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***Practice Report - Almost there
Gustafsson: "It's the last game of the regular season to really show something."***

By Jamie Thomas

WINNIPEG – Clinch a playoff berth. Check.

Clinch home ice advantage for opening round series with Colorado. Check.

Go into the playoffs healthy...hold on a second.

The Winnipeg Jets beat the Seattle Kraken 4-3 last night at Canada Life Centre but lost Morgan Barron in the first period. Head coach Rick Bowness announced that Barron has a lower body injury and is day-to-day. Bowness added that Barron's status for Game 1 is unknown as the forward is still being evaluated.

Now the debate will go on amongst the fans as to who should or shouldn't play in tomorrow's game against the Canucks.

"So, we're talking to some of our guys. Some guys want to play the 82 game so we're going to give them that opportunity. Some guys want to take the night off, we're going to give them that opportunity," said Bowness.

"We're still going through all of that right now. If there's certain guys that want to play 82 games and they want to play, they're gonna, that means they're into the game, right, so we'll let them play."

Dylan DeMelo is one of eight Jets (Sean Monahan, who could play in his 83rd game tomorrow, Adam Lowry, Josh Morrissey, Nikolaj Ehlers, Mason Appleton, Alex Iafallo and Neal Pionk) who have played in every game this season.

"To play 82, that's something to take a lot of pride in. I think as players, maybe more so than any professional sport, playing a full season means a lot for us," said DeMelo.

"We know the grind; we know what it takes to take care of your body and to be a true professional."

Winnipeg with a win Thursday would end up with the second most points in the Western Conference. Vancouver can still clinch top spot in the West but will need help from St. Louis who has to beat Dallas in regulation to give the Canucks a chance.

Bowness hinted that David Gustafsson, Cole Perfetti, Rasmus Kupari, Nate Schmidt and Colin Miller will play as the coaching staff wants them ready to go for the postseason.

"Yeah, no. It's a huge deal for us," said Gustafsson.

"It's the last game of the regular season to really show something in and if you have a good game, you might have a chance to be a player in the playoffs. It means a huge deal for us."

Laurent Brossoit will get the start in goal tomorrow against the Canucks. The Jets have given up the fewest goals this season and that means Connor Hellebuyck is in the driver's seat for the William M. Jennings Trophy. Brossoit will not qualify because he has to have appeared in 25 games, Thursday's game will get him to 23.

"That's a rule I honestly don't understand. I don't understand why the backup has to play a certain amount. I really don't understand that one," said Bowness.

"I know it's a league rule and we all live by it. Do I understand it? Absolutely not. So, what happens if he plays 24 games. He doesn't qualify for it? Anyways, whatever. He's played great hockey, and that's the bottom line."

Winnipeg Free Press

[Plenty at stake in season finale](#)

[Canadian bragging rights, Jennings Trophy on line in Jets-Canucks tilt](#)

By: Mike McIntyre

Meaningless game? Not so fast.

The Winnipeg Jets still have plenty to play for Thursday night as they wrap up the regular season, even if the result against the Vancouver Canucks doesn't change the immediate future.

Whether they end the night with a record of 52-24-6, 51-25-6 or 51-24-7, the Jets will finish second in the Central Division and have home-ice advantage in their first-round playoff series against the Colorado Avalanche.

It's expected the best-of-seven series will start Monday, April 22 at Canada Life Centre.

However, dig a little deeper and there's quite a bit at stake. Let's count the ways:

1) *Stingy squad* — The Jets have a golden opportunity to get their hands on some hockey hardware in the form of the William M. Jennings Trophy, awarded annually to the NHL team that allows the fewest goals in the 82-game campaign.

It is theirs for the taking as long as they don't give up four or more against the Canucks. Winnipeg enters play with 197 goals against, while the Florida Panthers have already played their final game and sit at 200. Two or less would give the Jets the prize to themselves, while three would mean sharing it with coach Paul Maurice's crew.

"For sure, I think it means something," defenceman Dylan DeMelo said Wednesday afternoon following an optional skate at the downtown rink. "It means we have a total buy-in from everybody. It speaks to our team play. It's a nice thing to have, I'm sure, that we can kind of hang our hat on."

DeMelo said the fact the Jets are in running shows how far they've come.

“It’s definitely been a big transition. The team when I first got here was a little more run-and-gun, OK with trading chances as long as we got ours,” said DeMelo, who is second in the NHL in plus-minus at plus-45.

He trails only Florida blue-liner Gustav Forsling, who is plus-56.

“I think you realize pretty fast you’re not going to win that way. It definitely took a mindset change. Obviously, different personnel too that kind of helped buy into that process. And obviously the coaching change with Rick coming in and the staff we have here emphasizing that,” DeMelo added. “I think we realize now more than ever what it takes to hopefully go far. I feel really comfortable with our game...”

2) Might as well jump — It’s false to say Thursday’s game has no impact on the standings. It actually does. A Jets victory vaults them over the Canucks and into second in the Western Conference, meaning they would have home-ice advantage against any opponent through the first three rounds other than the Dallas Stars.

The Jets would also leap ahead of the Boston Bruins and Florida in the Eastern Conference, meaning only the New York Rangers and Carolina Hurricanes would have home-ice should Winnipeg ultimately meet either team in the Stanley Cup Final.

Hey, it doesn’t hurt to have every potential advantage in your back pocket.

Last but certainly not least, the Jets could lay claim as the best Canadian team in the NHL, at least during the regular season. Although that might not mean a ton to the players, no question fans would enjoy the bragging rights that come with it.

3) Making history — The 2017-18 Jets set a new franchise benchmark with 52 wins, which this current edition can match with a positive result against Vancouver.

Doing so would mean concluding the campaign on an eighth-game winning streak, which would also tie a franchise high established earlier this season.

Sure, the playoffs are “a whole new animal,” as DeMelo said Wednesday. But these records demonstrate how well this group has performed, especially down the stretch,

4) Rest vs. rust vs. risk — Jets coach Rick Bowness wasn’t ready to reveal his lineup for Game 82, but he admitted it’s a safe bet to assume the five players who were healthy scratches in Tuesday’s 4-3 win over the Seattle Kraken would all see action in order to stay sharp while also allowing some regulars to rest (and avoid any risk of injury).

That means forwards David Gustafsson, Cole Perfetti and Rasmus Kupari and defencemen Nate Schmidt and Colin Miller will all play.

“It’s a huge deal for us,” said Gustafsson, who has performed admirably in spot duty but now finds himself squeezed out of a deep, healthy roster. “It’s the last game of the regular season to really show something in, and if you have a good game you might have a chance to be a player in the playoffs.”

With Morgan Barron suffering a lower-body injury on Tuesday, Gustafsson would likely be the next man up if the fourth-line winger can't be ready in time for the start of the playoffs. (Bowness wouldn't rule Barron out, only to say he won't play Thursday).

The Jets have seven players who have appeared in every single game this year — DeMelo, Josh Morrissey, Nikolaj Ehlers, Mason Appleton, Adam Lowry, Alex Lafallo and Neal Pionk — so, how many of those guys will be lobbying to keep their perfect attendance streak intact?

"I'd definitely like to play," said DeMelo, who has never had an 82-game season on his resume.

