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Lessons learned

Connor: "We need better from everybody, myself included."

By Jamie Thomas

WINNIPEG – The Winnipeg Jets have had a couple of days to digest that their season ended abruptly, after bowing out in five games to the Colorado Avalanche in the opening round of the Stanley Cup Playoffs.

The feeling obviously is the same as Tuesday night. Disappointed, missed an opportunity. There is a big difference between facing a team that was on its way to winning a Stanley Cup as opposed to one that had won just two years ago and was desperate to get back.

"We just didn't execute well; we didn't play well. I think you have to tip your hat to Colorado for playing a very good series, I am not going to take anything away from that group over there," said Dylan DeMelo.

"I thought they had a really strong series, they played really well, they're intensity was really high — they went to the net harder than us, special teams were better than us, they were on the puck faster, they were just better in all aspects... just a lot of questions for sure on why it happened. There needs to be some time to kind of evaluate everything — everything's on the table, for sure... like we got to improve everything."

Mark Scheifele finished a playoff series for the first time since 2019, he was injured in 2020 and 2023 and received a four-game suspension in the second round in 2021. The 30-year-old led the Jets in scoring with six points (2G, 4A). Scheifele carries a lot of respect for the Avalanche elite players like MacKinnon, Rantanen and Makar.

"We saw firsthand the abilities that team, that those guys, first and foremost have and obviously they're skilled players. But I know them personally and they go home every summer, and they give it their all," said Scheifele.

"They don't leave one stone unturned on improving their games and taking care of their bodies and eating the right things and doing all that and they put a big emphasis on their team to be at their best every night. And I think that's a great lesson to learn."

Scheifele's linemate, Kyle Connor was asked about the possibility that there is a different feeling in the group this year as opposed to when they lost to Vegas in five last year.

"I mean, we've won two playoff games in the last two years. It's a pretty similar feeling," said Connor.

"You could say the way we lost - I think we played one of our best games in Game 5 - we put up a pretty good fight and we played well; we switched up a lot of things and you could see the results right away. You can kind of find a silver lining in that, but at the same time it's a results-based business here. Two wins, we need better from everybody, myself included."

Tuesday night, Jets head coach Rick Bowness was quick to point out that despite going out in the first round in two consecutive springs, there was growth between this team and last year's group. But there is some concern with his team not being at its best when the games matter the most.

"If you compare the two years, Game 5 last year in Vegas was a no-show. This year, we were down a goal, we fought back. Down a goal, we fought back. We kept fighting back. There was growth there," said Bowness.

"There will also be growth knowing that we didn't play our best, knowing that the things that were our strength during the regular season, we got away from when it counted the most. Now, again, give Colorado a lot of credit. We had a tough time dealing with their pace. They played a lot faster and a lot harder. We had a tough time dealing with that. A lot of that is execution. The players will grow from this."

Clearly, next season a big key will be continuing to grow and getting over this hump and finding a way to turn playoff frustrations to playoff celebrations.

"I think if you ask the teams that did, they look at probably their failures or, for us, why haven't we been able to put playoff success together the last number of years... And, going back prior to that, when we do lose a game or two in the playoffs, how are we not able to get out of that streak and keep one loss at one loss instead of turning it to two, three, or four in a row," said Josh Morrissey.

"I think we need to look at all aspects of it, whether it's our preparation throughout the season, the mental side of the game... As I mentioned the other night, I think the execution, how we can all be better as individual players on the ice, that would be how I think that we handle it right now."

'Heartbroken' Hellebuyck describes emotional playoffs **"It was like a flood of emotions I had suppressed all series long."**

By Mitchell Clinton

WINNIPEG – Over the course of Connor Hellebuyck's career – which could include a second Vezina Trophy when the National Hockey League gives out its annual awards at the end of June – there is a long list of times he's backstopped the Winnipeg Jets to victory.

Since the start of 2017, he has the second most regular season victories (236) and has faced the most shots (13,147) all while playing the most minutes (24,790:12) of any goaltender in the league.

So the fact he couldn't figure out a way to have another legendary performance during the series against the Colorado Avalanche, one that could put his team in the win column and potentially change the momentum in the series, is something still eating away at the 30-year-old.

"Specifically, Game 4, the afternoon game I was — you ask (assistant coach) Marty (Johnston) — laser-focussed. From the second I woke up I was ready to steal a game," said Hellebuyck. "This kind of was my mindset going into every single game, but especially in Game 4. And when

I got pulled to give me more rest, it was like a flood of emotions I had suppressed all series long.”

Hellebuyck is known for his confidence. It's a critical asset that makes him the special goaltender he is - one that helped bring the William M. Jennings Trophy to Winnipeg after the Jets allowed a league-low 198 goals against in the regular season.

But just because he's confident, it doesn't mean he's immune to the ups and downs of the series. That rare glimpse into his emotions after the second period in Game 4 shows how much the Commerce, Michigan product wants to push the Jets to the next level.

With a bit of perspective that comes from being only two days removed from being eliminated, Hellebuyck already knows what kind of mental shift he'll have to make going into next season.

“That was the realization that, I can't do this alone. And I'm not saying that I needed to do it alone. That was my mindset, I needed to do this alone,” Hellebuyck said. “That was the realization that I need to be part of this team more than I am, and to take everything onto my shoulders — and that's, I'm talking me personally, that's not me talking against the team — it's just the way my mentality is, I'm trying to put everything on my shoulders. I don't think that's the right way to go about playoffs anymore.”

Head coach Rick Bowness has seen that mentality from Hellebuyck the last two seasons. While the trait of trying to steal games on a nightly basis is an admirable one – and no doubt part of the reason Hellebuyck has become a premiere goaltender in the NHL – Bowness knows it can be a lot to carry.

“We've taken pride all year in our team game, that's what carried us, and he was a big part of our team game. I think it's an example of a player putting a lot of undue pressure on himself that he had to make a difference,” Bowness said. “We've always made sure that we're trying to improve the defensive play in front of him to help him out, which we have done over the past two years. What matters now is we didn't do it when it counted the most and that's when he's putting a lot of pressure on himself.”

Hellebuyck tried to find anything in video to help find a way to halt the Colorado offence. As is his usual routine, he'd go over video after every game to find any other extra saves he could make.

Colorado had 55 high-danger chances in the series at five-on-five, and Hellebuyck stopped a number of those, but he was looking for more.

“I'm not going to go and tell you I don't want to be better. I absolutely need to be better if we're going to win,” Hellebuyck said. “When I'm watching video and looking back on my game and I'm not seeing a goal like, 'oh, I've got to have that.' That's usually the easiest way to fix something, is like, 'OK I can have that, I'm going to stop that next time.' When I'm looking at these things and I'm really nitpicking myself now, 'this is a good goal I've got to find a way to stop that.'”

Of the 97 blocked shots the Jets had in the series, Josh Morrissey was tied for the team lead with 12 (alongside Neal Pionk and Dylan Samberg), and came to the defence of his goaltender after the series.

He believes Hellebuyck's realization of not having to win games all on his own, every single night, is a lesson that every member of the team can take to heart. By doing so, it becomes more about the strength of the collective, which can pay off in the postseason.

"The culmination of all the parts doing their collective jobs is stronger than any one individual trying to do too much or putting too much pressure on themselves. I think teams find a sense of calm in that," said Morrissey.

"We all need to - even in the high-pressure moments when the lights get brighter - continue to be that much more confident in our game, raise our individual levels, but do our individual jobs and that's all you need to do as an individual."

Heartbreak was the word Hellebuyck used to describe his emotions going into the offseason. His new seven-year extension kicks in at the start of next season, and he hopes this painful moment is the hardest lesson the Jets have to learn.

"Your details have to be so fine-tuned by the time you make playoffs that there's no room for error, there's no room to find your game," Hellebuyck said. "You're emotionally almost disconnected, in the sense of, anything bad (that) is going to negatively affect you, you're just, you're playing your game. And I'd like to think that, I'm hoping that, this series kind of opened our eyes to the last piece of the puzzle to go on a long run."

NHL.com

[Hellebuyck, Jets stunned by 'heartbreaking' 1st-round loss to Avalanche 4-time Vezina finalist had 5.23 goals-against average, .870 save percentage in series](#)

By Darrin Bauming

WINNIPEG -- Connor Hellebuyck can be forgiven if he sees flying pucks in his sleep for a while.

The Winnipeg Jets goalie, a four-time finalist for the Vezina Trophy, awarded to the best at the position in the NHL, is not used to the type of offensive onslaught he and the Jets faced at the hands of the Colorado Avalanche, whose 6-3 victory Tuesday ousted Winnipeg in five games in the Western Conference First Round.

Hellebuyck, who was second in the NHL in wins (37), third in goals-against average (2.39, minimum 30 games played) and led in save percentage (.921, minimum 30 games played) during the regular season, had those numbers turned inside out by the Avalanche in the first round and described the result as "heartbreaking."

Hellebuyck was 1-4 with a 5.23 GAA and .870 save percentage during the series, allowing at least four goals in each of the five games against Colorado.

"You're probably not going to believe when I say, I was playing the best hockey of my career," Hellebuyck said Thursday. "But that's truly how I was feeling. Not only was I playing some of my best hockey but I was in that zone where you're not thinking, you're just playing ... To not be able to keep four goals off the board (in a game) is heartbreaking. It really is heartbreaking."

"I mean, you've got to give them some kudos for what they did, but looking back, I don't know if I even saw half of the pucks that went into the net. They did a great job, but for me to not be able to put my foot down even in a single game is really heartbreaking. It's not typically how I do things."

Hellebuyck, the 2020 Vezina winner and 2024 winner of the William M. Jennings Trophy after Winnipeg allowed a League-best 199 goals against (including shootout-deciding goals), said he needed a mental reset after being pulled following the second period of a 5-1 loss in Game 4.

"Specifically, Game 4 ... I was laser-focused," he said. "From the second I woke up I was ready to steal a game. And this kind of was my mindset going into every single game, but especially in Game 4. And when I got pulled (after allowing four goals on 30 shots) to give me more rest, it was like a flood of emotions I had suppressed all series long, and that was the realization that I can't do this alone."

