

## Winnipegjets.com

### *Nehring over concussion, ready for new challenge Zech Nehring (2023, 3rd round) will play at Western Michigan this season.*

By Jamie Thomas

After having the thrill of being drafted in the third round by the Winnipeg Jets in Nashville last summer, Zach Nehring was looking forward to his first season with the Sioux Falls Stampede of the United States Hockey League. After a slow start, he faced some early adversity.

“Definitely quite the experience. Coming into a new league it's tougher competition, new guys. (New) building I wasn't used to that. It's all an adjustment. It was unfortunate, got injured 10 games in and missed about two months with a pretty bad concussion,” said Nehring at Jets development camp earlier this month.

“Didn't get back out there till after Christmas. And the first ten games were an adjustment, but I thought the last 15-20 games was kind of me, how I wanted myself to be performing.”

It was a frustrating experience to say the least for the now 19-year-old especially when it came to the concussion that he suffered at the end of November. Nehring missed out on a critical window to get used to a new league and new teammates.

“The first 10-20 games are kind of where you get your feet wet and feel comfortable. And that was cut short for me,” said Nehring.

“So, it was super tough mentally, just to deal with that and spend a lot of time in my room, just by myself with the lights off because my headaches were so bad. But I'm just grateful it all healed up having any issues since I was glad to just finish off the year.”

A couple challenges during recovery that Nehring had were not being around his teammates and trying to avoid coming back too soon. The Minot product feels that he is past all of the hurdles from the injury and ready to go for the upcoming season.

“The mental side was probably one of the biggest. Obviously, I had lingering issues up in my neck from where I got hit with a stick. So, I had to do some more work on the summer just to kind of make sure more preventative care than anything,” said Nehring.

“And it's made a huge difference had me haven't had any issues since. So, I'm super grateful for that and have been going full throttle. So obviously if something comes up, that's kind of where you take precautions, but it's been good.”

Even though Nehring wasn't able to be around his teammates and coaching staff, he wasn't completely alone. His twin sister was nearby attending college in Sioux Falls and of course, Jets director of player development, Jimmy Roy, was just a phone call away.

“Jimmy especially was a lot of help for me. I mean, he's had a few concussions in his day. So, he's been there, especially playing in the pro level and how to handle that. It's definitely tough. And a lot of people especially on the outside, like they don't understand and how that feels and how you kind of have to go about it,” said Nehring.

"It's a lot of work. A lot of it, you're kind of doing by yourself, you don't really have anyone around you. Unless you're talking to your parents or especially like Jimmy and they were a lot of help for me and I'm super happy to have him in my corner."

Nehring has moved on from the USHL to college hockey for the 2024-25 season. He will begin his first campaign with Western Michigan University this fall.

"Going into college next year. It's bigger, stronger, guys. But I think I'm ready. You know, just the training in the summer has been nice kind of compare yourself and put yourself with those older guys in the weight room especially," said Nehring.

"I think that's the big focus for me. It's just getting stronger and filling out my frame. I'm really excited to play for (head coach) Pat Ferschweiler and the Broncos this year. It'll be an exciting group. We got a lot of young guys, so I'm interested to see how it goes and I'm ready to push myself every day."

## **NHL.com**

### ***Freij makes return to Winnipeg, this time as Jets prospect 'It's so special' to be back after tournaments in city as boy, defenseman says***

By Darrin Bauming

WINNIPEG -- Alfons Freij could say he's back to where it all started when he was just a child -- playing hockey on the other side of the globe.

Selected by the Winnipeg Jets in the second round (No. 37) of the 2024 NHL Draft, the 18-year-old found himself in familiar surroundings when the Sweden-born defenseman took to the ice for development camp at the Hockey For All Centre, the Jets training facility in Winnipeg.

"When I was 9 years old, I was in a tournament here. Two tournaments, actually," Freij said of the intercontinental trip his childhood hockey team took to Canada. "Pretty fun couple weeks here in Winnipeg ... It was such a good experience."

Following the draft, Freij's father re-posted a photo he took of his son at the tournament in 2015, and Winnipeg's social media team shared it on Instagram juxtaposed with Freij in the same pose in the same spot nearly a decade later.

Seeing NHL players up close, Freij and his childhood teammates dreamed of returning.

