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[Practice report: Home ice advantage](#)

[Dillon: "I think we've played really well here."](#)

By Jamie Thomas

WINNIPEG – Sitting on a three-game win streak, the Winnipeg Jets practiced this morning before leaving for the most important road trip of the season.

The Jets are two points back of Colorado for second spot in the Central Division and home ice advantage. Winnipeg will face Nashville Tuesday, Dallas on Thursday and wrap up the trip Saturday afternoon in Denver.

It would be easy to look down the road to the game on Saturday, but Nikolaj Ehlers focus was on how the Jets can be better against the Predators. Nashville beat Winnipeg last month in the Manitoba capital 4-2 and Ehlers discussed what the Jets need to do better this time around.

"Come with a lot more energy. Be ready from puck drop. It's all the hockey cliches but when you get this close to playoff hockey and you're playing against a division team you got to be ready to play," said Ehlers.

"Because if you're not, they are. These games are going to be fun to play in. So, we're excited. We're ready for the challenges that we have coming up."

While the Jets are more concerned about how they are playing right now, it is hard to ignore what the importance of home ice advantage in the opening round would mean to their success.

"That's why you play the 82 games, to be able to get whatever attempted matchups you want to get, play in front of your fans, be in your home, in your bed. There's a comfortability to it," said Brenden Dillon.

"In a seven-game series, you're going to have to learn how to win on the road anyways. We're comfortable in whatever situation we have to be in, but home ice, I think we've played really well here, we're comfortable here where you've got all your facilities."

After their season high six game slide, the Jets have smoothed things out with the aforementioned three game win streak by playing the right way for longer stretches. A huge part of their success is returning to their excellent play in the third period, Winnipeg has outscored their opponents 4-0 in the final period over the streak.

"For the most part, we did. Was it for 60 minutes, no, but at least we corrected it. The most important part of that," said Rick Bowness.

"All three periods, the third period was really good. We were really good in the third periods. We locked them down so that's the most important thing on that."

Team defence has returned and then some over the last week or so. With five games remaining on their schedule, Winnipeg has allowed the fewest goals against in the entire league. The Jets have surrendered 190 goals, Florida 194, Los Angeles 198 and Carolina 200.

“Guys are sacrificing offence in order to be better on defence or be harder to play against. They’ve just really committed to it, and it’s been a huge success for us, to see the benefits of it, see the teams we’re able to beat when we play that way,” said Dillon.

“I didn’t know we were that high up in it, but it’s some kudos to us that we can really buckle down here and have that be our identity through playoffs. We could have a lot of fun.”

#### ***BACK-TO-BACK-TO-BACK 20 POINT SEASONS***

For the first time, Dillon has posted three consecutive seasons of 20 or more points, all of them since he joined the Jets in 2021-22. In fact, the BC product has recorded the most points (63) in his career over a three-season span.

“I don’t know, it’s funny how things work out like that. Since I got here to Winnipeg, the guys, everybody has been so supportive of me, and the coaching staff has given me every opportunity to succeed. Hopefully, I’ll keep sliding over and keep getting some points here. I think our team, just in general, everybody’s contributing, which has been fun,” said Dillon.

I like it when we score, I love it when I score. It’s just great when everyone’s having success, usually the team is too. To hit that 20-point plateau total is a big milestone for me.”

#### **Winnipeg Free Press**

##### **[Home-ice advantage in Jets’ sights](#)**

##### **[Neck-and-neck battle with Avs likely to come down to final game of season](#)**

By: Ken Wiebe

NASHVILLE — The playoff picture in the Central Division is close to becoming crystal clear for the Winnipeg Jets.

There’s still work to be done.

Thanks to a 7-4 victory over the Colorado Avalanche on Sunday, the Dallas Stars look like a safe bet to finish in top spot, but the chase for second place is heating up as the Jets head continue a four-game road trip against the Nashville Predators on Tuesday at Bridgestone Arena (7 p.m. CT).

The Jets trail the Avalanche by two points and currently hold a game in hand.

Looking closer at the schedule, the Jets have road games against the Predators, Stars and Avalanche and home games against the Seattle Kraken and Vancouver Canucks to close out the campaign.

The Avalanche play just once against a non-playoff opponent (Tuesday against the Minnesota Wild), while finishing up with games against the the Jets, Vegas Golden Knights (on a back-to-back that includes travel) and the Edmonton Oilers.