"And I'm not saying that I needed to do it alone. That was my mindset; I needed to do this alone. That was the realization; that I need to be part of this team more than I am and to not take everything onto my shoulders -- and I'm talking me personally, that's not me talking against the team -- it's just the way my mentality is, I'm trying to put everything on my shoulders. I don't think that's the right way to go about [the] playoffs anymore. I think what I need to do is just dive into a team game even more, and that will hopefully bring me peace of mind."

Winnipeg set a modern-era NHL record this season, allowing three goals or fewer in 34 consecutive games. That memory seemed very far away during this series.

"We've taken pride all year in our team game, that's what carried us, and [Hellebuyck] was a big part of that team game," Jets coach Rick Bowness said. "It's an example of a player putting a lot of undue pressure on himself. That he had to make a difference. You get in the playoffs, and we're watching hockey all of the time, there's always a game in a playoff series where the team isn't playing [well] and the goalie steals a game. I think that's what he is referring to."

"The reason, and I explained after we pulled him in Game 4, we wanted to put a little more onus on the players: 'OK, we've got to tighten this thing up here. We're not going to rely on him every ... game to keep us in there.' ... What matters now is we didn't do it when it counts most, and that's when he's putting a lot of pressure on himself."

Asked what it was like watching a Jennings-winning team perform the way it did against Colorado, Winnipeg general manager Kevin Cheveldayoff said his team may not have taken the proper approach to the postseason.

"I guess it shows you that the playoffs are a different animal," Cheveldayoff said. "You have to be prepared to try and play any different way to be successful. The other team has got talented players. Us sitting here saying it was all about us would be a disservice to what kind of great players and great team and well coached and well managed the organization that we matched up against [is]."

"I think back, even when we talked when we made the trades at the [NHL] Trade Deadline: You've done nothing. Until you're the team standing there at the end, you've done nothing. The onus is on everybody within the organization to be that 10 percent better."

Canadian Press

Jets Enter Off-Season in Disbelief, Wanting More After Early Playoff Exit

By Judy Owen, The Canadian Press

WINNIPEG — Disbelief seemed to be the overriding emotion among the Winnipeg Jets after their early exit from the NHL playoffs.

“I am truly kind of puzzled why it didn’t work because I really thought we had a really good group,” defenceman Dylan DeMelo told reporters Thursday as players met with the media before beginning their early summer vacations.

The Jets finished fourth overall in the league and second in the Central Division with a franchise-tying 52 wins (52-24-6). They were riding an eight-game win streak into the playoffs.

After winning the first game of their opening-round series against the Colorado Avalanche, the Jets dropped the next four and were outscored 28-15 during the best-of-seven contest, including four empty-netters.

“We were rolling pretty good going into the playoffs,” winger Kyle Connor said. “You almost blink and it’s over. You can’t believe it.

“I’m sure we’ll go over Xs and Os and what we needed to do differently. Just emotionally, pretty devastated.”

General manager Kevin Cheveldayoff met with players throughout the day and described the way the season ended as “incomplete.”

“We talked about reaching 110 points is something that they should be proud of but, to a man, they’re all talking about (how) they still wanted more,” Cheveldayoff said.

“That’s what they’re all going to have to think about and we’re all going to have to think about. As an organization, we all have to find a way how we can be better.”

Winnipeg was also bounced out of the playoffs in last season’s first round, losing to the Vegas Golden Knights in five games after winning the first match.

Head coach Rick Bowness signed a two-year contract with the team. A third year is a club option.

He was away from the team twice because of a seizure his wife, Judy, experienced last October and then his own minor medical procedure in March.

The 69-year-old said he’ll talk to his family and then Jets co-owner Mark Chipman and Cheveldayoff.

“I know what I’m going to do. I know what I want to do. That will come out. We will let you know,” Bowness said with a smile.

He sounded like he wanted to return.

"I take full responsibility for that playoff performance. I do. Our team did not play well," Bowness said.

"The standards that I had set for the team and myself, we didn't reach that standard. I put the onus on me to make sure that doesn't happen again."

Players committed more this season to the defensive system Bowness and his assistants implemented and saw results in the regular season, but too many breakdowns against Colorado.

Winnipeg had a stretch of 34 straight games when it allowed three or fewer goals. Connor Hellebuyck won the William M. Jennings Trophy as the goaltender (minimum 25 games played) on the team with the fewest goals allowed.

Hellebuyck is also a finalist for the Vezina Trophy that's awarded to the league's top goalie.

The netminder told reporters he felt great during the series, but had an emotional realization after he was replaced by Laurent Brossoit in Game 4 with the Avalanche up 4-1.

"When I got pulled to give me more rest, it was like a flood of emotions I had suppressed all series long and that was the realization that I can't do this alone," Hellebuyck said.

He vowed to change his approach in the future.

"It's just the way my mentality is, I'm trying to put everything on my shoulders," Hellebuyck said. "I don't think that's the right way to go about playoffs anymore."

"I think what I need to do is just dive into a team-game even more and that will hopefully bring me peace of mind."

Jets captain Adam Lowry said the loss to the Avalanche was a lesson on the different intensity level of playoff hockey.

"Not for lack of effort on our part, but just the desire to win every battle and the desire that the guy across from you isn't going to beat you that night," Lowry said.

"That's the learning curve. That's the thing you need to do to take the next step."

CONTRACT QUESTIONS

The Jets head into the off-season with six potential unrestricted free agents: DeMelo and fellow defencemen Brenden Dillon and Colin Miller, forwards Sean Monahan and Tyler Toffoli and Brossoit.

Dillon exited the series after his hand was sliced with a skate blade in Game 3 during a scrum. He said he got 12 stitches, which will come out on Monday.

"All things considered, I think I got really lucky with it," he said.

Global Winnipeg

'I take full responsibility': Winnipeg Jets' Bowness takes blame for playoff failure

By Russ Hobson Global News

Instead of preparing for what would have been an all-important Game 6, Winnipeg Jets players and staff took to the witness stand to get grilled over the disappearance of the regular season Jets who went missing after entering the playoffs as the league's hottest team.

"Listen, I take full responsibility for that playoff performance," said Jets head coach Rick Bowness. "I do. Our team did not play well."

Bowness has shouldered the blame for their playoff failure that saw them go out in just five games for the second straight year. And it was clear by the emotion in their voices that this one hurts just a little bit more.

"As weird as it sounds there was so many guys that were unprepared to talk today," said general manager Kevin Cheveldayoff. "Because they're like, we're not supposed to be talking today, we're supposed to be practicing today."

"This one for me stings the most out of my four years here in our playoff losses," defenceman Dylan DeMelo said. "Just still trying to comprehend why, why it all happened."

"I mean, if guys aren't burning fire because of that or not thinking that we all need to get better, then something's wrong."

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With six straight losses in playoff elimination games going back to 2018, it's easy to say the Jets aren't built for the playoffs, but Bowness said this year is different than the last.

"We had to change the culture," he said. "This organization, this team, had a bad reputation. We've improved that. We've fixed that."

"We've made huge strides. Is there more to go? Yes there is."

"I'd like to think this is hopefully the last learning curve we need to go through," said Jets goalie Connor Hellebuyck. "I'm hoping that this series kind of opened our eyes to the last piece of the puzzle to go on a long run."

The Jets allowed at least five goals in every game, but it's awfully difficult to pin their elimination all on the goalie.

"You're probably not going to believe when I say I was playing the best hockey of my career. But truly that's how I was feeling," said Hellebuyck. "To not be able to keep four goals off the board, it's heartbreaking. It really is heartbreaking."

"I don't know if I even saw half the pucks go in the net."

"For me not to be able to put my foot down in a single game is really heartbreaking."

Bowness is now 69 years old. He didn't sound like someone who's ready to retire, but wouldn't reveal his future plans.

“I know what I’m going to do,” Bowness said. “I know what I want to do, but that will come out.”

Sportsnet.ca

Jets face critical off-season questions after 'emotional' playoff exit

By Sportsnet Staff

It would be reasonable to look at the similarities between the way this year and last season ended for the Winnipeg Jets and assume lots of overlap.

In 2023, the Jets bowed out in five first-round games to a Vegas Golden Knights club that, soon thereafter, proved itself Stanley Cup-worthy. This time out, it was a five-game loss to a Colorado Avalanche squad that won a title just two years ago and could very conceivably win another six weeks from now.

Despite the apparent parallels, according to Rick Bowness, there’s a different feeling today than there was 12 months ago, when the Jets coach basically put his team on blast and questioned their character following the loss to Vegas.

“If you compare the two years, Game 5 in Vegas was a no-show,” Bowness said on Thursday afternoon as the team held its year-end media availability. “This year, we were down a goal, we fought back; down a goal, we fought back. We kept fighting back, so there’s growth there.”

Still, both Bowness and GM Kevin Cheveldayoff expressed no shortage of disappointment over the loss to Colorado after the Jets — who racked up 110 regular season points and made bold, all-in moves ahead of the trade deadline — lost four consecutive matches following a Game 1 victory and allowed 5.6 goals-per-game against in the series.

“It hurts,” Cheveldayoff said. “I can’t tell you it didn’t get emotional after the series. I’m not B.S.-ing you; this group cared, this group gave it every single day. But at the end of the day you’ve got to find more.”

And now the off-season questions begin in earnest.

First and foremost, the club has an option to pick up the final year remaining on Bowness’ three-year contract. Cheveldayoff said he hasn’t yet had a chance to speak with any of the coaches following Tuesday’s final defeat at the hands of the Avs, but endorsed their efforts this year.

“I think they did a great job,” he said, while placing no firm timetable on the decision to bring Bowness back.

For his part, the oldest coach in the league — Bowness turned 69 in January — made it pretty clear he’s more than game to try and finish the task at hand. And that’s even after a very difficult season, personally, as Bowness had to step away from the club temporarily after his wife, Judy, suffered a seizure in the fall.

“I know what I’m going to do, I know what I want to do,” he said. “But that will come out. We’ll let you know.”

