown a wet blanket on Artemi Panarin and the Blue Jackets' top line in the first three games.

Panarin has just one assist and a minus-7 plus/minus rating, while center Pierre-Luc Dubois has no points and is minus-3 and right wing Cam Atkinson has two goals with a minus-5.

Blue Jackets try to work through sudden slump on offense

By Brian Hedger, Columbus Dispatch – March 8, 2019

This is not how this was supposed to work.

This is not how any of this was supposed to work after the Blue Jackets added three forwards and a goalie before the Feb. 25 trade deadline. Since fearlessly going all in, the lugnuts have loosened and the wheels on the Jackets' season are starting to wobble.

Since the deadline, they have lost two more games than they've won, have dropped from third in the Metropolitan Division to outside the playoffs, and their offense in just six games has gone from an overflowing fountain to a rusty, dried-up spigot.

"We're just not opportunistic right now — they are," is how captain Nick Foligno put it Thursday after another humbling loss, 3-0 at the Pittsburgh Penguins (a.k.a. "they"). "That's really the difference in this game. I thought we did a lot of good things and had a lot of good looks, and ... we're just not scoring."

The Blue Jackets, who play the Penguins again Saturday night at Nationwide Arena in the finale of the season series, have been shut out twice in six games since the deadline. During that span they're averaging about half of their previous goals per game, dropping from 3.2 (10th in the NHL) to 1.5 (29th).

Want to talk goal differential? Well, that's ugly, too.

Since adding at the deadline, including star center Matt Duchene and forward Ryan Dzingel in separate trades with the Ottawa Senators, the Jackets are minus-12 in goals for and against, and their top scorers are either slumping or not producing at their usual levels.

Artemi Panarin leads the team with a goal and five assists since the deadline, but he's also toting around a minus-7 rating. Cam Atkinson leads in goals in that span with two, but neither Duchene nor Dzingel have a point in the past four games.

"Still not totally in flow offensively," coach John Tortorella said after losing to the Penguins. "I think we need something good to happen. They blocked 24 shots. We have a lot of shot attempts and a lot of good things, but we still ... we don't score a goal."

That's a big problem at any time, but especially with the playoffs still within reach and games disappearing off the schedule every other day.

Whether the problem is simply nerves associated with increased expectations or something else, the Blue Jackets need to get things corrected quickly — and putting more pucks into the opposing net would be a good starting point.

"Scoring and not scoring are both contagious," Duchene said. "All of us are a little snakebit right now, and I have no explanation for it. We just have to work through it."

After adding Duchene and Dzingel, the Blue Jackets suddenly had six 20-goal scorers on their roster, the most of any team in the league. They leaped straight to the top of the league in depth scoring, statistically speaking. But players have to live up to their stats, which hasn't happened yet.

“We’ve got to find a way, because you’re not going to win a game unless you score a goal,” Foligno said, pointing out an obvious fact that has become entirely pertinent. “There’s chances to be had. We’ve just got to fight that extra inch to put them in right now.”

Penguins 3, Blue Jackets 0: Five takeaways

By Brian Hedger, Columbus Dispatch – March 8, 2019

PITTSBURGH – It was better than Tuesday.

That was the biggest thing the Blue Jackets took away from their latest loss to the Pittsburgh Penguins, a 3-0 shutout Thursday night at PPG Paints Arena.

Two days after escaping from a near catastrophe with a 2-1 shootout win in New Jersey, the Jackets played better, overall, in Pittsburgh – where they made the Penguins work for the victory.

The problem, however, is that it's getting late. Columbus didn't gain a single point, staying at 77, while the Penguins moved to four points ahead of them with 15 games left in the regular season.

It was encouraging to see the Jackets stay with the Penguins and even take it to their oppressors at times, but it wasn't enough.

Pittsburgh scored the first goal, again, when Phil Kessel capped a power play just 2:22 into the game. The Penguins also got a goal late in the second for a 2-0 lead and captain Sidney Crosby put it on ice with his second empty-netter in the past two games against the Blue Jackets.

"(I'm) not going to pick it apart," said coach John Tortorella, who went with backup Joonas Korpisalo in net over Sergei Bobrovsky. "I thought our effort was much better tonight. I thought we did some really good things. We just didn't win the game. You're not going to win the game if you don't score a goal."

They couldn't, so they didn't and here the Blue Jackets (37-27-3) stand – still outside the bubble in the Eastern Conference race for playoff spots.

The Penguins (36-22-9) are up next on Saturday, too, paying another visit to Nationwide Arena to conclude the season series. Until then, here are five takeaways from the Jackets' latest hiccup in Pittsburgh.

1) What it meant

The Blue Jackets remain in fifth place of the Metropolitan Division and ninth in the Eastern Conference, one spot (and two points) out of a wild card into the Stanley Cup Playoffs.

Pittsburgh moved into sole possession of third place in the Metro, the idle Carolina Hurricanes (79 points) moved down to the East's first wild-card spot and the Montreal Canadiens are clinging to the second wild card after losing x-x Thursday in San Jose.

The Blue Jackets will play 10 of their final 15 games against teams currently in playoff positions in both conferences, including the next six in a row against the Penguins, Islanders, Bruins twice, Hurricanes and Calgary.

Their work, as the old saying goes, is cut out for them the rest of the way.

2) Another early hole

The Blue Jackets allowed the first goal again, which has become a troubling trend. This was the 34th of 67 games Columbus has fallen behind 1-0 this season, including eight of the past 12 games.

Phil Kessel gave the Penguins an early lead at 2:22 of the first period, sending a close-range shot into the net off Korpisalo lying in the crease.

The Jackets fell to 11-22-1 overall in such games and 1-7-0 the past eight times it's happened. There's only two ways to reverse it, too. Either find more ways to win those games or ...

"Try to score the first goal," Tortorella said. "I thought we have some good minutes there early on, we have energy, we take a penalty. You try to score the first goal. We didn't."

The Penguins did and improved to 23-11-6 in those games.

3) A Penguins block party

Pittsburgh's top skill players often get talked about, but one thing the Penguins have done well against the Blue Jackets is a blue-collar staple.

They've stepped in front of shots with regularity, paying the physical toll that often requires. Pittsburgh prevented 24 shot attempts from getting to goalie Matt Murray after blocking 19 in the Penguins' 5-2 victory Feb. 26 in Columbus.

During that game, a hard one-timer by Artemi Panarin injured forward Bryan Rust – who left that game, didn't return and is still out with a lower-body injury. Thursday, leading goal-scorer Jake Guentzel was hobbled by a Panarin shot but stayed in and assisted on Crosby's empty-netter to seal it.

"The flow of it, offensively, I mean, you give them credit," Tortorella said. "I mean, 24 blocked shots. We had I'm not sure how many attempts."

The Blue Jackets finished with 59 attempts, according to the stat sheet – 42 at even strength, according to naturalstatatrick.com, an advanced-stat site.

4) Korpisalo responded

This wasn't the first time Tortorella has thrown a curveball by starting Korpisalo over Sergei Bobrovsky in a big game. He also did it Jan. 12 in Washington, when Korpisalo picked up the win in the Jackets' 2-1 overtime victory.

Korpisalo also started the season-opener in Detroit, getting another win in overtime, and started the first game this season against Pittsburgh – taking the loss in the Penguins' 4-2 win Nov. 24 at PPG Paints Arena.

Korpisalo played well Jan. 10 against the Nashville Predators, too, earning yet another overtime win while Bobrovsky was suspended. Prior to this game, Korpisalo hadn't started since allowing five goals in the Jackets' 5-1 loss to the Lightning on Feb. 18 in Columbus.

He finished with 29 saves, including 17-of-18 in the second periods.

"He played good," Tortorella said. "He doesn't care (about long layoffs). That's the greatest thing about Korpi. That stuff doesn't bother him."

5) No 'Bread' crumbs

The Penguins have found a defensive solution to Artemi Panarin and the rest of the Jackets' top line this year.

The Blue Jackets' dynamic leading scorer, who has 73 points, was tagged with a minus-2 plus/minus rating. That brings his rating to a frigid minus-4 in three games against Pittsburgh this season.

Panarin has one assist against the Penguins this year, but has traditionally had good success against them. He has nine career goals, six assists and 15 points against Pittsburgh,

One of his linemates, right wing Cam Atkinson, didn't fare much better. Atkinson also had a minus-2 next to his name.

[‘One dog at a time’: John Tortorella’s passion for animals can’t be leashed on ‘Hockey and Hounds’](#)

By Tom Reed, The Athletic – March 8, 2019

COLUMBUS, Ohio — The blunt and pugnacious nature of John Tortorella makes him an inviting target to critics, but it’s not the guest star of the NHL’s most unconventional and quirky coach’s show who wears a bulletproof vest.

“Anthony is the real deal,” the Blue Jackets coach said. “He sees the animals and he helps save the animals. He is on the front line. I have so much respect for him.”

Anthony Rothman is a sports talk show host for 97.1 The Fan in Columbus. He’s also a volunteer humane agent for Columbus Humane, a labor of love that requires him to rescue dogs and other beasts from dangerous and abusive environments.

