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[Guideposts: Is bad luck all that is affecting the Blue Jackets?](#)

By Alison Lukan, The Athletic – March 14, 2019

After a splashy trade deadline, a 4-5-0 record since probably wasn't what Blue Jackets fans — or management, for that matter — had in mind. But of late, there has been belief that the team was playing the right way and had to keep with it.

"It's part of the game, to battle through this," John Tortorella said Tuesday before his team put together a 7-4 win over Boston. "I think our game is there in a lot of areas. Obviously we need to score to win, to get results."

So was Tortorella just being optimistic, or was he on to something with his belief in the quality of the Blue Jackets' play?

Better backstops

Before Tuesday's win, through eight games, the Jackets had been outscored 14 to 24. Even after a seven-goal burst against Boston, the team still sits with a minus-3 goal differential since the trade deadline.

When this kind of performance is happening on paper, often the first place people look is goaltending. But, that's not been an area of growing weakness for the Jackets in this stretch. In fact, it is improving.

The chart below from Sean Tierney shows all the shots that Sergei Bobrovsky has faced in just under 400 minutes of play across eight games. The red shows areas from where a greater amount of shots have come.

In the table to the right, we see that Bobrovsky has allowed 22 goals on 297 shots, which is slightly higher than the number of goals he was expected to allow (19.52) based on shot quality.

On first pass, that doesn't feel like a good thing. But note the graph in the bottom right. This mini-chart tracks how Bobrovsky performed relative to expectations; the higher the line, the better.

What we see is that game over game, Bobrovsky's play is improving. He's been on an upward trajectory in terms of playing as he should against the shots he faces, and, of late he has found ways to not just meet, but exceed expectations.

In terms of the rest of the goaltending lineup, Keith Kincaid has yet to see time in a game, and Joonas Korpisalo has played just 59 minutes across two games. But, the Finn has played competently in that very small sample.

Staying stingy

The goaltenders are meeting expectations, but are they being asked to do too much?

Moving outward from the net, the next question becomes, how is the team playing defensively?

The Jackets haven't been a defensive stalwart this season. According to [Evolving-hockey.com](#), in five-on-five play, they rank ninth in the league in shot attempts against per 60 (54.5), but sixteenth in shot quality against (2.4 expected goals per 60). That's not tops in the league, but it is solid.

The good news is, since the deadline, compared with the bulk of their season, Columbus is actually doing a better job defensively. Using data from [NaturalStatTrick.com](#), the table below looks at how many five-on-five events (rated per 60 minutes of play) are happening against the Jackets comparing the 60 games before the deadline with the nine since.

In all but goals (which have held steady), there's been a nice bump in terms of reducing what other teams create against the Jackets.

Another improvement? Columbus is reducing the amount of quality looks an opponent gets on the ice.

The chart below from Tierney shows the rolling average of the expected goals against that the Jackets have allowed this season. The black bar marks league average, and the lower a team is below the bar, the better as that means fewer quality chances against. The red line marks the trade deadline.

We can see that since the deadline, Columbus is actually enjoying its longest stretch of being lower (which in this case is better) than league average when it comes quality chances against.

But stopping opponents is one thing. If you can't also turn play around to get going the other way, you're stuck playing defense more than offense, and that's a risky game.

We've seen stretches of late when the Jackets have struggled to get out of their own zone. It bears mention that this is one of the parts of the game where Ryan Murray is missed.

Using tracking data from Corey Sznajder, the chart below measures both how much a player prevents an opponent's zone entry (marked "break-up %" on the y-axis) and how frequently they get out of the defensive zone with possession (marked "possession exit %" on the x-axis). The higher up a player's icon is, the more he prevents zone entries against. The farther to the right, the more times the player gets the puck out of the zone with possession.

We see that Murray ranks second only to Seth Jones in terms of helping his team get the puck going the other way.

Looks and luck

Of course, the final piece of the puzzle is offense. Let's start with the first step, and that's generating chances. Just as we looked at shots and chances against, let's look at shots and chances for.

What we see is that the Jackets are still shooting, but they are getting a few more shots blocked, and a few more misses when the puck gets through.

"Hitting the net is an inconsistency of ours," Tortorella said Tuesday.

On top of all of that, the Jackets are suffering from a spurt of bad luck that has their post-deadline shooting percentage (4.91) cut by almost half compared with the majority of the season (9.11).

How does all this affect overall expected offense? As the chart below shows, shot quality has dipped for the second time this season and at a most inconvenient time.

But lest people think it's time to hit the panic button, the team's expected goal performance is already rebounding, and when a shooting percentage drops that much, that fast, expect it to return to something a little closer to (at least) average sooner than later.

But what does it all mean?

As Tortorella said, results matter, and this time of year, there's little room for moral victories, but is the sky falling? No, it's not.

While the offense has struggled, it is trending up in terms of how it's playing, and the drop in shooting percentage should resolve if not entirely back to its pre-deadline levels, at the very least to league average.

In the meantime, the defensive play has allowed the Jackets to stay fairly close to their pre-deadline advantages in terms of having an edge in shot share and overall scoring chances. They've also managed to grow their margin in terms of shots taken and shots on target, which is impressive when you consider that there's been a drop offensively. There's no doubt that their drop in goal share ties closely to that pesky shooting percentage.

It also bears mention that nine games are an extremely small sample size. Of course this is the time of year when there is not a lot of time to wait for things to balance out, but in the grand scheme of things, we can see in terms of overall expectations, the Jackets are already rebounding in terms of being on the winning side of things in terms of how they are playing.

Is all of this the cost of finding ways for a new offensive lineup to jell? Is it just a blip similar to earlier ones in the season? That we don't know. The team is walking a fine line when it comes to margin of error just as they have all season, but if we believe in what the Jackets have shown on the season as a whole as well as in the law of averages, the team has a good chance to start to get the results of play that is returning to a solid level.

"As we've talked about, our game is improving," Tortorella said. "We just have to keep on playing and trying to get a result."

Visuals via Sean Tierney; data via NaturalStatTrick.com and Evolving-Hockey.com. All numbers represent five-on-five play unless otherwise stated. This post relies heavily on shot-based metrics. Here is a good primer on these numbers.

[Michael Arace | Second period was best, and worst, of times](#)

By Michael Arace, Columbus Dispatch – March 15, 2019

The second period the Blue Jackets played against the Carolina Hurricanes on Friday night had to be one of the worst 20 minutes of hockey, or whatever it was, the Jackets have played all season.

It's a subjective thing, though. If someone said they could think of four or five worse periods the Jackets have played just in the past two-plus weeks — or since the Feb. 25 trade deadline — they could make a pretty good case.

In any case, period No. 2 Friday night was ... how shall we put this? Let's go with "exciting." The Jackets were outshot 22-2 by the Hurricanes. The Jackets allowed zero goals, and that was exciting for the sellout crowd of 18,832 at Nationwide Arena. Goaltender Sergei Bobrovsky was sublime.

The Jackets allowed 46 shots against, a season high, and came away with a 3-0 shutout victory. It might be a little much to use James Earl Jones' voice and say "it was a critical Metropolitan Division victory in the final playoff push." But it counted for something, that's for sure.

The Jackets (40-28-3, 83 points) are holding the No. 2 wild-card playoff spot in the Eastern Conference. They are chasing the Hurricanes (38-25-7, 83 points) for the No. 1 wild card. The Hurricanes had won 15 of their previous 20 games — and, by the way, they put up 48 shots and beat the Predators in Nashville last week.

On Friday night, Adam McQuaid — there he is! — gave the Jackets a one-goal lead three minutes into the first period. Here's a stat: It was McQuaid's first goal with the team since the Jackets drafted him 55th overall in the 2007 draft. (Yes, there is a catch.)

Stat of the night?

"No," McQuaid said. "Forty-six saves. I think that was the difference."

Three minutes after McQuaid scored, another Jackets defenseman scored on another long-range wrist shot. The second goal was David Savard's. It was his fifth of the season.

Is he a sniper now?

"No," Savard said. "Technically, we shouldn't have won. I thought they were the better team. But we have Bob. We'll take the points."

Here's a stat: The Jackets have allowed 40-plus shots five times this season and they are 5-0 in those games. So, we asked coach John Tortorella if that was the recipe for success as the Jackets head down the stretch here. Yeah.

No, we didn't ask him that. Are you kidding?

Bobrovsky's career high for saves is 52. Friday night was the second-most — and the most in a shutout.

Bobrovsky was asked about this and many other things. Blue Jackets fans know what he said about following the process and focusing on the task at hand and so forth. He is phoning in his quotes, which is to say he is dialed in right now.

Bobrovsky has won 12 of his last 18 decisions and, in that span, he has had four shutouts and three single-goal games. It seems that, as the Jackets have struggled and come out of it, Bobrovsky has been the steadiest thing going. And now, he is getting hot — just at the right time.

There have been plenty of games where the Jackets should've had a point or two and blown it, or just came up short. There have been times, earlier this season, when Bobrovsky didn't exactly look like a two-time Vezina winner. To say the least.

As Tortorella said of the points, "Sometimes they come out in the wash."

And as Bobrovsky said of The Bob, you just have to follow the process, focus on the task at hand and so forth.

On Friday night, two points came out of 46 saves. They came at a critical time, against the team the Jackets are chasing on a night when they played one of the worst periods of their season. Depending on how you measure.

Goal against Bruins came as relief to Zach Werenski

By Bill Rabinowitz, Columbus Dispatch – March 15, 2019

Zach Werenski's gesture was premeditated. In fact, it was 2½ months in the making.

After the Blue Jackets defenseman scored Tuesday in a 7-4 victory over the Boston Bruins, he motioned as if something had lifted off his back.

It had — a figurative monkey.

Werenski hadn't scored since New Year's Eve, a span of 30 games, which is stunning for a player with his skill. Earlier Tuesday, he had told a reporter that he needed to get the monkey off his back.

When Werenski scored from the slot off a pass from Artemi Panarin to give the Blue Jackets a two-goal cushion after three consecutive Bruins goals late in the third period, he remembered that comment.

"I was like, if I score, I'll do that," Werenski said Friday morning before a game against the Carolina Hurricanes at Nationwide Arena.

Werenski had a 25-goal goal drought a year ago when he was playing through a serious shoulder injury. He said the just-ended one didn't seem as long.

"These games have been important and I'm just trying to find ways to help us win so I didn't really think about it too much," Werenski said. "But the longer it gets, the more you start to feel it."