"We wanted to be there (in the NHL) one day. That was one of my goals," said Freij, who now stands 6-foot-1 and 187 pounds. "My buddy Herman Traff got drafted to [the] New Jersey [Devils] (third round, No. 91, 2024), he was on the same team as me. One of my teammates at home, Joel Svensson, was drafted by the Chicago Blackhawks (fifth round, No. 138, 2024). It's pretty fun to see those boys getting drafted as well."

One can only imagine how surreal it would feel to be drafted to the same NHL city once visited as a kid.

"It was kind of blackout when Winnipeg called my name," Freij said of draft day. "That was a dream come true. It was so cool. It's so special to be part of the Winnipeg Jets."

Freij flew straight from Vegas to Winnipeg the day after the draft.

"You hear about his skating, you hear about him playing over in Europe," Winnipeg general manager Kevin Cheveldayoff said. "But when you get him here in the group, you get excited about those opportunities in front (of him)."

Freij played the majority of last season in the J20 Nationell in Sweden's junior league with 33 points (14 goals, 19 assists) in 40 games with Vaxjo and three points (two goals, one assist) in five playoff games. He also had six points (two goals, four assists) in seven games to help Sweden win a bronze medal at the 2024 IIHF Under-18 World Junior Championship.

"I'm a two way defender who is more offensively minded," he said, describing his game. "I like to have the puck to create scoring chances. I've also got a pretty good shot, I think."

Freij is expected to play this season with Bjorkloven of HockeyAllsvenskan, Sweden's second-tier professional league. He said he knows his game needs to develop even further.

"Especially my defense," he said. "Of course, my offense as well. But my physicality -- I'm going to play with men next year, so use my body a bit more. I've got pretty good size, so use my body a bit more and my physicality."

## **Winnipeg Free Press**

### **Strength in numbers**

By: Mike McIntyre and Ken Wiebe

There are no musical acts performing, no food trucks or mosh pits to be found and no merchandise for sale. For those reasons alone, this particular seasonal gathering doesn't quite pack the same punch that so many others around Manitoba do this time of year.

But make no mistake: The first-ever "summer coaching summit" that begins today is an important one to a Winnipeg Jets organization hoping to hit all the right notes when the curtain rises on a new season in the fall.

Taking centre stage will be new head coach Scott Arniel, who has put together the itinerary for Hockeypalooza 2024.

"There's lots on the schedule. We've got 19 or 20 bullet points," he told the Free Press of the four-day event, which runs through Thursday.

The list includes integrating a pair of new assistant coaches — Dean Chynoweth and Davis Payne — into the systems and structure of a squad that went 52-24-6 last season, finishing fourth-overall in the NHL standings and leading the league in fewest goals against.

Those two men will work with Arniel, who takes over from the retired Rick Bowness, and returning assistants Marty Johnston and Wade Flaherty.

“There will be some teaching. With Dean and Davis, we’ve got to get them up to speed on how we go about our business. Marty and I have been doing lots of prep work to get that started,” said Arniel.

Scheduling, training camp plans, media relations, video usage and all-important special teams — which was a significant sore spot for the Jets last year — are other hot topics.

“I want some of their opinions and some of their thoughts on how they did it in other organizations,” Arniel said of the newcomers. “The other side is that both of them are going to have a big part in the speciality teams. I’ve mentioned how much it is important to me and our team that those areas get better. So that will be a big emphasis, as well.”

Staff from the Manitoba Moose will also be in attendance, with the idea of ensuring both the big club and the farm team are on the same page.

One of the primary focal points during the summit will be analytics, which Arniel said at his introductory news conference in May will take on a greater role under his watch.

“There’s a gazillion different statistics out there that can make you look good, make you look bad, things that you can use, things that are overkill,” he said.

“So, what we’re trying to do is funnel it to our coaching staff, so we can determine, ‘OK, what is it that we want? What do you guys want, what do you guys (in the analytics department) have?’” Arniel explained.

“We make that a little bit smaller and the stuff that gets to the players has to be even more fine-tuned, because players have a lot going on and we don’t want to overkill them in that department. But if there are things we can feed to them, that’s where we’re planning on going.”

The move is being applauded by external experts in the field, who believe the Jets have been lagging behind some of their competition when it comes to the so-called fancy stats game.

