

Winnipeg Free Press

Revived Jets facing tough tests

By: Ken Wiebe

ST. PAUL, Minn. – What a difference a week makes.

At this time seven days ago, the Winnipeg Jets were forced to talk about a lethargic loss to the Ottawa Senators, extending their skid to six games (0-5-1).

Their defensive-zone play was leaky and the offence was running a bit dry.

A first-round matchup with the Colorado Avalanche seemed inevitable, with Winnipeg virtually assured of finishing third in the Central Division and starting the Stanley Cup playoffs on the road.

Fast forward to the present and the Jets are riding a three-game winning streak after Saturday's 4-2 victory over the Minnesota Wild, which included three goals from the fourth line.

"You need all four lines going," said Jets head coach Rick Bowness, following the contest. "You want to win the Stanley Cup? You have to have all four lines going and playing at their best."

A skeptic would say two of those wins came against non-playoff teams and that's true, but it's the win over the Los Angeles Kings that set the stage for what came after.

You could also say the true tests are ahead, with dates looming this week with the Nashville Predators, Dallas Stars and the aforementioned Avalanche.

There are 10 more points available to the Jets and Avalanche and two points separate the two clubs, which should only serve to heighten the intensity.

Both clubs have a tough slog ahead and whoever gets the leg up in the chase for home-ice advantage in the first round is going to have to earn it:

Here are five storylines to monitor:

The top-6 composition

It has been three games since Bowness made the decision to put Mark Scheifele and Kyle Connor on separate lines. That meant a reunion for Nikolaj Ehlers, Gabriel Vilardi and Scheifele, a trio that was dominant for much of December when Connor was out with a knee injury.

There are signs the line is winning its matchups, though the scoring hasn't come easily — yet. It's worth giving it a longer run to see if it can help spark Scheifele, who hasn't been as dominant in the 10 games since he recorded his eighth career hat trick against the New York Rangers.

Scheifele has four assists in the past 10 games and only has one shot on goal during the past three outings. It's important to remember that Scheifele's two-way game has been excellent this season.

If the Jets are going to go on a lengthy run, they need both Scheifele and Connor producing offensively, whether they're playing together or on separate lines.

Sean Monahan has been the driver of the second scoring line and made an excellent pass on Connor's 31st goal of the season on Saturday. Connor has a goal and five points during the past three games — including three helpers against the Kings — and has generated eight shots on goal.

The most important development is that Vilardi has made an immediate impact after sitting out 15 games with an enlarged spleen and another undisclosed upper-body injury. A close second is that Tyler Toffoli has generated 10 shots on goal during his past two games and is back to looking dangerous.

That is part of what makes Toffoli a strong candidate to be back with Monahan at some point sooner than later, even though Cole Perfetti has done a solid job in his return to the top-6. That Perfetti has regained his offensive mojo is important for both the individual player and the Jets, whose depth is a strength they will be leaning on.

Can special teams round into form?

The return of Vilardi has clearly provided a boost to the power play, even if it didn't generate as much against the Wild in two opportunities. The Jets are in the bottom third of the NHL with the man-advantage (18.3 per cent, 22nd). Those numbers are better with Vilardi on the ice and since the arrival of Monahan.

The penalty kill is of greater concern — as the Jets allowed a Kirill Kaprizov one-timer after a beautiful cross-seam pass from Mats Zuccarello on Saturday — finishing three-for-four on the afternoon. The Jets are 26th while shorthanded, checking in at a 76.4 per cent efficiency. Teams can often survive one of the units underperforming, but when both have issues it puts an inordinate amount of pressure for teams to be almost perfect at five-on-five during the postseason.

Even strength play has been the foundation for the Jets this season and they'll be working to sharpen up that area down the stretch. They've taken incremental steps forward during the winning streak. Now, it's about continuing to push forward on that front.

The Jennings chase

Elite-level goaltending has been a common theme for the Jets throughout the course of this season and that's one of many elements that make them a dangerous opponent. The Jets and Florida Panthers are in a tight battle for the Jennings Trophy for fewest goals against allowed in the NHL — with the Jets in the lead right now.

The Jets have allowed five fewer goals than the Panthers, but have played 77 games compared to the 78 played by the Panthers. Connor Hellebuyck made his 57th start of the season on Saturday and is tracking to hit (and possibly eclipse) 60 starts once again.

Look for Laurent Brossoit to start against the Dallas Stars on Thursday. He should get two starts in these final five games. The most logical other one at this point seems like the game against the visiting Seattle Kraken, but it's possible he gets the call in the season finale against the Vancouver Canucks.

