

Winnipeg Free Press

The reviews are in... Hellebuyck, Morrissey, Scheifele shining stars of '23-24 Jets roster

By: Mike McIntyre and Ken Wiebe

The Winnipeg Jets' season ended in swift, stunning fashion earlier this week, crushing speculation they might just have a Stanley Cup run in them.

Now what?

A longer-than-expected off-season awaits, with plenty of questions about what the team could — and should — look like when they re-convene in September for training camp.

The Jets finished with 26 players on the active roster. Of those, 17 are under contract for next season. Six are pending unrestricted free agents as of July 1, while another three are restricted free agents who will need to get new deals done prior to training camp.

Here's our breakdown of what the future might hold for each Jets player.

G Connor Hellebuyck

- Season: 60GP, 37-19-4, 2.39GAA, .921 save percentage
- Playoffs: 5GP, 1-4-0, 5.01GAA, .870 save percentage
- Contract: Entering Year 1 of a seven-year extension with an AAV of US\$8.5 million

A sensational regular season will likely earn him his second Vezina Trophy, along with some Hart votes as well. The playoffs were a different story, and he (and his teammates) had no answers. Expect this to light an even bigger fire under a guy who desperately wants to win a Stanley Cup.

G Laurent Brossoit

- Season: 23GP, 15-5-2, 2.00GAA, .927 save percentage
- Playoffs: 1GP, 0-0-0, 0.00GAA, 1.000 save percentage
- Contract: Pending UFA (made US\$1.75 million)

Parting will be such sweet sorrow. Brossoit proved to be among the best backups in the business, which means an opportunity for a bigger role elsewhere (and the bigger salary that comes with it) which will take him out from under Hellebuyck's shadow.

C Mark Scheifele

- Season: 74GP, 25G, 47A, 72P
- Playoffs: 5GP, 2G, 4A, 6P
- Contract: Starting a seven-year extension with an AAV of US\$8.5 million

The Jets' top-line pivot was asked to deliver a better two-way game, and that's what he did while still leading the Jets in scoring during the playoffs and regular season. This was the first time since 2019 he didn't finish the playoffs with an injury or suspension. He's going to remain the No. 1 centre for the foreseeable future.

LW Kyle Connor

- Season: 65GP, 34G, 27A, 61P
- Playoffs: 5GP, 3G, 2A, 5P
- Contract: Two seasons left at US\$7.143 million, then a UFA

He was challenging for the Rocket Richard Trophy before a knee injury knocked him out of the lineup on Dec. 10. It was the first time in his career that Connor missed considerable time, but he still led his team in goals and game-winners (10). During the post-season, he took his game to another level, adding a defensive component that was often lacking during the regular season. He remains the best pure goal scorer on the roster and could threaten to score 50 next season if he stays healthy.

RW Gabriel Vilardi

- Season : 47GP, 22G, 14A, 36P
- Playoffs: 5GP, 0G, 4A, 4P
- Contract: One season left at US\$3.438 million, then a RFA

When healthy, the cornerstone piece of last summer's blockbuster was a power-play maestro and a fantastic complementary piece on the top line. He's just scratching the surface when it comes to his potential, but he needs to eclipse his career high for games played (63) to help this group push forward.

C Sean Monahan

- Season with Montreal: 49GP, 13G, 22A, 35P
- Season with Winnipeg: 34GP, 13G, 11A, 24P
- Playoffs: 5GP, 0G, 1A, 1P
- Contract: Pending UFA (made US\$1.985 million last season)

A valuable in-season addition who helped solidify the second-line centre position, but a quiet playoff certainly took some shine off the trade. There would appear to be a long-term fit here if the price is right. If not, the search for a 2C continues.

LW/RW Nikolaj Ehlers

- Season: 82GP, 25G, 36A, 61P
- Playoffs: 5GP, 0G, 2A, 2P
- Contract: One season left at US\$6.0 million, then a UFA

Stayed healthy and appeared in all 82 games but had his worst offensive production (points-per-game) in five seasons and did very little in the playoffs, which has been a theme with him. At times, he fell out of favour with the coaching staff, and his lukewarm answer on Thursday about being part of the future suggests a change of scenery might be coming. It might be for the best, as he's arguably the best trade chip to land an impact blue-liner.

