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**Practice Report: Jets are in a good place**  
**Bowness: "I think we're in far better shape mentally and our team game than we were last year."**

By Jamie Thomas

WINNIPEG – The Winnipeg Jets do not have much time to prepare for the 2024 Stanley Cup Playoffs which begin Sunday at Canada Life Centre.

The Jets held an optional skate on Friday after their regular season finale in which they won 4-2 over the Vancouver Canucks. Winnipeg has won eight straight games and have held opponents to three goals or less in their last nine contests. They are playing their best hockey at the right time of year.

"I think we're pretty happy with the strides we've made. Obviously, our defensive game has been the strength of our team all year. I feel like we have a confidence in this group. We like the depth of our team," said Adam Lowry.

"Our five-on-five play, our goaltending, our D-core. I think, looking at what we tried to accomplish coming into training camp to now, we're satisfied. But now the real work begins. We're looking forward to the next challenge."

An obvious statement is this group is in a much better place this year than they were at the same time in 2023.

"I mentioned it the other day, I think we're in far better shape mentally and our team game than we were last year. It was a scramble to get in the playoffs, and it was a scramble in the playoffs. It helped that we got in, clinched that spot a couple weeks ago," said Rick Bowness.

"But all year long our team has been more committed to that team game, day in and day out. And when things didn't go our way, which happened, we had a couple of losing streaks which is going to happen to everybody, they worked hard to fight their way out of it. So right now, the team mentally is in really good shape. We're confident in our team game."

That team game will be put to the test with the Avalanche who have one of the front runners for the Hart Trophy in Nathan MacKinnon, a Norris Trophy winner in Cale Makar and a five-time 30 goal scorer in Mikko Rantanen.

"They've got some great players over there and they won a championship, they've been there. So, I know we've got a couple of guys in the room LB (Laurent Brossoit) and Toff (Tyler Toffoli) who have won Stanley Cups, but the other guys haven't," said Bowness.

"So, they have a little bit of advantage with that, they have won a Cup, and they know what it takes to get there. And we're gonna keep pushing here and we're gonna kind of learn as we go along, I guess."

Part of Bowness' message to his team will be to respect the Avalanche elite players but not too much.

"It's the first to four wins. And at the same time, it's understanding and respecting their strengths and knowing what our strengths are and trying to put forth what we do well and be aggressive in our game while understanding, again, what their bread and butter is," said Josh Morrissey.

"That's the task we have to overcome and figure out. For our group, it's just going back to our team game and our structure that's gotten us to this point and given us a chance to be in the playoffs. We have to respect them, of course, but be aggressive in our game."

The Jets rested the likes of Morrissey, Lowry, Mark Scheifele, Vladislav Namestnikov and Brenden Dillon on Thursday night. So, the team will be rested and ready to go for Sunday's series opener. They will go into Sunday without the services of Morgan Barron who remains out with a lower-body injury. Bowness said that he knows who will be replacing Barron on the fourth line, but he wasn't revealing that to the media today.

"It's been made (the decision)," said Bowness.

"Yeah, depends on roles and where, we got to look and see their lineup, we'll look at our lineup again."

### [Experiencing the Whiteout](#) [Jets fans tell their stories of what the whiteout means to them](#)

By Jamie Thomas

WINNIPEG – Another regular season is done, and the 2024 Stanley Cup Playoffs are around the corner. The Winnipeg Jets finished the 2023-2024 campaign with the second most points in the Western Conference and will have home ice advantage for their first round series against the Colorado Avalanche.

That means the Whiteout comes early.

Snow is falling on the Friday before the postseason but on Sunday the streets outside of Canada Life Centre and of course, inside the rink will be overtaken by white.

The players who have experienced it love it, the Jets players who haven't been in it, can't wait to be in it. The coaches love it as well.

"This building especially with the Whiteout is extremely loud. It gives us what we feel an advantage in that first game, the first two games so that we can go out and get on top of them," said associate coach Scott Arniel.

"Even last year when we were down to Vegas, it was amazing how loud it was. We were down 4-1 both games and came storming back, certainly in the overtime one (Game 3). I know the whole city and province is so excited for it."

But what about the Jets fans that line the streets, watch from home and those that are in the building? WinnipegJets.com spoke some huge Jets fans about the Whiteout.

Sheila Hathaway loves the fact that even if you are inside or at the Whiteout party that it's a chance for the city to come together and be one with the common goal, for a chance at winning the Stanley Cup.

"I love the power of the crowd cheering and causing the stands to vibrate. The feeling is electric. The roar of the crowd reminds me of a lion roaring in your face or a freight train. It is amazing and something everyone should experience," said Hathaway in an email.

"There is no better feeling than a Jets playoff game. No matter what happens, you always come back, thinking next year will be our year."

Matthew Sobocan remembers attending the original Whiteout in the late 80's at the old Winnipeg Arena, not understanding what it would eventually turn into. Now that the Whiteout year over year gets all this attention locally and nationally, he says he is proud to be a Winnipegger.

"I always kind of feel that it's my city, I've always lived in Winnipeg. We're a small cog in a huge world, right? Somehow when you do watch a television show or a writeup where someone talks about the Whiteout, it shows you what Winnipeg, a small city in Canada can pull off as a united group of people," said Sobocan.

"Even my 86-year-old dad who doesn't come to games, he puts on a white sweatshirt just to watch the game. He's at home, but he somehow feels he has to be a part of this kind of thing. It's a lot of pride. Just based on Winnipeg and it's winters and the joke about the mosquitoes in the summer, somehow in the Whiteout you get people saying, 'You guys are true fans', it makes you proud of Winnipeg."

Craig Harrison is pumped about the way the Jets closed out the regular season playing as well as they have. Harrison was at the original whiteout and was at Winnipeg Arena when Dave Ellett scored in double overtime of Game 4 to give the Jets a 3-1 series lead in 1990 and Game 3 in 2015 when the Jets lost in overtime to Anaheim.

"It's amazing the energy that's in the building. The first one against Calgary (in 1987), we were screaming 45 minutes before game time, and it didn't let up the entire time. Just shaking the whole building, we were going nuts," recalled Harrison.

"Even when you walk around town nowadays, in the shopping malls, the banks, the bars. There's just this buzz, this energy in the city that makes it infectious and that you're then able to share that with the country and the world. In 2018, we were the national team (Jets made it to the West Final) and I think that Winnipeg is a kind of team that the rest of the country can get behind."

Finally, Shay-Lee Bolton feels that the original Whiteout from the Jets 1.0 days is a piece of history that everybody likes to connect with and to her, it is a tradition. It's what it means to be a Winnipegger, to be a part of the Jets fan club over many decades. Bolton loves how the new Jets get to experience it for the first time.

"I'm excited and proud when they take that first step onto the ice to have them feel connected to us, I think that sells Winnipeg to them and make them work harder for this team and for the city," said Bolton.

“Because it’s kind of that reciprocal relationship in a way. Our family is really pumped. We have all our eggs in the basket. I think we’ve got the team; they’ve been playing like they want it; the fans are certainly behind them. I feel like we can do this, I feel like we can take it pretty far.”

Two months of the whiteout. Who wouldn’t want that?

## **CBC Manitoba**

### **[Winnipeg Jets are 'hottest team in the NHL' as playoffs get underway \(VIDEO\)](#)**

Hockey Night in Canada host Sean Reynolds discusses the Winnipeg Jets' prospects heading into the first round of the Stanley Cup playoffs against the Colorado Avalanche.

### **[Winnipeg businesses in playoff mode ahead of puck-drop on Jets quest for Stanley Cup \(VIDEO\)](#)**

Businesses in the city are gearing up for the whiteout with the Winnipeg Jets playoff run almost set for liftoff.

## **Global Winnipeg**

### **[Excitement builds as Winnipeg prepares for the playoffs](#)**

By Drew Stremick Global News

Go Jets Go!

It’s a phrase expected to be heard across the province, in cities, homes and businesses as the Winnipeg Jets prepare for round one of the NHL playoffs, where they will take on the Colorado Avalanche.

Fans across the city are preparing, with many heading to the Jets store at the Canada Life Centre to pick up new jerseys and other gear. Fans on the street are already looking forward to the first round as the Jets closed out the regular season with a win.

“We went to the game last night [Thursday], and they played really well,” says Avery Schmitt. “So I think they have really good chances.”

Other fans are looking forward to the return of Whiteout Parties as they are a great way for fans to connect and support the team.

“Everyone’s so happy, and it’s just great to be around each other,” says Karie Ivey.

Crews were busy on Donald Street preparing for the parties; they could be seen hanging lights and reinforcing the bases of street lights. One notable figure was helping out as well.

Mayor Scott Gillingham hung a “Whiteout Way” sign at the intersection of Donald Street and Graham Avenue. After the sign was hung, Gillingham spoke to reporters and commented on how much the Whiteout Parties are a gift for the fans.

"I think it's one way to reward our great Jets fans, and it's so fun to get together to celebrate on the street," explains Gillingham.

Gillingham said he intends to get out and enjoy the festivities himself and part of the fun is seeing fans go all out for the Jets

"One of the fun things about Jets fans is they get really creative with their Whiteout costumes, and that is just a blast to see," says Gillingham.

"So to all the fans, young and old of any age, make sure you're getting ready for the weekend with your white t-shirts and sweatshirts and full body white, you know, costumes, whatever it may be. And let's celebrate our Jets."

Unfortunately, if you don't have your Whiteout Party tickets already, they are sold out ahead of Sunday's game.

### [Winnipeg Jets' anthem singer sharing passion for music in arena and in the classroom](#)

By Marney Blunt Global News

She's the familiar voice that fills the Canada Life Centre every Jets game.

Stacey Natrass has been the Winnipeg Jets' anthem singer ever since the team returned in 2011. Natrass, who previously sang anthems for the Manitoba Moose, says she was over the moon when the NHL came calling.

"I hit the roof, literally. Jumped up and down in my basement, almost hit my head," Natrass laughed. "I still pinch myself."

Natrass' passion for music is deep-rooted. She comes from a musical family and it's not only her evening gig, but also her day job.

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Natrass has been a music teacher at Garden City Collegiate for over two decades.

"I just love passing along my love of music and my knowledge of music to young people, and it's a joy everyday hearing them sing," she said.

Her moonlighting as the Jets' anthem singer also comes as a surprise to many of her students, she says.

"Before I was married, Natrass was the name I would go by at school, but at school I go by Ms. Brown," Natrass said. "And so most of the students don't put it together. In fact, I have very surprised kids coming in, even kids I've had for over a year, saying 'I saw you on TV last night – you do that?!'"

Natrass says she loves hearing the crowd cheer and sing along with her, something she says is electrified come whiteout season.

“There’s also a whole other level at the playoffs. Like, people sing along,” she said. “At a regular season Jets game you can hear people singing along to O’Canada. But at the playoff games, they are loud. it’s like a choir. Big choir.”

## **The Athletic**

### **Stanley Cup tiers: Anonymous GM, executives and scout rate every playoff team**

By Harman Dayal and Chris Johnston

The Stanley Cup contender field is wide open this year.

There isn’t an overwhelming favorite on paper like Colorado in 2022 or Tampa Bay in 2020 or 2021.

