

Winnipegjets.com

Practice Report: Good team defence key
Adam Lowry will be spending a lot of time against Nathan MacKinnon

By Jamie Thomas

WINNIPEG – Home ice advantage comes with its perks.

On Sunday and Tuesday, Rick Bowness will be able to run his top checking line of Adam Lowry, Nino Niederreiter and Mason Appleton against the Nathan MacKinnon trio. However, the Jets captain said it isn't that cut and dry and that the team will have to rely on their depth up front.

"I think the thing with players like that, Rantanen, Makar, they play so many minutes that you can't rely on just one line. That's what's kind of 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," said Lowry.

"When you have a guy (MacKinnon) 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."

Josh Morrissey is no stranger to facing the other team's best forwards over his NHL career. The 30-year-old and his defence partner Dylan DeMelo will also have a heavy dose of MacKinnon and company throughout the series.

"As mentioned, Lowry's line often gets tasked with that assignment to play against the top guys," said Morrissey.

"And as a back end, whether it's Mel and I or whoever it is back there, including up front, seven-game series, you're not always going to get the matchup you want or the ideal situation. There are a lot of fluid parts to the game of hockey."

Mark Scheifele will have a part to play in this as well. The Jets top centreman, Kyle Connor and Gabriel Vilardi will likely get the Avalanche's best unit when Lowry's line isn't out there.

"He's a guy we've got to watch out for. He's had a fantastic year, and this team has won before, and he was a big reason for that. For me, it's just a matter of getting excited," said Scheifele.

"Having a guy like him on the other side is just extra motivation to be even better and be even more sharp each and every shift. I'm just excited for that battle."

Bowness expects Jared Bednar to play MacKinnon 24-25 minutes a night and possibly more.

'It's on-ice awareness for when Nate is on the ice, whoever is out there.

It's almost been six years since the Jets went toe-to-toe with the Nashville Predators in the second round of the 2018 Stanley Cup Playoffs. The top two teams in the NHL that year exchanged wins until Winnipeg wrapped things up with a huge 5-1 win at Bridgestone Arena in Game 7.

"I think that was a pretty prime example of how playoff hockey is. It's, win-loss, win-loss. It's how you deal with the previous loss and how you deal with the previous win," said Scheifele.

"How you adjust when they're doing things that are better than you and how you adjust when we're doing better things than them. It's gonna be a roller coaster."

GUS BUS

Bowness would not elaborate on Friday what his plans were with regards to Morgan Barron's replacement to start the series. Barron is out with a lower-body injury and won't take part of Game 1. During line rushes on Saturday, there was David Gustafsson on the left side of Vladislav Namestnikov and Alex Iafallo. All signs point to the Swedish forward being in the lineup on Sunday and he certainly helped his cause with the way he played in Dallas and Denver during the Jets final road trip of the regular season.

"He played very well in the games that we asked him to play. Vladdy's not great on the faceoffs, David's better on the faceoffs," said Bowness.

"He's a good fit with that line, he can play centre, he can play left wing much like Vladdy can. But he's earned that spot with the way he played in those games."

NHL.com

[2024 Stanley Cup Playoffs: Jets vs. Avalanche Western 1st Round preview](#) [Central Division rivals set to clash in postseason for 1st time](#)

By Tracey Myers

The first round of the Stanley Cup Playoffs features 16 teams in eight best-of-7 series, which start Saturday. Today, NHL.com previews the Western Conference First Round between the Colorado Avalanche and Winnipeg Jets.

(2C) Winnipeg Jets vs. (3C) Colorado Avalanche
Jets: 52-24-6, 110 points

Avalanche: 50-25-7, 107 points

Season series: WPG: 3-0-0, COL: 0-3-0

Game 1: Sunday, 7 p.m. ET; TVAS, SN, ESPN2

They've had plenty of regular-season matchups in the Central Division, but now the Winnipeg Jets and Colorado Avalanche will meet for the first time in the Stanley Cup Playoffs.

It's the sixth time in the past seven seasons the Jets have qualified for the postseason. Last season, they lost to the eventual Stanley Cup champion Vegas Golden Knights in five games in the best-of-7 Western Conference First Round.

The Avalanche, who have qualified for the playoffs seven straight seasons and won the Stanley Cup in 2022, last season lost in the first round in seven games to the Seattle Kraken, who were making their first postseason appearance.

The Jets endured a six-game skid (0-5-1) at the end of March but have rebounded in April with a season-closing eight-game winning streak, including a 7-0 victory against the Avalanche on April 13.

"I don't think you can look at a single team in this League and say they had a perfect season; you have ups and downs all the time," Winnipeg goalie Connor Hellebuyck said. "Playoffs is one of those things where you want to be hot at the right time. I've been in the League long enough to know it and feel it.

"We walked into St. Louis [in 2019], we had a really good team, they got hot at the right time and look what they did. Our main focus is ourselves right now. Feel right and don't lose it."

Colorado is looking to get hot again after dealing with a frustrating few weeks; it is 4-5-2 since March 26, including a 4-3 overtime loss to Vegas on Sunday, a game the Avalanche led 3-0 entering the third period.

Nevertheless, Colorado remains a dangerous group, especially with the League's top offense (3.68 goals per game).

"We can't seem to find ways to put it together unfortunately," Avalanche defenseman Cale Makar said Sunday. "We've got a week to solve the problem."

Game breakers

Jets: Mark Scheifele continues to be one of the steadiest contributors in the NHL and led Winnipeg with 72 points (25 goals, 47 assists) in 74 games this season. That includes 18 power-play points, third on the Jets behind forward Kyle Connor and defenseman Josh Morrissey, who each had 19. The 31-year-old is averaging 0.97 points per game this season, the eighth consecutive season he's averaged more than 0.85 points per game.

Avalanche: Nathan MacKinnon had another tremendous season. The center reached 50 goals for the first time in his career, and his 140 points (51 goals, 89 assists) were second in the NHL behind Tampa Bay Lightning forward Nikita Kucherov (144 points), and set a single-season Avalanche/Quebec Nordiques record.

Goaltending

Jets: Hellebuyck continues to be one of the best goalies in the NHL. The 30-year-old has once again gotten a bulk of the workload, going 37-19-4 with five shutouts in 60 games this season. Among goalies to play at least 30 games, he led the NHL with a .921 save percentage and was third with a 2.39 goals-against average. It won't be surprising if he's once again a finalist for the Vezina Trophy, awarded to the goalie voted best in the NHL, which he won in 2019-20. He was a finalist in 2017-18, and again last season. Backup Laurent Brossoit was 15-5-2 with a 2.00 GAA, .927 save percentage and three shutouts in 23 games.

Avalanche: Alexandar Georgiev has had his struggles this season; the 28-year-old was 38-18-5 with a 3.02 GAA, .897 save percentage and two shutouts in 63 games (62 starts). It's likely not a question of workload, because he had the same last season when he was 40-16-6 with a 2.53 GAA, .919 save percentage and five shutouts in 62 games. It's just that the consistency hasn't

been there. Backup Justus Annunen was 8-4-1 with a 2.25 GAA, .928 save percentage and two shutouts in 14 games.

Numbers to know

Jets: Winnipeg allowed 2.41 goals per game this season, tied with the Florida Panthers for the fewest in the NHL. It's a solid improvement from last season when the Jets were 10th in the League (2.73), and a huge jump compared to 2021-22, when they were 20th (3.09).