“Yeah, I think that’s basically why you play 82 games, to try and get home-ice advantage...” said Jets blue-liner Brenden Dillon. “And you know, the situation we’re in, both Dallas and

Colorado... fantastic teams that have both had great seasons and we know the kinds of battles we've had against both of them all year.

"So, you know, we lose a couple, they lose a couple, we win a couple, they win a couple, I mean it's probably gonna come down to Game 82 to really define who's gonna have that second and third spot.

"Every game here coming down, even though we're clinched here we're wanting to play a playoff-type game and have that playoff-type mentality," he added.

The Predators, who rallied with a shootout win against the New Jersey Devils on Sunday after losing 2-0 to the New York Islanders on Saturday, close out the regular season against the Chicago Blackhawks, Columbus Blue Jackets and Pittsburgh Penguins.

Nashville had a couple of outlier games as their 18-game points streak (16-0-2) came to an end, losing 8-4 to the Arizona Coyotes and 7-4 to the Avalanche but they have since stabilized and are on the verge of clinching a wild-card spot.

*MILESTONE HIT:* Jets winger Nikolaj Ehlers appeared in his 600th NHL game on Saturday against the Wild and that's a mark he was proud to hit, especially given the time he's missed during the past several seasons.

"I don't usually set goals for the season but hitting 600 this year was definitely one of them," Ehlers said in Winnipeg on Monday. "Just trying to battle and play every game was up there on my wish list. So, it felt nice."

Ehlers is closing in on another milestone, as he's sitting on 199 NHL goals.

"I hope I don't have to wait too long," said Ehlers, who remains on the top line with Mark Scheifele and Gabriel Vilardi.

*PAIRINGS IN FLUX:* The Jets continue to tweak the defensive pairings. After running Neal Pionk with Josh Morrissey for several games, Bowness went back to Dylan DeMelo and Morrissey in the third period of Saturday's tilt with the Wild and that's how the team skated Monday in Winnipeg before flying to Tennessee.

Pionk is back with Brenden Dillon and the third pairing of Dylan Samberg and Logan Stanley was left together. Colin Miller and Nate Schmidt were on the fourth pair. This is another sign the competition appears to be open for the No. 6 spot heading into the first game of the post-season. Schmidt has a leg up, but usage this week could provide further hints about what the Jets plan to do on that front.

*NO UPDATE ON NINO:* One of the other things to monitor as the road trip continues is the status of Nino Niederreiter, who missed the last two games with a lacerated left leg. Bowness said Niederreiter will travel with the team, but there is no updated timeline for his return (which was originally estimated to be one week and would line up with Thursday's game against the Stars). The hard-nosed winger would need a skate or two before seeing real action.

**[Monahan a perfect fit for Jets](#)**

**[Centre's commitment to excellence everything team wanted and needed](#)**

By: Ken Wiebe

NASHVILLE — Rick Bowness isn't someone prone to exaggeration.

When the Winnipeg Jets head coach was recently asked about the arrival of Sean Monahan, he could hardly contain his enthusiasm.

"Somehow, he's a perfect fit," said Bowness, whose team continues a four-game road trip Tuesday against the Nashville Predators. "Good on faceoffs, good on the penalty kill, he's smart, he's reliable, he creates offence. His personality, he just fits right in. He's no maintenance. He's got great character, great leadership. Everything we heard about him is true and magnified.

"He's been exactly what we needed and exactly what we wanted."

The pre-emptive strike made by Jets general manager Kevin Cheveldayoff on Feb. 2 will go down as one of the best he's made — and that's saying something when you consider the run he's been on the past few years.

Was the 2024 first-rounder (and a conditional 2027 third-round pick if Winnipeg wins the Stanley Cup) a steep price to pay the Montreal Canadiens for a potential rental player?

No doubt it's significant, especially for a team that's deeply rooted in the draft, develop and retain model, but it's tough to argue Monahan wasn't worth it.

As the Jets prepare for the final five games of the regular season in a tight battle for second spot in the Central Division, Monahan's impact is undeniable, as the 11 goals and 21 points in 29 games on the stat line suggest. That impact also stretches well beyond the numbers, as Monahan has provided a presence on the second scoring line while contributing in virtually every area.

"It's been great having him," said Jets forward Morgan Barron. "He's battled through some really tough injuries and he's had to evolve his game a little bit. But he's done it so successfully. The biggest thing I noticed about his impact is that he's so good in the (faceoff) dot. Then you see all of the stuff around the net, and his defensive play, penalty killing and everything."