“I poke holes in basically every team this year. There’s not one team that emerges as like Yeah, they’re gonna win the Cup,” one NHL executive said.

It makes the 2024 playoffs harder to predict. Fans, media and statistical models are all giving their takes and projections, but what do people inside the league think? We assembled a seven-person anonymous panel including an NHL GM, four additional high-level NHL front office executives, one scout and an agent. We asked each person to sort all 16 playoff teams into a Tier from 1 to 5 and tallied the average votes.

This is how we explained the Cup contender tiers to our panel:

Tier 1: Stanley Cup favorites (top 3-4 teams)

Tier 2: Strong Cup contender (High-end contenders just below the inner circle)

Tier 3: Dark horse (Solid team that could make a deep run if they got hot, but have glaring question marks/concerns)

Tier 4: Long shot (maybe they can get hot and win a round, but they aren’t realistically contending for the Cup)

Tier 5: First-round cannon fodder (Should feel lucky just to be in the playoffs)

Let’s dive in.

#### *Tier 1*

##### *Carolina Hurricanes*

##### *Average rating: 1.1*

Carolina received a Tier 1 vote from six of our seven panelists, which tied with Florida for the most of any playoff team. The Hurricanes are a possession powerhouse and own the second-ranked power play and best penalty kill in the NHL. They defend exceptionally well, have a big, mobile blue line and the Jake Guentzel acquisition (25 points in 17 games) has been a slam-dunk.

The agent: “Guentzel’s been unbelievable since he got there. I think he’s changed (Sebastian) Aho’s game and lengthened their lineup. And they have the first- or second-best coach in the league. They’re going to be a real problem. Some people will question the goalie tandem but I think (Pyotr) Kochetkov has been good enough for long enough and (Frederik) Andersen’s been excellent since he came back. He has pedigree and experience too.”

Andersen has pitched a ridiculous .951 save percentage in 10 games since returning from a blood clot issue, and Kuchukov's been solid, but a couple of the panelists still weren't fully sold on the Hurricanes' goaltending.

"Andersen could get hurt tomorrow," said Executive 1. "How many times has he been hurt in the regular season or playoffs? If they get consistent, healthy goaltending they're right up there."

#### *Florida Panthers*

*Average rating: 1.1*

Florida has an elite top nine, a hard-nosed, physical identity that our panelists love, a blue line greater than the sum of its parts and a top-10 ranked power-play and penalty kill.

The GM: "They're hard, heavy, they can play the game any way."

The agent: "They'll be my pick to win the whole thing. They've been there before. (Anthony) Stolarz has been unbelievable when he's gotten games (.927 save percentage) so they're protected in the event that Bob (Sergei Bobrovsky) struggles or gets hurt. They're two goalies deep which matters. I saw the Bennett/Tkachuk line play (recently) and they were just unbelievable. They were going crazy with the tenacity, puck play and feeding off each other — I think it's the scariest second line in the East."

The Panthers' sliding form over the last month or so could be a blemish. They lost eight of 10 games from late March to early April. Florida closed the season by winning five of their last six games, but only one of those victories was against a playoff team.

#### *Dallas Stars*

*Average rating: 1.3*

Dallas was the highest-rated Western Conference team, earning five Tier 1 votes, well ahead of the second-best Western club.

The Stars' forward group is arguably the deepest in the NHL — their "third line" features Wyatt Johnston (32 goals and 65 points), Jamie Benn (60 points) and hot-shot call-up Logan Stankoven (14 points in 24 games). Their blue line is substantially upgraded from last year and Jake Oettinger, who struggled for most of the year, is heating up at the perfect time with a .941 percentage in his last 11 games.

The GM: "They're my favorite to win coming out of the West."

Executive 1: "They're elite in a bunch of ways. I think transitioning the puck gets overlooked ... the speed at which Dallas gets the puck up the ice is the separating factor. Their defense is elite. You're going to have (Miro) Heiskanen, (Esa) Lindell, (Thomas Harley) and (Chris) Tanev — there's no weak links there. They have four guys that can play 23 minutes a night, I think that might help Heiskanen."

Executive 2: "I love them — my only knock on Dallas is they don't have an offensive player that is a superstar. They don't really have a guy that you can say OK, with a minute left I'll put this guy on the ice and he's getting you a goal, he's winning you a series. Like it could be Jason Robertson, it could be Roope Hintz, it could be Wyatt Johnston or Stankoven but they don't have an impact (star) the way some of these other teams have — they don't have a (Nathan) MacKinnon, a (Connor) McDavid, a (Leon) Draisaitl, even a Jack Eichel. It's not a (huge) hole because they've got such good depth."

## *Tier 2*

### *New York Rangers*

*Average rating: 1.6*

Despite winning the Presidents' Trophy, the Rangers just missed the cut on making Tier 1 (four Tier 2 votes compared to three Tier 1 votes). New York's even-strength play does lag behind the Tier 1 teams — the Rangers only had a plus-one goal differential at five-on-five and their underlying numbers are middle-of-the-pack. They can, however, make up for it with their elite special teams.

The GM: "When we played them in the year I thought Wow, they're going to be a hard team to beat (in the playoffs). They don't have many weaknesses."

Executive 1: "On paper, they're the most talented team from front to back. (Igor) Shesterkin is really good, they've got (Adam) Fox (and a good D core), they've got a good complementary cast of forwards. The playoffs get hard and they struggle a little ... I like the Rangers better in the regular season than the playoffs. It's matchups (the key to them winning the East): I think the Rangers have to avoid Florida. Even though they're a better team than Boston, I don't love that (stylistic) matchup and then Carolina's a (toss-up) — I think the Rangers beat everybody else pretty handily. They'll walk Washington (in Round 1)."

### *Edmonton Oilers*

*Average rating: 1.8*

Many of our panelists view Edmonton similarly: They see an outstanding forward group, a decent-but-not-elite blue line and a question mark in net.

The agent: "I feel in the last 12 months he's (McDavid) become more (dialed in as a leader). Early in his career, he (McDavid) was very shy. I feel like he's just locked in right now ... and guys like him or MacKinnon or Patrick Mahomes or prime Tiger Woods, I just think you're at the mercy of them. He's the most terrifying player I've ever seen. You could easily convince me they're a Tier 1 team because he can just go out and score 16 points in six games and (as the opponent) you just lose."

One of the executives wasn't sold on Edmonton's blue line after Mattias Ekholm and went deep on how that could be exploited to slow McDavid down.

Executive 2: "The easiest way to shut down the Oilers is preventing McDavid from picking up steam in the neutral zone. The way you prevent McDavid from picking up steam is to mess with the way they do their breakouts and (defensive zone) exits. That starts with their retrievals. Ekholm, good f—ing player, but he can't make plays on his backhand and Bouchard won't retrieve the puck (in the corners).

"We had a good meeting about that before we played Edmonton. We executed that strategy perfectly and we just abused them. If I'm going up against the Oilers and I identify that vulnerability, that is what I'm going after."

By and large, though, the panel agreed that the Oilers are bona fide Cup contenders despite their flaws because of how McDavid and Draisaitl can take a series over.

### *Colorado Avalanche*

*Average rating: 2.0*



The Avalanche were one of the most polarizing teams in this exercise. They received two votes in Tier 1, three votes in Tier 2 and two votes in Tier 3.

The varying opinions are understandable because they have terrifying star power yet they've struggled down the stretch (although the same was true in 2022 when they won the Cup) and Alexandar Georgiev has imploded with an .840 save percentage in his last six games.

"They should be higher, but only because of goaltending," said the GM, who rated them in Tier 3. "I'm not sold on it ... and maybe not getting (Gabriel) Landeskog back."

Executive 2: "I like them because when you've got Cale Makar, when you have Nathan MacKinnon, it's the same as having Draisaitl/McDavid — those guys can just win you a series."

Executive 2 also highlighted that he likes the Casey Mittelstadt acquisition and how it addressed the second-line center position.

Executive 1: "I think they're treading water with their head barely above right now. They have so much talent with Makar, MacKinnon and so many other good pieces around, they've won (a Cup before but) they need something to go right and get on a roll otherwise they're in trouble."

### *Vegas Golden Knights*

*Average rating: 2.3*

After firing on all cylinders for the first three weeks of the season, the Golden Knights haven't played near their peak. Vegas went 34-29-7 through the final 70 games, ranking 10th among Western Conference teams in points percentage during that timeframe. Key injuries have, of course, played a major role in that. That's why most of our panel extended Vegas the benefit of the doubt, even if there was some hesitancy.

Executive 2: "On paper, what box don't they check? I guess just kind of goaltending but (Adin Hill) is proven in the playoffs. On paper, their D is excellent with (Alex) Pietrangelo, (Noah) Hanifin, (Nic) Hague, (Brayden) McNabb, (Shea) Theodore, (Alec) Martinez and (Zach) Whitecloud. And up front, you basically added (Tomas) Hertl and Mark Stone for the playoff run. This is a high-end team. The only reason they're not a Tier 1 team for me is they just haven't executed in the regular season. What version of Stone are you getting? How good is Hertl going to be? How well is your team going to flip the switch?"

Vegas' goaltending is a question mark. Since the All-Star break, Hill has a 7-10-0 record and an .882 save percentage. (Logan) Thompson has been vastly superior in that timeframe but he's never played an NHL playoff game before. Drawing Dallas in the first round doesn't give Vegas much margin for error. The Golden Knights need to hit their elite form and get steady goaltending immediately.

### *Winnipeg Jets*

*Average rating: 2.4*

Winnipeg narrowly made the cut for Tier 2. The Jets boast the league's best goaltender, a deep forward group, quality team defense and are entering the playoffs on an eight-game winning streak.

The GM: "They play well against Colorado. They can get through with the goaltending they have, the defensive (play) and then to add (Tyler) Toffoli and (Sean) Monahan (offensively at the trade deadline)."

Executive 1: "They're a Jekyll and Hyde team, it depends what version shows up. You got the Winnipeg that lost six in a row and then followed up winning eight in a row (to finish the season). They're a streaky team. I think they can beat any team in the league but I (still) think Winnipeg's gonna have a tough time."

Executive 2: "(Connor) Hellebuyck is a superstar. Up front, (they're) very, very deep. They do have a game-breaker potentially in (Mark) Scheifele or (Kyle) Connor or even (Nikolaj) Ehlers. If I could design a third-line center in a lab, it'd be Adam Lowry."

Winnipeg's power play has come to life in April, which is critical because it previously looked like a weakness. Many of our panelists expect the Jets/Avalanche series to be very close.

### *Tier 3*

#### *Boston Bruins*

*Average rating: 2.9*

Boston and Toronto tied with the same 2.9 average tier rating which is fitting considering they're about to play each other.

"I think they're gonna bounce back," said the GM, who was the lone panelist to slot them in Tier 2. "I think losing last year in the first round they're going to be motivated and there's not as much pressure this year. I don't see them as that Rangers, Carolina, Florida echelon, they're just below that."

Executive 2: "(David) Pastrnak's a legit superstar, (Brad) Marchand's still elite, (Charlie) McAvoy's elite, (Hampus) Lindholm's elite, their goaltending is elite. It's just one piece up front they're missing and that's Patrice Bergeron."