Werenski, who's only 21, has been trying to improve his defense this season. He's not sure whether that has affected his play at the other end of the ice.

"It shouldn't," Werenski said, "but I think just the nature of the game and how guys think when you're trying to be better defensively is you're not thinking offense as much. For me, a big focus this year was on being better defensively and ironing out that part of my game. Maybe I wasn't thinking offense as much and maybe that's the reason."

The Blue Jackets' scoring has been hit or miss lately. Werenski, who has 10 goals and 30 assists, has the ability to help.

"I think I'm capable of that as a defenseman whenever I get in a scoring area to bear down hard enough to put the puck in the net," he said. "It was good to get that one. Hopefully they'll start falling for me now."

New line clicking

The addition of Josh Anderson to the line of former Ottawa teammates Matt Duchene and Ryan Dzingel looks like it might have staying power. Anderson has certainly impressed Duchene, who called him "probably the most underrated player in the NHL."

With his combination of size and speed, Anderson resembles a locomotive when he accelerates.

“He’s always wowed me when we’ve played against them, but he’s always kind of been in maybe more of a checking role or a two-way role,” Duchene said. “His offensive ability has flown under the radar. He does everything so well, so I think the three of us are a good combination, and we were excited to play together the past couple games.”

[Blue Jackets 3, Hurricanes 0 | Sergei Bobrovsky stops all 46 shots he sees](#)

By Bill Rabinowitz, Columbus Dispatch – March 15, 2019

Sergei Bobrovsky fully understood the importance of Friday night's game against Carolina.

The Blue Jackets' goaltender has had his ups and downs this year, but he knows this is the time to round into the form that has made him one of the NHL's best. Bobrovsky couldn't have been any better against the Hurricanes.

He stopped a season-high 46 shots, most of them long after the Blue Jackets' offense vanished, in a 3-0 win in front of 18,832 at sold-out Nationwide Arena.

Carolina entered the game two points ahead of the Jackets and in the first wild-card spot. That's a coveted spot because the second wild card will play powerhouse Tampa Bay in the first round of the playoffs.

After beating the Hurricanes 3-0 on Friday, the teams are now tied with 83 points, though Carolina has played one fewer game.

"It's a huge game," Bobrovsky said. "That's the time to play well. At this time of the season, every point is huge."

Most of the Blue Jackets' offense came in the first six minutes of the game. They opened the scoring on a goal by defenseman Adam McQuaid on a pass from Artemi Panarin. With Pierre-Luc Dubois in front of the net, McQuaid snapped a wrist shot that beat goalie Petr Mrazek stick-side.

It was only McQuaid's third goal of the season and first since joining the team as a trade-deadline acquisition. The assist was the 50th of the season for Panarin.

Less than 3 minutes later, the Blue Jackets made it 2-0. Boone Jenner won a face-off back to David Savard, who beat Mrazek to the far side with a wrist shot.

Soon after that, the Blue Jackets' offensive spigot turned off.

"I think for some reason we lost our intensity," coach John Tortorella said. "Against a team that's desperate as Carolina and as good and quick as they play, it mounts on you."

But Bobrovsky was impenetrable. He was especially brilliant in the second period, during which the Hurricanes outshot the Blue Jackets 22-2.

"I felt good," Bobrovsky said. "I saw lots of pucks. Lots of shots were from outside and that allowed me to get into my game and control the game."

Not all of the saves were routine. He made several that served as reminders of why he has won the Vezina Trophy twice. The biggest might have come when he made a pad save on Michael Ferland, who got behind the Blue Jackets' defense for a mini-breakaway.

“He’s been good for a while,” Tortorella said. “There have been some games when a number of goals have gone in, but it’s pretty misleading as far as how Bob is playing. He was seeing shots in traffic, especially in the second period. In the third period, we checked better.”

But the offense largely consisted of flipping pucks into the neutral zone. The Jackets were outshot 46-20.

With less than 3 minutes left and the Hurricanes’ already having pulled Mrazek, Savard took a tripping penalty to make it a 6-on-4. But Josh Anderson won a puck battle and pushed in an empty-netter to end any suspense.

The Blue Jackets now go on the road for the next four games, starting Saturday in Boston and then to western Canada.

[Blue Jackets' top line confident that hot streak is coming](#)

By Brian Hedger, Columbus Dispatch – March 15, 2019

Helmet off, sitting in the penalty box with a scrape on the bridge of his nose, Artemi Panarin looked happy.

The Blue Jackets' leading scorer had just taken a couple of straight right hands to the chops in a fight with Boston Bruins defenseman Charlie McAvoy on Tuesday night, but he had a smile.

His linemate, Cam Atkinson, thinks he knows why.

"I was right there," Atkinson said. "I think everyone was surprised in the arena but also look at the situation he's in. It's a contract year, maybe not sure what he's doing (in free agency), hadn't been on the scoresheet in (four) games. He's so relied on to put the puck in the net or help us put the puck in the net. ... I'm sure he'd be the first guy to say he felt good after the fight."

Panarin, who later broke his offensive drought with an assist on a goal by Zach Werenski, wasn't the only member of his line feeling a little pent-up anger.

Pierre-Luc Dubois and Atkinson have, too, even though all three have generated some good scoring chances recently. As a trio, the goals just haven't happened as frequently for them as they had earlier this season — when they were basically the only line scoring goals.

In nine games since the trade deadline, Panarin has six points (one goal, five assists), Atkinson has five (four goals, one assist) and Dubois has just one assist. Statistically, that's underwhelming compared to previous stretches, but stats aren't everything.

Atkinson still leads the team with 38 goals, Panarin still leads the team with 74 points (25 goals) and Dubois has already exceeded his rookie numbers with 23 goals and 54 points. They're also generating scoring chances again and think a hot stretch might be right around the corner.

"They come up with a chance sheet, and in the past five games I've gotten a lot of chances — as much or as many as I usually have," Dubois center said. "The other guys have, too, as a line. That's how it goes sometimes. The positive side is that if it turns around right now, and you start getting luck, it's right around playoff time."

The Jackets' other top-six line is also showing signs of life, with Josh Anderson helping the new guys, Matt Duchene and Ryan Dzingel, find their top gear the past couple of games. Boone Jenner, who centers the third line, has also heated up with four goals in his past two games, including his first NHL hat trick against the Bruins.

"It's nice to see other lines stepping up and other guys contributing," Atkinson said. "It's great to see guys feeling good about themselves. That's what you want at this time of the year."

So, is it his line's turn to feel good next?

“It’s not always going to be rainbows and butterflies,” Atkinson said. “It’s not always going to go your way, but if you’re not getting on the scoresheet, it’s ‘What are you doing away from the puck?’ We’re definitely not a liability out there and I think we all take a lot of pride in being that No. 1 line.”

Panarin has the scrape on his nose to prove it

[It hasn't been an easy season for Sergei Bobrovsky, but he saved the Blue Jackets in a big win over Carolina](#)

By Aaron Portzline, The Athletic – March 15, 2019

COLUMBUS, Ohio — For the first five months of this season, Sergei Bobrovsky's contract status — have you heard he's a pending unrestricted free agent? — made more headlines than his play. Not that his play was worthy of much praise, at times, mind you.

This has been a season like no other for Bobrovsky, from his preseason dropping of the gauntlet on management to his midseason walking out on the team, for which he was suspended and subjected to public scorn.

But since the NHL trade deadline, the veteran goaltender's play has seemed more ... relaxed. On Friday, in a much-needed win over Carolina, old-school Bobrovsky returned to the scene.

"Phenomenal," said captain Nick Foligno.

"Unbelievable," said Seth Jones.

"Excellent," said Brandon Dubinsky.

Bobrovsky had 46 saves — the second-most in his 449-game career, and the most he's ever had in a shutout — and the Blue Jackets survived a ragged performance at other points on the ice for a 3-0 win.

"We don't talk to Bob much back there," Dubinsky said. "Give him a tap on the pads and, even then, he won't even look at you. We just leave him alone, especially when he's in the zone like that.

"It would be like a pitcher with a no-hitter or a shutout. Just leave him alone and let him do his thing."

Adam McQuaid, David Savard and Josh Anderson (empty net) scored for the Blue Jackets, who have won two games in a row for the first time since Feb. 23.

It was a four-point win for the Blue Jackets. With the win, they pull into a virtual tie with the Hurricanes for the first wild-card spot, staying in the second slot because Carolina owns the first tie-breaker for now, having played fewer games.

If they'd lost, the Blue Jackets' chances of qualifying for the playoffs would still have been alive, but they would have been much more likely to face world-beater Tampa Bay in the first round.

"You get two points in this league, you get out of here and feel good about yourself, knowing there are things you need to work on," Blue Jackets coach John Tortorella said. "That's the way we're going to approach it.

"It's a huge two points for this team, and I'm glad we play tomorrow."

McQuaid's seeing-eye wrister from the right side sailed into the net only 3:08 into the game. Savard scored on a similar shot from the left side almost three minutes later.

But after that, the Blue Jackets buckled their seat belts and turned it over to Bobrovsky. It's always ugly against the Hurricanes, but this was lopsided ugly.

Carolina had an unfathomable 83-29 advantage in shot attempts and a 46-20 margin in shots on goal. Eleven Hurricanes skaters had as many or more shots on goal than the entire Blue Jackets top line: Artemi Panarin (0), Pierre-Luc Dubois (1) and Cam Atkinson (2).

In the second period alone, Carolina owned the shot clock 22-2.

"We did a really good job in the first period," Tortorella said. "I just think for some reason we lost our intensity against a team that's as desperate as Carolina, as good and as quick as they play. And it mounts on you."

Tortorella was miffed about the number of icings the Blue Jackets took, how they sailed pucks out of their end because they couldn't manage clean breakouts.

The numbers: 12 icings in the game, 10 of them by the Blue Jackets, nine of them after the first period.

"There are going to be momentum swings," Dubinsky said. "We played well in the first and we get up. We have to know they're going to have a push in the second and we have to be prepared for it. We weren't prepared for it. I don't think we handled it the right way."

"It snowballed on us. We started losing battles and making plays that we normally don't make and shouldn't be making. We couldn't get it back on the rails. They played a good game. But sometimes we gotta take a step back and simplify. We just made it too hard on ourselves."

We've seen the Blue Jackets get tangled up in these games many times the past few seasons. It's almost unwatchable hockey. Hell, it's barely hockey.

