

**Winnipegjets.com**

**Practice Report - Seizing Opportunity**  
**"Those are the measuring stick games for us."**

By Mitchell Clinton

DENVER – Two teams tied with 104 points in the Central Division standings will face off on Saturday when the Winnipeg Jets take on the Colorado Avalanche.

It's the last stop on a four-game road trip for the Jets, who have rattled off five straight wins overall, punctuated by a 3-0 shutout victory over the Central leading Dallas Stars on Thursday.

Both the Jets and the Avalanche are five points back of Dallas. Mathematically, both teams can still catch the Stars, but even if they don't, there is a lot to play for as the higher seeded team between Winnipeg and Colorado would have home-ice advantage if the two meet in the postseason.

"Every Central Division game we play this year, whether it's game 10 or game 80, is a big one," said Jets defenceman Brenden Dillon. "I think at this point in the season we don't want to get too far ahead of ourselves. We know how good Colorado is. We have more than enough respect for them as a team and how well they've played all season. Much like the Dallas game, we're really going to see how good of a team we are."

The Jets have won both meetings with Colorado this season by scores of 4-2 and 6-2, but it would take more than a couple flips of the calendar to reach the dates those games were played (December 7 and 16, respectively).

Both teams have changed a lot since then.

Winnipeg has brought in Sean Monahan and Tyler Toffoli, while Colorado has inserted Casey Mittelstadt, Brandon Duhaime, Yakov Trenin, and Sean Walker.

Overall, Colorado is 5-4-1 in their last 10 games, but the last two have been polar opposites. They gave up seven goals in a 7-4 loss to Dallas on Sunday before dominating the Minnesota Wild 5-2 two nights later.

"That's the type of game we're going to see tomorrow," said head coach Rick Bowness, referencing the win over Minnesota where Nathan MacKinnon had a hat trick to hit the 50-goal mark for the first time in his career.

"Their elite players will be trying to take over the game much like they did against Minnesota," Bowness said. "It's up to us to slow them up as much as we can and play our game."

Despite all the sizing up that will likely occur on the ice when the two teams meet, it's still only game 80 of the regular season. Teams heading to the playoffs are fine-tuning their game and trying to reach the level of consistency required to go on a long run.

The focus for the Jets is bringing the same attention to detail to the ice on Saturday that helped them beat the Stars for the first time two nights ago.

“We knew that Dallas is one of the top if not the top team in the league at their structure and their neutral zone,” said Dillon. “That was one of our, if not our most complete game of the year which is nice to have that confidence at this time of the year. Pressure (on the puck) was a big part of it, I think our attention to detail and understanding that they’re a good team, they’re not going to give you much, and we took advantage of when we got our bounces.”

With the early puck drop of 3 pm CT at Ball Arena, the Jets won’t hold a morning skate ahead of the game.

Rick Bowness did reveal that Connor Hellebuyck – who made 45 saves in Winnipeg’s 4-3 overtime victory in Nashville on Tuesday – will get the call in goal. Laurent Brossoit, who turned away 24 shots in Dallas for his third shutout of the season, stayed off the ice on Friday while Hellebuyck joined his teammates for a 30-minute skate.

Also staying off the ice on Friday were Adam Lowry, Mason Appleton, Sean Monahan, Neal Pionk, and Dillon.

The expectation is that the Jets will ice the same line-up as in Dallas, but Bowness said there will be a couple extra players taking warm-up as a precaution.

In addition, Nino Niederreiter will miss a fifth straight game as he continues to recover from a cut he suffered against the Los Angeles Kings.

“At this point we’re hoping and planning that he’ll be playing Tuesday. We’ll give him a good skate today, put him on the ice on Monday, and we’ll see where we are,” said Bowness. “When you have stitches where he has them, it just gives him time to heal better. We’re not going to put him out there unless he’s 100 percent. He’s not 100 percent, so we need those extra days.”

David Gustafsson, who scored a goal on his 24th birthday and played a career high 14:13 as the cherry on top, will remain on the left wing – Niederreiter’s usual spot – in the game against Colorado.