Whether he can get the four appearances required to hit 25 (the minimum for inclusion on the trophy) remains to be seen. That will require at least a few relief appearances, even if those are brief. As Bowness said on Friday, "We'll see."

What impact will injuries have down the stretch?

The Jets enter the final two weeks of the season relatively healthy, with forward Nino Niederreiter sidelined with a left leg laceration he suffered against the Kings. The original timeline was roughly seven days, which leaves the door open for Niederreiter to return for the matchup with the Avalanche.

Niederreiter's return to form is important for the Adam Lowry line that's going to be tasked with trying to limit the damage Nathan MacKinnon does when the first round begins.

The Avalanche lost forward Mikko Rantanen after he took a big hit from Edmonton Oilers blue-liner Mattias Ekholm. Colorado head coach Jared Bednar would only say Rantanen would be under evaluation for a while, so whether he is ready for Game 1 remains to be seen. Rantanen is a force and his loss would be regarded similarly to the Jets losing Josh Morrissey and Scheifele against the Vegas Golden Knights last spring.

What about Rutger McGroarty?

The Jets' top forward prospect will be at Xcel Energy Center this week with the Michigan Wolverines for the NCAA Frozen Four. There's some buzz circulating that McGroarty is considering returning to school for his junior season and that could become more apparent as early as next week.

If McGroarty signs his entry-level deal, he would like to burn a year of that contract by appearing in an NHL game before the regular season wraps up. Having McGroarty around the Jets as an insurance policy for the playoff push would be extremely valuable for him, provided he signs on the dotted line.

Speaking of forward prospects, the Jets assigned Colby Barlow to the Manitoba Moose on Sunday after his junior squad, the Owen Sound Attack, was eliminated from the Ontario Hockey League. Barlow battled through injuries but still finished with 40 goals and 58 points in 50 games this season.

The Athletic

[NHL Vezina Trophy candidates breakdown: Connor Hellebuyck leads an impressive group](#)

By Jesse Granger

NHL general managers won't cast their votes for the Vezina Trophy until the end of the regular season, but the race for the award is essentially over, and has been for some time.

Winnipeg's Connor Hellebuyck had the best season of his impressive nine-year career, outplayed the rest of the NHL goalies by a considerable margin, and is the prohibitive favorite to win his second Vezina this summer.

The 30-year-old has saved an impressive 35.9 goals above expected in 56 starts, according to Evolving-Hockey. That means every time Hellebuyck has taken the crease for the Jets this season, he's stolen more than half of a goal per game on average. It's one of the biggest reasons Winnipeg has been well above the playoff cut line all year.

While Hellebuyck likely has the top spot wrapped up, there's still plenty of debate as to which goalies will join him as finalists for the Vezina. It has been a year of resurgence at the position, with several former stars returning to peak form. Jacob Markstrom and Thatcher Demko both bounced back after a disappointing 2022-23. Sergei Bobrovsky kept his hot streak from last year's playoffs rolling, and Jordan Binnington looked better than he has since leading the St. Louis Blues to a Cup in 2019.

Today we'll take a closer look at Hellebuyck's brilliance and break down which other goalies are most deserving of joining him on the 2024 Vezina ballot.

1. Connor Hellebuyck

GSAX: 35.9 GSAX (1st)

Save percentage: .920 (1st)

Wins: 33 (T-4th)

The Jets have allowed the fewest goals of any team this season. Their defense hasn't been poor, but the underlying numbers certainly don't scream "elite." Winnipeg ranks 16th in expected goals allowed per 60 minutes (3.14) and 23rd in high-danger chances given up (12.07) according to Natural Stat Trick.

Despite those middling defensive metrics, Hellebuyck makes Winnipeg a defensive powerhouse. When he and the Jets are at their best, they've been nearly impossible to score on.

How has Hellebuyck done it? While he is a great athlete, he isn't the most explosive or flexible compared to other top NHL goalies. He doesn't make as many sprawling highlight-reel saves as some others, mainly because he doesn't need to. His biggest strength is his mental processing speed, which allows him to diagnose the play and get into the best position to leave the shooter with no net to shoot at.

This save against New York Rangers defenseman Braden Schneider on March 19 is a good demonstration of Hellebuyck's awareness and ability to process information at a high rate of speed.

Early in the video when the puck bounces into the nearside corner, Hellebuyck realizes there's no immediate threat to shoot and takes two quick glances over his left shoulder to survey the ice. He's building a mental picture of where the opposing skaters are in the zone, what hand they shoot with, and any other clues that could help him make the eventual save.

When Erik Gustafsson makes the cross-ice pass to Schneider on the back door, Hellebuyck tracks the puck well through the traffic, leading his move across the crease with his eyes. Schneider is right-handed, so the threat of a one-timer is minimal. Hellebuyck likely knows he has extra fractions of a second to get across before the shot is released.

