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Future Jets take next step at development camp

Lambert: "It's fun to show the young guys around and kind of be a leader."

By Jamie Thomas

WINNIPEG – You know it's officially summer when the Winnipeg Jets kick off development camp at hockey for all centre.

Fans got to see prospects like Brad Lambert, Colby Barlow and Thomas Milic while also getting their first look at the draft class of the 2024, Alfons Freij, Kevin He, Markus Lopenen and Kieron Walton. Jets director of player development Jimmy Roy shared his thoughts on the new faces after the first on ice session on Thursday.

"All of them are really nice kids. I don't know them as players. One thing in player development, you go around, and you watch your players, and you get to know your kids when you draft them," said Roy.

"It's early, but meeting with them at the draft and getting to speak with them and seeing them in person here now, this is where the relationship starts. It's been good so far. Really enjoyed it."

It's been an action-packed day and a half already with a team dinner, pickleball and an appearance from Jets captain Adam Lowry.

"He talked about his path from where he grew up with his dad and being a hockey family. He talked about where he lived, the places he played junior hockey in Swift Current. He talked about the things that he does to prepare himself for games," said Roy.

"His path, the first time he was sent down and how disappointed he was, how he had to go back down to St. John's at the time, the Moose at the time, and work on his game and figure that out to get back up there. Those are all great growing experiences that kids are going, it's going to happen. So, to hear it from him, I think it has huge impact, more than I could ever tell a kid or a coach could ever tell a kid."

While this is some players first trip to Winnipeg, that is not the case for 2024 second round selection Alfons Freij.

"The whole story is when I was nine years old, I was in a tournament here. Two tournaments, actually. Pretty fun couple weeks here in Winnipeg," said Freij.

"We lost all our games, so that wasn't good. But I had such a good time here in Winnipeg. So that's the story about it."

The young defenceman has been here since Sunday and has had some Swedish tour guides showing him around.

"Elias (Salomonsson) and me, we've got the same agent. That's why we've known each other from the beginning," said Freij.

“Hooked up with Fabian (Wagner) as well, he’s a pretty good buddy who’s been taking care of me. Have played against him sometimes.”

Freij said he plans to work on his physicality this summer in order to prepare himself to play against men next season in Sweden.

HISTORY MADE BY HE

The Jets made Niagra IceDog forward Kevin He the highest drafted Chinese born player in NHL history last weekend. Winnipeg traded up in the fourth round with Buffalo so that they could select He who had a solid season with 53 points (31 G, 22 A) for a Niagra team that finished last in the OHL standings in 2023-24.

He plans on showing off his skills and competing hard at this week’s camp and is looking forward to all of the off-ice stuff as well.

“Yeah, there’s a lot of stuff behind the scenes, but that’s what really helps us get together and get to know the guys around,” said He.

“We all come from all over the world. Some I’ve played against, some I haven’t. Just try to get to know them.”

DIFFERENT EXPERIENCE FOR LAMBERT

Brad Lambert is now one of the seasoned veterans of development camp after he was the Jets second selection of the first round in 2022. The Finnish forward is coming off a solid season with the Manitoba Moose as he was named to the AHL’s All Rookie Team with 55 points in 64 games.

As a guy who has been here before, Lambert just wants to help the new guys

“Yeah, I guess. It was funny. We were talking about it with Chaz (Lucius), we feel old for the first time in our life,” said Lambert.

“So, but ya know, it’s fun to show the young guys around and kind of be a leader.”

The 20-year-old got to make his NHL debut on the final night of the regular season at Canada Life Centre against Vancouver registering his first NHL point (assist) in the win over the Canucks. Jets general manager Kevin Cheveldayoff recently said that there could be some opportunities for the younger players in the organization in the fall, Lambert said he’s super excited about that possibility.

“Obviously there’s a lot of work ahead of me this summer,” said Lambert.

“So that’s kind of my thought process, is taking it a day at a time trying to get as much better as I can. So that come training camp and ready to compete.”

Lambert along with his Moose teammates went through some notable adversity last season. Manitoba went on a long losing streak early in the campaign but recovered nicely with a huge push at the end of the year to make the playoffs.

“Yeah, I think to see how that group kind of came together and I've said this many times in the interview, when you go through a time like that you kind of come together or you fall apart,” said Lambert.

“And that team came together, a big part of it was the veteran leaders and kind of learning from them on how they handled everything and how they brought us together and one day I'll be the older guy to kind of learn from them and be able to do the same thing.”