“He’s a good fit for that line because that’s how they play. Give him credit,” said Bowness. “He hasn’t played much but he’s been working very hard, the coaches have been pushing him, and he’s responded. His number was called and he was ready to go.”

As a group, the Jets also want to be ready to go on Saturday, as they try to extend their win streak to six, but also put together consecutive statement victories against the other top teams in the Central Division.

“Those are the measuring stick games for us where we want to see where we’re at,” Dillon said. “Hopefully we can continue to take the confidence of beating one of the best teams in their building. Especially Nashville too, another solid building where maybe we didn’t play our best, but we were able to find a way to win.”

## **Winnipeg Free Press**

**[The making of McGroarty  
Jets’ top prospect, family give all to get forward NHL ready](#)**

By: Mike McIntyre

ST. PAUL, Minn. — He is the most intriguing prospect in the Winnipeg Jets pipeline, a unique player whose combination of character, compete and charisma has already made plenty of waves around the hockey world.

Now, eyes are on the left-shooting power forward Rutger McGroarty to see what he does next, after his college season ended here in the Twin Cities on Thursday night. The Michigan Wolverines lost in the semi-final of the NCAA Frozen Four, leaving him with an important decision to make: Turn pro and sign with the NHL club that drafted him 14th overall in 2022 or head back to school for another year?

We'll get to what the future holds shortly. First, there's quite a story to tell about how the 20-year-old from Lincoln, Neb. — a city of 290,000 that has produced a grand total of zero big-league hockey players — got to this stage.

"Sometimes, I'll look back and think about how the rink I grew up skating with my dad used to be a barn. It had cows and pigs painted on it," McGroarty recalled with a laugh, earlier this week.

And his first coach?

"He was a farmer. He couldn't even skate. He came on the ice with just his boots and a hockey helmet and stick," he added.

The Free Press spent the past few days talking with not only the man himself but members of his inner circle. Here's a look at what we learned:

#### *Family ties*

McGroarty wasn't born with a silver spoon in his mouth. But he was handed a hockey stick as a toddler.

His Toronto-born father, Jimmy, was an assistant coach of the Omaha Lancers of the USHL at the time, moving on to be assistant coach and general manager of the rival Lincoln Stars when Rutger was three.

"I'd never said the word Canada, I didn't know anything about skating. It meant nothing to me," said Cindy McGroarty, a native Nebraskan who first met Jimmy in 1999 when he played a game in her city.

"To marry a Canadian who played hockey, to have a son who plays hockey, to know how important (drills) are at practice, it kind of blows my mind."

Jimmy, who spent 12 years playing hockey in the minors with various stops around the U.S., was careful not to push their son in any particular direction.

"Him growing up in the locker room, you never know which way it's going to go. Is he going to love the game?" he said. "Cindy did a great job of getting our kids in all the sports. Playing lacrosse, soccer, flag football, baseball, so our kids could figure out what they wanted to do. Rutger always gravitated back to hockey."

He was naturally good at it, too. But there wasn't much local competition, which required some creative thinking.

"Three times we drove from Nebraska to Winnipeg for this hockey tournament," said Cindy. "It's kind of how he got put on the North American map, which sounds so dumb for (a child). But we're from Nebraska, so we knew spring hockey was important."

That annual Subway showcase event led Rutger to being invited to play on a Toronto-based team in the prestigious "Brick" tournament in Edmonton when he was eight. Standing 4-foot-9 and weighing 90 pounds at the time, he led his team with 13 goals and three assists in eight games.

They lost in the final to another Toronto-area team that included current Columbus Blue Jackets rookie and former Wolverines teammate Adam Fantilli, Shane Wright of the Seattle Kraken and Jets goalie prospect Domenic DiVincentiis, who is playing in the Ontario Hockey League and lived with the McGroarty family at one point.

Small world. Speaking of which...

Scott Pionk, a well-known local hockey coach from Omaha who is the father of current Jets defenceman Neal Pionk (one of the few NHL players originally from the state of Nebraska), was putting together a travelling team for kids born in 2003 (Lake Superior Stars) including his youngest son, Aaron.