Avalanche: Makar's average of 1.07 points per game during the playoffs is second all-time among NHL defensemen (minimum 30 games played), behind Bobby Orr (1.24). Nathan MacKinnon (1.30, third) and Mikko Rantanen (1.24, tied for fifth) are among the top seven skaters in points per game in the playoffs (minimum 50 games).

X-factors

Jets: Nikolaj Ehlers was limited to one playoff game last season because of injury when Winnipeg lost to Vegas. This season, the forward tied Scheifele for the Winnipeg lead in even-strength points (54), and he led the Jets with 233 shots on goal. He could continue to be a crucial secondary scorer and beneficiary of Winnipeg's trades for forwards Tyler Toffoli and Sean Monahan. Ehlers had five points (one goal, four assists) in three games against the Avalanche this season. -- Pete Jensen

Avalanche: Valeri Nichushkin was on a leave of absence for the final five games of Colorado's first-round series last season, when it lost in seven games to Seattle. Nichushkin nearly averaged a point per game (53 points in 54 games) this season but missed time while in the NHL/NHLPA Player Assistance Program, and also because of an injury later in the season. With Nichushkin, the Avalanche are better positioned for another deep playoff run; he had 15 points (nine goals, six assists) in 20 postseason games to help them win the Cup in 2022, including six points (four goals, two assists) in six games during the Stanley Cup Final. -- Pete Jensen

They said it

"It's not time to hold your head. You've got to find solutions, you've got to dig in and be better. I think it starts competitively, starts physicality-wise. The playoffs is another notch. [The Jets] showed up [Saturday], and they played a playoff game it seemed like, and we didn't. So we've got a good taste of what we're going to see." -- Avalanche forward Andrew Cogliano

"We didn't see Colorado's A-game, we saw their C-game. They're a great hockey team and they showed it [Saturday]. They went the next day in Vegas, I know they ended up losing in overtime [4-3], but they battled a lot harder. They recognize they had a bad game and they fixed it. We're not going to be fooled by a 7-0 game in Colorado; that's a one-off for them, and that's how we have to look at it." -- Jets coach Rick Bowness

Will win if ...

Jets: They can hold off the Avalanche's high-powered offense. They've done well in that capacity during the regular season, but the playoffs are different. Colorado is going to be hungry, especially after the lopsided loss to Winnipeg in the final week of the regular season. The Jets will need everyone playing great defense in front of Hellebuyck.

Avalanche: If Georgiev rights the ship. Colorado checks off a ton of boxes. But its goaltending is the big question mark. If Georgiev gets his consistency back, the Avalanche will advance to the second round.

CBC Manitoba

[What you need to know for Sunday's Winnipeg whiteout street party Jets take on Colorado Avalanche at Winnipeg's Canada Life Centre at 6 p.m. CT Sunday](#)

CBC News

Whiteout street parties are coming back to downtown Winnipeg starting this Sunday, as the Jets are at home to take on the Colorado Avalanche for their first game in their best-of-seven first-round NHL playoff series. Here's what you need to know.

Puck drop

Puck drop at the Canada Life Centre is at 6 p.m. Doors to the arena open 90 minutes before the game starts.

The outdoor licensed whiteout party will start at 4 p.m. CT, two hours ahead of game time. The event is ticketed, with tickets costing \$10, of which \$5 will go to the United Way.

All 5,000 tickets to the whiteout party were sold out within about an hour of going on sale on Wednesday, a True North Sports and Entertainment spokesperson told CBC earlier this week.

Tickets for the Game 2 whiteout party, to be held Tuesday evening, are also sold out.

The game will be broadcast live on three large screens on Donald Street, between Portage and Graham avenues.

Whiteout to return to Donald Street during Winnipeg Jets home playoff games
Downtown Winnipeg businesses eagerly preparing for lift-off as Jets begin playoff run
The Party in the Plaza at True North Square will also return. Tickets to that outdoor event are \$20, and \$5 of that will also go to the United Way. As of Saturday afternoon, Ticketmaster indicated tickets were still available for the Party in the Plaza on both Sunday and Tuesday.

To mark Game 1, the Royal Canadian Air Force plans to fly two fighter jets over the Canada Life Centre and the street party shortly after 6 p.m.

Road and sidewalk closures

The city is closing some roads in downtown Winnipeg on Sunday to make way for the setup and teardown of the first whiteout street party of the Jets' playoff run.

Southbound Donald Street between Ellice and St. Mary avenues will be closed Sunday starting at 8 a.m. It will reopen at about 3 a.m. Monday.

Graham Avenue will be closed in both directions between Hargrave Street and Smith Street, starting at 8 a.m. Graham will reopen at 1 a.m. Monday.

Sidewalks on Donald Street, between Ellice and St. Mary, and on the north side of Graham between Hargrave and Smith will close at noon Sunday. They'll reopen overnight into Monday.

The city is asking drivers to use alternative routes around those areas.

Transit

Winnipeg Transit buses that normally run on Graham between Kennedy and Smith streets will be rerouted starting at 8 a.m. Sunday, and will return to regular service by Monday.

Passengers can catch any bus affected by this reroute on Graham at Vaughn Street or Fort Street, and on Donald Street at Ellice Avenue or York Avenue.

The Winnipeg Transit Plus loading zone on southbound Donald at Graham will also be relocated to eastbound Portage Avenue, next to the Radisson Hotel.

The Millennium Library Winnipeg Transit Plus loading zone will be moved to the eastbound front driveway of the Winnipeg Police Service headquarters, and the City Place Winnipeg Transit Plus loading zone will be relocated to northbound Hargrave on the north side of St. Mary.

The Millennium Library parkade's Donald Street entrance will be closed starting at 8 a.m. Sunday. It will reopen at about 3 a.m. Monday.

The Millennium Library branch will be closing early on Sunday, at 4 p.m.

Canadian Press

[Streaking Winnipeg Jets feeling good about themselves entering playoff series with Colorado](#) **[Head coach Rick Bowness says team is looking better than it was going into 2023 post-season](#)**

By Judy Owen

Sean Monahan was walking his dog when a car drove past him, braked, backed up and stopped.

A mother and her son hopped out and approached the Winnipeg Jets forward, who was acquired in a trade with the Montreal Canadiens on Feb. 2.

"She said, 'We just wanted to say hi and wish you luck and we're looking forward to watching the playoffs,'" Monahan recalled with a smile.

He and his goldendoodle, Winston, often meet friendly, passionate fans. It's one of the reasons Monahan is looking forward to Winnipeg's first-round NHL playoff series against the Colorado Avalanche, which begins Sunday at Canada Life Centre.

The Jets (52-24-6) finished second in the Central Division and Western Conference, tying the franchise record for most wins in a season with the 2017-18 team. Their 110 points were the highest among Canadian clubs.

The finish earned Winnipeg home-ice advantage for the best-of-seven series with the division's third-place Avalanche (50-25-7).

Jets close out regular season with 8th-straight win, secure Jennings Trophy for defensive stinginess

Downtown Winnipeg businesses eagerly preparing for lift-off as Jets begin playoff run
It's the first time the teams will clash in the post-season. Both are trying to rebound from last year's early playoff exits.