Universally, the panelists agreed that Boston lacks offensive depth up front.

Executive 1: "They're really heavy and hard to play against all over the ice. I really like their D core, you could put out McAvoy and Lindholm in any situation for 27 minutes a game, all playoffs long, their structure (is great), but they're just not deep enough (up front). I think they're good enough to win one round, but I think their (forward) depth costs them after."

#### *Toronto Maple Leafs*

*Average rating: 2.9*

Toronto's narrative was easy to formulate: Everybody loves its offensive firepower but has varying levels of concern regarding the blue line and goaltending. The Leafs only appear to have two contender-quality top-four defensemen in Morgan Rielly and Jake McCabe (multiple executives brought up T.J. Brodie's sharp decline this season as an issue). Ilya Samsonov is a total wild card in net.

The GM: "Offensively, they've got elite firepower. And now it seems like they're getting scoring from (Tyler) Bertuzzi, (Bobby) McMann, from (all parts of the lineup)."

Executive 2: "I don't have any faith in their D or goaltending. Their D is really bad on paper and (so is) their team defense."

Executive 1: "They're certainly lucky to play Boston in the first round and not Florida. It's not like a big consolation prize either, Boston's not a great matchup for them. The only thing is the Leafs

are deeper than Boston (up front), they have more firepower. I certainly wouldn't want to be betting money on them, but I think they can win a round. The Boston series is a (coin flip). If they're fortunate enough to get by Boston, I think it ends after that."

### *Vancouver Canucks*

*Average rating: 3.1*

Our panel, except for the GM, wasn't fully sold on the Canucks as a high-end Stanley Cup contender despite Vancouver finishing third in the overall Western Conference standings.

"If they made it to the (Stanley Cup) Finals, it wouldn't shock me," said the GM, who was the lone panelist to rank them in Tier 2.

Executive 2: "I look at the rest of that D core and I'm like Quinn Hughes needs to be a f—ing Bobby Orr for them. I'm not a (Filip) Hronek guy — he did the exact same thing last year, he had an incredibly hot first half of the season and cooled off a bit. Hronek can complement a D very well because he has a lot of good attributes, but Hronek for me is a No. 3/4 (on a Cup contender). I don't have any faith in Tyler Myers. (Carson) Soucy's solid, (Ian) Cole's solid but again I just don't love this D core."

Executive 1: "Getting Nashville does help (the Canucks), I think they got the right matchup for the first round, but I don't see them winning more than a round. The first year in the playoffs is just hard.

"This is how I look at it: Do you like Vancouver (as a favorite) against Dallas? No. Do you like Vancouver (as a favorite) against Winnipeg? Probably not. Do you like Vancouver (as a favorite) against Vegas? No. Do you like Vancouver (as a favorite) against Edmonton? Well, the goalie difference (Thatcher Demko being elite and Stuart Skinner not) makes it pretty even, but I look at McDavid and Draisaitl and think that they find a way. Do you like Vancouver (as a favorite) against L.A.? (The Kings) are as flawed a team as there is and I'm not sure I like Vancouver against L.A. I don't think Vancouver's a clear favorite against anybody but Nashville. I'm not a believer yet."

### *Tampa Bay Lightning*

*Average rating: 3.1*

The Lightning have shown some promising signs over the last several weeks. Tampa Bay's struggling five-on-five defensive metrics have rebounded sharply, its power play and penalty kill both rank top-three in the NHL since the All-Star break and Anthony Duclair's acquisition (eight goals and 15 points in 17 games) has injected vital secondary scoring.

On the other hand, Florida is an incredibly challenging first-round opponent, the blue line looks vulnerable without Mikhail Sergachev and Andrei Vasilevskiy has been inconsistent.

The agent: "I just don't think they can overcome the Sergachev injury. They're asking too much from some of these guys like (Nick) Perbix and Emil Lilleberg."

Executive 1: "Every one of their guys — except for (Nikita) Kucherov — looks like a slightly lesser version of the guys that won the Cup. And that's normal. At some point, you regress as a team and as a player. Vasilevskiy was the beacon of consistency but now you see more ups and downs. (Victor) Hedman was Makar at f—ing 6-foot-6 and now he's not, he's slightly less of a driving force. Can they rally and put it together for 20 games? Yeah, they've won (Cups before). But I just think it's unlikely."

#### *Tier 4*

##### *Los Angeles Kings*

*Average rating: 3.7*

The Kings are excellent structurally, have solid forward depth, and a dependable blue line, but they lack offensive game-breakers, their goaltending has been highlighted as a red flag and they're facing an Oilers team that's had their number in back-to-back years. L.A. is the clear underdog in Round 1.

The agent: "There's weirdness in the water with the (PL) Dubois year and how it's not gone well. You can maybe win a round but you're going to run into Oettinger or Hellebuyck and it's going to be too hard for them to overcome the goaltending."

Executive 2: "It's Dallas without Jake Oettinger is how I would look at (the Kings). Like (Kevin) Fiala can score, (Anze) Kopitar's great, (Quinton) Byfield's great, (Phillip) Danault's one of the best shutdown guys, (Victor) Arvidsson is hopefully effective for them, (Adrian) Kempe's a good player. Pierre-Luc Dubois, what version of him are you going to get?"

##### *Nashville Predators*

*Average rating: 3.9*

A couple of our panelists warned that the Canucks and Predators series might end up closer than people expect. Nashville caught fire in the second half, which included an 18-game point streak. Since Jan. 1, they've controlled 55 percent of five-on-five expected goals, which ranks fifth-best behind only Carolina, Edmonton, Dallas and Vancouver. They also own the NHL's second-best power play since the All-Star break.

The agent: "I think of them as a sneaky team. I think that kind of heat check is so valuable this time of year where they'll walk in and think that they can beat anybody. I'd probably pick Nashville (over Vancouver) just because of how together and well they've played like (Filip) Forsberg, (Juuse) Saros and (Roman) Josi."

Executive 2: "I'd take Vancouver (if I had to predict a winner) but they (Nashville) can beat Vancouver."

Not everyone is buying the hype on Nashville's second-half run, though.

Executive 1: "I don't think they're a very good team, man. I just think there's a lot of holes there. They're a high-octane, rush-based team. (In the playoffs), other teams are going to play a higher level of D, with a higher level of compete ... different types of back pressure and we've all seen how difficult it is to get to the middle of the ice in the playoffs."

#### *Tier 5*

##### *New York Islanders*

*Average rating: 4.7*

The Islanders have improved defensively under Patrick Roy, particularly in the neutral zone, but we couldn't find believers for them heading into the playoffs. It obviously doesn't help that they'll be going up against Carolina, who's widely perceived as one of the top Stanley Cup favorites.

Executive 2: "They have elite goaltending and there's some good pieces, but they're your run-of-the-mill bubble team and I don't like the way they play."

Executive 1: “He’s (Roy) a high-level coach, a high-level motivator and he showed that just by getting them into the playoffs when they shouldn’t have. You see teams elevate their games (come playoff time)? I think you’re (already) seeing (the) Islanders’ top-level game right now. Carolina has at least another level if not two, the Rangers have another level.”

### *Washington Capitals*

*Average rating: 4.9*

The Capitals’ goaltending has been solid and their power play is No. 1 in the NHL since the All-Star break but other than that, their outlook is grim. Washington’s minus-37 goal differential is well-known by now and the club only has two forwards who’ve cracked 40 points this season.

Executive 3: “They’ve got a lot of pride, a lot of veterans, the goaltending has been unbelievable, but there’s nothing sexy about that team at all.”

Executive 2: “I actually think they’ve been well-coached this year but other than not they’re just not a playoff team.”

### ***Five keys for Nathan MacKinnon and Cale Makar matchup in Jets-Avalanche***

By Murat Ates

The last time Nathan MacKinnon finished a postseason without scoring at least a point per game was ...

Well, MacKinnon has actually never done that before — not in the NHL or at any level on record. He’s scored 100 points in 77 NHL playoff games after scoring 61 points in 34 games for the QMJHL Halifax Mooseheads as a teenager. Stopping him isn’t something teams do — not even the best ones.

MacKinnon has scored more points per game in the Stanley Cup playoffs than during the regular season — a wildly impressive feat for someone on pace to reach the 1,000-point plateau next season, when he’ll be 29. So no. There’s no “stopping” MacKinnon. He’ll be the best skater on the ice in a Winnipeg Jets versus Colorado Avalanche series loaded with quality.

Cale Makar hasn’t historically scored more in the playoffs than during the regular season — despite his 2022 Conn Smythe Trophy — which seems reasonable until seeing that his postseason numbers match his regular season scoring rate: still well over a point per game. Mikko Rantanen’s production has actually dwarfed his regular season scoring rate, with 87 points in 70 games compared to 616 points in 569 regular season games.

If the playoffs are a different animal, then so too are the playoff versions of Colorado’s biggest stars.

Winnipeg may have given up the fewest goals in the NHL, putting Connor Hellebuyck’s name on the Jennings Trophy. The Jets recently shut MacKinnon out in a 7-0 win, but everyone on both sides of the matchup likely understands that it was a one-off, chaotic game, wherein the Avalanche did not bring their best. There are things to like about Winnipeg’s defensive approach this season, the Jets’ depth, and the way their zone defense has done a better job of protecting the low and center slot than at any point in recent memory.

MacKinnon still finished with four points in the three-game season series, including this one.

So how do the Jets stop the Avalanche elite?

Not possible.

How does Winnipeg limit the amount of damage that MacKinnon, Rantanen and Makar will inevitably do, while giving itself the best chance to win?

Let's look at matchups, Winnipeg's best defensive schemes — including video — and the importance of staying disciplined because the Avalanche power play is perfectly suited to pick apart the Jets' PK.

*Adam Lowry: Grown in a lab?*

"If I could design a third-line center in a lab, it'd be Adam Lowry."

That's one NHL executive speaking anonymously for Chris Johnston and Harman Dayal's Stanley Cup contender tiers.

Lowry is a 6-foot-5 Selke candidate who can play a punishing physical game but whose bedrock is tenacity, a great stick and a standard-bearing work ethic. He's an enormous reason that home-ice advantage is such a big deal to the Jets, with head coach Rick Bowness preferring to run Lowry's line with Nino Niederreiter and Mason Appleton at elite competition whenever possible.

Lowry is a throwback in so many ways. Classic shutdown centers are rare these days, while "two-way play" is becoming associated with more offence than Lowry's 35 points. He's perfectly suited for the role of shutdown center, though, willing to battle for pucks in any corner and both creases, and committed enough to beat most players back to Winnipeg's zone even after crashing the net offensively.

He's also a great blend of ornery, physical and smart about when to get involved after the whistles.

"Lows sets the standard every game," said a Jets forward in this poll.

MacKinnon and Rantanen will get out against other players and Mark Scheifele has had success during the regular season. So far, the matchup game for both Jets centers is one where the flow of play has favored Colorado. Lowry won his minutes 2-0, though, while MacKinnon vs. Scheifele's line finished with a 1-1 scoreline at five-on-five.

What will it take, though?

*Winnipeg's zone defense at five-on-five*

When a team attacks with speed, like Colorado does, and when a team has the kind of second-wave weapons as the Avalanche do in Makar, defense starts well before the puck gets to the defensive zone. Backpressure is paramount in the playoffs against any team — you see stars buy in to being postseason puckhounds that avoid it in October — but the importance skyrockets against Colorado.