INJURY NOTES

Elias Salomonsson did not skate today but will be on the ice for the remainder of development camp. Meanwhile, fellow defenceman Garret Brown (lower body) is here in Winnipeg but will not be taking part of any of the on-ice activities. Brown should be ready to go for the start of the 2024-2025 season at the University of Denver.

Chaz Lucius (upper body) skated alone this morning as he continues to recover from surgery. Danny Zhilkin (upper body) was on the ice but was wearing a yellow non-contact jersey.

Winnipeg Free Press

Disappointment spurs goaltender DiVincentiis to refine his game

By: Ken Wiebe

Dom DiVincentiis was riding the wave.

Nine months ago, the Winnipeg Jets seventh round pick in the 2022 NHL Draft was the reigning Ontario Hockey League goalie of the year and had the inside track on being the starting goalie for Team Canada at the 2024 World Junior Hockey Championship.

DiVincentiis had taken part in his second NHL training camp with the Jets and showed well before he was reassigned to the North Bay Battalion of the OHL last October.

That's when things took an unexpected turn.

Following a solid six-game block to open the campaign, DiVincentiis went through a rough patch that saw him allow 48 goals in a 10-game span between Oct. 19 and Dec. 7.

Instead of going into Team Canada camp bursting with confidence, DiVincentiis was reeling.

By the time the final cuts were made, not only was DiVincentiis no longer in contention to be the starter, he actually found himself on the outside looking in.

While that was definitely a shock to the system, going through the experience actually helped DiVincentiis get his game back on track.

“Absolutely. That's adversity that you've got to deal with. It's every kid's dream to make that team and it's a very tough roster to make,” said DiVincentiis, who is in Winnipeg this week for his third round of Jets development camp “There are tons of amazing other goalies and players that were a part of that team. You've got to go there and you've got to earn a spot on that team. I fell short of that, but it's a learning lesson and for next time I've got to work on certain things that will get me on that team. You learn from that.

“That’s ultimately one of the biggest things that was able to turn around my second half was using that as motivation every day and remembering the adversity I went through and picking myself up from it and using that as fuel. It was a bit of a kick in the butt, as people would say, to get going.”

Get going is exactly what DiVincentiis did.

Rather than lament the missed opportunity to represent his country, DiVincentiis picked himself off the mat and got back to doing what he does best — making saves with regularity.

One of the many conversations DiVincentiis had in the aftermath of the Team Canada disappointment was a candid conversation with Manitoba Moose goalie coach Drew MacIntyre.

“I called him and gave him some hard truths. The way he was playing at the time, he didn’t really deserve it,” said MacIntyre. “So, to his credit, he took it and by the next time I talked to him, he had re-evaluated his outlook and everything. He made some changes and in my opinion, he was the best goalie in the league in the second half. If you look at the analytics and the numbers, it’s tough to say anybody was better.

“I said to him when he got cut, anybody can turn it around in the offseason. If you can turn this around mid-season, that shows very well for yourself, that’s a skill. And he did.”

As difficult as some of those bumps in the road were for Divincentiis to navigate, they should serve him well in the grand scheme of things.

“I knew that winning the top goalie (in the OHL) at 18 years old was going to bring some challenges for him — and it did. It really did. I think he got distracted,” said MacIntyre. “It was challenging for him. He went back and he struggled. He had to learn how to handle that type of success. I can relate. When I played, I was great at (handling) adversity. If you threw me adversity, I was awesome at it. Then I would have some success and be like, ‘Whoa.’ I didn’t know how to handle it.

“Long term, everything that happened last year was great for him. That’s not saying that I’m happy that it happened and he didn’t make Team Canada and all of that. But his attitude has been awesome.”

The ability to regroup on the fly is something DiVincentiis took a great deal of pride in.

“Ultimately, you come to (Jets) camp and you’re riding a bit of a high. You were here for a while and you were able to get on (the ice) with the pros, you go back to junior and you’re excited to start the season and all of a sudden, it starts slipping away from you a little bit,” said DiVincentiis. “It’s tough. I won’t lie. It’s definitely a hard experience to go through. But, the people that are going to make it to the next level are the ones that are able to battle that adversity and fight through it and be able to turn it around quickly. I feel that’s what I did, turn that around and learn from my mistakes. The way I finished the season is how I want to start next season.”

One of the other things DiVincentiis did last season was keep a close eye on the Jets and specifically, Vezina Trophy winner Connor Hellebuyck.

“You pick up on certain things he does that make him special. He’s the goalie of the year in the NHL and he’s the best goalie in the world,” said DiVincentiis. “To pick up on some of the little things that he does is very important to me.”

DiVincentiis suffered an injury to his right ankle in the second game of the OHL playoffs, but he’s back to full health and ready for what’s next — turning professional this fall.