RW Tyler Toffoli

- Season with New Jersey: 61GP, 26G, 18A, 44P
- Season with Winnipeg: 18GP, 7G, 4A, 11P
- Playoffs: 5GP, 2G, 0A, 2P
- Contract: Pending UFA (made US\$2.125 million last season)

Showed glimpses but didn't really provide the punch the Jets expected. He started Game 5 on the fourth-line, which was certainly not in the plans. This will go down as a short-term rental that was worth the risk but ultimately didn't pay off. He's gone.

C Adam Lowry

- Season: 81GP, 12G, 23A, 35P
- Playoffs: 5GP, 2G, 0A, 2P
- Contract: Two seasons left at US\$3.25 million, then a UFA

Faces the toughest defensive matchups, is a key cog on the penalty kill and flourished in a leadership role in his first season as captain. A physical force who played through a hand injury in the postseason. The 2012 third-rounder is preparing for his 11th season with the organization and will continue to play a prominent role.

RW Mason Appleton

- Season: 82GP, 14G, 22A, 36P
- Playoffs: 5GP, 0G, 2A, 2P
- Contract: One season left at US\$2.167 million, then a UFA

A red-hot offensive start helped the 2015 fifth-rounder hit career highs for goals, assists and points — impressive when you consider his primary responsibility is to defend first and get involved on the forecheck. Needs to help get the penalty kill turned around next season as he continues to ride shotgun with Adam Lowry.

LW/RW Nino Niederreiter

- Season: 74GP, 18G, 16A, 34P
- Playoffs: 5GP, 0G, 2A, 2P
- Contract: Starting three-year extension with an AAV of US\$4 million

A late-season gash from a skate probably prevented him from eclipsing 20 goals for the eighth time in his career. Plays hard, lives around the blue paint and rounded out the Jets' identity line. Despite numerous chances, Niederreiter went cold down the stretch and into the playoffs as he went 21 games without a goal to wrap up the campaign. Will be interesting to see if he might return to a second-line role next season or if he remains as the most natural finisher on the Lowry line.

C/LW Vlad Namestnikov

- Season: 78GP, 11G, 26A, 37P
- Playoffs: 4GP, 1G, 0A, 1P
- Contract: One season left at US\$2 million, then a UFA

He showed his value, and then some, taking on many roles and always delivering up and down the lineup. He's as tough as they come, too. Suffered a broken cheekbone in Game 4, so he'll be raring to go next season.

LW/RW Alex Iafallo

- Season: 82GP, 11G, 16A, 27P
- Playoffs: 5GP, 0G, 1A, 1P
- Contract: One season left at US\$4.0 million, then a UFA

A versatile utility piece, albeit one with little offensive punch who carries a hefty salary. You wonder if the Jets would look to clear some cap space by moving on, considering re-signing him is likely not in the cards with several young forwards coming up the pipeline, such as Brad Lambert and Nikita Chibrikov.

C/LW Morgan Barron

- Season: 80GP, 11G, 7A, 18P
- Playoffs: Injured, did not play
- Contract: One season left at US\$1.35 million, then a RFA

Hitting double-digits in goals primarily on the fourth line with no power-play time is impressive. Safe to say the Jets could have used Barron's defensive acumen and penalty-killing ability in the playoffs, which he missed owing to a knee injury.

C/LW/RW Cole Perfetti

- Season: 71GP, 19G, 19A, 38P
- Playoffs: 1GP, 0G, 0A, 0P
- Contract: Pending RFA (US\$894,167 AAV last season)

A breakthrough year in which he managed to stay healthy and blew away career highs, only to find himself pushed out of a deep roster down the stretch, There's a bright future here. It will be curious to see what his next contact looks like. A bridge deal seems the most likely route.

C David Gustafsson

- Season: 39GP, 3G, 4A, 7P
- Playoffs: 4GP, 1G, 0A, 1P
- Contract: Pending RFA (US\$775,000 AAV last season)

Took an important step forward and showed during the playoffs that he's ready to be a full-timer on the fourth line. Integrating him onto the penalty kill on a regular basis is the next step in his progression.

C/RW Rasmus Kupari

- Season: 28GP, 0G, 1A, 1P
- Playoffs: Did not play
- Contract: One season left at US\$1 million, then an RFA

No shortage of speed and creates some chances but hasn't shown an ability to convert them with any regularity. His season was derailed by a shoulder injury in November, and he never got back on track. He's now in a position where he'll need to win a job in training camp if he wants to avoid being an extra forward again.