“It would certainly seem like the Jets haven’t used analytics fully to their capacity. Especially compared to teams that are all-in on analytics, like Colorado, Florida and Carolina,” said Byron Bader, the Calgary-born creator of Hockey Prospecting, a data-driven player comparison and drafting tool.

His mention of Colorado is noteworthy, since the Avalanche just faced the Jets in the first round of the playoffs last spring, dropping the first game before winning the next four. Following that series, the Denver Post ran a story on how the club used analytics as “the secret sauce” to make adjustments on the fly to overwhelm Winnipeg.

Avalanche defenceman Jack Johnson, an 18-year veteran, described it this way to the Post when explaining how analytics helped them beat the Jets.

“I think it’s super useful for us. (Coaches) break it down and simplify it. I think it puts it into a perspective for the players that takes away any opinion or emotion, because numbers are unemotional,” he said.

For the second consecutive post-season, Rick Bowness was unable to launch his own counter-punch, and his group was quickly ushered into the golf season.

“This is a great example of using analytics in real time to make adjustments to swing the game in your favour,” Bader said. “Although it was a small game sample, they have millions of pieces of data from every puck touch over the past five or 10 years.

“So you can glean from the data that Winnipeg played X way in Game 1 and, based on hundreds of games historically where teams maybe played similar, if we react with Y then this can be how we counteract how they beat us in Game 1.

“The Avs obviously picked up on something and never looked back.”

“This is a great example of using analytics in real time to make adjustments to swing the game in your favour... The Avs obviously picked up on something and never looked back.”  
– Byron Bader

Vegas did the same thing in 2023, dropping the opener to the Jets before winning four straight. Was this a case of an old-school coach like Bowness disregarding the data that was coming his way in favour of the so-called “eye test?”

Some will draw that conclusion, especially with Arniel now leaning into the subject.

“Making sure everybody’s on the same page, making sure they’re all using the same stats, and when they speak to one another, making sure they’re all talking in a common language to one another,” said Micah Blake McCurdy, a Halifax-based mathematician who has done consulting work with five NHL clubs in the past and now runs HockeyViz, another data-fuelled website.

“That’s a lot of organizational infrastructure work. If you don’t actually have all the people on the same page, you can have the smartest people you like doing tremendous work, and it goes for nothing.”

For those reasons, how coaches and players use the data is also important. Bader said some of Winnipeg’s brightest offensive stars and biggest minute-munchers — Mark Scheifele and Kyle Connor up front, and Neal Pionk on the blue line — are some of the biggest culprits when it comes to the defensive side, meaning caution is often needed when it comes to their deployment.

“They have an all-world goalie in Connor Hellebuyck that can cover up a lot of mistakes,” said Bader. “Teams that are, perhaps, more engaged on the analytics side may use those types of players more strategically.”

McCurdy said the usage now extends well beyond things such as individual matchups within a game to areas including contract negotiations. Analytics are regularly brought up at arbitration hearings and free-agent signings. Simply relying on instinct and experience in a numbers game is a recipe for disaster.

“It’s going to have a certain amount of blind spots,” he said. “So one of the things you can do, if you have a disciplined process, is you can find the most severe errors that your instinct might lead you into, because it’s the precisely the kind of thing you’re not going to see coming, because you’re not weighing all factors or you’re using your gut.”

Winnipeg's analytics department is largely an anonymous, behind-the-scenes group — that's how teams prefer it — but its role will likely take on an increased importance with Arniel now at the helm.

"Analytics and data analysis aren't going anywhere. It's becoming more and more prominent," Bader said. "The motto in nearly any industry right now, not just sports, is, 'the more data the better.'

"So while they're, perhaps, a bit later to the game in terms of what they have set up analytically and how they're using it, you've gotta join the fold at some point. All the best teams that are winning currently are heavily focused on analytics."

### [Could Laine come back? What's up with McGroarty? Your Jets questions answered](#)

By: Mike McIntyre and Ken Wiebe

The dog days of summer are upon us. But our mailbox continues to overflow with questions about the Winnipeg Jets. They may be out of sight right now, but the NHL club is never out of mind.

From a potential reunion with an old friend, the mysterious status of a top prospect, to no shortage of roster concerns and complaints, Free Press hockey writers Ken Wiebe and Mike McIntyre had plenty to wade through this month.