Whether that means nailing down a spot with the Moose in the American Hockey League or following a similar path to that 2023 fifth-rounder Thomas Milic who started last season with the Norfolk Admirals of the ECHL remains to be seen.

With the Jets adding Kaapo Kahkonen and Eric Comrie to the goalie depth chart on July 1, some seasoning in the ECHL could be required for DiVincentiis.

“There’s all sorts of options, we haven’t sat down and made those decisions,” said MacIntyre. “He’s got instincts. He’s a student. He’s athletic and he has all of the skills. He gets a little — I don’t want to say the word busy. He needs to bring more ease to his game, so it’s more smooth. At times, he can be a little rigid. He needs to smooth it out or refine. We’ll do it. He’s all in and I can’t wait to see what he can do here.”

[Winnipeg tourney lit fire under Freij Jets 2024 draft pick back nine years after childhood visit](#)

By: Mike McIntyre

Alfons Freij was nine years old when he travelled with his father from their native Sweden to a far-flung place in the middle of Canada to compete in a pair of high-level youth hockey tournaments.

His team didn’t win a single game.

The long-distance trip wasn’t a total loss, however. Freij got an up-close look at the practice facility of the Winnipeg Jets — even posing for a picture under two towering posters of Mark Scheifele and Jacob Trouba — which he admits lit a bit of a fire.

“Wanted to be there one day,” he said Thursday, speaking inside the very same Hockey For All Centre that was known as the Iceplex back then. “That was one of my goals.”

Talk about a full-circle moment. The now 18-year-old Freij re-enacted the photo this week for the Jets social media team as one of the newest members of the organization, fresh off being drafted 37th-overall by Winnipeg last Saturday in Las Vegas.

Summer development camp is in session, and a wide-eyed Freij is soaking up every second of it.

“It’s so, so special to be a part of the Winnipeg Jets,” the smooth-skating defenceman said following the first of four on-ice sessions. “Such a good day here, nice to be with all the boys.”

A total of 35 players are participating in the camp, which is led by director of player development Jimmy Roy. The roster includes 17 drafted players and 18 free-agent invitees.

Because of that, this week means different things to different skaters.

For Freij and three others from the class of 2024 — fourth-rounder Kevin He, fifth-rounder Markus Lopenen and sixth-rounder Kieron Walton — it's about getting their feet wet with a new organization after a whirlwind few days.

"All of them are really nice kids. I don't know them as players. One thing in player development, you go around and you watch your players and you get to know your kids when you draft them," said Roy.

"It's early, but meeting with them at the draft and getting to speak with them and seeing them in person here now, this is where the relationship starts."

He, 18, made history last weekend, as the Beijing native became the highest-chosen Chinese-born player selected in an NHL draft.

"Just try to showcase my skills. Just compete. I also haven't been on the ice in a little bit here, so just try to get my legs going," He said of his mindset.

"There's a lot of stuff behind the scenes, but that's what really helps us get together and get to know the guys around. We all come from all over the world. Some I've played against, some I haven't. Just try to get to know them."

For already established top prospects such as forward Brad Lambert and defenceman Elias Salomonsson, this week is a stepping-stone to a chance to make the Jets roster as early as this fall. General manager Kevin Cheveldayoff, addressing a lack of free-agent signings earlier this week, called it an "exciting time" for young players in the organization.

"I think it's awesome. I'm super excited," Lambert said when asked about those comments. "Obviously, there's a lot of work ahead of me this summer. So that's kind of my thought process, is taking it a day at a time, trying to get as much better as I can. So that come training camp and ready to compete."

Lambert is coming off a tremendous rookie season with the Manitoba Moose in which he had 55 points (21 goals, 34 assists) in 64 games. Could he be in the mix for the wide-open second-line centre job? Lambert made his NHL debut in Game 82 last April, registering an assist.

"To be able to get to see where I'm kind of at and to get to see the atmosphere that it was to play in front of the crowd in Winnipeg was an unbelievable feeling and I guess that just drives me to want more of that," said Lambert.

Finally, for players whose rights aren't currently held by NHL clubs, this week is about trying to open some eyes and perhaps earn another look at some point down the road, perhaps eventually leading to a tryout or contract offer.

"What we tell kids is that professional hockey is a different animal than junior, college or European pro," Roy said of the lessons he hopes they all take away from educational sessions on things such as fitness, nutrition and even dealing with social media and the press.

He recalled driving Salomonsson back to the airport last fall following Jets training camp and asking him what his biggest takeaway was.

