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Yager eager to arrive at Jets training camp

"It's been pretty crazy, but I'm excited."

By Mitchell Clinton

WINNIPEG – Whether it was leg day, upper-body day, or cardio day at the gym for 19-year-old Brayden Yager on Thursday, it will go down in history as the workout he won't forget.

Near the end of the session, he checked his phone and saw he had a missed call from Pittsburgh Penguins president and general manager Kyle Dubas – the one who drafted Yager 14th overall in the 2023 NHL Draft.

"I called him back and he said I'd been involved in a trade and found out it was Winnipeg," Yager said. "Obviously a lot of texts and calls and the whole whirlwind. It's been pretty crazy, but I'm excited."

In fact, one of the first things that popped into the Saskatoon, SK product's mind was that he'd have the opportunity to play for a Canadian team. Not only that, but a team just one province to the east (or a little under 800 kilometres) from his home town.

Winnipeg Jets general manager, Kevin Cheveldayoff, said that pride came through in the initial conversation he and Yager had.

"A kid from the prairies to get to play for a prairie team, something he was pretty proud of," said Cheveldayoff. "It will be different, I'm sure, for him changing organizations. Again, that's kind of why you have the development side of things and the team services side of things and whether it's trainers or whether it's travel people, the logistics of all that is going to start moving very, very quickly. I assume it's a whirlwind for him today. I talked to him, like I say he was pretty excited."

Yager was part of a trade that saw Winnipeg's 14th overall pick from the 2022 NHL Draft, Rutger McGroarty, head to Pittsburgh.

This marks the first time in Yager's young career, which has spanned 211 Western Hockey League regular season games with the Moose Jaw Warriors, that he's felt the emotions of being traded.

"The first reaction is a little bit of shock. You don't obviously expect to get traded, but once you find out - you talk to your agents, you talk to Winnipeg's staff - you start to get excited and you look into the future," Yager said. "You get anxious to get started. Obviously camp is coming up pretty quick, so I'm really excited to get there and meet everybody and get on the ice."

There is some familiarity with not only Winnipeg, but some players in the organization as well.

It was the Winnipeg ICE (now the Wenatchee Wild) that eliminated Yager and the Warriors from the WHL playoffs in 2022 and 2023. On top of that, he's also spent time with Colby Barlow at

numerous Hockey Canada camps (where he also met Thomas Milic briefly). Brad Lambert also played in Saskatoon briefly with Yager's older brother, Connor.

Even if he only recognizes a few faces when he comes to camp, Yager will be coming off a 2023-24 season that will give him plenty of confidence.

Along with a career high 95 points (30 goals and 65 assists) in the regular season, Yager added another 27 points in 20 playoff games to help Moose Jaw to a WHL championship.

He then had six points in four games at the 2024 Memorial Cup, which earned him a spot on the tournament all-star team. Throw in the fact he represented Canada over the holidays at the 2024 World Junior Championship, and the young centre added a ton of experience to his resume.

"Individually, I'm trying to be a player that can rise to the occasion and play on big stages," he said. "That's something I got the chance to do this year was learn about the pressure games and learn how to still play my best in those situations."

It won't be long before Jets fans get to see Yager in Jets colours either.

"I look forward to seeing him in Penticton, our first chance to see him in a Jets uniform," said Cheveldayoff. "He's a very talented player in a very skilled position at centre where he can certainly make other players better around him."

The countdown to training camp is always filled with excitement for players and organizations after the summer.

After Thursday's trade, it's even more exciting for Yager.

"Playing in the WHL the last three years, I got to go to Winnipeg and play against the Winnipeg ICE," said Yager. "You see the fan base in Winnipeg, it's pretty special and especially in the playoffs - the whiteout and everything - it's crazy. So I'm super excited."

***Samberg excited to tee it up against the pros
"I'm excited to see the atmosphere and see what that brings."***

By Mitchell Clinton

WINNIPEG – Dylan Samberg has had quite a summer.

He and his now wife, Destiny, were married on July 26. Shortly after that, the newlyweds flew to Greece for their honeymoon – a place both had near the top of their list of places to travel to.

Next up for Samberg? Becoming the fourth member of the Winnipeg Jets to play in the CentrePort Canada Rail Park Manitoba Open, part of the PGA Tour Americas schedule of events, on a sponsor's exemption.

"I have my best friend from back home, Ryan Sandelin, on the bag for me," said Samberg at Tuesday's press conference. "I finally got a golf membership this year, so I had time to play some more golf - which was good. I joined a league and everything, so just trying to prepare as much as possible for this."

As much as Samberg's focus for the week is on fun and enjoying every moment, he still plans to be competitive about his score.

Perhaps not necessarily against the pros, who play week in and week out to try and advance their careers to the PGA Tour, but against his Jets teammates.

Mark Scheifele's two-day score of 162 remains the one to beat.

"We'll be spending a lot of time in the locker room together. If I don't beat him, I'm sure I'll hear about it all year," Samberg grinned. "It'll be important to beat his score."

Scheifele played in the tournament in 2018 and 2022 (he set the team's scoring record in the latter) while Kyle Connor participated in 2019. The most recent was forward Morgan Barron, who teed it up in last summer's event.

It was Barron who Samberg turned to for advice.

"I was just curious to see what the tournament was all about," Samberg said. "He said he talked to a lot of the players and even the caddies to pick their brain and see what a different pro sports perspective is. He says it was great to help him with the tournament."

The 25-year-old product of Hermantown, MN will try and use all that advice, as well as his short game – which he says is a strength of his – to try and tame the 7,311 yard Southwood Golf and Country Club.

Samberg has played the course "about 10-12 times" but says it looked a lot different driving in this week.

"Driving in here was pretty cool with all the grandstands and everything, I'm excited to see the atmosphere and see what that brings," he said.

There is a pro-am event on Wednesday before the tournament officially starts on Thursday morning. All the proceeds from the tournament go to the True North Youth Foundation.