Of course, the questions are in no way limited to the bench. The Jets have two key unrestricted free agents on defence in Dylan DeMelo and Brenden Dillon. Up front, the two big acquisitions Winnipeg made before the deadline — winger Tyler Toffoli and centre Sean Monahan — are also eligible to hit the open market.

Cheveldayoff said the club would love to retain both DeMelo and Dillon and while he didn't close any doors with regard to the forwards, he did acknowledge certain realities that made it easier to incorporate them under the salary cap this season relative to how things could look come next year — especially with twin, \$60-million extensions kicking in for centre Mark Scheifele and goalie Connor Hellebuyck.

“We were able to get Toffoli with 50 per cent retention (on his 2023-24 cap hit) and obviously [Monahan's] contract, he was coming off a unique situation and circumstances [a string of very limiting injuries] where it was an undervalued contract for what he brings to the table,” Cheveldayoff said.

Looking even further out, Nikolaj Ehlers is eligible for a contract extension this coming summer ahead of what will be the final season on his current seven-year pact. Ehlers — who could become a UFA in 2025 — said he has yet to put any real thought into a new deal and that his agent has yet to have meaningful conversations with the Jets.

The bottom line, as Cheveldayoff noted, is that change is inevitable every off-season. And while the Jets will certainly head into the break feeling at least a bit better than they did last year when the off-season saw them buyout former captain Blake Wheeler and trade away disgruntled forward Pierre-Luc Dubois, this team still has miles to go before being satisfied.

“You've done nothing,” Cheveldayoff said, describing the feeling of falling short in any capacity. “Until you're the team standing there at the end, you've done nothing.”

The Athletic

[The Winnipeg Jets' first 3 steps to a successful offseason after playoff disappointment](#)

By Murat Ates

WINNIPEG — Josh Morrissey said he felt terrible. From his emotional state, moments after Game 5 had ended, he said the Winnipeg Jets hadn't been good enough. That the Jets needed to do more than take responsibility for what happened in the first round against Colorado. They need to do something about it. Stop themselves from falling short again.

“It feels like a missed opportunity,” Morrissey said, seething from the Game 5 loss. “The only way that there is any good from this is that we learn from it and we actually look at how we can improve as individuals and as a group.”

It might not feel like it now — all playoff losses taste bitter — but this is a striking push forward in the Jets' narrative about themselves. Last year at this time, the talk was of pushback, a lack thereof, and whether or not Rick Bowness should have called out his players. The Jets took an enormous step this season, showing up — in some ways, for the first time — with their season on the line. The moment called for more and they delivered.

And Morrissey was right to say it wasn't enough.

"They brought that Stanley Cup-winning class to this series, and we didn't return it for three or four of those games," he said. "We have levels that we need to find this offseason. I hope it stings for all of us into the summer and we use it as motivation."

If you ask me it's about time Winnipeg's leadership group talked like this. It's one thing to blame outside factors, injuries, bad luck or bounces. Another to credit the opposition, giving it the respect it earned through its dominant win.

It's another for leaders to say, with emphasis and authority, that they weren't good enough. That the team wasn't good enough.

That, despite everything the Jets accomplished during a glittering regular season, the level they're at and the one they need to get to are worlds away. As an organization, the Jets have shied away from "I'm the problem. It's me."

As someone who believes he can decipher between platitudes and earnest calls to action, Morrissey's words were a refreshing approach to a devastating moment.

So which lessons do the Jets take away from their devastation? Which improvements stand between Winnipeg, regular season darlings, and the version which can do to other teams what Colorado did to it?

All of this starts with Winnipeg's critical offseason. This one isn't nearly as clear-cut as "Solve the PL Dubois situation, move on from Blake Wheeler, sign Connor Hellebuyck and Mark Scheifele if you can." The Jets handled that problem well.

This summer's priorities are more difficult to pin down. A good team — a really good team, at times — just embarrassed itself in Round 1. It hasn't won anything substantial with its core group.

What went wrong and what needs to change for Jets after another first-round exit

Winnipeg's top offseason priority in a long list of them is to determine which elements of its success it can take forward.

Which elements can become good enough to compete for the Stanley Cup, knowing that none of them were good enough during these playoffs, and which should be thrown away?

We'll dig deeper into each of these in the coming weeks but, for now: Here are the Jets' first three steps for a successful offseason.

1. The inevitable assessment

This is the top item, it's Kevin Cheveldayoff's specialty, and it's usually one of the most boring things to talk about.

Consider the stakes this time, though. Winnipeg has just been authoritatively schooled in the business of playoff hockey. Colorado's secondary scorers scored more, played faster, won more battles and otherwise pushed the Jets out of the series.

It's easy for fans and media, myself included, to look at every player who made a mistake in a lost-looking five-game cause and declare them unfit for playoff success, but Cheveldayoff has to be wiser than that. He can't turn Nikolaj Ehlers into Mikko Rantanen, Kyle Connor into Valeri Nichushkin, or Scheifele into Nathan MacKinnon. He can only push his roster (and coaching staff) forward from the place it stands now, determining which players are organizational pillars.

Losing organizations often get this moment wrong, moving on from good players for not being great. Winning ones help them get there — and, if they can't, then they find the most resource-savvy way to move on. Winnipeg needs to assess which members of its team can deliver plus-value, in the playoffs, at the pace and intensity we just saw, relative to their position on the club. Morrissey? Check. Hellebuyck? Check.

And that leads us to No. 2.

2. Declare an identity and vision

There is simplicity in saying Winnipeg needs to get bigger to compete with teams like the Avalanche. The Jets rely on smaller skill at the top of its lineup, with top players like Scheifele, Connor, Ehlers and Morrissey. But the Jets didn't give up a lot of size to Colorado. They gave up quality and speed.

Colorado's top point producers, in order — all of whom outproduced Scheifele, who led the Jets — were Cale Makar, Rantanen, MacKinnon, Artturi Lehkonen and Nichushkin. Three of those players are listed at 6-foot or shorter and 200 pounds or less but they dominated Winnipeg all the same. "Getting bigger" is an oversimplified catch-all and so is the frequently declared "get more veterans." Winnipeg's roster demographics averaged one year older and five pounds heavier than the Avalanche did.

Colorado won by being better than Winnipeg and by playing such a committed and aggressive forecheck that the Jets couldn't get out of their own zone. It's not the only way to win. Teams like Vegas and Dallas backpressure so effectively and collapse to the middle of their ice so patiently — no matter what chaos ensues — that they become deadly on the counterattack.

Colorado's speed made the Avalanche feel inevitable in Round 1. Other teams do it with heaviness, or elite top-end talent, or defence corps that can attack and defend with the elites. The feeling is the same: St. Louis found it in 2019, Vegas last year and Colorado now. The commitment to the game plan was automatic.

Winnipeg needs to know its playoff-winning identity — that strength it can count on with Avalanche-like consistency — and make managerial and coaching decisions that serve that identity. It seems possible but unlikely that the Jets can double down on the same roster and game plan and simply execute so much better that they meet the standard Colorado showed them in Round 1.

So what are their strengths? What kind of game do they believe they can win against anybody on their day?

It's tough to see anyone in the Jets' top six winning as many puck battles as Nichushkin or Lehkonen did. Winnipeg appears to need more offence from its defensively savvy players and more defence from its offensively gifted players throughout the top nine. It was also clear that the second line gave up too much speed to the Avalanche to be effective. "Rely on Hellebuyck

to clean everything up despite giving up more scoring chances per minute than the league's worst regular season teams" has not proven effective, either.

This team may need a new identity, whether it comes from players' personal improvements, fresh coaching or a stylistic change in personnel. Cheveldayoff needs to understand which is which and to what extent.

3. Decide Bowness' future

Rick Bowness and his wife Judy were planning to retire when Winnipeg called in the summer of 2022. Bowness, then 67, missed that first call while golfing in Scottsdale, Ariz. When he and the Jets got to talking, it took him a moment to realize Winnipeg was exploring the idea of hiring him — he thought he was offering his viewpoints as something of a consultant.

Since then, Bowness has delivered much of what was asked of him. Winnipeg's defensive structure improved in his first season and again in his second one. Its leadership group was changed over, with Bowness removing Wheeler's captaincy in 2022 and then naming Adam Lowry captain heading into this season. Multiple Jets sources have shared a sense of feeling freer, like their contributions to team discussions have been more valued since Bowness took over than in the era that preceded him. Cheveldayoff helped with transformative roster moves; Bowness led a 39-win team to 46 and then 52 wins.

He's also left a lot on the table. A midseason fixation on playing Connor, Scheifele and Gabriel Vilardi together defied the number of goals they gave up, their poor transition defence and atrocious underlying numbers. Cole Perfetti scored 19 points in his first 23 games but was demoted in high-leverage moments. These types of mistakes were most apparent in Game 4, with the Axel Jonsson-Fjallby brought into the lineup and then onto the second line — but not onto the penalty kill as Bowness intended — with Winnipeg desperate for offence. Cheveldayoff acquired a veteran right-handed defenceman whom Winnipeg opted not to use until Game 5, opting for an all-lefty third pair of Logan Stanley and Dylan Samberg instead. The results were predictable, with zone exits being tough to come by.

Bowness' tenure has elevated the Jets. The culture has improved. The locker room is a fun, engaging place to be, and the team's defensive structure helped Hellebuyck to the Jennings Trophy. If Cheveldayoff exercises the club option on Bowness' deal heading into next season, he might need to be more hands-on with roster decisions — a boundary he has thoroughly respected during his time as GM.

Winnipeg's future depends on a pipeline of young talent, whether it's Perfetti believing he's valued, Rutger McGroarty seeing an NHL path in front of him or Brad Lambert and Nikita Chibrikov consolidating their end-of-season NHL debuts by winning jobs at camp. Good player development is a conduit to cap efficiency and gives the Jets impact players under team control, with ties to the city. Cheveldayoff's hands are sometimes tied via no-trade clauses or preconceived notions of Winnipeg. He can't afford for the Jets' player development path to become a drag on player retention.