So, how did the sixth-overall pick in the 2013 NHL Draft get here?

Jets winger Tyler Toffoli has seen Monahan's progression firsthand, going back to their time together as teenagers on the Ottawa 67s of the Ontario Hockey League. Toffoli remembers Monahan returning from the World Under-17 Challenge (held in Winnipeg, where Monahan helped Team Ontario win a gold medal) in January of 2011 with a renewed sense of confidence.

"From when he came into Ottawa in junior, like any 16-year-old kid, he was scrawny, he was tall but he wasn't grown into his body, yet," said Toffoli, also acquired by the Jets prior to the trade deadline. "(Monahan) went to the under-17 tournament... we had some injuries at centre and he came back a completely different player.

"He's always in the right spot, it feels like. He's always been like that. He was one of those guys that did everything right. Coaches trust him everywhere he goes and that's why he's been so successful in his career."

Longtime NHL head coach Bob Hartley was involved in the pre-draft meetings with the Calgary Flames in 2013 and Monahan left a positive first impression.

It turns out that Monahan didn't just interview well.

He arrived at his first NHL training camp and Monahan made the team in his first crack at it, quickly becoming a focal point of the Flames rebuild along with Johnny Gaudreau.

"His maturity really struck me, right at that time," Hartley said from Florida. "As soon as he came to the first training camp, I knew that we had an NHL player. There was no doubt in our mind.

"I remember many days we would do individual video together and he was a bright student of the game. He never took it for granted that he was going to be an NHL player. He was never entitled as a first-round pick. He was always willing to learn and it was also about how composed he was."

Those qualities allowed Hartley to put more and more on Monahan's plate despite his lack of experience at the professional level.

"Sean, right from the start, he never went to the American Hockey League. He went basically from primary school to university. He skipped high school," said Hartley. "Penalty killing, five-on-five, big faceoffs in our zone. Big faceoffs in the offensive zone. It wasn't only about faceoffs, it was about his understanding of the game and his commitment to play the right way."

Even with the success he enjoyed, that first season tested Monahan's mettle.

"It wasn't easy. I was trying to stick around and make my mark and be an everyday player in the NHL," said Monahan. "I wouldn't necessarily say (Hartley) was hard on me, but he was on me a lot. Lots of video sessions, lots of time after practice and he really dissected my game. The work he made me put in, that's something that really helped me in my career. It's not an easy league to play in and he really helped me push to that next limit."

Monahan, who fired 22 goals in his rookie season (2013-14) admits his appreciation for that push grew over time.

"He was just trying to push me to be all that I could," he said. "I remember there were days I would go home and think, 'This is tough.' But looking back now, as I got older, it really benefitted me to work hard on both sides of the puck. The little details of the game are something he really stressed. That really helped me out for my career."

Monahan took what Hartley told him in his exit interview to heart after that rookie season and had an excellent summer of training.

The Flames head coach was blown away when Monahan walked into his office in August of 2014.

"At the year end meeting, we talked about his faceoffs, his battles in the corners and where he had the frame to put on a few pounds of muscle," said Hartley. "He came into my office, I looked at him and gosh, it was unbelievable, the change. He probably put on 10 or 15 pounds of muscle, but at the same time, he did it without losing his mobility."

Although Monahan, listed at 6-foot-2, 202 pounds, battled through some tough injuries during his tenure (2013-22) with the Flames, he got healthy and regained his form with the Canadiens last season.

“Monny is a top goal scorer in this league. He knows how to score in tight,” said Flames captain Mikael Backlund. “He cares a lot and he plays with a team-first mindset. His whole time in Calgary, he was a great leader for us on and off the ice.”

Monahan, who had three 30-goal seasons during his time with the Flames, is back producing the way he did earlier in his career, with 24 goals and 56 points in 78 games in ‘23-24 split between the Habs and Jets.

“Sean is a true pro. That’s maybe not really so much about his game, but the way that he handled himself,” said current Flames head coach and former assistant Ryan Huska. “For his time around us, he made people around him better because of the way that he approached his day-to-day work. The cool thing to see when you watch him play is that he’s turned himself into a really good defensive centre, not just one who can score.”

