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Winnipeg Jets training camp primer: Roster projections, position battles

By Murat Ates

Winnipeg breaks camp with 28 forwards, 16 defencemen, six goaltenders and more to prove this season than any in recent memory.

New head coach Rick Bowness has already changed his leadership group, taking the captaincy from Blake Wheeler while promising more leadership opportunities for the Jets' core.

Star centres Mark Scheifele and Pierre-Luc Dubois were each great last season — just at different times, and not always for as long as one would hope. Scheifele in particular saw his defensive impact crater while it took him a long time to start scoring. Dubois was terrific for most of the year but tapered off down the stretch just as Scheifele went on an offensive tear. Winnipeg needs both of them at their best all season to have a shot at the playoffs.

Meanwhile, the defence, which Nate Schmidt and Brenden Dillon were supposed to fix, struggled with a lack of structure throughout last season. Certainly, the forwards had an awful lot to do with that, meaning Bowness, Scott Arniel and Brad Lauer have their work cut out for them introducing new systems. From there, Josh Morrissey can show the world his stunning resurgence is here to stay, Neal Pionk and Logan Stanley are looking for bouncebacks of varying sizes and Ville Heinola and Dylan Samberg will seek to show — finally — that they belong in the NHL and no other league.

Something has got to give.

Winnipeg also gets to enjoy a top-end trio of first-round talent: Cole Perfetti is a virtual lock to make the team and could be poised for a breakout season, but he's not alone. Brad Lambert and Chaz Lucius could play in the NHL, AHL or WHL this year and could be Manitoba's most dynamic one-two Moose punch since Kyle Connor and Jack Roslovic.

Oh right. Connor. He of the 93 points, the offensive brilliance and the emerging league-wide acclaim. Will he lead the Jets in scoring once again or be challenged by Scheifele or Nikolaj Ehlers? Whose defensive game will improve — and how?

What will the lines and pairings be? What are the biggest battles in camp?

Performance will dictate opportunity this season — it simply must; that's what Bowness is here for — and you can bet the Jets are still frustrated with last year's crash and burn.

This is our training camp preview, with roster analysis, camp battles, projected lines and cut dates. (Expect Sept. 30 to be a massive day for the fortunes of an awful lot of Jets and Moose players.)

Let's go.

Forwards

Surefire roster locks: Kyle Connor, Pierre-Luc Dubois, Mark Scheifele, Nikolaj Ehlers, Blake Wheeler, Adam Lowry, Mason Appleton, Jansen Harkins, Sam Gagner

Virtual locks: Cole Perfetti, David Gustafsson, Dominic Toninato

Vying for spots: Morgan Barron, Kevin Stenlund, Michael Eyssimont, Jeff Malott, Chaz Lucius, Brad Lambert, Kristian Reichel, Alex Limoges, Saku Maenalanen, Wyatt Bongiovanni, Henri Nikkanen, Daniel Torgersson, Nick Jones, Evan Polei, Daniel Zhilkin, Cole Maier

Biggest camp battles: Harkins vs. Barron, Gustafsson vs. Stenlund vs. Eyssimont vs. Malott, Lucius and Lambert vs. realistic expectations

I wouldn't get too hung up on my "virtual lock" designation but I'll explain it all the same.

Perfetti will almost definitely make the team but he's waivers-exempt and coming back from a pair of injuries. His summer training will help and so will the Young Stars tournament but I just wanted to leave the tiniest amount of room for him needing to get back up to pro speed in the AHL — just in case. In truth, Perfetti's biggest battle will probably be to assure himself an 82-game dose of top-six minutes. He's 20 and it would be reasonable to expect moments of inconsistency in between stretches of real offensive impact.

Gustafsson is no longer waivers-exempt, meaning that Winnipeg would risk another team claiming him for nothing if it tried to send him to the Moose. Gustafsson will obviously not be resting on those laurels — he'll be seeking to emerge as a full-time NHL player in a way that his injuries didn't allow him to be last season.

Toninato passed through waivers at the end of training camp last year but that was for LTIR cap acrobatics. He's a bona fide part of the Jets and I expect him to make the team.