The Jets only grabbed the second conference wild-card spot in Game 81 last season and ended with a 46-33-3 record. They were bounced out of the playoffs in five games by the eventual Stanley Cup-champion Vegas Golden Knights.

After winning the 2022 Stanley Cup, the Avalanche claimed top spot in the division last season but were upset by the Seattle Kraken in Game 7 of the opening round.

The Jets have rolled into this post-season on a high, finishing the regular season on an eight-game win streak. It included a 7-0 thumping of the Avalanche on April 13 that gave Winnipeg a sweep of their three-game season series.

Colorado was 4-4-2 in its final 10 contests.

Jets head coach Rick Bowness feels a different vibe around his team these days.

"I think we're much better prepared going into this playoffs than we were last year," Bowness said. "We're a better team this year than we were at this time last year. There's no question. We're a more-committed team."

The Jets had a few slumps, but a six-game losing skid was followed by the current win streak that tied a franchise record they set earlier in the campaign.

Players referenced a video session at the tail end of that skid as the match that ignited their turnaround.

"Instead of like guys being mad at themselves or mad at each other, it was more of a monkey off our back. 'Oh, that's what we're doing wrong, and that's what we need to be doing differently,'" starting goaltender Connor Hellebuyck said.

"At least for me, that's what it felt like. And ever since that moment, it was all smooth sailing from there."

Hellebuyck gets his name on the league's William M. Jennings Trophy as the netminder for the team that allowed the fewest goals (199) this season. The name of his backup, Laurent Brossoit, won't be on it because he appeared in 23 games instead of the award's 25-game minimum.

Hellebuyck played 60 games with a 37-19-4 record and five shutouts. The veteran is a favourite to win the Vezina Trophy, the league's top-goalie award he claimed in 2020. He was a finalist last year and in 2018.

Brossoit was 15-5-2. His three shutouts included a 3-0 blanking against the division-leading Dallas Stars in the game before Hellebuyck's 7-0 shutdown of Colorado.

All those accomplishments don't mean the Jets are taking the Avalanche lightly. Far from it.

"Two tough teams that have been solid and high up in the standings really all year," Winnipeg veteran defenceman Brenden Dillon said.

"They've got two or three basically mega-superstars on that team that can really change the game on any shift."

A right-handed shooter goes wide to his right past a defender holding his stick outstretched with his right hand.

Colorado Avalanche centre Nathan MacKinnon drives to the net against Minnesota Wild centre Joel Eriksson Ek in a game earlier this month. The Colorado superstar is among the favourites for the Hart Trophy, awarded to the NHL's most valuable player, after setting a franchise record with 140 points this season. (Bart Young/The Associated Press)

Avalanche centre Nathan MacKinnon set a franchise record for points in a season with 140. Winger Mikko Rantanen registered 104 points, while defensive dynamo Cale Makar tallied 90 points.

Colorado's netminders feature Alexander Georgiev and his league-best 38 wins (38-18-5) and backup Justus Annunen (8-4-1).

The Jets counter with a roster they believe has depth and four-line scoring.

Centre Mark Scheifele recorded a team-high 72 points and defenceman Josh Morrissey was next with 69. Winger Kyle Connor had 34 goals, followed by trade-deadline newcomer Tyler Toffoli with 33.

"We're a confident team," Morrissey said. "We've got a good thing going and we know a lot of work is ahead of us, but I think our game's in a good place heading into the playoffs."

He dismissed having an edge because of their regular-season results against Colorado.

"I really don't put much stock into the season series and to the last game," Morrissey said. "Once the playoffs start, it's first team to four [wins]. So, it really doesn't matter."

The deepest the Jets have been in the playoffs was the conference final in 2017-18, when they lost to Vegas in five games. They've won one playoff series since then, an opening-round sweep of the Edmonton Oilers in 2021. They were then swept by the Montreal Canadiens in the next round.

Tale of the tape

- Regular-season series: 3-0, Winnipeg, with the Jets outscoring the Avs 17-4.
- Goals per game: Winnipeg, 3.16 (15th); Colorado, 3.68 (1st).
- Top scorers: Winnipeg, Mark Scheifele, 72 points; Colorado, Nathan MacKinnon, 140.
- Starting goaltender: Winnipeg, Connor Hellebuyck, 37-19-4, 2.39 GAA, .921 save percentage; Colorado, Alexander Georgiev, 38-18-5, 3.02 GAA, .897 save percentage.
- Power play percentage: Winnipeg, 18.8 (22nd); Colorado, 24.5 (5th).
- Penalty kill percentage: Winnipeg, 77.1 (21st); Colorado, 79.9 (12th).
- The Big Stat: The Jets led the league in allowing the fewest goals at 199; Nathan MacKinnon was second in league points with 140.

Winnipeg Free Press

Scheifele looks to be difference maker against Avalanche

By: Ken Wiebe

Mark Scheifele wasn't interested in revisiting ancient history.

The Winnipeg Jets top centre is acutely aware the last time he finished a Stanley Cup playoff series was the spring of 2019, when his team was bounced in six games by the St. Louis Blues.

The list of post-season disappointments is long, though few of them come from his on-ice performance.

There were season-ending injuries suffered against the Vegas Golden Knights last spring and against the Calgary Flames in the play-in series in 2020 and the much-ballyhooed suspension for his hit on Jake Evans that knocked him out of the final three games of the series sweep by the Montreal Canadiens in 2021.

But there was also the brilliant play of Scheifele during the magic carpet ride to the Western Conference final in 2018, when he made a habit of driving play and chipped in 14 goals and 20 points in 17 games before his team was bounced by the Golden Knights — a mere three wins from advancing to the Stanley Cup final.

So, as Scheifele and company prepare to open their best-of-seven series with the Colorado Avalanche on Sunday night (6 p.m., Sportsnet, CBC, CJOB), the first-ever draft pick of the 2.0 version of the Jets is ready to write a new chapter.

"Every time you get to come to the playoffs, every year is a new year... and it doesn't really compare," said Scheifele. "You're just a human being, you try to learn from past experiences and how you dealt with going to the conference finals, how you dealt with losing in the first round. Those experiences make you who you are.

"That's the biggest thing for us as a team, to take it in stride and take it game by game. That's all we can do. Don't look in the past and don't look in the future, just focus on what is in the present time."

Scheifele delivered on numerous occasions during the 2023-24 regular season.

The improvements to his all-around game are well documented and it didn't take away from his offensive contributions. He still led the Jets in scoring, accumulating 25 goals and 72 points in 74 games.

This is an opportunity for Scheifele to provide an exclamation point by going on another lengthy playoff run.

Standing in his way is an Avalanche team that is led by Nathan MacKinnon, who has made a strong case to win the Hart Trophy this season.

Although Jets captain Adam Lowry will see a lot of MacKinnon as the matchup game unfolds, Scheifele will be on the ice against him as well.

“When there are guys (like that) on the other side, you want to be better than them,” said Scheifele. “Obviously, Nate is a fantastic player. Our games are not very similar, so it’s a matter of both of us trying to do what’s best for our team. He’s a guy we’ve got to watch out for.

“He’s had a fantastic year and this team has won before and he was a big reason for that. For me, it’s just a matter of getting excited. Having a guy like him on the other side is just extra motivation to be even better and be even more sharp each and every shift. I’m just excited for that battle.”