“He’s like, ‘I couldn’t believe how well guys look after their body.’ To see all of those guys going up into the gym right after practice, spending time on rehab or small muscle groups, recovery, all different kinds of things that kids just don’t know,” said Roy.

Current Jets captain Adam Lowry was brought in as a guest speaker Wednesday to address the current crop of kids, sharing valuable insight from his own experience as a 2011 third-round draft pick and development camp alumni who spent parts of three seasons working on his craft in the AHL after finishing up his junior career.

“He talked about his path from where he grew up with his dad and being a hockey family. He talked about the things that he does to prepare himself for games,” said Roy.

“His path, the first time he was sent down and how disappointed he was, how he had to go back down to (the AHL) and work on his game and figure that out to get back up there. Those are all great growing experiences. So to hear it from him, I think it has huge impact, more than I could ever tell a kid or a coach could ever tell a kid.”

Some players recovering from injuries, others absent
Not all 35 players were full participants on Thursday in drills and a short, spirited scrimmage.

Forwards Chaz Lucius and Danny Zhilkin wore non-contact sweaters as they recovered from season-ending injuries they suffered with the Moose last year. Salomonsson wasn’t present because of a medical appointment but should be good to go Friday, and defenceman Garret Brown is just doing off-ice work as he recovers from an ACL injury that ended his college season after eight games last season.

There was also some talk about a prized prospect who wasn’t present in 2022 first-rounder Rutger McGroarty, who was the darling of summer camp last year but is skipping this year’s event. According to sources, he’s at an impasse with the Jets over his development path, which may force the organization to trade him

“You know what, I had a great relationship with Rutger. I still do,” said Roy, who spent plenty of time watching McGroarty in person with the University of Michigan last year, including during the Frozen Four in April.

“But I don’t know. That’s probably more comments for Chevy. On the player development side, we had some great conversations and I watched him play quite a bit this year. That’s all.”

Cheveldayoff has so far declined to discuss any specifics of the situation. Roy was asked if he had ever detected any “red flags” that something was amiss.

“Nope. Not for me. Not at all,” he said.

The camp continues with daily skates on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday beginning at 10 a.m. These are free and open to the public.

Winnipeg Sun

[Full-circle moment for Jets prospect Alfons Freij](#)

By Scott Billeck

One of the first things that Alfons Freij did as a member of the Winnipeg Jets was make Jimmy Roy feel old.

Roy, the team's director of player development, was making the rounds at the NHL Draft in Vegas last weekend after the Jets took the Swedish defenceman in the second round when he was shown a picture from 2015.

"Doesn't seem like that long ago, but it made me feel really old to see a kid (in the picture), and then he's up here (at the draft)," Roy, 48, said Thursday as the on-ice portion of development camp got underway.

Freij was nine when he made the 6,500-kilometre trek from his native Sweden to the middle of Canada for a tournament at the Jets' practice facility.

Nearly a decade later, the facility's Instagram account posted an updated shot of Freij posing for the same picture on Thursday, his arms draped over the same railing where giant background posters of Mark Scheifele and Jacob Trouba have been replaced by Cole Perfetti and a Manitoba Moose ad.

"There were two tournaments, actually," Freij said. "Pretty fun couple weeks here in Winnipeg. We lost all our games, so that wasn't good. But I had such a good time here in Winnipeg. So that's the story about it."

It turns out the tournament was a preview of things to come for Freij, now 18, along with a chance for anyone watching back then to see some future NHL talent coming up.

"My buddy Herman Traff (2024 third-rounder) got drafted to New Jersey, he was on the same team as me," Freij said. "One of my teammates at home, Joel Svensson (2024 third-rounder), he was drafted by the Chicago Blackhawks. It's pretty fun to see those boys getting drafted as well."

Trouba and Scheifele were some of the first NHLers Freij saw up close that year.

A moment to be awestruck and also a chance to dream.

"We wanted to be there one day (in the NHL)," Freij said. "That was one of my goals."

Last weekend in Vegas was the first step, and this week in Winnipeg is the second.

Kevin He, meanwhile, is taking in Winnipeg for the first time.

The Jets took the Ontario product in the fourth round last Saturday, making him the highest-drafted China-born player in NHLer history.

"I had no idea when I was going to go and when Winnipeg (traded up in the draft to take me) I was very happy, very excited," He said. "It was a surreal moment."

“It was a huge honour. I had my whole family at the draft, some of them I hadn’t seen in a long time. I just saw my two nephews—one is six years old, the other one’s one and a half—so I had a chance to see him for the first time at the draft. It was a lot of fun.”

He might not be familiar with the city, but he knows a few of the faces in the dressing room.