Tortorella and Rothman are “kindred spirits” and passionate animal welfare advocates who each week during Blue Jackets season take to the airwaves to discuss power plays, penalty kills and pit bulls.

Welcome to “Hockey and Hounds,” the only show in America where a coach can talk about a doghouse in a positive manner. For the past three seasons, Tortorella and Rothman have combined to give fans insight on the Blue Jackets, while also educating them on issues surrounding endangered animals.

“I’ve done a lot of these shows throughout my career because it comes with the job,” said Tortorella, who earlier this season became the first American-born coach to win 600 NHL regular-season games. “This is the most rewarding show I have been a part of.”

The unique format demonstrates the powerful platform professional athletes and coaches have during their careers. Many use it to promote causes outside the sports world. In the case of John and Christine Tortorella, it’s to “help those who protect children, animals and our environment from harm.” It’s the mission statement of Tortorella Family Foundation, which is run by the Stanley Cup-winning coach and his wife, an author of children’s books and music.

The Tortorellas raise four rescued dogs and two rescued horses on their farm outside of Columbus. The family’s love of animals has been well documented from the coach’s time (2009-13) with the Rangers. But it wasn’t until he took charge of the Blue Jackets in 2015 and met Rothman that the family gained a weekly forum to encourage people to adopt animals from shelters, promote low-cost and free clinics and enlighten the public on the cruelty and neglect of dogs.

Rothman and Bobby Carpenter, a former Ohio State football star, co-host a weekday sports talk show. They dedicate a weekly segment of about 20 minutes to “Hockey and Hounds” in which Tortorella calls the program and updates fans on pucks and pooches.

During a Jan. 25 episode, the coach spoke of the need for center Alexander Wennberg to elevate his play before Rothman segued to a spotlight on “Virginia,” a 4-year-old pit-bull mix who had been at Columbus Humane since Christmas. Rothman informed listeners Virginia would make a wonderful pet in a one-dog-only home.

“Great stuff, Anthony, great stuff,” Tortorella said.

Rothman followed the report with a letter from a loyal listener who works as a contractor for Lowe’s Home Improvement. The man volunteered his labor to build shelters for dogs who live outdoors during the winter and hinted the company might be willing to donate material for the project.

“Stop right there, Anthony, stop right there,” Tortorella said. “You’ve got to get with my wife right now because she’s in the middle of an initiative involving building doghouses. ... When you finish your show today, you get with my wife because I think there could be a match with this man.”

The show has become so popular they are printing “Hockey and Hounds” T-shirts with all the proceeds going to the Tortorella Family Foundation.

“We are going after the same goal when it comes to animals,” Rothman said. “He inspires me and I think I inspire him. We both are so passionate that we don’t take no for an answer.”

The two men frequently trade text messages. Rothman ends every text with: “one dog at a time.” Tortorella responds: “Damn right.”

Anthony Rothman spotlights a different rescue during episodes of “Hockey and Hounds.” He’s pictured here with “Major.” (Courtesy of Anthony Rothman)

Life-changing moment

Rothman’s affinity for animals dates to his childhood in Chicago. He owned an English setter named Winston who pulled Rothman through his neighborhood on a skateboard. Child and dog slept in the same bed every night.

Tortorella’s love for animals came later in life. He doesn’t recall having a canine as a kid growing up in Concord, Mass. He had a dog while playing hockey and baseball at the University of Maine, but it wasn’t until he met Christine, his wife of 31 years, that his “calling” took hold.

The Tortorellas were living in Westchester County, N.Y., when they discovered an animal shelter 2 miles from their home. Nobody in the neighborhood ever saw dogs outside the facility, which aroused Christine’s suspicions.

One night, Christine and their son, Nick, broke into the shelter and were horrified by the sight of neglected dogs. With the help of volunteers, the facility’s owners were driven out.

“There were 30 pit-bull mixes and nobody knew they were there because they were stuck in their cages,” Tortorella said. “They saw these poor animals lying in their feces. That’s what started all of this.

“We laugh about it and we cry about it, but that situation in Westchester County changed my life. I was down there every day at 8 a.m. waiting for the place to open to walk those dogs.”

The Tortorellas, with an assist from the Rangers, organized a dog walk in New York City to benefit the Westchester Humane Society in 2012. Hundreds of dog owners, Rangers fans and a few Rangers players participated in the mile-long walk.

“I had (Rangers and Knicks owner) Jimmy Dolan out there with his Rottie (Rottweiler) in Riverside Park,” Tortorella said.

The coach rarely makes his private life a matter of public record. His son, Nick, is a member of the elite U.S. Army 75th Ranger Regiment, a unit known as one of the most skilled special operations strike forces in the world.

Two years ago, Tortorella skipped a chance to coach in the All-Star Game to care for his son's ailing dog.

On a recent "Hockey and Hounds" episode, Tortorella spoke of touring his son's base and shared a story of Nick's transition to military life. He was an excellent high school athlete, but chose not to pursue a career in sports.

"Nick said, 'Dad, I just don't love it like you do,'" Tortorella told listeners. "He found his niche in service. I didn't see it coming, but I am so proud of him."

The coach seldom reveals lineup changes until game day and is notoriously tight-lipped on injury news. And yet "Hockey and Hounds" listeners sometimes are treated to nuggets before the media that covers the team on a daily basis. Several weeks ago, he told Rothman and Carpenter the upper-body injury to Ryan Murray was more long term than first suspected, saying the defenseman would be sidelined for "a while."

Asked about his penchant for breaking news on "Hockey and Hounds," Tortorella laughs.

"It's a twofold thing," the coach said. "First, the fans deserve to hear it, but I also want them to keep listening to hear about the dog stuff, too."

There's no telling what humane agents might find on an abandonment call. In searching for two dogs, Anthony Rothman and Kerry Manion found a 4-foot-long monitor lizard. (Courtesy of Anthony Rothman)

'Our calling until we drop'

Despite their recent form, Tortorella has helped transform the Blue Jackets from a struggling franchise into a perennial playoff contender. To many Columbus sports fans, it represents his most meaningful rescue.

But his desire to have an impact on the lives of endangered animals and his work with a "rock star" like Rothman will endure long after the 60-year-old coach steps from behind the bench for the last time.

"I've told you before, I would rather be with animals than people," the coach said. "When I'm told to stop coaching and I'm gone, we're going to double up on animal welfare. That is going to be our calling until we drop."

Tortorella isn't sure where the family will live after he retires from coaching, but he plans to remain close to animal advocates in central Ohio.

Last June, former Gov. John Kasich signed landmark anti-puppy-mill legislation that implemented major reform designed to improve the lives of breeding dogs in Ohio.

Tortorella and Rothman used the "Hockey and Hounds" platform to campaign for the bill and encourage listeners to sign petitions. They continually update fans on the need to keep pets indoors during cold weather and urge them to adopt dogs from an overcrowded Ross County shelter that's been storing some animals outside.

“Hockey and Hounds” listeners have responded. A local automotive shop donated four new tires for a Columbus Humane rescue vehicle that had been rolling along on bald ones. The show also produced volunteers to assist “Save Ohio Pets,” a group that goes into low-income areas and provides free vet care and spay/neuter for pets of people on government assistance.

“Stuff like that makes this the most fulfilling thing I’ve done in 25 years of broadcasting in Columbus,” Rothman said.

It’s not uncommon for UPS and FedEx drivers making deliveries to the Tortorellas to notify them of neglected animals they see on their routes.

The coach lauds the tireless effort of Rothman and other humane agents that investigate such cases.

“Christine saw a pregnant dog outside by itself and told Anthony,” the coach said. “He and other agents went out there immediately and checked on the dog. We are connected for life with Anthony no matter where he goes or I go.”

Recently, Rothman and Columbus Humane agent Kerry Manion answered an abandonment call for two mastiffs when they made a surprising discovery. As they searched the house, they noticed a pair of empty aquariums with heat lamps above them.

They opened a closet door and found a 4-foot-long monitor lizard that weighed 20 pounds.

“They’re the ones with forked tongues,” Rothman said. “When they breathe, it sounds like a blowtorch or a gas-leak sound.”

Rothman sent a picture of the lizard to Tortorella with the message: “Do you want to find a home for this?”

Columbus Humane placed the lizard with Jimmy’s Reptiles and Exotic Rescue.

Tortorella treasures such stories.

“Both of us would rather talk animals than hockey,” Tortorella said. “But at the end of the day, we know we have to talk a little hockey.”

[Victory puts needed charge in Blue Jackets' playoff hopes](#)

By Michael Arace, Columbus Dispatch – March 9, 2019

The Blue Jackets beat the Pittsburgh Penguins. There, it has been written in your lifetime.

OK, that's a bit hyperbolic — but, golly, it has been a long time. The last time the Jackets posted a regular-season victory over the Penguins was Feb. 17, 2017. The last regular-season game the Jackets won in regulation against the Penguins was on Dec. 17, 2016. Remember that 7-1 romp just before Christmas?