So where will the true battles be?

We'll get line combinations when Winnipeg hits the ice Thursday but perhaps we can use Bowness' two camp groups to guess at forward lines.

Everyone expects some combination of Scheifele, Dubois, Connor, Ehlers, Wheeler and Perfetti to comprise the Jets' top two lines. The rookies and veterans are split between Winnipeg's two camp groups — Team Hawerchuk and Team Steen.

Team Hawerchuk includes Connor, Scheifele and Ehlers. Team Steen includes Perfetti, Dubois and Wheeler. If Bowness goes straight to committed line combinations, then there are your top two lines. (Remember though that Bowness is still learning the ins and outs of his new team. It would be completely reasonable for him to take multiple looks at multiple line combinations between now and Oct. 14 against the Rangers.)

The single biggest battle will be between Harkins and Barron for third-line left wing. Lowry and Appleton have established chemistry and Bowness has an established track record of running a checking line against tough matchups. Harkins has the edge in age, speed and NHL experience, while Barron delivered instant offence when acquired from the Rangers at last year's trade deadline. Another advantage in Harkins' favour is that Winnipeg can send Barron to the AHL without needing waivers if need be; we'll get to it but, with the logjam on defence,

waivers exemptions could have a disproportionate impact on who wins which job to start the season.

Team Hawerchuk: Scheifele, Connor, Ehlers, Gagner, Toninato, Gustafsson, Reichel, Malott, Lambert, Nikkanen, Torgersson, Bongiovanni, Polei, Zhilkin

Team Steen: Dubois, Wheeler, Perfetti, Lowry, Appleton, Harkins, Barron, Stenlund, Eyssimont, Maenalanen, Limoges, Lucius, Maier, Jones

If you assume the top six plays out how we imagine and Harkins wins the third line job, then Barron — who does not require waivers — would join Toninato, Gagner, Gustafsson, Stenlund, Eyssimont and Malott — who all do require waivers — in the fight for the fourth line and press box. My guess is Barron makes his way to the AHL while Toninato, Gagner and Gustafsson make up the fourth line.

If I'm right, then Winnipeg will waive at least two of Stenlund, Eyssimont and Malott, meaning all three players will either be claimed by another NHL team or play for the Moose.

But what about the kids?

Perfetti is a lock but Lucius and Lambert are each eligible to play for the Jets, Moose or WHL. The last time Winnipeg had two highly touted first-round picks in a position like this, Roslovic and Connor led the Moose in scoring when each player was just 19.

Lucius turned 19 in May and Lambert turns 19 this December. The Jets seem like a tough, tough team for either to make right now but the AHL could be the perfect launchpad for each player's North American pro careers — just as it was for teenaged versions of Connor, Roslovic and Perfetti.

Projected forward lines

Connor — Scheifele — Ehlers

Perfetti — Dubois — Wheeler

Harkins — Lowry — Appleton

Gustafsson — Toninato — Gagner

Defence

Roster locks: Josh Morrissey, Neal Pionk, Brenden Dillon, Nate Schmidt, Dylan DeMelo, Logan Stanley

Vying for spots: Kyle Capobianco, Johnathan Kovacevic, Dylan Samberg, Ville Heinola, Declan Chisholm, Leon Gawanke, Simon Lundmark, Ashton Sautner, Dmitry Kuzmin, Tyrel Bauer

Biggest camp battles: Samberg and Heinola vs. the loggiest jam you ever did see; Capobianco, Kovacevic, Gawanke and Sautner vs. the waiver wire; a balanced roster vs. the opposite of the same

The biggest question facing Winnipeg's defence is whether or not Heinola or Samberg can outplay enough veterans to justify losing somebody on waivers.

The simplest, most stifling thing Winnipeg could do is start the year with eight defencemen on the roster. All of Morrissey, Pionk, Dillon, Schmidt, DeMelo and Stanley are locks to make the team. Capobianco and Kovacevic both require waivers to be sent to the Moose. If the Jets are keen to hold on to everyone they have under contract, then it doesn't matter how well Heinola or Samberg play, they'll both be sent to the Moose.