What comes next?

Bowness is a class act and one of the most respected people working in the NHL. Any decisions the Jets make will be in consultation with the veteran coach. Winnipeg will need to decide if it's content with Bowness' pros outweighing his cons or if Bowness' legacy will be that he was the coach who set things up for future success. He's accomplished a lot, even while missing time to attend to his and his wife's health at different times during his tenure.

Winnipeg Jets roster tiers and offseason decisions: Who stays? Who goes?

By Murat Ates

WINNIPEG — Rick Bowness' future as Winnipeg Jets head coach is up in the air. The Jets have a club option for the third year of the contract Bowness signed in 2022, with meetings planned between ownership, management and Bowness in the coming days.

Bowness spoke to his future on Thursday.

"Since my last season in Tampa, every year I sit down and I talk to (his wife) Judy, talk to the kids," he said. "I will talk to (Mark Chipman) and (Kevin Cheveldayoff) and I know what I'm going to do. I know what I want to do. That will come out. We will let you know."

For the moment, it's difficult to know if Bowness intends to retire — on his terms, or at least in collaboration with the team — or to make his case to come back for one last dance as head coach. My guess is the former, with a formal search and Scott Arniel first in line. Speculation will continue until we know for sure.

Cheveldayoff declined to put a timeline on the critical decision.

"It's an emotional time for everybody here. We'll have those conversations and we'll update from there," he said.

One other possibility is that the Jets are waiting to see which head coaches emerge as free agents as other teams falter in the first round.

Bowness is far from the only member of the Jets whose future is up in the air. Winnipeg has six unrestricted free agents, including goaltender Laurent Brossoit and all three trade deadline acquisitions — Sean Monahan, Tyler Toffoli and Colin Miller — along with core defencemen Dylan DeMelo and Brenden Dillon. Meanwhile, an NHL source tells *The Athletic* that Nikolaj Ehlers is going to be shopped.

"There are going to be changes," Cheveldayoff said. "Changes are inevitable every offseason, whether you want them to happen or you don't want to happen."

So who stays? Who goes? And whose status as a member of the Jets is still in question?

The 'untouchable' core

Mark Scheifele and Connor Hellebuyck are core pieces whose seven-year, \$8.5 million AAV contract extensions kick in next season. They are pillars around which the Jets will seek to build.

Kyle Connor has two seasons left on his \$7.1 million AAV contract. He's entrenched on the top line, the top power-play unit and Winnipeg's outdoorsman/ice-fishing contingent. It was inspiring to see Connor dial up the intensity of his two-way game throughout the first-round loss, too; one wonders what the 34-goal scorer who didn't outscore his opposition during the season is capable of if that's his new normal.

Josh Morrissey's emergence as an elite all-around defenceman was one thing. Now, the conviction with which he's pushing for individual and organizational improvement has become a story of the offseason. If Winnipeg's core ever gets back over the first-round hump, one expects we'll reflect on Morrissey's commentary.

Adam Lowry was playing with a hand injury, despite telling reporters he was "fine" after Game 5. The guy is a warrior and, when assessing players who might deliver on future Jets playoff teams, one believes in Lowry's ability to win his minutes.

Gabriel Vilardi was hurt a couple of times this season and unable to turn the tide for Winnipeg in the playoffs. His status is assured, while his contributions to the power play — before and after Monahan's arrival — made it a treat to watch. Everyone involved is hoping for a healthy season and another step forward from the 24-year-old scorer.

Very, very likely to stay

Nino Niederreiter adores Winnipeg and was eager to stay. Vladislav Namestnikov signed a two-year deal on Day 1 of free agency last summer. They're both great fits who make their lines harder to play against and they'll both be back. Mason Appleton is a staple alongside Lowry on the Jets' third line. Mark it down now if Bowness returns and consider it likely even if he doesn't.

I'm not sure what Namestnikov or Appleton's 2025 UFA status will bring but suspect it's too soon for those conversations to have begun.

Alex Iafallo is also a 2025 UFA and has been effective in spurts. His \$4 million cap hit is inefficient but not such an albatross that Winnipeg needs to do anything about it now. Morgan Barron's lower-body injury kept him out of the playoffs; he was particularly frustrated when he tried to skate and found that he was far away from ready. He'll be back next season, too.

Dylan Samberg was one of many defencemen who struggled to move the puck against Colorado but his season-long story is that of an emerging top-four defenceman. His \$1.4 million contract offers cap efficiency that helps elsewhere and he's a restricted free agent in 2025. He'll be back, either offering third-pairing excellence or continuing to grow into a second-pair role.

Neal Pionk struggled this season, makes \$5.9 million and is scheduled to become a free agent in 2025. In most cases, this would put a target on him but he's a big part of the team's culture and played big minutes even on his most difficult days. I believe the plan is to play the situation out and re-evaluate at a different price point if they can.

Young lions playing for pride

Cole Perfetti is headed for a bridge deal, likely resolved late in the summer once the UFAs are taken care of. A team-friendly deal could match the \$3.4 million that Vilardi got coming off a 41-point season last summer.

It should also be noted that he missed a \$212,000 performance bonus by a single goal. Other teams noticed the healthy scratches; I wouldn't be surprised if Cheveldayoff receives a bit of tire kicking on a player that he likely values more than Bowness does.

I've also wondered about offer sheets; an offer sheet between \$2,145,062 and \$4,290,125 would cost a rival team a second-round pick. It would also be an automatic match by Winnipeg. An offer sheet between \$4,290,126 and \$6,435,186 would require a first- and third-round pick. To be clear, both paths strike me as unlikely but are included for conversation's sake.

Either way, Winnipeg would do well to show Perfetti he's meant to be a big part of the team's future. He has the ninth most points from his draft class and has played fewer games than everyone in front of him — and fewer minutes in those games, too. The Jets need a pipeline they can believe in — and one that rewards them when the time comes by committing to the long haul.

Logan Stanley and David Gustafsson are restricted free agents with arbitration rights. Winnipeg's depth meant that neither played the full 82-game complement, although they each played more playoff games than Perfetti did. One imagines both players are back on modest contracts, fighting for playing time once again.

Rasmus Kupari dressed in 28 games and skated for miles but registered a single assist.

UFA priorities

DeMelo's return seems like something approaching a lock. He's entrenched in the community, has set down roots — he and his wife Jessica are expecting their second child this August — and was a lot of key Jets players' votes for "most underrated" during our player polls this season.

The DeMelo/Jets appreciation is mutual.

"I really enjoy the city and being here and the fans," DeMelo said. "It feels like home for sure. I hope it works out. Obviously nothing is guaranteed, but I can definitely see myself staying here."

The only questions I have about the 31-year-old DeMelo are dollars and term; \$3.5 million for three years comes to mind, but those negotiations haven't begun yet.

Dillon expressed a sense of worry that he hadn't been signed earlier in the year, adding that commiserating with DeMelo helped him get through the uncertainty. Cheveldayoff conveyed that he'd spoken to both players' agents, saying that extension talks were more about "when" than "if" they would happen. His hope is that both players return.

Dillon sounded as though he wished he were already signed.

"Am I frustrated that I'm not signed as I sit here? Absolutely. I feel like I'm a big part of this team. I feel like coming in, I've said it numerous times, I love the group of guys we have. The D group we have, we have a lot of fun together, we want to get better together," he said. "I want to win. I want to be a big part of this team, and obviously you want to feel wanted and like you're a big part of that. Basically, until July 1 I'm a Winnipeg Jet. Hopefully we can make it work."

Recall that Dillon switched agents this season, choosing Allain Roy of RSG Hockey Inc. Roy told The Athletic this season that Dillon is open to re-signing in Winnipeg but was clear that he will be prepared to approach free agency if he doesn't find a long-term fit. Health-wise, Dillon will be at 100 percent well before training camp after suffering a skate blade cut on his hand and would have been ready to go for Game 7 if the Jets had made it that far.

Monahan is a signing target for the Jets and expressed some amount of interest in the same.

"I think the biggest thing for me is I want to give myself a chance to win," he said. "This is a spot that definitely wants to win and has the makings of doing that."

Cheveldayoff characterized Monahan's communication as positive, saying that there's a desire to make things work.

Monahan is an interesting case; his single assist in five games means fan perception of him might be at a low. He did manage a trick that not every Jets forward pulled off — good, low puck support for defencemen and the patience to create zone exits against Colorado. He didn't bury any of his chances, getting particularly robbed by Alexandar Georgiev on a Game 5 power play that will haunt him for some time.

I think the Jets believe they need a veteran, faceoff-winning centre like Monahan on this roster and value his chemistry with Vilardi on the power play.

Sail on, so long, farewell

Toffoli was polite and respectful while being clear that free agency is something he looks at as an opportunity to explore. It's unlikely the Jets have the cap space, it's unlikely Toffoli is interested in a return, and I think everyone involved is OK with that. Toffoli's two goals in five playoff games were big until they weren't.

If you're Miller, I'm not sure what's happened to convince you the Jets believe in you. The coaching staff limited Miller to five regular season games and one more in the playoffs. His name got overlooked in the UFA discussion during Cheveldayoff's availability and Cheveldayoff didn't bring him up on his own.

Collin Delia played 32 AHL games and didn't excel; Thomas Milic put up substantially better numbers in 33 games. The Jets need someone to play goal behind Hellebuyck but that person will need to be capable of more than Delia showed this season. Meanwhile, Oskari Salminen is a restricted free agent and Domenic DiVincentiis will seek to match Milic's quality in his pro debut.

For sale, but at what price?

I fully expect Ehlers to be shopped — and likely moved — between now and the draft.

Winnipeg has gotten a ton of value out of Ehlers' six seasons at \$6 million from 2018-19 to now. He's third in goals and fourth in points over the duration of his contract, leading all forwards in plus-minus in that six-year span. His underlying numbers are spectacular, suggesting Winnipeg has gotten a ton of benefit from the good things he does at five-on-five, even when accounting for the chaos, but his playoff production has not matched his regular season efficacy. I wonder if the organization is burned by that.