About these Hurricanes ...

They are a team full of faceless bots, each of them 6-0, 180 pounds, with three legs, four arms, and the ability to play with eight sticks at once. There are no passing lanes or shooting lanes against Carolina. There's no flow, just two teams whacking each others' sticks as if the object is to break the puck, not skate and score with it. These games are so hard to watch that they force you to lower your standards and become wowed by the most basic act. By the midpoint of the second period, you're saying, "Nice dump in!" and "Solid clear!"

The Blue Jackets only survived because of Bobrovsky. He had more saves in the second period (22) than his counterpart, Peter Mrazek, managed all night (17).

"I felt good," Bobrovsky said. "I saw lots of pucks."

"There was lots of shots from outside. That allows me to get into my game, to control the game. I saw a majority of the pucks. I was able to control the rebounds and control the game."

After the game, the Blue Jackets formed a conga line for Bobrovsky hugs. It wasn't just Foligno on this night.

"It's a big win, so obviously everybody's happy," Bobrovsky said. "It's a huge two points for us. It's a huge game. That's the time to play well, at this time of the season, every point is huge."

Notebook

- Good night for the Blue Jackets in Toronto, too. Philadelphia led 5-2 in the second period but ended up losing 7-6 in regulation. That drops the Flyers seven points behind Columbus for the second wild card with 11 games to play. It's starting to look like a nine-team fight for the eight playoff spots in the East.
- The Blue Jackets flew to Boston after the game, where Saturday they'll play the Bruins. No word on a starting goaltender. Bobrovsky was asked after the game if he'd be able to start Saturday. "It's tough to say right after the game when you are still hot, still warm," Bobrovsky said. "It's easy to say, 'Yeah, I can play.' But after you cool down you have to see where you're at and how your body feels."
- Bobrovsky's career high for saves was a 52-stop performance at Florida on Dec. 4, 2014. This marked the 12th time he's had 40-plus saves in a game. His previous high save total for a shutout win was 39, which he had done three times previously, most recently Dec. 23, 2018 vs. New Jersey.
- Bobrovsky now has 30 shutouts in his career, all with the Blue Jackets. That's tied for 16th among active goaltenders.
- The top line had an off night ... literally. Panarin played just 13:32, the lowest of his NHL career, with both Chicago and Columbus. Dubois had just 12:39, the second lowest of his career. He's gone eight games without a point.
- Dubinsky played 14:20, had two blocked shots and won 16 of 23 faceoffs.
- One night before KISS was to take the stage in Nationwide Arena, legendary guitarist Gene Simmons caught a hockey game. Simmons, who did a live hit with Fox Sports Ohio's Dave Maetzold, had on-the-glass seats. Because of course he did.
- The Blue Jackets assigned forward Alexandre Texier to AHL Cleveland just one day after his season ended with KalPa in Finland. Texier is expected to make his North American debut for the Monsters on Saturday in Rockford, Ill.
- Forward Trey Fix-Wolansky, a seventh-round pick (No. 205 overall) last summer, signed his three-year, entry-level deal with the Blue Jackets on Friday. He's playing with the Edmonton Oil Kings of the Western Hockey League.
- More prospect news: G Elvis Merzlikins could be bound for North America soon, too. His club, Lugano in Switzerland's National League, is down 3-0 to Zug in the first round of the playoffs. Game 4 is Saturday.

Analytically speaking

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

- Tonight's win came primarily from the work of Bobrovsky. The Jackets scored two goals in the first six minutes but were otherwise stymied offensively for the rest of the game. According to naturalstattribick.com, in five-on-five play, Columbus had just 25.89 percent of shot attempts, 29.41 percent of scoring chances and 20.83 percent of high-danger attempts. That's a season-low in shot share, and in terms of chances and high-danger looks, only the Dec. 8 loss to the Washington Capitals had a worse showing.

- In terms of shot quality, according to moneypuck.com, the expected goal total was 3.43 to 1.13 in favor of Carolina, but to make that a reality, the Hurricanes had to get through Bobrovsky, and that was impossible. Bobrovsky's perfect save percentage was 5.97 percent higher than what was expected based on the shots he faced. That equates to 3.88 goals saved. In the other net, Peter Mrazek was 4.27 percent below expectations, allowing .98 goals more than he should have.
- Anderson considers to be a top performer. Even in a game when no Jackets player earned a shot advantage in any matchup they faced, Anderson created two of the team's five high-danger chances and tied with Atkinson for the lead in individual scoring chances (3). Anderson's expected goal total of .59 was the highest of any skater on the ice.
- The best chance of the game came off Seth Jones' stick 2:30 into the game. His tip-in had a 22.1 percent chance of becoming a goal.

[Blue Jackets primer: 12 games to go, and Friday against Carolina is huge](#)

By Aaron Portzline, The Athletic – March 15, 2019

COLUMBUS, Ohio — As of this morning, the Blue Jackets, according to MoneyPuck.com, have a 58.6 percent chance to make the Stanley Cup playoffs. While fans have been conditioned to target Washington and Pittsburgh and even the upstart New York Islanders this season, it's the game Friday against Carolina that looms largest.

For now, anyway.

The Blue Jackets, who hold the second wild card in the Eastern Conference, have 12 games remaining in their quest to make the postseason for a third consecutive season.

Here's a hardcore breakdown of the final kick.

Three biggies

Yes, of course, every game is huge this time of year, but there are three games that hold incredible (potential) weight for the Jackets.

Tonight, vs. Carolina — The first order of business is to make the playoffs, obviously. But the Blue Jackets will likely have the pedal pushed firmly to the floor the rest of the way because they do not want to be the second wild card.

Why? That would put the Jackets in a first-round matchup with Tampa Bay, the best team in the NHL. The Blue Jackets have lost six in a row to the Lightning, including all three this season ... by a combined score of 17-3.

The Blue Jackets (81 points) need to work their way into the first wild-card spot or higher, and right now the Hurricanes (83) own that spot.

This won't be easy, though: The Hurricanes are 23-7-2 since Dec. 29, and Carolina has won two out of three against Columbus this season.

Even with a regulation win Friday, the Blue Jackets won't leapfrog the Hurricanes in the standings. They'd have the same number of points (83), but Carolina has played one fewer game.

But lose tonight, the Blue Jackets would slip four points back of the Hurricanes. Not a death knell, certainly, but not ideal, either.

March 26, vs. NY Islanders — OK, we're starting to take the Islanders seriously. They've won all three games with Columbus this season, the most recent two by shutout. Goaltender Thomas Greiss has made it look easy against the Jackets.

The Islanders, second in the Metro, are eight points ahead of the Blue Jackets, but who knows what that will look like 12 days from now?

This game will have meaning for each of these teams, you can bet on it. If nothing else, it would do the Blue Jackets well to beat the Islanders before they head into a possible postseason matchup with them

March 28 vs. Montreal — The Blue Jackets and Canadiens have the same number of points (81), but the Jackets own the second wild card — Montreal sits in ninth place — because the Jackets have played one fewer game and because they have three more regulation and overtime wins.

Still, Montreal and Philadelphia are the only teams Columbus needs to worry about in their rearview mirror. (The Flyers' 5-2 loss to Washington on Thursday was a blow to their cause.)

This game is still two weeks away, but it could be a “four-point game” with respect to the wild-card standings. The Jackets are 0-2 versus Montreal this season.

Home vs. road

The Blue Jackets play eight of their final 12 games on the road, a fact that would make most teams blanch. But this club has been better on the road (20-12-1) than at home (19-16-2), so maybe it's not a big deal.

The toughest part of the remaining road schedule begins this weekend when the Jackets play in Boston on Saturday, then fly to Calgary on Sunday for the start of the three-game Western Canada swing beginning Tuesday. The Blue Jackets are 0-3 versus Calgary, Edmonton and Vancouver this season.

After Canada, the Jackets have two back-to-backs on the road, which are never easy: March 30-31, at Nashville and Buffalo; and April 5-6, at New York Rangers and Ottawa, to end the season.

The good news is only one of those teams (Nashville) in the twin back-to-backs will still be fighting for playoff positioning.

The landscape (Metro + wild card)

1. Washington (91)

Games remaining: 11 (6 home, 5 away)

Game remaining vs. current playoff clubs: 6

Notes: The Capitals are closing in on their fourth consecutive Metro title, but it won't be easy. Three of their remaining games are against the NHL top team, Tampa Bay.

2. NY Islanders (89)

Games remaining: 12 (4 home, 8 away)

Games remaining vs. current playoff clubs: 6

Notes: The Islanders end the season at Washington on April 6, a game that could decide the Metro. Added deliciousness: Islanders coach Barry Trotz against his old club.

3. Pittsburgh (87)

Games remaining: 11 (6 home, 5 away)

Games remaining vs. current playoff clubs: 5

Notes: The Penguins are set up for a strong final kick, perhaps their first Metro title since 2014. Their final three games are a home-and-home with Detroit and the New York Rangers, two clubs way out of contention.

WC1. Carolina (83)

Games remaining: 13 (8 home, 5 away)

Games remaining vs. current playoff clubs: 7

Notes: The Hurricanes have a game in hand over almost everybody in the Metro, but it's hardly an easy walk home: two against Washington, two against Pittsburgh, one each against Toronto and Tampa Bay.

WC2. Columbus (81)

Games remaining: 12 (4 home, 8 away)

Games remaining vs. current playoff clubs: 6

Notes: The Blue Jackets busted out for seven goals Tuesday versus Boston, as many as they'd scored in their previous six games. The newbies are starting to settle in, but can the No. 1 line awaken?

9. Montreal (81)

Games remaining: 11 (6 home, 5 away)

Games remaining vs. current playoff clubs: 7

Notes: The Canadiens have sputtered of late — 6-9-1 since Feb. 7 — and they don't have long to get their acts together. The final five games of the season are against Columbus, Winnipeg, Tampa Bay, Washington and Toronto.

10. Philadelphia (76)

Games remaining: 12 (5 home, 7 away)

Games remaining vs. current playoff clubs: 9

Notes: Full marks to the Flyers, who are 18-5-2 since Jan. 13, a resuscitation nobody could have expected. But they have the toughest remaining schedule among the contenders, with seven of their final eight games against playoff clubs.

The math

After the games Thursday, per Money puck, the Blue Jackets have a 41 percent chance of missing the playoffs altogether and a 33 percent chance of claiming the second wild-card spot.

