



This is part three of my Columbus Blue Jackets' All-Decade Team. I will be writing about my selections for top goaltender, top two defensemen, top three forwards, and best overall player. The third installment will cover the top three forwards of the decade.

Over the past couple of years, the Blue Jackets have started to develop home grown talent. The first five or six years of the franchise, like most expansion teams, were patchworked together with NHL veterans looking to rekindle some of their past glory. Some of them were complete flops and never succeeded on the ice with the Blue Jackets. Some of them played an integral role in the development of the franchise.

Putting an expansion team together with players that have boatloads of NHL experience is a fruitful endeavor. There are plenty of guys around the league on the backside of their career who understand what their role is. Their job is to further the betterment of the game through being mentors to the next generation of players. Luckily for a Columbus Blue Jackets franchise in its infancy, some of these guys could still play. Two of them are named in this post as two of the three best forwards of the decade. The other player is the unquestioned face of the franchise.

When **Geoff Sanderson** came to the Blue Jackets at the age of 28, he had been battered with injuries and seemed to be older than his age would suggest. He broke in to the NHL at the age

of 18 with the Hartford Whalers and had some very good seasons, racking up 156 points from 1992-94 and 132 points from 1995-97. By the end of the 1990s, he had become a checking line forward for the Buffalo Sabres, including being a part of their 1999-00 Stanley Cup run.

In 2000, the Blue Jackets made him the 23rd pick of the NHL Expansion Draft. Sanderson was the first forward taken in the draft and paid immediate dividends for the Blue Jackets. In the team's inaugural season, Sanderson led the team with 30 goals and 56 points.

Sanderson would play 261 games for the Jackets, tallying 168 points in the process, including a 34-goal season in 2002-03. He is currently a scout for the New York Islanders.

Geoff Sanderson's linemate **Ray Whitney** has played nearly 1100 NHL games in his career. He is one of the most underrated guys in the game. He has average size at 5'10" and 180 lbs, but has the heart of a warrior and has a pretty good set of skills. Whitney has been a consistent player throughout the decade and it started with the Columbus Blue Jackets.

After starting his career with the expansion San Jose Sharks, Ray Whitney became a bit of a household name with the Florida Panthers, while playing alongside Pavel Bure at the back end of his career. The Panthers experienced the franchise's best run of success while Whitney was part of the team.

The Blue Jackets picked up Whitney late in the 2000-01 season. He was accustomed to playing on young teams, so the Jackets were a good fit. Over the two year period from 2001-03, Whitney had 137 points in 148 games. Being a point-per-game player in that era, on a team as deficient of talent as the expansion Blue Jackets were, was quite an achievement.

Since then, Whitney has won a Stanley Cup with the Carolina Hurricanes and continues to put up very solid numbers. Two years after the lockout, at age 35, Whitney had a career-high in points with 83. He still plays an active role for the Phoenix Coyotes.

Any discussion of the top forwards of the 2000s, both for the Jackets as well as the league as a

whole, has to include **Rick Nash**. Nash, the Blue Jackets first round draft pick in 2003, has been one of the league's best point producers despite a lack of talent around him. The Blue Jackets have never been able to put Nash with a bona fide first line center, yet his production has continued at an impressive pace.

Nash has been a lifelong Blue Jacket and the signing of an eight-year, \$62.4 million contract in July of 2009 will keep him in Columbus for the next decade. Nash is easily the franchise leader in every offensive category, as well as games played and has been the team's captain for the past couple of seasons. Nash has 432 points in 531 games. He is the unquestioned face of the franchise, as well as a member of the Canadian Olympic team.

I hate to ruin the suspense, but there will be a more in-depth piece on Rick Nash next week to finish out the decade.

However, I would be remiss if I did not mention another forward who experienced success in the first decade of Blue Jackets hockey and may have been on this list had it not been for the worst moment in franchise history.