"Early in my career I was healthy scratched a lot. Then you have some tough injuries along the way. Broke my wrist (and) I was out two months. Broke a finger, out six weeks. Things like that, that are kind of out of your control. Some bad bounces. To play 82, that's something to take a lot of pride in."

It's not clear who, along with Barron, might take a seat. It's also possible the Jets decide to call up a handful of players from the Manitoba Moose — who were scheduled to play Wednesday night in Milwaukee — to give them an NHL game.

Laurent Brossoit will make his 22nd start in net, as Connor Hellebuyck finishes with a total of 60. The game will likely mean plenty to Brossoit, a pending unrestricted free agent who has established himself as arguably the best backup in the league and will likely get a more lucrative contract offer from another club this summer.

In that sense, this could be his swansong with the Jets.

Regardless of what the roster looks like, Bowness said it's important to keep building momentum.

"You want the playoffs to start. But we have a game to play (Thursday) night. We want to go out there and play with good habits and play the right way and get ready for Colorado," said Bowness.

[Reflection leads to turnaround](#) **[Jets busted late-season slump after taking long look in mirror](#)**

By: Mike McIntyre

Some eye-opening video sessions. Some candid conversations. And plenty of long looks in the mirror.

Members of the Winnipeg Jets say those were the main ingredients to a late-season turnaround which has seen a six-game slide followed up with a seven-game streak.

"We were all searching in our own games like, 'What could I be doing differently?'" goaltender Connor Hellebuyck admitted earlier this week.

"And then we had a really good video session at the very end of that that instead of guys being mad at themselves or mad at each other, it was more of a monkey off our back. 'Oh, that's what we're doing wrong. And that's what we need to be doing differently.' At least for me, that's what it felt like and ever since that moment, it was all smooth sailing from there."

Yes, the good ship Winnipeg finds itself in calm waters right now, charting a course players hope ends with a Stanley Cup championship.

Turns out a little adversity may have been the best thing in the big picture.

“Absolutely. I don’t think you can look at a single team in this league and say they had a perfect season. You have ups and downs all the time,” said Hellebuyck, who appears to be a lock to win his second Vezina Trophy.

“Playoffs is one of those things where you want to be hot at the right time. Our main focus is on ourselves right now. Feel right and don’t lose it.”

A return to what made them so successful earlier in the year — attention to defensive details and sound structure — ultimately helped them from taking on too much water.

“We lost our way a little bit, but we were able to get it back,” said defenceman Dylan DeMelo.

“It (shows) our resiliency as a group and our leadership, everybody buying in. There’s going to be ebbs and flows throughout the season. We lost it for a little bit. We’re happy to get it back. I’d like to think we got it back at the most crucial time.”

Forward Kyle Connor, who has points in eight consecutive games (four goals, eight assists), said it boiled down to everyone digging a little deeper.

“We took a deep look at our game and what was working and what wasn’t working,” he said. “Personally, I think everybody kind of looked themselves in the mirror at that point, realizing that we needed better from everybody and we’re just as hungry as everybody right now.”

Jets head coach Rick Bowness said a combination of continuity and maturity from a group that has largely grown together allowed for some quick course correction.

“Now, when things aren’t going well what do they have to do? It’s a little easier now to see it for themselves, because we’ve been doing that for two years. It’s a little bit easier to recognize and, again, they have to buy in and they’ve done that,” he said, while also giving credit to his coaching staff.

“They’re here early in the morning and they’re all very intelligent. They’re good hockey people and they’re good people. They all have good rapport with the players and that’s important. That communication, you have to have with your players. The whole staff is very good at that.”

Now the key is carrying it over into the playoffs, where everyone starts with the same 0-0 record and the 16-team sprint to 16 wins.

“It’s a really exciting time. Obviously a lot of work went into this year, ups and downs throughout. To get to where we are now, it’s a great accomplishment,” said DeMelo.

“We know it’s just the first step of the ladder for us. We want to go as far as we can and have a nice long run.”

Defenceman Josh Morrissey is the Jets' nominee for the 2023-24 King Clancy Memorial Trophy, awarded annually "to the player who best exemplifies leadership qualities on and off the ice and has made a noteworthy humanitarian contribution in his community."

The winner will be chosen by a selection committee consisting of Commissioner Gary Bettman, former winners of the trophy and the NHL Foundation Player Award. The committee will consider the criteria of a nominee's inspiration, involvement and impact to positively benefit his community.

The winner receives a \$25,000 donation to benefit a charity or charities of his choice and be eligible to elect that his club receive a grant from the NHL, up to \$20,000, to help organize an event related to his humanitarian cause.

Morrissey is active in the community on a number of fronts, including his annual Dream Factory golf tournament for children battling life-threatening illnesses.

Jets forward prospect Brad Lambert has been selected to the 2023-24 AHL All-Rookie Team.

The 20-year-old has 52 points (20G, 32A) in 62 games this season, which is second among first-year players and third-most all time by a Moose rookie.

Lambert, a 2022 first round pick from Finland is the seventh player in franchise history named to the all-rookie team after Kevin Bieksa (2004-05), Eddie Lack (2010-11), Eddie Pasquale (2011-12), Brenden Kichton (2013-14), Sami Niku (2017-18) and Mason Appleton (2017-18).

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[2024 Stanley Cup Playoff Preview: Jets vs. Avalanche](#)

By Ryan Dixon

The Winnipeg Jets and Colorado Avalanche have been in the same division for 10 years, but we're about to get the first-ever playoff series between the Central foes.

Even with Colorado's disappointing first-round loss to the Seattle Kraken 12 months ago, these organizations seemed to be heading in very different directions following Winnipeg's uninspiring five-game, Round 1 loss to the eventual-champion Vegas Golden Knights in the 2023 Stanley Cup Playoffs. But Jets GM Kevin Cheveldayoff had a marvelous off-season, making a great trade with the Los Angeles Kings that finally ended the Pierre-Luc Dubois subplot and inking franchise cornerstones Mark Scheifele and Connor Hellebuyck to twin extensions the day before the season began. Suddenly, it felt like the clouds parted in Manitoba.

Still, while it's tempting to say the Jets are playing with house money to some degree, their franchise goalie turns 31 in May and Scheifele just hit that number a month ago. A couple playoff round wins would also likely go a long way toward quelling any questions about attendance in Winnipeg. Remember, while the Jets have been back where they belong since 2011-12, the club has advanced past the first round on just two occasions since returning to Canada.

Colorado, meanwhile, has to be obsessed with hanging another banner to go with its 2022 title. Nathan MacKinnon, 28, is playing at an MVP level; 27-year-old Mikko Rantanen has gone over

100 points for the second consecutive campaign; and 25-year-old Cale Makar is one of the defining blue-liners of his generation. When you have three pillars like that, one championship isn't going to satisfy anyone.

Jets Outlook: It appears a lot better than it did even a couple weeks ago. From late January to the end of March, the Jets spun their tires with a 14-14-2 record, punctuated by a six-game losing streak that concluded that stretch.

However, Winnipeg has climbed out of that funk by ripping off seven straight wins and clinching home-ice advantage versus the Avs.