“Me and Kieron Walton (Winnipeg’s 2024 sixth-round pick) played together growing up in minor hockey, so we’ve always been best friends growing up,” He said. “That was pretty fun to see him come here as well.”

He also knows Winnipeg’s 2023 first-rounder Colby Barlow quite well, too. All three play against one another in the Ontario Hockey League.

Those battles will resume in the fall, with He heading back to the Niagra IceDogs.

For now, it’s all about soaking in his first strides with a Jets practice sweater on.

“Just try to showcase my skills,” he said. “Just compete. I also haven’t been on the ice in a little bit here, so just try to get my legs going.”

Speaking of that, there’s less emphasis on the on-ice portion of development camp this year, a shifting trend across the NHL.

“We got away from the on-ice testing this year just because some kids haven’t skated in the summertime, some kids have,” Roy said. “Maybe it gives a bit of a false sense of security if they do well or kids don’t do well. Some of the stuff on ice we’re trying to get away from a little bit, but the off-ice stuff you want to do.”

This includes bringing in Jets captain Adam Lowry to speak to their wide-eyed players.

“What he said and what path he took will resonate with these guys incredibly,” Roy said.

“He talked about his path from where he grew up with his dad and being a hockey family. He talked about where he lived, the places he played junior hockey in Swift Current. He talked about the things that he does to prepare himself for games. His path, the first time he was sent down and how disappointed he was, how he had to go back down to St. John’s at the time, the Moose at the time, and work on his game and figure that out to get back up there.

“Those are all great growing experiences that kids are going, it’s going to happen. So to hear it from him, it has huge impact, more than I could ever tell a kid or a coach could ever tell a kid.”

JETS NOTEBOOK: No McGroarty red flags, Roy says; Lambert ready for youth movement

By Scott Billeck

There was a Rutger McGroarty sighting on Thursday, if only a digital one. He even liked something the Winnipeg Jets did.

We’ve only heard of an apparent discontent between the disgruntled prospect and the club for the past few weeks, and we haven’t heard a peep from the Nebraskan himself.

But an Instagram post by the Jets showcasing the double signing of forward Mason Shaw and defenceman Haydn Fleury, two depth additions, earned a quick click out of McGroarty.

It's the most we've seen from his camp since it was reported that the Jets were suddenly shopping the 2022 first-rounder ahead of the NHL Draft last weekend.

Thursday was also the first day of the Jets' development camp's on-ice portion. McGroarty, arguably Winnipeg's top prospect, wasn't in the building.

Jets director of player development Jimmy Roy was the latest to attempt to address the situation.

"I had a great relationship with Rutger," Roy said. "I still do.

"But I don't know. That's probably more comments for (general manager Kevin Cheveldayoff). On the player development side, we had some great conversations, and I watched him play quite a bit this year. That's all."

So no red flags from what you saw?

"Nope," Roy said. "Not for me. Not at all."

Many believed McGroarty would have been gone by now, as speculation ramped up before the draft, where he was expected to be dealt on the draft floor, or even before teams arrived in Vegas last weekend.

Nothing materialized on that front, and then after Cheveldayoff's quiet opening to free agency on Monday, the tenured GM had this to say:

"If I'm a young player in the Jets organization today, I'm pretty excited about the opportunities that are in front of me and I'm working pretty hard in the offseason to make sure that I take full advantage," he said.

It remains a bit of a puzzling thing to say after he was reported — and league sources further suggested—to be in on multiple veterans who would have blocked such opportunities from happening.

Perhaps those words were aimed directly at McGroarty.

We don't know how much access Cheveldayoff has had to the player or whether or not his advisors have been talking on McGroarty's behalf.

The saga continues.

Lambert excited for youth wave

Brad Lambert heard Cheveldayoff loud and clear on Monday.

The 20-year-old centre, who played his first full season as a pro with the Manitoba Moose last year in the AHL, is ready to make the next step in his career.

“I’m super excited,” Lambert said. “There’s a lot of work ahead of me this summer. So that’s kind of my thought process, is taking it a day at a time trying to get as much better as I can so that come training camp and ready to compete.”

Taken 16 picks after McGroarty at 30 in the first round in 2022, Lambert made the most of his season in the AHL, scoring 21 times and posting 55 points in 64 games.

He was named to the AHL All-Star Game and finished second in rookie scoring, earning himself a spot in the league’s All-Rookie Team to cap off his year.

“We had a great group of guys,” Lambert said. “I love being around the guys. I love being a part of that team. It was a great team atmosphere and had a lot of fun playing with those guys. It was great.”