Jets head coach Rick Bowness explained the impact Scheifele’s had this season.

“He’s been outstanding at both ends of the ice,” said Bowness. “You’ve seen him backcheck a lot. He’s really responsible in our zone. His plus-minus is better and he’s scored some big goals. He’s doing what you want your leaders to do, play hard at both ends of the ice.”

The Jets swept the season series with the Avalanche 3-0 and outscored them 17-4 — including a 7-0 victory last Saturday — but those outcomes won’t be much of a factor when this first-round battle opens.

“Once the (playoff) games come, it’s a whole new animal,” said Scheifele. “You never know what’s going to happen and then you’ve got to be ready to deal with anything. They’re going to come out hot after the last game and it’s playoffs so we’re gonna be ramped up in front of our amazing fans. So, you just have to get excited about it. We need to be calm, be excited. We need to be excited and just go and play hockey.”

A lower-body injury to Morgan Barron has opened the door for David Gustafsson to open the series on the fourth line with Vladislav Namestnikov and Alex Iafallo.

The Avalanche announced Saturday that forward Jonathan Drouin will miss the series with a lower-body injury, which is a blow considering he’s been playing on the top line with MacKinnon.

That moves Zach Parise onto the top line with MacKinnon and Mikko Rantanen.

Scheifele was asked about the enthusiasm surrounding his team going into the season after they finished the regular season with an eight-game winning streak and tied a franchise record for wins (52).

“We play a great team game. We have a lot of great players, our depth is special,” said Scheifele. “Obviously, we have a fantastic goalie, but we’re a team. That’s what it comes down to. You need everyone, come playoff time. First line, fourth line, first d, sixth D, you need everyone to be battling and pushing each other to be better. That’s what we have, we have a great cohesive group in here and we play a good, solid team game and that’s what we rely on.”

Winnipeg Sun

[‘Can’t take him out:’ After 57 games in press box, Stanley ready to make playoff impact for Jets](#)

By Ted Wyman

Between Dec. 13 and Feb. 7 of this hockey season, Winnipeg Jets defenceman Logan Stanley sat out 21 straight games.

It was a humbling and disheartening time for a former first-round draft pick who had seemingly lost his opportunity to become an NHL regular.

“There were some points in the season where it wasn’t much fun for me,” Stanley said Saturday after the Jets practiced at the IcePlex.

That was just the longest press-box stint of the year for the 6-foot-7, 231-pound, bruiser. On another occasion he sat out 10 straight games, on another seven and on three separate occasions he was a healthy scratch for four in a row.

Those kinds of situations have to mess with a 25-year-old’s mindset.

He was a healthy scratch for 57 games in total, a little-used fill-in, seemingly an afterthought for a team that was winning regularly and appeared to be happy with its starting group of six defencemen.

Having signed just a one-year contract with the Jets last off-season and seemingly not a big part of future plans, Stanley had every reason to be miserable.

But that’s not how it went.

“He really made a conscious effort in the middle of the year to work on his craft through all that adversity he was dealing with,” fellow defenceman Dylan DeMelo said on Saturday.

“It speaks to the character of Logan, the type of player he is and the type of person he is. To see him come out the other end of it and get a chance, it’s great to see. When you see a guy working as hard as he was, on and off the ice, that gives everybody in here a boost.”

It all paid off in a way few people expected.

As the Jets entered the final stretch run of the season, Stanley had become a regular on the third defence pairing, with Dylan Samberg.

He played the final six games of the season, his longest stretch in the line-up all year, and helped the Jets to six wins.

And all those press box stints will seem like distant memories come Sunday night when Stanley suits up for Game 1 of the Jets best-of-seven, first-round playoff series against the Colorado Avalanche (Canada Life Centre, 6 p.m.).

“He has played really well, to the point where we can’t take him out,” DeMelo said.

“He’s done a great job with his physicality, being such a presence out there. He’s moving fantastic, the best he’s ever moved since I’ve been here, and he’s making plays. He’s really confident with the puck.”

Stanley started the season as the Jets' seventh defenceman, ready to jump in should someone get hurt.

Amazingly, no one did.

Josh Morrissey, DeMelo and Neal Pionk all played full seasons, while Brenden Dillon only missed a handful of games due to a suspension and Samberg played 78 games and was a healthy scratch for four others.

Nate Schmidt, who eventually lost his starting job to Stanley, played 63 games and was a healthy scratch for the other 19.

"We were healthy all year on the blue-line, which was great, but it's very uncommon that you go through that many games without any injuries," said Stanley, who knew a healthy line-up would be much more difficult for him to crack.

"We've got a great team in here and eight good defencemen, so that's how the cards fell for me. I'm just happy I got a chance to get in and play good down the stretch."

Stanley's size, strength and toughness should come in handy for the Jets, as long as his footspeed and puck-moving skills can keep up when players like Nathan MacKinnon and Mikko Rantanen are on the ice for the Avalanche.

While he is noticeable on the ice for his big hits, his willingness to mix it up after a whistle or even drop the gloves, Stanley does have his detractors.

He had just a goal and an assist this season and analytics will tell you his possession numbers aren't great. His 47.63% Corsi for the season is lowest among all Jets defencemen and second lowest among all regular players (forward Kyle Connor's is 47.51%).

Still, a strong performance in these playoffs should give Stanley a chance to earn more than the \$1 million, one-year deal he signed last off-season.

He'll be a restricted free agent again this summer and Jets management will surely have noticed his resilience and perseverance.

"I always thought if I worked hard and stuck with it, I was going to get an opportunity," Stanley said. "It came around and I took advantage of it. I think I've done a good job down the stretch and now I'm ready for the playoffs."

'We've got something to prove': Jets hope to atone, as bad taste lingers

By Paul Friesen

Friday night, the Winnipeg Jets went out for dinner, en masse. Players, coaches, management and ownership broke bread together downtown.

It was symbolic, in a way.

The team usually does these dinners in training camp.

For Kyle Connor, the feeling was similar.

“It’s like a new season,” Connor said, Saturday. “We want to put the regular season behind us and move on. It’s a whole new ball game.

“You want to be coming into the playoffs and be hungry.”

Hunger shouldn’t be a problem for this team.

Since reaching the conference final six years ago, it has been starving for post-season success, winning one, solitary round.

Being left with Vegas’s table scraps in the first round last year left another feeling in their stomachs. A knot that lingers, 12 months later.

“In the back of our mind is what happened last year,” Connor acknowledged. “So we’ve got something to prove.”

It sure seems that way from the outside, going into this series against Colorado.

Interesting to hear the players feel the same way, even if they aren’t all as quick to acknowledge it as No. 81 is.

“This group’s been together for quite a long time, and we really haven’t had the success that we wanted to,” Connor said. “Yeah, we made some playoffs. But we haven’t really done anything. We’re aware of that.

“I’m just speaking for myself, but I know a lot of guys feel that way as well.”

The Jets are as well-positioned to do something as they were back in 2018, if not better.

As the NHL’s toughest team to score against, with its No. 1 regular-season goalie, two scoring lines, a dominant shutdown third and a fourth that can more than hold its own, it’s all there — on paper.

But paper gets soggy and torn in trying conditions.

You need something more.

Mark Scheifele describes what’s to come as a blind roller-coaster ride that’ll test the strongest stomachs.