Part of that comes from the tough matchups he faced in the Pacific Division as a teenager, going nose-to-nose with the likes of Ryan Getzlaf, Ryan Kesler, Henrik Sedin, Joe Thornton, Martin Hanzal, Anze Kopitar and Jeff Carter.

“He’s always been put in the situation of having to play against really good players and he’s realized that he has to play well at both ends of the ice,” said Toffoli. “When he came into the NHL, the Pacific Division was probably the hardest division to play in. Everywhere you went, there were really good centremen.”

Facing that stiff level of competition helped Monahan grow into the player he is today.

Although the focus for Monahan is on this playoff push and to see what the post-season brings, it’s impossible to ignore the fact he will be an unrestricted free agent for the second time in as many years on July 1.

Considering everything he’s brought to the Jets, finding a way to keep Monahan in the fold — potentially even before he hits the open market — is going to be a priority for Cheveldayoff.

After taking a one-year contract worth US\$2 million (including a performance bonus), Monahan will be looking for a multi-year pact with a significant raise, somewhere in the range of US\$5 million (or north of that).

There’s plenty of time for that negotiation to take place, but it’s abundantly clear Monahan is providing outstanding value, and given his age (he will be 30 in October), a five-year deal would align well with the organization’s window to win.

## **Winnipeg Sun**

### **[Jets eye second place, home-ice advantage as they head back out on road](#)**

By Ted Wyman

As they headed back out on the road Monday for three games against playoff-bound division rivals, the Winnipeg Jets found themselves with a realistic chance of moving up in the standings and securing home-ice advantage in the first round of the post-season.

If the Jets can stay hot down the stretch, they can pass the Colorado Avalanche, who are currently two points ahead in the race for second place in the Central Division.

The Jets have a game in hand against the Avs, are ahead 42-40 in regulation wins, lead 47-46 in regulation-overtime wins and have already won the season series against Colorado.

With five games left, the Jets (100 points) likely only need to tie the Avalanche (102 points) to make sure they'll start the playoffs at home.

"That's why you play the 82 games, to be able to get whatever attempted match-ups you want to get, play in front of your fans, be in your home, in your bed," veteran defenceman Brenden Dillon said Monday after the Jets practised at Canada Life Centre.

"In a seven-game series, you're going to have to learn how to win on the road anyway and we're comfortable in whatever situation we have to be in, but home ice ... we've played really well here and we're comfortable here where we've got all our facilities."

The Jets play at Nashville on Tuesday night and can lock up at least third place in the Central Division with a win. They move on to play the first-place Dallas Stars (107 points) on Thursday and then take on the Avalanche on Saturday afternoon. They'll finish out their regular-season schedule with home games against the Seattle Kraken and Vancouver Canucks next week.

Still, while everyone knows a strong finish combined with a win over the Avalanche on Saturday will get the Jets home-ice advantage, it would be stretching it to suggest that's the No. 1 priority for the team.

"For us, it's just more about how we play," defenceman Neal Pionk said.

"We've been focusing on that and not the overall grand scheme. We're paying attention to the standings, for sure, but what we really want is to get into that playoff style as fast as we can. We want to focus on the little things right now. If we look down the road at the bigger picture, we'll lose focus and that just leads to bad habits, bad shifts, bad periods, bad games."

So far this month the Jets have rebounded from a six-game winless skid to put together three straight wins.

They looked strong in their last outing, a 4-2 win over the Minnesota Wild in St. Paul, on Saturday.

But the truth is, the Western Conference is stacked with good teams and the first round of the playoffs is likely to be a free-for-all. Home ice should mean something, but with how closely matched all of these teams are, it might not be that much.

"The teams are so close, all neck and neck," Jets' winger Cole Perfetti said.

"To me, home ice is huge so we've got to fight for that second spot.

“It looks like we’re going to play Colorado. We play April 18 against Vancouver and the playoffs are starting on the 20th, so it’s a quick turnaround. So, second place could be the difference between having a day at home in Winnipeg, as opposed to playing against Colorado and having to fly out the next day. It’s a lot easier on the body if they are flying to us. That would be a huge difference.”

Jets coach Rick Bowness is charged with creating a balance for his team down the stretch. The most important thing is likely that the Jets stay healthy and are not tired by the time the playoff games begin.

“We’ve done a good job, we really have,” Bowness said. “I’ve said this many times ... a big part of our job is managing the schedule and managing the days off and the travel.

“So I’m not worried about that. We’re doing as good a job as we can with the days off, the rest and the practice time.”