LW Axel Jonsson-Fjallby

- Season: 26GP, 2G, 3A, 5P
- Playoffs: 1GP, 0G, 0A, 0P
- Contract: One season left at US\$775,000, then a UFA

A decent depth piece with speed to burn who excelled with the Manitoba Moose and brings some injury insurance for at least another year.

D Josh Morrissey

- Season: 81GP, 10G, 59A, 69P
- Playoffs: 5GP, 3G, 1A, 4P
- Contract: Three seasons left at US\$6.25 million

The top blue-liner had another excellent offensive season while improving his defensive play during another season in which he received Norris Trophy votes. Expect him to take another step forward as he prepares for his 10th season.

D Dylan DeMelo

- Season: 82GP, 3G, 28A, 31P
- Playoffs: 5GP, 0G, 1A, 1P
- Contract: Pending UFA (made US\$3 million last season)

One of the most important decisions of the off-season. He picked a great time to produce a career-high in assists and points. Has a history of making life easier on his defence partner — and Morrissey will vouch for that. He's interested in sticking around but is looking for a long-term commitment. It says here that he re-ups on a three- or four-year pact that includes a raise.

D Neal Pionk

- Season: 82GP, 5G, 28A, 33P
- Playoffs: 5GP, 0G, 1A, 1P
- Contract: One season left at US\$5.875 million, then a UFA

A tough season, both personally and professionally. Pionk is a proud pro who will want to turn the page. His contract status, along with the Jets likely looking to clear some cap room and space for young defencemen such as Ville Heinola and Elias Salomonsson, makes you wonder if a trade could be in the mix.

D Brenden Dillon

- Season: 77GP, 8G, 12A, 20P
- Playoffs: 3GP, 0G, 3A, 3P
- Contract: Pending UFA (made US\$3.9 million last season)

Along with Monahan and DeMelo, he's the other UFA to watch. Brings elements the Jets don't otherwise have and is a tremendous leader on and off the ice. He wants to re-sign here, and you'd have to think the feeling is mutual. It should be. Get it done.

D Dylan Samberg

- Season: 78GP, 1G, 17A, 18P
- Playoffs: 5GP, 0G, 0A, 0P
- Contract: One season left at US\$1.4 million, then RFA

One of the best defenders during the regular season and a shot-blocking machine at even strength and the penalty kill, Samberg had a few hiccups in the post-season but he's clearly trending upward. Will continue to add a physical element this defence needs more of. Tracking to be a shutdown defender who will see an increase in minutes.

D Nate Schmidt

- Season: 63GP, 2G, 12A, 14P
- Playoffs: 3GP, 1G, 0A, 1P
- Contract: One season left at US\$5.95 million, then a UFA

Bounced between the sixth and seventh spot on the depth chart late in the season. Provided steady play and didn't give up much on a pairing with Samberg. His offensive numbers were down a bit and there's little doubt that the ankle injury he suffered in the first exhibition game set him back a bit. Seems destined for the sixth or seventh spot again next season unless a buyout or trade is in the offing.

D Logan Stanley

- Season: 25GP, 1G, 1A, 2P
- Playoffs: 3GP, 0G, 1A, 1P
- Contract: Pending RFA (US\$1 million AAV last season)

A polarizing figure, consistency remains an issue and one wonders if it's time to cut the cord with the 18th-overall pick from 2016.

D Colin Miller

- Season: 46GP, 4G, 5A, 9P
- Playoffs: 1GP, 0G, 0A, 0P
- Contract: Pending UFA (made US\$1.85 million last season)

Brought in to add depth as a right-handed shot, Miller's opportunities were limited and he didn't show off his full arsenal until the final game of the playoffs. Not getting him into the lineup sooner, given his postseason experience was a mistake. The Jets have shown interest in Miller previously, but he's likely to search for a new hockey home this summer.

Milic signs entry-level deal with Jets

By: Mike McIntyre

Have yourself a year, Thomas Milic.

The 21-year-old goaltender capped off quite the stretch Friday, signing his first NHL contract with the Winnipeg Jets. Milic inked a three-year entry-level deal with an average big-league salary of US\$841,700 that begins in 2024-25.