Espen Knutsen is the only Norwegian-born player to have participated in the NHL All-Star Game. Knutsen played 188 games with the Blue Jackets from 2000-04. Knutsen was a very solid checking line center with some scoring ability, having 53 points during the first season of Blue Jackets hockey.

His career was on the upswing, getting a chance to play nightly with the Jackets and getting a good bit of ice time. A seemingly harmless slapshot from his defensive blue line while going off for a line change would end a life, change a family forever, and ultimately, end his NHL career.

Brittanie Cecil was at the March 16, 2002 game with her father as a fourteenth birthday present. Then Calgary Flames defenseman Derek Morris deflected Knutsen's shot and it rifled into the crowd. Cecil was struck in the left temple and emergency personnel were immediately called. She had suffered a skull fracture.

The teams continued play, unbeknownst to them that a serious injury had occurred. When Brittanie Cecil got to the hospital, she suffered a seizure, but soon recovered and showed no ill effects. Tragically, the subsequent CT-scan failed to show that the impact and the snapping back of her head had produced a torn artery in her brain. Unable to stop the swelling and bleeding, Brittanie Cecil died on March 18, 2002.

Knutsen was completely grief-stricken by the incident and never fully recovered. Some news outlets reported that he retired due to injury. Others report that he left North America and went back to Norway to try and regain his life. No matter the reason, the horrible accidental tragedy of Brittanie Cecil's death robbed a promising young girl of her life and Espen Knutsen of his career.

Honorable mention: Knutsen, Andrew Cassels, Sergei Fedorov, RJ Umberger

In other Blue Jackets news, the Jackets have had some days off to get healthy since their game against Colorado on Friday night. Rick Nash had been battling a lower body injury and defenseman Anton Stralman has missed practice time. In contrast to last season with the two-week Olympic break, the Blue Jackets have played just 16 games since the start of the season. On November 17 of last year, the team had already played 19 games. The Jackets will play 16 games over the next 28 days.

With their road win over the LA Kings on Wednesday night, the Jackets improved to 5-1 on the road. They were 12-23-6 on the road last season.

Former Blue Jackets defenseman Luke Richardson is facing a parent's worst nightmare. Richardson, the former captain and current assistant coach for the Ottawa Senators, will be burying his fourteen-year-old daughter Daron after she died from injuries resulting from a suicide attempt. Her mother found her unresponsive in their Ottawa area home and she died at the hospital from her injuries. Condolences to the Richardson family for their horrible loss.

In other news from around the NHL, the NHL All-Star Game will be changing formats this year. The fans will vote on the starters for the game and then the NHL will name 36 more players to the game. The 42 players will then name a captain for each team and two alternate captains. At that point, a televised draft will take place where the team captains will pick their

teams.

According to Allen Walsh from Octagon Hockey, [attendance is up .5%](#) league-wide from this time last year.

NHL Dean of Disciplinary Colin Campbell has come under fire recently for some email comments made about him ruling on his son Gregory's games. Gregory plays for the Florida Panthers and there have been some conflict of interest allegations against Campbell. The NHL's suspension policy has a history of being very suspect and biased toward non-star players. Campbell has denied any wrongdoing.

A minor league update on the Lake Erie Monsters:

I outlined the [Monsters new multi-year contract](#) with the Colorado Avalanche that was announced last week in the previous article linked above.

The team is struggling in the AHL's Western Conference North Division as roster call-ups by Colorado have taken a good bulk of their talent. So far this year, David van der Gulik, David Liffiton, Greg Mauldin, Colby Cohen, Kevin Shattenkirk, Kevin Porter, and backup goaltender John Grahame have all been recalled to Colorado. Cohen and Liffiton were just returned this past Monday.

Upcoming schedules:

Columbus: □ 11/19: @ ANA, 11/20: @ SJ, 11/22: v. NSH, 11/24: @ NYI

Lake Erie: 11/19 v. Toronto, 11/20: @ Grand Rapids, 11/21: @ Chicago, 11/23: @ Chicago, 11/24: @ Rockford