It's more than a "first forward back" thing. F1 needs to get back, it's true, allowing the defensemen to play a tight gap and putting pressure on the first Avalanche into the zone. You can count on Lowry for that at any time and Scheifele has shown dedication, too.

A team with Colorado's speed will get its entries. That's what makes the second forward back at least as important and no Jets forward is better at tracking back to the far post, taking away weak-side and backdoor options than Niederreiter is ... And still, that won't be enough. MacKinnon and Rantanen can gain the zone against properly gapped defensemen and they're both great at protecting the puck until help has arrived — and that's often Makar's cue.

That's why Winnipeg's third forward back will often be as important as F1 and F2. And it's exactly why Lowry, Niederreiter and Appleton are Winnipeg's best bets to defend MacKinnon and company. We will absolutely see "power versus power" matchups in the form of MacKinnon against Scheifele but, when that happens, I can see circumstances in which Makar beats Scheifele's wingers down the ice. Kyle Connor and Gabriel Vilardi are very good players and their transition defense is exploitable — especially by the best players in the world.

You're about to watch a mundane shift wherein Winnipeg plays MacKinnon the right way — an early faceoff win and clear, then a tight gap by Josh Morrissey because Lowry is on his horse, a great F2 trackback by Niederreiter to help Dylan DeMelo take away a weakside option, and then Winnipeg's defenders playing things well when DeMelo gives it away.

Winnipeg plays a zone defense, with emphasis on protecting the low and center slot. Toward the end of the clip, you'll see MacKinnon look for soft ice high in the zone — he's dangerous enough to be a threat anywhere — and then drop into the slot looking to help or become an outlet for Valeri Nichushkin. A pick from DeMelo and good coverage by all five Jets skaters mean he's never alone in the middle of the ice.

A lot of shifts are more dangerous than that. MacKinnon and Rantanen will win their one-on-one battles and they will get into space. The key for Winnipeg is not to give them that space for free — and that takes all five skaters on the ice, as you saw above.

Colorado's dominant power play vs. Winnipeg's passive PK  
Colorado finished the season with the NHL's fifth-best power play. It's inevitable, it's led by MacKinnon, Rantanen and Makar, and they might be overlooked but Jonathan Drouin and Nichushkin are dominant, too.

There's a ton of movement on and off the puck that leads to this heat map of shots from Hockey Viz.

Players are not married to locations so much as encouraged to be creative, exploiting whatever space they find, and it led to the second most power-play goals in the NHL.

That said: MacKinnon is a right-handed shooter who tends to set up on the left half-wall, making him a one-timer threat as well as a playmaker. Rantanen is a left-handed shooter who tends to set up opposite him — also a shooting and passing threat. The Avalanche use one-timers from both, including one-timers into slap passes for back-door tap-ins, and they also interchange spots freely, turning Drouin and Nichushkin into shooting threats. Don't underrate Nichushkin's ability to gain space and make himself an option in the low slot, either.

Winnipeg's penalty kill has given up a shooting gallery to most teams, ranking 21st in efficiency on the back of strong goaltending even though the Jets have struggled to win faceoffs, get clears or deny entries — all problems the Avalanche power play will create.

Discipline will be the name of the game because this area of the series projects to be a solid Avalanche advantage.

#### *Josh Morrissey and Dylan DeMelo*

With both coaches focused on forward matchups, the Jets were able to get Morrissey and DeMelo out against MacKinnon at home and on the road.

Morrissey is Winnipeg's most mobile defenseman — an offensive threat in his own right — whose agility is easy to see whether he's moving forward, backward or side to side. He's in the Norris Trophy conversation in part because of his offence, in part because his defensive game has continued to improve, and in part because he reads the game so well at this stage of his career that he can go toe-to-toe with the game's greats at both ends of the ice.

Even he will need to give up ice to MacKinnon's speed, while DeMelo's game — typically defensively sound, with strong exit passes and an ability to put his teammates in good spots — will give up size to Rantanen and Nichushkin in any battles in front.

All hands in and Winnipeg can reduce the damage if it gets its top pair out early and often. Neal Pionk's puck management has been a struggle down the stretch, though, leading to defensive zone giveaways and lapses in coverage for Winnipeg's second pair that give him and Brenden Dillon the worst goals-for percentage of Jets defensive pairs.

That percentage is still above 50 percent, thanks to the parts of the season where they excelled — and to Winnipeg's five-on-five team game — but it's a pairing to worry about against the Avalanche elite.

Finally, Logan Stanley looks set to draw in on the third pair. He struggled against MacKinnon early in the season, getting particularly burned on a play that would have beat most people, and that looks like a matchup Winnipeg can't afford even noting Stanley's stronger stretch run.

It's not that Colorado doesn't have other weapons throughout its lineup but MacKinnon's speed is a cheat code and Rantanen can play the game with elite skill or physical dominance. They are an enormous matchup concern.

#### *Connor Hellebuyck*

If all else fails, there's the 2020 Vezina Trophy-winning goaltender who looks set to win his second Vezina this season. He's the Jets' MVP at five-on-five and on the penalty kill, elevating a good defensive team to great overall numbers. Hellebuyck finished the season with the most goals saved above expected, whichever public model you use, led all starters in save percentage, and has Laurent Brossoit to back him up.

It's a cliché because it's true: Goaltending wins championships. If Winnipeg is to deny Colorado's elite, it might not be because the Jets were able to limit Colorado's flow of play with its stars on the ice.



## [\*\*NHL Playoff Preview: Jets hope to continue recent success against Avalanche \(VIDEO\)\*\*](#)

The Jets had their way with the Avalanche this season, beating them in all three meetings quite convincingly. However, counting out the Avs and Hart Trophy candidate Nathan MacKinnon would be a foolish mistake. Can Winnipeg translate regular season success against Colorado into the playoffs?

## [\*\*Jets have evolved from a team that relied too much on Hellebuyck \(VIDEO\)\*\*](#)

Making life easier on Connor Hellebuyck was one of the Jets' priorities this season and that came to fruition on a couple of fronts. John Lu explains which new tendencies have become part of Winnipeg's identity as they evolve beyond a team that relied too much on their world class goaltender

## **Winnipeg Free Press**

### [\*\*Black ink and Whiteouts\*\*](#)

By: Kelly Taylor and Ken Wiebe

Few predicted with certainty last fall the Winnipeg Jets would even qualify for the National Hockey League's Stanley Cup playoffs.

Exceeding the expectations of most fans and so-called experts by finishing second in the Western Conference, they host the Central Division-rival Colorado Avalanche Sunday in the first game of what's expected to be a tightly contested opening-round series.

But as the Jets were piling up victories during the 2023-24 campaign, the storyline switched from on-ice success to attendance woes.

Now, as the city braces for the full wallop of a Winnipeg Whiteout, the team's participation in the post-season isn't just an electric thrill-a-minute roller-coaster ride for fans, it's a welcome injection of revenue for an ownership group that sounded alarm bells a couple of months ago.

On the ice, the Jets enjoyed one of their best regular seasons since relocating from Atlanta in 2011, posting a 52-24-6 record to clinch second spot in the Central and home-ice advantage in Round 1. And, perhaps, beyond.

How far will that go in easing ownership's financial concerns?

"Profitable? Yes, but it's not the magic wand and we're looking to play the long game," True North Sports and Entertainment chief financial officer John Olfert told the Free Press.

"Without getting into specifics — and what the public needs to be mindful of — is we don't budget for the playoffs. It's a windfall, but it's not a massive windfall, acknowledging that more than half the gate goes to the league."

When Jets co-owner and True North executive chairman Mark Chipman said in February the team's declining attendance "isn't going to work over the long haul," it made headlines across

the country. Even NHL commissioner Gary Bettman came to town on Feb. 27 to assure fans the sky is not falling.

Chipman softened his stance days later, reminding the faithful the agonizing 1996 departure of Jets 1.0 was exactly why he started his journey to bring the NHL back to Winnipeg.

He told the Free Press that he wasn't threatening to sell the team. But he wanted to make it known the Jets couldn't continue spending to the NHL salary cap without more season-ticket revenue.

There were no sellouts at 15,225-seat Canada Life Centre through the Jets first 18 dates on 2023-2024's 41-home game schedule. But it was a better finish; the building was full 10 times in the last 23.

If the playoffs mean anything to the club, it's that nothing breeds success like success. Olfert says teams around the league aspire to season-ticket renewal rates of 90 per cent. The Jets are already past that line.

The team charged into the playoffs this season — beating the Pacific Division-champion Vancouver Canucks Thursday to cap off an eight-game win streak — as opposed to last year, when it limped to the finish, hanging on by a thread to a wild-card spot.

The benefits are showing.

"Certainly, team performance has been a fantastic circumstance for us," Olfert said. "The team is winning and is gearing up towards the playoffs. That certainly helps.

"What's fascinating is that as we've entered the world of post-event surveys... and as much effort as we've put into guest experience, the greatest driver of post-event surveys is winning and losing. People feel better after they win."

Olfert says he's confident the team will return to its desired base of 13,000 season tickets — achieved in the blink of an eye in 2011 after the relocation of the Thrashers was announced — though, perhaps, not by next year.

Driving that, he expects, will be the benefits for post-season play that season-ticket members enjoy.

"As people are realizing right now, the demand for playoff tickets is high," he says. "If you want to guarantee yourself playoff tickets at value prices, become a season-ticket member and there's great value."

The team is privately held, and does not release details about its finances. While Forbes speculated team revenues, inclusive of ticket sales, concessions, merchandise and sponsorship revenue, at US\$161 million in the 2022-23 season, nobody but Chipman and his inner circle knows for certain.

Still, some educated guesses about the finances of playoff hockey are possible.

"If the Jets make a deep run, they could be looking at \$6 million a game," says Dan Mason, professor of sport management at the University of Alberta. "That increases the pressure on

teams to make the playoffs, and why you see teams mortgaging their futures at the trade deadline to make it over that hump.”

Consider: a rough calculation of a sold-out Winnipeg regular-season home game brings in almost \$1.5 million in ticket revenue (average ticket price of \$95 times capacity). The \$61.5 million that generates over the 41 home games of an 82-game season doesn't come close to matching the salary cap of US\$87.7 million, which translates to \$110 million in Canadian funds. (Jets player salaries for this season are within US\$400,000 of that cap, including a hit of US\$2.75 million paid to buy out the final season of former captain Blake Wheeler's contract.)

The expenses don't stop there, however: there's a substantial amount of non-player staff salaries, league royalties, operating expenses, travel costs — the team typically flies charters arranged by Air Canada Jetz — advertising, taxes and debt servicing, among others.

A very conservative estimate of concession revenues suggests the team earns at least an extra \$304,500 per game, which assumes an average spend of \$20 per patron. Considering \$20 won't cover the price of a beer and a Jets dog, it's likely the average is higher.

Comparing the differences in ticket prices between regular-season and playoff games shows why making it to the show is so important.

The \$80 a fan paid for a Section 329 seat for Tuesday's game against the Seattle Kraken jumps to \$257 for a comparable seat in Game 1 of the first round of playoff action. The \$219 a fan in Section 117 paid becomes \$487 in Game 1.