Let's get right to it, shall we:

#### *1. What are the odds of Patrik Laine coming back? David*

Wiebe: The prospect of the second overall pick of the 2016 NHL Draft returning to the Jets is an intriguing one and it's generated plenty of buzz on social media. Determining the odds of Laine suiting up again in a Jets' uniform? That's a bit more complicated to try and determine for a variety of reasons.

Laine has been cleared to return from the NHL/NHLPA Player Assistance program and the most important thing for him is that he's in a better place.

That should open the door for him to be traded, though Elliotte Friedman reported on Friday he is still recovering from shoulder surgery.

One of the impediments to a trade is the \$8.7 million AAV he will carry for the next two seasons. That salary would be tough for the Jets to absorb and even if the Columbus Blue Jackets were to retain some of it (leaving an AAV in the \$6 million range for the sake of this conversation), the next question relates to what the asking price might be.

When healthy, Laine has been a productive player but he's been hampered by injuries during the past several seasons.

He needs a change of scenery and it makes sense to question whether he'd be interested in returning to the place he enjoyed his greatest successes — many of them as an 18- and 19-year-old when Laine filled the net with his booming shot and filled notebooks with his colourful quotes that included "Winnipeg is good."

The Finnish forward was wildly popular and provided plenty of highlight-reel moments during the early stages of his career. Laine also helped give the Jets global appeal, as evidenced during the Global Series in his home country in 2019.

Yes, things were rocky at the end of the relationship for Laine and the Jets and it was time for a change, but with the benefit of hindsight, one would expect both sides probably wished they had been able to find a way to stay together.

Could that lead to a reunion? Maybe, but at least at this stage of the game, the odds are more likely in the range of 10 to 15 per cent. That number could rise in the summer of 2026 when Laine is scheduled to be an unrestricted free agent.

*2. After 13 years of Chevy's "draft & development" model, and now entering year 14, we've proven that we're not a playoff contender. Players want out and season ticket holders are taking off at an alarming rate. What is True North's vision? Joey*

McIntyre: I can see the glass is definitely half-empty in your cup, Joey!

I wouldn't agree the Jets aren't a playoff contender, considering they're coming off a 110-point season in which they finished fourth-overall in the NHL standings.

Did they disappoint in the playoffs? Absolutely, and for a second straight year.

I'd also take issue with the "players want out" comment. Winnipeg's track record is actually quite strong when it comes to retaining talent, whether that's drafted and developed stars (Hellebuyck, Morrissey, Scheifele, Connor, Ehlers, Lowry) who sign long-term extensions, or trade adds (Niederreiter, Namestnikov, DeMelo) who opt to stay.

Season tickets are an issue, for sure, although the second-half trend last year was encouraging.

All of which is to say: this coming season is another big one for the organization. Not only will they need to remain competitive on the ice, but they need to continue making progress when it comes to re-engaging with the community and plenty of lost fans.

They'll once again spend to near the salary cap ceiling, and the vision continues to be icing a team capable of winning the Stanley Cup one day. Duplicating last year's 82-game campaign would be a big step in that direction.

*3. Are the Jets going to match last year's point total? Are they finally going to advance further in the playoffs? Bobby*

Wiebe: The Jets took a significant step forward last season, eclipsing 100 points for the second time in franchise history and finishing tied for fourth in the NHL with 110 points.

The crystal ball is always a bit cloudier and it's risky to make predictions before training camp even gets underway, since the roster picture isn't nearly complete.

I'll answer the first question this way. It will be difficult for the Jets to match last season's point total, but they could easily be in the 100-to-109 point range and still compete with the Dallas Stars and Colorado Avalanche for the Central Division crown.

The more pressing matter for the Jets is trying to figure out the playoff portion of the equation. Qualifying for the playoffs isn't an easy task, but after consecutive early exits in the first round, the Jets need to show that they've learned from the disappointments and are ready to move forward.

How far the Jets go this season is nothing more than a guess right now, but I would suspect they will win more than just one playoff game next spring and could win multiple rounds if a few things fall into place — and a trade or two get made to bolster the roster.