With two days to go before Samberg hits his first tee shot, he's not too concerned about nerves.

"It was more just excitement about this week than nerves or anything," he said. "I was excited to get up here and see what these tournaments are all about. I haven't been to too many golf tournaments in my life. I'm just excited to talk to a lot of the pros and see what it's like from a different pro sport perspective. It should be a fun week."

Winnipeg Free Press

Jets trade McGroarty to Penguins, get prospect Yager

By: Mike McIntyre and Ken Wiebe

It's always a fool's game to declare winners and losers before the dust has even settled on a big trade — and even moreso when the players involved are still at the prospect stage of their careers.

At first blush, however, Winnipeg Jets general manager Kevin Cheveldayoff has made the most of a bad hand, putting on his poker face and finding a resolution to a problem he would have much rather avoided.

Rutger McGroarty, selected 14th in the 2022 NHL Draft, was shipped to the Pittsburgh Penguins on Thursday in exchange for Brayden Yager, the 14th-overall pick in 2023. The Jets spent plenty of time scouting Yager given that they were drafting 18th a year ago, ultimately taking forward Colby Barlow with their selection.

"We are very excited to add Brayden to the organization. I think he's a very talented player, a very skilled position at centre where he can certainly make other players better around him," Cheveldayoff said in a Zoom call with media.

This is an intriguing one-for-one swap of potential young impact forwards that is sure to be debated for years.

Yager, who is 5-11 and 179 pounds, was a force in the Western Hockey League last year. The Saskatoon product had 95 points (35 goals, 60 assists) in 57 regular-season games with the Moose Jaw Warriors, then added 27 points (11G, 16A) in 20 playoff games for the league champions.

McGroarty, who was born in Nebraska, recently finished his second season with the University of Michigan and indicated to the Jets he didn't plan to sign with them. Cheveldayoff said Thursday that news came out of the blue in June courtesy of a text from McGroarty's agent.

"I sat down and asked the agent why — he said he didn't have an answer. He didn't have a reason," said Cheveldayoff.

"I went through a litany of questions to the agent to see, was it player development, was it that we didn't burn a year (by signing him this past spring and getting him in a game)? He says, nope, no, no. He just said he just didn't feel right. I said, well, I guess I would just like to have an answer."

Cheveldayoff ultimately got a face-to-face with McGroarty and said he came away without any further clarity.

"He said that when he got to development camp here (in 2023) he put the jersey on, it became real and it just didn't feel right at that time, and it culminated with that," said Cheveldayoff.

“So again, if there’s a specific reason, Rutger hasn’t told us.”

There has been speculation it’s based on the fact the Jets weren’t going to guarantee McGroarty an NHL job immediately this fall and indicated he may have to spend some time working on his game in the American Hockey League.

“We have never had that conversation once,” said Cheveldayoff.

So would McGroarty have been given every chance to crack the big-league roster off the hop?

“We make our decisions for the greater good of the club. And all the players that are on it, they earn their opportunities and that’s never going to change,” said Cheveldayoff.

“As far as we’re concerned here, from the drop of puck in training camp anybody has a great shot at making this team if they deserve it and earn it.”

McGroarty has a big personality to go along with his big frame, but once it became clear he had at least one foot out the door, moving him became necessary. However, Cheveldayoff made it clear he wasn’t going to rush into a deal unless it made sense for the Jets, who still owned his rights for another two years.

After a few potential deals got close to, but not across, the finish line at the NHL Draft in Las Vegas, Cheveldayoff regrouped and looked at other options. He was willing to wait — knowing McGroarty could be a valuable chip at the trade deadline in 2025 — but the preferred resolution arrived this week as Penguins GM Kyle Dubas made him an offer he couldn’t refuse.

“There was a great deal of conversations that were had with various different teams,” said Cheveldayoff. “Some were very short, some maybe had a little more legs. This is one ultimately we felt was the proper direction for the organization.”

McGroarty now goes to a team that requires some youth and provides him with a direct path to the NHL. Less than an hour after the trade on Thursday, he signed a three-year entry level deal with the Penguins.

It isn’t easy for a draft-and-development team like the Jets to part ways with a top prospect before he’s even suited up for a game. Retention of those drafted and developed prospects is essential for a team to remain competitive, but this outcome could prove to be favourable for Winnipeg.

Yager is a year younger than McGroarty, has been playing centre in junior and has already signed his entry-level contract. The fact he grew up one province over probably doesn’t hurt the cause, either.

“A kid from the prairies, to get to play for a prairie team, that’s something he was pretty proud of,” said Cheveldayoff, who spoke with Yager by phone.

Here's what McKeen's draft report had to say about Yager last year:

"A sturdy two-way pivot who would be a welcome addition for all 32 NHL organizations. He's a trustworthy workhorse that a coach can send over the boards and rely on in any situation and is already playing as the first-line centre for the Warriors. He's good on the powerplay, he's good on the penalty kill, he's good at matching up against the best players on other teams, and he's good in the dying minutes of a game whether you're trying to defend a lead or tie the score up. He's quite strong and compact, which helps him out in various ways, whether that's staying on his feet as he fights through checks or generating a lot of power through his shot. Speaking of his shot, it's a major selling point for him and is his single best attribute."

While Yager is versatile enough to play the wing (and did so for Canada at the 2024 World Junior Hockey Championship), centre is his natural position. Given his age (he turned 19 on Jan. 3), Yager isn't eligible to play for the Manitoba Moose this season, so he's likely to return to the WHL, unless he earns a spot on the Jets with an excellent training camp.

Even if that's the case, there's no guarantee he would be ready to stick around beyond nine games, which would burn the first year of the entry-level deal.

While the McGroarty era ends with a whimper after he was essentially the King of Kensington at Jets development camp in 2023, Yager offers hope of brighter days ahead.

Even for the crowd that wanted the Jets to try and turn McGroarty into more immediate help, Yager is precisely the type of player the organization is going to need as they move forward and make decisions on the futures of wingers like Nikolaj Ehlers and Kyle Connor.