Milic was selected in the fifth-round (151st-overall) of last summer's draft. He was the reigning Western Hockey League goaltender of the year and was coming off a huge season with the Seattle Thunderbirds in which he helped lead them to the Memorial Cup and was named MVP of the WHL playoffs.

Milic also helped Canada win a gold medal at the 2023 World Juniors and played for Team Canada at the 2023 Spengler Cup.

After aging out of junior, the B.C. product began last season in the ECHL with the Norfolk Admirals, going 11-3-2 with two shutouts, a 2.45 GAA and .908 save percentage. He won ECHL Goaltender of the Week for the period ending Oct. 29 and was selected to the all-star game.

All of which earned him a promotion to the Manitoba Moose, where he helped salvage their season. Milic played in 33 games with a 19-9-2 record, one shutout, a 2.72 GAA and .900 save percentage. He won 14 of his final 19 games for Manitoba and was AHL Player of the Week for the period ending Mar. 17.

There could be some changes in Winnipeg's goaltending depth chart coming for next season, as Jets backup Laurent Brossoit and Milic's job-share partner with the Moose, Colin Delia, are pending unrestricted free agents.

Oskari Salminen, who began the year as on the Moose with Delia, finished up in the ECHL and is a restricted free agent this summer. Domenic DiVincentiis, who was the Ontario Hockey League's goaltender of the year last season, just finished his third season with the North Bay Battalion and has previously signed an ELC with the Jets after being drafted in 2022.

Who will stay and who will go?

Plenty of unknowns as Jets enter longer-than-anticipated off-season

By: Ken Wiebe and Mike McIntyre

The final buzzer has sounded, exit meetings have occurred and "garbage bag day" — when the players clean out their lockers and say their goodbyes before heading to their offseason homes — is now in the rear-view mirror.

It's time to focus on the future. And we at Dump & Chase see four burning questions when it comes to the Winnipeg Jets.

1) Who is the head coach?

Rick Bowness was announced as a finalist for the Jack Adams Award on Friday, along with Rick Tocchet of the Vancouver Canucks and Andrew Brunette of the Nashville Predators, but there's no guarantee he will return for a third season behind the Winnipeg bench.

The Jets have a team option and it's unclear whether they will exercise it.

Speaking on Thursday, GM Kevin Cheveldayoff gave no timetable for a decision. While he went out of his way to praise the entire coaching staff for the job they did this season, a final decision has not been made.

The Jets have a coach-in-waiting on the staff in associate coach Scott Arniel. He stepped in and did a great job when Bowness was absent for a one-month stretch to be with his wife Judy after she suffered a seizure in October, and again in March when Bowness dealt with health issues of his own.

The 69-year-old helped the Jets take massive strides implementing a sound defensive structure and improved the culture since his arrival, but playoff success hasn't followed.

It will be interesting to see if the Jets give him one more shot next season or if Bowness decides to retire on his own terms.

Arniel, who spent two seasons as the bench boss of the Columbus Blue Jackets from 2010-12, has shown he's ready for a second NHL opportunity.

Whether that will come next season or in 2025 remains to be seen.

2) Shake it up?

We had a buyout (Blake Wheeler) and a blockbuster deal (Pierre-Luc Dubois) last summer. Will history repeat itself?

Nate Schmidt would be the only real candidate for a buyout given that he was, at times, a very expensive healthy scratch this season and has another year at US\$5.95 million on his deal, which isn't really tradeable as a result.

Forwards Nikolaj Ehlers and Alex Iafallo and defenceman Neal Pionk have one more year on their deals and could be trade candidates if signing them to extensions isn't in the cards. (Mason Appleton and Vlad Namestnikov are in the same situation, but carry much lower price tags).

"I hope we find ways to do the things that we need to do. A lot of you have been around the organization for a long period of time here (know) that nothing's off the table," 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. I'm just saying as an organization we don't say, 'You cant do that.'"

3) Which unrestricted free agents will return?

When you consider the Jets inked Mark Scheifele, Connor Hellebuyck and Nino Niederreiter to extensions before they became UFAs, it's wild to think the Jets still have six guys who could head to market on July 1.

Let's start with the easy ones.

As much as the Jets would love to have goalie Laurent Brossoit back to round out the tandem with Hellebuyck, he's always wanted to be a No. 1 guy and needs to be in a situation where he gets more than 22 starts. That means Brossoit will be moving on.