“You never know what’s going to happen,” Scheifele said. “It’s a matter of what team stays composed the longest. When things go bad, how do you react?”

And things will go bad.

You don’t line up opposite Nathan MacKinnon, Mikko Rantanen and Cale Makar and not get thrown for a loop now and again.

A playoff series is night and day from the regular season.

That recent 7-0 Jets win, for instance, probably doesn’t mean a lot.

“You’d like to think so,” Connor said. “At the same time, we know how we’d feel after we get beat pretty good. Playoffs are about will. You win your one-on-one battles. That’s what it’s going to come down to.

“You can throw all the systems in the world, best defensive team and all this, but if we don’t win our battles it’s not going to mean anything.”

One team grabs momentum, wins a couple, and it can be too late for the other to correct.

Mistakes are magnified and often blow up in your face. That failed clear. The “hope” pass. The decision to try to get one through traffic, instead of putting it deep.

Trying too hard to create can cost you.

Watching the league’s highest scoring team run and gun can tempt skilled players on the league’s best defensive team to try and match.

Players like Connor.

“It can be tough at times,” he said. “We sacrificed quite a bit to be able to play that way this year.”

Just look at the leading men.

Mackinnon’s 140 points, even Rantanen’s 104 and Makar’s 90, dwarf Scheifele’s 72.

A couple years ago, Connor looked like the NHL’s next 50-goal man. But 47 became 31 last season, 34 this year.

How much this year’s total was affected by injury (he played just 65 games) and how much by his team’s commitment to defence is up for debate.

“It’s a learning curve,” Connor said. “You can see it from the way everybody’s been playing. It’s about a whole team mentality and we’ve really adapted to that. That’s been our identity.”

Forged by head coach Rick Bowness, that new identity is personified in the choice of Adam Lowry as the captain.

“The team takes the mould of your captain in a lot of ways,” Connor acknowledged.

Lowry lives it, while Bowness keeps preaching it.

Last year, with Lowry’s C still in waiting, it didn’t completely take hold. And when the Vegas heat came, the paper dried up and blew away.

So yeah, there’s plenty to prove.

“I’ve felt it all year,” Bowness said. “It didn’t sit well with them over the summer how we exited last season, so that’s a good thing. From the beginning of training camp, this has been a very committed group and a tighter group, there’s no question.”

Disciples of defence, you might call them.

Ready to take their crusade further than they've ever gone.

Friday's meal, then, could wind up being just an appetizer for a feast to come.

Or else the last supper.

JETS SNAPSHOTS: 'Be kind to yourself in your thoughts': The 'Gus Bus' set to ride ... Hellebuyck's not talking ... Scheifele amped, and so is coach

By Ted Wyman, Paul Friesen

David Gustafsson is one of the Winnipeg Jets bubble players eager make a mark in Thursday's regular-season finale, hoping he can get a shot in the playoffs.

An injury to fourth-line winger Morgan Barron means David Gustafsson will get into the Winnipeg Jets line-up for their post-season opener on Sunday, and the 24-year-old Swede has just the kind of desperation a coach wants to see in a playoff game.

"In my mind, this might be the last game I play this season," Gustafsson said Saturday, after the Jets practiced for the last time before facing the Colorado Avalanche in Game 1 on Sunday.

"I don't know, so I've just got to treat it like that and do as well as I can. That's the mindset that I'm trying to go into this playoff game with."

Gustafsson has had that kind of mindset all season. He's played in 39 games, usually when there is an injury to someone else in the forward group, and is mostly viewed as a depth player for a strong Jets team.

But he's shown enough, particularly over the last week of the regular season, to get the nod from head coach Rick Bowness for the playoff opener. Bowness could have gone with 19-goal scorer Cole Perfetti, but chose Gustafsson and his three goals and seven points because he's more suited to a grinding, fourth-line style.

The "Gus Bus" will ride with centre Vlad Namestnikov and right-winger Alex Iafallo on Sunday.

It's been a trying year for Gustafsson, who played in three playoff games for the Jets last season. He suffered a lower-body injury in late December and didn't get back into the line-up until early March.

In between, he spent time on a conditioning stint with the Manitoba Moose and even after he returned to the NHL, he got into only 12 of the Jets remaining 24 games.

"The hardest part is staying ready mentally, knowing that you're still a player on this team and you've got to be ready for a game," Gustafsson said. "It's a lot of self-positivity talk in your mind.

"When you start going down a spiral, thinking 'I'm not playing, I'm not worth anything,' that's when you get down. Mentally, you've got to be positive as often as you can. Be kind to yourself in your thoughts."

Gustafsson said it was a special moment for him when Bowness told him on Saturday that he'll be playing in the playoff opener.

"It's exciting," he said. "Especially here in Winnipeg, these are the games you want to play in because it's something different, the whiteout here."

MUM BEHIND THE MASK

If Connor Hellebuyck's goal total in Game 1 matches his pre-series word total, the Jets will register another shutout over the Avs.

Hellebuyck wouldn't do interviews going into the playoffs, apparently choosing to do his talking on the ice.

Despite his 17-23 career playoff record, teammates are confident they have the edge between the pipes.

"Helle's incredible," Kyle Connor said. "You don't want to take anything for granted. It's a whole different animal than the regular season. But we've got one of the best goaltenders in the world, and the way we're able to play we're able to shut down those guys."

Backstopped by Hellebuyck and Laurent Brossoit, the Jets allowed the fewest goals in the NHL this season.

Hellebuyck's 37-19-4 record, .921 saves percentage and 2.39 goals-against-average should earn him a second Vezina Trophy as the NHL's top goalie.

SCHEIFELE AMPED TO FACE MACKINNON

Squaring off against high-end players like Colorado's Nathan MacKinnon adds a little extra juice for Jets centre Mark Scheifele.

"Of course there is," Scheifele said. "When there are guys (like that) on the other side, you want to be better than them. Our games are not very similar, so it's a matter of both of us trying to do what's best for our team. He's had a fantastic year and this team has won before and he was a big reason for that."

Bowness will usually match Adam Lowry's line against MacKinnon's.

But having one of hockey's top checking units isn't always enough to shut down a player like that, even with home-ice advantage and the last change.

"Every time there's an icing, he's coming over the boards," Bowness said. "So you have to have a couple lines ready to go. The key here is making sure we're always aware when Nate's on the ice."

MacKinnon plays so many minutes, no single centre can match it.

The Jets, though, are comfortable with other lines, including their fourth, going against the Avs top trio.

The best defence is playing in Colorado's zone.

THE LAST WORD

As fired up as the players get at this time of year, it's no different for the men behind the bench.

"This is why we come into work in September," Bowness said. "To get to here. You've got to enjoy this. It's a long road, man, and you've got to enjoy it every day."

PLAYOFF PREVIEW: Jets have what it takes to survive Avalanche

By Scott Billeck

Josh Morrissey's fondest playoff memory came as a nine-year-old kid growing up in Calgary in 2004.

Too young to be out at the Red Mile, Morrissey watched from home alongside his brother Jake and father Tom as the Calgary Flames marched all the way to the Stanley Cup Final before losing in seven games to the Tampa Bay Lightning.

The Cinderella run ended with Morrissey in tears, his hometown team coming oh-so-close to hockey's pinnacle.