All of which, considering the discounts offered to season-ticket and share-package holders, points to the average ticket price jumping by between 200 and 300 per cent, meaning the gate for one game in Round 1 could be worth between \$3 million and \$4.5 million.

Even after giving more than half to the league, playoffs represent revenues the team doesn't include in budgeting.

The Jets, not wanting to jinx Round 1, have not announced pricing for Round 2, but in previous seasons, each subsequent round has become increasingly pricey.

It also creates an incentive to earn home-ice advantage, as the Jets have this season, hosting Colorado for Games 1 and 2 and, with most pundits predicting a protracted best-of-seven series, Games 5 and 7 would also be played in downtown Winnipeg. A team without home-ice advantage could host three games — the third, fourth and sixth.

A seven-game series could boost True North's coffers by as much as \$18 million (\$11.7 million after league revenue-sharing contributions), not including concessions and merchandise. For a team that might average \$60 million over the 41 home games of a regular season, an extra \$11.7 million goes a long way to paying for US\$87.7 million in player salaries, based on the 2024 salary cap.

None of these figures include concessions, merchandise or sponsorship, which typically spike during playoffs, Mason says.

“People get swept up in the excitement, so concessions are up... It's sort of a perfect storm, which is why teams are so desperate to make it into the playoffs,” he says.

Olfert says merchandise sales spiked as soon as the Jets clinched a playoff berth on April 4 with a 5-2 win over the Calgary Flames. He's expecting concession revenue, particularly with the added Whiteout street parties, to follow suit.

The playoffs also provide a showcase to folks swept up in the hoopla who might be converted into more than just casual fans.

"There's just natural excitement," he says. "Everybody is wearing white. You drive down the street and you see posters in the windows. It catches on at schools and kids are watching. They're asking their parents (about the Jets)."

The playoffs are a financial windfall for the 16 participating teams, but the 16 that fall short also benefit, though to a lesser extent. According to the NHL and NHL Players' Association collective agreement, 35 per cent of playoff teams' gate revenue is collected by the league.

The Player Compensation Cost Redistribution System is a fancy title for what is essentially revenue sharing. During the regular season, teams in the Top 10 in revenues contribute to a fund distributed to teams in the Bottom 15, roughly speaking.

That all changes in the playoffs, however, as each team that qualifies contributes 35 per cent of its ticket revenue to the redistribution fund. The playoff contribution can't exceed 50 per cent of that fund, so any amount more than half is refunded to the playoff teams.

For the Jets, it's not just the march to the post-season dance driving ticket sales. While fans were on tenterhooks last summer wondering if top centre Mark Scheifele or star goaltender Connor Hellebuyck would stay with the team or move on — triggering what would likely be a painful rebuilding period — the unexpected Thanksgiving Day signing of both reverberated around the league, and among fans.

"There's an expectation of winning. We've taken the word 'rebuilding' out of our vernacular. We are retooling and we always want to keep on competing. We think we owe that to our fan base," says Olfert. "That's just intrinsically motivated. We want to win. Our task on the business side, as a broader community, is to operate this asset such that we generate earnings that we spend to the cap.

"Echoing Mark (Chipman) and (general manager Kevin Cheveldayoff's) comments, the players' commitments reflect well on the city. We've talked about being a source of pride and it's not just for the Winnipeg Jets, it's Winnipeggers feeling good about themselves."

**['Man, it's war'](#)**

**[Jets, Avs hunker down for what could be epic first-round series](#)**

By: Mike McIntyre and Ken Wiebe

Rick Bowness wasn't about to make a prediction. He'll leave that to the so-called hockey experts to weigh in on whether his Winnipeg Jets or the Colorado Avalanche have the edge.

However, the veteran bench boss was confident in making one declaration Friday as the Central Division rivals prepared for their first-ever playoff meeting Sunday evening at Canada Life Centre.

“Man, it’s war,” said Bowness.

### *JETS VS. AVALANCHE*

(First-round NHL playoff schedule, all times Central)

Sun, April 21 – Colorado at Winnipeg 6 p.m.

Tue, April 23 – Colorado at Winnipeg 8:30 p.m.

Fri, April 26 – Winnipeg at Colorado 9 p.m.

Sun, April 28 – Winnipeg at Colorado 1:30 p.m.

Tue, April 30 – Colorado at Winnipeg Time TBD

Thu, May 2 – Winnipeg at Colorado Time TBD

Sat, May 4 – Colorado at Winnipeg Time TBD

In an NHL season filled with compelling first-round matchups that many see as too close to call, the Jets-Avalanche battle might be the biggest coin-flip of all. Only three points separated them in the standings, the smallest gap of the eight series.

“That first round is always the toughest. We know it’s going to be a tough first round with the Avs. Even though we have home-ice advantage, you’ve got to take advantage of it,” said Bowness.

“There’s going to be four very excellent hockey teams (in the West) that have great years and are going home early. We have to make sure that we do everything in our power to make sure that’s not us.”

Winnipeg went 3-0-0 against Colorado during the regular season, outscoring them 17-4. That and \$5 will get you a nice cup of coffee.

When we last saw the Jets on a big playoff stage last spring, they were staggering home from Sin City with their collective tails between their legs, having lost four consecutive games to Vegas including a complete no-show in the final one that had their furious head coach issuing a public scolding.

All of which led to an important message and timely reminder Bowness shared with his troops on Friday morning.

“As I told the players, no one knows the outcome of the series. But whatever it is, make sure we can live with ourselves, that we left everything we could on the ice,” he said.

“That’s the most important thing. If you play your best and you give your best and end up losing the series, it’s a lot easier to live with yourself than when you walk away and you know, ‘You know what, we didn’t.’ That’s the most important thing for us.”

So, how do these teams measure up? Here are seven storylines for the best-of-seven series:

#### *1. Star power*

Nathan MacKinnon. Cale Makar. Mikko Rantanen. Connor Hellebuyck. Mark Scheifele. Josh Morrissey.

There's no shortage of elite talent on both sides of the ice, but the scales would seem to tip in Colorado's favour when looking at the 18 skaters a side.

MacKinnon (140 points) might just win the Hart Trophy this season as league MVP, Makar (90 points) is once again in the conversation as the NHL's top defenceman. Throw in a pure power winger such as Rantanen (104 points) and that is quite the three-headed offensive monster.

"They've got probably one of — if not the — best player in the world right now. It starts with MacKinnon," said shutdown centre Adam Lowry.

Expect Morrissey and blue-line partner Dylan DeMelo to see a healthy dose of Colorado's big guns.

"We, as a group, need to be aware how elite some of their top guys are, how dangerous they can be offensively, certainly just commit to playing team (defence)," he said. "As much we have to worry about those guys, and rightfully so, we need to do our jobs individually and ones we've set forth as a group."

## *2. Offence vs. defence*

It's a classic battle between the NHL's highest-scoring team (Colorado led the way with 3.68 goals-per-game) and the stingiest squad in the land (Winnipeg captured the Jennings Trophy giving up just 2.41 goals-per-game).

If the old saying "defence wins championships" holds true, that should favour the Jets, right?

"If you look at their offence, they put up pretty gaudy numbers offensively. It's certainly a tough test just trying to slow them down and try to limit their chances," said Lowry. "We know there's going to be stretches where they take the play to us, they have a lot of zone time. I think it's just trying to weather those storms and kind of countering, getting to them with the forecheck and things like that."

Special teams often play a huge role in the post-season, so Winnipeg's 21st ranked penalty kill (77.1 per cent efficiency) will have its hands full with Colorado's fifth-ranked power play (24.5 per cent). On the flip-side, Winnipeg's power play finished 22nd (18.8 per cent), while Colorado's PK was 12th (79.9 per cent).

In that sense, keeping a level head is crucial.

"The intensity ramps up in the playoffs. You want your players playing hard, you want them playing with passion. You can push discipline all you want and that's going to be a big factor in it," said Bowness. "But you get into that first round, man, your passion is up, your intensity is up and, sometimes, you take a few penalties you wish you didn't take."

## *3. Masked men*

This would appear to be an epic mismatch. Winnipeg has Hellebuyck, who should be a slam-dunk to win his second Vezina Trophy, along with Laurent Brossoit as a valuable insurance policy should something go wrong.

“Our details are right, our team game is right and everyone’s mind is right so this is what you want to do when you’re entering playoffs — you want to get hot and stay hot,” said Hellebuyck, who went 37-19-4 in 60 starts with a 2.39 goals-against-average and .921 save percentage.

Colorado has Alexander Georgiev, who may have led the league in wins (38) but put up personal numbers that are mediocre at best (3.02 goals-against average, .897 save percentage). Rookie Justus Annunen had much more impressive stats but only has a dozen starts under his belt.

Of course, playoffs is a whole new season, so everyone is now starting with a clean slate.

#### *4. Intangibles*

The injury list is short for each team (not counting Avalanche captain Gabriel Landeskog, who has missed two full seasons with a serious knee issue).

The Jets will be without forward Morgan Barron for at least Game 1 and, possibly, longer. That opens the door for one of David Gustafsson or Cole Perfetti. Bowness wasn’t about to tip his hand when pressed for answers, saying only that the decision (which was already made) comes down to the role.

That bodes well for Gustafsson, who entered the lineup late in the season and did an excellent job on the forecheck and on the defensive side of the puck. He plays a more physical game as well, which could be a bonus when looking at the fourth line of the Avalanche.

As for Perfetti, he finished the season on a high note, scoring in four of his past five games to finish with 19 goals on the season, good for seventh on the team. It’s hard to call the young forward an unsung hero, considering he spent the first half of the season in a top-6 role, but he’s the type of player that could come up with a big goal once the playoffs begin.

The Avalanche are also without right-winger Logan O’Connor, a valued checking-line forward who contributes to the penalty kill.

Home-ice advantage could play a big role, since the Jets will have last change in four of the seven games if it goes the distance. The Avalanche were the best team on home ice in the NHL this season, though the Jets combat that by setting a franchise record for road wins (25).

#### *5. Shopping spree*

Both Jets general manager Kevin Cheveldayoff and Avs GM Chris MacFarland made significant moves prior to the arrival of the NHL trade deadline, and several of those players figure to play prominent roles in this series.

For the Jets, the impact of Sean Monahan has been undeniable, with the veteran pivot checking off so many important boxes after the deal with the Montreal Canadiens in early February. It’s tough to find an area he hasn’t contributed to, yet.

Not only has Monahan given the second line a serious offensive lift, his defensive acumen will also come in handy during this series. Along with the 13 goals and 24 points he’s delivered during 33 games with the Jets, he’s been a key cog on both the power play and the penalty kill, and he quickly became the most dependable option in the faceoff circle.

Tyler Toffoli has been somewhat hot and cold but is currently playing on a line with Monahan and Nikolaj Ehlers that has been fantastic since being reunited.

Colin Miller is expected to open the postseason as an extra defenceman and he was limited to only five games, but the Jets won't hesitate to use him if a situation arises.

For the Avalanche, they dealt second-pairing blue-liner Bowen Byram to the Buffalo Sabres to stabilize their own spot at second-line centre, bringing in Casey Mittelstadt. Colorado also brought in defenceman Sean Walker.