Rutger, a year younger, was brought in. There were other out-of-state kids on it, too, including Lane Hutson from Michigan. Hutson's father, Rob, who was born in Swan River and played minor hockey throughout the U.S., was a good friend of Jimmy's. Their boys bonded instantly, with the dads coaching them in various tournaments over the years.

"I've got to watch (Rutger's) whole journey. And I'm excited to continue watching where he's going," said Rob.

Rutger and Lane, who was drafted in the second round by the Montreal Canadiens in 2022 and currently plays for Boston University, were teammates on the American world junior squad this past winter. They hoped to meet in the Frozen Four final on Saturday, but Lane's club lost to Denver 2-1 in overtime on Thursday afternoon in the other semi-final.

Perhaps a future Jets vs. Habs game?

"Rutger is the type of kid that's always going to put the team first," said Rob. "We played on pretty big stages with the boys, Rutger especially, always finds a way to deliver. The bigger the stage, the bigger the delivery. He's going to do well."

### *Growth and development*

Getting to the next level meant having to make a painful decision — leaving Nebraska. And so father and son packed up in 2017 and moved to Michigan where he played on the 13U AAA Honeybaked team in 2017, putting up 40 goals in 17 games with his dad coaching the club. Two more seasons of elite production in the state would follow, with Cindy and daughter, Molly, staying in Lincoln.

“We didn’t live a normal life, and our story is obviously different,” said Jimmy, who eventually stepped off the bench and into a general manager position with Muskegon of the USHL.

“Rutger had to learn to grow up quick because I was either out scouting or helping out my team. He had to do his own laundry, he had to learn to cook his own meals, we’re talking at a young age and the sacrifices for him. I think the biggest thing we always said to Rutger was, ‘You don’t have to do this. This is hard. But if you’re going to do it, go all in, kid.’”

His eye-popping numbers put him on the radar with the U.S. National Training Development team, which welcomed him in 2020 — the first-ever player from Nebraska — and would be the next step in his rapid development. All those sacrifices, all those long drives, began to come into clearer focus for the family, which fully relocated to Michigan at this point.

“He definitely stood out,” said Brian Galivan, the director of sports science for the national development program. “He was definitely competitive and had a desire to learn. NTDP is a hard place, but he was very excited coming in. All credit to his parents, he wasn’t intimidated, that was for sure. His work ethic right off the hop was impressive.”

Although Galivan often focuses on the physical aspect of player development, he was most impressed by what he saw between McGroarty’s ears, which led to him being selected as captain.

“That’s Rutger’s biggest attribute. He is in a pretty elite category of human,” he said.

It’s the type of sentiment one hears all the time about the Jets prospect.

“I can’t say enough about the character of Rutger,” said Barb Underhill, one of Canada’s most decorated pairs figure skaters who won multiple national titles and a world championship in 1984. “Just the quality of the human that he is. You got a great one there.”

Underhill has served as his personal skating coach since the summer of 2021, when she was asked by a long-time friend (Jim Hughes, the father of NHLers Quinn, Jack and Luke) to take a look at him. She was working at the time as a consultant for both the Toronto Maple Leafs and Tampa Bay Lightning and didn’t have a lot of free time.

“Literally the minute we touched the ice I was like, ‘Oh, my gosh, I want to be a part of this,’” said Underhill. “I could just tell in his personality how bought in Rutger was to the process. I just knew that I would be able to help him.”

Hughes is an agent with CAA, which was consulting with the McGroarty family as he was about to begin his second year with the NTDP.

“(Rutger) had been told by so many people over and over and over that skating was an issue. So, that really gets stuck in your head,” said Underhill.

“I said, ‘Look, Rutger, you’re going to be at a point where nobody is going to talk about it anymore, and I want to get you to that point. I want to help you get there.’”

It’s still an area that needs further attention — Underhill and Rutger will have more sessions this summer — but the difference in just a few short years is stark. Underhill has been amazed at

the “buy-in” from her pupil, who frequently travels from the family’s current home in Michigan to Toronto and is willing to do whatever it takes to improve.

“It’s not fun work. It’s hard work and it’s slow and it’s a process and you’ve got to take the time to build and you have to have patience,” she said. “The character on that kid is one of the best I’ve seen in all my years. I can’t say enough.”

