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[Blue Jackets' offense finally produces, and it must continue](#)

By Michael Arace, Columbus Dispatch – March 12, 2019

Boone Jenner scored his first career hat trick a day after missing a game because of the flu — and that was probably the third or fourth bullet point on Tuesday night. The Nationwide Arena cannon was fired so many times, it nearly broke. Seriously. Brian Johnson screamed, “For those about to rock ...” and the stupid, glorious cannon didn’t fire right on cue. I forget which goal.

Jenner scored short-handed, at even strength and into a net, and the Jackets beat the Boston Bruins 7-4. Yes, the Jackets scored seven goals. Of late, Jackets fans had been thinking that their team might never score again, not ever.

There were 16,554 souls at Nationwide. They were ready to order playoff tickets when the Jackets took a 5-1 lead eight minutes into the second period. They were ready for the NFL draft by the second intermission, at which point the Bruins had cut the lead to 5-4. They couldn’t really process what they’d seen by the time the final horn sounded, and somebody fixed the cannon.

Boone had a hat trick? Sure. The two new guys — Matt Duchene and Ryan Dzingel — each had a goal in Union Blue. That’s the first time they’ve each scored in the same game. Duchene and Dzingel played on a line with Josh Anderson, who had a goal and three assists. They marauded.

A Jackets defenseman scored his first goal since Dec. 31 — on the power play, no less. It was only the second power-play goal the Jackets have scored this month. They handed Bruins goaltender Tuukka Rask his first regulation loss since Dec. 23.

In the middle of it all, Artemi Panarin dropped the gloves and fought Bruins defenseman Charlie McAvoy.

“That was pretty exciting,” Anderson said of Panarin’s pugilistic pursuit. “I know he likes to watch UFC, so he had the left-hand-right-hand thing going. Exciting.”

It was a decent scrap. McAvoy probably won on points — but he’s a defenseman and he’s supposed to win against a skinny dangler whose claim to fame, from a social-media standpoint, is having one of the cutest little doggies on the Scioto Mile.

As Bread sat down in the penalty box — Bread Box, anyone? — he smiled.

There was a lot of smiling. The cannon was blasting. That was the most important thing for this team.

For the past three weeks — or since the Feb. 25 trade deadline, pretty much — the Jackets have been vexed on so many levels. After giving their scouts the rest of the year off at the deadline, they hadn’t gotten the desired offensive impact from their new recruits.

Generally speaking, they’ve struggled to score. The Jackets are the only team in the league with six 20-goal scorers and, it seems, all of them left the building all at once. Heading into the game against the Bruins, the Jackets had lost five of eight — and they’d been shut out three times in the process.

This, at a time when Sergei Bobrovsky was getting red-hot (2.17 goals-against average, .921 save percentage from Feb. 8 through Monday night's 2-0 loss on Long Island).

This, in the middle of March, amid a heated race for the playoffs.

Then there was Tuesday night. Afterward, everyone in the locker room said they could feel it coming. (Especially Zach Werenski: "Awesome. About time.")

Coach John Tortorella had a sense that his team was heading in the right direction. He said he admired his players for sticking with the system and, as he is wont to say, "staying above the puck" and minding their checking through their offensive drought.

They won't score seven goals every night, but if you are a Jackets fan, it was good to remember that it's possible. They have a dozen games remaining. Maybe they're loaded up now and ready to go. That is what it felt like after the final cannon blast Tuesday night, for whatever that's worth.

[Blue Jackets' power play is misfiring again](#)

By Brian Hedger, Columbus Dispatch – March 12, 2019

After revving their engine for a prolonged stretch, the Blue Jackets' power play stalled out again.

Before playing the Boston Bruins on Tuesday night at Nationwide Arena, the Jackets hadn't scored a power-play goal in four straight games and were 2 of 20 since the Feb. 25 trade deadline — after acquiring center Matt Duchene from the Ottawa Senators. But they did score a power-play goal late against Boston.

"I think we're impatient on the power play," coach John Tortorella said, before the Jackets allowed a short-handed goal by Bruins center Patrice Bergeron on their first power play. "I think we're forcing plays and we're not giving ourselves a chance."

Between Jan. 10 and Feb. 9, coinciding with the hiring of Martin St. Louis as a special-teams consultant, the Blue Jackets went from moribund to scorching hot. They scored on 10 of 31 power plays for a 32.3 percent rate of success and began to creep up the NHL rankings.

The fire burned out after about a month. Since Feb. 12, the Jackets had only scored a power-play goal in three of their previous 15 games, going 3 of 38 (7.9 percent) in that span.

"We may try a couple of different looks tonight to see if we can open ourselves up," Tortorella said. "I just think we're a little bit impatient. We've just got to keep our patience and let the puck do the work."

Fourth-line rotation

Tortorella hasn't been unhappy with the play of his fourth line, but also hasn't been thrilled. There is a surplus of bottom-six forward options, so he plans to shuffle them in and out of the lineup.

Against Boston, it was Oliver Bjorkstrand, Alexander Wennberg and Brandon Dubinsky who started out as the fourth line. Riley Nash, Boone Jenner and Nick Foligno formed the third line.

"I want to keep everybody involved," Tortorella said. "I don't think anybody has played poorly. No one has taken that position, but no one deserves to be out, so I might just rotate people in and out."

Tough assignment

Tortorella kept Josh Anderson on the right wing of the second line, playing with Ryan Dzingel and Duchene. He played another strong game, tying it at 1 in the first period with his 23rd goal, but his promotion left a hole at right wing of the third line.

Foligno filled it by skating with Nash and Jenner. Tortorella planned to match them up against Boston's top line, centered by Bergeron.

[Blue Jackets 7, Bruins 4 | Boone Jenner hat trick highlights big night for offense](#)

By Brian Hedger, Columbus Dispatch – March 12, 2019

The cannon got a workout Tuesday night at Nationwide Arena, courtesy of a resilient bunch of Blue Jackets.

After failing to score Monday in a 2-0 loss at the New York Islanders — the third time they had been shut out in six games — the Jackets upended the Boston Bruins 7-4 to split a key road/home back-to-back with an impressive performance.

“We just had to keep on trying to play and trying to get a result,” coach John Tortorella said. “We got a result tonight.”

It was a big one, too.

The win helped the Blue Jackets maintain their hold on the Eastern Conference’s second wild card. They moved to 81 points and still have that spot thanks to a regulation/overtime win tiebreaker over the Montreal Canadiens, who beat the Detroit Red Wings 3-1.

Just as important was the jolt of confidence the Jackets gained from scoring seven goals for the fifth time this season (fourth on home ice).

Josh Anderson, Zach Werenski and Boone Jenner led the charge.

Anderson and Werenski had four points each on a goal and three assists, while Jenner — who scored his 100th career NHL goal — scored into an empty net with 47 seconds left for the first career hat trick.

“It’s just funny how it works sometimes,” said Jenner, who missed the game Monday while sick. “I think when you go through a little bit of a stretch like that, where you’re not scoring, I think you can get caught up in it and you’re just thinking about it too much.”

They didn’t have to ponder too long against the Bruins, despite allowing the game’s first goal 4:00 into the first on a short-handed shot by Boston’s Patrice Bergeron.

Anderson responded 3:19 later with his 23rd goal, extending his career-high, and that lit the fuse for the Blue Jackets and the cannon.

The Jackets’ two biggest acquisitions before last month’s trade deadline also got into the scoring act, as Matt Duchene and Ryan Dzingel (one goal, two assists) each scored.

Prior to this game, the Blue Jackets had scored 14 goals in eight games since the deadline, for 1.75 goals per game. They had been outscored 24-14 in those games and had a 3-5-0 record, putting them on the playoff bubble.

After breaking out against the Bruins (42-19-9), who have lost two in a row since a 15-0-4 stretch ended Sunday in Pittsburgh, the Jackets improved to 5-0-0 in games in which they have scored seven goals, and 17-1-1 in games in which they have reached at least four.

>> Read more: Struggles return for Blue Jackets’ power play

Boston made it interesting, cutting into a 5-1 deficit with three straight goals in a span of 5:30 late in the second, but the Blue Jackets held firm. Werenski scored at 12:21 of the third on a power play to make it 6-4, and Jenner's empty-netter completed the scoring.

"A little scary there the second period, when it was a close game, but we believed in ourselves," Anderson said. "We were playing good hockey, stuck to what we knew was best and got the job done."

[Blue Jackets survive mental mistake and Bruins' late rally as offense finally comes to life](#)

By Aaron Portzline, The Athletic – March 12, 2019

COLUMBUS, Ohio — The prevailing concern in Nationwide Arena at the start of Tuesday's game between the Blue Jackets and Boston Bruins was simple: Can the Blue Jackets finish enough of their scoring chances to beat the Bruins? Or, failing that, would they awaken offensively soon enough to salvage a playoff berth?