Bowness isn't afraid of change, though. The hope is that performance dictates results.

So while it may be difficult for both Samberg and Heinola to make the Jets roster out of camp, one hopes that a strong enough performance from either player compels Winnipeg to keep him with the big club.

Samberg is bigger, stronger and older — 23 to Heinola's 21. He made a steady, 15-game NHL debut last season and brings a well-rounded mix of size, strength and mobility on the back end. Heinola is an even better puck mover and the more effective, aggressive offensive player but will give up size and strength in defensive battles. All else being equal, the decision will be about stylistic preference, but rest assured both players are hungry to avoid another season in the AHL.

Flin Flonner Ashton Sautner, 28, and offensive wunderkind Leon Gawanke, 23, also require waivers. Sending Gawanke to the Moose could be an issue — he may have appeal to other teams — but one expects the sheer glut of players moving through the waiver wire offers him some protection.

The other major questions are all about veteran performance. Can Pionk re-establish himself as a strong contributor after an up-and-down year? Does Arniel, the new defence coach, keep DeMelo with Morrissey — a partnership that has had success against top competition since DeMelo was acquired — or use him as a mentor further down the lineup?

And is this the year Dillon and Schmidt deliver the impact that was expected of them last season? The whole team was a defensive mess but the hope is that improved structure will help veterans make cleaner reads and more effective decisions. Some players thrive in chaos — like Ehlers — but most need consistency and structure. My guess is Dillon in particular is someone who has a higher ceiling on a better defensive team.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that Stanley struggled in his sophomore season after a terrific camp in 2020-21 and a solid rookie season. I don't think this means he's at great risk of press box time but the quality of his camp could go a long way to cementing his future in the lineup.

Team Hawerchuk: Morrissey, DeMelo, Stanley, Kovacevic, Chisholm, Gawanke, Sautner, Bauer

Team Steen: Dillon, Pionk, Schmidt, Heinola, Samberg, Capobianco, Lundmark, Kuzmin

Projected defence pairs

Morrissey — DeMelo

Dillon — Pionk

Capobianco* — Schmidt

Stanley — Kovacevic

*With the enormous caveat that this spot will be open for competition, with Heinola and Samberg at the front of the line

Goaltending

Roster locks: Connor Hellebuyck, David Rittich

Vying for spots: Mikhail Berdin, Oskari Salminen, Arvid Holm, Domenic DiVincentiis

Biggest camp battles: Berdin vs. the waiver wire

Projected goaltenders: Hellebuyck, Rittich, Berdin

Every goaltender on this list enters camp with something to prove.

Hellebuyck's numbers have slipped since his Vezina Trophy-winning season. He's often looked overworked and hasn't been able to turn the dreadful shot quality Winnipeg gives up into the same kind of dominance he showed a few short years ago. Ideally, he plays a little bit less and gets a much better defensive effort but he needs to be better, too.

Rittich's brief stints in Nashville and Toronto were miserable after a very good four-year stretch with Calgary. He told reporters this summer that the lack of rhythm playing behind a workhorse like Juuse Saros impacted the quality of his game. I'm not sure if Hellebuyck is inclined to play any less often than Saros did but Rittich needs to be better either way.

Watch out for Berdin, by the way. He needs waivers for the first time in his career and, while his AHL numbers have not impressed in recent years, he's still just 24 and may yet have a future ahead of him as an NHL backup. Winnipeg will either risk losing him on waivers or start the season with three goaltenders on its roster. (I think he'd be safe but we all saw what happened with Eric Comrie.)

If Berdin does make it as far as the AHL then it's a three-way battle between him, Salminen and Holm for two jobs. Salminen, 22, is the youngest of the three and just had a spectacular season in Liiga. Holm, 23, struggled in his first AHL season but played very well in the SHL in the two seasons before that. It seems likely that one of these goaltenders will eventually assert himself but predicting which one — or when — is difficult to do.