For all of the comparisons to what the Dallas Stars have done by integrating the likes of budding young stars Wyatt Johnston and Logan Stankoven into their lineup while competing for top spot in the Western Conference, this is a move that can eventually help the Jets do the same thing.

Having a young player strong arm his way out of town is never a good thing for an organization, but this is another example of Cheveldayoff seemingly being dealt a lemon and turning it into potential lemonade.

[*Winnipeg familiar ground for Copp*](#)
[*Younger brother of former Jet confident heading into Manitoba Open*](#)

By: Mike McIntyre

Tyler Copp's first visit to Winnipeg didn't exactly go according to plan.

It was the spring of 2018 and the Michigan product arrived just in time for Game 5 of the NHL's Western Conference Final. Hope quickly turned to heartache as the Jets team he was rooting for suffered a season-ending loss that night — while his big brother, Andrew, was relegated to the press box as a healthy scratch.

“I came up and was like, ‘Well, this kind of backfired,’” Copp recalled Wednesday with a laugh. “That was pretty tough.”

Now he’s back, more than six years later, hoping to write a happier family story in a different sport. The 26-year-old Copp is among the 156 golfers who will tee it up beginning Thursday morning in the CentrePort Canada Rail Park Manitoba Open at Southwood Golf & Country Club.

His passport may say American, but this one feels like a bit of a home game. Andrew was drafted by the Jets in 2013, made his NHL debut in 2015 and played 501 career regular-season and playoff games with Winnipeg before he was traded to the New York Rangers in 2022, then signed as a free agent with the Detroit Red Wings a few months later where he remains.

“My brother lived here for seven years. Winnipeg will always be something we are familiar with and remember well,” said Copp. “He’s still got a lot of buddies on the team, and honestly, the fans here are great. It’s good to come back. Hopefully, it treats me well.”

After graduating from Mercer University in Georgia, Copp turned pro and gained his PGA Tour Americas card for the 2024 season. His rookie campaign is off to a rough start — six tournaments played, six cuts missed, zero cheques cashed.

“I would give myself a D-plus. Obviously the competition is tough, but I don’t feel like I can’t be right there with them. There’s a constant learning curve. You’ve got to keep staying aggressive,” Copp told the Free Press.

“But that’s just golf. You go through highs and lows. Unfortunately, I went through a low at a bad time. All you can do is keep working towards that next high.”

No time like the present, right?

“This week I’ve felt better than any week going into it,” said Copp. “I’m a big fan of the course. And the windier it gets, the more that I like it. Hopefully it’s a little bit more challenging than just a birdie-fest.”

Copp skipped last week’s tournament in Saskatchewan in order to serve as best man for Andrew, who got married Saturday. Jets centre Mark Scheifele was in the wedding party, while Adam Lowry and Josh Morrissey attended as guests.

“I had to give a speech, and I was more nervous for that than any golf shot I’ve hit,” said Copp.

The bachelor party included a round of golf, and Copp said he got the chance to ask Scheifele — who has played twice in the Manitoba Open as a sponsor’s exemption — about the event.

“(Scheifele) loves golf. I could talk golf with him all day,” said Copp. “He was interested to see what I think about the course. I’m just really excited about it. He said he thinks it will suit me, too.”

Both Copp brothers were talented hockey players as kids, but life ultimately took Tyler in a different direction than Andrew, who is four years older.

“It kind of got to a point where I was leaning towards golf, and I started getting better at golf. And I sort of plateaued in hockey,” said Copp, who was a goaltender.

“I would stop on the way home from hockey at this outdoor driving range in Michigan that had heaters. It would be like 9 o’clock in January, 20 degrees (F) outside. That’s when I kind of realized I liked golf more and more.”

Copp really excelled as a high school senior, being named to the All-State team that year, and then had a breakthrough in 2020 when he won the prestigious Michigan Amateur.

“That was big for kind of pushing me towards a pro career, as I wasn’t really sure,” he said. “That gave me a lot of confidence, and then I went on and won in college that first year, too. I was new to the scene in a lot of ways, and that gave me the confidence.”

Andrew caddied for Tyler last month when the tour made a stop just outside Montreal for the Bromont Open.

“He did a really good job. I had no critiques, no complaints. He was really excited,” said Copp.

His dad, Andy, will be on the bag for him this week, just as he was for earlier events this summer in Victoria, Edmonton, Windsor and New Brunswick — and when he won the Michigan Amateur four years ago.

“He does a good job. He’s not the most impressive golfer, so he’s definitely a better caddy than golfer,” said Copp.

Despite not making it to a weekend yet this summer, Copp has always been right around the cut line. His combined score in his dozen rounds so far is two-over par, and the last one he played was a four-under 66 in Ontario.

“The first half of the year, I was hitting it so poorly. I just went through a bad phase. I had to really work myself out of it,” he said. “The last couple weeks had gotten a little bit better, but I just couldn’t put it together.”

Copp’s strength is in the approach and short game rather than off the tee.

“But that became the worst part of my game (earlier this year),” he said. “It would be like if you took Mark Scheifele’s hands away from him, he wouldn’t be quite as effective.”

Copp will tee off Thursday at 2:30 p.m. in a group that includes Canadian Drew Nesbitt and South Africa’s Ben van Wyk. Their second round gets underway Friday at 9:20 a.m.

“I heard there’s a good amount of fans that come out here. As players, we welcome that,” said Copp.

With only two tournaments left before the season-ending Fortinet Cup Championship in Toronto, Copp needs to get going. The top 120 players on the points list after next week's event in Brainerd, Minn., advance to the finale. The top 10 in the final standings receive their Korn Ferry Tour cards for next year.

Copp is currently tied for 238th.

"Any way you cut it I've got to play well," he said. "But it's a little bit freeing. If you play bad again, you're already on the outside. So you might as well let loose."