The streaks ended Saturday night in Nationwide Arena, where the Jackets drew away to a 4-1 victory before an electrified, sellout crowd. Goaltender Sergei Bobrovsky played like he doesn't need a sports psychologist.

Everyone knows about Bobrovsky's playoff problems. They started with the Penguins in 2014. They continued with the Penguins in 2017.

On Saturday night, Bob outdueled Matt Murray — one of the hottest goalies in the league over the past three months. He can say anything he wants about his process and his focus, but this game had to ease a particular pain buried deep in his hippocampus.

"Statistics live in the past," Bobrovsky said. "You go out there and you create history."

Yes, he was feeling it.

Cam Atkinson had two goals, one unassisted and short-handed, the other an empty-netter. Two of the new guys — Matt Duchene and Ryan Dzingel — neatly set up the killer goal by Oliver Bjorkstrand. It put the Jackets up by two late in the third period and allowed the home fans, if not the usual contingent of Penguins fans on hand, to breathe. And to roar.

The Jackets needed this for so many reasons. They are two games over .500 (and are maintaining a negative goal differential) at home this season. They are a game over .500 in this calendar year. They are 3-4 since the trade deadline, when they made deals that were supposed to jolt them with offense and deepen their defense.

It has been depressing to the hard-core fans who thought the Jackets were a playoff lock before the deadline — and were stoked when general manager Jarmo Kekalainen went "all in" at the deadline. They've been filling Nationwide, hankering for some home cooking.

They finally got a taste, against the hated Penguins.

"I have so many things to worry about, I can't get worried about the crowd," Jackets coach John Tortorella said. "But I thought they were a big part of it. I thought they really gave us some juice. ...

"You're damn right. I think we've had a lot of situations where the crowd's there and we've laid a lot of eggs this season. I'm glad. I think they helped us and I hope we returned it the right way for them. Because it's a long time coming where we've had opportunities like this a number of times this year and we basically, uh, didn't get the job done. I have other words for it, but I'll leave it at that."

The playoff race is so tight among the teams fighting for a place among the top three in the Metropolitan Division, and for the two wild-card spots in the Eastern Conference, that the Jackets have just as good a shot as their closest competitors. Beating the Penguins, at home, injected some more hope.

Are the Carolina Hurricanes better than the Jackets? Are the Montreal Canadiens, who had a tenuous hold on the No. 2 wild card heading into the weekend?

If the Jackets have been mediocre for quite a spell here, it's not out of the realm of possibility that they could be out-mediocred by the Canes, Canadiens and maybe even the Islanders. In fact, it's not a bad bet. The odds improved Saturday night.

Who knows? Maybe the Jackets get hot. They are certainly due.

Settling in takes time for Matt Duchene, Ryan Dzingel

By Brian Hedger, Columbus Dispatch – March 9, 2019

It has been two weeks since the Blue Jackets made a splash with trades to get Matt Duchene and Ryan Dzingel from the Ottawa Senators.

It hasn't been an easy transition for either, including a choppy flight from Ottawa that included a white-knuckle landing in Buffalo, New York, to clear customs. It's been turbulent in other ways as the former Senators assimilate to life with the Blue Jackets.

"You think it would be easy," said Dzingel, who played for Ohio State. "You have it set up (in your mind) that you're going to get traded and you know a couple weeks in advance, but it's not (easy). It's a new city, living in a hotel, you have family trying to get down to see you. Everything's weird."

He means literally everything — from a new system to new roles and new teammates to living out of a hotel.

"You're trying to get all your stuff out of your old place (in Ottawa), wearing the same socks every day ... not really, but it's a little bit different lifestyle," Dzingel said. "You just have to get used to it."

It's the first trade for Dzingel, 26, who is playing his fourth NHL season. Everything about the process is new. Duchene, 28, experienced life after a trade last season, when the Colorado Avalanche dealt him to Ottawa on Nov. 5, 2017.

"Every team has different styles and systems, but at the end of the day, hockey's hockey," Duchene said. "For me last year, when I got traded to Ottawa, it took a little while for my teammates to get acquainted with me and vice-versa. It's coming every game (here)."

Time is the issue. The Blue Jackets have just 14 games left after playing the Pittsburgh Penguins on Saturday night, and they're locked in a tight race for a playoff spot. Duchene went into the game with only three points in seven games as a Blue Jacket (one goal, two assists), and Dzingel had two assists in six games.

"I'm getting there," Duchene said, when asked if he's feeling more comfortable. "Once pucks start to go in for me and my linemates it'll feel even better, but sometimes you've got to work through that. It's kind of the first little slump I've gone through this year, but I've been through it before."

Dzingel is also feeling more at ease.

"The first couple games were weird," he said. "At first, I came in here just trying not to step on anyone's toes and make sure everyone's OK, but you've got to put the pedal down and play your game, too. It's definitely been a learning lesson for me in my first trade."

Upon further review

Blue Jackets coach John Tortorella didn't challenge the Penguins' second goal for potential offside Thursday at PPG Paints Arena because neither he nor video coach Dan Singleton could find the puck in midair as it crossed the blue line.

Two days after the Jackets' 3-0 loss, he had a more definitive take.

"I thought (Penguins goalie Matt Murray) played very well at certain times in the game, as (Joonas Korpisalo) did with us," he said, before addressing the goal by Pittsburgh's Nick Bjugstad. "The second goal's offside, too."

Bob's back

After getting an unexpected night off Thursday in Pittsburgh, Sergei Bobrovsky returned to the Jackets' net Saturday. Korpisalo handled the backup role and Keith Kinkaid was a healthy scratch.

Quotable

"We're playing Pittsburgh tonight and you guys (media) can talk about the record. It doesn't matter what the record was before. We never talk about it." — Tortorella on the Penguins' eight-game winning streak against the Jackets before the game Saturday.

[Blue Jackets 4, Penguins 1 | Sweet success for Jackets](#)

By Brian Hedger, Columbus Dispatch – March 9, 2019

They'd had enough of it.

Oh, sure, the Blue Jackets clung to their claim that an eight-game losing streak against the Pittsburgh Penguins didn't mean anything to them, but their actions betrayed their words Saturday night at Nationwide Arena.

The Jackets, who ended the skid with a 4-1 victory, put everything they had into their final crack at the Penguins this season — outhitting them 22-13, outshooting them 33-29 and finally outscoring them for the first time since Feb. 17, 2017.

“Statistics live in the past, you know?” said Blue Jackets goaltender Sergei Bobrovsky, who made some great stops among his 28 saves to overcome a personal struggle against the Penguins. “So, you go out there and you create the history, actually. That's it.”

This time, the Blue Jackets (38-27-3) created some happier history, for themselves and their fans nestled amongst Penguins fans inside the sold-out arena.

They gave the local backers something to crow about, for once, moving back into the second wild card in the Eastern Conference with an impressive effort from start to finish.

The Jackets took it to the Penguins and didn't let up until the final horn, getting two goals from Cam Atkinson and one each from Boone Jenner and Oliver Bjorkstrand.

Bobrovsky, who was healthy scratch Thursday in the Penguins' 3-0 victory at PPG Paints Arena, was a major factor, helping the Jackets go 3 of 3 killing penalties and allowing just one goal, by Zach Aston-Reese 6:39 into the second period.

His teammates, meanwhile, played like the team most assumed they could be after adding four players before the Feb. 25 trade deadline. The Jackets were aggressive and physical, making assertive reads all game.

They helped Bobrovsky with some heady plays in front of their net and made life difficult for Penguins goaltender Matt Murray (29 saves), who made three fantastic stops against Jenner in the first (lunging stick save), Markus Nutivaara in the second (desperate blocker stop) and Josh Anderson in the third (sprawling right pad denial).

Jenner got one past him 2:31 into the game, though, 11 seconds after getting out of the penalty box, taking a pass from Anderson and burying a wrist shot past Murray for his 12th goal and Anderson's 100th career point.

It was the start of an exciting period, which had a mix of pushing, shoving, hard hitting and scoring chances — almost all in favor of the Blue Jackets. A Penguins power play in the second led to Atkinson's first goal, and he scored the second one into an empty net to seal it, 2:12 after Bjorkstrand's goal off a great pass from Ryan Dzingel.

“We play like that, we’re a dangerous team and it can’t be a one and done,” said Atkinson, who set a career-highs with his fourth short-handed goal and 38th overall. “It’s exciting. Our fans are amazing, especially when we play the right way. And we owed it to them, especially against Pittsburgh.”

[How a Saturday morning adjustment paid big dividends in Blue Jackets' streak-busting win](#)

By Tom Reed, The Athletic – March 9, 2019

COLUMBUS — Streaking into the attacking zone, Ryan Dzingel accepted a pass in the high slot from Matt Duchene and resisted his first impulse.

The Blue Jackets winger wanted to shoot the puck. Load up the musket with 3:02 remaining in a one-goal game and fire it from the top of the circles.

Many fans in the sellout crowd expected a shot. So did Zach Trotman — the only Penguins defender between Dzingel and goaltender Matt Murray.