Coach John Tortorella praised his club for not letting their scoring woes lead to impatience and a general unraveling of their all-around game. But how much longer could that be the case for the Blue Jackets, who had been shut out in three of their previous six games?

It didn't take long for all of those worries to be allayed, replaced by a bounty of storylines in one of the wildest games of the season.

The Blue Jackets scored five unanswered goals, then watched a 5-1 lead turn into a 5-4 sweatshop before pulling away with a gutsy third period. The final was 7-4.

"You just know when it's 5-1, with so much game to be played, you knew it wasn't going to be that easy," Tortorella said. "That Boston team, they've lost a couple (of games) now, but they didn't win or tie 19 in a row just out of luck. They play hard."

There were individual achievements ...

Boone Jenner had the first hat trick of his career, while Zach Werenski (1-3-4) and Josh Anderson (1-3-4) had the first four-point games of their careers, and Ryan Dzingel (1-2-3) had his first three-point game.

... rarely seen gaffes and bloopers ...

The Blue Jackets took a faceoff with only four players on the ice — no, they were not shorthanded because of a penalty — that led directly to the Bruins' 5-4 goal late in the second period. Tortorella refused to discuss this after the game.

... and an added bonus for fans of the fight game.

Blue Jackets star winger Artemi Panarin and Bruins defenseman Charlie McAvoy, after a fracas behind the play, engaged in a welterweight scrap that McAvoy clearly won, but that sent a charge through both teams.

Where to begin?

There were signs early that the Blue Jackets' snakebitten offense had found a cure.

The 2-1 goal was scored by Dzingel at 14:18 of the first after he gathered a puck off the end boards and fired at Bruins goaltender Tuukka Rask from below the goal line. The puck shot back to Dzingel, who corralled it with a whack out of the air, then batted off Rask's shoulder and into the net.

Those bounces have been missing for the Blue Jackets for weeks now.

The Blue Jackets scored two more goals (Matt Duchene, then Jenner) off passes from below the goal line to players in front of the net, the kind of bang-bang goals that have been spoiled by opponents' skates and sticks in recent weeks.

"This is fun," Anderson said. "This is what it's all about, playing hockey and scoring goals and winning games."

The Jackets led 5-1 at 8:09 of the second, and it looked like a get-well night for all of their struggling offensive players.

Then it got interesting. The Bruins scored three goals in the span of 5 1/2 minutes to make it 5-4, and the Blue Jackets needed to be saved by the second-period bell.

But the 5-4 goal — scored by Brad Marchand just seconds after the faceoffs — was a head-scratcher.

If the Jackets had lost this game there would have been hell to pay for somebody, either Tortorella for not noticing how many guys were (or weren't) on the ice, or for a player (Nick Foligno?) for not knowing that his line had gone over the boards.

Tortorella shot down the question before it was fully asked, but Werenski described the scene. He was on the ice with fellow defenseman Seth Jones, while Jenner took the faceoff and Riley Nash was on the left hash.

The right hash — which would seem to be Foligno's spot, as those are his linemates — was vacant. (The puck was dropped on the far end of the ice from the Blue Jackets' bench, up against the bench-side wall, making it harder for the Jackets' bench to see their personnel.)

Also, Blue Jackets players could be seen welcoming Panarin back to the bench after he'd served his fighting major seconds before the puck was dropped. Foligno was giving Panarin a proper head-mauling.

"I realized it right as the puck was being dropped," Werenski said. "I turned around to tell Nasher we were going to go weak side, and usually I tell two forwards. When I turned around, I was like, 'Is he behind me?' I thought he was maybe following me.

"Once I realized it, the puck was down and the puck was in our net. I've never seen that before. Probably won't ever see it again. It happens, I guess."

The Blue Jackets went into the second intermission clinging to a 5-4 lead, but they took the time to get composed.

"We just played," Tortorella said. "We moved right by it in between periods, didn't talk about anything. Just wanted to get back to attacking. We felt we had some really good success as far as getting through the neutral zone and playing in behind their net.

"A period like that, some of the crazy things that went on with it ... the biggest thing I talked about is we just can't be tentative. I don't care if we make more mistakes in the third period, but it has to be through us being on our toes. I thought (Sergei Bobrovsky) made a couple of really key saves early in the third period."

Werenski picked a perfect time to end his 30-game goal drought. He scored a power-play goal at 12:21 — his first goal since New Year’s Eve — to give the Blue Jackets a 6-4 lead and some much-needed breathing room.

Jenner sailed home the empty-net goal with 46.1 seconds remaining.

Jenner had scored two goals in a game eight times before Tuesday. Remember, he missed Monday’s game on Long Island because he was sick, but the Blue Jackets learned in the late morning that his fever had broken and he was ready to play, Tortorella said. But he still wasn’t feeling 100 percent, which is why Tortorella had extra players out for warmups just in case. “Yeah, I’m sure he’s not dead-on (healthy) right now.”

A quick Q&A with Jenner: AP: “Are you 100 percent or still playing through some stuff?” BJ: “Feeling good.” AP: “You wouldn’t admit it even if you were sick, would you?” BJ: (smiling) “Feeling good.”

Here’s Tortorella on Jenner: “It’s a huge boost for us. We talk about big-name players that are out of the lineup, Jens is just a guy that you pull for. He just doesn’t know how to do it any other way than to just simply work hard. I really respect how he’s handled himself. It was certainly a big boost for us tonight.”

The way Anderson has played lately — big, nasty, dangerous — he could make any forward line better. Since the third period on Monday on Long Island, he’s played with newcomers Duchene and Dzingel. On Tuesday, they totaled 3-5-8 with 10 shots on goal.

Here’s Tortorella: “Josh just fits there, it seems, right now. I’m not going to give Josh all the credit ... all three of them just play well together right now. How long it lasts? I hope it’s forever. I just don’t know what’s going to go on. You could see when we changed it last night and put Josh there, it was immediate, an immediate impact on that line.”

Here’s Dzingel on Anderson: “He’s north-south, always skating. Makes it easy for us. When you see him on the forecheck, nobody wants to go back and get pucks.”

This was Panarin’s first fight with the Blue Jackets, but his second in the NHL. While playing for Chicago, he had a scrap with St. Louis’ Scottie Upshall on Nov. 9, 2016. Here, let’s watch, shall we?

Here’s Jenner on the Panarin scrap: “I didn’t really expect that. You could see it kind of coming with them, battling a little bit early in the shift. I think they both had enough. It was a great fight by Bread, and obviously, we were really sparked by it.”

Here’s Anderson: “He’s a pretty tough kid. I watched his first fight (vs. Upshall) a couple of years ago. He did really good. He’s not the biggest guy, but he’s pretty strong and built. Nobody really realizes that when they’re going up against him.”

Here’s Tortorella: “It’s great for the bench. You could see everybody was excited. He threw (with) both hands. Yeah, it’s good for our team. I think it’s good for Bread. I think it’s good for Bread with his teammates. That stuff really helps as far as the camaraderie. He’s a competitor. We’ve all seen him play. He’s a competitor. I’m glad he stood right in there. He took a couple of shots and gave a couple of shots.”

The Blue Jackets needed the win to stay “above the bar” in the Eastern Conference because Montreal held serve with a 3-1 win over Detroit. The Jackets currently hold the second wild-card spot, two points

behind Carolina. The next game for both the Jackets and Hurricanes is against each other on Friday in Nationwide Arena. That's a big one.

Tuesday's game marked the fifth time this season the Blue Jackets have scored seven goals in a game: Oct. 25 at St. Louis (7-4), Nov. 15 vs. Florida (7-3), Nov. 26 at Detroit (7-5), and Jan. 13 vs. the New York Rangers (7-5).

It was, on the whole, a strange night for Foligno. With 1:04 remaining in the first period, Foligno had the stick whacked out of his hands along the wall, just as the puck skidded around the boards and in front of him. He started to go for his stick, then realized the importance of getting the puck out of his zone and reached for it with his glove, flinging it well into the neutral zone on the fly. He was called for closing his hand on the puck, a minor penalty.

Jenner's first goal, the rebound put-back off Anderson's shot, was the 100th of his NHL career. He's sixth on the franchise's all-time list now with 101 goals.

Pierre-Luc Dubois has gone seven games without a point, the second-longest streak of his young career. Hard to imagine, isn't it, that the Blue Jackets would score seven goals and the No. 1 line — Dubois, with Panarin and Atkinson — would total one point, an assist by Panarin.

Panarin's assist ended a four-game streak without a point, which matched the longest of his Blue Jackets career.

The Blue Jackets are off Wednesday. They're back at it on Thursday at 11 a.m.