Mittelstadt and Walker have both fit in well and will be players to watch for the Avalanche. The interesting thing is that Monahan and Mittelstadt might spend quite a bit of time going head to head in the matchup game.

### *6. Go deep*

The Jets finally became a four-line hockey team this season — an important development. By routinely getting that fourth line around 10 minutes per game, that group has felt more part of things and also allowed the Jets coaching staff to not run the top line into the ground.

By season's end, Winnipeg had 14 players in double digits for goals, which is impressive enough. The Jets also had five players eclipse 25 goals this season.

"We've been saying it all year long — the strength of our team is our depth at forward, to the back end and between the pipes as well," said Morrissey. "The organization, too, with some guys coming up and having big games. The strength of our team has been our team game, commitment to defence and our depth."

As for the Avalanche, they're top heavy but players such as Ross Colton and Andrew Cogliano are playoff hardened and can supply some secondary scoring. MacFarland changed the complexion of the bottom-six by adding Yakov Trenin from the Nashville Predators and Brandon Duhaime from the Minnesota Wild.

### *7. Championship pedigree*

The Avalanche captured the Stanley Cup in an exciting six-game series with the Tampa Bay Lightning in 2022 and a good chunk of that core group remains. But several key pieces of the supporting cast are gone, so that championship experience only goes so far.

As for the Jets, they've got two players — Toffoli and Brossoit — with their names etched on the Stanley Cup.

There's no denying the value of Cup-winning experience, but there's also something to be said for teams that have suffered the pain of defeat and are, perhaps, ready to grow from those lessons.

Bowness described it as ensuring the Jets have enough respect for the Avalanche — to a point.

"Our record against them in the regular season doesn't mean anything today. The regular season is done. It's a whole new entity. It's the first to four wins," summed up Morrissey. "At the same time, it's understanding and respecting their strengths and knowing what our strengths are and trying to put forth what we do well... it's going back to our team game and our structure that's gotten us to this point and given us a chance to be in the playoffs."



## [Puck prognosticators make their playoff picks](#)

By: Mike McIntyre and Ken Wiebe

It all came down to the final night of the NHL regular season — and the final minutes of the final game — for the full playoff picture to become clear.

Now that it has, we here at Dump & Chase are ready to dust off the ol' crystal ball and offer our two cents on how we see the first round playing out. There's no shortage of compelling matchups and juicy storylines in play, which should make these next two weeks must-see TV for every hockey fan.

Here are our fearless predictions:

### *WEST*

#### *1. Dallas Stars (52-21-9) vs. WC2. Vegas Golden Knights (45-29-8)*

This figures to be the most intriguing series, and it's a shame this rematch of the 2023 Western Conference final will be staged in the first round. But that's the luck of the draw and fans in both markets should be in for a real treat. The Golden Knights should be getting a few key players back in the lineup — including Winnipegger and captain Mark Stone — either in Game 1 or at some point in the series. But the Stars finished atop the conference and second overall in the NHL with 113 points. Dallas has eight players with 20 or more goals and Logan Stankoven might have joined that list if he'd played an entire season. Goalie Jake Oettinger has elevated his game down the stretch and Chris Tanev bolstered the defence corps. Both teams have tremendous depth up front and on the back end. The Golden Knights know what it takes to win and the defending Stanley Cup champions will still be a tough out.

*MIKE SAYS: Golden Knights in 7*

*KEN SAYS: Stars in 7*

#### *2. Winnipeg Jets (52-24-6) vs. 3. Colorado Avalanche (50-25-7)*

Call this series the irresistible force vs. the immovable object. The highest-scoring team in the NHL (Colorado) against the team that allowed the fewest goals (Winnipeg). A top-heavy club against one that features some of the best depth in franchise history. A Hart Trophy candidate (Nathan MacKinnon) going up against the favourite to win the Vezina Trophy (Connor Hellebuyck). Two blue-liners who figure to be on a number of Norris Trophy ballots in Josh Morrissey and Cale Makar. Can Jets captain Adam Lowry and company find a way to limit the production of MacKinnon and Mikko Rantanen? Will the Jets be able to take advantage a clear edge between the pipes? What role will special teams play? And is this the year the Jets go on their first extended run since 2018? There will soon be answers to all of these questions.

*MIKE SAYS: Avalanche in 7 (sorry, folks!)*

*KEN SAYS: Jets in 6*

#### *1. Vancouver Canucks (50-23-9) vs. WC1. Nashville Predators (47-30-5)*

Be careful what you wish for? Plenty of Canucks fans were openly rooting for a first-round meeting with Nashville, rather than the alternatives which were in play down to the wire (Vegas or Los Angeles). The thinking was it would simply be easier. The Canucks have taken big strides since the arrival of head coach Rick Tocchet and have one of the best goalies in the NHL in Thatcher Demko and the presumed Norris Trophy winner in captain Quinn Hughes, so why do they look a bit vulnerable? Well, the Predators were one of the hottest teams in the NHL down the stretch and play a relentless style that perfectly fits the playoffs. If Ryan O'Reilly, Roman Josi and Ryan McDonagh can help neutralize Elias Pettersson and netminder Juuse Saros stands tall, the Predators can pull off the upset and advance.

*MIKE SAYS: Canucks in 6*

*KEN SAYS: Predators in 6*

## *2. Edmonton Oilers (49-27-6) vs. 3. Los Angeles Kings (44-27-11)*

The Oilers have their flaws, for sure. But they also have the world's best player in Connor McDavid, as well as Leon Draisaitl who isn't that far behind him. They also have history on their side, after eliminating the Kings in two consecutive playoffs. Will third time be the charm for Los Angeles? They're going to need exceptional goaltending from the streaky Cam Talbot, some timely scoring and their depth to take over — we're looking at the likes of you, Pierre-Luc Dubois — to have any kind of chance. Edmonton's defence and goaltending is always an issue.

*MIKE SAYS: Oilers in 6*

*KEN SAYS: Oilers in 6*

## *EAST*

### *1. New York Rangers (55-23-4) vs. WC2. Washington Capitals (40-31-11)*

The biggest mismatch, at least on paper, pits the NHL's No. 1 regular-season club against the winner of the Turtle Derby that was the Eastern Conference wildcard "race." Congratulations to the Washington Capitals, who edged out the Detroit Red Wings, Pittsburgh Penguins and Philadelphia Flyers despite having a minus-37 goal differential (one of the worst in league history for a playoff team). It's always fun to watch Alex Ovechkin on a big stage, and he (and a handful of remaining teammates) won it all in 2018. Still, this would be an enormous upset, as the Broadway Blueshirts are built for the long haul led, by Hart Trophy candidate Artemi Panarin, an elite D-core led by Adam Fox and one of the best goaltenders in Igor Shesterkin.

*MIKE SAYS: Rangers in 5*

*KEN SAYS: Rangers in 5*

### *2. Carolina Hurricanes (52-23-7) vs. 3. New York Islanders (39-27-16)*

Here's another seemingly lopsided series, considering the Islanders won less than 50 per cent of their games but managed to bank enough "loser points" in overtime/shootouts to finish third in the division. The Hurricanes have been regular-season darlings for a few years now but unable to get to the promised land. Is this their year? The addition of Jake Guentzel has given them another offensive weapon. Head coach Patrick Roy got the Islanders turned around after taking over from Lane Lambert (20-12-5), and he certainly has his group playing a hard-nosed style, in addition to having high-end talent like Mat Barzal leading the way. In a series where goals could be at a premium, they'll put up a good fight.

*MIKE SAYS: Hurricanes in 6*  
*KEN SAYS: Islanders in 7*

*1. Florida Panthers (52-24-6) vs. WC1. Tampa Bay Lightning (45-29-8)*

The battle for state bragging rights is an outstanding rivalry featuring the past two Stanley Cup finalists representing the Eastern Conference. Nikita Kucherov is a Hart Trophy finalist and he'll see plenty of Aleksander Barkov and Sam Reinhart during the coming weeks. Lightning captain Steven Stamkos is on an expiring contract, which provides an additional layer of motivation. The goaltending battle is also an intriguing one, with Sergei Bobrovsky going up against Andrei Vasilevskiy. It also features two head coaches who are as eloquent as they are intense in former Jets bench boss Paul Maurice and Jon Cooper. The Panthers are trying to get where the Lightning went in 2021 and 2022, which is the top of the mountain. Tampa simply doesn't have the depth they used to possess.

*MIKE SAYS: Panthers in 7*  
*KEN SAYS: Panthers in 6*

*2. Boston Bruins (47-20-15) vs. 3. Toronto Maple Leafs (46-26-10)*

There's recent history here and the Maple Leafs will be looking to turn the tables. The Bruins have some scar tissue from last year's opening-round exit, when the top seeds were bounced in the seventh game by the wild-card winning Panthers. There's a genuine dislike between these two teams. The Bruins look to have a decided edge in the crease with the tandem of Linus Ullmark and Jeremy Swayman, but who will head coach Jim Montgomery go with in Game 1 and beyond? The Maple Leafs finally won a round last spring, but can they advance further with the Core Four this spring? Rocket Richard Trophy winner Auston Matthews is looking to deliver on the big stage after a fantastic regular season. But can he outperform the likes of David Pastrnak and Brad Marchand? Stay tuned.

*MIKE SAYS: Maple Leafs in 7*  
*KEN SAYS: Bruins in 6*

## **Winnipeg Sun**

### **[Jets looking to lean on strengths to weather Avalanche](#)**

By Scott Billeck

Structure, commitment to the game's defensive side, and depth.

"As much we have to worry about those guys, and rightfully so, we need to do our jobs individually and ones we've set forth as a group," assistant captain Josh Morrissey said Friday, 48 hours out from his team's quest for Lord Stanley's mug.

Winnipeg's first-round matchup against the Avs will pit the league's most prolific offence (302 goals scored this season, the only team to crack the 300-club) against the NHL's stingiest defensive team in the Jets, who won the William M. Jennings after allowing a league-low 199 goals and ended their 52-win regular season on an eight-game winning run.

“We’ve been saying it all year long, the strength of our team is our depth forward, to the back end, and between the pipes,” Morrissey said.

The 29-year-old blue-liner in the best-of-seven series will have one of the toughest jobs in the game: Shutting down Nathan MacKinnon and Co.

He’ll be joined as much as he can by a line that includes Jets captain Adam Lowry, one of the best shutdown players in the game, and one-third of one of the best shutdown lines in the league alongside Nino Niederreiter and Mason Appleton.

“It’s certainly a tough test just trying to slow them down and try to limit their chances,” Lowry said.

MacKinnon came second in the race for the Art Ross Trophy with 51 goals and 140 points. Linemate Mikko Rantanen finished eighth in the league, scoring 104 points, and 2022 Norris Trophy winner Cale Makar was second among defencemen with 90 points.

“We know there’s going to be stretches where they take the play to us, they have a lot of zone time,” Lowry said. “It’s just trying to weather those storms and countering, getting to them with the forecheck and things like that.”

Winnipeg’s recent 7-0 stomping of the Avs last weekend is being viewed as an anomaly despite how well they played in that game.

Even the season sweep means little at this point.