Winnipeg has floated Ehlers' name in trade talks before. Now, with one year left on his deal and at least some concern about the team's ability to retain him, I think Ehlers is Winnipeg's best trade chip for repairing its defence and/or picking up a first-round pick in the draft.

"I have one year left," Ehlers said on Thursday. "There has been no talk with Chevy so far and I still definitely have to talk to him with my agent as well, so it's not an answer I can give you right now. I love these guys. They know that. (But) I don't have an answer for anyone right now."

Unknown, for different reasons

Brossoit returned to Winnipeg looking to prove he could perform like a starting goaltender. Good health led to great form, with a .927 save percentage gathered over 23 games — two shy of the

number officially required for his name to appear on the Jennings Trophy. Hellebuyck played in 60 games despite Brossoit's excellence as a No. 2 and now Brossoit's future is his to choose.

Nate Schmidt thinks the game quickly despite his loss of footspeed and didn't wilt as much as other defencemen during the playoffs. His regular season body of work was quality for a veteran third pair and he's under contract for one more season. File him under "It depends on what happens elsewhere on the roster."

I think Winnipeg can afford to pay Schmidt's \$5.95 million contract if he keeps delivering third-pairing results, as inefficient as that number may be, and he's a well-loved teammate.

Lambert, Chibrikov and Salomonsson: Is there room?

Elias Salomonsson played an enormous role on Skellefteå AIK's championship-winning SHL team. Brad Lambert, 20, and Nikita Chibrikov, 21, had exactly the sort of AHL season that would constitute success for players their age.

The Jets' coaching decision, along with any signings and trades, will combine with each player's performance in camp to dictate the future of Winnipeg's prospects. Ville Heinola will lose his waivers exemption, meaning he needs to win a job outright — again — or risk departing the same way that Johnathan Kovacevic and Declan Chisholm did before him.

A note on the salary cap

Blake Wheeler's buyout will count \$2.75 million against the cap in 2024-25 before coming off the books. Scheifele and Hellebuyck's raises will kick in, adding almost \$5 million to the Jets' cap. Perfetti's raise could add over \$2 million, too.

The Jets project to have approximately \$14 million with which to incorporate contracts to Perfetti, Stanley, a backup goaltender and two more defencemen including any of their UFAs. Barring trades or other unforeseen transactions, I'm imagining that at least two of Monahan, DeMelo and Dillon are possible to retain without further roster surgery.

Winnipeg Sports Talk recently asked about buyout costs for Schmidt and Pionk. A Schmidt buyout would save the Jets \$3.2 million in 2024-25 and cost \$1.6 million in 2025-26. A Pionk buyout would save the Jets \$4.0 million in 2024-25 and cost \$2 million in 2025-26. Speaking in a strictly general sense, Cheveldayoff didn't take the concept of buyouts off the table on Thursday.

Winnipeg Free Press

Bowness's future with Jets remains uncertain

By: Ken Wiebe and Mike McIntyre

It wasn't necessarily what Rick Bowness said, but how the emotion poured out as he discussed the latest round of questions about his future with the Winnipeg Jets.

That the veteran head coach has essentially stepped into the purgatory stage, with his two-year pact reaching its conclusion after an excellent regular season gave way to another first-round exit, Bowness is now left to wait and see if the team option for a third season will be picked up.

As he took questions from reporters Thursday while taking a break from exit meetings, Bowness didn't directly say he wanted to be back, although it was certainly implied.

"Every year I sit down and I talk to (wife) Judy, talk to the kids. I will talk to (Mark Chipman) and (Kevin Cheveldayoff) and I know what I'm going to do. I know what I want to do," said Bowness. "That will come out. We will let you know."

Cheveldayoff didn't offer much clarity when he spoke a couple hours later.

"I'm not putting any timetable on anything. It's an emotional time for everybody here. An emotional time for them. We'll have those conversations and we'll update from there," he said.

Bowness conceded there was some adversity to deal with on a personal level this season, from leaving the team for a month to tend to his wife as she recovered from a seizure, before missing a handful of games later in the season to have a medical procedure done.

It's clear the fire still burns for the 69-year-old, whose Jets have gone 98-57-9 in the regular-season, but just 2-8 in the playoffs.

"Love of the game, man. This game has given us a tremendous lifestyle that we ever could have dreamed of as kids. Still love it. Still have the passion for it," said Bowness, his voice cracking.

"Listen, as I tell the players: every day in this league is a blessing. It is. We're treated so well. We're in the best league in the world. Never ever, ever take a day for granted in this league. And I never have and I never will. I just love this game. It's been my life."

Bowness made it clear there were some things he needed to do better after the Jets took the opener against the Colorado Avalanche, then lost four straight games.

"I take full responsibility for that playoff performance. I do. Our team did not play well," he said in response to a question about whether this group was built to win in the post-season.

"The standards that I had set for the team and myself, we didn't reach that standard. I put the onus on me to make sure that doesn't happen again. I have to get more out of the players. It's my responsibility to get those guys to the next level."

Using this as a teaching tool was a common theme from the dozen players who spoke, including several core pieces who have experienced plenty of playoff disappointment over their careers.

"I would say winning in this league is extremely difficult. You can have a great regular season, but it's about finding your game, finding ways to win at the most critical time of year," said captain Adam Lowry.

"We had a great regular season. We showed over 82 games we can be a really good team, but at the end of the day and we didn't perform in the playoffs, that really doesn't mean a whole lot."

It's almost as if all the positives lessons learned during the marathon that is the regular season were thrown out the window the second the hockey stage got bigger.

"It's still pretty raw. It almost feels like a missed opportunity the way we were playing, we were rolling pretty good going into the playoffs. You almost blink and it's over," said forward Kyle Connor.

"You can't believe it. I'm sure we'll go over Xs and Os and what we needed to do differently. Just emotionally, pretty devastated for sure."

Defenceman Dylan DeMelo, a pending unrestricted free agent who would love to return to Winnipeg, challenged everyone to find ways to improve.

"First off, look in the mirror at my own game at what I could have done better and obviously as a group what we could have done better, so trying to process everything. This one for me stings the most out of my four years here of our playoff losses... still just trying to comprehend why — why it all happened," said DeMelo.

"If guys aren't burning fire because of that or not thinking that we all need to get better, then something is wrong."

In addition to the future of Bowness, there are plenty of other questions regarding Jets players, including UFAs Brossoit, Sean Monahan, Tyler Toffoli and Brenden Dillon.

"Am I frustrated that I'm not signed as I sit here? Absolutely," said Dillon, who missed the last two games after suffering a skate cut to his hand that required 12 stitches

"I feel like I'm a big part of this team. As things progress, at this point I haven't even had my meeting yet with Chevy. We'll obviously see how that conversation goes. At this point in my career, I've been very fortunate and lucky to play on some great teams and see some guys that it's not always about going for the big money. I haven't won a Stanley Cup yet. I think that's going to be a big part of it. I want to win. I want to be a big part of this team, and obviously you want to feel wanted and like you're a big part of that. Basically, until July 1 I'm a Winnipeg Jet. Hopefully we can make it work."

Then there's the curious case of Nikolaj Ehlers, who has one year left on his contract and was asked directly if he'd like to remain in Winnipeg long-term.

"There has been no talk with Chevy so far and I still definitely have to talk to him with my agent as well, so it's not an answer I can give you right now," he said. "I love these guys. They know that. I don't have an answer for anyone right now."

Ehlers did reveal a neck issue that caused him to miss all of training camp continues to bother him, and that he won't play in the upcoming World Championship later this month because he will be consulting with doctors. Surgery hasn't been ruled out. Several other Jets, including Lowry, were also playing through various ailments.

What would Bowness have done differently to better prepare his players?

"We're coming off an eight-game winning streak (to end the regular season), so I kept telling them it's the playoffs, it's going to go up. Now they see what I'm talking about," said Bowness.

"They were a little bit awestruck there in that first game. We kept telling them that Colorado, and they knew it, is a much better team than we saw in the regular season. They just saw a team

that won the Stanley Cup a couple of years ago. That's a growth for (our players). That's what we have to deal with."

As for personnel decisions or line deployment in this series, Bowness realizes he didn't hit all the right notes.

"I'm going to get criticized no matter what. If you lose, you're going to get criticized," said Bowness. "He's staying with the same lines. He's not making... and if that doesn't work and you make line changes and that doesn't go well then you shouldn't have made them. I understand that. But I'm not afraid to make decisions, and I will live with the decisions."

Bowness was asked about how he feels about where this team is now compared to when he was hired as head coach in the summer of 2022.

"So they brought me in to do what? Change the culture," said Bowness. "This organization, this team, had a bad reputation. We've improved that. We fixed that. We had to give the team a better identity that gave them a chance to win. We did that. We had to get this team back in the playoffs, because it missed the playoffs. We did that."

"We're still very disappointed we came up short. So we've made huge strides. Is there more to go? Yes there is. But those are the reasons they brought me in. We've accomplished that. But now we have to take it to the next level."

Will he be around to oversee that? To borrow one of Bowness' favourite phrases when talking about lineup decisions, "We'll see."

Jets' playoff failure 'heartbreaking': Hellebuyck

By: Mike McIntyre

Thirty-six hours after a shockingly one-sided NHL playoff series came to an end, Winnipeg Jets goalie Connor Hellebuyck offered a jaw-dropper of his own Thursday morning.

"You're probably not going to believe when I say, I was playing the best hockey of my career," the club's most important player said at the start of his year-end media availability two days after the Jets fell 6-3 to the Colorado Avalanche to bow out of the playoffs in five games.

Yes, that would be the same Hellebuyck who got torched for 24 goals over 14 periods of hockey against the Avs (backup Laurent Brossoit mopped up in the third period of Game 4). The Jets' starter finished with an embarrassing 5.01 goals-against-average, .870 save percentage and a 1-4 record.

Is he serious?

"That's truly how I was feeling. Not only was I playing some of my best hockey, but I was in that zone where you're not thinking, you're just playing," Hellebuyck continued.