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

In a crazy contest, the Jackets — with a little help — deserved the two points. According to [naturalstatstrick.com](#), in 5-on-5 play, Columbus earned 50.78 percent of shot attempts, 59.25 percent of scoring chances and 61.71 percent of high-danger attempts. And where does the help come in? [Moneypuck.com](#) had the expected-goal total at 4.04 to 3.54 in favor of Boston, but Tuukka Rask, who let in five goals against, was 8.38 percent below his expected-save percentage, meaning he allowed 2.43 more goals than he should.

Speaking of letting in goals, Bobrovsky allowed four, but that's not a number to be judged in and of itself. Where Rask faltered, Bobrovsky was stronger. Tortorella cited, in particular, a few key saves to start the third. All in all, based on the shots he faced, Bobrovsky's save percentage was 2.79 percent below expectations, translating to 1.2 goals more than expected.

Jenner got the first hat trick of his NHL career off his only three shot attempts of the night. With that kind of quality, his individual offense equated to 25.74 percent of the Jackets' expected goal total. Anderson was second with 16.09 percent.

Seth Jones and Werenski looked like the threat they can be, tilting the ice more than any other Jackets skaters. The team was plus-10 in both shot attempts and scoring chances when they were on the ice.

[Defensive pairs start to jell without injured Ryan Murray](#)

By Brian Hedger, Columbus Dispatch – March 13, 2019

The Blue Jackets are adjusting to life without Ryan Murray.

Their best puck-moving defenseman is out “week-to-week” because of an undisclosed upper body injury — he missed his 12th straight game Tuesday in a 7-4 victory over the Boston Bruins — but his teammates are settling into defined roles now.

Zach Werenski and Seth Jones have gotten some of their old magic back, Markus Nutivaara and David Savard are clicking, and the third unit is coming along too — as Scott Harrington and Adam McQuaid learn each other’s tendencies.

“I think they’re playing much better,” Tortorella said of his defensemen. “We’ve really stressed on just getting the puck up to the forwards, just advance the puck. We don’t have to look for a better play. ... I think that’s helped them.”

It has helped ease some of the burden on Jones’ legs too.

Before logging just 22:37 against Boston, Jones had topped 27 minutes in six of 11 games after Murray’s injury Feb. 18 against the Tampa Bay Lightning, including the previous four in a row.

Assistant coach Brad Shaw sets the defensive pairings with help from Tortorella, and their comfort level with the current setup is starting to show, especially in regard to Harrington and McQuaid, one of four players acquired before last month’s trade deadline.

“I think Quaid has relaxed a little bit and he’s played much better,” Tortorella said after McQuaid posted three straight plus/minus ratings of zero after going minus-5 in his first four games. “So, the six (defensemen) have played well, have found their game and hopefully will stay consistent.”

That consistency also paid off with Werenski’s game against the Bruins. He had a career-high four points on three assists and a late power-play goal that ended a 30-game goal-less streak that stretched to Dec. 31.

“We’re just trying to grow as players together,” Jones said of Werenski. “We’ve switched the pairs around a little bit this year, but we want to be a dominant force.”

One sick night

Boone Jenner got the puck off a Bruins turnover inside the Blue Jackets’ blue line and shot it down the ice, straight into an empty net.

It was the game’s final goal, his third of the game and Jenner’s first NHL hat trick. Even more impressive was the fact he missed a 2-0 loss on Monday at the New York Islanders because of illness.

“The biggest thing was we just didn’t want him giving it to anybody else,” said Tortorella, who was informed Tuesday morning by head athletic trainer Mike Vogt that Jenner’s fever had subsided. “It’s a

huge boost for us. Jenks is just a guy that you pull for, and he just doesn't know how to do it any other way than simply work hard. I really respect how he's handled himself."

The Blue Jackets didn't practice Wednesday, giving the team a day to rest.

Tough on the draw

Since adding face-off winning center Matt Duchene in a trade Feb. 22 with the Ottawa Senators, the Blue Jackets' success rate has skyrocketed.

Before the trade, they were ranked 20th in the NHL with a 49.4 percent success rate. Since the trade, they have ranked second by winning 54 percent of their draws in 11 games, including 64 percent against the Bruins (38 of 59).

[Josh Anderson's fast, furious play provides spark](#)

By Brian Hedger, Columbus Dispatch – March 13, 2019

As games dwindle and pressure mounts, the Blue Jackets' most effective forward has emerged in two-plus weeks since the trade deadline.

It's not Artemi Panarin or Cam Atkinson, although they both are threats. It's not Pierre-Luc Dubois, Matt Duchene or Ryan Dzingel, either.

It's Josh Anderson, and it's not even close.

"I'd like to see him lead the way, as far as how you play," coach John Tortorella said last weekend, before Anderson did exactly that in a demon-exorcising, 4-1 trouncing of the Pittsburgh Penguins on Saturday at Nationwide Arena. "We're waiting for someone to lead the way, and Andy certainly has the ability, the speed and the season to do that and say, 'Follow me.' "

Anderson's play the past three weeks has gotten that message across to his teammates, loud and clear. They are following Anderson, even if most have no prayer of actually catching him on skates.

Anderson not only is the Jackets' biggest, baddest dude up front — a guy who stood toe-to-toe with Boston's towering Zdeno Chara last season and lived to tell about it — he also is their fastest forward, with breathtaking speed at 6 feet 3 and 221 pounds.

That size/speed combination has been on display the past four games, including Anderson's career-best effort Tuesday, leading the Blue Jackets to a 7-4 victory at home against the Boston Bruins, who had a 15-0-4 stretch end Sunday in Pittsburgh and sit comfortably in second place in the Atlantic Division.

Anderson pushed his goal total to a career-best 23 and finished with career-highs in assists (three) and points (four). He also impressed in three previous games, despite adding only one assist during a frustrating offensive slog for the team.

His lines, however, have been the Jackets' most effective, led by Anderson's hard-nosed forechecking.

In two games against Pittsburgh last week, Anderson helped the Jackets' "identity" line — which included captain Nick Foligno and Boone Jenner — hem the Penguins into their zone for long stretches and also take a 1-0 lead on Jenner's goal 2:31 into the game.

Tortorella broke them up Monday during a frustrating 2-0 loss at the New York Islanders, but it didn't affect Anderson, who immediately helped Duchene and Dzingel get traction. Those three stayed together against Boston and the results were even better.

Anderson's read of a play while backchecking, and then speed after a turnover created by Dzingel, sparked his goal and a big night for their line. Dzingel and Duchene also scored, with Dzingel adding two assists for the first three-point game in his NHL career.

"This is the time of the year when you've got to step it up and kind of lead by example on the ice," said Anderson, who also leads the Jackets with 185 hits. "I want to be that guy, too. I want to lead by example on the ice and I've got to continue to do that with my play."

It hasn't gone unnoticed, either. The Jackets have climbed aboard the No. 77 train and hope to keep chugging right into the Stanley Cup playoffs.

"If he doesn't have the puck on his stick, he's going to forecheck somebody and get it back," said Jenner, whose first of three goals against the Bruins was scored off Anderson's rebound. "He's dangerous out there, and I think that brings a lot of guys with him into the fight."

Tortorella agrees.

"Andy is having a hell of a year," he said. "Everywhere we put him, he seems to help. He's a very important guy for us right now."

Blue Jackets 7, Bruins 4: Five takeaways

By Brian Hedger, Columbus Dispatch – March 13, 2019

There were a lot of eyes looking at Columbus on Tuesday night.

After another stumble Monday at the New York Islanders, losing 2-0 in a Metropolitan Division game, the Blue Jackets knew a lot of people wanted to see how they would respond against the Boston Bruins – a team that just had a 15-0-4 stretch halted Sunday in Pittsburgh.

The Jackets' answer was rooted in resilience, refusing to let the Bruins knock them out of a playoff spot. Despite allowing the game's first goal again, a dangerous recent trend, they stormed back to take a 5-1 lead on Boston midway through the second period.

And allowing three straight goals late in the second, Columbus steadied themselves in the third, holding off the Bruins for a big 7-4 win at Nationwide Arena.

Boone Jenner had a hat trick, Josh Anderson and Zach Werenski each had a goal and three assists – career-highs – and even the new guys, Matt Duchene (goal) and Ryan Dzingel (goal, two assists), got into the act. It was exactly what the Blue Jackets (39-28-3) needed after being shut out 24 hours earlier for the sixth time this season and third time in a six-game span.

“My dad and my brothers are baseball guys and it's just the law of averages, you know?” said Dzingel, who hadn't scored a goal since the Blue Jackets acquired him Feb. 23 from the Ottawa Senators. “You can either stay in the dumps or you can keep playing the way you know you can play and eventually they're going to get in somehow.”

His went in after banking off goalie Tuukka Rask's right elbow, after an impressive second effort off his own shot from near the left post.