Winnipeg Sun

'Just didn't feel right': Jets swap McGroarty for fellow blue-chipper

By Paul Friesen

One blue chip out, another blue chip in.

The Winnipeg Jets on Thursday traded their top prospect, forward Rutger McGroarty, to the Pittsburgh Penguins for one of their top prospects.

Centre Brayden Yager was Pittsburgh's first-round pick, 14th overall, last year, which on paper makes this swap look about as even as it could get.

McGroarty was Winnipeg's first-round pick, 14th overall, two years ago, after which he captained the U.S. to a world junior gold medal win last winter and led the University of Michigan to the NCAA championship game in the spring.

What he wanted next winter, a job in the NHL, is what appears to have put him on the outs with Jets management.

Rutger McGroarty

Jets first-round pick from 2022, Rutger McGroarty, has been traded to the Penguins. Photo by Chris Procylo /Winnipeg Sun

Earlier this summer sources told the Winnipeg Sun McGroarty and the Jets didn't agree on his developmental path: he and his agent feel the 20-year-old is ready for the big leagues, while the Jets tend to steep prospects on their AHL farm team, sometimes longer than those prospects are willing to steep.

On a Zoom call with reporters on Thursday, Jets GM Kevin Cheveldayoff said neither McGroarty nor his agent ever did spell that out for him. All they've said is he wouldn't be signing a contract with the Jets because he "didn't feel right" when he attended summer development camp a year ago.

"I sat down and asked the agent why," Cheveldayoff said. "He said he didn't have an answer. He didn't have a reason. I went through a litany of questions to the agent to see... he just said he

just didn't feel right. I met with Rutger face-to-face several days later and that was the same response as well. He said that when he got to development camp here he put the jersey on, it became real and it just didn't feel right at that time.

"If there's a specific reason, Rutger hasn't told us."

Speculation was the team's handling of centre Cole Perfetti last season, including his lack of playing time in the first round of the playoffs, was also a bad look for the Jets and how they limit opportunities for young players.

Cheveldayoff says every player's situation is unique, but one thing remains consistent in his approach.

"We make our decisions for the greater good of the club," he said. "And all the players that are on it, they earn their opportunities and that's never going to change. There's always the want for younger players to get there fast. If you do a real deep dive, it's more important to get there long than to get there fast. To stay and to become a pro and extend your career as opposed to trying to get in there and not being ready."

A year older, McGroarty might be more ready. The 6-foot-1, 200-pound winger scored 16 goals, 52 points, in 36 college games last season.

Yager, 19, says he's added five to seven pounds to his 6-foot-0 frame this summer, putting him at at least 175.

A centre, he posted 35 goals and 95 points in 57 games while helping Moose Jaw win the Western Hockey League title and advance to the Memorial Cup last season.

The Saskatoon native sure didn't expect this summer curve ball.

"It was pretty crazy," Yager told the Winnipeg Sun. "Obviously shocking. You never really expect to get traded. Found out it was Winnipeg and super-excited to be able to play for a Canadian team. Close to home, so my parents are really excited."

Named the WHL's most sportsmanlike player two years in a row and junior hockey's Sportsman of the Year last season, Yager comes signed to an entry-level contract, while McGroarty promptly signed his with the Penguins after the swap.

Yager says neither he nor his agent have any concern about how the Jets develop players.

"Not at all," he said. "Everything's pretty new, but I think the teams have a pretty good idea of when a player's ready. I'm going to come to camp and try to prove to them that I'm ready and try to make their decision as hard as possible for them to send me home. Make their lives tough."

Over in Pittsburgh, first-year president/GM Kyle Dubas said trading the player he took with his first pick for the organization wasn't easy.

“We had a difficult decision to make with this trade because we hold Brayden Yager in such a high regard as a person and prospect,” Dubas said in a statement. “After much consideration, we decided that the opportunity to add Rutger McGroarty was ultimately in the best interest of the Penguins. Rutger possesses the combination of ability, leadership and competitiveness that the Penguins need to achieve our goals in the short and long run.”

Cheveldayoff had gushed over McGroarty, too, after drafting him, lauding his attitude and character.

“Man, that smile on his face coming toward our table is going to be etched into my memory for a long, long time,” the Jets boss said that day. “That was genuine. That was real. That’s what he’s all about.”

Somewhere along the way, that smile became a frown.

It’s not a good look on the Jets, but as he’s done with trading other disgruntled players, Cheveldayoff has at least broken even, at least on paper.

As with any trade, the final verdict is years away.

NHL.com

Lambert 'super excited' for chance at top-6 spot with Jets Forward led Manitoba in points last season, will have opportunity with Monahan, Toffoli departing

By Darrin Bauming

WINNIPEG -- Brad Lambert understands the opportunity he has this season to earn a top-six forward spot with the Winnipeg Jets.

"I'm super excited," the 20-year-old said during Jets development camp last month. "Obviously there's a lot of work ahead of me this summer. So that's kind of my thought process, taking it a day at a time, trying to get as much better as I can. So that come training camp I'm ready to compete."

The immediacy of Lambert's opportunity seemingly has been amplified in the wake of comments by Jets general manager Kevin Cheveldayoff on July 1, the day Winnipeg lost top-six forwards Sean Monahan (Columbus Blue Jackets) and Tyler Toffoli (San Jose Sharks) in free agency.

"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," Cheveldayoff said then.

Lambert, a first-round pick (No. 30) in the 2022 NHL Draft, appears primed to make the NHL leap, possibly into a second-line role with forwards Cole Perfetti and Nikolaj Ehlers.

"There are players that we've seen that have come through this, like [defenseman] Josh Morrissey, [with] how prepared he was for his opportunity when he came along," Jets director of player development Jimmy Roy said. "All of the work, he had put it in, in the American [Hockey] League. He came here and had an impact right away. Sometimes those opportunities don't come for a while. You don't know when they're coming but you've got to be prepared for them."