“Our record against them in the regular season doesn’t mean anything today,” Morrissey said. “The regular season is done. It’s a whole new entity. It’s the first to four wins.”

And there’s a delicate balance to strike here.

“We know what we’re up against,” head coach Rick Bowness said. “But the other thing for me is not to give them too much respect.”

The Jets must appreciate what Colorado brings to the table but also avoid admiring it as it happens.

“Let’s go out there and play our game and stay aggressive and stay with our pressure game and not wait for things to happen,” Bowness said.

Added Morrissey: “That’s the task we have to overcome and figure out. For our group, it’s just going back to our team game and our structure that’s gotten us to this point and given us a chance to be in the playoffs. We have to respect them, of course, but be aggressive in our game.”

The Jets winning home-ice advantage by finishing second in the Central Division, and ahead of Colorado, is also a big key, especially for Bowness and his coaching staff.

“Matchups are going to be very, very important, clearly,” Bowness said.

As mentioned, Lowry's line will get the lion's share of those duties, but it's not an exact science. When the series shifts to Denver for Games 3 and 4, the Jets lose control of that last change and their ability to get the hard match on MacKinnon's line.

"That's what has been so good about our team this year, we've been able to play different lines against the high-end players and have some success," Lowry said. "When you have a guy that plays as many minutes as he does, you're going to need to have awareness up and down the lineup that when you're on the ice against him kind of how to mitigate his chances.

"Great players, they can create at any given time."

Meanwhile, the Jets will be without fourth-line forward Morgan Barron for at least Game 1.

Barron's been dealing with a lower-body injury since he got tangled up in the second period along the boards in Winnipeg's 4-2 win over the Seattle Kraken this past Tuesday.

Barron missed the regular-season finale on Thursday and won't factor into Game 1 on Sunday, Bowness said.

Bowness did suggest a decision on his replacement has been made, then backtracked a bit, suggesting it depends on roles and Colorado's lineup.

Conventional wisdom would suggest David Gustafsson getting the nod. He played very well against Dallas and Colorado on Winnipeg's most recent road trip after subbing in for the injured Niederreiter on the third line.

Gustafsson's defensive game is stout and a perfect fit for a line that likes to pressure on the forecheck and keep it tidy in their own end.

### **[FRIESEN: Jets' jam about to be tested](#)**

By Paul Friesen

Going into the playoffs, we know keeping the puck out of their own net is the Winnipeg Jets' bread and butter.

But do they have enough jam?

The answer to that question is likely to determine how far into the spring this team goes.

A year ago, they ran out of the stuff early in their series against Vegas.

They've had another year to restock, and players seem to like what they see.

"That jam is definitely a big thing," defenceman Brenden Dillon was saying, Friday. "You can see it. Sometimes you almost know a guy cares, but this (team) you can just watch and see. Everybody cares, everybody's engaged. We've got a lot of good vibes going on in the room."

It reminds Dillon of his time with the San Jose Sharks, where he suited up for a whopping 62 playoff games over five seasons, including one trip all the way to the 2016 Stanley Cup Final.

“It wasn’t necessarily the best team on paper,” Dillon recalled. “But we were a team that really cared about one another and a group that was all pulling the rope the same way.”

You couldn’t say that about last year’s Jets.

Not only were they pulling in different directions, some never did find the rope.

“We’re in far better shape mentally, and our team game, than we were last year,” head coach Rick Bowness said. “It was a scramble to get in the playoffs, and it was a scramble in the playoffs. It’s two totally different teams right now, last year to this year.”

The Colorado Avalanche will test that proclamation, and the Jets’ jam, in Round 1, beginning in Winnipeg on Sunday.

A team with a 140-point scorer (Nathan MacKinnon) and another with 104 points (Mikko Rantanen) against one whose top player managed just 72 (Mark Scheifele).

A defenceman with 90 points on one side (Cale Makar), one with 69 on the other (Josh Morrissey).

The visitors with 50- and 40-goal scorers (see above), the home side with two who had 30-plus (Kyle Connor, Tyler Toffoli).

But not one of those numbers measures what it takes to shut an opponent down, take away its bread and butter.

It was Jets defenceman Nate Schmidt who first brought up the jam issue the other day.

In every locker around him, Schmidt says he sees it. Has for the last couple of weeks, as the Jets jarred eight straight wins to end the regular season.

“That type of jam that you have to have for this time of year,” Schmidt said. “It’s jam in your confidence, it’s jam in the way you play — it’s that inner feeling. It’s not rah-rah. You look at a guy, you just know. You know if he’s got it.”

Schmidt sees a difference from a year ago.

“Collectively, yes,” he said. “Some guys had it, going into the playoffs. But you need everybody. There are lesser teams in the playoffs every year, teams that aren’t as good on paper, that win, because they’re feeling it.”

Schmidt used Vegas as his example.

He played for the expansion Golden Knights Years 1-3, packing 47 playoff games under his belt, including a trip to the Cup final that included a conference final win over the Jets in Year 1.

“Everybody was like, ‘We’ve got a good team, good job. You’re playing L.A., though, and they’ve won a ton.’ All of a sudden, we won.”

The Jets have won one playoff series since that season.

Last year, they won just one game.

It's the wreckage from the other four that they'd be wise to pull something from.

Like not letting the moment get too big.

"In the playoffs, there's lots of chaos," Morrissey said. "There's crazy stuff that happens, there's momentum swings in series, in games, in periods, and there's so much on the line. The emotion. It's about leaning on some of those past experiences that went well or not ... and continuing to try and be composed in those moments.

"For sure we can take some positives from that."

When the negatives happen, the true test begins.

Players talked Friday morning about the need to keep things loose, no matter what.

"When we're almost too serious or too quiet, usually it's not a good sign," Dillon said. "And this year that's been part of why we've had so much success in the regular season. You've got to have fun, got to enjoy it. We've worked hard to make the playoffs. There's a lot of teams today that are going home.

"Let's enjoy the process and the bumps and bruises that come along the way."

The coach's message to his team on Friday: just don't have regrets.

"No one knows the outcome," Bowness told them. "But whatever it is, make sure we can live with ourselves, that we left everything we could on the ice. If you give your best and end up losing the series, it's a lot easier to live with yourself than when you walk away and you know we didn't. It's been a long season for 16 teams, and now we're going to keep pushing. So the intensity ramps up ... for the most part that first series, man, it's war."

So pack plenty of jam.

Or quickly be toast.

### **['Hate to see it go': Jets' Bowness has soft spot for doomed Coyotes](#)**

By Paul Friesen

When it comes to the multi-part melodrama that is the Winnipeg Jets/Phoenix Coyotes franchise, Rick Bowness stands alone.

Bowness is the only person on the planet who has coached the original Winnipeg Jets, the Phoenix Coyotes and the reincarnated Jets.

Oh, and for good measure he also played for the original Jets and for a pro team in Salt Lake City, where we learned this week the Coyotes are headed next.

Watching the team play its final game in Arizona on Thursday broke a small piece of Bowness's heart.

"It's sad," he said, Friday. "We spent seven years there. My daughter went all through high school there and University of Arizona for four years. So we have a special place in our heart for Phoenix. I hate to see it go. When I see guys like Stan Wilson, their trainer who started here with the Jets, has been there from Day 1, and been through multiple coaches and GMs and ownerships and turmoil, and you see him with tears – it hits home."

Bowness was with the Coyotes for five seasons, starting as an assistant coach for their fourth year in the desert and finishing with the head job for the last 20 games of the 2003-04 campaign.

"We started downtown in the arena that was built to keep hockey out," he recalled. "Then we ended up going to Glendale and everyone complained, 'Why are we out in Glendale?' Well, there was reasons why we ended up in Glendale. Scottsdale wanted no part of the team at that point."

Eventually, Glendale didn't either, and the Coyotes ended up at a 5,000-seat college arena, where they weren't even the biggest thing on campus.

They didn't win a single playoff series in Bowness's five years, and only won two in their entire 28-year existence, a wobbly run that's always felt unstable.

"It always did because we weren't getting good crowds," Bowness said. "We knew the team was losing money and you knew the current ownership wasn't going to stay in there for that long unless it turned around, and it never did turn around."

The franchise's dysfunctional reign of error includes six different ownership groups, including the NHL itself for four years. It lost nearly \$55 million in one season alone.

There was bankruptcy court, a GM resigning on the eve of the playoffs, public finger-pointing, rule violations for testing draft-eligible players, unpaid bills and not a single profitable year.

As for the team's new home, Bowness has fond memories from there.

"I played there in '79-80 and we won a championship," he said, recalling the Salt Lake Golden Eagles of the Central Hockey League. "It was a beautiful city. We loved it there and it's a great hockey market and I'm really happy that they've got a franchise."

Scott Arniel, Bowness's assistant with the Jets, can match his boss: he was ready to retire as a player with Houston of the International League when the Utah Grizzlies called.

"It was a chance to maybe go out with a bang," Arniel said. "And ended up it was. It was cool. The atmosphere was great. There was a huge hockey fan base there."

With fans throwing fish onto the ice for every goal, Arniel's Grizzlies won the 1995-96 championship, even as his former team in Winnipeg was pulling up stakes and heading to Phoenix.

The Jets relocation allowed Arniel to extend his career in his second home: he played three seasons with the IHL's Manitoba Moose.



“When the Jets left it was tough on anybody that played here,” he said. “For me, especially. It’s where I started. It’s been a real tough time for them, trying to find that place to call home. I just hope, and it sounds like things will be a lot more stable. That’s what you want. These guys don’t want to be playing out of a 4,500-seat arena.

“It’s nice to see they’re going someplace they’ll be well-received.”

## **JETS VS. AVALANCHE: How the teams compare at each position**

By Ted Wyman

While the Winnipeg Jets wound up a few points ahead and wrestled away home-ice advantage from the Colorado Avalanche, there’s not that much to separate these two elite hockey teams.

The Avalanche have the NHL’s most explosive offence, a world-class defenceman and the intangible of having made it through the playoff grind to capture the Stanley Cup just two years ago.

The Jets have the league’s best defensive team, the finest goaltender in the game and will have their crowd behind them for four of the seven games, if the series goes that long.

As Jets goaltender Connor Hellebuyck is fond of saying, this will all come down to little details and which team executes best in the key moments.

With that in mind, here’s a look at a position-by-position comparison of the two teams, which will open their series Sunday night at Canada Life Centre.

### ***FORWARDS***

While Colorado has some incredible firepower up front, the Jets have tremendous balance.

The Avalanche have the NHL’s second-leading scorer in Nathan MacKinnon (51 goals, 140 points), a second centurian in Mikko Rantanen (104 points) and high-scoring defenceman Cale Makar providing the bulk of their offence. Secondary scoring will come from Casey Middelstadt, acquired from Buffalo at the trade deadline, the resurgent Jonathan Drouin and winger Valeri Nichushkin.

The Jets leading scorer was Mark Scheifele, with 72 points, while blue-liner Josh Morrissey had 69 and wingers Nikolaj Ehlers and Kyle Connor both had 61. Where the Jets make up for that lack of dominant scoring is in the fact that they had 13 forwards with at least 10 goals this season. Cole Perfetti, who may or may not be a healthy scratch in the opener, had 19 goals in 71 games. The Jets really like to spread it around.