Hockey is an endless series of split-second decisions. The Blue Jackets winger had to make a big one at winning time. In that instant, Dzingel remembered a point of emphasis from Saturday morning's meeting with John Tortorella and the coaching staff.

The subject was the Penguins' penchant for blocking shots. They had blocked 24 on Thursday in Pittsburgh's 3-0 win against the Blue Jackets at PPG Paints Arena.

"I had that in the back of my head, and luckily it worked out," Dzingel said.

The winger froze the Penguins defenseman, who had started to crouch down, before stepping around him and feathering the puck to a wide-open Oliver Bjorkstrand, parked a few feet in front of the right post. Murray had to respect Dzingel's prime shooting position and was helpless to defend Bjorkstrand's tap-in goal.

A nervy one-goal lead was replaced by a 3-1 advantage en route to a vital 4-1 victory in front of 19,146 fans. The win thrust the Blue Jackets back into a playoff spot and snapped an eight-game losing skid to the Penguins.

"That's a really good play by Zinger at the end to (set up) a pretty important goal for us," Tortorella said.

Adjustments. Sports fans are inundated with the word during the broadcasts of sporting events. New England Patriots coach Bill Belichick is considered the master of halftime adjustments in football. Steve Kerr makes terrific tweaks for his dynastic Golden State Warriors in basketball.

They happen in hockey, too, but given the speed and free-flowing nature of the sport, they are sometimes more difficult to execute. There just aren't many set plays other than faceoffs.

But when the Blue Jackets arrived for morning skate, Tortorella addressed the bevy of blocked shots from Thursday's matchup. The Penguins rank eighth in the NHL in blocks, averaging 15.25 per game. The selfless, painful sacrifice served them well in their recent back-to-back Stanley Cup triumphs.

Blue Jackets fans should recall how effective Pittsburgh was early in the 2017 opening-round series when so many potential scoring chances caromed off Penguins' shin pads and body parts.

“They always have layers,” Tortorella said. “I know the coach over there. He’s always going to have layers blocking shots.”

Penguins coach Mike Sullivan was a longtime Tortorella assistant. With the Rangers, they turned shot-blocking into a black-and-blue art form in the 2012 playoffs. Poor Dan Girardi probably still has bruises from the second-round series against the Capitals seven years ago.

Coaches often use video clips to illustrate their points in meetings. That was unnecessary Saturday morning. The Blue Jackets understood what Tortorella was saying without visuals.

Comprehending it in a meeting is one thing. Executing it on the ice in the heat of a playoff race is entirely different.

But on multiple occasions Saturday night, the Blue Jackets demonstrated restraint in key moments. They held onto pucks for an extra second as Penguins dropped to the ice anticipating shots. Sometimes, Columbus players changed the angle on shots. Sometimes, they moved laterally and either shot or passed the puck to an open teammate.

“They are a good team at blocking shots,” said Cam Atkinson, who scored a pair of goals. “You make a fake and walk around, and it’s amazing what it opens up.”

In the second period, Atkinson was in the high slot and thought about shooting. Instead, he drifted to his right as Evgeni Malkin plopped to the ice. Atkinson whipped the puck to Pierre-Luc Dubois, who fed it to Markus Nutivaara cutting to the net.

Murray made a spectacular stop to rob the Finnish defenseman.

In the third period, a similar fake led to a power play as Penguins winger Jake Guentzel was boxed for interference.

“I thought we did a better job (of holding onto pucks),” Tortorella said, on a night Pittsburgh finished with 10 blocks.

The biggest payoff came on the Bjorkstrand clincher.

Nutivaara did a marvelous job keeping the puck in the zone at the left point after Trotman attempted to clear it along the wall. The puck popped in the air and Duchene, who arguably played his best game with the Blue Jackets, gloved it to the ice and spotted Dzingel barreling into the zone.

“I was going to shoot right away and (Trotman) went down to block it,” Dzingel said. “I’ve been getting blocked a lot so I just tried to walk around him.”

On Thursday, Trotman took a puck to the face and barely missed a shift while recovering. Two nights later, the Penguins defenseman got his ankles broken on Dzingel’s fake. Trotman stumbled and fell.

In the NBA, such a clip goes viral.

Once past the fallen Trotman, Dzingel still had a decision to make. Shoot the puck at Murray, who made a handful of tremendous saves, or pass it to Bjorkstrand. If the pass had failed to connect, the sound of a groaning, second-guessing crowd would have been louder than a cannon blast.

But the feed was true and the Danish winger tapped it home for his 14th goal of the season to complete a perfect play.

“That pretty much ended it,” Duchene said. “It was nice to get that one before (the Penguins) pulled their goalie and not have to white knuckle it to the end. It was a great play by Zing when he found Bjorky backdoor.”

It was a play that started with a great pinch from Nutivaara. It was a finishing move that started with a productive Saturday morning meeting.

[With so much at stake, Blue Jackets exact a measure of revenge vs. Pens](#)

By Aaron Portzline, The Athletic – March 9, 2019

COLUMBUS, Ohio — The phrase “must-win game” gets thrown around like parade candy this time of year. There’s less than a month remaining in the 2018-19 regular season, and the NHL standings change dramatically from one day to the next. Every win a party, every loss a funeral.

Saturday’s game against Pittsburgh was truly not a must-win game for the Blue Jackets, but it started to have a similar feel when you considered all that was at stake.

The Blue Jackets hadn’t played well for a couple of weeks. GM Jarmo Kekalainen added significant players at the NHL trade deadline, but it almost seemed as if the team’s identity and confidence — not just its draft picks — were sent packing.

A win over the Penguins was important because the Blue Jackets were suddenly looking up to see the two wild-card teams in the Eastern Conference. But it also mattered because the Blue Jackets hadn’t beaten Pittsburgh in more than two years.

The Blue Jackets finally brought it all together — their energy level, forechecking, strong goaltending and offensive confidence. Before 19,147, the largest crowd in Nationwide Arena this season, the Blue Jackets beat the Penguins 4-1.

“We’ve been building toward this,” Blue Jackets center Matt Duchene said. “We knew we needed to win this one. This was an absolute must-win, no doubt about it.

“(Beating Pittsburgh) is a little hurdle we had to get over. I felt like both games (including Tuesday’s 3-0 loss) we could have won against them. Tonight I felt like we were the better team from start to finish, and when we needed Bob (goaltender Sergei Bobrovsky) he was there and played great. Hopefully, something like this kickstarts us.”

So ended an eight-game losing streak by the Blue Jackets against the Penguins, one that dated to Feb. 17, 2017.

Boone Jenner scored the all-important first goal, Cam Atkinson had two goals (short-handed and empty-net) and Oliver Bjorkstrand scored a much-needed insurance goal late in the third.

But it was Bobrovsky, whose struggles have mirrored (caused?) his club’s struggles against Pittsburgh in recent seasons, who was the revelation. He made 28 saves and looked perfectly composed against a club that had beaten him in 10 of his last 11 outings.

“It doesn’t really matter actually what’s been in the past,” Bobrovsky said. “It doesn’t matter what the score was last time we played, stuff like that. It doesn’t really matter.

“Statistics live in the past. You are to go out there and create the history.”

The Blue Jackets set a physical tone early in the game, nearly sparking a line brawl five minutes into the game when Pierre-Luc Dubois brushed past Pittsburgh’s Patric Hornqvist, and Hornqvist responded by trying to fight Dubois.

What followed was a telling scene for how the Blue Jackets approached this game: Artemi Panarin jumped in front of Hornqvist and gave him a series of face washes before they were separated.

“We played the right way for the first time in a little bit,” said Atkinson, who now has 38 goals. “It shows how well we can play, and we have to continue to do that.

“We were connected, forechecking hard. We had two guys in there battling, creating turnovers and hitting and playing the right way. We were in the right spots.”

Jenner took a slashing penalty only 20 seconds into the game, but the Blue Jackets killed the penalty with ease and took a 1-0 lead when Jenner stepped out of the box and into an offensive rush.

Anderson had two Penguins on him as he entered the attack zone, but managed to get the puck over to Jenner for a clean look on Penguins goaltender Matt Murray. Jenner beat Murray to his stick side for a 1-0 lead at 2:31.

The Jackets took a 2-0 lead on the kind of break that usually befalls the Penguins in these games. Phil Kessel, skating the puck up the ice on the power play, simply tripped over his own two skates, allowing the puck to dribble ahead of him.

Atkinson gathered it, skated past the pile of Kessel and beat Murray for a 2-0 lead only 2:17 into the second.

The Blue Jackets may be most excited about the 3-1 goal, scored by Bjorkstrand with 3:01 remaining. Not only was it a dagger for the Penguins, but it involved two of the club’s recently added players.

After a strong keep-in at the blue line by Markus Nutivaara, Matt Duchene gathered the puck on the left side half-wall and waited for options. He fed Ryan Dzingel coming through the slot, and Dzingel weaved his way around a Penguins defender to set up Bjorkstrand on the doorstep.

“We played better with the puck,” Blue Jackets coach John Tortorella said. “Made more plays.