Put another way: there's a 3-in-4 chance the "all in" Blue Jackets will either miss the playoffs or face Tampa Bay in the first round. Not ideal.

The Jackets have a 15.8 percent chance to grab the first wild card and still a 7 percent chance to finish third in the Metro.

Sportsclubstats.com is fairly more optimistic.

They give the Blue Jackets a 68.4 percent chance to make the playoffs, a number that rose 6.3 percent with the losses suffered by Montreal and Philadelphia on Thursday. The Jackets have a 44 percent chance of earning the second wild-card spot and a 19 percent chance of finishing with the first wild card.

How big is the game Friday night against the Hurricanes? If the Blue Jackets win in regulation, Sportsclubstats says their chances of making the playoffs will increase to 76.5 percent. If they lose, it's only 56.8 percent likely.

That's almost a 20-point swing.

[Blue Jackets' Nick Foligno out to deal with personal matter](#)

By Brian Hedger, Columbus Dispatch – March 16, 2019

BOSTON — It's been a challenging season off the ice for Nick Foligno.

After missing five games while dealing with his young daughter Milana's heart condition, the Blue Jackets' captain missed the start of another trip Saturday night at the Boston Bruins while attending to a different personal matter.

"That family, they've gone through a lot," coach John Tortorella said before the game. "We're just trying to support them the best way we can."

Foligno, who is expected to rejoin the team soon, also missed the start of a trip Nov. 17 at the Carolina Hurricanes when Milana became sick. He then missed four games from Dec. 31 to Jan. 8 after her surgery in Boston to correct the issue.

Foligno was replaced by Lukas Sedlak, who was a healthy scratch in nine of the previous 11 games. Sedlak took Foligno's spot at left wing on the third line, skating with Boone Jenner and Riley Nash, who made his first return to Boston after signing with the Blue Jackets as a free agent.

"I've got good memories with those guys," said Nash, who played the past two seasons with the Bruins. "It's a little bit weird being on the opposite side after a couple years with them, but it still kind of makes you smile when you're going against guys you just battled with for two seasons."

Another breather

After making 46 saves in a 3-0 win against the Carolina Hurricanes on Friday at Nationwide Arena, Sergei Bobrovsky got a full day off in Boston.

Not only did Joonas Korpisalo start against Boston, but Keith Kinkaid handled the backup role — allowing Bobrovsky to rest up for the remainder of the trip in Calgary, Edmonton and Vancouver.

"Bob's played a lot of hockey, had some back-to-backs here, so this is how we're going," Tortorella said. "I talked to Bob prior to this. He's fine physically, fine mentally. He'll play forever. He's in a good spot right now."

Since Jan. 19, Bobrovsky leads all NHL goalies with 1,237 minutes played. Getting Kinkaid from the New Jersey Devils at the trade deadline last month allows Tortorella the luxury of resting Bobrovsky. Kinkaid is 29 and has plenty of NHL experience.

"We're trying to use it (the best) we can," Tortorella said.

McQuaid settling in

Tortorella said the three defense pairings he's been using recently are developing more consistency, including the third pair of Scott Harrington and Adam McQuaid, who played the first nine seasons of his career with the Bruins.

“It’s tough when new guys come in on the trading deadline to try to fit in, and we sputtered a little bit there,” Tortorella said of McQuaid, who initially struggled after joining the Jackets in a deadline deal. “I just think with ‘Quaider’ right now, he’s just playing. He’s not overthinking.”

Fun start

Jenner had quite a night before the puck was even dropped. Jenner, one of the Jackets’ alternate captains, filled in for Foligno during two pregame ceremonies.

The first was to celebrate NHL linesman Brian Murphy’s 2,000th career game — the second American-born official to reach that milestone. The second, as part of the Bruins’ St. Patrick’s Day festivities, was a ceremonial puck dropped by former UFC champion Conor McGregor, who’s from Dublin, Ireland.

McGregor was so pumped up that he initially forgot to shake hands with Bruins captain Zdeno Chara and Jenner.

[Bruins 2, Blue Jackets 1, OT | Four-game trip opens on losing note](#)

By Brian Hedger, Columbus Dispatch – March 16, 2019

BOSTON — It was their second game in two days, fourth in six and the ninth time the Blue Jackets played in the first 16 days of this month.

That's a lot of hockey at any time, but especially with the regular season winding down in a heated race to secure playoff spots. It showed, too, but the Blue Jackets still found a way to get another point in a 2-1 overtime loss to the Boston Bruins on Saturday night at TD Garden.

"We came in here, back-to-back, for sure guys are really tired, but it didn't show up on the ice," said goalie Joonas Korpisalo, who made 31 saves in a strong performance giving Sergei Bobrovsky a night off. "We went out there, all business, and everyone put in 100 percent — so, it was huge."

Bobrovsky, who had a 46-save shutout of the Carolina Hurricanes on Friday at Nationwide Arena, watched from the press box while resting up for the remainder of a four-game trip. It might've felt like he was viewing a replay, as the Blue Jackets (40-28-4) were outshot 33-25 and lost the possession game.

They lived off a huge game by Korpisalo, who made three big stops in overtime before Brad Marchand finally ended it with 1:30 left.

Patrice Bergeron, who assisted on Marchand's goal, scored in regulation for the Bruins (43-20-9) — who got 24 saves from goalie Jaroslav Halak to snap a three-game losing streak.

Matt Duchene scored the lone goal for the Blue Jackets, who moved to 84 points and maintained their hold on the second wild card in the Eastern Conference.

"We'll take that every day of the week," Duchene said. "If you tell us that we're going to get three out of four points on a back-to-back, yeah, we're taking that every day. That was big for us — and to do it the way we did it, to still have the work ethic, energy and stinginess that we did tonight, it's a testament to what type of team we are."

The game started like the previous one ended, with the Jackets again struggling to gain possession. With 5:26 left in the first, the Bruins had a 1-0 lead on Bergeron's power-play goal at 5:51 and held a 10-4 edge in shots — picking up where the Hurricanes left off.

Korpisalo allowed Bergeron's goal off a backhand shot from the slot but stopped 11 of Boston's 12 shots in the first to keep the Jackets within a goal. His work paid off late in the period when Duchene tied it 1-1 with 3:08 left on his 30th goal of the season.

After receiving a stretch pass from Markus Nutivaara, who banked the puck off the opposite wall, Duchene scooped it and made a fantastic play to shake off a check by Bruins defenseman John Moore, a former Blue Jacket.

Duchene quickly cut to the net with the puck on his backhand and then popped a wrist shot over Halak's glove into the short-side corner.

“It’s a big goal for us,” coach John Tortorella said. “I think it settles us down, and then from there, I thought the teams, we traded chances. We have some great chances in overtime. We don’t score.”

In the second, the Bruins held the puck in the Blue Jackets’ end for long stretches but failed to convert on several great scoring chances. It was more of the same in the third but the Jackets weathered it all to earn a big point.

[Joonas Korpisalo solid in net](#)

By Brian Hedger, Columbus Dispatch – March 17, 2019

It had to be tempting.

After watching Sergei Bobrovsky stonewall the Carolina Hurricanes on Friday at Nationwide Arena — looking like a two-time winner of the Vezina Trophy while making 46 saves in the Blue Jackets' 3-0 win — coach John Tortorella could've easily stuck with the hot hand.

They had a tough finale to a home/road back-to-back Saturday at the Boston Bruins, a team hungry to end a three-game skid, and it was also St. Patrick's Day in a city that treats that holiday like Christmas. Nobody would've blinked twice had Bobrovsky played.

Instead, as he's done a number of times this season, Tortorella went with Joonas Korpisalo, who responded with a 31-save effort to make sure Columbus earned another point in a 2-1 overtime loss to start a four-game trip.

"It means a lot that they trust to put me in a game in Boston, back-to-back, second game," said Korpisalo, who has responded in similar fashion a number of times this year. "It feels great, and of course, I try to do my best to redeem it."

He's trying his best to prove something else, too.

Should Bobrovsky sign elsewhere as an unrestricted free agent July 1, which has become the expected outcome of his unresolved contract situation, Korpisalo wants to be first in line to replace him.

He'll be 25 in April, has four NHL seasons under his belt and knows the Blue Jackets have a number of promising goaltending prospects behind him — including Europeans Elvis Merzlikins and Veini Vehvilainen, who are closest to NHL-ready.

Bobrovsky still owns the Blue Jackets' net for the rest of this season, but Korpisalo's time to shine is now. He's taking full advantage of it — going 4-4-1 with a 2.28 goals-against average and .918 save percentage in 12 games since the NHL's Christmas break.

"I feel my game is getting better all the time, especially after Christmas," Korpisalo said. "I've not been in too many games lately, but ... my goal is to go out there and try to enjoy every game. It's fun to play hockey."

If that's the case, he's having a lot more fun than the previous two seasons. Korpisalo has appeared in 24 games and started 19, which is more appearances and starts than he got in each of the past two seasons.

It's less than his 31 appearances and 30 starts in 2015-16, when he handled the starting role as a rookie while Bobrovsky was injured, but Tortorella made it a point to use him more this season.

"This season is so long and to get in the playoffs, you need both goalies playing well and getting in there, doing their jobs," goalie coach Manny Legace said. "(Korpisalo's) still got to play well. That's the only

way it works, is if he plays well, because if he doesn't, Torts will go, 'He's not playing,' especially if there's no back-to-back situation. Your backup needs to get points, and he's done his job so far."

It could be one of the hidden keys to how this season plays out. Since Jan. 18, Bobrovsky has logged the fifth-most time in net among all NHL goalies — playing 18 of the past 21 games and amassing 1,237:40 in ice time.

That's a heavy workload, but Korpisalo — along with the acquisition of Keith Kinkaid at the trade deadline — gives the Jackets a luxury few teams possess in net.

"Korpi's been good for us all year long," Tortorella said. "Bob's coming on. Bob's played very well, so Korpi just keeps himself ready. The last couple games (he's played), he has stood in there really strong for us in a tough situation where he hasn't played much."

[Matt Duchene winning face-offs](#)

By Brian Hedger, Columbus Dispatch – March 17, 2019

CALGARY, Alberta — Points are talked about most with Matt Duchene, but the star center has helped the Blue Jackets most on face-offs.

Duchene has six points on three goals and three assists after scoring the Jackets' lone goal in a 2-1 overtime loss Saturday in Boston, but he's also won 57.7 percent of the 196 draws he's taken — including 8 of 14 (57 percent) against the Bruins.