**ADVANTAGE:** Avalanche

### ***DEFENCE***

Makar is a superstar and Morrissey isn’t that far behind him, so those two balance out.

Overall, the Jets are a much superior defensive team, however, with solid blue-liners like Dylan DeMelo, Brenden Dylan, Dylan Samberg, Neal Pionk and Logan Stanley providing a good mix of toughness and puck-moving ability. Pionk had been a liability at times this season and needs to be better in the playoffs, where his value can go up as he’s an expert at getting under the skin

of opponents. Stanley and Dillon are the bruisers who will be expected to handle the stronger Colorado forwards.

The Avs have the tough and gritty Josh Manson on the blue-line, along with veteran Jack Johnson and two-way threat Devon Toews, among others. They are solid, but Colorado was not a stellar defensive team this season, especially late in the campaign.

ADVANTAGE: Jets

### *GOALTENDING*

This is the easiest one to pick. The Jets have the Jennings Trophy and likely Vezina Trophy winner in Connor Hellebuyck, and if he plays up to his usual level, he will easily be the best goaltender in the series. Of course, there are still question marks about that, as Hellebuyck has not yet proven himself to be an elite playoff goaltender, having been outplayed in the four of the last five playoff series' the Jets have been in.

The Avalanche have Alexandar Georgiev, who appeared in 63 games and finished with poor numbers — a 3.02 goals against average and an .897 save percentage. He needs to be much better than he has been or the Avalanche will have little chance in this series.

ADVANTAGE: Jets

### *SPECIAL TEAMS*

Colorado has a better power play (24.5%) than the Jets (18.8%) and better penalty killing (79.9%) than Winnipeg (77.1%). The Jets have been better on special teams late in the season than they were early on, but it's been a sore spot for them all season long. Still, the Jets managed to win 52 games to match a franchise high and put together the second-best record in the Western Conference, so poor special teams haven't been costly. They'll have to hope they can be a little more successful than usual in the playoffs.

Gabe Vilardi is a key player for the Jets on the power play, as they've simply been much stronger when he's on the top unit, while Dillon, Stanley, DeMelo and Hellebuyck will be charged with trying to make sure MacKinnon, Rantanen and Makar don't do their thing.

ADVANTAGE: Avalanche

### *COACHING*

Rick Bowness and his assistants have done a masterful job with the Jets this season, getting them to buy into playing a structured game and turning them into a defensive-minded group.

On the other hand, Jared Bednar led the Avs to a Stanley Cup just two years ago and he has many tools at his disposal.

Bowness has been the better coach this year.

ADVANTAGE: Jets

### *INTANGIBLES*

You'd think home-ice advantage would work in the Jets favour, as they are expecting another Whiteout inside and outside of Canada Life Centre. However, the Jets have lost the last seven

playoffs games that were played in front of the Whiteout, so it's hard to say how much of a difference it might make.

The Jets have just one player who has won the Stanley Cup (winger Tyler Toffoli), and only a few who have played in the league championship series. Many of the Avalanche players won the Cup just two years ago and are battle tested in every possible way.

It will also be interesting to see how much of an indicator the season series between the teams turns out to be. The Jets won all three games, by a combined score of 17-4. They want no part of thinking that gives them an upper hand now, but surely the Avalanche are hoping it leads to some overconfidence on the Winnipeg side.

ADVANTAGE: Even

### **Daily Faceoff**

#### **[Colorado Avalanche have a mountain to climb to beat Winnipeg Jets](#)**

By Naftali Clinton

Frank Seravalli was joined by Colby Cohen to discuss the upcoming Jets/Avalanche series and who will come away with the win on the latest episode of Daily Faceoff Live.

Frank Seravalli: Who do you have in the Winnipeg Jets/Colorado Avalanche series?

Colby Cohen: This is a tough one. If you're a Winnipeg Jets fan and you're watching this, you can hate me and I deserve it. I'm going with the Colorado Avalanche, with the uncertainty in goal, I'm not picking against Nathan MacKinnon and Cale Makar and the rest of the Avalanche. They didn't finish the season great but they didn't either in 2022 when they went on to win the Stanley Cup.

I know how well Winnipeg is built, Adam Lowry is as effective as any bottom-six player in the league is. I think Morrissey doesn't get nearly the credit he deserves for how good he's been over the last couple of seasons and then there's Connor Hellebuyck in net. But at the end of the day I just can't do it, I can't pick against MacKinnon, Makar, Rantanen and the list goes on. I like Colorado in seven, even though that means they're winning on the road in game seven which they haven't done all season, they haven't been good on the road.

The Winnipeg whiteout is going to be difficult to play against but my gut tells me don't bet against the Colorado Avalanche, so Frank do we part ways on this or are we in lockstep again?

Frank Seravalli: We do because you went with your heart and not your head and I did a Jets playoff preview today with Josh Morrissey and he said, "we have as good a shot as any time I've been here". That's a team that went to the conference final in 2018. I love everything about this matchup for Winnipeg. It couldn't be better in my opinion.

They're 3-0 this season against the Colorado Avalanche and they've outscored them 17-4. You might say oh the last one was a lopsided game with a 7-0 win but even if they won 1-0 they'd still have outscored them 11-4 and by the way why does that last game not count, it was for home ice in this series and they stopped them. I think there's something to that this is just a

stylistically poor matchup for the Avs. And the reason for that is they love creating speed and harnessing that through the neutral zone and on the rush.

They also take chances and give them up more than almost any other team, with that said and a Winnipeg team that can defend and collapse with Adam Lowry a guy who got Selke love from me. When you have all those things come together, all you need to do is be opportunistic enough against Alexandar Georgiev who goes into the playoffs on maybe the shakiest ground with a sub .900 save percentage this season. I have the Jets winning in six over the Avalanche, you could call it an upset but it's not really one because they finished higher in the standings and I think for a reason.

## **Globe and Mail**

### **[Winnipeg Jets hope playoff run will reverse dwindling attendance](#)**

BY TEMUR DURRANI

These days, Mark Chipman is being more careful with his words. The co-owner of the Winnipeg Jets doesn't want to say the wrong thing. He knows anything articulated incorrectly could create a tizzy in the hockey-obsessed city.

"The idea of the Jets leaving again is such an anathema to me. I can't tell you that enough," he said in a wide-ranging interview at his downtown office on a rainy Thursday this month. "When it happened all those years ago, it really was the most traumatic experience for our entire community. It changed us."

But Chipman wants Winnipeggers to understand – without worrying them with déjà vu – that perhaps even more than the team's performance in this year's Stanley Cup playoffs, there is another concern plaguing his mind: filling seats in the home arena.

"We were cruising along for 10 years," he said of the energetic period after the team returned to the city in 2011, following a 15-year hiatus because of financial issues. "I don't want to say we were arrogant; we just didn't have to sell much from year to year. We would just backfill from the waitlist."

He fiddled with the business cards on his desk before leaning forward, then added: "Now, it's just a very different mindset."

As the playoffs begin this weekend, not only will the Jets be playing the 2022 champion Colorado Avalanche on Sunday, the company behind the Winnipeg club will also face the test on its recent efforts to bring up ticket sales.

Attendance for Jets games dwindled to new lows last year. According to True North Sports + Entertainment, the company that owns the team, for which Chipman is executive chairman, the season-ticket base dropped by 27 per cent in just three years to less than 9,500 holders from around 13,000. Their arena, the Canada Life Centre, has a capacity of just more than 15,000.

NHL playoffs are wide open as the race to the Stanley Cup begins

And yet, a drive around the Prairie city reveals how disconnected those attendance numbers are from the Jets frenzy shared among its residents. Dollar stores from the North Kildonan and

Transcona neighbourhoods to Waverly West and the strip malls near Assiniboine Park have been selling out on budget-friendly paraphernalia. Large downtown buildings facing the arena, such as the historic Paris Building on Portage Avenue, have giant letters spelling out “GO JETS GO,” on eight windows in a row. The same is seen on different towers in the Exchange District and further down Main Street a distance away.

“I know everything has obviously been getting very expensive, but the love that we have for the Jets here isn’t going to go anywhere,” said Mike Kofler, who has been buying season tickets for himself and his family since the team’s return. The 54-year-old finds the prices to be comparable to other NHL teams.

Shawna Penty, 42, disagrees. “Of course, I’m a fan. And yeah, I’ve come back to watch a few games here and there with a friend since COVID. But I’m not buying stuff for the whole season any more,” she said. “I could spend all of that money on groceries.”

Chipman said a number of factors have led to the widening number of fans not buying tickets. True North had built a robust waiting list that allowed for standard attrition on an annual basis, with more than 90 per cent renewing season tickets since 2011. “The year prior to the pandemic, we had a little bit of softening, but we had a backfill with the waitlist. And then the pandemic hit us hard,” he said.

“The first hit we encountered were people that were really upset with us over enforcing the vaccine to attend. Then of course we played in an empty building. And last year, there was nothing but ourselves to blame.”

Chipman said True North had too slow of a reaction to the downtrends. He said the flexible prices the Jets have now should’ve been introduced sooner.

On top of that, he added, roughly 15 per cent of the team’s season-ticket base is held by corporate firms and groups. “I thought that was our strength – and it was, until it wasn’t,” he said. “Dips in discretionary spending. Inflation hitting. The bubble really burst on us.”

Since last year, however, True North has changed almost every part of the sales force’s day-to-day routine. Employees have been personally calling back former ticket holders and have enlisted about 40 business leaders across different sectors, who are effectively part of the selling process. “They’re going through their Rolodexes, their customers and letting them know,” Chipman said. “This was something we hadn’t done since our minor-league days.”

Wherever possible, the Jets have also tried to lower or maintain prices. Flyers sent out to apartment buildings and suburban houses earlier in April listed discounts of up to 34 per cent on single-game tickets, 25-per-cent discounts on food and drinks at the venue, and interest-free payment plans to purchase memberships.

“We’re very mindful of the affordability problem in Winnipeg. We all grew up here, we’ve all seen this. We currently have the second-lowest price of the NHL teams by a fair margin,” Chipman added. (The Ottawa Senators have the lowest price.)

Chipman said True North is “beginning to see some good results.” Still, even with all of these new measures to curtail the attendance issues, fans such as Mark Wyland – who used to make the three-hour drive to Winnipeg from Brandon, Man., to watch Jets games with his grandkids

before the cost became untenable over the past couple of years – find themselves scared at the thought of losing the team again.

Wyland cited this week's decision to relocate the Arizona Coyotes to Utah as a reason for his apprehension for the Jets. "I wish I could afford to start coming back. Maybe we'll go to the parties or get-togethers," the 68-year-old said. "But I think our whole province would be sad if this ticket selling becomes the reason we lose them. Don't they have a great shot this year?"

Chipman said he likes the team's chances at the playoffs, especially with top performers such as goaltender Connor Hellebuyck and centre Mark Scheifele, both of whom surprised the industry by deciding to extend their stay with the team late last year, as they signed matching seven-year, US\$59.5-million agreements.

And for the people worried about anything else, pointing to the Winnipeg skyline in the large window behind his office, where the real estate arm of True North has helped build several large-scale downtown developments, Chipman said: "Look around you. We're here. Does it look like we're going anywhere?"