Lambert made his NHL debut in April, notching his first NHL point with an assist in Winnipeg’s 4-2 win over the Vancouver Canucks.

Now, he’s trying to improve on some areas that will help him fight for a top-six spot on Winnipeg’s roster in the fall, including the vacant second-line centre role.

“Just getting bigger and stronger,” the 6-foot-1, 183-pounder said. “That’ll help me in a lot of aspects to my game and winning corner battles and d-zone and stuff like that. Being able to battle on the boards and winning faceoffs. It’ll get harder. So my strengths the biggest part, and at the same time, I want to work on everything. I still keep up with my skills and skating and push everything forward. But I think my strength is the biggest thing I’m working on.”

House cleaning

Top blue-line prospect Elias Salomonsson wasn’t on the ice on Thursday, but he’s expected to be for the final three days of the camp.

“He’ll be here for the rest of the week,” Roy said. “He just had to go see a doctor or something. Nothing major. He’ll be on the ice the rest of the week.”

Meanwhile, 2022 fourth-rounder Garrett Brown won’t see the ice after having season-ending surgery last November.

The University of Denver forward has only just begun skating again back at college, and he’ll only be an onlooker this week.

“This camp, it’s not about, if a kid’s coming off an injury, I’m like, ‘Hey, I don’t want you to get injured going back to school,’” Roy said. “That’s the last thing that you want is to see a kid get injured, right?”

Roy said Brown is expected to be good to go for the upcoming college season.

“At DU, they have him on a plan, a progression plan of where he’s going, and I don’t want to screw that up,” Roy said.

Global Winnipeg

[Winnipeg Jets begin on-ice portion of 2024 Development Camp](#)

By Kelly Moore Global News

Thirty-three of the 35 players whose names appear on the roster of the Winnipeg Jets 2024 Development Camp were in uniform for the first on-ice session Thursday morning at Hockey For All Centre.

Forwards Danny Zhilkin and Chaz Lucius skated in non-contact jerseys while defencemen Elias Salomonsson and Garrett Brown did not participate.

Salomonsson was a bit under the weather, but according to a team spokesperson is expected to join the group for Friday's on ice workout.

Brown underwent surgery back in late November to repair a lower body injury suffered while playing for the University of Denver and has not yet been cleared to begin skating, but is attending the camp.

Jets director of Player Development Jimmy Roy and his partner Mike Keane were joined by several Jets coaches in putting the players through their paces and enjoys the opportunity to work with prospects he has been following "off the ice" for varying degrees of time.

"It's interesting because Mike and myself travel throughout the year and you build relationships with these kids and you get to know them," said the former Manitoba Moose and Canadian National Team forward.

"We don't get on the ice with them much, and you go out for supper with them and talk to them here and there and stuff, but to get on the ice it's a different atmosphere where you're in their own element, and they're a lot more comfortable."

One of two significant names missing from the camp roster is Rutger McGroarty. The Jets 2022 first-round pick (14th overall) is reportedly at odds with the team's plan to develop him in the minors at the outset of his pro career, believing he is ready to play immediately at the NHL level.

Roy would not comment on that situation, even though he has probably spent more time with the University of Michigan star forward than anyone else in the Jets hockey department. "I had a great relationship with Rutger, I think I still do. That's probably more of a comment for Chevy," said Roy in reference to Jets General Manager Kevin Cheveldayoff who has more than once refused to speak publicly about that situation.

It was interesting that Roy, several times, spoke about the welcome-to-camp speech current Jets captain Adam Lowry delivered to the 35 prospects on Wednesday afternoon. And part of that talk was about Lowry's own development path after being selected by Winnipeg in the third round of the 2011 NHL entry draft

"The thing about Adam, coming from a hockey family he was very driven. He knew what he wanted and how he was going to do things," was Roy's recollection of Lowry during the early stages of the Winnipeg Captain's pro career.

"He talked about his injury that he had at end of the year in Swift Current and then going up to the Moose. He knew the path more than some kids I think because he was coming from a hockey family. He's a smart guy."

Even with McGroarty's much-talked-about absence at this camp, there are other blue chip prospects who could someday wind up in a Winnipeg uniform.

Besides Salomonsson, who was selected in the second round of the 2022 draft, forwards Brad Lambert and Colby Barlow — who were first-round selections in 2022 and '23 respectively — are also thought of very highly by the Jets organization, as is Nikita Chibrikov who has been excused from this week's proceedings due to what was described by Kevin Cheveldayoff earlier in the week as "some kind of school commitments" back in Chibirkov's home country of Russia.