Finally, 2022 seventh-round pick Domenic DiVincentiis is likely heading back to North Bay but looked good in the Young Stars tournament. It may be a few years before we're asking these same questions about his professional future.

This projection comes with two major caveats:

It assumes Winnipeg goes through camp without making trades.

It assumes Winnipeg does its best to hold on to everyone under contract — specifically, Capobianco and Berdin

If Heinola or Samberg wins a job out of camp, Capobianco is the one to be waived.

If Winnipeg feels confident it can get Berdin to the Moose without losing him, then the team can add a 13th forward like Stenlund, Malott or Eyssimont to the group above.

But right now, it seems that something has to give on defence and in goal. Perhaps there is a trade to be made that sends a defenceman out for a middle-six forward. Whether it's a move that bold or just a little bit of bravery on the waiver wire, it seems that the Jets need to clear a veteran defenceman and promote one of their top prospects — and still finish camp with eight defencemen on the roster.

Either way, the Jets project to begin the season well under the salary cap maximum. We won't see any strange moves made just for LTIR purposes because nobody is on LTIR.

Instead, Winnipeg's roster will be a work in progress from Day 1 of camp throughout the season and right up until the trade deadline. This is not a balanced team but there are plenty of quality players. Performance should dictate opportunity — and that, in and of itself, is the good news.

Global Winnipeg

<https://globalnews.ca/news/9145059/analysis-losing-captaincy-motivate-winnipeg-jets-blake-wheeler/>

ANALYSIS: Losing captaincy should motivate, refocus Jets' Wheeler

By Paul Edmonds CJOB

Despite having his captaincy relinquished — in what was for certain anything but a mutual agreement between him and the hockey club — Blake Wheeler is still an extremely important player to the Winnipeg Jets.

Last week's demotion certainly changed the course of the team's leadership structure superficially, but make no mistake, Wheeler will still command a presence in the team's dressing room this season and his ubiquity as a top-six forward is still very much relevant.

How he truly absorbs the indignity of losing the 'C' is unknown, but for someone who has watched and covered the franchise-leading scorer for over a decade, it's likely to be motivational.

Moreover, in shedding the pressure and responsibility of being the team's ultimate leader, it should allow Wheeler to recoil and refocus on his game and nobody else's — a pressure valve release that just might ignite a bounceback season for him — and by extension, his teammates.

At 36 years old and with two years remaining on the richest contract on the team, you know Wheeler would like to reaffirm his value and be a vanguard in a Jets revolution back toward playoff hockey next spring.

And while his point production the last two seasons wasn't close to his pair of 91-point contributions of the recent past, he was still close to a point-per-game player each of the last two years despite enduring a bout with COVID-19 and some injuries last season.

As a new season starts to lift above the horizon, part of the excitement of it is not knowing how it will finish until its conclusion. This year for Wheeler also mirrors that sentiment.

Simply put, perhaps his individual and his personal objectives can help the collective overall, and Blake Wheeler's biggest contribution yet to the Winnipeg Jets is still to come — even without a letter on his lapel this season or next.

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<https://www.cjwwradio.com/2022/09/21/former-w-h-l-star-defenceman-sautner-looks-to-rise-from-fringes-to-regular-n-h-l-role-with-winnipeg/>

Former W-H-L Star Defenceman Sautner Looks to Rise From "Fringes" to Regular N-H-L Role With Winnipeg

By Les Lazaruk

Main N-H-L training camps, for the most part, opened Wednesday.

The Winnipeg Jets were included in that list. Among the players on the Jets' training camp roster is 28-year-old veteran professional defenceman Ashton Sautner. A W-H-L graduate from the Edmonton Oil Kings, the Flin Flon product has played 23 N-H-L games with the Vancouver Canucks, scattered over the last eight seasons. He goes into Winnipeg's camp wearing Number 6 and hopeful of catching a spot on the Jets' roster for the upcoming 2022-23 season. Les Lazaruk recently caught up, and spoke with Ashton Sautner.....