*4. Nothing has happened to put fans in the seats, actually the opposite. So the team needed a few things, at least two good defencemen, one right-handed shot at least, that was not addressed. Right now they have three NHL defencemen and the balance AHL material. Morrissey, DeMelo and Samberg. Needed two forwards, retain Monahan, pay him what he is worth, Columbus did, surely Winnipeg can compete with Columbus as a city to play in. And find one other goal scorer. How can a team with just a few needs, not do anything? Dwayne*

McIntyre: You won't get an argument from me that the Jets, at least on paper, appear to have taken a step back from the club that wasn't good enough to get it done in the playoffs last year.

Sean Monahan, Tyler Toffoli, Brenden Dillon and Nate Schmidt are all gone, as is backup goaltender Laurent Brossoit. That being said, I'm holding off judgment until I see how those holes are filled — specifically what some young players who are going to get increased opportunities can do.

That includes the likes of Dylan Samberg, Cole Perfetti, hopefully a full season of a healthy Gabe Vilardi and the likes of top prospects such as Ville Heinola, Brad Lambert, Nikita Chibrikov and Elias Salomonsson.

It may not be the way they initially drew it up, but the door is now wide open for a bit of a youth movement here which could prove beneficial.

*5. My question regards Rutger McGroarty. Doesn't he have college time left or did the Jets sign him? Another year in college could help him mature and maybe open up the possibility of him making the NHL roster in 2025-26. It seems to me they shouldn't give up easily on such a good prospect. Brian*

McIntyre: The Jets have not signed McGroarty, but he is eligible to play college for two more seasons before he would become a free agent able to sign with any team.

Even then, he couldn't sign with another team until Aug. 15, 2026. In that sense, the organization has time on its side.

Going back to Michigan this fall isn't the end of the world, for sure, although it might feel that way for McGroarty given the fact he apparently believes he is currently NHL-ready. That's the sticking point right now with Winnipeg (and, by the sounds of it, potential trade partners), but going back to college rather than take the risk you might have to spend a bit of time in the AHL working on your pro game would seem to be a rather impractical solution for the player.



I don't believe the Jets will "give up" on him in the sense they're going to move him for pennies on the dollar if he sticks to his guns and refuses to sign. But his mindset is also making it difficult to find much of a market for him at this point. And so this proverbial game of chicken continues.

*6. McGroarty seemingly was on his way elsewhere pre-draft. Now, it's slowed. What do you see as more likely: He's traded before the season begins, prior to trade deadline or the relationship mends? Terrag*

Wiebe: It wasn't just smoke surrounding McGroarty leading into and coming out of the 2024 NHL Draft. There was plenty of action and communication with multiple teams about his future and several close calls when it came to a potential trade.

Neither the Jets nor McGroarty's camp are interested in discussing the situation publicly, which isn't a surprise. But it also makes it difficult to discern what the next steps are going to be.

As it stands right now, McGroarty plans to return for his junior season with the University of Michigan Wolverines. He'll play a big role there and be part of the leadership group. The stakes are high for McGroarty when it comes to his development. He wants to be in the NHL and barring a late summer change, he will spend the next college season trying to show that he's ready to make the jump as soon as the Wolverines season is over.

The better he plays, the better his chances are of making that happen. Whether that's with the Jets or another team remains to be seen. If McGroarty is a finalist for the Hobey Baker Award, that's only going to increase his value on both fronts.

The Jets haven't closed the door on trying to find a way to get the relationship with McGroarty back on track. Because he wasn't moved at the draft, determining his trade value isn't easy, otherwise a deal probably would have been made already.

Of the scenarios offered, it seems most likely to me that McGroarty will be part of an NHL trade deadline deal that brings back a package that includes a defenceman who is under team control for multiple seasons.

*7. In your estimation, will the Jets make any significant roster moves from now until training camp or does that depend on the McGroarty stalemate? How much do the Jets expect to get now in return for such a highly publicized situation and a 14th overall pick? Ed*

McIntyre: The longer the summer goes on, the more convinced I am that what you see is what you're going to get when it comes to the Jets.

Other than signing restricted free agent Cole Perfetti to a new deal, I don't expect much other movement. Depending on the number Perfetti's cap hit comes in at, the Jets could have plenty of cap space still available to keep their eyes open for bargains that may be available courtesy of teams who will need to shed salary before the season starts, so that's worth keeping an eye on.