Lambert made his NHL debut in Winnipeg's 82nd and final regular season game of 2023-24 and had an assist in the Jets 4-2 win over Vancouver. He has been talked about as being one of the contenders to replace the departed Sean Monahan at center on Winnipeg's second line after scoring 21 goals and adding 34 assists for 55 points in 64 games for the Manitoba Moose to earn a spot on the AHL's All Rookie Team.

Any conversations about what may or may not happen at main camp in the fall will be had at a more appropriate time, but what Lambert will admit is, that brief taste of NHL action in mid-April has certainly created a hunger for more. "To be able to get to see where I'm kinda at, get to see the atmosphere that it was, play in front of the crowd was an unbelievable feeling and drives me to want more of that."

Jets Development Camp continues through Sunday at Hockey For All Centre with 9:30 a.m. sessions for the goalies, followed by 10 a.m. sessions for all the skaters. And all sessions are open to the public.

The Athletic

Why the Winnipeg Jets should extend Cole Perfetti long-term this offseason

By Murat Ates

"The one thing about free agency is that it doesn't just stop on free agency day."

That's Kevin Cheveldayoff on July 1, ostensibly tipping his hand about the Winnipeg Jets' plans. They'd swung and missed at retaining Sean Monahan and Brenden Dillon — maybe even for the best, if they can make smart use of their cap space — and needed to move on to Plans B and C. If the Jets are to get better it's going to have to come in the form of a trade or a leap in development from one of the team's younger players.

It's easy to see a route whereby Cole Perfetti takes a big step forward this season, Brad Lambert claims a job, Ville Heinola sticks in the NHL or Elias Salomonsson impresses everyone at training camp. But the next trade Winnipeg makes might see the club's top prospect, Rutger McGroarty, sent packing. Meanwhile, Perfetti needs a new contract after multiple third-period benchings and a series of healthy scratches took the lustre off a season that started with 17 points in 20 games.

Why the Jets haven't traded Rutger McGroarty yet and what I'm hearing comes next

What will Perfetti's contract be worth? And how should McGroarty's situation influence Winnipeg's approach to it?

McGroarty's insistence on a path to NHL playing time has proved a challenge for Winnipeg — not only in terms of signing him but also when it's come up in trade talks. McGroarty's current position has become a touchpoint for a bigger conversation about the Jets.

If Winnipeg is going to have limited UFA success — and if it's going to lose the occasional McGroarty, PL Dubois or Patrik Laine — then the Jets' only hope of leaguewide excellence is to have a best-in-class approach to handling their top young players.

Young players want to know that their team values them, makes them feel like an important part of the future and will support them in their growth. McGroarty doesn't feel that way. Heinola and Logan Stanley have previously conveyed their hopes of being traded but could now have the chance to become everyday players.

Player development also plays a role in player retention. If Winnipeg isn't going to clean up on the UFA market, then it must excel in its approach to its restricted free agents — like Perfetti.

By missing on Monahan and Dillon, the Jets project to have a bit more cap space than they did heading into July 1. Assuming that Axel Jonsson-Fjallby and new signee Jaret Anderson-Dolan start the season in the AHL, Winnipeg has approximately \$9.5 million worth of cap space to sign Perfetti, Heinola, Stanley and David Gustafsson. It seems as though the Jets keep trying to sign NHL veterans — Darren Dreger reported interest in Adam Henrique and then Blake Lizotte — but missing out on those players may walk Winnipeg into a great opportunity with Perfetti's contract.

I've spent the offseason feeling certain that Perfetti and the Jets were heading toward a two-year bridge contract. It made sense to me that Winnipeg might start in the range of Gabriel Vilardi's two-year, \$3.4 million AAV bridge deal signed last summer. But Vilardi is going to outscore his cap hit and get a big raise next summer. He'll also be two years away from UFA eligibility, giving him all kinds of leverage should he stay healthy and continue to excel on the Jets' top power-play unit.

Perfetti is two years younger than Vilardi was when he signed that contract. He's scored 75 points in 140 games, comparable but slightly better than the 78 points in 152 games Vilardi had scored before last season. The salary cap has also increased to \$88 million this summer: If Perfetti gets the same percentage of the cap that Vilardi did, then his AAV would come in at \$3.625 million.

Suddenly there's a better-case scenario available.

Some of Winnipeg's best work as an organization — and its best value contracts, in terms of players outperforming their cap hit — has come from signing top young players to long-term deals at team-friendly cap hits.