As for pushing to get second spot and a better situation to start the playoffs?

“Let’s focus on the process, focus on getting that 60 minutes playing the right way,” Bowness said. “And the rest will take care of itself.”

The Jets headed out to Nashville after a practice in which every player except forward Nino Niederreiter (leg cut) participated.

Bowness said Niederreiter, who was originally expected to be out at least a week, was accompanying the team on the road trip but there was no timeline for when he might resume skating.

### **Centre of attention: Jets need Scheifele to warm up, and soon**

By Paul Friesen

He’s scored one goal in his last nine games, chipped in just three assists and, in a nod to Masters week, is playing well under par during that stretch, at minus-7.

But Winnipeg Jets centre Mark Scheifele didn’t sound the least bit concerned about his lack of recent production when I sat down to chat with him on Monday.

“Not at all,” he said. “This time of season it’s not about points. It’s about winning games and getting into the playoffs and having a good feeling. That’s what this team is about. It’s not about individual accolades, it’s not about individual statistics.”

Three straight wins is the bottom line, as the Jets continue to leave their recent skid in the rear-view mirror.

But when coaches say they need all four lines to win when it matters most, they’re not just talking about getting goals from the bottom of the lineup.

The 2018 post-season was a heady example of what Scheifele can do, and how far he can carry a team, when he’s feeling it, and the Jets aren’t likely to go anywhere without him this spring.



Of course, there's still plenty of time to warm up that stick of his.

It would help if he started shooting.

Over these last three games, Scheifele has just one shot on goal. Seeing those sparse numbers might cause some to wonder if he's nursing an ailment.

"I'm 100%," he said. "I'm not much of a shooter. I shoot when I have opportunity. When you play with guys that are good shooters, you try to get it in their hands. That's the focus."

After a career-high 42 goals a year ago – one on every five shots – Scheifele might be selling himself short in that department.

As for who his wingers are, not long ago he had Kyle Connor to his left, but they were giving up too much and the Jets were losing.

Head coach Rick Bowness moved Nik Ehlers into that slot, but chemistry has been slow to come.

"Yeah, it hasn't been great," Ehlers said. "When you're going as a line and it's not working for the team, there's always something that's got to get switched up. You try to get some other guys going and you switch some things up and sometimes it works out and sometimes it doesn't."

"So far it hasn't worked out for our line. We've got to be better."

It's worked out for the second line, as Connor, Sean Monahan and Cole Perfetti have come alive.

But while that cylinder is firing, there's no spark up top.

Getting high-end fuel to ignite is not supposed to be this hard.

"They're not getting enough chances and when they're there, they're not burying them," Bowness said. "Their turn will come and they'll have to step up and win us a game."

If they don't start clicking over the next few games, you wonder if the coach will shuffle the deck yet again.

"We'll see on that one," Bowness said, chuckling. "There's always Plan B."

Scheifele is on pace for 27 goals, nothing to sneeze at but still his lowest goal output (in a full season) since his second year in the league, when he potted 15.

His shot count is down considerably from last season, as is his shooting percentage.

One area in which he's reached a career high is penalty minutes, where he's matched his jersey number for the first, and preferably last, time.

No. 55 has added a more usable tool this season: something closer to a consistent, 200-foot game.

While he says that's not a message he got from anybody in particular, it does mirror what his team as a whole has improved on.

"Every year you try to improve on things," Scheifele said. "We're a great defensive team, five on five. And that goes first line to fourth line. That's something that makes our team great."

At 31, Scheifele still hasn't become a wizard in the faceoff circle – he remains below 50% – but credit where it's due: over the last three games, he's won 71% of draws.

And his team has come up with the bigger win in all three.

In the end, no matter what the Jets do these last five games, what happens after April 18 is what this team and its No. 1 centre will be measured by.

You'll get no argument from him on that count.

"That's what it's all about," Scheifele said. "It's enjoying the moment, enjoying the thrill of playoff hockey, the adrenaline – everything."

And putting off that first round of golf for as long as possible.

### **[Jets Dillon credits past and present teammates for his scoring surge](#)**

By Graham Sceviour-Fraehlich, For the Winnipeg Sun, Winnipeg Sun

After a howitzer with eyes gave the Winnipeg Jets a 3-2 lead Saturday in Minnesota, Brenden Dillon's teammates came out to hug the veteran defenceman.