This is where the save is special. Rather than sprawling across in desperation, which would only cover a small portion of the net, Hellebuyck stays within his structure, gets to the far-side post

and drops into a controlled reverse vertical horizontal (RVH) position that gives Schneider nowhere to shoot the puck. Here's the save in slow motion from a better angle that shows just how controlled Hellebuyck is. Not only does he make the save look easy, but he's also in perfect position for any rebound attempt, and an easy cover.

Hellebuyck is visibly calm in the crease, and it's one of the biggest reasons he tracks pucks so well. He makes very little unnecessary movement and holds onto his structure even in chaotic situations.

Let's look at one more of the season-high 39 saves he made that night, a 3-2 Winnipeg win over the Rangers. This one is a glove save on a backdoor one-timer by Vincent Trocheck on a two-on-one rush.

Hellebuyck anticipates the pass across and tries to get his stick into the passing lane, but does so without completely selling out on the poke check. The stick ends up missing the pass, but he's still balanced and gets across in a controlled manner. Because he stays upright rather than dropping into the splits, he maintains visual attachment with the puck and reaches his glove over for what looks like a much more casual save than it should.

Hellebuyck has been good across the board this season. His 382 saves on high-danger shots are the second-most in the league behind only Binnington (386). He also has the second-highest save percentage (.989) on long-range shots, a testament to his strong puck tracking through traffic. He leads the NHL in goals saved above expected (35.9), wins above replacement (4.85) and save percentage (.920) for goalies with at least 30 games.

He's already been a Vezina finalist three times and will undoubtedly add to that this summer. Perhaps more importantly to Hellebuyck, he's started under 60 games for the first time in a full 82-game schedule since 2016-17, so he should be fresh for what he and the Jets hope is a deep playoff run.

2. Thatcher Demko

GSAX: 24.79 GSAX (4th)

Save percentage: .917 (T-3rd)

Wins: 34 (2nd)

There may not be a more technically sound goalie in the NHL than Demko, who has looked clinical in the crease for Vancouver. The 28-year-old had the best season of his career statistically and will get a chance to prove himself in the playoffs for the first time in four years.

Demko moves incredibly well for a goalie his size, mainly because he's so efficient with his movement. His edgework is precise and his post integrations — moving between standing and onto his knees sealing his posts — are buttery smooth. The results are the fourth-most goals saved above expected (24.79) and the third-highest save percentage (.917).

Demko has really stood out on scoring chances from right in front of the net. The Canucks have allowed the 10th fewest high-danger shots in the NHL, but on the rare occasions they do allow them, Demko has been stellar. His .842 save percentage on those shots is second-best in the NHL. He's had several save-of-the-year candidates, including this beauty of a glove stop on Los Angeles Kings forward Alex Turcotte.

Demko never cheated on the play, staying square to Anze Kopitar right up to the point where he passed the puck. Once the pass was made, Demko dug his right skate into the ice and exploded across the crease, holding his glove perfectly on top of his left pad. Turcotte's face at the end of the play says it all. He joined a long list of shooters Demko has left staring into the rafters this season.

Another reason Demko has been so effective on shots from in tight is his ability to stay ahead of the play. The combination of hockey IQ and smooth skating allows him to get into position and set before the shot ever comes, making life easier on himself. This play against Golden Knights center Jack Eichel on March 7 in Las Vegas is a good example of Demko staying ahead of the play.

This was a particularly difficult play for the goalie to read because the pass went through Ivan Barbashev's skates on the doorstep. When Vegas winger Jonathan Marchessault gets the puck at the bottom of the circle to Demko's left and shovels the puck into the slot, Demko can't slide all the way across to defend a shot from Eichel (in the nearside faceoff circle). He must first respect the threat that Barbashev can redirect the puck on net, so there's a brief pause while he tracks the puck through Barbashev's skates.

Despite that, Demko still pushes across to get to the nearside post well ahead of Eichel releasing the shot. By the time the puck is off Eichel's stick, Demko has the post sealed and his shoulder covering the short-side corner with absolutely nothing for Eichel to shoot at.

Demko is still second in the league with 34 wins despite missing the last month with an injury. He was leading the league at the time. Missing out on the last month likely ended his chances of catching Hellebuyck for the Vezina, but he is expected to be back in time for the postseason.

3. Jordan Binnington

GSAx: 27.16 GSAx (3rd)

Save percentage: .912 (9th)

Wins: 27 (10th)

Before the season began, many believed Binnington's best play was behind him, and it's hard to blame anyone for thinking that. Over the previous two years, he had saved 16.84 goals below expected, which ranked 117th out of 126 goalies. After posting an .894 save percentage last season, it wasn't even a sure thing Binnington would hold onto the starting job this season with promising rookie Joel Hofer entering the mix.