"It really is heartbreaking. I mean, you've got to give them some kudos for what they did, but looking back, I don't know if I even saw half of the pucks that went into the net. They did a great job, but for me to not be able to put my foot down even in a single game is really heartbreaking. It's not typically how I do things."

No, it's not, with Hellebuyck the backbone of a team that at one point this year went an incredible 34 straight games giving up three goals or less — the second-longest streak in modern NHL history. In that sense, you can put him at the top of the list of those around here wondering the heck just happened.

How did the NHL's stingiest squad in the regular season (199 goals against to win the Jennings Trophy), led by the guy who is likely a lock to win his second Vezina Trophy, just become the first team in NHL history to give up at least five goals in five consecutive games to begin playoff series? How did the Jets, with a 52-24-6 record (including 3-0-0 against Colorado), suddenly have no answers for an opponent that finished behind them in the standings?

"In my head, I can think of a couple of their goals that were exactly the same game-in and game-out. So, I guess we just didn't make the right adjustment and didn't jump on those fixes that we needed to make," said Hellebuyck, whose seven-year, US\$59.5 million contract extension kicks in next season.

Adam Lowry, who sat beside Hellebuyck at the podium, believes his group let the franchise netminder down.

"We didn't do a good enough job protecting the middle, slowing down their rush, kind of slowing them down and getting them away from what makes them successful," said the Jets captain.

"The chances we gave up, we gave up so many grade-As, the power play outnumbered opportunities at the net, things like that. Hearing Helle say what he did, there's not really much he can do on tips. You've got another guy that can swallow up a rebound, puck screen redirection six feet away, right? So I think frustration (that) we couldn't have done more in front of him to slow down those things."

Hellebuyck said getting the hook after two periods in Game 4 — something that has never happened in his playoff career — was humbling. It also led to a light going on, one he believes will serve him well.

"From the second I woke up I was ready to steal a game. And this kind of was my mindset going into every single game, but especially in Game 4. And when I got pulled, it was like a flood of emotions I had suppressed all series long and that was the realization that, I can't do this alone," he said.

"And I'm not saying that I needed to do it alone. That was my mindset, I needed to do this alone. That was the realization that I need to be part of this team more than I am, and to take everything onto my shoulders — and that's, I'm talking me personally, that's not me talking against the team — it's just the way my mentality is, I'm trying to put everything on my shoulders. I don't think that's the right way to go about playoffs anymore. I think what I need to do is just dive into a team game even more, and that will hopefully bring me peace of mind."

Jets coach Rick Bowness wasn't surprised by Hellebuyck's confidence or candor or the obvious frustration he felt at how this series played out, which quickly started swirling down the drain.

"We've taken pride all year in our team game, that's what carried us. And (Hellebuyck) was a big part of that team game. It's an example of a player putting a lot of undue pressure on himself," said Bowness.

Since I've got here, we're always making sure we're trying to improve the defensive play in front of him to help him out, which we have done over the two years. We have done that. What matters now is we didn't do it when it counts most, and that's when he's putting a lot of pressure on himself."

No doubt there will be some who take Hellebuyck's comments as lacking self-reflection and, perhaps, throwing teammates under the bus. As he continued to speak, it became clear Hellebuyck wasn't absolving himself of blame.

"I feel like a lot of those games I was stealing some goals. That being said, I'm not going to go and tell you I don't want to be better. I absolutely need to be better if we're going to win — I can't be giving up that many goals," he said.

He also believes there can be a silver lining to what is, for now, a very dark time.

"I'd like to think this is hopefully the last learning curve that we're going to go through, but... I mean, we were so good. You can't imagine you'd be good for 82 games and then you just don't... you're just not there, you're not the same team," said Hellebuyck.

"I hope we're going to learn that this is the small difference between playoffs and the regular season. This is why the hockey gets so exciting, it gets so quick. Your details have to be so fine-tuned by the time you make playoffs that there's no room for error, there's no room to find your game. I'm hoping that, this series kind of opened our eyes to the last piece of the puzzle to go on a long run."

Finding answers Chevy's top priority *Another early-playoff exit a sign Jets GM's mission far from complete*

By: Ken Wiebe

It's back to the drawing board for Kevin Cheveldayoff.

The only general manager the 2.0 version of the Winnipeg Jets has known once again finds himself in next-year country far earlier than he would have hoped or imagined.

While the future of head coach Rick Bowness is somewhat up in the air, with the Jets holding a team option for a third season, there is no doubt that Cheveldayoff is going to be back for a 14th season.

In many ways, one could make the argument Cheveldayoff just completed one of the best 12-month stretches since taking the job, but that amounted to a grand total of one playoff win this spring.

We all know the GM isn't on the ice and can't have an impact on execution, though it's his job to construct a roster that can win not only in the regular season but also in the playoffs.

To this point, that hasn't transpired, which is why Cheveldayoff will continue to be among those doing some serious soul-searching after the dust settles and players head home.

“The word that comes to mind is incomplete,” said Cheveldayoff, who spoke for nearly 33 minutes Wednesday and conceded the search for answers was nowhere near complete.

That’s not to take away from the long line of decisions that were made, but incomplete is an apt description for what transpired as the Jets were eliminated in five games by a Colorado Avalanche team that resembled the one that captured the Stanley Cup in 2022.

To review, Cheveldayoff dealt disgruntled centre Pierre-Luc Dubois to the Los Angeles Kings at the NHL Draft for a package that included forwards Gabriel Vilardi, Alex Iafallo, and Rasmus Kupari and a second-round pick in 2024, which will be 37th overall.

The Jets stabilized the backup goalie position by bringing back Laurent Brossoit and brought back versatile forward Vladislav Namestnikov on a two-year deal.

In August, the Jets made the difficult decision to buy out the final season of former captain Blake Wheeler’s contract.

Just before the season began, Cheveldayoff got goalie Connor Hellebuyck and centre Mark Scheifele to sign identical seven-year deals, eliminating the question marks about the future of each franchise cornerstone.

Nino Niederreiter was the latest pending UFA to extend, inking a three-year deal.

Before the NHL trade deadline arrived, the Jets made a series of moves to bolster an already deep lineup, including the pre-emptive strike for Sean Monahan to shore up the second-line centre spot.

Adding the championship pedigree of proven goal scorer Tyler Toffoli didn’t yield the dividends that were expected, but the move was lauded at the time and made sense on a number of levels.

Defenceman Colin Miller was brought in to add depth. He was limited to five games in the regular season and one in the playoffs, which was his best game in a Jets uniform.

All of those moves played a valuable role in helping the Jets tie a franchise record for wins (52) in a regular season and a once-porous defensive group capture the Jennings Trophy for allowing the fewest goals in the regular season.

The next step for Cheveldayoff is to build a roster that can take a significant step forward when the lights are shining brightest.

Since that didn’t lead directly to playoff success, the next step for Cheveldayoff is to build a roster that can take a significant step forward when the lights are shining brightest.

For all of the steps forward, the Jets have won only three playoff series since the franchise returned in 2011 and two of those came in 2018 when they reached the Western Conference final.

The Avalanche will be a power for some time, the Dallas Stars have done an exceptional job of integrating young, skilled talent and blending that with a veteran group that is hungry.

The Nashville Predators found a playoff spot and the four other teams in the Central Division are all working to get better.

For the Jets to stop spinning their wheels, there are some very important decisions on the horizon.

There are players to sign and others to make decisions on, including winger Nikolaj Ehlers, who has one more season left on his seven-year contract before he can become an unrestricted free agent in the summer of 2025.

Ehlers' playoff point totals haven't matched his regular season output and he probably represents the Jets most valuable trade chip if the two sides can't come together on a contract extension.

Determining his future could represent another franchise-altering move.

Mixed into the long string of hits for Cheveldayoff was a clear miss: losing mobile blue-liner Declan Chisholm on waivers to the Minnesota Wild.

Chisholm wouldn't solve all of the issues for the Jets back end, but he showed with the Wild that he can be a full-time NHLer who helps run the second power play.

Those are qualities the Jets could use, though they may find those internally from Ville Heinola next fall.

Another miss for Cheveldayoff was not adding someone like Chris Tanev or Sean Walker to bolster the defence corps in a top-four role.

Of course the price tag would have been high, and some salary-cap gymnastics would have been required, but throughout the five-game series with the Avalanche, it was clear the Jets' defence could have used a further boost to become a position of strength.

That's probably one of the lessons Cheveldayoff will take from this season.

Cheveldayoff knows he can't get a mulligan on the trade deadline.

He took some serious swings to address some needs, just like a GM should when his team views itself as a contender.

All Cheveldayoff can focus on now is making the tough decisions that will influence the way the roster looks this fall. That doesn't mean blowing it up, but further improvements are needed.

All Cheveldayoff can focus on now is making the tough decisions that will influence the way the roster looks this fall.

That doesn't mean blowing it up, but further improvements are needed.

"For us, obviously there are going to be changes," said Cheveldayoff. "Whether it's trading picks or trading different things or making hard buyouts. Nothing's been off the table. That's not saying anything is imminent."

All options will be explored and when it comes to ranking off-season priorities, it's all relative, but it's not a short list — it rarely is.

In order for the Jets to be better when the chips are down, they must upgrade the defence — even if they're able to secure the services of Brenden Dillon and Dylan DeMelo, who are among the list of pending unrestricted free agents.

The Jets must bring back Monahan — or a reasonable facsimile — on a multiyear deal.

A Band-Aid solution isn't the answer, while Brad Lambert has made great strides at centre, it's still not known if he can handle the position at the NHL or might have more success on the wing.

The Jets must integrate some youth, such as Lambert or defenceman Elias Salomonsson, who helped his team capture an SHL championship.

The Jets must also find a capable backup goalie in the vein of Brossoit, someone who can ensure Hellebuyck stays within the 56-to-60-game range.

On top of all of that, the Jets need to add speed, size and sandpaper if they want to win multiple rounds, let alone have the opportunity to sip from Lord Stanley's mug.

"Until you're the team standing there at the end, you've done nothing," said Cheveldayoff. "The onus is on everybody within the organization to be that 10 per cent better."