The feeling is mutual.

“She’s the best,” said Rutger. “I gotta be honest, the first skate I was so nervous. I don’t even think I learned anything from the first one because I was in so much awe. Just who she was and being able to come on the ice with me. I respect her so much. She’s unbelievable. She’s helped my skating so much, from top to bottom.”

### *Disaster and recovery*

Rutger, listed at 6-foot-1, 200 pounds, was looking to build off a terrific ‘22-23 rookie season at Michigan (39 games, 18 goals, 21 assists) and was well on his way — leading the entire NCAA in scoring this season — when it all came to a crashing halt. On Nov. 17, he was rocked by a bodycheck, sending him crashing into the boards.

He had to be stretchered off the ice and was rushed to hospital.

“I’ll be straight up honest with you, I was (expletive) terrified, I nearly had a heart attack,” said Galivan. “Rutger is like family to us and our kids. That was horrible.”

Jimmy Roy, the Jets director of player development, was at the game.

“It was kind of scary to see how much pain he was in and what had happened,” he said.

The official diagnosis was a broken rib and a collapsed lung. Fortunately, it healed quicker than expected and a clean bill of health was granted 11 days after the accident. Cindy recalls watching Rutger, his finger trembling as he slid the screen of his phone across to access his medical report, getting the good news.

“We all screamed. I was on my knees praying. Just so grateful,” she said. “As soon as he saw that it was game on.”

The U.S. world junior team kept a spot open for Rutger, who had put up seven points in seven games during the 2023 event and would now be back, this time as captain.

“For him to come back and be able to play in world juniors, and then to have the tournament that he did, is amazing,” said Wolverines teammate (and roommate) Frank Nazar, who was on that gold-medal club as well. “It’s awesome to see him succeed and be not only a great player, but a great person. It’s awesome to grow up with him.”

Wearing a flak jacket for extra protection, Rutger had five goals and four assists in seven games, culminating with a U.S. victory over Sweden for the championship.

“He didn’t just go to be a mascot. He led that team,” said Galivan.

And created an incredible memory for the entire family.

“It put everything into perspective. We’re always learning, as parents, and our kids are always surprising us in a good way,” said Rutger’s dad, Jimmy. “To be able to celebrate that moment with our son when just a month and a half before we never thought any of this was going to come to fruition.”

### *Heartache and hope*

Now what?

Rutger wasn’t in the proper mindset to discuss it Thursday night as he sat in his locker room stall, nearly half an hour after his season had ended, still in full equipment. His voice was cracking, his eyes welling with tears as he spoke. The devastation of falling one win short of reaching the final for a second straight year was evident.

Change was in the air, with several seniors set to move on and perhaps a few top prospects, like himself, looking to make the jump to pro.

“As a human I’ve learned so much from all these guys. I came into Michigan like a boy. I had too much swagger, I was too cocky coming off a great year at NTDP. The way these guys have helped me mature as a man,” said McGroarty.

“I feel like I’ve matured so much as a human just being around these guys. It’s been the best two years of my life.”

Will there be a third?

The Jets have built a terrific relationship with Rutger and his family. Roy, fellow player development coach Mike Keane, general manager Kevin Cheveldayoff and assistant GM Larry Simmons have all got repeated up-close viewings this season.

“What he’s been able to do this year at the University of Michigan, I think it’s just tremendous,” said Roy. “And he’s such a great kid. I’m happy for him. The whole organization couldn’t be happier with Rutger overall. Everything. The whole situation.”

With Michigan in the hunt for a title, the NHL club gave their prized prospect plenty of personal space — which has been most appreciated.

“Throughout the year we talked one, two three times a week. Just catching up, getting to know each other better. These people are investing so much money in you, you’ve got to get to know them as a person. I feel like we’ve grown our relationship,” said Rutger.

“Definitely in the second half it’s picked up. More texts, meetings, Chevy coming to watch me. I feel like it’s definitely increased. They’ve been so respectful with the playoff push. I have to give them so much respect.”

Expect conversations to pick up in the coming days, with the next chapter of his story waiting to be written.