*8. Which teams are in cap hell and might swap out some high-dollar talent that the Jets can capitalize on? Mark*

Wiebe: According to Puck Pedia, the Washington Capitals are the team with the toughest situation right now at more than \$10 million over the salary cap, but the number is a bit

deceiving, since Niklas Backstrom (\$9.5M) is likely staying on long term injured reserve and there are questions about the future of fellow forward T.J. Oshie (who has one season at \$5.75M and could also be heading for LTIR).

There was some chatter around the 2024 NHL Draft that the Jets and Capitals were considering a deal that involved centre Connor McMichael. McMichael is under contract for two more seasons at \$2.1M and then will be a restricted free agent. McMichael was bumped down the depth chart with the arrival of former Jets centre PL Dubois.

Jets head coach Scott Arniel would be familiar with McMichael from his time with the Capitals and he would immediately find himself in the battle for the 2C job that is vacant after the departure of Sean Monahan in free agency.

The Vegas Golden Knights are currently \$3.64M over the cap, but there isn't really a fit similar to the one that was explored in October of 2020 when Paul Stastny returned to the Jets as the Golden Knights worked to shed some salary.

It's not just the cap ceiling to consider here though, as there will be some teams that won't be contenders who are looking to move out some money. That's an area the Jets are likely to focus on, whether it be during the remainder of the offseason or at some point during the 2024-25 season.

*9. Reviewing the Carolina Hurricanes' player adds/losses, the Jets situation doesn't look bad. Do the Jets stand pat or do you see a top-4 D-man or 2C upgrade before camp? Craig*

Wiebe: The Hurricanes had a large number of pending unrestricted free agents and there were certainly notable departures, from defencemen Brett Pesce (New Jersey Devils) and Brady Skjei (Nashville Predators) and forwards Teuvo Teravainen (Chicago Blackhawks), Stefan Noesen (Devils) and Jake Guentzel (Tampa Bay Lightning), among others.

But the Hurricanes retained Jordan Martinook, added Stanley Cup pedigree and feistiness in William Carrier, took a flier on former Jets forward Jack Roslovic and revamped the D corps with Sean Walker and Shayne Gostisbehere and also signed Jaccob Slavin to a long-term extension.

New GM Eric Tulsky is having a solid offseason so far, though he needs to get a new contract for Winnipegger Seth Jarvis and fellow restricted free agent Martin Necas (unless he is moved in a deal).

As for the Jets, right now they seem to be lurking in the weeds and investigating what else the offseason will bring.

Without fully knowing what other players around the league are available (and what the asking prices are), it's tough to know for sure what Jets GM Kevin Cheveldayoff is thinking about his roster.

I wouldn't rule out a blockbuster of some kind, but the Jets are probably comfortable with the roster they currently have.

Jets head coach Scott Arniel told me last week he would see how the battle for the second-line centre job plays out, but went out of his way to praise the job Vladislav Namestnikov did in the role before Sean Monahan was brought in.

As for the defence corps, unless the Jets find an upgrade for Neal Pionk, the top 4 is set. As of now, the most likely scenario sees Pionk and Samberg playing together. That leaves Colin Miller to skate alongside either Ville Heinola or Logan Stanley, unless Haydn Fleury forces himself into the equation (which is possible). Heinola has played on his off side before, so it's possible he spends some time with Samberg.

If the Jets are going to acquire a top-4 D-man, it would come in a trade involving Nikolaj Ehlers and that seems less likely right now.

I expect the Jets will want to see how the defence corps holds up after the departures of Brenden Dillon and Nate Schmidt. If an upgrade is required, a pre-emptive strike prior to the trade deadline seems like it could be in the cards — especially if the 2C job is filled internally by Brad Lambert or Perfetti.

*10. Rapid fire questions: Will Ehlers play on the top line? Will Lambert make the team at 2C? Bridge or long-term for Perfetti? Sign or trade McGroarty? Bill*

McIntyre: I'm going to say, in order: No (he'll start on the second line, but top power play unit).

No (I suspect Vlad Namestnikov starts the season in that spot).

Bridge (although I firmly believe a long-term deal is the better play for both Perfetti and the Jets.

And trade (although I think this situation will drag on past the start of the season and maybe all the way into next summer, so don't hold your breath.)