Lambert, in his first professional season in North America, led Manitoba of the AHL with 55 points (21 goals, 34 assists) in 64 games last season and was named to the AHL All-Rookie Team.

His outstanding season earned him his first NHL game. Lambert had an assist in Winnipeg's regular-season finale, a 4-2 win against the Vancouver Canucks at Canada Life Centre. The experience allowed him to assess where he was in his development.

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

Lambert (6-foot-1, 173 pounds) said he wants to get better at face-offs, increase his strength to help in corner battles, and improve his defensive-zone play. But the development in his leadership and his character just may be leaving the greatest impression on Winnipeg management.

"It says a lot about a player like Brad Lambert who doesn't have to come here but wants to come here and be a part of it and take on that leadership role," Cheveldayoff said during Jets development camp. "You are not asking a player to be or do anything that they're not, but I do think part of the process is that you do see players do grow year over year. Not only physically but emotionally, mentally. That is the essence of when you have young players is seeing them grow, seeing them come into their own, having confidence, not only to carry a puck down the ice but to have the confidence to go and sit with a first-year guy and say, 'How's it going? How's your day?' That's just part of the process."

[McGroarty traded to Penguins by Jets for Yager Pittsburgh, Winnipeg exchange NHL-ready top forward prospects](#)

By NHL.com

Rutger McGroarty was traded to the Pittsburgh Penguins by the Winnipeg Jets on Thursday for Brayden Yager.

Following the trade, the Penguins signed McGroarty to a three-year, entry-level contract.

McGroarty, who was selected with the No. 14 pick in the 2022 NHL Draft and was one of the Jets' top forward prospects, was ninth among NCAA players with 52 points (16 goals, 36 assists) last season as a sophomore at the University of Michigan. The 20-year-old also had nine points (five goals, four assists) and was the captain for the United States at 2024 IIHF World Junior Championship, helping it win the gold medal.

"We had a difficult decision to make with this trade because we hold Brayden Yager in such a high regard as a person and prospect," Penguins general manager Kyle Dubas said. "After much consideration, we decided that the opportunity to add Rutger McGroarty was ultimately in the best interest of the Penguins. He possesses the combination of ability, leadership and competitiveness that the Penguins need to achieve our goals in the short and long run. We look forward to welcoming Rutger and his family to the city of Pittsburgh and the Penguins."

Yager, a 19-year-old forward, was chosen by Pittsburgh with the No. 14 pick of the 2023 NHL Draft. He had 95 points (35 goals, 60 assists) in 57 games with Moose Jaw of the Western Hockey League last season.

He also had five points (two goals, three assists) in five games for Canada at the 2024 WJC. Yager attended the 2024 World Junior Summer Showcase last month, the first evaluation event for the 2025 WJC, which will be played in Ottawa from Dec. 26-Jan. 5, 2025.

"We are very excited to add Brayden to the organization," Jets general manager Kevin Cheveldayoff said. "I think he's a very talented player, a very skilled position at center where he can certainly make other players better around him. That's kind of what we've watched and viewed throughout his draft year and obviously in subsequent scouting situations after that. Obviously, you never know what comes up, and just because you don't end up drafting a player you don't stop keeping tabs on him. So, fortunately for us, we were able to come to an agreement with Pittsburgh here."

Yager signed a three-year, entry-level contract with the Penguins on July 24 and was expected to have a chance to play in the NHL this season.

"I would never want to limit a young player's ability to make the team," Penguins assistant general manager Jason Spezza said prior to the trade. "So, he controls that in terms of how he shows up and how he plays. But we saw great growth as far as his ability to play tough matchups."

The Athletic

[NHL trade grades: Jets, Penguins swap top prospects Rutger McGroarty, Brayden Yager](#)

By Corey Pronman and Sean Gentile

The trade

Winnipeg Jets get: Prospect Brayden Yager

Pittsburgh Penguins get: Prospect Rutger McGroarty

Corey Pronman: Yager scored 95 points this past season in the WHL. Despite his production, he wasn't truly a standout player in junior like his draft slot would suggest. He's clearly a talented forward with NHL speed, a good shot and a high skill level. For a 5-foot-11 forward, he isn't dynamic, though. I don't see him as a true driver of offense at higher levels. Rather, he's a

hardworking center who can create some offense and be a player coaches rely on. He projects as a middle-six forward or a potential third-line center.

McGroarty was one of the better forwards in college hockey this season and captained Team USA to a gold medal at the world juniors. He then requested a trade, which led to this move. McGroarty has good offensive skills and hockey sense, but his game, like Yager's, isn't the flashiest. He accomplishes a lot through his great compete level. He's a tenacious competitor on pucks and around the net. His footspeed is mediocre at best with a choppy skating stride but he still gets to a lot of pucks due to his effort. I don't think he's going to be as major a scorer in the NHL as he's been at lower levels, but he'll still provide some offense and be a player coaches love to plug into their middle six.

Ultimately, both players are strong pro prospects with similar profiles in terms of two-way play and minor questions on offensive upside. I lean slightly to Yager's long-term NHL profile as he's a superior skater who plays the middle, but he's not as big and, quite frankly, I was underwhelmed by him this season at times, hence why I'm sure Pittsburgh was open to moving him. I'm also surprised Winnipeg was able to get a quality prospect for McGroarty given the public nature of this trade request.

Penguins grade: B

Jets grade: A-

Sean Gentile: When McGroarty's preferred next step became clear — he didn't attend the Jets' prospect camp and, instead, announced he'd play a third season for Michigan — Pittsburgh seemed like a potential dance partner for the Jets, with one major roadblock.

Most of Kyle Dubas' plan for the Penguins revolves around getting younger and staying competitive, at least theoretically, at the same time. There aren't a ton of players who fit that bill, though; shocking as it sounds, most teams aren't interested in parting ways with guys who are good, young and close to NHL-ready.