With goaltending upgrades required for several playoff teams, Brossoit should have no shortage of choices. Might the Jets be able to move the exclusive negotiating rights of Brossoit to help recoup some of the draft capital they lost prior to the NHL trade deadline? Stay tuned.

Forward Tyler Toffoli also figures to be moving on, as he didn't end up having the impact that was expected when the Jets acquired him.

"It's one of those things that I feel I've worked my way to an opportunity to see what's next," said Toffoli, who had nine goals and 13 points in 22 games with the Jets, including the regular season and the playoffs.

Defenceman Colin Miller is also likely going to find a new team this summer since his opportunities were limited after he was acquired.

The other two D-men on this list are valued for their on- and off-ice contributions.

Dylan DeMelo has been a great partner for Josh Morrissey and he's interested in sticking around, he's looking for a raise from his current salary of US\$3 million and wants a long-term deal. DeMelo and his wife are expecting a second child, so putting down roots is essential in his next deal.

Brenden Dillon says used humour to help cope with his frustration of not receiving an extension offer during the season and appreciated having DeMelo as a sounding board. Dillon brings a physical presence to the defence and he's probably looking for north of US\$4 million (he made US\$3.9 million last season) and at least three years. Dillon changed agents during the season and knows he will be in demand this summer if the Jets don't meet the asking price.

It says here one of Dillon and DeMelo will return, though it's hard to pinpoint which direction this will go if the Jets can't sign both.

Having an experienced second-line centre remains a priority for the Jets and that bodes well for an extension with Sean Monahan, who expressed a desire to stick around.

"I really enjoyed my time here," said Monahan. "It felt like I was here for a long time. I think the biggest thing for me is I want to give myself a chance to win. This is a spot that definitely wants to win and has the makings of doing that."

Monahan, who fit in seamlessly, will be looking for a multi-year deal with an AAV between US\$4-5 million. The best chance for the Jets to keep him would be to sign him before July 1.

4) Make way for some kids?

Forward Brad Lambert was chosen to the AHL All-Rookie team after an excellent season with the Manitoba Moose and notched an assist in his NHL debut, showcasing his explosive speed. He's the best bet up front to challenge for a roster spot next season, especially if the Jets choose to move Ehlers.

A fractured ankle knocked Ville Heinola out of the Jets' opening-night lineup and he didn't appear in a NHL game this season. No longer exempt from waivers next season, the 2020 first-rounder will either be with the Jets or another NHL team next fall. His puck-moving skill and ability to quarterback the second power play are two of his best assets.

Nikita Chibrikov is feisty forward with finishing ability and was also rewarded with a late-season call-up. He scored the game-winning goal in his NHL debut and will be in the mix to compete for a spot, but likely needs a bit more seasoning.

Elias Salomonsson is a mobile blue-liner who plays with an edge and helped his Swedish league team capture a league championship while playing important minutes as a 19-year-old. Will he be on the top-pairing with the Moose or the third pairing with the Jets this fall? That will be up to his play.

These four, along with plenty of other promising kids in the pipeline (Chaz Lucius, Colby Barlow, Rutger McGroarty, Thomas Milic, Domenic DiVincentiis among them) show the future is quite bright around here, even if the present has been dimmed a bit by the poor playoff performance.

AROUND THE GLASS:

A pair of Jets' first-rounders are set to take on the Carolina Hurricanes as the second round opens on Sunday at Madison Square Garden.

New York Rangers captain Jacob Trouba and forward Jack Roslovic are into Round 2 for the first time since advancing to the Western Conference final with the Jets in 2018.

Trouba had two assists in the opening round, while Roslovic (who was acquired from the Columbus Blue Jackets at the NHL trade deadline) chipped in two goals and four points during the four-game sweep of the Washington Capitals.

Roslovic's ability to produce in the playoffs and play a top-six role (at times) with the Presidents' Trophy winners should help him as he prepares to be an unrestricted free agent for the first time in his career.

Blake Wheeler, who suffered a devastating leg injury earlier this season, has also resumed skating recently, although a return to the New York lineup is not imminent. They would likely need to get to the Cup Final for him to have a chance

The Edmonton Oilers dispatched the Los Angeles Kings for a third consecutive season, this time in just five games.

The high-powered Oilers used a dynamic power play to pull away, but also showed an ability to defend well. Given how Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl are playing, the Oilers look like Canada's best shot to capture the Stanley Cup since the Montreal Canadiens did it in 1993.