“If you're a .300 hitter, you're a .300 hitter,” said Dzingel, who scored his 23rd goal of the season. “That's what you're going to do.”

Are the Blue Jackets a .300-hitting playoff team?

They looked like it against the Bruins, but we'll find out over the final 12 games of the regular season. Until then, here are five takeaways from their win Tuesday:

What it meant

Columbus maintained its position as the Eastern Conference's second wild-card team, tied with the Montreal Canadiens at 81 points.

Montreal, which beat the Detroit Red Wings 3-1 on Tuesday, remains on the outside of the postseason with three less regulation/overtime wins than Columbus (38-35). The Blue Jackets next play Friday, hosting the Carolina Hurricanes in a huge divisional matchup to start another tough back-to-back that concludes Saturday in Boston.

The Canadiens will play Thursday at the New York Islanders with a chance to unseat Columbus from the second wild-card spot.

Raining goals

The Blue Jackets hadn't scored seven goals in a game since Jan. 13 in a 7-5 win here against the New York Rangers.

They hadn't scored six since Feb. 2, winning 6-3 at the Colorado Avalanche. It was also the Jackets' first game with five-or-more goals since Feb. 16 in Chicago, a 5-2 victory against the Blackhawks.

The trend here is that when the Blue Jackets score a lot, they win – improving to 17-1-1 when scoring four-or-more goals.

Unfortunately for them, the opposite is also true. When the Jackets are muted, held to two-or-less goals, they're 5-24-2. For a comparison, Boston is 9-13-7 in games they've scored two-or-fewer goals – a difference of 13 points.

Add those 13 points to the Blue Jackets' tally and they'd be leading the Metro with 94 and have a five-point cushion over the Washington Capitals.

Career bests abound

There were career-highs and career-bests splashed around Tuesday night like free cars being given out by Oprah.

Jenner scored three goals in an NHL game for the first time, notching his first hattie. Anderson was credited with his first three-assist game, not to mention his first four-point NHL game. He also scored the Jackets' first goal, which pushed his career-high to 23 – four more than his previous career-high last year (19).

Not to be outdone, Werenski and Dzingel also had career-best nights.

Like Anderson, Werenski finished with four points – the most in his NHL career – and broke a drought of 30 straight games without a goal by scoring a key one late in the third for a 6-4 lead. His dry spell had stretched back to New Year's Eve, when the Blue Jackets routed Dzingel and Matt Duchene's Ottawa Senators 6-3.

“Just seeing (Werenski) after he scored the goal, he was pretty excited,” Tortorella said. “Players judge themselves. A guy like that judges himself on that. Sometimes coaches don't. I think he's worked at his defensive part of his game. I think he's improved there, but as we're trying to fight to score some goals it's nice to get him to chip in It's a big goal.”

Dzingel finished with three points for the first time in his career and his 23rd goal tied his career-high for a season.

'Bread' boxed

Artemi Panarin finished with an assist, a fighting major, seven penalty minutes and a wild finish in the second period.

His fight started with a face-off win by Boston's Sean Kuraly, an alum of the Ohio AAA Blue Jackets program, after Brad Marchand's first of two goals to cut the Blue Jackets' lead to 5-2 with 6:53 left in the second.

Panarin chased the puck, which McAvoy quickly played before knocking Panarin off kilter with a forearm shove to his face. The Jackets' Russian star didn't appreciate it and they came together again seconds later in the Boston zone, where McAvoy threw a shoulder at Panarin and then whacked him across the back of the legs with a two-handed slash – drawing a minor penalty.

Panarin immediately turned around and they dropped the gloves in the neutral zone. It was the second official fight for each and McAvoy got the better of it, landing several right crosses that led to Panarin's nose bleeding from the bridge – likely cut by his plastic visor.

Panarin stayed on his feet, though, and landed a couple shots of his own. The Blue Jackets rapped their sticks on the boards in approval, while captain Nick Foligno skated across the ice to give Panarin an "atta boy" as he sat in the penalty box.

The Bruins scored the next two goals – the first 15 seconds after McAvoy's slashing minor ended and the second a couple seconds after Panarin and McAvoy were released – but Panarin's willingness to defend himself didn't go unnoticed.

"It's great for the bench," Tortorella said. "You could see everybody was excited and he threw both hands. It's good for our team. I think it's good for 'Bread,' with his teammates. That stuff really helps as far as the camaraderie. He's a competitor. He stood right in there. He took a couple of shots and he gave a couple of shots."

Panarin's only previous fight was Nov. 9, 2016 in St. Louis, his second season with the Chicago Blackhawks. He fought Blues forward Scottie Upshall, a former Blue Jacket, and got the "Gordie Howe Hat Trick" with a goal, assist and fight – scoring in overtime to end the game.

This time, despite assisting on Werenski's goal, he didn't get the goal for the "Gordie" – which he lamented through a team spokesman when asked to speak with reporters.

The fight likely dashed any chance Panarin had to win the Lady Byng Memorial Trophy, awarded annually for "sportsmanship and gentlemanly conduct," and he added another two minutes in the third for good measure – slashing Bruins defenseman Torey Krug.

Close call

Marchand's second goal, scored late in the second, cut the Jackets' lead to 5-4 with 1:23 left in the period. It wasn't a power-play goal, officially, but the Bruins did have one extra skater for the face-off that preceded it.

Following a stoppage, the Blue Jackets only sent four players onto the ice during a full-strength situation and paid for it dearly after Patrice Bergeron won a face-off against Jenner at the left-wing circle. Marchand got the puck off the draw and fired it past goalie Sergei Bobrovsky on the short side.

Defensemen Zach Werenski and Seth Jones were on the ice for Columbus along with Jenner and Riley Nash – who had two assists against his former team. Captain Nick Foligno had been shifting with them throughout the game, but it's unknown if he was the missing forward.

Tortorella, who had a look of disbelief after the goal, declined to talk about the play after the game. Had the Bruins completed the comeback, it would've been a much bigger deal.

Instead, the Jackets got to the second intermission with the lead and reset themselves for a strong third period.

"We just played," Tortorella said. "We moved right by it in between periods. We didn't talk about anything. We just wanted to get back attacking."

[On Zach Werenski, the end of a slump and the tale of a 'lucky ducky'](#)

By Tom Reed, The Athletic – March 13, 2019

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Zach Werenski was badly in need of some puck luck. It arrived Tuesday night in the form of a tiny yellow rubber duck that sat on a shelf in his locker nestled between two elbow pads.

Hours before the Blue Jackets outlasted the Bruins, 7-4, in a chaotic game filled with goals and wacky moments, Werenski and Ryan Dzingel had a chat about their scoring droughts. The newly acquired winger hadn't registered a goal in his previous nine games, dating to his time with the Ottawa Senators.

Werenski's skid read like some twisted New Year's resolution. He had gone 30 games without a goal. His last coming on Dec. 31.

And so prior to Tuesday's contest in Nationwide Arena, Dzingel handed the defenseman the rubber duck.

"He gave me his 'lucky ducky' before the game and told me it had brought him luck in the past," Werenski said.

The Indians of "Major League" fame have Jobu. The Blue Jackets of the NHL have a toy duck.

Hey, whatever gets you two points in a tight playoff race, right?

Werenski delivered a power-play goal and three assists for the first four-point game of his career. His third-period tally at 12:21 restored a two-goal lead and allowed everyone in the arena to breathe a sigh of relief on a night all sports psychologists in Columbus were standing by to offer counseling.

The Blue Jackets were on the verge of blowing a 5-1 second-period advantage. A regulation loss would have dealt a major blow to their postseason hopes. But Werenski ripped a shot past goalie Jaroslav Halak, who had replaced starter Tuukka Rask, to make it 6-4.

"I guess the duck was lucky tonight," Werenski said after scoring his 10th goal of the season and first in the calendar year.

Turns out it brought good fortune to the player who gifted the rubber toy, as well. Dzingel scored his first goal as a Blue Jacket and added a pair of assists.

In a game where the home team nearly squandered a four-goal lead, its most skilled player threw haymakers in a wild fight and the Blue Jackets failed to put five guys on the ice for a faceoff that led to a Bruins' goal, Dzingel's decision to farm out his "lucky ducky" was well down the list of strange occurrences.

When it was over, the Blue Jackets had maintained their grip on the final playoff spot and, in the process, got one of their best players feeling good about his offensive game again.

"I didn't think that (shot) was going in," Werenski said. "Sometimes, you just need one like that to get yourself going. It felt really good to get that one."

Werenski had accepted a diagonal pass from Artemi Panarin in the offensive zone. At first, he worried the puck might bounce over his stick. The Blue Jackets had given up a first-period shorthanded goal and, just seconds before Werenski scored, nearly yielded another.