"He's helped us on power-play face-offs," coach John Tortorella said. "I've used him in the defensive zone (too), because I wear out (Brandon Dubinsky)."

Tortorella has used Dubinsky and Boone Jenner almost exclusively this season to take key face-offs. Prior to Duchene's arrival, he'd used his best two face-off winners all over the ice and in all situations — including Dubinsky even starting some 3-on-3 overtimes with the specific purpose of winning the first draw and then heading off the ice.

It's not ideal, though, because of the logistics involved with a designated face-off winner trying to exit the ice after taking a draw. Having Duchene allows Tortorella to keep Dubinsky and Jenner on the bench more often for their usual shift work.

"The thing that (is tough) about it when I use Dubi is it stops your flow offensively," Tortorella said. "I need to use Dubi, but then we're trying to get Bread (Artemi Panarin) on and we can't get our offense going. So, I'm trying to stay away from that as much as I can. I can use three of those guys now in that type of situation."

Since Feb. 7, the Blue Jackets have surged to the top of the NHL's team face-off rankings — winning 602 of 1,125 face-offs (53.5 percent). During that span, Dubinsky (first), Jenner (ninth) and Duchene (10th) are all ranked among the top-10 in the league in win percentage.

Try, try again

Duchene was starting to feel a little "snakebit" after clanging shots off the crossbar too much for his liking following the Feb. 22 trade that made him a Blue Jacket.

In fact, the exact number of times was stamped in his mind Saturday night at TD Garden, when he finally got one under the crossbar for his 30th goal.

"I've had four since I've been here," said Duchene, who tied his career high for goals in a season. "When you're that close, you're doing things right and you're getting chances. You've just got to stick with it. It's kind of the first slump I've been in all year."

Tortorella was also glad to finally see one go into the net for Duchene, who's been trying to spark his offensive production since the trade. The goal tied the score at 1 late in the first period.

"He's looked for that area of the net a number of times with us," Tortorella said. "Hit the crossbar a number of times. It's a big goal for us (at the time). I think it settles us down."

One-timers

The Blue Jackets didn't get a power play in the loss to the Bruins, but Tortorella said Ryan Dzingel would've replaced captain Nick Foligno on the top unit. ... Foligno is expected to join the team soon after missing the game in Boston for an undisclosed personal matter. ... Rookie forward Alexandre Texier made his debut in the American Hockey League on Saturday, finishing with two shots for the Cleveland Monsters in their 3-2 loss at the Rockford IceHogs.

[Bruins 2, Blue Jackets 1, OT: Five takeaways](#)

By Brian Hedger, Columbus Dispatch – March 17, 2019

BOSTON – It wasn't exactly a thing of beauty.

In fact, the Blue Jackets' 2-1 overtime loss Saturday night at TD Garden was more of a slog through choppy ice with weary legs against the Boston Bruins.

They were outshot (33-25), struggled to get ahold of the puck for any significant stretches of time and couldn't generate a lot of scoring chances because of it.

According to the stat-tracking site NaturalStatTrick.com, Boston finished with a 57.7 to 42.3 percent edge in even-strength shot attempts (Corsi), a 52.6 to 47.4 percent advantage in unblocked shot attempts (Fenwick) and a 53.3 to 46.7 percent margin in overall scoring chances generated.

In other words, the Bruins controlled this game in most ways from start to finish.

That said, Columbus still came out of it with a point and had a couple good opportunities to win it in overtime, including two goos looks for Matt Duchene and a great one for Artemi Panarin in the low slot – a shift before Brad Marchand ended it with 1:30 left to play.

The Blue Jackets also blocked 13 more shots than the Bruins (20-7) and – according to NaturalStatTrick – generated more high-danger scoring chances (7-4).

So, it wasn't pretty – but coming on the heels of being dominated by the Carolina Hurricanes on Friday at Nationwide Arena, and still winning 3-0, the Blue Jackets have to be thrilled with the results of their weekend back-to-back.

"This time of year, we're grinding away here (against) this team that's lost three in a row," coach John Tortorella said, referring to the Bruins' three-game skid that was snapped with the victory. "I just like the way we stood in there tonight."

That's a good way to put it, actually.

"Stood in there," not exactly like an orange traffic cone, like they did Friday against the Hurricanes, but more like one of those lighthouses from countless oil paintings – "standing in there" against an angry sea.

In this case, it was an angry sea of Boston Bruins, who crashed and thudded the Jackets all night but couldn't deny them of an all-important point the visitors from Ohio needed to bank.

"I like the way we played," Tortorella said. "That's five out of six points (the past three games), twice against Boston, getting three out of four from them ... I just thought everybody contributed tonight."

Here are five takeaways from a gritty one-point game for Columbus:

1) What it means

It's cliché to say "that was a big point," after getting a game to overtime for a guaranteed overtime "loser point," awarded to the team that doesn't win.

This, however, was a huge point for the Blue Jackets.

Not only did it push them to 84 points in the second wild-card spot of the Eastern Conference, it moved Columbus three points ahead of the Montreal Canadiens – who are the next closest team. It also kept them within striking distance of the Carolina Hurricanes, who now have 85 points and own the first wild-card spot with one less game played than the Blue Jackets.

Columbus is still fifth in the Metropolitan Division, trailing the Hurricanes there too, but the Jackets' point earned resonates further up the division standings too. The Pittsburgh Penguins (third, 87 points) and New York Islanders (second, 89 points) both lost Saturday – meaning Columbus can still reasonably catch one or both.

2) Korpisalo comes through (again)

This was the latest example of Tortorella feeling comfortable enough to start his main backup goalie, Korpisalo, and then watching Korpisalo reward him for that trust.

Korpisalo, 24, was impressive again. He only allowed one goal in regulation, early in the first period during a Bruins power play, and stopped 32 other shots Boston put on net – including three in overtime before Marchand's goal.

Each of these important starts Korpisalo gets has a twofold purpose. They allow him to keep developing as a young goalie who still harbors hopes to become the Jackets' No. 1 starter if Sergei Bobrovsky leaves as a free agent this summer and it also gives Bobrovsky some needed rest in a busy stretch.

Since Jan. 19, Bobrovsky has played the most minutes of any goalie in the NHL (1,237), so it's a nice luxury for the Jackets to give him a full day off at this point in the season – allowing him to watch Saturday night from the press box as Korpisalo started and Keith Kinkaid handled the backup role.

"Korpi's been good for us all year long," Tortorella said. "The last couple games (he's played), he has stood in there really strong for us, in a tough situation where he hasn't played much."

3) Top shelf goal

Matt Duchene made it sound like a run-of-the-mill, ho-hum type of goal for him – and maybe it is, since he's Matt Duchene – but his game-tying goal late in the first was top notch.

It's easily among the Jackets' best this season in terms of skill, strength and precision, and might wind up alone at the top.

It started with a great read by Duchene once Markus Nutivaara got a pass from David Savard while standing inside the Blue Jackets' blue line. Nutivaara's cross-ice feed, which he aimed at the far boards, bounced off the boards and hit Duchene in stride – allowing Duchene to do the rest.

He zipped past former Blue Jackets defenseman John Moore along the half wall, fighting off an attempted check, and then cut sharply to the net for a quick wrist shot into the top corner of the net on the short side. It's a move Duchene has used several times since coming to Columbus in a Feb. 22 trade with the Ottawa Senators, but the previous attempts hit the crossbar and bounced away.

“I’ve had four since I’ve been here,” Duchene said. “When you’re that close, you’re doing things right and you’re getting chances. You’ve just got to stick with it. It’s kind of the first slump I’ve been in all year.”

The goal was Duchene’s 30th of the season, which ties his single-season high set in 2015-16 with the Colorado Avalanche.

4) Nutivaara heating up

The front end of Duchene’s goal deserves mention too, because Nutivaara’s pass was impressive. After spotting Duchene open at the Bruins’ blue line, he fired the pass with a player bearing down on him for a hit.

The puck caromed perfectly off the boards and hit Duchene in stride for the push to get around Moore. It was exactly the kind of play the Blue Jackets need Nutivaara to make more often, either setting up the forwards with scoring chances or getting himself open for good shots.

Nutivaara had a breakout season with seven goals, 16 assists and 23 points in 61 games last year. He has four goals, 13 assists and 17 points in 71 games this season, with a minus-1 plus/minus rating 12 points lower than last season.

Nutivaara hasn’t scored a goal since Dec. 15 against the Anaheim Ducks, a dry spell of 39 games, so he’s overdue to start contributing that way too.

“It’s been the last five, maybe 10 games I’ve been (feeling) that it’s (getting) there,” Nutivaara said. “It’s still coming. I’ve got one more gear coming and I hope I can get there (before) the playoffs.”

5) The ice was ‘awful’

The NBA and the NHL need to figure a scheduling issue out in future seasons.

The Boston Celtics hosted the Atlanta Hawks at TD Garden on Saturday afternoon, with the game not concluding until close to 3 p.m. The panels that cover the ice, which sit between the ice and basketball floor, were still covering the ice as late as 5 p.m., shortly after players from each team arrived.

The arena’s maintenance crew worked hard to get the ice ready for an NHL game, but the short turnaround time resulted in a choppy, rough mess, according to several Blue Jackets.

That’s unacceptable for such a pivotal game for at least one of the teams, as the Blue Jackets chase a playoff spot

Bruins and Blue Jackets players were stumbling over ruts in the ice, losing their footing, missing wide-open shots and turning pucks over simply because the ice was torn up from the basketball game.

It was bad for both teams, which the Jackets fully acknowledged, but the visitors were not shy about slamming the ice conditions.

“It was awful,” Duchene said. “It was terrible. It was like pond ice back home in March. Probably shouldn’t have even been skating on it, but you keep it simple in those games. Both teams have to play on it. It’s just the way it is.”

Nutivaara was also unimpressed.

“(It was) really bad,” he said. “I’ve never seen that bad (of ice conditions). It’s the same thing for the other guys, too, the other team.”

The Bruins ultimately won in overtime after the puck hopped over Seth Jones’ stick at the Boston blue line and led to a rush that ended in Marchand’s goal.

Resilient Blue Jackets earn precious point as they continue to navigate demanding stretch

By Tom Reed, The Athletic – March 17, 2019

BOSTON — The Blue Jackets earned an important point Saturday night, while also making one.