He remembers the controversial Martin Gelinás no-goal call that would have handed Calgary the Cup in six games instead of losing that night in overtime as Tampa forced a Game 7.

Morrissey grew up playing with Gelinás' son, Matthew, and later they played against each other in the Western Hockey League.

He also remembers the night his dad, Tom, who had gotten tickets to one of the games, called from the Saddledome.

"He called when they were doing intros, and you couldn't even hear his voice it was so loud," Morrissey said.

Now 29, Morrissey also fondly recalls how that run captivated a Canadian city. At the time, Morrissey was in Grade 4 and wore red on game days.

"They had all these little events," he said. "Draw the best jersey, all that kind of stuff. It was pandemonium in the city. I lived and breathed that whole series."

Morrissey felt that again in 2018 when the Winnipeg Jets went to the Western Conference Final.

He lived and breathed that, too. And this time, he was in the building. Better yet, he was on the ice at Canada Life Centre.

"You could see, round by round, it captivating the city in the same way," Morrissey said.

The roar of Game 3, when then-defensive partner Jacob Trouba scored the 3-3 goal against Nashville in the second period, has never been louder.

The Red Mile was now the Whiteout on Donald. And the heartbreak, too, of falling short of the dream.

“Hopefully, we can go all the way (this year), and bring a Stanley Cup to Winnipeg,” Morrissey said. “That would be amazing.”

That quest begins Sunday against a Colorado Avalanche team (50-25-7, 107 points) that lived the dream two seasons ago.

Some have called the series a coin flip. Just three points separate the two sides, the smallest gap in any of the eight first-round playoff matchups.

But these Jets (52-24-6, 110 points) are confident they can not only hang with Nathan MacKinnon and Co., but beat them over the course of a gruelling seven-game test.

There’s a pretty good case for that, too, as you’ll read.

Here are five storylines ahead of one of the most intriguing matchups to kick off the playoffs.

1. Lowry, third line set to take centre stage

Adam Lowry was born for these moments, and so many times in the past he’s shown an elite ability to remove that same moniker from some of the game’s biggest names.

The captain of the Jets, along with linemates Nino Niederreiter and Mason Appleton, will have their hands full with MacKinnon and Mikko Rantanen. The former set a franchise record with a 140-point season and has a good chance to take home his first Hart Trophy as the league’s MVP in June. The latter, a linemate alongside MacKinnon, had 104 points himself, and helped Colorado become the only team this season to surpass the 300-goal mark.

It’s a formidable duo, and that’s without even mentioning 2022 Norris Trophy winner Cale Makar, who finished second in defenceman scoring with 90 points.

“That’s kind of what we pride ourselves on and what we know we’re good at,” Appleton said.

The Jets don’t own the kind of firepower Colorado boasts, but what Lowry and his linemates do to negate it is just as valuable.

To that point, Lowry, who will get some Selke Trophy votes for best defensive forward in the NHL and deservedly so, led the league in goals against per 60 minutes played at just 1.21.

Head coach Rick Bowness plays Lowry’s line against the other team’s best more than any other on Winnipeg’s roster, and they handle it like few others can.

To that point, you won’t find a better shutdown combo in the NHL, allowing just a league-low 1.32 goals against per 60 minutes.

Lowry’s line played the fifth most minutes (682) of any line in the NHL this season, and it allowed just 15 goals against, the lowest total of any line that played together for 500 minutes or more.

The same was true on shot attempts allowed, finishing third among lines with the same criteria, only slipping to fourth when you pulled back the minutes to 400.

It's a proven line with a proven track record of stifling opponent offence. Bowness will trust them most against Colorado's titans.

"Adam's line is going to play a huge role," Bowness said.

2. Hellebuyck needs Conn Smythe form after Vezina season

The only knock against Hellebuyck these days is he hasn't put it together in the post-season. What better time than against the league's most prolific scoring team to shake that loose?

Winnipeg exploited Colorado's weak point in their 7-0 thrashing a week ago.

And while that game won't likely be replicated in the playoffs, the Jets have a mountainous advantage between the pipes.

Hellebuyck is this season's clear-cut Vezina winner. It will be the second of his career, and second in his past five seasons.

Hellebuyck led the way with a .921 save percentage among starting netminders and was second with a 2.39 goals-against average.

But goals saved above expected is where it really shows how Hellebuyck shined.

Indeed, Hellebuyck was miles ahead in first place, stopping 33.1 more pucks than expected. Thatcher Demko came second, but he was a full 11 goals back in all situations. At five-on-five, the gap was even larger to the nearest starter, with Hellebuyck's 28.2 nearly 16 goals ahead of St. Louis ace Jordan Binnington.

Alexandar Georgiev, who will man the crease for the Avs, is one of just two starters who will enter the playoffs with a sub-.900 save percentage (Ilya Samsonov in Toronto is the other), and one of just three with a goals-against average above three.

Georgiev was chased by the Jets inside the first period in that 7-0 mauling. One would think that's still swimming around in the back of his mind.

3. 11th-hour return to form

The Jets were the best team in the league through their first 44 games of the season, and then the wheels started falling off.

For a while, it looked like a carbon copy of the previous season, when the Jets made the ascent only to free-fall on their way down.

The Jets showed their maturity down the stretch, rebounding from a six-game losing streak to finish the season with an eight-game winning run.

Their commitment to team defence pulled through, allowing Connor Hellebuyck to get his name on the William M. Jennings Trophy after he, backup Laurent Brossoit and the cast in front of them allowed a league-low 199 goals on the season.

Furthermore, the Jets boasted the best five-on-five goal differential at 58 (179 for, 121 against), including another league-low with just 1.79 goals against per 60 minutes played.

The work done in front of Hellebuyck and Brossoit limited the tandem to 165 Grade-A chances against, good for 14th, while the Jets were quick to defend rebounds, leading to only 16 goals against off of them, second-fewest behind Minnesota.

“Give the players a lot of credit for that, because we did have to flip that switch from a run-and-gun team to a team that can play defence first and get offence from that,” Bowness said.

4. Jets stars in good place

Kyle Connor has his scoring touch back, while Mark Scheifele is a known commodity in the playoffs and once again led Winnipeg with 72 points in 74 games.

Gabriel Vilardi is a lethal weapon on the power play, and the primary reason it caught fire down the stretch after Vilardi missed significant time due to a knee injury early on and a late-season enlarged spleen.

Nikolaj Ehlers has found a home next to Sean Monahan, acquired in early February, and Tyler Toffoli, who the Jets nabbed at the deadline and comes with Stanley Cup pedigree, having won it in 2014 with the Los Angeles Kings. Since that line’s been together, they outscored their opposition 11-4.

Ehlers led the Jets with 47 points at five-on-five, where his impact is no secret. He paced Winnipeg with 2.6 points per 60 minutes played.

Winnipeg’s scoring depth was evident all season, with a record 14 players with 10 goals or better. Connor led the way with 34 despite missing several weeks with a sprained MCL.

Bowness’s blue-line also continued to be a force, finishing eighth in scoring by a defenceman with 189 points.

Morrissey was the catalyst for that, putting up another solid offensive year with 69 points, sacrificing very little of his offence as his defensive game reached for another gear.

5. By no means will it be easy

The Jets may match up well against the Avalanche. They swept the season series 3-0 (outscored the Avs 17-4). But this won’t be a cakewalk.