“You can see ... still a number of guys are looking to get involved. But two new guys ... they want to be a part of this. They want to join in. That’s a big goal by that line.”

The Blue Jackets needed a win. They needed two points.

But earning a win over Pittsburgh made it feel like more than two points, even though Blue Jackets players and coaches (well, Tortorella) routinely acted as if ending the eight-game losing streak was meaningless.

Jenner: “Didn’t even think about it, not gonna lie.”

Tortorella: “It’s a mental hurdle for you guys (in the media). You guys talk about it all the time. I’m not trying to be a smartass. I really think ... I don’t think they really think about that much. I know ... you could see it growing. It’s a really good game when these two teams play in either building. I don’t think that team gets wrapped up in it either, as far as how many wins they have against us, whatever it is. When the puck is dropped, it’s two competitive teams that are developing that stuff, playing some good games against one another.”

Notebook

Bobrovsky had been 1-7-3 with an .880 save percentage and 3.89 goals-against average vs. Pittsburgh dating to April 4, 2017. Those numbers include the first-round playoff series in 2017-18.

Here's Bobrovsky: "Personally, I didn't think about how many, what's the streak, how are the statistics in the past. ... every game is a new game. I prepare myself for the one game at a time, and that's it. I didn't think about last time we played them, didn't try to watch the tape (to see) what they do. I tried to keep my mind clean and just try to compete against these guys today."

Here's Tortorella on Bobrovsky: "Bob has told me he's mentally good. He's physically good. Even if I played him in Pittsburgh, he's good. I thought he looked ... not a lot of extra movement. I don't know a hell of a lot about goaltending. But I know the goalies I've had ... and when I think they look confident. Pittsburgh's always around that net. 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. I thought he was really confident in how he played. He's set. He's set. He was a big part of it tonight."

Bobrovsky, who is now 12-8-5 all-time vs. Pittsburgh, was given a night off Thursday when the Penguins won 3-0 in Pittsburgh. Not just a night as the backup, but an off night. He sat in the press box and watched the game while Keith Kinkaid served as Joonas Korpisalo's backup.

Yes, Bobrovsky was very good. But Penguins goaltender Matt Murray, who finished with 29 saves, was exceptional. "He had some unbelievable saves," Bobrovsky said. "Like three, maybe four (unbelievable) saves." Murray robbed Jenner of a second goal by making a paddle save in front of an open net during the first period. He also went left to right so quickly in the second period that Markus Nutivaara, alone in front of the net, couldn't believe he'd somehow brushed aside the puck. Nutivaara's left hand started up in celebration before he saw the puck at his feet beside the net.

Atkinson, with 38 goals, is now tied for the third-most single-season goals in franchise history. Rick Nash had 38 in 2007-08. Nash also had 41 in 2003-04 and 40 in 2008-09.

Atkinson's first goal was short-handed, his fourth of the season and 12th of his career. Only Nash — him again — has more short-handed goals for the Blue Jackets (14).

Jenner's goal at 2:31 of the first period ended the Blue Jackets' goal drought at 126 minutes, 39 seconds. The Jackets hadn't scored since the first minute (52 seconds) of a 2-1 shootout win in New Jersey on Tuesday.

The Blue Jackets got a beastly performance from their "identity line," with Jenner, Nick Foligno and Josh Anderson setting a tone right from the start of the game. Anderson finished with seven shots on goal and seven hits to lead the way. Jenner had the 1-0 goal with assists from Anderson and Foligno.

Panarin was slashed in the first period by Pittsburgh's Zach Aston-Reese, drawing a penalty. Panarin continued to play, but he was spotted on the bench getting a numbing agent applied to his hand.

The Blue Jackets had been 3-7-1 during sold-out games in Nationwide Arena this season, or 3-10-1 if you go back through the first round of the Stanley Cup playoffs last spring. The three previous wins were vs. Toronto, Ottawa and San Jose ... not exactly on the list of most-hated opponents (yet).

Here's Tortorella, who has made clear his disappointment in this stat all season: "I don't get too wrapped up in it. I can't. I have too many other things to worry about. I can't worry about the crowd. I

thought they were a big part of it tonight. I thought they really gave us some juice. We've had situations where the crowd is there and we have laid a lot of eggs this year. I think they helped us, and I hope we returned it the right way for them. It's a long time coming where we've had opportunities like this a number of times and we (pause) didn't get the job done ... I have other words for it."

The Blue Jackets' penalty kill was perfect once again: 3 for 3, and scored a short-handed goal. When the Jackets acquired Ryan Dzingel at the trade deadline, his ability to kill penalties was mentioned as one of his strengths. So far, though, he's seen limited time on the kill — 0:00 Saturday night — as he gets acclimated to the Blue Jackets' hyper-aggressive style.

Three of Duchene's first nine games with the Blue Jackets have been against the Penguins. He's gotten a quick taste of what the rivalry is about. "Tonight was fun," he said. "There was a ton of energy in the building. In Pittsburgh, it was obviously a good crowd. Tonight I felt like our fans were outstanding for us. There's obviously a good bunch of Pittsburgh fans in the building, so it creates a rivalry in the crowd. It was fun to play out there tonight."

Penguins forward Patric Hornqvist matched a career-low with a minus-4 rating, something he'd done only once before in his 704-game career.

Analytically speaking

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

The Jackets came out strong in the first period, dipped a bit in the second, but then rebounded for another strong 20 minutes in the third to earn the win over Pittsburgh. On the whole, Columbus gained the edge in shot attempts (51.12 percent), scoring chances (51.77 percent) and high-danger attempts (56.09 percent) according to naturalstatstrick.com.

While the Jackets owned the offensive battles from a volume perspective, the Penguins had more quality looks. The expected goal total, according to Moneypuck.com, was 3.47 to 2.39 in favor of Pittsburgh. But Bobrovsky was a difference-maker. In 60 minutes of play, Bobrovsky's save percentage was 3.73 above expectations given the shots he faced. That means he saved the equivalent of 1.53 goals against.

It was a monster of a game for Atkinson. Not only did he score twice, but he led the team in shot share (66.67 percent) and scoring chances (70 percent). He also generated the best individual chances of the night. The All-Star had nine shot attempts, seven on target, and totaled 32.73 percent of the team's quality chances.

Breaking down Blue Jackets prospect Emil Bemstrom's meteoric rise

By Scott Wheeler, The Athletic – March 8, 2019

Here's the thing about prospect evaluation and scouting: It's hard. Really hard.

In some cases, talent is disguised by opportunity. Not all players are afforded leading roles on their teams — the kind of roles that encourage production and result in being selected highly at the NHL Draft. Some players are rushed to the pro level due to their athletic ability but lack the skill needed to make that jump smoothly. At the junior levels, not all 17-year-old linemates are created equal. Below the major pro levels, parity often doesn't exist. Context ought to be carefully considered as a result.

In many cases, when ice-time isn't publicly available for those levels, data-driven analysis can be complicated and challenging. A skills-based evaluation becomes necessary. But our eyes miss things. They play tricks on us.

What we're left with is an imperfect science on all fronts. The best evaluators do their best to consider all of the factors and available information and still often come up short.

In my annual fall series, "The Gifted" (here's the 2017 series and here's the 2018 series), I explore through video the variety of tools that, when mastered, allow players to dominate.

The truly elite talents (the Elias Petterssons and the Miro Heiskanens) are easy to spot for the dynamic way they manage to take over games and the variety of skills they can use to remain unpredictable. Others, players of Jordan Kyrou's skating ability or Vitaly Abramov's puck skills, can sometimes take one skill far enough and still become stars — but it's much less predictable and takes a closer evaluation.

Emil Bemstrom has become one of those players. He's the fourth-round pick from the 2017 draft who went from being an ordinary forward in the second-tier Allsvenskan to the highest scoring under-20 forward in the SHL (as well as, on the date of publication of this piece, the league's leading goal scorer with 22 goals through 44 games), and a breakout star at the world juniors, where he was named one of Sweden's top three players.

Due to that meteoric rise, I decided to make Bemstrom an honorary addition to "The Gifted" and dive deeper into what makes him tick as a player — and whether that skill is complemented by enough else to make him a true star-level prospect. This analysis is founded upon viewings of the majority of his games this season.

It starts with his shot. His one-timer, more specifically.

The vast majority of Bemstrom's goals are scored from the same spot (the left-wing faceoff circle), with one touch. He's a right shot winger who prefers to position himself on the left wing (both on the power play and at even strength).

Because he's not the biggest player in the world (he stands 5-foot-10) and he doesn't have the leverage that length provides a player whom they turn on a puck, Bemstrom (No. 72 in all clips) has to get low, drop his trailing leg, and use all of that pressure to make his one-timer as hard as it is. Look for all of that here:

It's a repeatable motion that gives the shot some kick while also allowing Bemstrom to control it. While many players struggle with hitting the net once that shot slides out from the bottom of the circle to the top, Bemstrom doesn't:

When he's not releasing it from a standstill and he's in motion, Bemstrom also does a wonderful job, when necessary, shooting from an upright by sliding back onto his heels and opening up to the pass even further:

The other thing worth picking up on with Bemstrom's one-timer, and maybe the most valuable of the bunch, is the way he gets open for it. The goals above happen predominantly because A) either Bemstrom is on the power play in that spot or B) thanks to the spacing international ice affords him. He'll continue to get those power-play looks if the right coach uses him in the right spot at the next level, but to earn those opportunities he's going to need skills that allow him to score at even strength.