*11. The line of Kyle Connor-Mark Scheifele-Gabriel Vilardi was horrible last year. Connor and Scheifele have no track record of success to fall back on except when with Nikolaj Ehlers or Blake Wheeler in 2017-18. Are the Jets really planning to run them as a top line again? @MennoKnight427*

Wiebe: First of all, horrible is a relative term and in this case, it feels like an exaggeration.

Secondly, sample size is something to consider — especially when looking at the injuries suffered to both Connor and Vilardi at various stages of last season. This is not to throw out the underlying numbers (which certainly could have used improvement) or to suggest there isn't evidence that Scheifele and Connor haven't been outscored by their opposition previously).

But the early injury to Vilardi and Connor's departure from the lineup in December, coupled with Vilardi's late-season ailment, meant that the trio always seemed to have at least one player coming back and trying to get back up to speed.

Vilardi is a smart two-way player who is strong along the boards and it's easy to see why a coach would think he would mesh well with the skillsets of Scheifele and Connor and it wouldn't be surprising if the Jets rolled out those three players as the top unit at various points of the season.

I also don't think for a second that it's the only combination Scott Arniel will use this season when he puts his lines together for training camp. Provided he remains on the roster (which I

expect him to), Nikolaj Ehlers will be under consideration for top-line duty and the same could be said for Cole Perfetti once his next contract is signed.

The challenge for Scheifele and Connor when they play together is to ensure they outproduce the opponent. Of course, shot share and high danger chances produced versus allowed is important and will be part of the discussion. There's no denying Scheifele and Connor have been productive players during the course of their respective careers and have a keen understanding of where each other are going to be on the ice.

There's also no denying Ehlers-Scheifele-Vilardi had an exceptional run when Connor was out of the lineup, but that hot stretch didn't continue coming out of the Christmas break, nor did it ignite immediate chemistry when Rick Bowness went back to them late in the season.

That's not to suggest it should not be looked at again either. Connor and Perfetti played well together at points a few seasons ago when Dubois was at centre, so that's a duo that could be used as well. There are a lot of moving parts and one of the storylines of training camp will include what direction Arniel goes when it comes to the early look at the top line.

*12. Is Elias Salomonsson going to be at the full Jets training camp and get an honest chance at making the team or is he staying home or going to the Moose? The Jets desperately need someone to step up and take the RHD position and give some excitement and hope to the fans. Stuart*

Wiebe: Salomonsson will be at training camp and the plan is definitely for him to be playing in North America this season and he will certainly be given an honest chance to show what he can do.

He's in the mix for a job on the right side but would need to outplay several players — as he's not going to be kept on the NHL roster as the seventh or eighth D-man. The Jets' second round pick in the 2022 NHL Draft is coming off a fantastic season in the SHL with Skelleftea that included a league championship.

Salomonsson is a mobile puck-mover that plays with an edge, all qualities that are welcome on the Jets' defence corps.

While Salomonsson has been playing professionally in his home country and has the benefit of international experience with Sweden at the World Junior Hockey Championship, it will be up to him to show that he's ready to make the jump to the Jets — whether that's directly out of training camp or after gaining some additional seasoning with the Manitoba Moose of the American Hockey League.

When Salomonsson is ready, he will provide plenty of excitement and hope to the fan base, as he's the top defence prospect in the organization and is only 20 years old.

But that's not going to be a factor in the initial decision of where he starts the campaign. There are obvious benefits to Salomonsson playing more of a top-pairing role in the AHL rather than skating on the Jets' third pairing. The long-term development of the player is the primary concern here and while Salomonsson projects to be a top-4 NHLer before long, achieving that goal is likely going to be helped by some time with the Moose.

Asking Salomonsson to start the season on the second pair alongside Dylan Samberg is a big ask. Some patience is likely going to be required, but it won't be long before he helps stabilize the right side.

## **Winnipeg Sun**

### ***Jets' Cole Perfetti has options, comparables for next contract***

By Scott Billeck

Cole Perfetti has an important decision to make this summer.

The 22-year-old restricted free agent needs a new contract before next season, and it's not just short-term options sitting on the table.

What I've been able to dig up this off-season is this: I believe there has been communication between Perfetti and newly appointed Winnipeg Jets head coach Scott Arniel and his coaching staff where the player heard some positive things.

Why is that important?

I'm led to believe it could sway Perfetti to sign longer-term, provided the Jets are interested in going the same route they went with Mark Scheifele, Nikolaj Ehlers, and Kyle Connor in the past.