Though the goal was credited in the end to Alex Iafallo, who deflected the puck just underneath the crossbar, it was Dillon's rising blue-line blast that created the chance.

Despite not getting credit for the goal, which would've been his ninth of the season, the undrafted Winnipeg defenceman has logged a career-high in that department.

Dillon credits his teammates — past and present — for helping him find shooting lanes from the blue-line.

"I've been so lucky, the D-men I've been able to play with in my career ... Brent Burns, Erik Karlsson, John Carlson, Josh Morrissey here," he said. "Some of the elite offensive D-men that always seem to find a way to get pucks through to the net."

Dillon, a 33-year-old from New Westminster, B.C., said wiring rubber through a crowd will be a top priority come playoff time for Jets' defencemen.

Winnipeg associate coach Scott Arniel urges the players to look at the Vegas Golden Knights' ability to congest shooting lanes, Dillon said.

This habit helped the Knights take Winnipeg out of last year's playoffs in five games, en-route to a Stanley Cup victory. Vegas blocked a whopping 450 shots in the postseason, more than 20 per game.

“They blocked a lot of shots and if you can buy that little bit of time to get that slap shot off, if you can use deception ... some of these high, high-end forwards and defencemen that just seem to find ways to get pucks on net, usually you’re creating more offence,” Dillon said.

Dillon, whose eight goals this season include two game-winners, said the team is feeling good about its scoring depth this year.

“I like it when we score, I love it when I score,” said Dillon through a smile. “It’s just great ... when everyone’s having success, usually the team is too.”

The blue-liner has crossed the 20-point milestone for the fifth time of his career, which has seen him play at least parts of 13 NHL seasons with the Dallas Stars, San Jose Sharks, Washington Capitals, and now three campaigns in Winnipeg.

Dillon and his teammates have reason to feel good about the defensive side of their game too, having allowed the fewest goals in the NHL this season at 191. Currently, they’re edging off defending Eastern Conference champion Florida by five.

Dillon credited the squad’s consistently close focus on the defensive zone.

“I think their attention to detail has been so huge for us. It’s infectious,” he said. “When you’re working on it in practice, when you’re talking about it in video, before games, after games, and we see the benefits of it.”

He’s excited about where the team’s defence can bring it come beard-growing time.

“I didn’t know we were that high up in it, but it’s a kudos to us that we can really buckle down here and have that be our identity through playoffs. We could have a lot of fun.”

Winnipeg’s next opponent, the Nashville Predators, have scored an above-average four or more goals in seven of their 17 games since the beginning of March, including a 4-1 win at Canada Life Centre on March 13.

## **Global Winnipeg**

### **[ANALYSIS: Making the case for a better Jets finish in Central Division race](#)**

By Kelly Moore Global News

The Winnipeg Jets are heading into the final week and a half of the NHL’s regular season schedule, still with a shot at improving their current third-place position in the Central Division standings.

And yours truly is prepared to make the case for that to happen.

Now, the odds are still very much stacked in favour of a 1-2 finish by Dallas and Colorado in the Central.

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For Winnipeg to change that narrative, it would require sweeping the Predators, Stars and Avalanche — right in their own buildings.

And there is reasonable doubt for that to occur after the Jets left plenty of areas for self-improvement in last week's home wins over Los Angeles and Calgary, as well as the Saturday victory in St. Paul.

But would your honour, and the have-every-reason-to-be-skeptical jury, please consider the following submissions to support the idea that the Jets gaining home ice advantage in round one remains very much in play.

Nashville has descended back to earth since their 14-0-2 run with four losses in their last six games. Will the Preds perform at the same level Tuesday night, as the confident team that ran roughshod over the Jets nearly a month ago at Canada Life Centre? Perhaps more importantly, will Winnipeg play as slow and disconnected as they did in that 4-2 loss?

Moving along, your honour, could the Jets be any more motivated to win in Dallas after the way they played in that lacklustre 4-1 loss to the Stars in late February? And also, to avoid being swept in four game season series while proving something to themselves ahead of the playoffs?

And finally, your honour, Colorado does have some question marks while they grapple with the anxiety from a 2-4-1 slide. Most notably, there is the inconsistent performance of number one netminder Alexandar Georgiev, and the health of Mikko Rantanen, who went into concussion protocol during Friday's concerning 6-2 loss in Edmonton.

The teams will now go through their deliberations, and at this time next week, we'll approach the bench for a final ruling.