Makar’s 1.07 points per game in the playoffs is tied for second all-time. Not among Avs blue-liners, but among every defenceman to play the game. Yes, that’s correct. He trails only the great Bobby Orr (1.24).

Colorado’s playoff success hinges on Georgiev’s ability to steady the ship. He was only pedestrian in last season’s playoffs, with the Avs crashing out in seven games.

Avs GM Chris MacFarland was busy at the trade deadline, adding mobile defenceman Sean Walker and solidifying their second-line centre position with Casey Mittelstadt in a trade with Buffalo. They also rounded out some of the edges, with depth forwards Yakov Trenin and Brandon Duhaime joining the fray.

Their off-season acquisition of Jonathan Drouin also paid off. After spending their junior years together in Halifax of the QMJHL, the former third-overall pick was reunited with MacKinnon.

Drouin posted a career-high 56 points, but on Saturday, the Avs announced he would miss the entire first round due to a lower-body injury. That's a big blow to their hopes.

The Jets will need their penalty kill better than it's ever been, with Colorado finishing with the fifth-ranked power play clicking at 24.5%

Killing off penalties was a weakness for Winnipeg, ranking 21st at 77.1% efficiency.

Billeck's prediction
Jets in 6

Colorado has the firepower and the experience, but the Jets have the defensive game that can shut down anyone on their best day. There's no comparison between the pipes, and the Jets have four lines that can come at you in waves.

Full first-round predictions

Eastern Conference

Rangers over Capitals in 4

Bruins over Maple Leafs in 6

Hurricanes over Islanders in 5

Panthers over Lightning in 5

Western Conference

Stars over Golden Knights in 5

Jets over Avalanche in 6

Nashville over Canucks in 4

Oilers over Kings in 5

TSN.ca

[Jets look to erase last year's early exit and seek first conference final since 2018 \(VIDEO\)](#)

This year's edition of the Jets has two playoff years that could be used as measuring sticks. The franchise's high-water mark in 2018, and last year's flameout to the eventual Cup winning Golden Knights. John Lu has more on what this playoff run means for Winnipeg with the potential to make the conference final, erasing last year's disappointments, how Mark Scheifele has played this year and how he matches up against Nathan MacKinnon.

Denver Post

[Renck: Avalanche's Jared Bednar must be prepared to act quickly if Alexander Georgiev's slump continues](#)

By TROY RENCK

Entering the playoffs with a goalie problem is like taking a road trip in the family truckster.

Think you hate it now, wait 'til you drive it. The Avs head to Winnipeg on Sunday. Buckle your seat belts. The Avs are in for a bumpy ride.

No one quite knows how Colorado went from Stanley Cup contender to staring down a second straight first-round exit. The Avs looked up on the morning of April 14, and there it was in their inbox: "Urgent. Factory Recall. Brake hoses could rupture, increasing the risk of crash and the inability to stop anything, including power plays or odd-man rushes."

Alexander Georgiev picked a bad time to have a bad month. Hockey playoffs feature games that can barely breathe. Every mistake is magnified. Every fundamental gaffe amplified. A great goalie calms the nerves, covers more blemishes than Revlon.

No one can say with any conviction that Georgiev can steal a game right now. Or make a big save. Is it too late to sign DU's Matt Davis?

Georgiev is in a slump, meaning coach Jared Bednar must be prepared to act quickly and lean on Justus Annunen if necessary.

Nothing creates more concern on the ice like not knowing what to expect from the backstop. It's the baseball equivalent of porous starting pitching. This is not an overreaction to Winnipeg's 7-0 blitzing of the Avs last Saturday. Georgiev was leaking transmission fluid long before this meltdown. The numbers paint a picture that makes loyalty — he won 38 games this season — a difficult argument to advance given the stakes.

In Georgiev's last five games, he has allowed 22 goals with an .853 save percentage. Yes, nine were on power plays, leaving multiple fingerprints at the scene. That still leaves an alarming 13 even-strength scores. Extrapolate it deeper, and it gets worse.

Styles make fights, and Georgiev does not match up well vs. the Jets. They have peppered him for 42 shots this season, delivering seven goals. An .833 save percentage? Really. Anything below .900 is below average.

It is why it's fair to wonder if this Avs season will end abruptly because they lack even mediocre net work. Let's not forget that for the season, Georgiev posted a 3.02 goals against average, ranking 24th out of 32 starters. Translation: He has gone from OK to Ruh-Roh.

Could Georgiev start to simmer? Sure. I could also lose 75 pounds and become a jockey. What evidence exists that either could happen?

The Avs have eased Annunen into the fold this season, typically against non-contenders, to build his confidence. In his last five games, he has stopped 120 of 129 shots with a .930 save percentage. Those numbers are encouraging, but he also failed to inspire vs. Winnipeg, allowing three goals in 11 shots after replacing Georgiev in the most recent rout.

I get it. The Avs won a Stanley Cup two years ago without excellence between the pipes. But Darcy Kuemper looks like Patrick Roy when compared to Georgiev. Kuemper posted a 2.54 goals against average in the regular season and .902 save percentage in the postseason. Neither number is special, but it made the Avs dangerous, keeping them close enough for the offense to take over.

Colorado boasts a similar attack this season. No team scored more goals. It is central to Nathan MacKinnon's case to win his first Hart Trophy. The statistics, however, were not inflated with helium against the Jets.

The simple truth is goalie Connor Hellebuyck is a problem. He is expected to win the Vezina Trophy, and will if his work against the Avs is weighed heavily. Winnipeg blitzed Colorado in three games, outscoring the Avs 17-4. Hellebuyck allowed four goals on 96 shots, posting a 1.33 goals against average.

In April alone, he is 5-0 with a 1.99 GAA — a number that only ticks up slightly at home (2.34) in 30 games.

The Jets boast an eight-game winning streak. They are smoking hot. The Avs' roster is so talented. It is hard to reconcile that they are in such a compromised position because of their uncertainty at the most important position.

Trust Curious Georgiev at your peril. It's time to pull him out of the fridge, place him in the microwave and hope, with white-knuckle fingers crossed, that he defrosts.

[Cale Makar's ongoing evolution has required time, freedom to help unlock his superpowers](#)

By COREY MASISAK

BROOKS, Alberta — Cale Makar collected the puck along the left wall, faked like he was going to the middle of the ice and instead cut toward the net with a violent juke that sent a defender to the ice.

Makar's burst of speed was so furious, the other defenders nearby missed their angle and could not stop him en route to a goal.

Brooks Bandits coach Ryan Papaioannou described it as his favorite goal from one of the best players he's ever coached — the kind of highlight-reel play that lives up to expectations on YouTube.

Papaioannou loved it because there was a player on the other team who had played for Brooks and was telling his new teammates where and how to stop the Bandits on faceoff plays. So he drew up a new one during an intermission, with the idea of creating more space for his star defenseman.

Makar went beyond what Papaioannou could have imagined.

"That was a goal that was like, 'Wow. Yeah. ... He might be better than the other guys on the ice,'" Papaioannou deadpanned. "What were the chances that play was going to work? Well, Cale just literally did the entire thing himself."

When asked if he remembers that goal from seven years ago, Makar's reply was another reminder of his perpetual pursuit of a standard so high it drives his path to greatness.