They couldn't celebrate with the gusto of Bruins winger Brad Marchand, who scored the overtime-winning goal at TD Garden before strutting across the ice in homage to former UFC champion Conor McGregor. NHL teams don't publicly crow over loser's points. It's bad form and sends the wrong message.

But the Blue Jackets took pride in the resilience they showed again in a 2-1 OT loss on a night McGregor was in attendance and firing up the crowd. Such resilience has helped the Blue Jackets overcome scoring slumps and other obstacles during a demanding run of March contests.

Playing their second game in as many nights and fourth game in the past six nights, the Blue Jackets found a way to tighten their grip on the final Eastern Conference playoff spot. Clearly a step slow, they rode a 31-save performance from backup goaltender Joonas Korpisalo to move three points clear of Montreal and remain within one point of Carolina.

"If you tell us that we're going to get three out of four points on a back-to-back, we're taking that every day," said Matt Duchene of a Blue Jackets weekend that began with a 3-0 home win against the Hurricanes on Friday.

John Tortorella also took positives away from a night that saw his team improve to 2-0-1 in its past three games, including two against the Bruins.

"This time of year we are grinding away here," he said. "We're coming in here and this (opponent had) lost three in a row and we know they are coming. I just like the way we stood in there tonight."

In fact, the Blue Jackets have "stood in there" through a grueling slate of games against some of the NHL's better teams. On March 2, they began a 10-game, mettle-testing stretch in which they played just two opponents (Edmonton, New Jersey) outside the playoff picture. That sequence of games ends Tuesday in Calgary against the Flames.

They are 4-4-1 thus far with wins over the Penguins, Bruins and Hurricanes. It might not sound like an impressive mark, but considering the quality of opponents and their sporadic offense — one goal or fewer in five of the last nine games — it's a sign the Blue Jackets might be righting themselves.

- The club is getting terrific goaltending from Sergei Bobrovsky and Korpisalo.
- The club is solidifying its defensive pairings in the absence of Ryan Murray (upper body), who shows no sign of returning in the immediate future. Don't forget, this 10-game run began with Seth Jones and Scott Harrington as the top tandem.
- The club is starting to reap the benefits of the Duchene trade. The center has two goals and an assist in the past five games and is making more impactful plays.

His line with Ryan Dzingel and Josh Anderson was good again Saturday. Duchene scored twice this week against the Bruins, including a beautiful first-period goal Saturday for his 30th of the season. He also had two glorious chances to win it in overtime — robbed by goalie Jaroslav Halak and denied by defenseman Charlie McAvoy.

The center is ascending at a time when Artemi Panarin has one goal in his past 14 games. He's a minus-9 in that spell. Panarin had only one shot attempt Saturday night, but it required a good save from Halak in OT.

"We had great chances in overtime," Tortorella said. "I think the right people had the puck on their stick to try to score a goal. (The Bruins) do have the right people also and they do score."

It was a gritty effort from the Blue Jackets, who kept working on a night when little was clicking offensively. They blocked 20 shots, and Korpisalo said the majority of the chances he faced were not screened.

Still, the Blue Jackets don't get to overtime without at least a handful of great stops from Korpisalo.

"He's as good a backup goalie as you're ever going to see," Duchene said. "You take 'backup goalie' with a grain of salt when it's him. He's outstanding."

Korpisalo helped keep the Blue Jackets within three points of the Penguins, who sit third in the Metro Division.

After Tuesday's game, Columbus plays just three opponents who sit in postseason spots in the final nine contests. Given more time to jell and a softer schedule perhaps the Blue Jackets will start to resemble the contenders everyone expected when they made their series of daring trade deadline moves.

Absent an abundance of energy and offensive fluidity, they still earned a point Saturday. It's what resilience and good goaltending can do for you.

Notes

- The Blue Jackets played again without captain Nick Foligno, who missed the game for family matters. He missed five games earlier this season while tending to 5-year-old daughter Milana, who was recovering from heart surgery.

Saturday's absence had nothing to do with Milana's health, a team spokesman said.

"That family, they've gone through a lot," Tortorella said. "We're just trying to support them the best way we can."

Lukas Sedlak replaced Foligno.

- For the second time in two weeks, Bobrovsky did not dress for a game as coaches tried to get him a rest. Keith Kinkaid served as the backup. Heading into Saturday's action, his 1,237 minutes played since Jan. 19 were the most in the NHL.

- Duchene tied his career high in goals. He also registered 30 goals in the 2015-16 season.

- Talk about your tough assignments when rarely getting to play. Korpisalo's past three starts have come against the Lightning, Penguins and Bruins since Feb. 18.

Analytically speaking

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

- The Jackets likely got what they deserved in this game. Money Puck had the expected goal total at 2.46 to 2.04 with Boston earning just a .42 advantage. How the contest stayed so close statistically, however, is in large part due to the performance of Joonas Korpisalo. While the team couldn't build an edge in shots (minus-14), nor scoring chances (minus-3), their goaltender stood tall against 65 shot attempts in all situations and ended the night with a save percentage that was 1.38 percent higher than expected based on what he faced.
- One area of the game where the Jackets did gain the edge? Getting to the dangerous areas. Columbus ended up plus-2 in high-danger attempts, and for just the fifth time this season, they allowed fewer than five attempts from those areas. The players who were most effective in building that advantage against Boston were those on the Matt Duchene line that includes Ryan Dzingel and Josh Anderson. That combo generated three high-danger looks of their own while not allowing any for Boston.
- The two best chances in the game both came from Blue Jackets skaters. First, Dzingel's shot at 18:50 into the opening period had a 23 percent likelihood of becoming a goal. Second, Artemi Panarin's shot that came 2:34 into overtime had a 22.2 percent chance of getting in the net.

[Blue Jackets | Prized prospect Alexandre Texier headed to AHL](#)

By Brian Hedger, Columbus Dispatch – March 14, 2019

The French flash is taking another stride toward the Blue Jackets.

After helping KalPa end its season with a win on Thursday in the Finnish League — scoring twice, including the overtime winner — 19-year-old forward Alexandre Texier is heading to North America to finish the season.

“He’s under contract, so he’s coming over and we’ll see where it goes from that, but he’s a top prospect for sure,” Blue Jackets general manager Jarmo Kekalainen said. “We’re really, really, really excited about him.”

If you’re keeping track, that’s three reallys, from a general manager who prides himself on stoicism and patience, so it’s safe to say Kekalainen is fired up.

It’s easy to see why.

KalPa didn’t qualify for the playoffs, but Texier thrived in his second season with the club. After putting up 13 goals and nine assists as a rookie — and suffering a broken collarbone — Texier flourished this season with 14 goals and 27 assists in 55 games.

“I think he had an unbelievable season,” said Kekalainen, who played in the Finnish League and has scouted it for years. “For that age, to do that in that league is special. That’s why he was one of those prospects that under no circumstances was going to be moved at the deadline.”

Kekalainen mentioned Texier, Swedish forward Emil Bemstrom and Canadian forward Liam Foudy during his news conference after the trade deadline Feb. 25. After adding four players in trades, including center Matt Duchene for two forward prospects sent to Ottawa, Kekalainen made it clear his top prospects were off-limits.

“If it took (Texier) or Bemstrom or Foudy to get what we got, we wouldn’t have those (new) players,” said Kekalainen, who moved up to the 45th pick in the 2017 draft to get Texier by trading prospect Keegan Kolesar to the Vegas Golden Knights. “We’re very eager to see him here now.”

Texier is from Grenoble, located in the French Alps. He began his pro career in the French league at 16, playing one season for the same team his father, Fabrice, played for, but he was considered a diamond in the rough.

The Blue Jackets, however, think the gem is no longer hidden.

Texier arrives Friday in Chicago, may warm up with the Cleveland Monsters before a game against the Chicago Wolves and will likely make his American Hockey League debut Saturday in Rockford, Illinois.

“The NHL is still the best league in the world,” Kekalainen said. “No need to rush him into anything that he’s not ready for, and who knows, maybe he is ready for it. But let’s take it one step at a time.”

Lucky ducks

The tale of the “lucky duck” is beginning to make its way through the Blue Jackets’ locker room.

It involves a plastic, yellow duck that is taking up residence in Zach Werenski’s locker — after Ryan Dzingel had him touch it for good luck before a 7-4 victory Tuesday against the Bruins.

Werenski had a goal and three assists, snapping a 30-game goal drought, and Dzingel scored his first goal as a Blue Jacket and added two assists. Now, other Blue Jackets want some duck luck.

“Right before the game, (Dzingel) said, ‘Hey, Z, touch my lucky duck,’ ” Cam Atkinson said. “Next thing you know, they both went off and had a night. So, I’m going to be touching the lucky duck next game.”

[The Athletic / Breaking down perception vs. reality when it comes to playing 'heavy hockey'](#)

By Dom Luszczyszyn, The Athletic – March 14, 2019

Last week, I wrote an article about the merits of heavy hockey in the playoffs, an article that proved to be one of the most contentious I've ever written.

That's to be expected given the subjectivity of the topic at hand, but the degree of controversy it provoked in the comments sparked a new light towards a deeper understanding of what heavy hockey means to the average fan.

Heavy hockey does not have one set definition, different things are valued by different people whether it be pure physicality, consistent pressure, a relentless forecheck, a strong cycle game, winning battles, recovering pucks, finishing checks and just simply not being pushed around. All those things matter, but matter differently depending on who's watching. To me, heavy hockey means physical hockey: using your body to create pressure, to win battles, to recover pucks, to cycle it, to forecheck – just letting your opponent know you're there and you're not going to give them much breathing room.

Hockey data is very limited at the moment and there isn't public access to the much of what makes up heavy hockey. That doesn't mean it doesn't exist, it just means it's not currently being measured. To circumvent this in my last article, I used hits as a proxy for heavy hockey, figuring that a team that plays a heavy style will usually be a team that plays a physical game.

That idea struck a nerve for some, so out of curiosity, I tested that theory with a poll last Friday asking fans to vote on which team they viewed as the heaviest. I like employing a 'wisdom of the crowd' approach to things like this because it brings together everyone's different perspectives into one collective truth. It may not be perfectly accurate to everyone participating, but as a whole, it paints a passable picture.

As it turns out, my assumption that hits were a decent proxy for heavy hockey was very wrong based on the answers of just over 1,000 fans. Hits-per-60 in all situations had almost no correlation with fan perception of what constitutes a heavy team. The chart below has each team ranked by their poll results and coloured by their hits-per-60 rate this season (blue means a lot of hits, red means not a lot of hits).