One thing that's dovetailed with improved fortunes is Gabe Vilardi's return to the lineup. The winger has had an injury-marred first campaign in Winnipeg after coming over from the Kings in the Dubois swap. However, when he's been playing, he's been deadly. Vilardi has five goals in his past eight outings and scored at nearly a 40-goal clip this year when healthy.

He's one of three serious dudes up front Winnipeg will have in the lineup who were not on the team during last year's losing effort versus Vegas. The other two, of course, are Cheveldayoff's significant adds ahead of the trade deadline, centre Sean Monahan and winger Tyler Toffoli. Both players have proven to be dream fits, with Monahan sniping 24 points in 33 games with Winnipeg while centering the second line and Toffoli — who has proven playoff pedigree — kicking in seven goals in 17 contests.

The hope for Winnipeg — which ranks as a middle-of-the-pack team offensively — has to be that it will finally ice its best lineup come Game 1 of the playoffs. Monahan and Toffoli were late-comers; Vilardi missed half the year with multiple injuries; elite sniper Kyle Connor was out six weeks with a knee injury; even Scheifele missed nearly a month with an ailment. With all those guys ready to rock in the top six, this lineup looks like one that can do some damage.

Avalanche Outlook: At the very least, there have been some dispiriting losses to key rivals of late. Colorado was pumped 7-0 by the Jets team it's about to face on Saturday night in Denver. That came not long after the Avs' chase for top spot in the Central was effectively ended by a 7-4 loss to the Dallas Stars — also on home ice — on April 7. Colorado also blew a 3-0 lead in Vegas in their second-last game of the season and, making matters worse, lost defenceman Samuel Girard in that contest to what coach Jared Bednar later confirmed is a concussion.

To put a meme into words, “Not great, Bob!”

Colorado is 3-5-2 heading into Game No. 82 and has surrendered 4.1 goals per game in that stretch. Obviously things need to improve in a hurry.

Still, when you have a Big 3 of MacKinnon, Makar and Mikko, everybody is taking you seriously as a Cup threat.

The supporting cast, mind you, has changed enormously from the group that lost 2-1 in Game 7 to the Kraken in 2023. The bottom six is basically completely rebuilt, populated by the likes of off-season acquisitions Ross Colton, Miles Wood and deadline addition Brandon Duhaime.

At the top of the lineup, first-year Av Jonathan Drouin would be a favourite for comeback player of the year if the league had such an award. The 2013 third-overall pick has been nearly a point-per-game guy since mid-December skating beside his old major junior pal, MacKinnon.

Throw in a new second-line centre in Casey Mittelstadt and his fellow deadline acquisition on defence, Sean Walker, and there are a lot of guys who will be making their Avalanche playoff debuts versus Winnipeg.

One old face you should not expect to see this spring is Gabriel Landeskog. The Colorado captain — who has not played since lifting the Cup two years ago in Tampa Bay because of knee issues — does not appear to be anywhere close to re-joining the team.

Jets X-Factor: The goaltending of Hellebuyck isn't so much an X-factor as critical factor. The Jets are certainly banking on high-level play from their stud No. 1 — who will surely be in the running for a second career Vezina Trophy come awards season — it's just a question of exactly how good can he be.

As the season wound down, Hellebuyck had the best save percentage (.922) of any goalie who saw more than 40 games. Partner Laurent Brossoit also had a fantastic year in a support role, which is why the Jets entered their final game with the best save percentage (.919) in the league.

That Winnipeg will have a goalie advantage in this series seems a given; it's just a question of how wide the gap will be. Which brings us to...

Avalanche X-Factor: Year 2 has not gone as well in Denver for Alexandar Georgiev as Year 1 did. The 26-year-old lost his batterymate, Pavel Francouz, for the year in November and that has forced him into the kind of workload teams try to avoid for their top tenders these days. Georgiev is set to play more than any other puckstopper this year and while he does lead the league in wins (38), his save percentage sits at .897 and 44 goalies who played at least 1,000 minutes this year have a better high-danger save percentage than Georgiev's .804.

Colorado doesn't need him to be all-world. But even for a team with championship pedigree, few things are more deflating in the playoffs than not getting a save — especially if you can't seem to get one by the other guy.

For what it's worth, backup Justus Annunen had some very solid outings in the final eight weeks of the season.

POSSIBLE GAME 1 LINEUPS

Winnipeg Jets

Kyle Connor-Mark Scheifele-Gabe Vilardi

Nik Ehlers-Sean Monahan-Tyler Toffoli

Nino Niederreiter-Adam Lowry-Mason Appleton

Morgan Barron-Vladislav Namestnikov-Alex Iaffalo

Josh Morrissey-Dylan DeMelo

Brenden Dillon-Neal Pionk

Logan Stanley-Dylan Samberg

Connor Hellebuyck

Laurent Brossoit

Colorado Avalanche

Jonathan Drouin-Nathan MacKinnon-Mikko Rantanen
Artturi Lehkonen-Casey Mittelstadt-Valeri Nichushkin
Miles Wood-Ross Colton-Zach Parise
Andrew Cogliano-Yakov Trenin-Brendan Duhaime

Devon Toews-Cale Makar
Sean Walker-Josh Manson
Jack Johnson-Caleb Jones

Alexandar Georgiev
Justus Annunen

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[7-Eleven That's Hockey: 1-on-1 with Jets' Monahan ahead of playoff date with Avalanche \(VIDEO\)](#)

Jets' forward Sean Monahan joins John Lu to discuss their upcoming first round playoff series against the Avalanche, what they'll take from their win over Colorado last week and much more.

The Athletic

[2024 NHL playoff preview: Winnipeg Jets vs. Colorado Avalanche](#)

By Dom Luszczyzyn, Sean Gentile and Shayna Goldman

Season-ending hype might have surrounded the Eastern Conference playoff race, but don't forget about the battle of the Central Division. The Stars, Jets, and Avalanche spent 2023-34 jostling for position to avoid exactly this: A showdown against a division rival in Round 1.

Two teams, led by their own Hart-caliber players, will try to push their teams further than last year and on deep runs into the spring. It's Nathan MacKinnon and the Avalanche against Connor Hellebuyck and the Jets.

Recency bias may tell you that this won't be a close series after Winnipeg demolished Colorado 7-0 just days ago. But this is shaping up to be a tight competition between two high-end teams.

The odds

The Avalanche are the stronger offensive team. The Jets are the stronger defensive team. The end result: Opponents that grade out as nearly identical, giving us the closest matchup of the opening round.

This series is exactly why it was so important to win the Central — something both teams let slip through their hands during the season. It's too close to call, which means one elite team will be sent home early — something both teams experienced in 2023.

Some people may ask why the Avalanche aren't larger favorites, and a lack of home ice is part of the equation. But that question also does a disservice to how strong Winnipeg has been most of the season. It may also give too much credit to a team that began to show some cracks.

The numbers

Despite last week's result, the Avalanche have the offensive edge with a plus-41 rating. At five-on-five, they're still elite off the rush. A lot of that starts with their up-tempo, mobile blue line. But their offensive approach isn't one-dimensional, with a high rate of shots off the cycle and a forecheck to balance them out. That's something the team only improved on at the deadline, with bottom-six additions who can grind opponents down and maintain possession.