For shooters, the ability to get open becomes their biggest asset at the next level as the ice gets smaller and defenders close faster.

Bemstrom's pre-shot moment is a strength too, though. He does a nice job sliding off of defenders to the backdoor off the rush:

And off of set plays:

And while it predominantly happens to one location, he's also adept at sliding into open space in the more crowded slot, rather than the circle, when the backdoor isn't available:

Watch how he's constantly in motion ahead of this goal, to prevent the defenders (who have their backs turned to him) from picking him up:

Watch how instantaneously he attacks with his crossovers to activate from the left wing when the board-side winger sends the puck down low on this power-play goal, too:

There, the goal isn't scored if Bemstrom is stationary and doesn't drive the low slot for the set play from below the goal line (a lot of shooters are too slow to react on a play like that, but Bemstrom anticipates it).

Notice all of the curls and stops and starts below, as Bemstrom tracks the play from high in the zone and, rather than staying there, goes to the far post ahead of the pass:

Bemstrom is persistent. If his play doesn't work the first time, he'll fade away from it before giving it another try:

He's also not afraid to drive into players, rather than away from them, in order to make himself available for passes:

Bemstrom is also a strong kid for his size and he has added muscle this season to push above 180 pounds. While he's not an overtly physical player, Bemstrom isn't afraid to engage in a battle before releasing to his spot:

Or to just drive the net and bump his man along the way:

Those net-front plays give him some much-needed versatility — and prevent teams from stacking a forward on him at the top of the circle in the offensive zone. Instead of all of his goals being scored back-door or from the circle, he's able to create some jam plays (the kind of plays some players his size shy away from):

The biggest issue with Bemstrom's game translating to the NHL level is that players like him need other players to get him the puck. Bemstrom is not going to drive a line or be the primary carrier on his line off the rush. And he's likely going to need to play with a passer to truly become a high-end goal scorer.

Bemstrom is not a particularly strong playmaker. Instead, he's more of an opportunistic scorer. Even his assists can be reliant on his shot:

That can work in the NHL but it requires some help and the right coach.

This isn't to say Bemstrom lacks skill outside of his shot altogether. He doesn't. There have been real flashes of some puck skill off the rush this season too:

And when he releases the puck, rather than one-touching it, Bemstrom has the ability to pick his spots and cleanly beat goalies:

That's true even from distance:

More than anything, his shot is also extremely accurate, even from awful angles:

These are real, tangible, translatable NHL tools. But you'll notice they rarely start with Bemstrom making the play. None of the above plays began with a Bemstrom entry or a Bemstrom retrieval. Someone else did that for him and he had the talent to finish it off.

Does this mean Bemstrom won't be a star? Not necessarily. But it will likely limit his ceiling.

Because while he shows the occasional flash of cross-ice vision ...

... those plays tend to be fleeting.

Instead, the bulk of Bemstrom's goals and shots (I tracked more than four dozen shot attempts for this piece), come from the same location. Over time, opposing forwards and defenders (watch for how not one but two close on him below) learn to anticipate and front the shot:

And so do goalies. Watch the way the goalie Malmo cheats and pushes out to Bemstrom before the shot is even released here:

There are similar flashes as a carrier. Bemstrom has the speed needed to make plays off the rush:

But his problem is one of creativity. Because when he does activate and use the speed to create an entry, his default instinct is to throw it on net, rather than look for a teammate:

The end result is a player who plays a north-south game a little too much, at the expense of east-west options:

And when Bemstrom does pick up assists, it often means they are byproducts of an attempt to score, rather than a heads up play to a linemate. In fact, three of Bemstrom's 11 assists this season look exactly like this:

Yes, that's Bemstrom getting a stick on a backdoor chance and a teammate scoring off of it.

His one layer is a darn good one. An elite one. It will translate. There are smaller translatable layers too. Bemstrom's size, for example, isn't a major concern. As highlighted above, he competes, sometimes even for great assists off of a won battle one-on-two:

That skill set will allow him to battle with NHL-level competition. And when he makes a little play off of it, we know that he has the headspace to release from that battle and slide into open space.

When he does, he scores a lot of goals. And if teams defend that shot threat well, he can burn them in other ways:

Bemstrom's biggest challenge, on his way to the NHL, will likely be to execute on those less-developed layers more consistently.

The one-timer (and the ability to get into space to receive it) will carry him far. He's got a good thing going with the one-timer, and his ability to score on his off wing. Despite being a right-handed shot, here's a map of each of the goal locations tracked in this piece:

That skill will make him a terror on a power play at any level. What he has done this season is remarkable. It is tied for the sixth-best goal scoring season by an under-20 SHL player ever (behind names like Nilsson, Pettersson, Forsberg and Naslund). He will inevitably score goals. Probably a lot of them.

But everything else (from linemates to his coach to the way he can develop some other evident tools) will determine whether he becomes a star.

[The Athletic / Faceoff tinkering won't significantly increase offence. Getting rid of them would](#)

By Tyler Dellow, The Athletic - Mar 8, 2019

An interesting idea percolated out of the GM meetings in Florida this week. I first saw it on Twitter from Friend of The Athletic Frank Seravalli at TSN, although it was subsequently discussed on Sportsnet during their broadcast on Wednesday.

Now, I am anti-faceoff. If it was up to me, the only time we'd have faceoffs would be at centre ice. Other than that, I'd just give the puck to the team closest to the opposition goal. My reasoning for this is pretty straightforward: hockey's at its most fun when it's littered with scoring chances and the team closer to the opposition net is more likely to create a scoring chance. As fascinating as the drama of a linesman trying to settle down two centremen who are doing everything possible to cheat is, I'd be willing to trade it in for more scoring chances. Call me crazy.

The funny thing about this is that I think the NHL's hockey operations kind of agrees with me. They're constrained by faceoffs being a part of the game historically but they've already taken a step to try and make it more likely that the team closer to the attacking zone wins the faceoff by forcing the other player to put his stick down first. This would be another step toward what I'd like: a de facto 100 percent faceoff rate for the attacking team. (It would be nice if we could skip past this only applying for the first faceoff after a penalty is called but, one supposes, baby steps.)

How much of a difference would this rule change make? Well, let's start by identifying the difference in outcomes between a faceoff win and loss. As I've mentioned before, I slice the game into shifts at the team level based on the location and result of the preceding faceoff, with certain events triggering a transfer to what I call on-the-fly play. The difference between winning and losing an offensive zone faceoff at 5-on-4 is immense.

Through games played on Tuesday, the average shift starting with an OZW (offensive zone win – if you see anyone asking what an OZW is in the comments, please throw buns at the person asking for failure to read closely) lasted 40 seconds. An OZL (offensive zone lo ... come on – do I really have to define this given the context) shift lasted 43 seconds on average. When you think about it, that makes sense: an OZW shift is much more likely to result in a really short shift after a puck is fired at a goalie who freezes it than an OZL shift, where pucks are generally cleared right away.

In terms of process, unsurprisingly, shots are attempted and put on goal by the team on the power play at a much higher rate when they win the faceoff than when they lose it. When the team on the power play wins an offensive zone faceoff, they attempt 128.6 shots per 60 seconds with 69.8 of those becoming shots on goal. If they lose the faceoff, those numbers fall to 82.4 and 45, respectively. Unsurprisingly, teams score more when they win the offensive zone faceoff at the start of a shift too: 9.7 GF/60 vs. 5.5 GF/60. There's a shooting percentage bulge in there this year but it's not remotely surprising that more shots leads to more goals.

So how big might this impact be? Well, the change as reported by Seravalli would apply only to the first faceoff on a power play. I'm focused on 5-on-4 here, so let's look at how many 5-on-4 faceoffs might be

impacted. In order to figure this out, I looked for all 5-on-4 offensive zone faceoffs this year in which the preceding second of play was not 5-on-4 hockey. That gave me a group of 5,208 faceoffs so far this year. I have 2,643 of them on the right side of the ice and 2,565 on the left side. Unsurprisingly to me, as a league, teams have done better on the left side of the ice. There are more competent left-handed faceoff guys than right-handed faceoff guys and players are being selected for power play units primarily on the basis of skills other than winning faceoffs – coaches want guys out there who can make plays after the faceoff is won.

As I've discussed here before, there are significant differences between taking faceoffs on the right and left, depending on what hand you are. I won't revisit that discussion – there's a lot of it out there – but let's take a look at how much better teams have been at winning faceoffs on the left as compared to the right side of the ice.