Winnipeg Sun

Bowness, Cheveldayoff, coy about coach's future with Jets

By Paul Friesen

Rick Bowness sounds like someone who wants to be back behind the Winnipeg Jets bench at least one more year. Of course, that won't be just his decision.

Bowness is just completing a two-year contract, with the Jets holding an option for a third season. Coming off a vastly improved regular season but another first-round playoff exit, Bowness says he'll discuss his future with his family, then sit down with co-owner Mark Chipman and GM Kevin Cheveldayoff.

"I know what I'm going to do," Bowness told reporters on Thursday. "I know what I want to do. That will come out. We will let you know."

Asked later about potentially returning, given how difficult this season was for him — he missed time when his wife became ill and left the team for a minor surgical procedure on another occasion — he made it clear his passion for the game still runs deep.

"Love of the game, man," he said. "Still love it. Still have the passion for it. Listen, as I tell the players: every day in this league is a blessing. We're in the best league in the world. Never, ever, take a day for granted in this league. And I never have and I never will. I just love this game. It's been my life."

Cheveldayoff wasn't ready to tip his hand, but did acknowledge the "great job" Bowness and his staff did this season.

"I'm not putting any timetable on anything," the GM said. "It's an emotional time for everybody here. An emotional time for them. We'll have those conversations and we'll update from there."

In tying a team record with 52 wins, the Jets were the NHL's stingiest team this season.

Bowness says the big step forward is due to players taking more ownership compared to last year.

"That's a huge, huge step," the coach said. "We're not going to win until they all take ownership of what's going on here. It's easier for us to give them the Xs and Os. To get them to do it is the challenge. And to get them committed to do it is the challenge that they have to face from within."

Asked about the makeup of his team and whether or not it's built to have success in the playoffs, Bowness says it's up to the coaches to get more from the players.

"The roster is what the roster is," he said. "I take full responsibility for that playoff performance. Our team did not play well. The standards that I had set for the team and myself, we didn't reach that standard. I put the onus on me to make sure that doesn't happen again. I have to get more out of the players. It's my responsibility to get those guys to the next level."

A dozen players also spoke to the media one last time.

The theme: they missed an opportunity.

"This one stings the most out of my four years here of our playoff losses," defenceman Dylan DeMelo said. "Still just trying to comprehend why. Why it all happened. We had a great team, really thought we had the makings of a long playoff run. Clearly we under-performed."

Not finding their best game and a higher level of intensity against Colorado was a common thread, particularly since they were healthy and went into the postseason on a roll.

"Their intensity was really high," DeMelo said of the Avalanche. "They went to the net harder than us, special teams were better than us, they were on the puck faster, they were just better in all aspects. There needs to be some time to evaluate everything. Everything's on the table."

Mark Scheifele says there's no better team to learn from than Colorado.

"Those guys are a great lesson," Scheifele said. "They've won, they've experienced that, we saw how great they played against us. We all have to look ourselves in the mirror and see, what am I doing to improve?"

Goalie Connor Hellebuyck says he can always get better, too, even if he feels he was as sharp as ever in the series.

"You're probably not going to believe when I say, I was playing the best hockey of my career," Hellebuyck said. "But that's truly how I was feeling. Not only was I playing some of my best hockey but I was in that zone where you're not thinking, you're just playing. That's a dangerous

thing in sports and to not be able to keep four goals off the board is heartbreaking. It really is heartbreaking.

“You’ve got to give them some kudos for what they did, but looking back I don’t know if I even saw half of the pucks that went into the net.”

After winning the Jennings Trophy for being the goalie on the stingiest team, Hellebuyck gave up an average of more than five goals per game to Colorado.

“Since I’ve got here, we’re always making sure we’re trying to improve the defensive play in front of him to help him out, which we have done over the two years,” Bowness said. “What matters now is we didn’t do it when it counts most, and that’s when he’s putting a lot of pressure on himself.”

'Question everything': Emotions swirl as self-reflecting Jets say farewell to another season

By Paul Friesen

Stunned players, a head coach in limbo, a goalie convinced he was better than he’s ever been and a GM talking about throwing pebbles in the water.

Those were just some of the sound bites from garbage-bag day, as the Winnipeg Jets on Thursday gathered for the first time since their season went into the dumpster.

This has become must-hear stuff, an annual rite of spring that all too often feels wrong.

One year it’s a veteran such as Paul Stastny decrying a lack of accountability, or franchise poster boy Mark Scheifele wondering aloud if he wants to stick around.

The next, it’s players throwing their head coach under the bus.

This year’s version was without some of those salacious sound bites, but that doesn’t mean it was short on emotion, as players still couldn’t believe they didn’t have another game this weekend.

“How did this happen, and how does it never happen again?” is the message GM Kevin Cheveldayoff says he kept hearing in exit meetings. “I don’t know that I had that same level of self-reflection in the conversations that we had with the players last year.”

That’s because they were too busy complaining Rick Bowness had been too hard on them when they ran up the white flag in Vegas.

This time, after an equally early exit at the hands of Colorado, there are more mirrors around.

“The great teams are led by the players,” Bowness said. “So for our players to start taking more ownership, that’s a huge, huge step. We’re not going to win until they all take ownership of what’s going on here.”

Bowness sounded very much like someone who wants to return for a third season, even if he doesn’t have a contract. The Jets hold that option.

Considering nobody threw him an anchor this time, there's no reason to believe he won't be.

Unlike last year, the captain of the team defended him.

"For the longest time we've relied on having a world-class goalie and scrape by with mediocre results and just trying to outscore the other team," Adam Lowry said. "Rick coming in really had us double-down on the defensive side of the puck."

Nobody made it harder for teams to score than the Jets did this season.

The problem is it all went to hell in the playoffs.

"We were rolling pretty good going into the playoffs," forward Kyle Connor said. "You almost blink and it's over. You can't believe it."

All that promise, that smothering play, the streak of allowing three or fewer goals, gone in a five-game score-fest.

"This one stings the most out of my four years here of playoff losses," defenceman Dylan DeMelo said. "Still just trying to comprehend why. Why it all happened."

It wasn't because of goaltending.

Connor Hellebuyck played out of this world — just ask him.

"You're probably not going to believe when I say I was playing the best hockey of my career," Hellebuyck said. "And to not be able to keep four goals off the board is heartbreaking."

His average was actually over five. But who's counting?

The problem is what was happening in front of him: Far too much.

The Jets won one game 7-6, then let the Avs have their way.

"If we played our best hockey and we lose, you live with it," DeMelo said. "But we were nowhere close in all aspects of playing our best hockey, so that's why this one hurts the most."

DeMelo, 31, is a pending free agent. The clock is ticking for him just like it is for the core of this team.

"Getting reverse-swept twice in back-to-back years, if guys aren't burning fire because of that or not thinking that we all need to get better, then something is wrong," DeMelo said. "This is a massive summer. Question everything."

After the players had their say, Bowness and Cheveldayoff took the stand.

The GM's testimony went on for 32 minutes and covered all kinds of ground.

One thing he didn't say: We obviously aren't gritty enough to be successful in the playoffs.

While his players and his head coach have talked about needing more intensity, Cheveldayoff downplayed the notion, suggesting that was little more than a label.

"I could stand here and look you straight in the eye and say I didn't think this team ever gave up," he said. "And I'm not just BS'ing you here."

The obvious follow-up: if the team gave it their all and it's not even close to good enough, what does that say about his roster?

"There are going to be changes," Cheveldayoff said. "Changes are inevitable every off-season. We need to come back 10% better. Everybody. Somehow."

The 13-year GM brushed off a suggestion his team is in a pattern of postseason underachievement, calling every year different.

And he waxed poetic about the people he feels for the most: the fans in the NHL's smallest city.

"I liken it to when you're a kid and you drop a pebble into the water," Cheveldayoff said. "Sometimes when you've got a big body of water and you drop a pebble in, there's waves and it just kind of goes off. Well, in a small market like this, when you drop a pebble into the water, there's waves, and it keeps coming back. They care. Standing here today, that's probably the hardest thing."

"I'm going to do my damnedest to keep pushing."

How did it happen, and how does it never happen again?

The GM has another long summer to find out.

"I can't do this alone": Jets' Hellebuyck candid after playoff exit

By Scott Billeck

Connor Hellebuyck woke up on the morning of Game 4, intending to steal a game.

There was a laser-focus, he said Thursday, as the Winnipeg Jets went through their latest rounds of post-season medicals and exit interviews.

His mindset was similar through the first three games, but with the team trailing 2-1 in their best-of-seven series with the Colorado Avalanche and with 15 goals already past him, some extra emphasis was added.

Another four were tacked on during the first 40 minutes on Sunday afternoon, and any thoughts of thievery ended there.

"Not being able to keep four goals off the board is heartbreaking," Hellebuyck said. "For me to not be able to put my foot down even in a single game is really heartbreaking. It's not typically how I do things."

Perhaps it's a blessing in disguise for himself and the team he signed a seven-year contract extension with last fall.

It led to a moment of clarity.

“When I got pulled to give me more rest, it was like a flood of emotions I had suppressed all series long. And that was the realization that I can’t do this alone.”

Alone is often where Hellebuyck has been left in the past, at least on the ice.

He’s made a comfortable living on an island, but it sure seems to have taken its toll.

Or maybe it’s been ingrained over the years. The old mentality that if he doesn’t do it, who will?

“I’m not saying that I needed to do it alone,” he said. “That was my mindset—I needed to do this alone. That was the realization that I need to be part of this team more than I am, and to take everything onto my shoulders — and that’s, I’m talking me personally, that’s not me talking against the team — it’s just the way my mentality is, I’m trying to put everything on my shoulders.”

Thursday was rarified air for the 30-year-old Michiganian.

Sure, his exit interview began with him warning people they may not believe what he was about to say.

“I was playing the best hockey of my career,” he said. “That’s truly how I was feeling.”

It’s not an easy argument to make, given the 24 goals he allowed across five games, or the sub .900 save percentage or the negative goals saved above expected—statistics he either led or was near the top during a regular season that is sure to end with his second Vezina.