All together, that translates to an offensive attack that is among the best in the league in shot volume. Colorado's expected goal generation is just outside of the top 10, behind Winnipeg. The difference is how often they convert. There is a ton of finishing talent on the Avalanche that helps them score almost three goals per 60 minutes of play, which is good for second in the league. That, combined with a loaded power play, gives Colorado the advantage.

The Jets are a fine team offensively, but their strength stems from play back in their own zone.

The Jets are stingy and don't allow opponents to pepper their goalies with a ton of shots. Their zone-entry defense is a key part of that; Winnipeg thrives at limiting chances in transition, which should help them counter the Avalanche's rush. Similar to the offensive matchup between these two, the Jets and Avalanche are pretty even in expected goals against at five-on-five. The difference comes back in goal. Connor Hellebuyck is Winnipeg's backbone at even strength and while short-handed.

The big question

Did the Avalanche add enough depth to prevail against the Jets?

It's hard to pinpoint when the Avs' forward depth revealed itself as a potentially fatal flaw, rather than a temporary nuisance. Maybe it was at the start of the season. Maybe it was the 10-game stretch around the holidays when Nathan MacKinnon averaged more than 25 minutes a game. Maybe it was when Ryan Johansen and Ross Colton — the Avs' best 2C options, in theory — combined for 10 points in February. Like, all of it. While healthy. It was a leap year, too.

Either way, it was clear that the offseason middle-six reset, fueled mainly by trade acquisitions and reclamation projects, hadn't quite taken root. Johansen had been particularly bad, going from "worth a flier" to "not worth his half-off cap hit" in record time. He put up 1.61 points per 60 with Colorado. That's less than Teddy Blueger. If you fancy yourself a true contender, your second-line center probably shouldn't produce points on par with a player who's become shorthand for the concept of a defense-only fourth-liner.

Now, thanks in part to an audacious deadline deal for Casey Mittelstadt and some improved play from Jonathan Drouin, the Avs have a group of second- and third-line-caliber forwards that might not be among the league's best, top to bottom, but is certainly closer to playoff-worthy.

That starts with Mittelstadt, a short- and long-term play behind MacKinnon. He'd emerged as a solid playmaker in his last year-plus with the Sabres, particularly in 2022-23, finishing sixth in the league in five-on-five primary assists per 60 (1.21). His numbers dipped a bit at the start of the season with Buffalo, and that's continued in his first 17 games with Colorado (nine goals, five assists), but he still profiles as a fit thanks to his age, style of play and skill level. He's also, simply, not Johansen, whose Net Rating was down to minus-3 at the time of his trade to Philadelphia. Mittelstadt's presence also helps the rest of Colorado's forwards fall into place; for example, Colton — a solid playoff performer with Tampa Bay — is a whole lot more playable as

a third-liner. It's not just about adding Mittelstadt. It's about the down-the-lineup domino effect on a roster with as much top-end talent as anyone in the league.

Drouin's down-the-stretch play has been an even bigger coup for the Avs; in 19 games since March 1, he has 22 points (equal to Jack Eichel and David Pastrnak), with a five-on-five goal share of more than 65 percent and an expected goal share of 57. That sort of production is more than good enough for his spot in the lineup. The question, really, is whether it'll continue. Is Drouin traditional "depth scoring?" Maybe not; he's playing on a line with MacKinnon. Still, he's providing offense at a clip that the Avs haven't seen from players outside of the MacKinnon/Cale Makar/Mikko Rantanen/Valeri Nichushkin core. Against the Jets, production like that from Drouin — or someone else — will be a necessity, given Winnipeg's defensive skill throughout its lineup.

The X-factor

Can Alexandar Georgiev close the goaltending gap?

The better question might be whether the Avs can close some of the goaltending gap for Georgiev — because he's almost certainly not going to do it on his own. The fact that he's looking down ice at Hellebuyck is the single biggest reason to believe the Jets can pull off a mini-upset.

Georgiev's .897 save percentage is six percentage points below the league average, and he's been nearly break-even in expected goals allowed (minus-0.21). Both represent a serious drop from his play in 2022-23 and the worst goaltending the Avs have gotten since they emerged as a top-tier contender; the prevailing sentiment might remain that Colorado doesn't need elite play in net, but sub-mediocre isn't going to cut it either, especially against Hellebuyck, who might be on his way to a unanimous Vezina Trophy win.

Put more plainly, Georgiev has allowed a goal that he shouldn't have (or two, or three) in seven of his last 11 starts. If he keeps that up against the Jets, Colorado's skaters are going to have to consistently pick up the slack against the best goalie in the league. Good luck with that. Georgiev doesn't need to be great. He does, however, need to be better.

The rosters

For the Avalanche, everything comes down to the star talent — their most overwhelming advantage. Between MacKinnon, Rantanen, Makar and Devon Toews, Colorado has a foursome that very few teams can touch and the Jets aren't close to being one of them. If the Avalanche win, you'll know exactly why.

Some of that depends on which version of Makar the team gets for the playoffs. Makar has scored a lot of points this year and has looked as strong with the puck as usual, but his play without it hasn't been up to his usual lofty standard. That shows up during the rare times he doesn't share the ice with MacKinnon. Normally, Makar is a transcendent talent who can tilt the ice to a ludicrous degree. This year, thanks to playing through injury, he's given a lot back.

Even with MacKinnon, the duo hasn't looked the same. Last year when together they outscored teams by a 39-22 margin. This year they're at 56-42. Still great — just not as unstoppable as usual.

That can change, but it also depends on how Colorado configures its top six, namely whether or not the team splits up MacKinnon and Rantanen. The Avalanche love to put all their eggs in one

basket, but the emergence of Drouin and the addition of Mittelstadt allows for a configuration that may work better against a Jets team whose main strength is its depth.

It would, at least, if Rantanen shows he's able to drive his own line. This season he's played 231 minutes away from MacKinnon and in that time has been outscored 16-8 while earning only 39 percent of the expected goals. Things look a little brighter with Mittelstadt, but the duo has also played just 43 minutes together without MacKinnon and still only managed a 50 percent expected goals rate.

If Makar looks dependent on MacKinnon, and if Rantanen also looks dependent on MacKinnon, it's bad news for a Colorado team that may be forced to stack the deck. Last season the Avalanche were eliminated early because they were a one-line team against a deeper opponent. They added reinforcements to limit the chances of that happening again, including an offensively-minded second-pair defenseman in Sean Walker. They need players outside the core — like Drouin, Mittelstadt and Walker — to dominate their minutes against Winnipeg.

That's because the bottom six, sparsely used as they are, still don't stack up very well — specifically with their inability to create offense. Their collective Offensive Rating of minus-40 is 12 worse than the average playoff team.

All of this matters insofar as five-on-five play where the Jets are extremely hard to score on. That's not just Hellebuyck either — this is a stingy group headlined by a bottom six with serious defensive chops and a defense corps that has some strong defensive stoppers.

That's led by Winnipeg's top pair who grade out as one of the league's best and whose efforts will be crucial to thwarting Colorado's attack. Josh Morrissey has been sensational, cementing himself in the league's upper echelon of defensemen. While the Jets may be short on forward star power, they do have it on the back end in Morrissey, a player capable of tilting the ice in a tough-minute role at both ends. Having the always-sturdy Dylan DeMelo by his side helps, too.