**Sportsnet.ca**

### **[Scout's Analysis: What to make of Winnipeg ahead of the playoffs](#)**

By Jason Bukala

Coming down the regular season stretch, the Winnipeg Jets have played with inconsistency. A 4-5-1 record in their past 10 games, that segment started well enough with a road victory over the New York Rangers, but the next six games ranged from average to poor and all ended in losses. Now Winnipeg has rebounded nicely by winning their past three games, including a hard-fought contest against Los Angeles.

Since March 18, Winnipeg is 22nd in goals per game (2.70) and 22nd in goals-against per game (3.30).

So what do we think about the Jets with the playoffs so close?

It's no secret that to have success in the Stanley Cup Playoffs you need elite goaltending, positive results from special teams, and detail on and off the puck in all three zones.

If the group is struggling to score they need to be patient, defend with purpose, and out work their opponent. Winning key faceoffs and starting with the puck is also an important element of the game that can't be overlooked.

With some of these things in mind, I set out to break down what I'm observing from the Jets recently and what it might mean for their playoff outlook.

### *GOALTENDING*

We know the Jets are set up well between the pipes and can get elite goaltending. That alone could end up being the difference in a series.

Connor Hellebuyck has to be the favourite to win the Vezina Trophy this season after last winning it in 2020. He's 34-19-4, with a 2.41 GAA and .920 save percentage on the season, but it needs to be noted that -- by Hellebuyck's standards -- he did struggle a bit over his past 10 starts (2.94, .909).

However, he appears to be back on track again with two straight solid wins against Calgary (31 saves) and Minnesota (25 saves), allowing four goals combined.

Winnipeg arguably will have the best goaltending tandem in the playoffs, and we can't forget about Laurent Brossoit. With a 13-5-2 record, 2.10 GAA and .925 save percentage this season, the Jets would be confident if they ever had to turn to their backup. Brossoit won six of his eight playoff starts for Vegas last year (including four against the Jets).

### *DEFENCEMEN*

The Jets' defencemen have a wide range of skill and can play the game a variety of ways.

We all know about Josh Morrissey, who averages over 24 minutes a game and is eighth in scoring among all NHL blueliners with 63 points in 77 games. But Dylan DeMelo is perhaps one of the most underrated defencemen in the entire league. He complements Morrissey with his more reserved and safe approach to the game.

DeMelo takes care of his end before thinking offence. He could also be paired with a more defensive partner in a shutdown role, if desired. If he plays alongside someone like Brenden Dillon, it gives the Jets a pairing that can match up defensively against top-six opponents.

Dillon provides the Jets with a physical presence and doesn't give up any easy ice to opponents. He gaps up to kill plays effectively, competes in the trenches, and leads the Jets with 222 hits.

Dylan Samberg, Logan Stanley, Nate Schmidt and Colin Miller are interchangeable defencemen who provide varying levels of skill and will. Any one of these players can provide bottom pair minutes.

Winnipeg's "wild card" defenceman, in my opinion, is Neal Pionk.

Pionk averages 20:50 of ice time per game and he gets it in all situations. He's quick and fast and never backs down from contact, or from a battle to make or extend a play. And he can provide some secondary level of offence.

However, over the past 20 games Pionk's detail has fallen off. His decision making and execution hasn't been as crisp as it was earlier in the season and he's a minus-5 over this span (and plus-5 on the season overall).

There is some risk/reward to Pionk's game and I appreciate his compete level. He definitely empties the tank and gives all he has towards generating positive results. But his spatial awareness and composure will be put to the test in the playoffs. I think if he could simplify his game at times, it would lead to more positive results.

Here are a couple examples of what I'm noticing from Pionk recently:

In this first clip, I recognize what Pionk is trying to accomplish: He wants to extend an offensive zone sequence for the Jets. He initially keeps the play alive in the Oilers' zone, but tracks far too deep and ends up below the goal line. He needed to retreat earlier from this situation. Not every positive play has to end with the puck in the back of your opponent's net. In this sequence Pionk was matched up against Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl and they took advantage.

Pionk needs to pick his spots against top flight playoff opponents.

Conversely, Pionk has the legs to attack off the rush and back opponents off their blue line. He can make plays in open space.

Everyone has to play to their strengths for this defensive group to have success, and most of them have been relatively consistent this season.