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<https://www.nhl.com/jets/news/daniels-thrilled-to-be-part-of-additions-to-jets-scouting-staff/c-335678884>

Daniels thrilled to be part of additions to Jets scouting staff "She's passionate about the game and she's really passionate about the opportunity to work for the Jets."

by Mitchell Clinton @MitchellClinton / WinnipegJets.com

A great resume can often be the first step toward being hired, and when that resume leads to a 90-minute conversation with a National Hockey League assistant general manager - well, that's definitely a positive sign.

That's exactly what happened to Sydney Daniels, the newest college scout for the Winnipeg Jets.

The 27-year-old former assistant coach of the NCAA's Harvard Crimson women's hockey team is one of three new scouts announced on Wednesday, with NHL veterans Jari Kekalainen and Tony Martino joining the amateur scouting staff led by Mark Hillier.

Daniels describes her conversation with Larry Simmons, the assistant general manager of the Jets, as something she'll never forget.

"That 90 minutes might have made him late, but it definitely changed my life, whether I ended up in this position or not," she said. "I left thinking this is something I really want to pursue. Not only was it Larry himself, it was listening to him talk about the values of this organization and the values of what he wants the culture here to be - that was resonating to me."

Simmons remembers his first meeting with Daniels, which came in a coffee shop just outside of Boston.

"The first opportunity to meet her was really just supposed to be an informal and quick sit-down," Simmons said. "It probably could have kept going if not for a game that I had to get to. She's really easy to talk to and really passionate about the game."

After all, the game has been part of her family - and her life - for as long as she can remember.

Besides coaching at Harvard, Daniels played for the Crimson for four seasons between 2013 and 2017, wearing the captain's 'C' in 2016-17. She played one year of pro hockey, for the National Women's Hockey League's Boston Pride, in 2017-18, before returning to Harvard to coach to start the 2018-19 campaign.

On top of all that, her father Scott played 149 games in the NHL (with Hartford, Philadelphia, and New Jersey), and she honed her skills as a kid in Saskatchewan at her grandfather's farm in Leask, Saskatchewan.

"Her experiences in the game as a player and as a teacher are somewhat similar to that of Mark White and Brian Renfrew who have been in this position for us previously," said Simmons. "She's passionate about the game and she's really passionate about the opportunity to work for the Jets. She has Canadian roots, so I think the opportunity to work for a Canadian team is extra special for her."

She's a dual citizen, who grew up in Southwick, Massachusetts, and won gold with the USA's U18 team in 2011. That same year, she earned a gold medal at the National Aboriginal Youth Championships.

Daniels will be joining a pro scouting staff that includes Director Pete Ratchuk, Jack Birch, Danny Richmond, Ryan Caldwell, Jari Gronstrand, and Mark White.

On the amateur side, Kekalainen has been a European scout at the NHL level since 2002, and has spent the last five seasons as the Director of European Scouting for the Florida Panthers.

"We're excited to add somebody with his experience," Simmons said of Kekalainen, whose brother Jarmo is the general manager of the Columbus Blue Jackets. "He's really well connected all over Europe and has great experience and deep knowledge of the players."

Back on this side of the Atlantic Ocean is where Martino will work. He served as an amateur scout for the Toronto Maple Leafs for the last seven years while also being a goaltending coach for Lake Forest College.

"He's an interesting guy, he speaks several languages and has a background in goaltending as well. He brings a different perspective from that side of things," said Simmons. "He's another guy who came to us very highly recommended. He's in a really good spot in Chicago. Both of

these guys hit the ground running, and Tony is well situated to take over for Max Giese who left for a different opportunity."

There is always an excitement to a new season, especially with new faces joining the club and the anticipation of the puck dropping on the 2022-23 season in a few short weeks.

It doesn't matter if a staff member has been in the NHL for 20 years like Kekalainen, or is gearing up for a first season like Daniels.

The excitement of the game has that effect on everyone.

In fact, Daniels has already started in her role. She met up with Ratchuk in Buffalo this past weekend.

"It's very dialed in on players we're looking for and things we're looking for," said Daniels. "I'm just excited to work and figure out those demands and try to fill those as best I can, in the vision of what we're trying to build here in Winnipeg."