Not wanting to take any chances, the defenseman decided to shoot quickly from the top of the left circle, firing the puck just inside the near post. As Werenski turned to the crowd, he reached to his back and appeared to throw something into the stands.

There was symbolism behind the celebration.

“I thought of it just today,” he said. “I thought, ‘If I score a goal, I’ve got to do something — it’s been so long.’ The first thing I thought of was getting the monkey off my back.”

Werenski scored 16 goals last season while playing most of it with a badly damaged shoulder that required surgery to repair. At the time, he never imagined this campaign would be just as challenging.

While Werenski tallied nine goals in his first 39 games, his defensive play had become a serious concern for coaches. John Tortorella removed him from the top pairing with longtime partner Seth Jones and told him to focus on correcting his deficiencies behind the red line.

The budding star, who scored 36 goals in his first 196 NHL games, began to siphon risk from his offensive approach. Although his assist rate has improved, he’s down 1.32 shots per game at even strength, according to naturalstatstrick.com. That multiplies to just over three shots per 60 on the power play. Werenski also is generating about one scoring chance fewer per game when skating at even strength.

Compounding the problem is Jones’ lack of goal scoring. The perennial All-Star has nine on the season with just two coming since Jan. 5. On a team suddenly struggling to score — it had been shut out three times in its previous six games — the Blue Jackets desperately need Werenski and Jones to rediscover their offense.

On a night when goals came in bunches, Werenski’s breakout performance might be the most encouraging sign.

“I think it’s been kind of up and down in terms of when I was being more offensive or being more defensive and learning more of the defensive side of the game,” he said. “I think I’m kind of finding that balance right now and it’s the right time to find it.”

A season ago, Werenski endured a similar slump. He went 25 games without a goal from Dec. 29 to March 2. The defenseman rallied to score five times over the final 17 games to help the Blue Jackets reach the playoffs.

“I have been getting chances, the puck just wasn’t going in for me,” Werenski said. “I would have been a lot more worried if I wasn’t getting chances. I just haven’t been scoring. I have been missing the net with shots and just not getting any puck luck. None of us have.”

Enter Dzingel’s rubber duck.

The Ohio State product spoke to the media after the game but said nothing of his offering to Werenski. His 23rd goal of the season tied a career high.

“My dad and my brothers are baseball guys,” Dzingel said. “It’s the law of averages, ya know. You either can stay in the dumps or you can keep playing the way you play and eventually they’re going to go in somehow. (I’m) thankful that one went in. Law of averages. If you’re a .300 hitter, you’re a .300 hitter. That’s what you’re going to be.”

Neither Dzingel nor Werenski has likely played in a game as bizarre as this one.

With about seven minutes remaining in the second period, Panarin took exception to a slash from Charlie McAvoy and decided to fight the Bruins defenseman. Panarin is a fan of mixed martial arts and did Dana White proud during an entertaining lightweight bout in which each combatant landed serious blows.

Just prior to a defensive zone faceoff, Panarin was released from the penalty box. The crowd of 16,554 fans erupted in applause. On the bench, Panarin was greeted to a hero’s welcome.

In all of the excitement, one of the Blue Jackets forwards forgot to hop over the boards to take part in the faceoff. The home team had four skaters on the ice. Werenski was one of them. He realized the mistake just as the linesman was dropping the puck.

“I turned around to tell (Riley Nash) we were going to go weak side, and usually I tell two forwards and when I turned around it was like, ‘Is (the other forward) behind me?’ ... I’ve never seen that before. Probably won’t ever see it again.”

The Bruins won the draw and Brad Marchand, using Werenski as a screen, scored to cut the Boston deficit to 5-4 late in the second period.

With the fan base fearing the worst, the Blue Jackets played a solid third period, including killing a big penalty. As Werenski has regained the coaches’ trust, he’s been deployed on one of the league’s top penalty-killing units.

In the absence of injured Ryan Murray, he’s also been reunited with Jones to play heavy minutes in the Blue Jackets’ playoff push. Werenski responded Tuesday with his best game of the season.

“I think he’s worked on the defensive part of his game,” Tortorella said. “I think he’s improved there. But as we fight to score some goals, it’s nice to get him to chip in.”

Maybe history repeats itself and Werenski finishes the season with a flurry of goals. He’s not above taking a little help when he can get it, however.

After concluding his postgame media obligations, Werenski walked from his corner stall to the adjacent changing room. The little yellow duck was still on the shelf between his elbow pads.

[The Athletic / Matchup data for defencemen from all 31 teams to find out who has earned their coach's trust](#)

By Tyler Dellow, The Athletic – March 12, 2019

One of the things I like to keep an eye on is how defencemen are being matched up against opposing forwards. While there's a debate about the extent to which that matters, when you look at the data it's pretty obvious that coaches believe in it. There a million ways to do this but the approach that I like to take involves classifying opposition lines based on who the coach likes to use. In order to do this, I've simply classified the forward with the highest average time on ice for the season as the first line. I eliminate him and his two most common linemates in that game from the data and then classify the forward with the second highest average time on ice from the remaining nine as my proxy for the second line. Everything else is bottom six minutes.

What this does is let us look at ice time profiles for a team's defencemen. Defence is a position where reputations sometimes last longer than a coach's faith in a player. Looking at things like this lets us see what the coach is thinking. In order to provide a sense of the ranges involved, I've put together a line graph showing the percentage of ice time played against opposition top lines, second line and bottom sixes by defencemen this year.

Just to explain what we're looking at here, the 100th percentile defenceman against opposition bottom six forwards (the defenceman who played the highest percentage of his time against them) played just under 70 percent of his ice time against bottom six forwards. You can see a few things in this. First of all, the distribution of ice time against second lines is much narrower. If I'd broken this out further, we'd probably see the same thing with fourth lines too. It's easier to control matchups on the edges – against the opposition's best and worst players.

Second, the spread actually is fairly big for the top and bottom of the opposition's lineup. Again, it's more on the edges than anything. You can see in particular that things change starkly in the bottom and top ten percent of defencemen. Whether it's impacting results or not, coaches deploy different defencemen differently. Finally, note that the second line is going to make up a smaller proportion of most defencemen's ice time than the first line (which plays more by definition) or the bottom six (which involves two lines rather than just one.) As you look through the various teams, you can use the graph above for a sense of where a given player's usage rates relative to the team.

Pacific Division

San Jose Sharks

One of the things that you notice when you start looking at teams this way is that the defenceman who plays the most ice time isn't necessarily the one who has played the toughest minutes. There's been a long time trend in San Jose where Marc-Edouard Vlasic provides some shelter for Brent Burns. This year, that's extended to Erik Karlsson as well. Justin Braun and Vlasic have played much tougher minute than the typical defenceman sees; this provides a benefit to the rest of San Jose's defence.

Calgary Flames

It's not surprising that TJ Brodie and Mark Giordano are playing the toughest minutes in Calgary. Two other things jump out at me looking at this. First, Travis Hamonic and Noah Hanifin aren't being particularly sheltered. Rasmus Andersson and Oliver Kylington on the other hand ... they're getting a very nice introduction to life in the NHL. As we'll see, this is something of a Mike Babcock trait and Calgary coach Bill Peters is a product of the Mike Babcock finishing school for coaches.

Vegas Golden Knights

Vegas is similar to San Jose, in the sense of one pair providing some cover for the rest of the defencemen, only more so. Nate Schmidt and Brayden McNabb are taking the hardest minutes; every other defenceman on the team is nicely sheltered from the opposing first lines as a result. This will be worth keeping an eye on if the Golden Knights run into deeper opposing teams in the playoffs. Their second and third pairs haven't been asked to eat minutes against really high-end competition for most of the year.

Arizona Coyotes

Oliver Ekman-Larsson and Niklas Hjalmarsson are pretty clear matchup favourites for Rick Tocchet in Arizona. Beyond that, he doesn't really seem to have any preferred matchups, although, with the injuries that the Coyotes have endured this year, it might be difficult to spot trends there. To the extent that Tocchet's had a preferred matchup for opposition second lines, it's probably depended a lot on who happens to be healthy on any given night.

Edmonton Oilers

Edmonton's basically run with a top four and bottom two this year. There's a slight edge towards shifting the more difficult minutes to Adam Larsson and Oscar Klefbom but it's not particularly strong. Kevin Gravel and Matt Benning have been particularly sheltered.

Vancouver Canucks

Travis Green is a coach who's really impressed me as someone who decides on the matchups he wants and in his time behind an NHL bench, finds a way to get them. Sure enough, that shows up again, with Tanev and Edler playing heliciously difficult minutes. After that, Ben Hutton stands out, particularly given that 2017-18 was a difficult year for him and then you've got a group of four who look to have been more sheltered. It will be interesting to see where Quinn Hughes slots in here exactly. Green would presumably like to break him in slowly but there are a lot of people in Vancouver fighting for those minutes.