McGroarty, though, was forcing Winnipeg's hand. And while Pittsburgh should've been in on him from the start, the question was always going to be whether it had the sort of assets necessary to get a deal done. The Penguins' roster, generally speaking, is made up of players they'd either never want to trade, they'd never be able to trade or that would never net a return like McGroarty.

The prospect pool, meanwhile, was deeper overall but still thin at the top. Yager was certainly No. 1, but it was fair to wonder a) whether he'd be ready in time to help Sidney Crosby, and b) just how much value he'd have on the open market. He's not the kind of player you move for a rental, but he also might not be enough to serve as the primary return for Pittsburgh's platonic ideal. Yager is pretty good; he's also probably not going to net you, say, a cost-controlled 26-year-old with a couple 30-goal NHL seasons under his belt.

McGroarty is probably as close as Dubas was going to get. He's a year older than Yager — both were No. 14 picks — and unquestionably more prepared for the NHL game. He's 6-foot-1 and

plays with skill, sense and physicality, and he's joining an organization that could use all three of those attributes. Like, immediately.

It's beyond easy to imagine him sticking on the roster out of camp; you wouldn't have been able to say the same about Yager, who would've then been stuck playing his 20-year-old season in the WHL. McGroarty might not make the Penguins better in 2024-25, but he has a better shot than Yager. That fact, combined with a high enough ceiling, makes this a win for Pittsburgh.

That doesn't make it a loss for Winnipeg, though. Yager's speed, skill and potential to stick at center probably give him a higher ceiling than McGroarty, all told. Being a Saskatchewan native doesn't hurt, either. Not a bad return for a trade they were forced into making.

Penguins grade: A-

Jets grade: B+

[Penguins acquire Rutger McGroarty from Jets, sign him to 3-year entry-level deal: Source](#)

By The Athletic Staff

By Murat Ates, Josh Yohe, Scott Wheeler and Jenna West

The Winnipeg Jets traded prospect Rutger McGroarty to the Pittsburgh Penguins in exchange for prospect Brayden Yager on Thursday, amid McGroarty's desire to start his NHL career with a different franchise, a league source said.

The Penguins then promptly signed McGroarty to a three-year entry-level contract, according to the source.

McGroarty was Winnipeg's dream pick at No. 14 in 2022. They valued his character, his leadership ability and his finishing skills, and we won't rewrite that history based on this trade — as inevitable as it became.

"I think you have to really look at the intangibles when you look at a player like a McGroarty," general manager Kevin Cheveldayoff said after drafting McGroarty in 2022. "There are probably some guys who are better skaters, more skillful. But if you look at his numbers over the different leagues he's played in, he's scored 50 goals.

"Doing that with the type of attitude and the type of character and the type of hardiness that he has, man, I think that smile on his face coming toward our table is going to be etched into my memory for a long, long time. That was genuine, that was real. That's what he's all about."

McGroarty has completed two years of college hockey at Michigan, and The Athletic previously reported that his view of his long-term future with the Jets had changed since the conclusion of the 2023-24 NCAA season.

It is the movement from that once-thrilled position to McGroarty's trade request that Jets fans were concerned with this summer. McGroarty's NHL path appeared blocked in Winnipeg, with the Jets unwilling to promise a route to playing time but his fixed desire to play elsewhere raised questions about the changed relationship between prospect and club. Those questions are unanswered, even now.

McGroarty has yet to give his version of his trade request, although one source close to the player told *The Athletic* that McGroarty loved the city of Winnipeg and his time there.

How McGroarty fits with Penguins

The Penguins, in possession of a few top-tier prospects and craving more of them, traded their best prospect to the Jets on Thursday. This is a pretty good indication of their affection for the player they're receiving.

The Penguins have a gaping hole on Sidney Crosby's line and Crosby, to the surprise of many, still hasn't signed a new contract with only one year remaining on his deal.

The 6-foot-1, 200-pound McGroarty projects as a top-line power forward at the NHL level. A year older than Yager, his NHL timeline is faster as there is every reason to believe he will play in Pittsburgh at some point this season, perhaps as soon as the Oct. 9 opener.

Yager, the first draft pick of the Kyle Dubas era in Pittsburgh, did nothing to disappoint the Penguins during the past 15 months. He projects as a top-six center at the NHL level and the Penguins' plan was for Yager to be in Pittsburgh by the 2025-26 season.

McGroarty will have to earn an NHL job in training camp, but there's every reason to believe he has a legitimate opportunity to do so. The Penguins have five spots in their top six — Crosby, Evgeni Malkin, Bryan Rust, Michael Bunting and Rickard Rakell — taken. While Drew O'Connor did a nice job on Crosby's left wing late last season, he's probably at his best in a third-line role. McGroarty, who can play the left or right wing, figures to get a long look.

McGroarty, a native of Lincoln, Neb., has produced 34 goals and 91 points in 75 career games at Michigan. — Josh Yohe, Penguins senior writer

What Jets are getting in Yager

It won't be lost on anyone that McGroarty's discontent has been resolved by the acquisition of 19-year-old, Saskatchewan-born, prairie-raised 2024 WHL champion Brayden Yager. Yager was the 14th pick in the 2023 draft, balancing McGroarty's selection at that same spot one year earlier, and comes with a similar list of intangibles and awards. The 6-foot right-shooting center was named the CHL's Sportsman of the Year in 2024 following his second straight Brad Hornung Trophy win as the WHL's most sportsmanlike player. He was also named to the 2024 Memorial Cup All-Star team.

What about Yager's on-ice acumen? Yager's best-case scenario likely sees him top out as a second-line center with enough offense to justify the position and enough all-around ability to make him reliable in all situations. For now, it might be safer to consider him as a likely middle-

six contributor with upside, but Yager's speed and offensive ability would make him a popular prospect even without considering the off-ice intangibles.