Pionk had taken a nice step forward compared to last season until this recent blip. Given the amount of ice time he logs in every situation, he's a player I'm keeping a close eye on heading into the playoffs.

### *FORWARDS*

The Winnipeg Jets' forward group has a workman like approach to the game when they are clicking on all cylinders, with a mix of skill and will.

Players like Mark Scheifele, Kyle Connor, Nik Ehlers and Cole Perfetti provide finesse, while Adam Lowry, Mason Appleton and Nino Niederreiter aren't shy about battling. And having a healthy Gabe Vilardi provides the Jets with yet another scoring option. Vilardi doesn't play with exceptional speed, but he does have fantastic puck touch and vision in the offensive zone that the team missed when he was out.

Outworking your opponent is a choice and I'm not worried about the Jets' middle six forwards (Lowry, Appleton, Alex Lafallo, Neiderreiter and Morgan Barron) being able to do that. I trust their work ethic, willingness to mix things up, and check opponents defensively.

What I am concerned about with this forward group, however, is its success in the faceoff circle, which shouldn't be underestimated in the playoffs. The penalty kill relies on its centre to win them the puck and it's also imperative to win key faceoffs in the offensive zone when you're chasing a game.

Sean Monahan has been Winnipeg's top faceoff-winning centre with a 54 per cent success rate, but after him everyone else is lacking. The Jets as a team are 24th in faceoff winning percentage this season (47.8 per cent).

### *DETAILS, DETAILS, DETAILS*

Like all teams, Winnipeg's scoring forwards log the most ice time up front and need to be committed at both ends of the ice. On balance, the Jets have been more defensively committed

this season compared to years past. The one exception to that might be Kyle Connor, who has a team-worst minus-9. Scheifele, on the other hand, has worked to improve his habits and detail and is a plus-17 this season after being a minus-16 a year ago.

However, there have been some instances in recent games where I have noticed some poor habits creeping into both of their games. Connor needs to keep his feet moving off the puck and track back the entire 200 feet, while Scheifele has to re-focus and be more committed as well.

Here's an example of what I've noticed on occasion.

This clip catches both Scheifele and Connor above the play on defence to start. Scheifele pounces on a puck and attempts to make a play to Connor in the middle of the ice. But when things don't connect the two forwards fail to make the necessary adjustment and check back the entire length of the ice. Instead, they stop moving their feet momentarily, which allows the Ottawa Senators to attack the Jets' zone with numbers.

### *SPECIAL TEAMS*

The Jets' power play has scored only 12.5 per cent of the time in the past 10 games and their penalty-kill has only operated at a success rate of 65.4 per cent.

When on the PK I'd like to see the group jump to pucks quicker and win more battles below the goal line before their opponent has opportunity to gain full possession.

Here's an example of what I mean.

In this clip, the Calgary Flames work the puck below Winnipeg's goal line. Pionk is engaged with Nazem Kadri and fails to chip the puck up the wall. Samberg (No. 54 for the Jets), had two choices on the play: anticipate the puck being chipped up the wall and pounce on it for a zone exit, or engage quicker down low to create a turnover. Finally, Lowry stops skating far too early when he's attempting to front the shot from Calgary's Mackenzie Weegar.

Meantime, almost every NHL team will have its power play run hot and cold throughout a season. When it's out of synch, it's generally due to slow puck movement and poor execution on zone entries.

Here's an example of the Jets setting up on their power play and not moving the puck quick enough. Scheifele has the puck on the flank and needs to make a quicker decision to move the play along. He has Vilardi at the net front and Morrissey up top as options. He simply needs to move his feet and the puck more effectively.

Scheifele ends up directing the puck on net, but it's not a quality shot on goal. The Jets end up losing control of the sequence and Minnesota ices the puck.

The second sequence comes from the same power play. Connor leads the zone entry with speed and notice how slow Monahan and Scheifele are supporting him down low in the zone.

The Jets end up being out numbered and the Wild again ice the puck.

### *CLOSING THOUGHTS*

This version of the Winnipeg Jets has a chance to find success in playoffs. The goaltending is in place, they have the lowest GAA of any team on the season, and they have a nice mix of size and skill.

But Winnipeg needs to get back to basics at times. If the penalty kill and power play are struggling it's never wise to stop moving your feet, or the puck, and limit your physical engagement.

Creating more chaos, and confusion, via relentless compete generally leads to positive results. The Jets are capable of that, but will it all come together in the playoffs? Time will tell.