On a similar note, Winnipeg's most important forward in this series may just be captain Adam Lowry, a vintage shutdown center who has played his way onto Selke shortlists. Between him, Nino Niederreiter and Mason Appleton, the Jets have a retro checking line that takes on tough minutes and has earned 59 percent of the expected goals while only allowing 1.3 goals against per 60.

It's telling that the Jets hard-matched Lowry and company against MacKinnon at home, while on the road the Avalanche went power vs. "power," putting him against Mark Scheifele. There isn't a matchup the Jets can reasonably win against MacKinnon over seven games, but Lowry's crew allows them to slow him down (as best as anyone can). It also frees up the top-scoring line to do damage elsewhere. It's why Colorado needs a dependable second line.

The big question for the Jets is whether they can depend on their own top line. There's a configuration that works well (cough, Nikolaj Ehlers on the top line, cough) that Rick Bowness seems oddly reluctant to use. What's left is a trio that simply has not worked very well together. Scheifele, Kyle Connor and Gabriel Vilardi are good players, but they seem to be worse than the sum of their parts at the top of the lineup. In 182 minutes, they have just 37 percent of the expected goals together.

The problem may be that the Jets have found a second line that does work extremely well — so much so that it may not be worth splitting up. But the common denominator of what works for

the first and second line isn't hard to spot. That's a major reason why the Jets aren't favored in this series, a common thread that weaves its way throughout the lineup. It's less about the cards they've been dealt and more about how they choose to play them.

The Jets are strong enough and deep enough to overcome some lineup inefficiencies, but at a certain point, those inefficiencies add up and nullify their biggest advantage. The Avalanche may have similar weak links in their lineup, but they don't have stronger players waiting in the wings. Logan Stanley is a choice, one that lessens Winnipeg's chances of winning the series. And it's not the only choice the Jets are likely making in the wrong direction.

The key matchup

Nathan MacKinnon vs. Connor Hellebuyck

Who else could be the key matchup besides each team's MVP?

On one side, there's MacKinnon, who has been as dominant as ever. He has delivered the most value of any player in the league, with an impressive plus-32.5 Net Rating.

MacKinnon forces his way up the ice and through defenders into the scoring areas with a level of speed, skill and strength that few can compete with. He is a dual threat between his dangerous shot and high-end passing, and the skill he tends to have around him makes opponents' jobs even tougher.

When the pressure rises, MacKinnon tends to take over games. The Jets can do their best to contain that, but this series could come down to whether Hellebuyck can be the difference against him.

Hellebuyck continues to show why he is one of the best goalies in the world, if not the absolute best. No goalie is projected to be more important to his team and it's not close either. Hellebuyck has put up sparkling numbers between his 0.922 save percentage and almost 41 goals saved above expected. The latter isn't just a career high but the seventh-best mark in the analytics era. If that is the level he can bring to the playoffs, compared to last year's subpar first round, the Jets have a legitimate chance to advance.

The bottom line

The Jets have the ingrained defensive ability and goaltender necessary to handle their business and the Avs still hew too closely to a one-line team to make this pick a no-brainer. Still, Colorado's top-of-the-roster talent — especially when compared to Winnipeg's — should ultimately shine through.

[The Stanley Cup playoff bandwagon guide to all the NHL teams you could root for](#)

By Sean McIndoe

The playoffs are almost here, and while we're still waiting on a couple of matchups, we know the 16 teams. If you root for one of them, you're not reading this because you're curled up in a little ball, twitching and sweating and trying not to puke. Playoffs, baby!

That leaves the rest of you, the fans of the 16 teams that spent the season being big losers strategically retooling for a brighter future. You've got to figure out who to root for over the coming weeks and months. You could skip that part entirely, of course, and just enjoy the

playoffs as a neutral observer. You could hate-watch your team's rivals. Or you could pick and choose, dropping in and out of whichever series looks good and cheering on whoever feels like the right choice in the moment.

Those are all valid options. But there's another, and it's a somewhat controversial one: You could pick a bandwagon team to ride with all spring. It's good practice for the real thing, after all, giving you a taste of the ups and downs of following one team for as long as it can last. And when your team gets knocked out, you can feel bad for 10 minutes before shrugging and moving on to someone else.

If you're considering a bandwagon team, I've got you covered. Here's my annual look at all 16 playoff teams, ranked from the worst bandwagon options to the very best.

2. *Winnipeg Jets*

Why you should get on board: One year ago, we all figured they were done for, an inevitable rebuild starting years too late. Today, they're finishing off a fantastic season, they have the presumptive Vezina winner in net, they were aggressive at the deadline and their coach is the ultimate OGWAC. And they're doing it all in front of one of the best fan bases in the league, one that has a super-cool playoff tradition but has never seen their Jets get past the third round, and oh yeah, had no team at all for 16 long years.

Also, and Jets fans might not like me mentioning this but it has to be said: All your favorite players have the Jets on their no-trade list. That means that the Jets are building a contender with one hand tied behind their back. A deep run would be extra impressive under those circumstances, and it might also change a few minds.

Why you shouldn't: They probably have to go through Colorado and Dallas to get out of the Central, which is quite possibly the ugliest playoff path that any team in the league is facing. There's a very good chance this ends both badly and quickly.

Bottom line: Oh, and the franchise itself is in danger. But don't let that guilt you into anything, go ahead and cheer for them to lose their team again, it's not like it makes you a bad person.

[Winnipeg Jets player poll, part 2: Chirps, cold winters, group chats and more](#)

By Murat Ates

On a cold winter day in Winnipeg, a unique message appeared in the Jets player group chat.

From Alex Iafallo, it was a simple enough question, but it was met with mixed reactions.

"Does anybody have a chainsaw?" he asked.

One of his teammates told me that no one knew what Iafallo wanted the chainsaw for, exactly. It was just a confusing, hopeful request made in the group chat Winnipeg's players use for jokes, announcements, memes, and, on this occasion, borrowing tools.

Iafallo lives in an apartment building. He's not in charge of his own landscaping and, even if he was, the idea of him heading outside to trim a midwinter elm tree seemed to confuse a lot of people.

In Part 2 of our Jets player poll series, we'll complete the story of Lafallo's chainsaw request. We'll also share the team's best and worst chirpers, a few items from players' non-hockey "bucket" lists, a few more items about the group chat and — for the first time — which teammate Winnipeg's players would be most likely to call for help if caught in a jam.

The answer to that last question is a wholesome one. Read on for more.

Best chirps?

It's one of hockey's most fascinating elements: Elite professional athletes, running on peak adrenaline, managing to be funnier and more cutting in the heat of battle than most people are amongst their closest friends. Some topics are off-limits, others are fair game, and even though some of the team's longer-standing players spoke wistfully of Dustin Byfuglien, Brandon Tanev and other Jets of days gone by, three clear leaders emerged.

Mason Appleton	33.3%
Adam Lowry	26.7%
Brenden Dillon	20.0%
Vladislav Namestnikov	7.7%
Neal Pionk	7.7%
Nino Niederreiter	7.7%

Mason Appleton is your chirping champion.

"Appy's chirps are nuts," I was told. "He's crazy, that's all I've gotta say."

What in the world could that mean?