From Winnipeg's perspective, it's a clean and optimistic exit from a situation that had grown untenable. That's a GM win, although further conversations with the Jets' player development and McGroarty himself are necessary to identify why this trade became necessary. There may yet be more than meets the eye. — Murat Ates, Jets staff writer

Analyzing McGroarty and Yager's playing styles

McGroarty and Yager were my 33rd- and 58th-ranked prospects respectively in my twice-annual top 100 drafted NHL prospects ranking released last month, but they both slotted in the same tier, which ran from 26-59.

Scott Wheeler's top 100 drafted NHL prospects ranking, summer 2024 edition

I've long been a huge fan of McGroarty's in particular. He's a pro-style, pro-built winger who has for years shown that he can play on any line, with any type of player and have success in a variety of ways. On the ice, he plays hard, he's got a heavy one-touch shot, he is dexterous and has playmaking skills and the only real area of development for him has been his skating, which I would grade as about league average. Off the ice, he's an extremely charismatic and likable kid who has worn the 'C' repeatedly for USA Hockey. I think he's ready to be a top-nine NHLer, and I expect him to have a long NHL career.

Yager, a center, was known as a shooter coming up because of his natural wrist release but has worked hard to diversify his game, adding some playmaking elements and becoming a reliable two-way pivot who plays a heady game. His offensive numbers haven't taken off like some hoped but I expect him to be one of the top players in the WHL this season and an important part of Team Canada as a returnee at the world juniors. He projects as a middle-six secondary scorer in the NHL. — Scott Wheeler, NHL staff writer

ESPN.com

[NHL trade grades: Why McGroarty-Yager swap is a win-win](#)

By Ryan S. Clark, NHL reporter

Could a one-for-one end up being a win-win? That's what the Pittsburgh Penguins and Winnipeg Jets are banking on with the Pens getting forward prospect Rutger McGroarty and fellow forward prospect Brayden Yager heading the other way.

McGroarty, who was the Jets' top prospect, is entering his junior season at the University of Michigan, while Yager, who signed his entry-level contract with the Pens, scored 95 points last season for the WHL's Moose Jaw Warriors.

How did each general manager fare in a swap of top prospects? Here are our grades:

Penguins grade: A-

Any potential deal involving Yager leaving the organization meant Penguins GM Kyle Dubas had to get a forward prospect of similar value. Getting McGroarty meets that need.

The Penguins have a future to think about when it comes time for Sidney Crosby, Evgeni Malkin, and Kris Letang to retire. That's what made drafting Yager so crucial, and having McGroarty as their new top prospect allows them to retain that continuity.

The Penguins' pipeline has faced a variety of challenges over the past several years. Their chase for another Stanley Cup came with the cost of moving on from draft picks, which is why they didn't own their first-round pick from 2015 through 2018. While they did own their 2019 first-round pick (Sam Poulin), they did not have a first-round pick in 2020 and in 2021.

Then there's this: Since 2016, they've had only two draft picks play more than 100 NHL games - with a caveat. Neither of those players -- Calen Addison and Filip Gustavsson -- ever played a single game for the Penguins, which further underlines the need for them to strengthen a system that will be expected to carry the franchise in the future.

McGroarty's game has grown during his two seasons in Ann Arbor. He scored 18 goals and 32 points as a freshman for a team that won the Big 10 title. Plus, he was part of the United States' team at the IIHF World Junior Championships, where he scored a goal and seven points in seven games to help the team to a bronze medal finish.

He enhanced his profile as a sophomore. Scoring 16 goals and 52 points, he was named to the conference's all-tournament team, was a conference first-team All-Star selection and garnered support for the Hobey Baker Memorial Award as the nation's top men's collegiate player. He captained the U.S. squad at the WJC, where his five goals and nine points in seven games helped the U.S. win the gold.

With an entry-level deal signed, McGroarty could join the Penguins this season or spend one more campaign at Michigan, and he enters this season as one of the strong favorites to challenge for the Hobey Baker. If he does go back to school, he could join the Penguins after Michigan's campaign is complete, hoping to help the Pens in their bid to return to the playoffs following a two-year hiatus.

Jets grade: A-

There had been rumblings for some time that McGroarty didn't want to be in the Jets organization, and that a trade was forthcoming. The challenge for Jets GM Kevin Cheveldayoff was finding another top prospect who could be like McGroarty -- in other words, ready to reach the NHL within the next 12 months.

Enter Yager, a center who has consistently produced during his time with the Warriors. He finished last season with 35 goals and 95 points in 57 games after scoring 28 goals and 78 points in 67 games in the 2022-23 campaign. He has also developed in a player who can be trusted on a penalty kill.

A detail that makes Yager different from McGroarty is that the Jets now possess a sense of certainty they previously didn't have. Yager signed his entry-level contract in late July, putting

the Penguins' (now the Jets') top prospect under contract. And if McGroarty had no intention of wanting to remain in the Jets system, it made the desire to add a player who was already under contract even stronger.

What does it mean for the Jets in the short and long term? Yager joins a farm system that already had promising forward options such as Colby Barlow, Brad Lambert and Chaz Lucius. Still, the Jets might have to wait before fully incorporating Yager into their setup.

With the Jets seeking a third consecutive playoff berth, they're a team with what appears to be few openings in their lineup. While Yager would join them at training camp, it appears he or any Jets forward prospect could find it challenging to make the opening night roster.

In that event, it appears Yager would likely return to Moose Jaw for what would be a fourth full season. Because of the NHL-CHL agreement requiring that a prospect must be 20 years old by Dec. 31 of that season, it appears that Yager, who does not turn 20 until Jan. 3, would need to go back. That would provide him with one more year of development before he'd be eligible to join the Jets' AHL affiliate.

TSN.ca

Trade Verdict: Jets get 'equal type of prospect' in Yager for McGroarty (VIDEO)

TSN's Director of Scouting Craig Button gives his Trade Verdict on the Winnipeg Jets sending Rutger McGroarty to the Pittsburgh Penguins in exchange for fellow top prospect Brayden Yager.