“We always told Rutger when preparedness intersects with opportunity, it’s time to go,” said Cindy.

“Winnipeg knows when opportunity is there, Rutger knows when he’s prepared. He won’t put himself in a bad situation, and it’s not like he’s in a horrible situation for development. So, if someone says, ‘No, you have room to grow before you’re ready,’ that’s OK, too. He’s prepared for just about anything.”

One thing is clear: He has no shortage of people rooting for him.

“He’s going to be a captain in the NHL. He has those characteristics,” predicted Rob Hutson.

“I know it takes a village, but it’s all credit to Rutger,” added Galivan. “Rutger is just getting started. This is just the beginning of what he’s going to do. He’s had a lot of success for our federation, for USA hockey, now for Michigan. But it’s just the beginning for him. No doubt about it. I’m excited to watch it.”

Nobody — and we mean nobody — is more excited than the man himself.

“This year has taught me so much as a human and a hockey player about what it takes to really get to that highest level of hockey and highest level of a human being,” said Rutger.

“The amount of stuff I’ve learned this year from my teammates and my parents, coaches, friends. Everything is kind of coming together and it’s a lot of fun. It takes a village, and it’s been unbelievable.”

### **[Jets victory over Stars signals return to top-flight form](#)**

By: Ken Wiebe

DENVER — The Rick Bowness blueprint was in full effect for the first time in a long time.

There were glimpses of it in recent weeks and it’s been closer during the early stages of the five-game winning streak these Winnipeg Jets have been on since a victory over the Los Angeles Kings on April 1.

Thursday’s 3-0 blanking of the Dallas Stars was reminiscent of a December run that pushed the Jets onto the radar as a legitimate contender.

This was the most complete effort since the victory over the Boston Bruins in the final game before the Christmas break and would be given consideration as the best game of the regular season so far.

“For the most part our puck management. Everyone seemed to be together,” said Jets defenceman Brenden Dillon. “We talked about being connected and having the defence with the forwards, the D partners together, just little things — whether it was on breakout or neutral zone.

“That was one of our, if not our most complete game of the year which is nice to have that confidence at this time of the year. Pressure was a big part of it, I think our attention to detail and understanding that they’re a good team, they’re not going to give you much, and we took advantage of when we got our bounces.”



That this type of effort came against a Stars team that had won 10 of the past 11 and 15 of the previous 18 to create some separation atop the Central Division standings is what made it even more impressive.

“It’s massive,” said Dillon. “Those are the measuring stick games for us where we want to see where we’re at. We had a tough spell there a couple weeks back, and you never want that to linger any longer than it has to. Hopefully we can continue to take the confidence of beating one of the best teams in their building.”

Naturally, it begs the question: can the Jets do it again as they get set to close out this four-game road trip with another marquee matchup against Hart Trophy candidate Nathan MacKinnon and the Colorado Avalanche on Saturday afternoon (3 p.m. CITY, TSN, CJOB)?

“That’s the secret sauce right there,” said Dillon. “We know what works for us. It wasn’t for a lack of goal scoring, we’re still able to get a couple on the board. We’re still able to play solid defensive hockey. Dallas is a good team and they’re going to get some opportunities. Colorado is a good team and they’re going to get some opportunities. I think limiting them and not beating ourselves is the biggest thing. When we’re doing that, we’re setting ourselves up positively.”

If the Jets can follow that formula, the chances of the first game of the Stanley Cup playoffs in the likely matchup with the Avalanche will be played at Canada Life Centre instead of Ball Arena.

Both teams have three games remaining in the regular season and boast identical records of 49-24-6, though the Jets hold the tiebreaker due to a league-leading 43 regulation wins.

“You’re not winning a Stanley Cup (on Saturday), but at the same time we would love to get home-ice advantage in the playoffs, at least for the first round anyway,” said Jets defenceman Josh Morrissey. “We certainly feel that our crowd and our arena is a tough one to play in in the playoffs. We think that would be an advantage, so of course we want to play well. It’s a real chance that it’s looking like we’ll play these guys in the first round anyways, so we want to bring our best game and sort of show what a seven-game series would be like.