It was a bit baffling, but a separate poll showed that the fan results were generally agreeable with room for a few disagreements considering the subjectivity of it all, meaning that when it comes to defining heavy hockey, hitting a lot doesn't matter at all – according to these results anyways. In a way, it sort of makes sense considering that heavy hockey entails not only hitting, but hitting with a purpose. It's about hitting to leave a mark and retrieve the puck.

A few people in the comments suggested just that, noting that I should control a team's hit totals for how often it has the puck (using Corsi as a proxy for puck possession), an idea that made too much sense and I'm a bit ashamed I didn't think of it initially. I also accounted for rink bias by using only 5-on-5 road hits instead and voila, a slight relationship was uncovered.

But there was something else that needed to be accounted for: reputation bias. While hits this season had no correlation, and road hits per time without possession had a slight relationship, an even stronger relationship occurred when using data from the last three seasons rather than just this one, even more so when the playoff data was included. That last wrinkle is extremely important to all of this. Playoffs are on the national stage and the general public starts familiarizing themselves with teams more than they have all season, doing so in an environment that is now known to have 37 percent more hitting (based on data from my previous article on the subject) than the regular season. The farther a team goes, the more lasting their impression is as a heavy team simply due to a newfound familiarity with them in a context that's biased towards increased physicality. Reputations are built in the playoffs when everyone is watching.

With the poll results in hand, I began to look to other factors that did explain what people thought when it comes to heavy hockey and a few things stood out: average weight and pace of play (measured by total shot attempts per 60). The first is laughably obvious: big boy hockey means having big boys to play it and fans seem to have a decent understanding of which teams have a roster of large human beings. The second is interesting philosophically. A big part of heavy hockey is pressure, forechecking and board play – things that tend to slow games down, so it makes sense that teams that fans consider heavier play a much slower game.

Oh, and one more: age. Yes, age. It seems as if the concept of knowing how to win via veteran experience is part of what constitutes heavy hockey in the mind of fans. Not only was it a significant factor in figuring out what inputs channelled the poll results best, but it was actually the most important. If a decent chunk of what constitutes the perception of heavy hockey is reputation, this actually makes sense too – a player and team have to prove they're tough and it takes time to build that sort of credibility.

Based on the poll results, the best explainer for heavy hockey appears to be a combination of age, adjusted hits over the last three seasons, average weight and pace of play – in that order. Those four factors explained 43 percent of the poll results, which means there's plenty of missing pieces that can't be explained with current numbers, but given the dearth of data to account for heavy hockey it's a decent framework of fan perception.

Based on the four factors that proved important to the poll results, and using adjusted hits from this year only (to adjust for reputation bias), here's a look at which teams should be considered the heaviest and lightest this year. The chart is mapped to their poll score to find areas of disconnect between general public perception and whatever numbers we do have to figure out which team is perceived as the heaviest.

Some of the biggest differences: Winnipeg, Boston, Philadelphia, Calgary and Nashville were considered heavier than what the numbers dictate, while teams like Tampa Bay, Edmonton, Dallas, Vegas and Carolina were considered lighter.

Perception comes down to paying close attention, so I asked the people who cover those teams whether they considered them as ones that play heavy hockey.

Leading the poll results was Boston, who are fourth in adjusted hits, top 10 in slowing the game down, middle of the pack by weight, and 10th in age. A heavy team using these criteria, but probably not the

heaviest, a notion Fluto Shinzawa agreed with, calling it reputation-based from years past with a heavy fourth line and defenders like Johnny Boychuk, Dennis Seidenberg and Adam McQuaid. “They still have some elements, but it’s very much a team built on closing quickly with feet and sticks,” Shinzawa said, more akin to calling the Bruins a fast team.

Murat Ates had a similar feeling about the Jets. “They can play a few different ways and absolutely have big people, but I think the guys who drive the bus are more skilled than bruising.” Ates then added, “They’re a big team and some of their skilled players are strong and don’t get pushed around, but they’re so far from number two in my books.” Maybe the pollsters are big fans of Dustin Byfuglien, though to their credit Blake Wheeler and Kevin Hayes both said the Jets play a fast and heavy style postgame on Friday, so maybe we should just listen to the pros there.

In Philadelphia, Charlie O’Connor figured it was mostly franchise reputation for the former Broad Street Bullies, with only Radko Gudas and Robert Hagg billed as tough customers. For the Predators, Adam Vingan gave Nashville a three and was surprised they landed sixth in the poll, saying they can be heavy and got bigger at the deadline, but wouldn’t call them overly physical. As for Calgary – a team that is sixth lightest, fifth youngest, bottom five in adjusted hits, and plays at a fast pace – I was perplexed the team was that high to begin with. Kent Wilson said they weren’t a heavy team, with Garnet Hathaway being as close as the team gets to an enforcer or bruiser.

On the other side of the coin, Tampa Bay was deemed deceptively heavy by Joe Smith and that was on full display in Monday’s dominant win over the Maple Leafs where they didn’t give Toronto any space or time. “They are actually a heavier team than people think – not in a sense of size, but their tenacity in fighting for space and puck on forecheck,” Smith said. “They are perceived as a team based solely on speed and skill, but they use both to be effective and heavy at times. As Babcock said you don’t have to be big to play a heavy game.” Perhaps surprisingly, the Lightning rank first in adjusted hits and may deserve a lot more credit for the edge they play with. They’re far from an easy team to play against, that’s for sure.

Vegas finished just outside the top 10 in the original poll, but based on the modelled output might be in the running as the league’s top heavy-hockey team. The team is one of the heaviest, the players are experienced, their pace is surprisingly slow and they lay the body a lot. But Jesse Granger sees things differently, calling Vegas more of a middle of the pack team, close to where they were on the poll and one that relies on speed more than brawn. “Vegas has one heavy line (The fourth line of Reaves, Bellemare and Carpenter — was Carrier before he got hurt—) and the rest of the team plays fast, transition hockey. They forecheck hard, but I definitely wouldn’t call them heavy.”

The three others – Edmonton, Dallas and Carolina – haven’t exactly been playoff teams of late and that lowers perception. I was surprised the Oilers showed up so low considering they completely overhauled their team for the purpose of being heavy. “Chiarelli only said it 20 times at his opening press conference – it’s still mostly his roster – and Hitchcock personifies heavy hockey,” said Jonathan Willis. He figures the lack of heaviness in their star players is a contributing factor. In Dallas, it’s a matter of consistency, but they’re literally the fourth heaviest team by weight and play at the second slowest pace. As for the Hurricanes, they’re seventh in adjusted hits and average by weight, but do play at an uptempo pace. As Sara Civian aptly put it, “it’s hard to shake a candy cane reputation.” Carolina hasn’t been pushed around much this season, but without many people watching and no recent playoff

experience to go by, it's not surprising to see them ranked 23rd – even if they have no actual business being that low based on their physicality this season.

A lot of what goes into heavy hockey depends on what you see. Until there's better data to unearth the qualities of what makes up heavy hockey, the answers will depend on what you personally see or who you ask, with the potential of that answer being littered with subjective bias based on reputation and viewing availability. Ask 1,000 fans to grade each team by how heavy they are and you'll most likely get 1,000 different answers.

Heavy hockey is a tricky subject. It's real. You know it when you see it. But when you can't see everything and can't rely on data to fill in those blanks, perception gets muddy which makes analysis difficult. Even the best analysts the game has to offer, the best scouts, the greatest hockey men and women – they don't and can't watch everything, meaning their answers will vary greatly too. They'll be more informed than anyone, but even they'll be missing pieces of the puzzle.

I'm still of the mind that "heavy hockey" doesn't matter as much as it's been made out to be. There's a place for it, just not to the current degree. There's likely more nuance to it than what I showed last week, I'll admit, and we may not know the true answer until there's better data to test it. However, we need to be collectively mindful about the inherent biases that come with the discussion of such a subjective matter. A matter where no one can really agree and answers are mostly mired by reputation and bias. A matter where seemingly every fanbase thinks they need to get heavier without being mindful of where they stand in the league's hierarchy in that domain.

Debate is good and healthy, and I'm not claiming I have all the answers in this one, far from it. But given the current state of the analysis behind the ideology, I remain skeptical of the utility of heavy hockey in determining which teams win or lose a given game.

[The Athletic / Pronman: Who's the most divisive prospect in this year's NHL Draft? Meet Arthur Kaliyev](#)

By Corey Pronman, The Athletic – March 14, 2019

Every draft has a divisive prospect.

Last season was Ryan Merkley, other years it was Lawson Crouse, Brandon Saad, Mikhail Grigorenko, Tony DeAngelo, Josh Ho-Sang. Saying those names to a scout would have elicited a strong response: a pound on the table to emphasize how good the player is or an equally fierce rejection of them.

This year's divisive prospect is Arthur Kaliyev.

Kaliyev sits on 50 goals and 100 points in the OHL, making him the first 17-year-old to score 50 in the OHL since Alex DeBrincat. The only other current NHL players to do the same Steven Stamkos, John Tavares and Jeff Skinner. Kaliyev is also one of the leaders in shots on goal across the CHL. Yet there are NHL teams who are hesitant to take him in the top 10, the upper half of the first round, the first round in general and, for some, even at all.

I watched Kaliyev live with Hamilton last season in the playoffs, a few times in the summer at USA's Select Camp and several more times at the Hlinka Gretzky Cup. In a span of about five months, I saw him live about 10 times and did not remember one positive viewing. If anything, it was the exact opposite.

I talked to NHL scouts who were at the same events who echoed the concerns: No compete, doesn't drive play.

When he started scoring a ton this season, it would have been easy to say it's not for real. I watched him a lot already and never saw a real player. There's nothing to get excited about there. However, it's important to combat sample size biases and, if a guy is about to score 50 goals and 100 points at 17, you better look twice and be 100 percent sure.

So, I looked again. I went to several Hamilton games this season and I watched all his point-scoring plays. Truth be told, I still haven't been to a game of Kaliyev's where I was blown away. With that said, I think upon further research and reflection there is more to his game that intrigues.

What immediately stands out about Kaliyev is not his shot, which you would think would be the selling point for a 50-goal scorer. Rather, his hockey sense stands out as his best trait. He's one of the best passers in the OHL.