Mark Scheifele is the best example of this: He scored 572 points in 570 games in eight seasons from 2016-17 to 2023-24 — the 18th highest point total in those eight years — all on a cap hit of just \$6.125 million. Kyle Connor has scored 357 points in the first 353 games of the seven-year, \$7.14 million AAV contract he signed in 2019. Nikolaj Ehlers hasn't gotten big minutes since signing his seven-year, \$6 million AAV contract, but he has scored the 16th-most points per minute in the league in its first six years. When the Jets have bet on their youth — and have gotten those bets right, as they usually do — it's led to some of the most valuable contracts in

club history. Not only do Cheveldayoff and assistant GM Larry Simmons seldom miss when they bet big on young talent, long RFA deals like Scheifele, Connor and Ehlers all signed have helped keep top-end talent in Winnipeg beyond their earliest UFA dates.

To me, this makes drafting, development and retention the most important pillars of Winnipeg's success. Some teams overpay on the UFA market, working hard to retain veterans. The Jets' best work has come in the form of value contracts to restricted free agents — and, with a microscope on Jets development courtesy of McGroarty's unhappiness, this could be the ideal moment in Jets history to double down on their biggest strength.

We can zoom in on comparable players for Perfetti's contract options.

Senators forward Shane Pinto, 23, signed a two-year, \$3.75 million bridge deal with Ottawa. Perfetti, 22, has scored five more points (75 to Pinto's 70) in the same number of games as Pinto has while playing 285 fewer minutes during that same time frame. (Those 285 extra minutes equate to approximately 20 extra games in Pinto's favour, using Perfetti's 14:10 average time on ice.) It seems as though the Vilardi-esque price Winnipeg might start with could become the floor for Perfetti's ask as opposed to the limit.

Anton Lundell's six-year, \$5 million AAV extension is a nice piece of work by Florida in a better tax situation than Winnipeg can offer. Instead of throwing money at a veteran second-line centre on the wrong side of his aging curve, the Stanley Cup champions decided to spend it on the player they chose two spots after Perfetti went to Winnipeg in the 2020 draft. The 22-year-old Lundell has been entrusted to play 216 games (at 15:49 per game) to Perfetti's 140 games (at 14:10 per game.) Perfetti's produced more points per game than Lundell while playing further down the lineup, although injuries have limited his total games played.

If Perfetti signed a seven-year, \$6 million AAV extension, I suspect some Jets fans would argue against it. They'd cite his size or injury history. They'd say he hasn't earned it yet. But let's take a look at two alternate timelines for Perfetti to illustrate why it could make sense — for the player and team alike.

In the "bridge deal" scenario, we've given Perfetti a deal to match Pinto's. Perfetti is just over one year younger, scores more points per game and many more points per minute, but work with me for a moment. In the bridge scenario, we've anticipated top-six success, a rising cap and a raise to \$7 million on a higher cap two seasons from now. We've given him a five-year deal that takes him two years past free agency, leading to \$42.5 million in total earnings over the course of seven more Jets seasons.

In the "long term" scenario, we've given Perfetti seven years at \$6 million right off the hop. The scenario also buys Winnipeg two years of Perfetti's UFA status while paying him \$42 million over seven years. The big difference? A lower cap hit in the two final years of the contract. The even bigger difference is a guarantee that he's signed beyond his UFA date. This takes the assumption that being made an integral piece of Winnipeg's future would be worth forgoing the opportunity to bet on himself on a bridge deal.

Winnipeg pays Perfetti (almost) the same money in both scenarios. If the Jets had any assurance that Perfetti would sign the deals as listed, a lower long-term cap hit — and two extra years of security on a good, young player — would be worth mitigating against the risk of an early departure. If they truly believe in the player, then the \$9.5 million they have for him, Gustafsson, Stanley and Heinola, would be better used on signing him long-term.

And if Lundell's \$5 million contract is the ceiling, with deference given to Lundell's Cup win and minutes played over Perfetti's superior points per game (and far superior points per minute) then it's an even bigger win for the club. Whether or not these numbers bear out — and whether or not Perfetti would even entertain a long-term deal — it's one strategy the Jets could use to retain top young talent. If a top-four defenceman became available later? Then Alex Lafallo or perhaps even Neal Pionk could be the necessary safety valve.

Winnipeg might not be a premier UFA destination. Fine. That weakness comes with strength: cap space to sign top youth to deals they can outplay. Do that enough times and a summer like this one won't repeat itself anytime soon.

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***List It: Ranking all seven Canadian goaltending tandems* (VIDEO)**

Now that the dust has pretty much settled on NHL Free Agency, it's time to list the best goaltender duos amongst the Canadian teams. NHL Hockey analyst and former goalie Martin Biron joins SportsCentre to rank the goalie tandems from the seven Canadian teams.