Rather than talk about the goal, he immediately went to a bad decision he made that led to a goal against in overtime — one of only nine games the Bandits lost that season before collecting a second-straight Alberta Junior Hockey League championship.

For the second time in three seasons, Makar has established a new record for points by an Avalanche defenseman. The first time he did it, Makar won the Norris Trophy, the Conn Smythe Trophy and the Stanley Cup in 2022.

For the Avs to climb back to the top of the NHL mountain in these upcoming playoffs, Colorado will need him to be the guy who grew from a tiny kid in Calgary to a unique weapon who can dictate terms of engagement against the best hockey players on the planet.

“He’s got a tough job out there. He plays the most minutes, in every situation,” Avs center Nathan MacKinnon said. “He’s definitely the best defenseman in the league and it’s not really that close.”

It took time, growth and a lot of hard work to get there.

Makar was not a phenom as he reached his teenage years. When he first played for the Bandits in the AJHL, Makar’s birth certificate said he was 16 years old. His coach looks at an old photo and still swears he looked 12.

During his two years in Brooks, a small town two hours east of Calgary, and two years at UMass in Amherst, Makar evolved from an eighth-round pick in the WHL draft to one of the sport’s elite prospects. His body transformed, which allowed Makar to unlock the full capabilities of his three superpowers — his mind, his feet and his hands.

“By year two, it was clear-cut, like ... wow, this kid is different,” Papaioannou said. “... Throughout that year, he kept moving up draft boards to the point where it stopped being scouts at our games and we started seeing NHL GMs.

“You knew it was something different.”

Training his mind

Colorado’s two aces — MacKinnon and Makar — have so much in common. Their drive and commitment to succeed are the stuff of legend. Their talent is obvious.

The standard they set, both for themselves and everyone around them, is stratospherically high. Both players will typically deflect credit when they have a big game or reach a milestone. Makar often goes a step further.

Even on the nights when the scoresheet says Makar was a difference-maker, he finds reasons to not be satisfied. He also speaks to the media more often, particularly after losses, and typically finds a way to shoulder the blame.

Makar’s modus operandi has been a marvel to those who have coached him for years.

“The first thing that was unique to me was the books he was reading,” Papaioannou said. “And honestly for guys at this age, even the fact that he was reading books. They weren’t all hockey books. They were mindset books, all these different things that his dad instilled.

“It wasn’t like he was a crazy gym guy or he was doing all this extra work with his stick. It was the stuff he was reading, the mental training stuff, the visualization. Most of these kids aren’t reading books, unless they have to. That was different.”

Makar read books like “Hockey Tough” by Saul L. Miller, looking for an edge on his competition and ways to develop as a player. During his time at UMass, he read plenty through his studies as a sports management major.

There have been stories written about Makar and his literary prowess since joining the Avalanche. Even on this innocuous factoid, Makar finds a way to downplay it.

“I feel like I get credit for being an avid reader when I’m really not. If I see something that I like, I might read it,” he said. “I think that comes from my family, but it wasn’t like I was just going home and reading every day.”

Papaioannou and his coach at UMass, Greg Carvel, gave particularly similar answers to the same question: What was it like to coach Cale Makar? The words they used paint a familiar picture: humble, selfless, just wanting to be one of the guys.

There was another common thread: emotional maturity. The physical maturation of Makar’s body was ongoing during his time at both stops, but being the wise-beyond-his-years kid was evident to both. Papaioannou touted his ability to remain even-keeled, avoiding the highs and lows of a typical teenage hockey player.

Carvel praised his decision to remain in college for a second season, and how he kept “two feet in” during a breakout campaign that was obviously going to end with him signing a contract with Colorado.

“The big thing was time. He needed time to build stamina, build strength,” Carvel said. “I think a big part of development is being a leader and being in a role where you have a really big impact on the group. When he was a freshman, there were other leaders. But when you’re a sophomore and you’re the best player on the team and the one everyone is looking up to you, you’ve got a responsibility.”

Training his body

Makar’s feet and hands were already advanced before he arrived in Brooks, but his work both on and off the ice there and in Massachusetts set the course for a potential Hall of Fame career.

One reason Makar ended up with the Bandits was that an older cousin had played for the program. Another was that Papaioannou looked beyond his diminutive stature and pursued Makar for his offensive upside.

He was happy to allow Makar to explore that potential, even if it meant mistakes at first. The reward was obvious as he became a dominant player.

“It always started with his deception,” Papaioannou said. “We would encourage him and push him to try and do more. I think his first evolution was being allowed to try whatever he wanted offensively. I think from there he really learned how to manipulate people in one-on-one situations. He was breaking guys down and then knowing what the next play would be. He already had these unique qualities, and the biggest thing was his feet.”

Makar’s biggest takeaways from his hockey education in Brooks were the details the coaching staff helped implement and the habits he created. He was given freedom to make magic happen, but also the tools to play at both ends of the ice in a more structured system.

That served him well as he matriculated to UMass, where defending against bigger, older, stronger players was a top challenge. Carvel, who coached a young Erik Karlsson as an assistant with the Ottawa Senators and just had top prospect Scott Morrow with the Minutemen, called gifted players like them “uncoachable” — at least when they have the puck.

So they worked on Makar’s play without it, while he continued to work on his body away from the ice. One of the biggest selling points NCAA programs like to make for a player choosing between college and major juniors in Canada is the schedule.

NCAA teams play fewer games, so players spend more time training and less time recovering. Makar had access to a strength and conditioning program that also helped develop Division I football and basketball players.

His feet were elite for the AJHL level — the edge work, his shiftiness and ability to change directions. They found another level at UMass, with his increased strength and stamina.

“His skating took a big jump from his first year to his second year,” Carvel said. “In his second year, it felt like he was getting breakaways every game. He wasn’t doing that in his first year.”

Makar’s hands kept getting better as well — one of the main reasons he doesn’t need to wind up and blast pucks to beat goaltenders these days. His wrist shot is arguably the best at his position.

Raising the bar

Makar is now 25 and just wrapped up his fifth NHL season.

He’s now scored 20-plus goals twice in the NHL. It would be three straight if not for injuries limiting him to 60 games last season.

He’s likely to finish in the top three of the Norris Trophy voting for the fourth consecutive year. Nicklas Lidstrom didn’t finish that high until his age-27 season. Victor Hedman rattled off six straight top-three finishes, with the first at age 26.

His path, from Calgary to a Hall of Fame plaque in the Great Hall at the corner of Yonge and Front streets in Toronto with stops in Brooks, Amherst and Denver, is very much on course. The development of his mind, feet and hands has helped Makar continually raise the bar for himself with each new season.

It’s how Makar can score a franchise-best 90 points this season and still feel like he has more to do. He can look across the locker room at the other superstar reaching new heights in his late 20s, and it’s not hard to forecast the same.

“If Cale has a rough night or gives up a bad scoring chance or they get a penalty-kill goal against or he’s late going someplace or he’s in the wrong lane but he has three points, he’s going to be critical of himself,” Avs coach Jared Bednar said. “And the same thing vice versa. If he’s great defensively but he knows the team needs him to contribute offensively, he’ll be critical of himself.

“I like that, as long as you’re not using a negative talk toward yourself and you know you’re striving to be better and you’re going to work to be better, it’s exactly what we want.”