"He says the most outrageous stuff that no one else could think of," said a player in the top half of team scoring. "It's not anything bad — he's just unique."

Rest assured, Mason Appleton: Your teammates protected your clever secrets, although apparently you're even funnier on the bench and in the room than in the heat of battle.

Adam Lowry shows up as a more obvious No. 2 candidate.

"He's a smart guy and he's quick-witted," said one defenceman. "He's not a chirper all the time but, when he does, I always feel like he has some good ones. I would also say that he can back it up with anyone in the league so I feel like that adds an element to anything he says."

Another defenceman heaped even more praise upon the Jets' leader.

"He's just so quick. I don't know if he has them holstered already or what," I was told in a tone of awe. "And I don't know what you can say back to him. He's a good player. He's nails. He's big. He's our captain. There's not a lot of things you can go after him for. Plus, he's TDH."

"TDH?" I asked.

"Tall, dark and handsome."

Brenden Dillon got his votes for reasons including quick wit, frequency of wit and a general sense of being able to back up anything he says with big hits and physical play. I will protect the identity of the following quote by refusing to name him.

“Dilly, for sure. He’s my D partner. That’s why I hide behind him.”

Neal Pionk, who I’m mentioning now for purely coincidental reasons, also got some love.

“I don’t want to give any credit to Neal but he’s quick and witty. I hate to say that but I’d probably have to go with Neal. He always loves to be in the action.”

Worst chirps?

The three “winners” of this category ended up winning for different reasons.

There was some debate about what constitutes being bad at chirping. One forward was adamant that his vote go to a player who doesn’t chirp at all. There was a defenceman who preferred to pick on people who he wouldn’t particularly fear, should words turn to shove. A few players skipped the question altogether, while one of Winnipeg’s newer players got a kick out of the words his teammates will or won’t use.

Nino Niederreiter	20.0%
Neal Pionk	20.0%
David Gustafsson	20.0%
Morgan Barron	10.0%
Mark Scheifele	10.0%
Cole Perfetti	10.0%

Nino Niederreiter shows up at the top thanks to a pair of teammates who feel “like he doesn’t chirp.”

Ever?

“Ever. He just doesn’t say anything.”

So how do you explain the vote he got as Winnipeg’s best chirper just a minute ago?

“He’s always dropping little one-liners among the group,” said a forward. “He’s always screwing around and it’s all in good fun.”

David Gustafsson, who played so well in Niederreiter’s absence last week, got his votes in a different way.

“Gus for sure. You just laugh at him and whatever he says that he thinks is a chirp,” I was told in a tone that conveyed friendship with Gustafsson. I asked if there was a chance that Gustafsson is simply too nice of a person to be an elite chirper.

“For sure. He just doesn’t fit the mold to chirp. You chirp him, he tries to give it back, and then you start laughing.”

Pionk got one of his votes from a forward whose shifty expression prompted follow-ups. Why Pionk, then?

“Because he always comes after me,” I was told, as the forward laughed.

Pionk got his other vote from one of the three defencemen who are at least four inches taller and 20 pounds heavier than he is. (“He’s a little guy,” I was told.)

Finally, there was this bit of wonder — expressed by one of the many Jets acquired between last season’s trade deadline and now — about Mark Scheifele.

“Mark, for sure. He doesn’t swear. Did you know he doesn’t swear? Good on him. But he’s definitely, in my opinion, the worst chirper. If you’re not swearing, it’s funny. I giggle sometimes. He’s almost like a kid talking.”

Which Jets player makes the most out of Winnipeg’s cold winters?

Yeah, yeah, yeah, we get it. Winnipeg is cold sometimes. The air hurts our faces, frost forms in our beards, eyebrows and eyelashes, and did I mention the air hurts our faces?

Well, Winnipeg may be cold but at least it’s a dry cold.

It’s the kind of cold that can be defeated with proper bundling, layers and an intrepid spirit that fights back, makes the best of things and plays outside instead of giving in to the climate. And lots of Winnipeg’s players are great at this. We’ve all seen Connor Hellebuyck’s goalie mask and its homage to fishing Lake Manitoba, right?

He’s not the only one who makes the most of Manitoba’s beautiful outdoors.

Alex Iafallo	27.8%
Connor Hellebuyck	25.0%
Dylan Samberg	16.7%
Kyle Connor	16.7%
Nate Schmidt	11.1%
Nino Niederreiter	5.6%

Winnipeg’s hunting and fishing crew leads the way.

“We’ve got a lot of them,” said a younger Jet. “KC, Sammy (Dylan Samberg), Bucky, Al (Iafallo) ...”

“Sammy or Bucky,” chimed in another. “I know Sammy’s sat outside trying to get a buck for an unfathomable amount of time this year. I don’t think he even ended up getting one. He was too patient, waiting for the right one.”

“We’ve got a lot of hunters on our team and a lot of guys ice fish, so they make the best of things,” said one of Winnipeg’s top-10 scorers. “I’ll go with KC and Bucky always go ice fishing or hunting together. I’ll go ice fishing the odd time and I like it, but getting up at 5:30 or 6:00 a.m. the day after a game to get out to the lake is hard. Sometimes I just want to rest but when we have a couple of days off between games, I’ll go. I like it a lot but they love it. They’re crazy.”

It was pointed out that Minnesotans, Michiganders and other players from northern U.S. states are big fans of Manitoba because of our beautiful backcountry. It was also mentioned that the players who lead this list have a ton of “get up and go” to them, just as people.

“Those guys have high motors,” I was told. “On an off day, when a lot of us would just want to melt on the couch, you don’t see that from those guys. They’re always going out and doing something.”

Now, about the champion.

We’ve detailed lafallo’s commitment to camping, adventure and the way he raved about the Whiteshell after spending the end of his offseason exploring Lake Nutimik. Hellebuyck has spoken to the way he’s impressed by lafallo as a fisherman, catching catfish and sturgeon seemingly at will.

About that chainsaw, though. Take it from a Jets defenceman who’s pretty keen on playing outside himself.

Who’s the best Jet at playing outside in the winter?

“I would say Alex lafallo and it’s really not that close,” he said. “He was asking me for a chainsaw earlier in the year to go cut out some ice and I said, ‘Dude, just get an ice auger.’ He said ‘No, no, no. I want to do it old school.’ I guess chainsaws are old school, but the guy is out there building igloos and stuff. He’s my No. 1. And look at his trade story. He was camping for a week. That’s why he didn’t hear about it. Just put his phone away, like ‘See ya!’”

More than a few players were amazed by the igloo and the camp story, while lafallo was also the nearly unanimous answer to my follow-up question. Who’s the most likely Jet to survive the elements on “Alone”? (The other vote went to Dylan Samberg.)

Who’s the biggest wimp about Winnipeg’s cold winters?

There was also the matter of who’s the least in love with Winnipeg’s cold weather.

The Jets had some fun with this one — and the champion took it in good spirits — so I feel comfortable sharing their answers with you.

Who’s the biggest “wimp” about the cold?

“All of us,” said one forward from a northern U.S. State.

When pressed, a couple of people went with Gabriel Vilardi just because the former California resident has yet to experience a properly frigid Winnipeg winter.

But the winner was a runaway.