Anaheim Ducks

Curiously, given Randy Carlyle's reputation as a matcher of lines and pairs, there aren't all that many particularly strong trends with Anaheim this year. The Ducks only have five defencemen who made the games played limit due to the injuries and player churn that they've endured this year. Unsurprisingly, Hampus Lindholm and Josh Manson are the matchup pair but Carlyle and Bob Murray don't really seem to have hidden any of the Ducks' five regulars.

Los Angeles Kings

There's not a ton of really hard matching going on in Los Angeles this year. Drew Doughty and Derek Forbort are, I suppose, playing a little more against top line competition than Jake Muzzin, formerly of that parish, and Alec Martinez. Then you've got three guys who are clearly being more sheltered with Dion Phaneuf having been the most sheltered of the three.

Central Division

Winnipeg Jets

Winnipeg's kind of been running with a top three this year. Dustin Byfuglien, Jacob Trouba and Josh Morrissey have all been playing minutes with markedly different profiles than the other Jets defencemen. There was a school of thought amongst some smart Jets' fans to whom I pay attention before the trade deadline that Winnipeg could really use a left-shot defenceman. As it so happens, Paul Maurice's usage patterns kind of line up exactly with that.

Nashville Predators

In the years that I've been paying attention to this, it seems like nothing has ever changed with Nashville. They roll out the big four defencemen against the opposition's best and then the bottom pair is heavily sheltered. Plus ça change ...

St. Louis Blues

Vince Dunn is someone who's gotten a lot of positive attention this year. He's had a good year, but St. Louis is fairly similar to Nashville in terms of having a clear top four and bottom two.

Dallas Stars

Miro Heiskanen isn't going to have much luck in the Calder Trophy race this year what with Elias Pettersson but a teenager playing top-four minutes and surviving on a likely playoff team is worthy of a mention. It's not all that common.

Minnesota Wild

The Wild are another team that's kind of clearly running a top four and a bottom pair. If Matt Dumba had been healthy all year, Greg Pateryn's splits would probably look a lot more like Nick Seeler's.

Colorado Avalanche

Jared Bednar hasn't run particularly strong matches this year. There appears to be a bit of a preference for getting Erik Johnson, Samuel Girard and Ian Cole out against the other team's best players and a bit of a preference for Nikita Zadorov and Patrik Nemeth against bottom six forwards but beyond that, it's a pretty generic looking split.

Chicago Blackhawks

Surprisingly to me, Connor Murphy and Carl Dahlstrom (!) have been playing a lot against the opposition's top players. In addition to them, Jeremy Colliton seems to have given Duncan Keith and Henri Jokiharju a bit of a run there. That leaves Erik Gustafsson, Gustav Forsling and Brent Seabrook playing the more sheltered minutes in Chicago.

Metro Division

Washington Capitals

There's not much to say here. This is a very clean example of a top four and a bottom pair. It will be worth keeping an eye on whether or not the usage patterns change now that Nick Jensen has been slotted into the third pair with Brooks Orpik.

New York Islanders

One of the curious things about the Islanders last year was that they didn't really have a lot of definition in their defence pairs. That's changed this year, with Ryan Pulock having become someone who Barry Trotz is using in a matchup role. Also of note: Johnny Boychuk's competition seems to have been taken down a notch.

Pittsburgh Penguins

One of the big stories coming out of the Stadium Series were the injuries suffered by Kris Letang and Brian Dumoulin. When you see this, you can see why. Letang and Dumoulin are very much Mike Sullivan's preferred pair in terms of playing against the opposition's first line. You can contrast that with a team like Washington, where that burden is being shared more evenly.

Carolina Hurricanes

Speaking of burdens that are evenly shared, Rod Brind'Amour seems to spread the work out fairly evenly in Carolina. There's a slight tendency towards Calvin de Haan and Trevor van Riemsdyk playing a little bit more against bottom six opposition and a little bit less against top six opposition but it's fairly weak compared to some other teams.

Columbus Blue Jackets

Seth Jones has evolved into a tough competition player in Columbus. About a quarter of the defencemen who qualified under the limits that I established played a greater percentage of their time against opposition top lines than against bottom six forwards; Jones is one of them. More surprisingly, so too is Ryan Murray. Murray's had a bit of a tough start to his career since going second to Columbus in 2012; judging by his usage this year, he's earned John Tortorella's trust.

Philadelphia Flyers

Ivan Provorov has become the clear first choice in Philadelphia, with Travis Sanheim and Robert Hagg also playing a reasonable share of their time against opposition first line players. After that, Shayne Gostisbehere, Radko Gudas and Andrew MacDonald look to be players who the Flyers coaching staff has preferred to get on the ice for the opposition's bottom six forwards rather than their top six.

New York Rangers

There appear to be three groups of defencemen who appear from the Rangers' data. In the first tier, you have Neal Pionk and Marc Staal. They're followed by Brady Skjei, Tony DeAngelo and Adam McQuaid. Finally, you've got a more sheltered group that includes Fredrik Claesson, Kevin Shattenkirk and Brendan Smith.

New Jersey Devils

New Jersey's more in the mold of teams like Washington, with four defencemen who the coaching staff uses against opposition top lines and then two who they tended to deploy more against the opposition's bottom six.

Atlantic Division

Tampa Bay Lightning

It's surprising to see Victor Hedman third on this graph, which is sorted by 5-on-5 ice time. The Lightning have reduced his minutes this year, both overall and at 5-on-5. He still leads Tampa's defence in overall ice time but his 5-on-5 minutes have been dialed back. So, uh, they can probably play him more in the playoffs if they're so inclined. It's also kind of noteworthy to me that Hedman isn't particularly someone who the Lightning are matching up against opposition top lines this year. He's not being hidden or anything but Ryan McDonagh, Anton Stralman and Erik Cernak are carrying more of that load. Again, that kind of suggests to me that Tampa could make things even more uncomfortable for the opposition in the playoffs if they're so inclined.

Boston Bruins

It's hard to say that an inner circle Hall of Famer is underrated but if there's a case to be made for anyone, it's Zdeno Chara. According to hockey-reference, only nine defencemen have even played in the NHL in their age 41 season – Chara, Tim Horton, Allen Stanley, Nicklas Lidstrom, Chris Chelios, Doug Mohns, Tommy Albelin, Carl Brewer and Terry Harper. I'd be very surprised if anyone other than Lidstrom was playing the hellacious competition level that Chara's facing. Even at 41, he's still making life easier for Boston's other defencemen.

Toronto Maple Leafs

This is a very typical Mike Babcock split. He picks a pair and rides them hard. As with last year, Morgan Rielly and Ron Hainsey eat a lot of the tough minutes. Travis Dermott and Igor Ozhiganov have had much more limited exposure to the opposition's top players. In fact, of the 202 defencemen who qualified for this study, only Bogdan Kiselevich in Florida has played a smaller share of his minutes against the opposition's top line. (Calgary's Oliver Kylington is next on that list; as was mentioned earlier, Peters and Babcock seem to share a philosophy with respect to sheltering their third pair.)

Montreal Canadiens

About the only surprising thing with Montreal is that Victor Mete has played the second highest share of his minutes against the opposition's top line. This is, I suspect, a result of being the left-handed partner of choice for Jeff Petry or Shea Weber when they were filling the matchup role. Other than that, Claude Julien has managed his bench very carefully.

Florida Panthers

You can make a case that Aaron Ekblad has the toughest minutes amongst NHL defencemen this year. He's played the fifth highest share of his minutes against the opposition's top line and the lowest share against their bottom six forwards. The Panthers then kind of have a tier of Mike Matheson, Keith Yandle

and Mark Pysyk, with MacKenzie Weegar and Bogdan Kiselevich being very heavily sheltered by Bob Boughner and his staff.

Buffalo Sabres

The Sabres are kind of similar to Winnipeg in that there are three defencemen who their coaching staff seems to trust above the others: Rasmus Ristolainen, Jake McCabe and Marco Scandella. Rasmus Dahlin's usage looks a little easier than Heiskanen's in Dallas but fairly similar. As with Heiskanen, it's always noteworthy when a teenaged defenceman takes on significant minutes in the NHL. Nathan Beaulieu was clearly less trusted than the others; unsurprisingly, he's no longer a Sabre. He's been getting a look in Winnipeg as the Jets deal with the absence of Josh Morrissey and look for a defenceman to solidify their top four.

Detroit Red Wings

Two things really jump out about Detroit. First, Nick Jensen was getting some exposure to opposition top lines. He's a bit of an analytics darling and analytics darlings are occasionally players who aren't facing the strongest competition. You certainly can't say that about him. Second, Filip Hronek's usage this year is interesting, in terms of a coaching staff trusting a young player. If you contrast his usage with that of Dennis Cholowski, it's pretty easy to see a difference. Hronek's ice time is still reasonable but for a defenceman in his age 21 season, he's getting some significant exposure to high-end opposition forwards.