“No. 1, we want to win and put ourselves in the driver’s seat but also, with us most likely playing them in just over a week’s time, it would be nice to play the right way and have our game in a place where they know it’s going to be a tough, seven-game series.”

#### *Niederreiter not quite ready*

Jets winger Nino Niederreiter had a chat with Bowness near centre ice after the formal portion of Friday’s practice was complete and the decision was made to hold him out for a fifth consecutive game with a left leg laceration that was the result of a skate cut

“Yeah, he’s skating better. He’s getting stronger every day and feeling better every day. He’s just not quite there.” said Bowness, noting the two-day break before the next game against the Seattle Kraken played a role in the decision. “It’s huge. When you have stitches where he has them, it just gives him time to heal better. We’re not going to put him out there unless he’s 100 percent. He’s not 100 percent, so we need those extra days.”

David Gustafsson jumped into the lineup on Thursday and provided his best Niederreiter impression while filling in with captain Adam Lowry and Mason Appleton.

Not only did Gustafsson get to the blue paint to be in position for the puck to go in off his skate, he finished the game with three shots on goal and four hits.

“He played strong on the boards and he was good on the forecheck, he had a good stick, his reloads were good, his reads were good,” said Bowness. “He battled hard is what he did. He’s a good fit for that line because that’s how they play.”

Bowness said the Jets plan was to dress the same skaters on Saturday, though a couple of players are banged up so there could be one extra defenceman and one extra forward taking the pre-game warmup.

Lowry, Appleton, centre Sean Monahan and defencemen Neal Pionk and Dillon used Friday as a maintenance day.

The Avalanche are expected to get forward Mikko Rantanen back after he missed the past two games in concussion protocol.

The goalie matchup is expected to be Connor Hellebuyck for the Jets and Alexandar Georgiev for the Avalanche.

### **Central Division deemed best Nashville coach says top teams, ‘as good as there is’**

By: Ken Wiebe and Mike McIntyre

DENVER — It might be his first season as a head coach in the Central Division, but Andrew Brunette has a long history within it, dating back to his time as a player and later, an assistant coach.

Brunette has suited up for the Nashville Predators, Colorado Avalanche, Minnesota Wild and Chicago Blackhawks and spent two seasons behind the bench as an assistant for the Wild and one more as assistant GM there before heading to the Eastern Conference with the Florida Panthers and New Jersey Devils before working his way to his current job.

So when the bench boss of the Predators, one of the hottest teams in the NHL during the second half of the season, was asked for his assessment of the Central, Brunette gave an answer that was rooted in perspective.

“Maybe I’m biased because I played in the Central, but it’s always been, in my opinion, the best division in hockey,” Brunette said. “The three teams (at the top of) are as good as anybody we’ve played all year.

“They all have different challenges and they play different styles. But they’re as good as there is.”

Nashville Predators head coach Andrew Brunette has spent the majority of his career in the NHL’s Central Division.

When it comes to ratings and rankings, personal preference always ensures there is plenty of debate, depending on what you value or how you measure it. With the Stanley Cup playoffs set

to begin in one week, revisiting what's transpired in the Central Division this season seemed fitting, given how some of the races are unfolding.

The Dallas Stars can clinch first place with one victory during the final three games, while the Winnipeg Jets and Colorado Avalanche will meet on Saturday at Ball Arena in Denver in a game that will give the winner a significant leg up in the chase for second spot and the home-ice advantage that comes with it.

"Every team has their strength, but the biggest thing is that everyone is fast. Fast and heavy," said Stars left-winger Jason Robertson. "Everyone is hitting their stride at this time of the year."

The Predators are a safe bet to be the first wild-card and could end up providing plenty of grief for their first-round opponent, no matter who that is, given their relentless style of play.

"Our group worked hard for it and we feel we can take on anyone," said Predators centre Ryan O'Reilly.

Meanwhile, the St. Louis Blues made a late push in the chase for the final wild-card berth, though it's likely a case of too little, too late.

Jets captain Adam Lowry was asked about the ferocious competition and jockeying for position in the Central and he landed on the need to consider a change to the playoff format that sees the top three teams in each division and two wild cards rounding out the field.