Nikolaj Ehlers	66.7%
Gabriel Vilardi	33.3%

“He’s been here a long time and he still complains about the cold quite a bit,” said one teammate, before considering things from Nikolaj Ehlers’ point of view. “He doesn’t have much body fat to him so I guess he’s got a fair point.”

Ehlers, who’s listed as Winnipeg’s lightest player on the official roster, chuckled when he found out he was the runaway champ.

"I definitely used to be," Ehlers said. "This winter wasn't really that cold, though, but I don't like the cold in general. I get cold pretty easily, so yeah. I can agree to that. I have been a little wimpy."

Who's most likely to dominate the team group chat?

I didn't ask this question to everybody and, when I did, true dominance didn't emerge. All of the players on this table earned a single vote, tying for first place:

Dylan DeMelo	14.3%
Nate Schmidt	14.3%
Neal Pionk	14.3%
Josh Morrissey	14.3%
Mark Scheifele	14.3%
Nino Niederreiter	14.3%
Adam Lowry	14.3%

"Schmidty talks a lot. Exactly like in real life," said one Jet.

"In terms of non-serious texts, I would say Nino. In terms of serious ones, Lows," said another."

"Neal's pretty funny," said the same player who voted Pionk as best chirper.

What have we learned? You tell me. But let's move on.

Who do you simply not mess with on game day?

You are similarly unsurprised. "The goalies," was the most common answer, by far, followed closely by "The starting goalie."

When pressed, Laurent Brossoit emerged as the player teammates give the most space when he's in his zone.

Laurent Brossoit	55.6%
Connor Hellebuyck	33.3%
Mark Scheifele	11.1%

"Both goalies are pretty good compared to what I've seen in the past but those are the two who I just steer clear of," said a forward who has played for two NHL teams.

"The goalies. They're unique people and they like to do their own thing," said a non-goalie. "I don't want to disturb them or mess with them. I think LB needs more space than Helly. Helly's more loose, I would say. He plays soccer with the guys."

And then there was this item — perhaps a little bit of proof that Winnipeg's starting goalie is pretty darned easygoing by goaltending standards.

"I'll mess with Bucky ... But everyone loves to mess with Bucky."

Something to explore, perhaps!

What is one non-hockey item on your bucket list?

No chart here — just a collection of quotes from players who were encouraged to share an item from their bucket list that had nothing to do with hockey.

“I’d say playing in a professional golf tournament but I did that,” said a Jets player who has played in a professional golf tournament. “I love travelling so there’s definitely some parts of the world that I want to see. Australia, but it’s not easy to get there during a short offseason. I’ll save that for when I’m done.”

“I’ve always wanted to travel to Switzerland,” said a North American forward.

“I’d like to go to England, see where my Nana and my mom are from. I haven’t made it out there yet,” said a player with English roots.

“Everything,” said an adventurous player whose identity would not surprise you. When pressed to specify: “Learning how to sky-dive.”

Note the “learning” part. He’s not content to do a tandem or have his chute pulled by a professional. He wants to be the professional.

Speaking of other professions, I thought this veteran player’s item was fun and unique. I wonder if you’ll be able to guess who it is.

“I always wanted to do a Broadway show or be in a play. I always wanted to be in the Jabbawockeez. I got so close to doing it and then I got traded. I guess it will have to be after I’m done playing. I would love to be in a Cirque show or something like that. I don’t know if I could do some of the jumping or tricks but I’d love to be in the acting part.”

Beyond that, travel ran rampant. Specific ideas included attending the World Cup when it’s in North America in 2026 and visiting a Formula 1 race during the offseason.

Players get so wired into their routines during the year that disconnecting and getting away from “it all” also emerged as a theme.

“I’ve been to a lot of spots in Europe but I’d like to go to Italy, maybe somewhere in the mountains — just leave my phone and just disappear,” said a particularly hardworking player. “Not by myself, though: with someone. I don’t want to die alone in the mountains. Maybe I’ll take Al. We’d survive.”

On that note, here’s the final question for Part 2 of our Jets player poll:

You are stuck, in trouble, in a jam. Which teammate is your first call?

This question was presented in the vaguest possible terms, with players allowed to ask questions if they wanted to.

“You’re in a jam,” I said as consistently as I could. “I don’t know if you’re lost in the woods, have a flat tire, or what, but the key thing is you’re in a spot of trouble and you can only call or text one teammate. Who do you choose?”

It’s obvious, right? Iafallo is a chainsaw-wielding, igloo-building, outdoor specialist who disappears into the mountains for days at a time. He’s the guy voted most likely to survive in the wilderness all by himself. Surely, they’re all calling Iafallo?

Not so fast.

“Al would be the last guy,” said a clever Jets forward. “I love him. I’d do anything for him. I think he’d do anything for anyone else. But he’s never on his phone.”

“I don’t think he’s the one to go with,” said a player under 25. “You text him and he answers six hours later.”

I think it’s encouraging that, with survival potentially at stake, the Jets considered the likelihood of phone answering alongside practical skills.

Here’s how they voted.

Adam Lowry	18.8%
Dylan Samberg	12.5%
Neal Pionk	12.5%
Vladislav Namestnikov	12.5%
Alex Lafallo	12.5%
Cole Perfetti	6.3%
Mason Appleton	6.3%
Connor Hellebuyck	6.3%
Mark Scheifele	6.3%
Nino Niederreiter	6.3%

“I’d call Sammy (Dylan Samberg). He’s reliable, almost all of the time, when I call or text him. He’d pick up the phone.”

“For me, I’m probably calling Scheif,” said a star defenceman who might get Norris Trophy votes. “He’s my closest buddy. We’ve been friends for a long time and he was one of my groomsmen. I trust him to come help me out.”

Most players preferred reliability to wilderness know-how, although one defenceman was torn.

“I’d probably call Fetts (Cole Perfetti) or Neal. It would depend on the situation. Either one would come — I hope,” said the defenceman laughing.

Then came an interjection from the neighbouring stall.

“Flat tire, you’re not calling Fettsy.”

Laughter ensued and the initial defenceman clarified his answer.

“That’s the thing. If it’s just picking me up in the middle of nowhere, I’m calling Fetts. If it’s picking me up in the middle of nowhere and I need something done, I’m probably calling Neal.”

The next few answers all come from players known for their outdoorsy skills.

“Bucky. I’ve been hunting and fishing with him. He’s capable and he knows the situations I’d be in.”

“I’d call Vladdy (Vladislav Namestnikov). He’s got some undercover skill. I don’t know what he would do but it would be something and it would be a good time, too.”

“Gosh dangit,” said an exuberant defenceman. “It’s probably between Al or Adam. Adam is a knowledgeable guy. Apple is pretty good, too. I’d say probably lafallo. The problem with him is that he’d be like ‘I dunno, we’ll figure it out.’ And I’d be like, ‘Dude! We have to get off this mountain!’ He’d be like, ‘No problem.’ And I’d be like, ‘How!’”

“I would say Adam is probably the most knowledgeable but the most fluid would be Alex lafallo,” said a similarly exuberant defenceman. “The easiest to just go to with ‘Hey, this is what I got myself into.’ Adam is the most likely to answer his phone.”