Ottawa Senators

The Senators kind of dialed back the usage of Cody Ceci against the opposition's top players this year. He's had years where he was much more the main man for Ottawa than he is now. In fact, five of Ottawa's defencemen – Ceci, Max Lajoie, Ben Harpur, Mark Borowiecki and Christian Jaros all have fairly similar usage profiles. There are two that are markedly different from the rest: Thomas Chabot and Dylan DeMelo.

Ottawa's usage of Thomas Chabot is kind of surprising, in that with this being a bit of a transitional season for Ottawa, it seems like the sort of year in which you could get Chabot time against the opposition's top lines and live with the consequences a little bit. That's not the direction that the Senators chose.

It's all the more unusual because Chabot has led the Senators defence in average time on ice this season. That's something that's usually done by a player who the coaching staff is using against the opposition's best players. Chabot's one of just three defencemen to lead his team in average time on ice while spending less than 30 percent of his time on ice against the opposition's top line (Brent Burns and Mike Green are the others); he's the only one to come in below 25 percent. He is, obviously, very young – this is his age 21 season – but it seems like this would have been the sort of year for in which Ottawa could make that investment in him. It will be something to keep an eye on going forward – if Chabot is going to be the player that they ultimately want him to be, his minutes will have to start to skew away from the bottom six opposition at some point.

There you have it – 31 teams worth of matchup data for defencemen. It's important to remember that a defenceman isn't good or bad simply by virtue of his matchups; coaches are fallible. At the same time,

it's a helpful point of context when looking at a defenceman, thinking about what he might be in other circumstances and understanding what his current coach thinks of him. While it's not dispositive of anything, it's another piece of information that can help in painting a picture of a player.

From my perspective, going through this is useful for a couple of reasons. It gives you some insight into the ways in which different coaches are running their benches. I always find it particularly interesting to see who's really riding one pair in tough matchups (San Jose, Vegas, Boston, Toronto, Florida, Montreal and Vancouver) both in terms of their immediate strategy and, in the case of Vancouver, how that might inform what they end up doing with Alex Edler this summer. Travis Green would, presumably, have a hard time seeing him leave. Similarly, with a team like Winnipeg, it's easy to see how adding another left-shot defenceman might be a priority at the end of the year.

It's also useful in terms of identifying players with big names and reputations who the coaching staff doesn't trust. When free agency rolls around in the summer, it'll be worth checking back on this to see if the roles that teams are acquiring players to play are roles that their current coaches trusted them with during this past season.

[The Athletic / Down Goes Brown: I haven't watched a shootout in two years and I highly recommend it](#)

By Sean McIndoe, The Athletic – March 13, 2019

I'd like to go on the record as being against league-mandated team-wide extinction. But allowing for a little bit of hyperbole to make his point, I'm with Tortorella on the broader issue. I'm not a shootout guy. I wouldn't mind if the league got rid of it altogether, or at least figured out a way to drastically reduce how often they occur. Tyler Dellow has been on the case and he makes a convincing argument that expanding overtime by even a few more minutes would mean far fewer shootouts. Sounds good. Let's make that happen.

But in the meantime, I've come up with a slightly more straightforward way to reduce the number of shootouts I'm subjected to: I just stopped watching them. Literally. I haven't sat through an NHL shootout in almost two years.

Yes, I know. Great job, Einstein, figuring out that you can avoid something by, uh, avoiding it. And I realize that this doesn't exactly qualify as some sort of scandalous confession. But it's a bit of a strange thing to say given that, you know, my entire job is to watch hockey.

But that's the thing: I like hockey. I've spent huge chunks of my life watching hockey. It's pretty much my favorite thing to do short of making my children smile and it's possible that I only said that last part because my wife might be reading. Hockey is great.

But here's the thing, shootouts are only kind of hockey. They're closer to being hockey than they are to being, say, backgammon or competitive Rubik's cubing. But only barely. And when the game you're watching finishes up overtime without a winner, there's a good chance that there's still real hockey being played on some other channel. Why wouldn't you want to watch that instead?

A couple of years ago, that's what I started doing. The shootout starts, I reach for the remote and find another game.

You know what? It's way better this way. I highly recommend it.

I can't remember the last shootout that I sat through, although I'd assume it came late in the 2016-17 season. But when opening night arrived in 2017, I made an impulse decision to bail on any shootouts and go looking for a game where they were still playing actual hockey instead.

NEW POLICY FOR BUSY NHL NIGHTS: WATCH THE CRAP OUT OF 3-ON-3, FIND ANOTHER GAME WHEN SHOOTOUT STARTS. CAN CATCH UP ON COIN-FLIPPING LATER.

— DOWN GOES BROWN (@DOWNGOESBROWN) OCTOBER 6, 2017

At first, switching away from a game right before it ended seemed odd, like walking out of a movie right at the big finale. But it turns out that it doesn't feel that way. I'd already seen the big climax – two teams had played real hockey for 65 minutes without finding a winner and now they were going to flip a glorified coin to award an extra point. Skipping the shootout turned out to be more like walking out of the movie before the long, boring credits sequence that you don't really need to see anyway.

Back then, I figured my no-shootout experiment would last a week before I'd go back to watching hockey the way everyone else did. But a week turned into a month, which turned into a year and now two. And I can tell you: I don't miss those things at all. There's a good chance you wouldn't either.

It turns out that you don't actually miss all that much when you decide to just stop watching shootouts. You still find out who got the extra point within minutes, and somebody on Twitter will almost certainly be live-tweeting every attempt, so you don't miss any important information. In the rare cases where somebody does something creative or there's a spectacular save or a controversy or whatever, you'll see that somewhere too, almost immediately. You're not actually gaining anything by watching, other than a head start of a few seconds and maybe some vague sense of closure. Those things are worth something, I guess. They're just not as much fun as watching actual hockey.

And here's the weird part: I say that as someone who's come to accept that the shootout is probably here to stay. I'm old school, and I never had a problem with ties. But I get that many fans don't agree and that the NHL felt like it was an unsatisfying way to end a game. If Gary Bettman retired tomorrow and I was named as commissioner, we'd switch over to playing ten minutes of 3-on-3 overtime, accept a small number of games ending in ties and be done with shootouts forever. But until that happens, we've got a league that feels strongly that they don't want any ties at all. If that's your stance, and you know that you can't just play endless overtime in the regular season, then your only other option is a shootout.

I can live with that. I'm not here to rail against the existence of the shootout, if only because I know that ship has sailed. The NHL is going to be a league with shootouts, and that's OK. I just don't feel like watching them.

So I stopped. Admittedly, there's been some luck involved. I have the dual advantage of having access to the league's streaming package and living in a country where there's usually a game on another channel. My favorite team is the Maple Leafs and they haven't had a single shootout so far this year. I haven't found myself faced with a shootout where the two points were absolutely crucial to a playoff race; if something like last season's Blues/Avalanche finale had gone to the shootout, I'd have had no choice. And I also haven't had a game I was actually attending go to a shootout, because I'm obviously not going to drag my kids home or cover my eyes in the press box just to make a point.

Eventually, I'll end up watching one again. Knowing how my luck works, now that I've written about this for the first time, it will probably happen within days. But in the meantime, bring on the real hockey.

And sure, I can hear the argument that some of you are making at your screens: "But 3-on-3 overtime isn't real hockey either!" And that's at least a little bit true. The endless odd-man rushes and back-and-forth action doesn't look much like your typical 5-on-5 game. It's a different rhythm, and yes, even a little gimmicky. Maybe a lot.

It's also all sorts of fun. At its best, when two teams are going end-to-end at top speed and trading chances and ignoring their stodgy defensive-minded coaches tearing their hair out on the bench, overtime can pack as much entertainment into five minutes as some 60-minute regulations. There's no way I'm turning that off. I'm here for the fun and 3-on-3 overtime is almost always crazy fun.

Shootouts were fun too, once. For the first few years, there was a sense of novelty and a chance that you'd get something you'd never seen before. The first time you saw a shootout stretch into a dozen

rounds, or watched a guy do that big swooping slow-motion entry, or laughed at somebody fanning on a shot, it was its own sort of fun. But after over a decade of these things, we've pretty much seen it all. We get it. At this point, they're almost all the same.

Now, maybe you disagree. I'm told that there are fans out there that enjoy shootouts. And if you're one of them, that's cool. As I said, this isn't meant to be some sprawling anti-shootout manifesto. Hockey fans should watch what they like to watch and if you're still enjoying shootouts after all these years then more power to you.