Then Binnington reminded everyone what he was capable of. His quick-twitch reactions and incredible lateral movement make him one of the most exciting goalies to watch when he's at the top of his game, and this season that was the case on most nights.

The Blues are statistically one of the worst defensive teams in the NHL. They've given up the fifth-most high-danger chances (13.43) and the seventh-most expected goals (3.48) per 60 minutes. Despite that, Binnington has managed to save 27.16 goals above expected. He's the biggest reason St. Louis has remained in the playoff chase as long as it has.

It has been a season full of spectacular desperation saves for the 30-year-old from Richmond Hill, Ontario. Outside of having legs seemingly made of rubber, how does Binnington do it? Many times it starts with his ability to find his edges from the butterfly, like this athletic save on Kings defenseman Mikey Anderson on March 13.

Binnington drops to the butterfly in reaction to the initial shot attempt from Kevin Fiala, but it's blocked by Blues forward Alexey Toropchenko. The redirection goes straight to Anderson, who is already in a position to shoot. Binnington rotates his hips to the nearside post and pushes across hard. The power he's able to generate from that position is impressive, as is his hip flexibility to extend his left pad to the post as he's sliding over.

Typically the wider a goalie's skates are, the less leverage they have to push from side to side. Whether he's already down in a butterfly, or just in a really wide stance, Binnington's ability to move laterally from awkward positions is elite. Unlike the goalies discussed above, Binnington thrives outside of his structure. It's no secret he plays the game with a lot of emotion, and a benefit of that is he makes many saves on compete level alone.

The Blues needed a vintage performance from Binnington to be competitive this season, and he delivered. His base metrics like save percentage and wins may not be as good as you'd expect from a Vezina finalist, but Binnington has drastically outperformed his environment this season and is deserving of a nomination.

Honorable mentions

Jacob Markstrom

GSAx: 28.39 GSAx (2nd)

Save percentage: .906 (21st)

Wins: 23 (16th)

Markstrom is outside of the top 15 in save percentage and wins, but through no fault of his own. The hulking Swedish netminder has been superb for Calgary this season, trailing only Hellebuyck with 28.39 GSAx.

How did he post such an impressive GSAx number with a save percentage barely above league average? The answer lies in the quality of shots he faced all season. Of the 34 goalies to log at least 2,000 minutes of ice time, no one faced shots from closer to the net on average than Markstrom (32.53 feet).

Markstrom handled the difficult workload as well as he could have, leading the NHL with an .854 save percentage on high-danger shots. For reference, the league average on those chances is only .784. He used excellent positioning and rebound control to hold the Flames in games.

It was an excellent bounce-back year for him to reestablish himself as one of the league's top goalies.

Sam Montembeault

GSAx: 21.14 GSAx (7th)

Save percentage: .906 (23rd)

Wins: 15 (33rd)

Montembeault quietly had an excellent season in net for Montreal. Playing behind a bottom-three defense, he regularly stood on his head to give the Canadiens a chance on most nights.

What really stands out about Montembeault's year is his level of consistency. He posted a save percentage above the league average (.904) in an impressive 72.2 percent of his starts this

season, which is the best of any goalie in the NHL. Here's how he compares to the other Vezina contenders in that metric.

In the end, 36 starts for Montembeault isn't enough to make him a Vezina finalist. Playing on a last-place team also doesn't help, but his season was impressive enough to deserve a mention here.

Sergei Bobrovsky

GSAX: 14.81 GSAX (15th)

Save percentage: .913 (8th)

Wins: 34 (T-2nd)

Similarly to many on this list, it was a throwback season for Bobrovsky in Florida. He maintained the form he showed during last year's run to the Stanley Cup Final, racking up the second-most wins in the NHL this season.

Even at 35, Bobrovsky is still one of the most athletic goalies in the world and covers the bottom half of the net exceptionally well. The Panthers have played well in front of him, and with Bob at his best they are one of the favorites to win it all.

Linus Ullmark and Jeremy Swayman

Both of Boston's goalies were excellent this season. Together, they posted numbers worthy of a Vezina. However, because the starts were split so evenly — 41 for Swayman and 36 for Ullmark — neither was able to accumulate the stats needed to win the award.

The Bruins are the only team with two goalies inside the top 10 in GSAX. Swayman is fifth with 21.51 and Ullmark is right behind him in sixth with 21.39. It's only the second time ever that two goalies finished with at least 20 GSAX. The first time was last season, and it was Swayman and Ullmark again.