It's a little bit funny that both Seravalli and the Sportsnet Wednesday Night Hockey gang highlighted the possibility of Washington doing this to set up Ovechkin in his office. The Capitals are actually struggling to win faceoffs on the right side of the ice this year. When you think about it for a minute it makes sense – Ovechkin's not taking the draw. John Carlson's not taking the draw. TJ Oshie is having a bad year. That leaves a couple of left-handed shots. They don't have a lot of good options.

Looking at this, you can see that most teams tend to be around the mean, with a few teams that really struggle on one side or the other. Edmonton having the biggest differential isn't surprising. The Oilers were running with a five left-shot power play for a while this year and it didn't really feature anyone who was great at faceoffs, let alone great at winning them on his weak side. Boston's presence is a little more surprising but Patrice Bergeron has missed some games this year and there's a bit of an additional issue that we're going to encounter when we contemplate how much of an impact this rule change might have – sample size. Boston's difference in left vs. right faceoffs is being driven by an absurd 61-20 record on the left dot for the first faceoff of a 5-on-4 situation. They're 40-39 on the right side, which isn't actually that bad.

For the sake of completeness (and because I know people will ask if I don't provide the information), here are the numbers on the right and left dots on faceoffs to start a power play for the league.

It's one thing if you've got a big differential on one side because you've done spectacularly well, like Boston; another if it's because you've done poorly, like Edmonton and Washington on the right side.

The critical question is this: how many extra faceoff wins might a change like this produce? Let's do some back of the envelope math. Assume that the numbers teams have achieved this year represent their true talent and that every team in the NHL would choose to take faceoffs exclusively on their strongest side to start the power play, if given that opportunity. My math – with some favourable assumptions – suggests that we'd have seen an extra 188 faceoff wins to start power plays so far this year. Prorating that to a full season, we're talking about an extra 232 offensive zone faceoff wins to start a power play.

To put a goal value on that, I'm going to use the numbers just from power play opening faceoffs. They're very similar to the numbers discussed above for offensive zone faceoffs but the shifts last slightly longer on average, which makes sense. My estimate comes out to something like an extra 12 goals scored. By the entire league. Over the course of a season. Some of that would be given back in an unseen fashion

because we'd get more power-play goals earlier in power plays, returning the game to a 5-on-5 state in which goals occur less often. It's not a game-altering change.

What if we did away entirely with faceoffs to start power plays? If you use the numbers for shifts starting with an offensive zone faceoff win only, you end up with an extra 185 goals scored when you prorate it out. In other words, the real gains aren't going to be found in making marginal changes to how faceoffs are conducted that add a few points to the attacking team's likelihood of winning a faceoff; the real changes will come from just giving the attacking team the puck and letting them get after it.

You can imagine what a change we'd see if we got rid of all offensive zone faceoffs and just gave the puck to the attacking team. You can see the same tendency in 5-on-5 hockey, although it's not as extreme. If a team wins an offensive zone faceoff at 5-on-5, there is nearly 30 percent more offence that occurs on the shift than there is if they lose it.

Is this too drastic a change for hockey? I don't think so. To me, there are things that the general managers, as custodians of the NHL game, have to protect. They have to protect the essential nature of the game, the things that make NHL hockey NHL hockey. Some things are absolutely central to that. I can't imagine endorsing, say, the elimination of ice from the game and turning NHL hockey into floor hockey. Fighting is an example of something that a lot of people argued for a long time was central to the game and then, as decisions by teams all but eliminated it, we started to see a shift toward a conclusion that it's not really central to the sport.

We've seen changes like this in other sports, so it's not really something that can't be done. Soccer banned goalkeepers from picking up the ball when it's passed back to them by a teammate. The NBA added the three-point line and then experimented with different distances for it. Major League Baseball added the designated hitter and lowered the mounds. Sports are constantly evolving – the choice that custodians of the game have is how to respond to those changes and how to keep the games exciting while simultaneously preserving the essence of the sport.

Faceoffs, to me, are a lot more like fighting than they are ice. Nobody gets out of their seat for a faceoff win. They aren't central to what hockey or the NHL are selling. And while, yes, it would be devaluing a skill that some people have spent years perfecting, it would simultaneously be increasing the value that other skills – defending and creating offence – provide. Those skills, particularly the latter, are a lot more fun to watch. While I wouldn't expect it to happen for a long time, the fact that the managers are prepared to tinker with faceoffs suggests to me that there might be a day where they simply do away with them altogether.

[Sportsnet.ca / Truth By Numbers: Is Columbus good enough to make the playoffs?](#)

By Andrew Berkshire, Sportsnet - March 8, 2019, 11:44 AM

With the playoff races in full swing, this week Andrew Berkshire looks at how important Brendan Gallagher's rise as a goal scorer has been to Montreal's wild card bid.

He also looks at the Columbus Blue Jackets, who are now 2-4-0 since the trade deadline, to try and figure out what is going wrong with them and how they're post-season hopes stack up to the others in the race.

Those topics, and more, in this week's Truth By Numbers column.

SPOTLIGHT PERFORMANCE

Now that he's accomplished the feat twice in a row, we can officially call Brendan Gallagher a 30-goal scorer in the NHL. That's something I've been expecting of him all the way back to his junior and AHL days because his shot rate was so obscene, I figured based on where he shoots from eventually the volume was going to overtake a poor shooting percentage and produce results.

After breaking his right hand twice in two years, first blocking a shot by Johnny Boychuk and then trying to provide a screen on a Shea Weber blast, Gallagher's utility as a top line player was highly questionable.

However, even when he posted a career-low shooting percentage of 5.3 while struggling to get his hand back to full health the underlying numbers proved that his impact on the Canadiens was among the best in the NHL for his position. Gallagher ranked as the ninth, 12th, and 11th best right winger in the NHL the past three years when I broke everything down.

For a large portion of his career, Gallagher rode shotgun with another one of the best play-driving wingers in the game in Max Pacioretty. But unlike other players who saw huge boosts alongside Pacioretty, Gallagher never saw much of a drop off when he was away from him – the two were just even better together. With Pacioretty now a Golden Knight, Gallagher has spent most of the season playing tough matchup minutes with Phillip Danault and one of the players Pacioretty was traded for, Tomas Tatar.

Danault isn't considered a high-end offensive centre and Tatar was coming off a down season, but put them both with Gallagher and what happens? They've formed a dynamite line that's led to career-best seasons for all three, even though the Canadiens' power play has been terrible, because they've been absurdly good at 5-on-5, led by Gallagher's huge breakout in shooting.

I included league ranks here in order to account for the NHL's growing number of scoring chances overall. You can see clearly that after Gallagher's hand was broken in 2015-16 he started to shoot more often from the high slot, dropping from more high danger chances than anyone in the league down to the 66th-most. Since then he's had two seasons where he's climbed up the rankings in high danger chances.

The thing is, moving out of the inner slot gave Gallagher more opportunity to contribute off the cycle with one-timers, and more room to get his shot off. As it turns out, he's actually quite efficient at scoring from further out as well. And though his high danger chances are increasing to career-high levels, just 47.5 per cent of his scoring chances on net are from the inner slot now. That's the lowest mark of his career and it's because he's absolutely spamming goalies with shots from the high slot.

Adding a new shooting option to his repertoire has made Gallagher a much better goal scorer, and he's proved that two brutal injuries to the same hand haven't hurt his ability to be a high impact player.

Being forced out of his comfort zone allowed Gallagher to discover that he's more than just a net-front goal scorer, and the Canadiens have benefitted.

Ryan Dixon and Rory Boylen go deep on pucks with a mix of facts and fun, leaning on a varied group of hockey voices to give their take on the country's most beloved game.

THE QUESTION

The Columbus Blue Jackets have only been okay recently, going 4-6-0 in their past 10, and are on outside looking in at playoffs. They bought big at the deadline and are poised to lose at least Artemi Panarin and Sergei Bobrovsky in the off-season, so Steve Dangle asks:

"Should we expect Columbus to make the playoffs? They loaded up, but is the team playing well enough to force someone else out?"

I'm on record saying that I like Columbus' decision to keep Panarin and Bobrovsky and go for it this year, but I'm a little dubious on the heavy buying they did at the deadline. I like Matt Duchene and Ryan Dzingel, but adding them at a high cost puts even more pressure on the team for the rest of the season.

The Blue Jackets are in a tight race with the Montreal Canadiens, Carolina Hurricanes and Pittsburgh Penguins for one of the two wild card spots in the East, or even the third place spot in the Metropolitan Division. Which of these teams has an advantage over the final stretch of the season?

Let's look at how they've all been playing since the New Year.

Looking at this field of teams, the Canadiens are the only one that remains positive by all four measures. The Penguins are what they've been for the past three seasons, only okay in the more general metrics, but brilliant at controlling the most dangerous plays on the ice. The Hurricanes seem to be controlling volume better than quality, and the same goes for the Blue Jackets, except their high-quality plays are slightly further in the negatives than Carolina.

Three of these teams can squeeze in, so the Blue Jackets only need to be better than one of them, but getting shutout 3-0 by the Penguins Thursday night isn't a good sign. And actually, looking at the play of these four teams if I had to guess which one ends up on the outside, it'd be Columbus.