Lowry pointed to the 2018 run to the Western Conference final as an example of why the seeding system makes more sense.

The Predators won the Presidents' Trophy that season and their reward in the second round was to face a Jets team that set a franchise record with 114 points, which left them second in the NHL.

As exciting as that seven-game series was, it would have been better as the Western Conference final.

"It was an unbelievable series, so yeah you get these great series in the first round, but you lose some of the best teams right away," said Lowry.

"That's my little spiel on the divisional format. In the Central Division, going into the season, obviously Colorado was a favourite and Dallas thought they were going to be a really good team but us and Nashville were not write-offs, but everyone was looking to the Pacific (Division) to be high end.

"I know we have some of the lower-seeded teams in our division, but the thing with the Central is that there are no easy nights. Every team makes you work for it. They're all competitive. The parity is so great."

Count us among those who agree with Lowry's take on this situation.

Given how well Marc-Andre Fleury played in those 2018 playoffs and the magical ride those Original Misfits were on, it might not have made a difference, as the Golden Knights could have eliminated one of the Jets or Predators anyway.

The point remains the same.

Stoking the regional rivalries made sense when the decision was made to go to that format, but going back to a 1 vs. 8 scenario would help reward the teams that earn the top seeds.

That's not to suggest upsets aren't going to occur or that great clubs won't be eliminated earlier than they had projected.

"It's been competitive right down to the stretch and if you look at the matchups, any team can beat any team going into the playoffs," said Lowry. "That's what makes watching the playoffs so exciting and what makes our game so great is the parity across the board."

As a point of reference, based on points percentage, if the season ended on Thursday, the opening round series in the Western Conference would be as follows:

Dallas Stars (1) vs. Vegas Golden Knights (8)  
Vancouver Canucks (2) vs. Los Angeles Kings (7)  
Winnipeg Jets (3) vs. Nashville Predators (6)  
Edmonton Oilers (4) vs. vs Colorado Avalanche (5)

With the current format, it would be:

Stars vs. Golden Knights  
Jets vs. Avalanche  
Canucks vs. Predators  
Oilers vs. Kings

#### *Around the glass*

The players have spoken — 639 of them, in fact, and they had plenty to say as the NHLPA released its annual poll results this week.

A few highlights:

- Tampa Bay's Andrei Vasilevskiy was deemed the most clutch goalie to "win one game," getting 46.92 per cent of the vote. Jets puck-eater Connor Hellebuyck was fourth (5.03 per cent), just behind Igor Shesterkin of the New York Rangers and Ilya Sorokin of the New York Islanders. No doubt Hellebuyck would like to prove any doubters wrong with a sensational playoff effort this spring.
- Connor McDavid (48.71 per cent) and Cale Makar (56.38 per cent) were the runaway winners in the forward and defence category, to no real shock. No Jets cracked the list. McDavid also took home the best stick-handler category and Makar the best breakout passer, while Sidney Crosby, who is having another superb season, was deemed the "most complete player." Brad Marchand won the "who do you hate playing against but would love to have on your team" honours (McDavid, for much different reasons we suspect, was second).
- There were some lighter categories such as most stylish player, with David Pastrnak edging out division rivals William Nylander and Auston Matthews. Speaking of "Pasta", Italy led the way in the desired global destination question, getting 11.95 per cent of the vote. That was just ahead of Sweden, England, Switzerland and France.

- Winnipeg did get a shout-out in the “best ice” category, with Canada Life Centre (11.07 per cent) finishing third behind the Bell Centre in Montreal (34.48 per cent) and Rogers Place in Edmonton (14.52 per cent). However, the downtown barn didn’t register in the “toughest building to play in” category, with T-Mobile Arena in Vegas (31.36 per cent) the runaway winner ahead of PNC Arena in Carolina and TD Garden in Boston.

## **Winnipeg Sun**

### ***BILLECK: Jets looked like old, impenetrable selves in Dallas win***

By Scott Billeck

Nikolaj Ehlers said it best on Thursday night.