"You don't get 50 assists without having very good vision," said Hamilton GM Steve Staios.

Hamilton's power play runs through him, not just for his finishing touch, but also for his ability to make plays. Kaliyev often feathers seam passes to his teammates and makes creative feeds through small lanes to create chances. A few examples:

What you see there are passes of a true playmaker. He's putting pucks in the right spots to be tipped in, finding lanes and, on the last play, showing creativity to flip the puck to an open teammate.

Of course, he does have a great shot. I don't think his shot is great in the typical sense. I rarely saw Kaliyev pick a corner and go bar down on a goalie as you typically envision a sniper in the modern day game. Rather, his shot is dangerous because it's a bullet. Here are two examples.

The first one is an 80-grade shot. A cannon of a shot, far corner as a one-timer and one of the few times I saw him pick a corner. Very few players in the world can pull that off. The second one isn't a great angle but it's a slo-mo replay and it's still hard to follow it go in.

Very few of his goals are of the spectacular variety. That doesn't mean they required no skill, scoring is a skill, and Kaliyev did hit the highlight reel. But a lot of Kaliyev's scoring was from finishing off a play. Thus there are concerns about whether Brandon Saigeon (since traded), Matthew Strome and Jan Jenik helped support Kaliyev's numbers. In that sense, there is a bit of a rhyme with DeBrincat where, at the time, scouts wondered whether Connor McDavid and Dylan Strome made him (of course a bit of a difference between the two groups of players). I'm skeptical of this claim.

Critics of Kaliyev point to the prospect's skating and compete level.

Scouts also point to the fact he doesn't drive offense on a line, meaning there are often games where you wonder if he accomplished anything. It was a running joke this season with NHL scouts who said they went to a Hamilton game, didn't notice Kaliyev much, but he scored and got two points. Teams who have invested in getting deeper analytics on CHL players, like Corsi and zone entry numbers, Kaliyev comes out as fine but nothing amazing.

On it's face those are reasonable concerns. There are shifts like these where his forecheck leaves something to be desired:

Or shifts like these where he doesn't show much speed or pace on a zone entry:

I don't think he's slow, though. Kaliyev isn't fast by any means, but I see average speed. And when he wants to turn a corner, he can do it at a fair level:

Despite that, many scouts who have reservations key in on the on-ice compete. Kaliyev is not a perfect player by any stretch. He's not much of a fan of physical play, he's likely not going to be a penalty killer in the NHL, and he's not often asked to be the guy bringing the puck up the ice to break a puck in on a power play. His strengths are fantastic and visible, and his weaknesses are visible too.

I will say this about Kaliyev: I don't believe this is a character issue. With cases like DeAngelo and Merkley, you'd hear negative stories from people who worked with them about the person. With Kaliyev it's been mostly the opposite, as the impressions of him as a person and player are positive. I wouldn't say that is universal, as there are some who have expressed concerns, and scouts can always pick apart a player's personality and background. But in my opinion, this is not a glaring red siren.

When you talk about a winger with average feet, a big shot, great production and so-so compete level, some scouts get flashbacks to Oliver Wahlstrom and his not-so-hot freshman season at Boston College. I see the argument, it's reasonable, but I also see some differences in Kaliyev as a playmaker.

Other scouts say Kaliyev reminds them, in part, of Mikhail Grigorenko. Stylistically there are differences, but in terms of a highly talented, intelligent and productive player with size whose game can lack pace and compete, there is a bit of a rhyme there.

While this might paint a negative picture, there are certainly scouts who are all aboard the Kaliyev bandwagon and see him as a potential impact guy at the NHL level.

The scouts on the more optimistic side of the projection argue the DeBrincat situation as a comparison to Kaliyev. Sure there are major differences in size and compete level, but both didn't have a ton of speed, but have elite brains and shots, and both produced a lot in the OHL. DeBrincat's coach went to bat for him, as well.

"Arthur is one of the most dynamic players I've coached in the OHL in my six years here. I coached Dylan Strome and Alex DeBrincat. In my opinion, Arthur is just as good a player as either of those two," said Vince Laise, the acting coach of the Hamilton Bulldogs.

Laise was formerly an assistant coach with Erie.

"Arthur has the ability to find the back of the net just as those two did at the same age," Laise said. "They differ in play styles but all achieve what NHL organizations look for. Arthur is more than just a power play producer, his underlying value is his ability to produce at even strength and his playmaking. He's been as coachable as they come and a pleasure to work with."

It's possible Kaliyev won't work out. There are signs there. He has limitations in his game. Most prospects have limitations, though.

My job as far as I see it is to do my research, weigh the evidence and give my best attempt at a balanced opinion.

On the pro-Kaliyev side: Elite hockey sense, cannon of a shot, decent frame with some room left to fill out, elite goal, point and shot production. Runs a power play as well as anyone in the CHL.

On the anti-Kaliyev side: Average feet, pace isn't always good, on-ice compete level, consistency.

Those pros are very persuasive and could be indicators of a good, if not a very good NHL player. However, those cons are significant too and must be given significant weight. I don't think those cons are so glaring that it should knock a 50-goal man with his toolkit out of the first round, but I do think they raise reasonable concerns from elevating him to the top tier of the draft. For these reasons, I have Kaliyev in the 8-15 range in this year's NHL Draft.

[Sportsnet.ca / Current NHL playoff format creating season-long rivalries](#)

By Mark Spector, Sportsnet – March 14, 2019

WINNIPEG — Ask Brad Marchand about meeting the Toronto Maple Leafs in Round 1 of the Eastern Conference playoffs, and he'll pump the brakes on you.

"That matchup isn't set in stone by any means," cautions the Boston Bruins winger, always the picture of pragmatism. "You're getting a little ahead of yourself here."

Realistically, with the Bruins trailing Atlantic Division-leading Tampa by 17 points, followed closely by Toronto — which has an eight-point bulge on fourth-place Montreal — a Boston-Toronto Round 1 is not only a lock.

It is, in fact, the only first-round series across the National Hockey League that is as good as set in stone. So, going on that assumption, we asked Marchand what he thinks about the fact Toronto and Boston will meet in a playoff series for the third time in the past seven post-seasons.

"I don't think it's fair that ... one team would finish second (in the NHL) and have to play a third or fourth place team, compared to a seventh-place team," he said. (Boston is currently the fourth-ranked team in the NHL, while Toronto is fifth). "But, if you're going to get to a Stanley Cup you've got to get through your whole Conference anyway."

The debate is clear-cut: Do you prefer the "one versus eight, two versus seven" system that the league abandoned in 2014? Or is the newer, Division-based system — that has pitted Boston and Toronto against each other twice in six springs — preferable?

"(Playoffs are) where the rivalries are built," he said. "If you're excited about Toronto, it's because we've played them a few years in the playoffs, and there have been some exciting finishes."

"I don't think we're looking forward to playing the Leafs any more than any other team in the East. It's just another team."

Now, this is a player who dipped into Leafs Nation with a couple of complimentary tweets about Mitch Marner recently. He knows the Leafs and Bruins are on a collision course, but with the Bruins trying to right the ship tonight in Winnipeg, it just wasn't the time for Marchand to rock that boat about a series that is almost a month away.

The debate about the two playoff formats, however, is a pertinent one here in Winnipeg, where last season the No. 1 team in the NHL (Nashville) met up with the No. 2 Jets in the second round.

"It was a hell of a series," said Jets head coach Paul Maurice. "Nobody in Nashville or Winnipeg got cheated, if you bought tickets."

Hockey people, almost to the man, will tell you that a team that earns a high placing over the 82-game grind of a regular season deserves to face a lesser opponent in Round 1. There should be a tangible reward for regular-season success, and meeting Toronto, then No. 1 Tampa, does not amount to any kind of reward for the Bruins.

But, consider the entertainment side.

“The first argument is, go one through eight, and the better teams have a better chance. The series are shorter,” said Maurice. “Do it the other way and you get some heavy match-ups — in that second round especially — and it’s going to increase the number of games.

“If I’m a hockey fan, I want to turn on the TV every night and have a bunch of hockey games on,” the Jets coach said. “We are here to put an exciting product in the ice for two straight months. So if the argument is, that’s the most exciting product? Then that’s absolutely the way it should be.”

The theory that the Divisional format produces more first-round games, and thus, more Hockey Related Revenues for the league and the players, sounds logical. However, it does not bear out under scrutiny.

Between 1994 and 2013, in the old 1 vs. 8 system, the average first-round series lasted 5.78 games.

1994-2013 Conference quarter-finals

YEAR	# OF GAMES	# OF SERIES	AVG SERIES LENGTH
1994	48	8	6
1995	49	8	6.13
1996	45	8	5.63
1997	48	8	6
1998	46	8	5.75
1999	44	8	5.5
2000	41	8	5.13
2001	44	8	5.5
2002	47	8	5.88
2003	47	8	5.88
2004	47	8	5.88
2006	44	8	5.5
2007	43	8	5.38
2008	48	8	6
2009	44	8	5.5
2010	49	8	6.13
2011	49	8	6.13
2012	48	8	6

2013	47	8	5.88
TOTAL	878	152	5.78

In the six post-seasons since they switched to the Divisional format, the average first-round series was marginally shorter at just 5.68 games.

2014-2018 First Round series

YEAR	# OF GAMES	# OF SERIES	AVG SERIES LENGTH
2014	48	8	6
2015	47	8	5.88
2016	47	8	5.88
2017	42	8	5.25
2018	43	8	5.38
TOTAL	227	40	5.68

So, there are no extra gates to be had, as Maurice's theory proposes. But, what about the theory that, when two teams meet in a playoff series, the rivalry that gets built makes their four or five meetings the following season more entertaining?

"We took eight straight penalties in Nashville in our first game there (this season)," said Maurice. "The two teams both showed up for a street fight. The referees thought they were going to keep it nice? It wasn't a nice game.

"That's happened in our Minnesota games, and in our Vegas games we've played pretty strong," he said of last year's playoff opponents. "For sure, there's way more in the (games the) next season, after a playoff series."

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Boston goalie Tuukka Rask doesn't necessarily agree, however.

"I think those days are gone. It's not going to be like Boston-Montreal," Rask said. "The game has changed, it's not as heavy a game, not as many fights and dirty tricks like there used to be. It's a skill game now, and the best skilled team is going to win."

It's a debate that won't end soon. And one that will produce much howling, if the Maple Leafs get dispatched by Boston in Round 1.