That's a significant development after Perfetti seemed to fall out of favour with the retired Rick Bowness.

With Bowness no longer in charge, Arniel's willingness to play and trust Perfetti in a top-six role with expanded opportunity on the power play, and the club's pivot to leaning on their youth going forward, there's a road to a longer-term deal.

At first, a short-term bridge contract may seem the most sensible for the 2020 10th overall pick.

Such a deal would allow Perfetti to maximize his first long-term NHL contract a couple of summers from now after continuing his development as a young player at the NHL level.

Perfetti had a strong first half to the 2023-24 season, scoring 14 goals and 29 points in the first 40 games.

A 23-game goalless streak, a demotion to the fourth line, and several healthy scratches marred his second half.

Perfetti wrestled with problems many young players do. He has the skills and the smarts, and this past year will help him build confidence in dealing with the ebbs and flows of a season.

The other option, of course, is to settle into a long-term extension, which would seem most practical for general manager Kevin Cheveldayoff and the Jets.

Sure, Perfetti has dealt with injuries in the past (two season-ending ones, at that), but his health wasn't an issue last season, and he proved he could adapt to how physically his opponents play him.

A long-term deal would offer guaranteed money to Perfetti now and cap certainty for the Jets going forward. Perfetti is likely to eventually outplay whatever AAV he and the club agree on.

So, what are the comparables with each option?

Short-term contract projections have put Perfetti's AAV around \$3 million, but his representation would be wise to look at Shane Pinto's two-year extension in Ottawa.

Pinto's AAV came in at \$3.75 million.

Why Pinto?

Perfetti and Pinto have played the same 140 games at the NHL level, with Perfetti (75) outproducing Pinto (70) by five points despite a sizeable gap in average ice time and opportunity.

Pinto, suspended for 41 games this past year for violating the league's gambling policy, averaged 4:30 more than Perfetti per game when he returned and 2:30 overall throughout his career.

Longer-term deals have him in the five-to-seven-year range, with an AAV in the \$5.5-million region.

However, Quinton Byfield provided the best comparable yet regarding a longer-term deal.

Byfield signed a five-year, \$31.25 million (\$6.25 million AAV) earlier this summer with the Los Angeles Kings.

The second-overall pick in 2020, Byfield has played 39 more games than Perfetti, but Perfetti's production rate has been higher, scoring 0.54 points per game compared to Byfield's 0.49.

And Perfetti can confidently point to that number, knowing he's done so with lesser talent around him.

Byfield, a natural centre like Perfetti, played on the wing on L.A.'s top line with Anze Kopitar and Adrian Kempe.

He took a big step this year as such, aided by averaging 16:29 per game playing beside the Kings' two best forwards. He finished with 20 goals and 55 points in 80 games.

Perfetti, who had 19 goals and 38 points in 71 games, played nearly three fewer minutes (13:35) each night, rarely touched the top line, and spent a good chunk later in the year on the fourth.

A steady, increased role with the Jets would almost certainly mean better production, and Perfetti's glowing analytics back that up.

He still scored fifth on the Jets last season despite his second-half slump, reduced role and limited ice time.

He can also point to some solid statistics with Arniel at the helm.

During the first spell with Bowness out due to his wife's health scare, Perfetti's ice time and shift count rose, and he scored at a point-per-game clip, with six goals and eight assists in 14 games.

And Arniel won't be filling in for anyone next season.

From Winnipeg's side, signing Perfetti to a long-term deal would boost the club's tepid off-season and help shift the focus away from the uncertain situation surrounding 2022 first-rounder Rutger McGroarty.

If Perfetti is willing to entertain committing the next several years of his career to Winnipeg — and I'm made to believe he is — the team can add another homegrown prospect to the list of those who've committed to the city.

Scheifele signed a eight-year, \$49 million deal out of his ELC in 2014. He re-upped last fall on another seven-year pact worth \$59 million.

Jacob Trouba and Josh Morrissey elected to go the bridge route (both making just north of \$3 million per season). Trouba was eventually traded, while Morrissey got a nice pay raise (just in time for the team after Bowness turned him into a Norris contender).

Ehlers (six years, \$42 million) and Connor (seven years, \$50 million) extended long-term deals out of their ELCs, including Ehlers, who signed his before the final year of that deal.