That would be a heart breaker for the franchise, but the Canadiens look strong, the Hurricanes are red hot, and I just wouldn't bet against the Penguins with Sidney Crosby kicking things up a notch.

BUY OR SELL

- He's not really talked about for his offence, but my eyebrow raised a bit when I noticed Bo Horvat has the sixth-most scoring chances on net in the NHL this season with 143. He's probably getting more

power play time than he would on most teams, but he's getting to the right spots. Strangely, his shooting percentage this year is lower than his career average, but the shot volume has lifted him to a career high in goals anyway.

- I mentioned Tomas Tatar having a career year earlier. He's one of only 23 regulars in the NHL this season with a high danger scoring chance differential over 60 per cent, and he has the second-best Corsi at 59.4 per cent, behind only Erik Karlsson and a hair ahead of linemate Brendan Gallagher. The Habs have to be pretty happy he's got another two years left on his current deal, because a \$4.8 million cap hit looks like a steal right now.
- Nazem Kadri's streak of 30-goal seasons will end at two, but he has quietly had a fantastic season. No Leafs forward has a better high danger scoring chance differential and only Andreas Johnsson and Kasper Kapanen have a better Corsi.
- Losing Robin Lehner to injury is going to hurt the Islanders. For the past three months, he's second behind only Andrei Vasilevskiy in save percentage at .934, and the other option the Isles have is all the way down at... the sixth-best save percentage in the league over that time. Thomas Greiss has a .930 save percentage in the same period... Never mind.

[Sportsnet.ca / NHL, NHLPA have continued to meet to find solution to escrow issue](#)

By Staff, Sportsnet – March 9, 2019

Though focus has now shifted to the post-season on the ice, off it representatives from the league and the Players' Association have met privately to try to find a solution to an issue that will always be a point of contention in collective bargaining agreement discussions: Escrow.

"The NHL and the NHLPA have continued to meet quietly in small groups, and I understand that they are really trying to grind to see if they can try to find a solution for the escrow issue," said Sportsnet's Elliott Friedman during the 'Headlines' segment of Hockey Night in Canada Saturday. "I think everybody realizes that's the No. 1 thing that has to get worked on here and other things can fall into place. I understand they are having serious discussions at ways to handle this."

Just as a quick reminder, escrow is, in essence when applied to the NHL, a portion of a player's salary that gets deducted from each paycheck and then put into a fund that can't be touched until the end of the season, when the league knows what its revenue for the year was and can then calculate how much escrow can be handed out to the players and how much teams get.

This is an extremely contentious issue for the players as it can feel like an additional league tax on them, as there have been cases where that money that gets withheld actually ends up in lost salary.

This current escrow system was put in place to create a 50-50 split in hockey-related revenue between the teams and the players, but also, sometimes, at the cost of lost salary for the players.

The current CBA isn't scheduled to expire until after the 2020-21 season, but both the NHL (Sept. 1) and NHLPA (Sept. 19) can choose to opt out of it this year, meaning getting ahead on negotiations so as to avoid a potential lockout is still very important business.

[Sportsnet.ca / Stanley Cup Playoff Push: Columbus turns back to Bobrovsky for huge game](#)

By Rory Boylen, Sportsnet – March 9, 2019

It's a 12-game slate Saturday chock full of implications that will shape the playoff picture over the next week.

Among the East's top storylines are Columbus turning back to Sergei Bobrovsky for the biggest game of their season, Carolina looking to recover from a terrible loss Friday, and Boston hoping to extend their point streak to 19 games.

In the West, we're keeping an eye on Arizona and, to a lesser extent, Edmonton as they cling to playoff hopes over these last stages of the regular season, while a big injury to another bubble team has put them in a precarious position.

Here is your playoff outlook heading into Hockey Night in Canada Saturday:

Ryan Dixon and Rory Boylen go deep on pucks with a mix of facts and fun, leaning on a varied group of hockey voices to give their take on the country's most beloved game.

EASTERN CONFERENCE

If the regular season ended today...

(A1) Tampa Bay vs. (WC2) Montreal

(A2) Boston vs. (A3) Toronto

(M1) Washington vs. (WC1) Carolina

(M2) NY Islanders vs. (M3) Pittsburgh

Team of interest: Carolina Hurricanes

No, not because of the storm surge — the Canes play on the road Saturday. We're interested in how they respond to their worst loss of the season Friday night. The Hurricanes were listless and, dare we say, reminiscent of the team we've come to know over the past nine playoff-less seasons. The Winnipeg Jets, who themselves were coming off a one-sided defeat to Tampa Bay, had a 3-0 lead before the first period was even half over and cruised to an 8-1 win with backup Laurent Brossoit in net. Tonight, the Hurricanes play the Central's other big hitter in Nashville. The last time they met, Carolina chased both of Nashville's goalies en route to a big win.

Here's what the Eastern Conference standings look like today:

What'd I miss? The idle Tampa Bay Lightning became the second-fastest team to clinch a playoff spot in the salary cap era, getting the 'x' in game No. 68, tying the 2008-09 San Jose Sharks. Only the 2009-10 Washington Capitals clinched faster (67). Perhaps a bad omen for the Lightning: neither of the Sharks or Caps advanced past the first round in those seasons.

Fun fact: We know the Boston Bruins are in the midst of a wild run of success, earning a point in 18-straight games — the second-longest run in team history, equaling an identical stretch accomplished last season. But in their most recent win, a 4-3 decision over Florida, the Bruins became just the 10th team in NHL history to win a game in regulation after trailing in the last minute of play.

In a rematch of Thursday's 3-0 Pens win, the Blue Jackets are just a little more desperate this time. Head coach John Tortorella made the controversial decision to start Joonas Korpisalo in the last meeting and didn't even dress Sergei Bobrovsky, who watched from the press box. The Blue Jackets still haven't beat the Penguins in a regular season game since February of 2019 and now face their chief rivals while sitting two points out of the playoffs.

Tortorella decided to turn back to Bobrovsky for Saturday's key showdown, but that choice comes with its own concerning trend. The Columbus netminder has lost 10 of his past 11 games versus the Penguins with a 3.38 GAA and .880 save percentage. Goaltending was not the problem in Thursday's loss — that continues to be the dried-up offence. The Blue Jackets have just 10 goals in six post-trade deadline games and just one primary assist between their two biggest acquisitions, Matt Duchene and Ryan Dzingel. Columbus may have two games in hand of Montreal, the team they're chasing, but they also have one of the toughest finishing schedules in the league. After Pittsburgh, Columbus plays the Islanders, Bruins (twice), Carolina and Calgary in their next five games.

WESTERN CONFERENCE

If the regular season ended today...

(P1) Calgary vs. (WC2) Minnesota

(P2) San Jose vs. (P3) Vegas

(C1) Winnipeg vs. (WC1) Dallas

(C2) Nashville vs. (C3) St. Louis

Team of interest: Arizona Coyotes

Don't look now but with a win, at home, against the lowly Los Angeles Kings Saturday Arizona would move to within one point of Minnesota for the second wild card spot, and still have a game in hand. With eight wins in their past 10 games, the Coyotes' defence and strong goaltending has helped them stick around. Darcy Kuemper, acquired in a 2018 deadline trade from Los Angeles, has been a great find — he's allowed more than three goals in a game just once in the past month. Even further, looking at opponents' points percentage the rest of the way, the Coyotes have one of the five easiest schedules remaining.

Here's what the Western Conference standings look like today:

What'd I miss: The Colorado Avalanche suffered a huge blow with the news captain Gabriel Landeskog will be out the next four-to-six weeks following a collision with Dallas' Ben Bishop Thursday night. With lack of scoring depth already a crucial flaw with the roster, they'll now be without their second-highest goal scorer (33). With this news, more of the spotlight will be on trade deadline pickup Derick Brassard, who has a goal and an assist in six games as an Av.

Fun fact: Ben Bishop is making a late push for the Vezina Trophy and is currently running with a 144:20 shutout streak. But unfortunately, unless something goes horribly wrong, we won't see him try and extend that Saturday night. On one hand it's a bit of a curious choice to start Anton Khudobin with Bishop playing so stellar and with Dallas' next game not coming until Tuesday night. But head coach Jim Montgomery has split his goalies fairly evenly, which is what's really hurting Bishop's Vezina case. And though Khudobin has been steady and strong through most of the season, he has allowed 20 goals in his past six appearances.

You could make an argument that these are the two best teams in the Central and Pacific divisions right now and that the possibility exists Saturday's game is a Western Conference final preview. And while neither of these teams will miss the playoffs, there are still post-season implications here.

The Sharks are now just one point back of the suddenly snake-bitten Calgary Flames, and since they're idle tonight, San Jose could take over the division lead with a win. St. Louis, meantime, currently has two games in hand of Nashville, which sits five points ahead of them for second place in the Central and home-ice advantage in the first round. The Blues are looking to cap off a perfect California road trip, while the Sharks are aiming to complete a perfect four-game homestand.