Former Jets winger Evander Kane had two goals and three points in five games and had some fun with members of the media, noting he "loves the drama" when asked how he's been able to elevate his game when the playoffs arrive.

It was a tough series for former Jets centre Pierre-Luc Dubois, who was limited to one goal that he banked in off an Oilers defenceman in five games while racking up 20 penalty minutes.

Dubois was hoping to put an underachieving season behind him with a solid post-season, but he never really got going against the Oilers and now faces another long off-season. He is set to enter the second year of the eight-year contract he signed with the Jets before he was traded to the Kings.

Speaking of former Jets, goalie David Rittich got the call between the pipes for the Kings for the final two games of the playoffs and played well.

After appearing in 24 games with the Kings during the regular season and posting a 2.15 goals-against average and .921 save percentage, Rittich has positioned himself well to earn a backup job as he's set to become an unrestricted free agent again after making US\$875,000 on a one-year, one-way deal this season.

Winnipeg Sun

[Winnipeg Jets' Rick Bowness a finalist for Jack Adams Award as NHL coach of the year](#)

By Ted Wyman

Just three days after the Winnipeg Jets were bounced from the playoffs and a day after he spoke coyly about his future with the team, Rick Bowness was named one of three finalists for the NHL's coach of the year award.

Bowness, Andrew Brunette of the Nashville Predators and Rick Tocchet of the Vancouver Canucks were named as finalists for the Jack Adams Award on Friday.

Bowness, 69, led the Jets to a 52-24-6 record and 110 points during the regular season, at times flirting with first place overall in the NHL. The Jets finished second in the Central Division and the Western Conference and were tied for fourth place overall in the entire NHL with the Florida Panthers.

However, the Jets flopped badly in the playoffs, running into a superior Colorado Avalanche team and falling in five games.

The coach of the year voting, conducted by members of the NHL's Broadcasters Association, was completed before the playoffs began.

Bowness, who has been coaching for 41 years after retiring from the NHL as a player, is a Jack Adams finalist for the first time in his lengthy career. He's also the first Jack Adams finalist for the Jets franchise, dating back to its birth in Atlanta in 1999.

Bowness just completed his 14th season as a head coach, having made stops with the original Winnipeg Jets in 1988, Boston, Ottawa, New York Islanders, Phoenix and Dallas before returning to Winnipeg at the start of the 2022-23 season.

Despite dealing with health problems — both his own and his wife Judy's — Bowness has coached the Jets to a 98-57-9 record over two seasons.

Does he want to continue?

"For the last seven years, since my last season in Tampa, every year I sit down and I talk to Judy, talk to the kids," Bowness said during his season-ending availability with the media on Thursday.

"I will talk to (owner Mark Chipman) and (GM 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."

Tocchet and Brunette also had fine seasons.

Vancouver finished first in the Pacific Division with the third-highest point total (50-23-9, 109 points) in franchise history. This, after missing the playoffs in 2022-23.

In his first full season with the Canucks, Tocchet took the team from 22nd overall in 2022-23 to sixth overall this year.

Brunette, also in his first year coaching the Predators, led them to 47-30-5 record and 99 points a year after they missed the playoffs.

Nashville put together a franchise-record 18-game points streak during the season as they surged into the playoff race and wound up finishing as the first wild-card team in the Western Conference.

Brunette only has been an NHL head coach for two seasons — with two different teams — and he had been nominated for the Jack Adams both times.

He coached the Florida Panthers to a second-overall finish in 2021-22, but was let go after the season in favour of former Jets head coach Paul Maurice.

With Bowness being a finalist, the Jets will be well represented at the NHL Awards, which will be presented after the end of the Stanley Cup final and before the NHL draft in late June.

Jets goalie Connor Hellebuyck will be awarded the William Jennings Trophy, as Winnipeg had the fewest goals against in the league during the regular season.

Hellebuyck also is a finalist for the Vezina Trophy as the NHL's best goaltender and many are predicting that he will win the award for the second time in his career.

The awards may well ring hollow for the Jets after their promising season ended with such disappointment.

However, Bowness still believes his team is on the right track.

"There was growth there," Bowness said, adding he thought his team played better in the playoffs this year than it did last year in losing in five games to the Vegas Golden Knights.

"But 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 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."

Bowness also said he stands by the decisions he made in the playoff series against Colorado, including some of the choices for lines and sitting certain players.