In the end, the (altogether very wholesome) outcome is this: Winnipeg’s players, from top to bottom of the lineup, whether veteran or young, said their captain would always answer their call.

“I’d call Adam, for sure,” said one of Winnipeg’s newer players. “I’ll say Adam because he’s just the nicest guy and I know he’d do anything for any of the boys. I know he’d show up.”

Winnipeg Sun

[Jets two goals from one-upping Paul Maurice's Panthers](#)

By Paul Friesen

One game, two goals. That’s all that stands between the Winnipeg Jets and a trophy they’ve never flirted with before.

No, not that one. The Stanley Cup remains 16 playoff wins, also known as a hockey eternity, down the road.

We’re talking about the William M. Jennings Trophy, going to the NHL’s stingiest team. With one game to play, Thursday at home to Vancouver, the Jets have allowed 197 goals, while Florida is at 200 with no games left.

If the Jets allow two goals, they’ll win the trophy. Three, and they’ll share it with Paul Maurice’s Panthers, and who would have predicted these two coming down to the wire in a race like this? The highest these Jets have ever ranked in the stingy category is fifth, back in 2017-18. Last season they were 10th. The year before that, 20th.

To jump up 10 spots in one year and potentially another 10 in Year 2 is a bit like a thief becoming a preacher — a complete identity change.

“And it doesn’t happen overnight,” second-year head coach Rick Bowness said Wednesday. “So the fact that it has taken this long doesn’t surprise me. You just don’t flip the switch. They’re used to playing one way for a long time, and then you have to change some habits.

“But the only way that happens is if the players buy in. So give the players a lot of credit.”

Bowness may direct the credit to his players for their buy-in, but he’s been the one doing the hard selling for two years.

Telling people who've poured in goals their entire lives to focus on preventing them first is a square-peg, round-hole scenario.

Those pegs can be made of some damn stubborn material.

"It's definitely been a big transition," defenceman Dylan DeMelo said. "The team when I first got here was a little more run-and-gun. OK with trading chances, as long as we got ours. You realize pretty fast you're not going to win that way. It definitely took a mindset change."

In 12 previous seasons, not including pandemic-shortened or lockout-shortened years, the Jets have never allowed fewer than 200 goals.

But it won't mean as much if it doesn't come with the Jennings.

"It's a nice thing to have, that we can hang our hat on," DeMelo said of the award. "If we can get that done, that'll be a great accomplishment for our group going into the playoffs."

The award actually goes to goalies, but they have to have played in at least 25 games to qualify.

So technically, if the Jets hold the Canucks to two goals or less, Connor Hellebuyck would win it alone, with Laurent Brossoit (22 games) shut out.

"That's a rule I honestly don't understand," Bowness said. "He's played great hockey, and that's the bottom line."

Bowness says he had no interest in throwing Brossoit into a few more games, even for just a minute or two, to get him to 25 appearances.

"The team has to come first. We're not going to make a mockery of it."

BRING IN THE B-TEAM

Bowness says Brossoit will start on Thursday, while all five players scratched on Tuesday are "a good bet" to suit up against Vancouver.

Those are: forwards Cole Perfetti, David Gustafsson and Rasmus Kupari, plus defencemen Nate Schmidt and Colin Miller.

Fourth-line winger Morgan Barron, hurt on Tuesday, won't play.

Others will get a rest.

DeMelo, though, won't be one of them.

The 30-year-old wants to play all 82 games for the first time in his career. His previous career high is 77, with Ottawa five years ago.

"To play 82, that's something to take a lot of pride in," DeMelo said. "Maybe more than any professional sport, playing a full season means a lot for us. We know the grind, we know what it takes to take care of your body and to be a true professional."

Others sitting at 81 games are Josh Morrissey, Nik Ehlers, Mason Appleton, Adam Lowry, Neal Pionk and Alex Iafallo.

GET IT OVER WITH

There's another item up for grabs in Thursday's game: Second place in the Western Conference.

Getting it — the Jets are one point behind Vancouver — could lead to home-ice advantage if they meet the Canucks in the conference final.

Bowness's lineup decisions indicate that's not a big deal.

Which causes a bit of a conundrum in games like this: what's there to play for?

"Yeah, even look at (Tuesday) night," the coach said. "There were times that we were looking ahead. It's human nature. So we got a little distracted, we got a little bit off our game. We talked about it after the second. They went out and played a really strong third period. So yeah, it is difficult ... you want the playoffs to start. But we have a game to play.

"We want to go out there and play with good habits and play the right way and get ready for Colorado."

As of late Wednesday, there was still no word on whether the Jets and Avalanche would start their first-round series on Sunday or Monday.

[Jets depth players antsy for opportunity in regular-season finale](#)

By GRAHAM SCEVIOUR-FRAEHLICH, For the , Winnipeg Sun

There's still work to be done this season for the Winnipeg Jets, even though their final spot in standings is set in stone.

It might not ring true for Winnipeg Jets fans, who are already guaranteed to be able to witness the first two home games against the Colorado Avalanche in a best-of-seven that could start Sunday or Monday.

But for the team's depth players, Game 82 is an opportunity.

"It's a huge deal for us," said Jets forward David Gustafsson, who's appeared in 38 games this season. "It's the last game of the regular season to really show something in and if you have a good game, you might have a chance to be a player in the playoffs."

Winnipeg head coach Rick Bowness said after the team's final practice of the regular season at Canada Life Centre Tuesday that all five players who were healthy scratched in Tuesday's game against the Seattle Kraken will play Thursday.

That means one more regular-season appearance for forwards Gustafsson, Rasmus Kupari, Cole Perfetti, and defencemen Colin Miller and Nate Schmidt.

Despite a recent two-game stint in the lineup in place of third-line winger Nino Niederreiter, during which he racked up a goal and two assists, Gustafsson was right back in the press box for Tuesday's game against the Kraken thanks to Niederreiter's return.

This isn't new for Gustafsson. The Winnipeg 2018 second-round draft pick has been in and out of the lineup in the second half of the season.

"Even if you play really well there's guys coming back and you know what's gonna happen," he said. "But you just got to take whatever chance you get and then in the end, you're going to get rewarded."

The Swede's next reward might come with his first taste of playoff hockey.

"It's nothing that's been defined, but I feel like if I if I have a good game tomorrow as well, I might have a good chance of being a player that goes in," he said.

Defenseman Dylan Demelo is a game away from playing his 82nd of a season for the first time in his 10-year NHL career, but he certainly knows what it's like to sit out. The Winnipeg rearguard has battled injuries and his own healthy scratch nights throughout his 10-year career.

Demelo says the team sentiment is positive toward the players who spend more time upstairs.

"Everybody's cheering for each other," he said. "Individual success is great and obviously as a team everybody cares about each other. So hopefully those guys can get in and feel good about their games going into playoffs even if they don't start game 1."

For Gustafsson, the playoff opportunity may come soon, at the expense of a teammate. Jets forward Morgan Barron left Tuesday night's game with a lower-body injury.

Bowness said the injury is day-to-day and is waiting for more evaluation before ruling Barron out for the start of the post-season.

While Gustafsson didn't ask for an injury to a teammate, the idea of playing emotional playoff hockey is exciting.

"You start feeling like a kid again actually," he said. "Because it's now when the games really matter the most."