“It looked a lot like that stretch we had with a lot of games with not a lot of goals against,” he told reporters after his Winnipeg Jets had seen off the Dallas Stars 3-0 at American Airlines Center.

But that was only the first part of what was a great answer from the speedy winger, who scored his 200th NHL goal and 24th of the season — a goal that proved to be the game-winner in the end.

“It’s not just the goals against — it’s seeing how everybody is working together out there, and that’s what we need, so that’s exciting,” he said.

Ehlers zoomed out a bit, choosing to look past the scoreline. The Jets’ performance in Dallas was more critical.

It’s the blueprint, the key to success if the Jets are to experience any in the playoffs.

It has to look like that.

Thursday’s game only had brief moments of worry, not extended stretches or whole periods at a time.

Winnipeg was poised from the moment the puck dropped, and they looked comfortable up 2-0 in the third period when Dallas was pressing.

This team played this style of game for 34 straight games until the end of January, when the wheels started to fall off.

Thursday was an excellent reminder to them that they could do that again against one of the most formidable teams in the NHL, never mind the Western Conference or the Central Division.

And Ehlers, who rode pine in the third period against Nashville on Tuesday, had his finger on that pulse, too.

“They’ve got an incredible team. For us to go out and play the way we did against a great team like that, it shows what we can do if we play the right way,” he said. “We’ve just got to buy in.”

Buying in wasn't an issue during the first half of the season when it was often rewarded with a win and the feeling of doing so the right way.

Few games in the last couple of months have produced that same feeling.

Sure, the Jets have continued to rack up wins, but some of them have felt quite hollow. Just look at Tuesday's 4-3 overtime win in Nashville. Two points, yes. But no one was singing the team's praises after it.

The win in Dallas was something the team could be proud of.

"That's the game we want to play," head coach Rick Bowness said. "That team's a great hockey team over there, obviously. We knew we had to bring our A-game out there on every shift, and we did. That's the way we want to play."

The Jets' test now is to avoid getting caught up in the emotional high of a statement win.

Colorado is next on the docket, and the Jets will likely face the Avalanche in the first round.

Saturday is just as much a tune-up for that as it is a chance for the team to show they can replicate the process.

You need to do that four times to win a round, and 16 times to win a Stanley Cup.

- Bowness on Ehlers' bounce-back game in Dallas: "He wasn't happy with his game. We had a good talk this morning. And he was really good. Listen, he was good at both ends of the ice, you saw that back check in the second period. Like that's just as impressive as the goal so I thought he had a really solid game."
- David Gustafsson's return to action from a five-game stint in the press box as a healthy scratch went about as well as he could have hoped. Put in a position to thrive on the third line, Gustafsson muscled his 6-foot-2 frame to the front of the net and got a touch on a point shot to snap a 30-game drought — a nice present on his 24th birthday.
- I see Winnipeg's 13th and 14th forwards going into the playoffs as the seventh guys for each of the top and bottom six. If someone were to get injured in the top six, Cole Perfetti, who was back as a healthy scratch on Thursday, would be a prime candidate to take their spot. In the same way, if someone in the bottom six got hurt, Gustafsson would be a solid replacement to fill in. (There are also permutations where someone like Nino Niederreiter could get bumped up to the top six to fill in, and Gustafsson, who had a great audition on the third line, could take his place.)
- The line of Ehlers, Sean Monahan and Tyler Toffoli has now outscored their opposition 8-2 in 15 games together since Toffoli was added at the trade deadline last month. That's a line that's clicking. The Jets need the same from Mark Scheifele's top unit.
- Speaking of that, Scheifele's line was good against Dallas. They weren't getting caved in, as we've seen in the past from that line. They had some chances. Connor nearly scored in the second, set up by Scheifele in the slot. That shift also witnessed a solid backcheck by Scheifele to negate an odd-man rush.

- Are Dylan Samberg and Logan Stanley Winnipeg's third pairing heading into the playoffs? They had a good game, minus the 2-on-0 they allowed when all five Jets seemed to forget there were a couple of Stars behind them in the second. Still, Samberg's hustle back saved a goal, even if he took a penalty for delay of game after crashing into the net and knocking it off its moorings.

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