Hellebuyck’s never doubted himself or his abilities.

It’s served him well throughout his career. He’s said in the past that few believed he could get to where he is now, so he had no choice but to put faith in himself and go from there.

It also made his honesty about taking the wrong approach on Thursday notable.

“I don’t think that’s the right way to go about playoffs anymore,” he said. “What I need to do is just dive into a team game even more, and that will hopefully bring me peace of mind.”

Jets head coach Rick Bowness didn’t see it as Hellebuyck being less of a team member.

Rather, he saw a player putting too much undue pressure on himself.

“That he had to make a difference,” Bowness said. “You get in the playoffs, and we’re watching hockey all of the time, there’s always a game in a playoff series where the team isn’t playing (well) and the goalie steals a game. I think that’s what he is referring to.

“The reason, and I explained after we pulled him in Game 4, we wanted to put a little more onus on the players, ‘Ok, we’ve gotta tighten this thing up here. We’re not going to rely on him every freakin’ game to keep us in there.’”

Winnipeg's defensive structure has improved immensely during Bowness's tenure.

The team went on a 34-game stretch this season—the second longest on record—allowing three goals or fewer.

Hellebuyck was a massive part of that, but so was his team's ability to lessen the load on him.

The Jets got away from that in the second half of the season, losing their way.

The game Hellebuyck came to know wasn't as consistent, so you could understand why he might revert to what had been drilled into his head for years and years.

That it was on him and him alone to keep the ship from sinking.

"What matters now is we didn't do it when it counts most, and that's when he's putting a lot of pressure on himself," Bowness said.

After a second consecutive first-round, five-game exit, there are many lessons to learn.

This could be one of the biggest.

'Frustrated' Dillon hoping to extend stay in Winnipeg, DeMelo too

By Scott Billeck

Until 11:59:59 p.m. on June 30, Brenden Dillon is a Winnipeg Jet.

He'd like to be one when the clock strikes midnight on Canada Day.

On Thursday, the pending unrestricted free agent made it well known that he'd like to be back in Winnipeg this fall, and not as a member of an opposing team passing through town.

Dillon said he was a touch disappointed sitting in front of a throng of local media members, having to tell them he wanted to remain in Winnipeg rather than knowing he would be.

"Am I frustrated that I'm not signed as I sit here? Absolutely," he said.

"I feel like I'm a big part of this team. I feel like coming in, I've said it numerous times, I love the group of guys we have. In the D group we have, we have a lot of fun together, and we want to get better together."

On a day where intensity was a theme, and the lack of it was part of the explanation for Winnipeg's first-round exit from the Stanley Cup playoffs, Dillon could count himself as an exception.

Through three games in the series against the Colorado Avalanche, the 33-year-old brought a style of play befitting of this time of year.

It made his absence in Games 4 and 5 all the more noticeable, to say the least.

Dillon got into it with Colorado forward Brandon Duhaime in a post-Game 3 melee that ended with Dillon's hand being sliced open by an apparent skateblade.

There was frustration there as well.

"I'm kind of frustrated with myself with it," Dillon said. "But, in the playoffs, from the physicality standpoint and never wanting to give up, emotionally I was just... you get caught up when your captain (Adam Lowry) goes and has a fight the shift before.

"I can't say that I wouldn't do it again next time, to just try and go stir things up and get a little momentum back our way."

On the replays, you could see a linesman pleading with Duhaime to let go of Dillon so he could get the wound tended to.

"Going down, I felt like my arm was behind the Avalanche player on the ice and as I was getting up, I thought (Josh) Manson was coming over to punch me in the face, but he was actually pointing at my hand and saying, 'Check it out.'" Dillon said. "I saw the blood and off I went."

Dillon, surprisingly squeamish about blood, given the type of hard-nosed game he plays, hasn't watched the replay.

"I've gotten more than enough from my buddies, whether it's on Twitter or, of course, I got to see it when they were stitching me up and stuff like that in the room," he said.

The good news for Dillon is that no long-term damage was done.

His stitches—12 of them—are expected to be out on Monday, and if the series reached that point, he was hoping to play in Game 6 or 7.

Now, his hope lies elsewhere.

"I want to be a big part of this team, and you want to feel wanted and like you're a big part of that," he said. "Basically, until July 1, I'm a Winnipeg Jet. Hopefully, we can make it work."

Dillon, who hadn't spoken to general manager Kevin Cheveldayoff, will be happy to hear there's mutual hope on the other side of the negotiation table.

Fellow blue-liner Dylan DeMelo, too.

Both became confidants for one another during the season, with DeMelo also staring down unrestricted free agency this summer.

"I could definitely see myself staying here," DeMelo said, reporting that he and his wife are expecting their second child in August. "There is no doubt about it. I am definitely comfortable here, and I feel like I've grown here as a player, as a person. I do hope it works here, I really do."

Cheveldayoff said Thursday that he's been in contact with both players' respective agents.

“We communicated... in both of those situations that it wasn’t a matter if, it was a matter of when and the when wasn’t at that point in time,” Cheveldayoff said.

The tenured GM, who handed out extensions to Mark Scheifele and Connor Hellebuyck just before the season got underway and another to Nino Niederreiter in early December, said he didn’t want to deviate from what had been built in the room, and the goal of hanging a Stanley Cup banner.

Then the deadline hit, and more UFAs were added to the mix with Sean Monahan and Tyler Toffoli.

“Those all have to be factored in,” Cheveldayoff said. “We will sharpen our pencils and we will do what we can.”

Cheveldayoff met up with Monahan’s agent a couple of weeks after his arrival in early February.

That conversation went well.

“The biggest thing for me is I want to give myself a chance to win,” Monahan said. “This is a spot that definitely wants to win and has the makings of doing that.”

Added Cheveldayoff: “He’s coming off a unique situation and circumstances where it was an undervalued contract from what he brings to the table.”

Monahan made \$2 million this past season on a one-year ‘prove it’ deal after injuries limited him to just 74 games over the previous two seasons.

The salary cap increases to \$87.5 million next season, up \$4 million from 2023-24.

The extensions for Hellebuyck and Scheifele increase their cap hits, combined, by a hair over \$4.7 million.

Dillon, who said money isn’t the be-all, end-all on his next contract, made \$3.9 million last season, while DeMelo hit the cap for \$3 million.

Culture changed, Jets' Bowness reaching for next level

By Paul Friesen

Rick Bowness took over a bit of a mess two years ago, there’s no denying that.

So as much as it seems the Winnipeg Jets have been spinning their wheels since their first and last deep playoff run six years ago, zooming in on the head coach’s first two seasons shows some traction.

“So they brought me in to do what? Change the culture,” Bowness said on Thursday. “This organization, this team, had a bad reputation. We’ve improved that. We fixed that. We had to give the team a better identity that gave them a chance to win. We did that. We had to get this team back in the playoffs. We did that.

“So we’ve made huge strides. But now we have to take it to the next level.”

Bowness sounds like someone who wants to be back behind the Jets bench at least one more year.

Of course, that won't be just his decision.

He's just completing a two-year contract, with the Jets holding an option for a third.

Coming off a vastly improved regular season but another first-round playoff exit, Bowness says he'll discuss his future with his family, then sit down with co-owner Mark Chipman and GM Kevin Cheveldayoff.

"I know what I'm going to do," Bowness told reporters on Thursday. "I know what I want to do. That will come out. We will let you know."

Asked later about potentially returning, given how difficult this season was for him – he missed time when his wife became ill and left the team for a minor surgical procedure on another occasion – he made it clear his passion for the game still runs deep.

"Love of the game, man," he said. "Still love it. Still have the passion for it. Listen, as I tell the players: every day in this league is a blessing. We're in the best league in the world. Never, ever, take a day for granted in this league. And I never have and I never will. I just love this game. It's been my life."

Cheveldayoff wasn't ready to tip his hand, but did acknowledge the job Bowness and his staff did this season.

They found a winning formula, trying a team record with 52 victories and gaining home-ice advantage against Colorado.

That formula blew up on them in the playoffs, but Cheveldayoff says he has yet to sit down with Bowness to talk about next year.

"I'm not putting any timetable on anything," the GM said. "It's an emotional time for everybody here. We'll have those conversations and we'll update from there. They did a great job. There are certainly going to be areas where they are going to be self critical and we have to be self critical. There was a level of consistency for a long period of time.

"You could hold yourself to that standard during a season."

The Jets were the NHL's stingiest team and one of its least penalized.

Both those strengths evaporated against the Avalanche.

Their special teams, not very good all year, were a disaster in Round 1.

Asked about the makeup of his team and whether or not it's built to have success in the playoffs, Bowness says it's up to the coaches to get more from the players.

"The roster is what the roster is," he said. "I take full responsibility for that playoff performance. Our team did not play well. The standards that I had set for the team and myself, we didn't

reach that standard. I put the onus on me to make sure that doesn't happen again. I have to get more out of the players. It's my responsibility to get those guys to the next level.

"So are we built for the playoffs? We are built (to be) a team that's better than we saw in the playoffs. I'll answer it that way."

Bowness has stickhandled his way through what was a treacherous end to last season.

Numerous players called him out for his public criticism after their early playoff loss to Vegas.

Those wounds appear to be healed.

"They're very honest and up-front with me, which I love," the coach said. "I have a great rapport with them, and that's very important in today's hockey is to have that one-on-one, ability to speak freely. That's huge."

Bowness hopes his players learned a thing or two from Colorado.

"They didn't change any systems. Nothing. They just played harder. They did everything faster. There's five of them, five of us. You've got to out-play, out-battle that guy you're up against.

"That was very clear to our players as it went along."

TSN.ca

[Lu details Hellebuyck's comments, future of Bowness in Winnipeg](#) (VIDEO)

It was an emotional day for a lot of the Jets players and staff as they spoke to the media about the team's season coming to an end with an early exit from the playoffs. TSN Jets reporter John Lu joins SportsCentre to share his thoughts on Connor Hellebuyck's comments and the future of head coach Rick Bowness in Winnipeg.