But if you're like me and you're kind of done with the shootout, you can just stop watching. It really is that simple. Lots of fans do it already and you can too. You won't regret it, you almost certainly won't miss anything cool and you'll get to watch more actual hockey.

That's about as good as it's going to get. At least until Dellow and Tortorella are done killing everyone.

[Sportsnet.ca / Who has the toughest schedule heading into the NHL season's home stretch?](#)

By Sonny Sachdeva, Sportsnet – March 13, 2019

We're down to the final month before the 2018-19 regular season gives way to the real one. The final few weeks before we break out the magnifying glasses and inspect every pass, snipe, check and skirmish that flashes across our screen.

For some clubs, this final slate of games is simply an opportunity to fine-tune, the larger goal being to simply stay healthy and pick up some momentum heading into the home stretch. For others, it's a mad dash, with the post-season pressure already hanging low as borderline clubs fight to secure a spot in the dance.

With a number of teams still in the mix heading into the final handful of tilts, Sportsnet's statisticians crunched the numbers to tell us who's set to enjoy the most favourable schedule over the coming weeks, and who's simply in cruise control.

Let's dive in. First up, the East, where the Metro looks intent on stuffing in as many of its squads as it can.

The Lightning have run away with the conference and a meeting with a wild-card squad, while the Metro remains in flux, still sorting out where the tightly-packed Capitals, Penguins, Islanders, Hurricanes and Blue Jackets will fall.

Here's how the conference playoff hopefuls' schedules break down for the rest of 2018-19:

Eastern Conference

Team	Strength of Schedule	Total Games	Home	Away	Back-to-Backs	vs. Playoff Teams	
Washington Capitals	0.612	12	6	6	1	6	
Montreal Canadiens*	0.599	12	6	6	1	8	
Philadelphia Flyers*	0.593	13	6	7	3	10	
Carolina Hurricanes*	0.587	13	8	5	3	7	
Tampa Bay Lightning	0.579	12	4	8	2	9	
Boston Bruins	0.573	12	4	8	1	6	
New York Islanders	0.565	13	5	8	2	6	
Columbus Blue Jackets*		0.561	12	4	8	3	6
Florida Panthers*	0.558	13	5	8	2	8	
Toronto Maple Leafs	0.546	12	5	7	3	4	

Pittsburgh Penguins 0.532 12 6 6 1 6

* = in a wild-card spot or on the bubble

Metro Shuffle

The defending Stanley Cup champs draw the toughest schedule over the final month of the regular season, highlighted by three tests against the high-flying Lightning. There's little worry about that stretch throwing too weighty a wrench into Washington's playoff hopes, but it is closer than most would assume. Only eight points separate the division-leading Capitals from the second wild-card spot, and a tough stretch could lead to some key re-seeding in the East.

The Islanders remain just two points back of the Metro lead, and sitting only four points back of the division title is Pittsburgh — who, incidentally, has the most favourable upcoming schedule of all Eastern playoff hopefuls, and seems to be picking up steam. The race is on to see who finishes in the top two divisional slots and earns home-ice advantage before the likely assignment of lining up against a familiar Metro opponent in Round 1.

On the Bubble

Eastern clubs on the outside looking in aren't set to get any favours from the schedule down the stretch. Montreal finds itself just outside the crop, but level points-wise with Columbus. However, the Canadiens are staring down a tough 12 games that will see them meet strong opponents eight times — particularly their final five tilts of the season, which consists of matchups with **Columbus**, Winnipeg, Tampa Bay, Washington and Toronto. Piling up as many points as possible before heading into that closing run seems a necessity.

Philadelphia's hill might be the toughest to climb — five points out of a playoff spot ahead of a 13-game stretch that includes 10 against playoff squads, and three back-to-backs. And the first two in that stretch will come without Jakub Voracek. That should help the Hurricanes' chances of sticking in a wild-card spot, despite having a decently difficult workload on their hands, too.

Home-Ice Advantage

The Atlantic side of this equation seems more set in stone, given the Bolts' season-long penchant for rolling through the opposition. Tampa Bay and Boston find themselves in the middle of the pack in terms of the strength of the coming opponents. Both clubs do have to battle through a final slate that'll see them play eight of 12 games on the road. That won't be an issue for the Lightning, who are 24-7-2 outside of Amalie Arena, but it could affect the Bruins, who are 15-12-6 on the road.

A slide from the B's could allow Toronto — four points back — to move up to second in the division, especially with the Maple Leafs on track for one of the less-daunting workloads over the next few weeks. The Maple Leafs' final 12 tilts feature just four playoff-bound teams, though they will have three back-to-backs to contend with.

Considering the Leafs' last two series against Boston have both stretched to seven games — and both resulted in Game 7 losses on the road — securing that home-ice advantage over the coming weeks, positioning a potential Game 7 at Scotiabank Arena, could be a welcome bonus.

A weekly deep dive into the biggest hockey news in the world with hosts Elliotte Friedman and Jeff Marek. New episodes every Thursday.

And then we have the West, which is chock-full of powerhouses and still has a genuine conference title on the line.

Two of the Western behemoths look set to cruise to the finish line while two others get battle-tested before the post-season begins. Here's how the schedule breaks down over the rest of the season:

Western Conference

Team	Strength of Schedule	Total Games	Home	Away	Back-to-Backs	vs. Playoff Teams
Minnesota Wild*	0.581	12	7	5	2	10
Nashville Predators	0.558	11	5	6	1	6
Winnipeg Jets	0.555	13	6	7	2	7
Chicago Blackhawks*	0.549	12	6	6	2	6
Dallas Stars*	0.542	13	7	6	3	4
Edmonton Oilers*	0.542	12	6	6	2	8
Vegas Golden Knights	0.541	12	6	6	2	6
Arizona Coyotes*	0.539	12	6	6	1	4
Colorado Avalanche*	0.536	12	7	5	2	6
San Jose Sharks	0.517	12	8	4	2	4
St. Louis Blues	0.517	13	7	6	3	3
Calgary Flames	0.501	12	7	5	2	4

* = in a wild-card spot or on the bubble

Cruise Control

The Calgary Flames head into the final few weeks with the most favourable schedule of any club in the league, with just four of their final 12 games against playoff squads, and only five coming on the road. After a slide that allowed some doubt to creep into the minds of the Flames faithful after an unexpectedly dominant campaign, a confidence-building finish could be a game-changer for the Flames' hopes of going on a deep post-season run.

Unfortunately, the schedule will do little to affect the Flames' chances of climbing into the conference's No. 1 spot, as the San Jose Sharks — who have just one more point at the moment — find themselves with a similar test over the final 13 games of the year. Considering who's waiting in the Pacific Division's No. 3 spot, the home stretch will be key for Calgary and San Jose.

Vegas has lost just once since acquiring Mark Stone to beef up its forward corps at the trade deadline, and figures to be a tough first-round test. Calgary was the lone club to halt that streak, but it's worth

noting they did so against backup netminder Malcolm Subban. A few days earlier, with Marc-Andre Fleury in net, the Flames managed just one goal and fell in a 2-1 loss.

Under Pressure

Separated by just a point in the Central Division, the Winnipeg Jets and Nashville Predators are in a similar situation. As it currently stands, Nashville gets St. Louis and Winnipeg draws a weaker wild-card squad. The prospective schedule figures to put some pressure on that arrangement, though. The Blues have the easiest road to the end of the season among the top Central squads, facing only three playoff-bound teams in their final 13 games.

Nashville and Winnipeg, however, have two of the hardest coming schedules, meaning there's a not-so-unlikely possibility of the Blues jumping them both, which would force the Jets and Predators into the unenviable position of facing one of the conference's toughest opponents in the very first round.

Uphill Climb

The West's on-the-bubble squads all find themselves in different situations for their final weeks. Minnesota, who sits just one point out, has a gargantuan task ahead — 10 of its final 12 games come against playoff teams, mostly on the road, with a couple back-to-backs thrown in. The Wild meet Winnipeg and Boston in two of their final three games, for what could wind up being two very tough make-or-break matches.

Edmonton, meanwhile, sits in the middle of the pack of playoff hopefuls, still only six points out as it continues to hang around. Late-season slides from Minnesota and Dallas — both currently above Edmonton in the standings and both with tougher schedules down the stretch — could help the Oilers slowly climb back into the post-season picture.

But eight meetings with playoff-bound teams won't make it easy for Connor McDavid's squad. Much like Minnesota, it'll be the final week that'll provide the biggest test, if they're still in it, as they'll face Vegas, Colorado, San Jose and Calgary (at the Saddledome) to close it out.

Even if that season finale winds up meaning next to nothing for the Flames' playoff path, you can bet they get up and offer a stiff test for their Albertan neighbours if given the chance to quash Edmonton's playoff dreams — a potential Battle of Alberta classic.