"Here's the problem: If you're not playing well, I'm going to get criticized no matter what," Bowness said. "If you lose, you're going to get criticized. 'He's staying with the same lines.'

"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. They're not always going to be looked at the way I look at them. I don't make rash decisions. I talk to the coaches, I talk to the management."

Global Winnipeg

ANALYSIS: Playoffs ouster proves the Jets are human after all

By John Shannon CJOB

Being the fan of a team can be exhilarating. The highs of a season can be so high. And this season's version of the Jets gave the fanbase a ton of highs.

That's what happens when you win 52 games and have 110 points in an 82-game season. You get the Jennings Trophy-winning team and what is certain to be the Vezina Trophy-winning goaltender.

It can also be heartbreaking. These last few days, I'm sure, have been sad for Jets fans. It wasn't supposed to end like this, so abruptly. It wasn't supposed to be this lopsided, with only five games in the post-season.

But for us, or rather, those who watch the team, or wear their favourite sweater to work and the game and after, life goes on.

Two days after the sadness of losing to the Avalanche, Jets fans get back to real life. They take the kids to school, ponder what to have for lunch, wonder when to go to the lake.

Nowhere do we feel the physical pain it took: playing all those shifts; taking the abuse of the opposition; and managing all the bumps, bruises and breaks that this game presents. It's truly amazing what these men will put their bodies through to win 32 pounds of silver.

Thursday, we heard of the physical pain the Jets went through to try to win the Stanley Cup. And we also heard of the mental anguish that each and every one of them feels about falling short of the objective.

It was revealing to hear the players and the coach talk in terms of being a team, and how hard it was and is to become a champion. That competitive edge that professional athletes have always sets them apart. We see it in a positive light with every goal, every great save, every body check, and every moment a trophy is raised.

But we rarely see the other side of that edge, the one that the losers have to face.

They have to live with it — and not for a couple of days, but at least until next season, and maybe even beyond.

It is truly the greatest reminder that the athletes, the ones we put on the pedestal, are after all, human.

[Winnipeg Jets sign Thomas Milic to entry-level deal](#)

By Russ Hobson Global News

The off-season work has already begun for the Winnipeg Jets just days after their playoff elimination.

The Jets signed goalie Thomas Milic to a three-year entry-level contract worth an average of \$841,700 per season on Friday.

The 21-year-old started the season in the ECHL with the Norfolk Admirals, but by the end of the campaign he was the number one goalie with the AHL's Manitoba Moose.

He appeared in 33 AHL games and had a 19-9-2 record with a 2.72 goals against average. He was chosen as the AHL Player of the Week in March.

The Jets selected Milic in the fifth round (151st overall) in the 2023 NHL Draft.

[Jets head coach Rick Bowness is a finalist for NHL's coach of the year](#)

By Sam Thompson Global News

Rick Bowness may have shouldered the blame for his team's early ouster from the Stanley Cup playoffs, but the veteran head coach of the Winnipeg Jets is getting recognized by the NHL.

The 69-year-old is one of three finalists for this year's Jack Adams Award, as the coach who contributed the most to his team's success.

In his second season as coach with this incarnation of the Jets, Bowness led the club to a 52-24-6 record, finishing second in the Western Conference and fourth in the NHL.

The Jets also set a franchise record for road wins this season, with 25, and won the William M. Jennings Trophy — to be awarded to star goalie Connor Hellebuyck — for the fewest goals allowed in the regular season.

It's been a difficult year for the coach, who had to take a few games off for a medical issue of his own, as well as a more substantial leave early in the season when his wife, who has since recovered, was hospitalized after suffering a seizure.

Bowness, who was also honoured at this season's all-star game, is the franchise's first Jack Adams finalist. The news also marks the first time he's been nominated for the award after more than 2,600 games behind an NHL bench.

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Some of those games were also in Winnipeg, as Bowness previously served as bench-boss for the original Jets in 1988-89, a team he also played for as a forward less than a decade earlier.

He's the only coach to have led both incarnations of the Winnipeg Jets.

Bowness is up for the award against Rick Tocchet of the Vancouver Canucks and Andrew Brunette of the Nashville Predators.

Whether he wins the award or not, there's still no word on whether the Jets' coach will return for another season. At the year-end press conference Thursday, he said he wasn't ready to reveal his future plans.