Strudwick on McGroarty forcing his way out of Winnipeg: "I don't like it at all" (VIDEO)

Jim Tatti, Frank Corrado and Jason Strudwick discuss the Jets trading Rutger McGroarty to the Penguins after he wanted out, and whether McGroarty mishandled his exit.

The Hockey News

Opinion: Jets' Low-Event Off-Season Puts Cloud Over Their Bigger Picture for 2024-25

By Adam Proteau

The Winnipeg Jets are a curious group. For the past two seasons, they've finished with a combined 98 wins, and this past season, they finished second overall in the Central Division. But in the Stanley Cup playoffs, it's been an altogether different story, with the Jets winning just one post-season game in each of the past two years. And now, Winnipeg has had to make some salary cap-related changes. The kind of moves that make you wonder what kind of team they're going to be in 2024-25.

For starters, the Jets have lost a slew of veterans, most notably, forwards Sean Monahan and Tyler Toffoli, defenseman Brenden Dillon and goaltender Laurent Brossoit. In their place are

goalies Eric Comrie and Kaapo Kahkonen, blueliners Colin Miller and Haydn Fleury, and forwards Jaret Anderson-Dolan and Mason Shaw. Doesn't sound overly intimidating, does it?

It's certainly true Winnipeg has got admirable depth at forward and on 'D', but compared to the way other Central teams have improved this summer, the Jets seem like they could take a step back or at least a lateral step this coming season.

More importantly, this Jets team doesn't seem like it's got the goods to go on a deep playoff run. Unless star goalie Connor Hellebuyck steals them some games – and if you look at his past two post-seasons, where he's posted a save percentage of .886 or worse, he hasn't been able to do that – Winnipeg is going to be hard-pressed to knock off the likes of the Colorado Avalanche, Dallas Stars and Nashville Predators. It's entirely likely they make the playoffs, but what if they don't? Who's paying the price for another sub-par year?

Jets GM Kevin Cheveldayoff still has approximately \$5.7 million in salary cap space, but some of that will likely go to RFA youngster Cole Perfetti. So until Cheveldayoff decides to make bigger moves, this is the group they'll begin the regular-season with. Again, does this strike you as an improved team? It doesn't for this writer. The Jets could easily wind up with a wild-card playoff berth, and if that's the case, they likely won't be favored to win regardless of who they're facing.

Cheveldayoff has doubled down on his core, and while there's an admirable quality to that approach, if it doesn't deliver Cups, it's not the right core. But changing things up in a major way likely won't be Jets management's focus until next off-season. If things remain the same, there's no way Cheveldayoff can justify making only peripheral moves.

Look no further than the reigning Cup-champion Florida Panthers. It would've been comparatively easy for the Panthers to keep going back to the battlefield with the same roster a few years ago. Instead, Florida GM Bill Zito threw caution to the wind and sent Jonathan Huberdeau and MacKenzie Weegar out to acquire the boost Matthew Tkachuk has provided for the team. The safe road isn't always the proper road.

Maybe we're wrong, and this is the year the Jets put it all together and win the next Cup. But there's a reason why you won't see many pundits picking Winnipeg to get that far. On paper, they're not as deep a team as they were this past season, and look how that ended. It all speaks to a group that hasn't been responding well when the games matter most, and it will be that way until they show us they've grown into something to remember. And right now, there just seems to be more high-bar talent on other teams in their division, let alone on consensus picks to win the Cup.

If we're incorrect about the Jets, an apology will follow. But we can't escape the nagging feeling we're right. This Jets crew is in show-don't-tell territory, and nothing less than a couple of playoff series wins will keep its fan base happy and justify keeping the core together.

[Winnipeg Jets and Pittsburgh Penguins Swap Top Prospects: Report](#)

By Jonathan Tovell

Update: Not only did the Winnipeg Jets and Pittsburgh Penguins make the trade official Thursday afternoon, but Pittsburgh then signed Rutger McGroarty to an entry-level contract.

“We had a difficult decision to make with this trade because we hold Brayden Yager in such a high regard as a person and prospect,” Penguins GM Kyle Dubas said in a press release. “After much consideration, we decided that the opportunity to add Rutger McGroarty was ultimately in the best interest of the Penguins. He possesses the combination of ability, leadership and competitiveness that the Penguins need to achieve our goals in the short and long run. We look forward to welcoming Rutger and his family to the city of Pittsburgh and the Penguins.”

The Winnipeg Jets and Pittsburgh Penguins are making a 1-for-1 prospects trade on Thursday.

Winnipeg is trading right wing Rutger McGroarty to Pittsburgh in exchange for center Brayden Yager, according to Sportsnet's Elliotte Friedman.

Both players were selected 14th overall in the NHL draft, with the Jets taking McGroarty in 2022 and the Penguins getting Yager in 2023.

McGroarty has been the subject of trade speculation since Friedman said he heard his name in trade talks ahead of the 2024 NHL draft. McGroarty previously announced he'd return to the NCAA and the University of Michigan for a third year instead of signing an entry-level contract with Winnipeg and turning professional.

The Hockey News ranked both players as the top prospects in their respective organizations in the 2024 Future Watch issue. Yager was also ranked the 26th-best NHL prospect by a panel of scouts and directors of player personnel, based on who has the best upside five to 10 years from now. McGroarty, meanwhile, ranked 35th.

Last season, the 6-foot-1, 205-pound McGroarty recorded 16 goals and 36 assists for 52 points in 36 games with the Michigan Wolverines, finishing eighth in the NCAA in points per game (1.44). He also contributed five goals and nine points as captain of Team USA's gold medal-winning world junior team.

Yager, meanwhile, had 35 goals and 60 assists for 95 points in 57 games for the WHL's Moose Jaw Warriors in 2023-24. His 1.67 points per game ranked him eighth among WHL players, and he helped lead his team to the WHL championship with 11 goals and 27 points in 20 games. Yager was also at the world juniors, recording two goals and five points in five games for Canada.