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Warriors coach excited for Yager to learn from Jets veterans
Brayden Yager will make Jets debut in Penticton in mid-September

By Jamie Thomas

Brayden Yager will be making his Winnipeg Jets debut soon at the 2024 Young Stars Classic tournament in Penticton.

Mark O'Leary knows a lot about Yager's abilities as he has coached the 19-year-old forward since the Saskatoon native began his major junior career in Moose Jaw. O'Leary and the Warriors will begin defence of their 2024 WHL title when camp opens on Wednesday.

"To have the summer to kinda look back on it. It was the perfect year. It was hard, it was ups and downs," said O'Leary.

"But I just think that for a guy like Brayden that we basically built our team around, when he first came in as a 15-year-old and for it to all come together last year, it was pretty special."

After being selected 14th overall by the Pittsburgh Penguins at the 2023 NHL Draft in Nashville, Yager took a big step on the ice with the Warriors last season. In 2023-24, he recorded 17 more points than he did the previous campaign in 10 fewer games. On top of that, Yager had 27 points (11G, 16A) in 20 WHL playoff games and six more points (3G, 3A) in four games at the Memorial Cup. O'Leary saw growth in Yager both on and off the ice.

"Yeah, you can talk about his on-ice game and how much it's matured in terms of playing at both ends of the rink and he's always cared about both ends, but I just think that through the true compete that you see in the one-on-one puck battles, it's come a long way at both ends," said O'Leary.

"So, I think that's the biggest thing on the ice and then just off the ice, just the maturity of being able to handle the ups and downs and the emotional roller coaster that is a full season."

Before last season began, the Warriors coach said they expected Yager to put up a lot of points. But Yager also worked on his play making abilities, helping his teammates look good in the process and he also added penalty killing to his skill set. The Warriors penalty kill was ranked 10th in the league during the regular season and that improved to 82.9% in the postseason.

"We had a really good power play (1st in the WHL, 32.4%). (Associate coach) Scott King had a real good time working with that group for years now and the power play was excellent. But for our penalty kill to start off as bad as it did last year. And then really come alive there in the playoffs. A big part of that is Brayden and I know he wants to be a part of that side of the game and that's impressive," said O'Leary.

"And that's why I think with Brayden, he is a true pro. It's one thing for coaches to have ideas and an organization to have a vision of what it looks like and how your team's gonna play. But it's another thing to have the buy in from the players and we had a lot of that with our leadership group and Brayden was a big part of that."

That should be music to the Jets and their fans that Yager wants to get better. It should also be music to their ears that he is excited to be a member of the organization.

"He was pumped. I didn't know what his first reaction would be but excitement about being in a Canadian market, and I know his family is excited. It's probably about a nine hour drive down that way," said O'Leary.

"So, he's a hockey player and he's played in Winnipeg before (against the Ice) and I just think he's excited about this challenge."

Yager will be in the Manitoba capital in early September with his fellow Jets rookies before the group takes off for Penticton. After taking part of the Young Stars tournament, he will take part of main camp where O'Leary is excited about Yager learning some good habits from one of the Jets veteran players.

"I'd expect a guy like Adam Lowry, who I have a lot of respect for in terms of watching him grow up in Swift Current (with the Broncos) and the way he plays and everything," said O'Leary.

"Brayden will be able to watch him and those other guys, how they are day-to-day and that's only gonna help our organization if he comes back."

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McGroarty looks to leave 'an impression' on Penguins at camp 20-year-old forward prospect acquired from Jets will push to make NHL debut, play next to Crosby

By Wes Crosby

CRANBERRY, Pa. -- Rutger McGroarty understands a spot with the Pittsburgh Penguins isn't guaranteed.

The 20-year-old forward prospect didn't expect to be handed one after being traded from the Winnipeg Jets on Aug. 22.

McGroarty will play at the 2024 NHL Rookie Showcase in Buffalo. That's all that's been promised, he said.

Earning a way to Pittsburgh is what he wants.

"I feel like I'm going to get what I deserve and I'm going to come ready to work for camp," McGroarty said Wednesday. "I like where my game's at right now, but I'm just excited to get to camp and hopefully leave a bit of an impression on them."

In the trade, the Penguins sent top forward prospect Brayden Yager to the Jets, who selected McGroarty with the No. 14 pick in the 2022 NHL Draft. McGroarty, hoping to soon debut in the NHL, signed his entry-level contract the same day, choosing not to return to the University of Michigan.

He previously informed Winnipeg he would not sign there.

"I wanted to be up front and honest with them and just tell them I wasn't going to be signing with them," McGroarty said. "I've got nothing but respect for those guys. They handled it with a lot of class, and I wish them nothing but the best, but as I said, I'm fired up to get started here now.

"I feel like everything's right here, the development path, the veteran guys that they have here, the organization that they have here and the town here as well."

McGroarty fits the current climate in Pittsburgh: focused on the future but dedicated to doing right by forwards Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin, and defensemen Kris Letang and Erik Karlsson. He could land a high-profile role with a good enough training camp, possibly next to Crosby or Malkin on the top two lines at either left or right wing.

"He possesses the combination of ability, leadership and competitiveness that the Penguins need to achieve our goals in the short and long run," general manager Kyle Dubas said in a press release announcing the trade.

Crosby, Malkin and Letang have won the Stanley Cup three times (2009, 2016, 2017). McGroarty wouldn't mind the pressure of joining them.

"I love it," McGroarty said. "I love being a part of an atmosphere like that. I feel like I've played on a lot of winning teams in my career. Obviously, not to this extent in the NHL with guys like that, but I love being a part of that atmosphere.

"I love coming in. I love the grind every single day. I love winning, so that makes me really excited. Hopefully, I can be a part of that."

McGroarty has considered playing next to Crosby in particular.

"He's the best player in the world," McGroarty said. "I've grown up watching him play, so it's definitely crossed my mind. I feel like that would be very cool if I could one day do that."

McGroarty isn't getting ahead of himself. He said his skating could use some work. He has size and power at 6-foot-1, 200 pounds and highlighted a high hockey IQ as a strength.

The native of Lincoln, Nebraska, was captain of the United States when it won the gold medal at the 2024 IIHF World Junior Championship, scoring nine points (five goals, four assists) in seven games. He had 91 points (34 goals, 57 assists) in 75 games across two seasons at Michigan.

And that's led to Pittsburgh, where McGroarty aims to have similar influence.

"Hopefully, drag the other guys across the line with you and help them get better," McGroarty said. "I'm also a very vocal guy. I've got a ton of energy. I'm always buzzing around, so hopefully, some of that is contagious energy that other guys can feed off of."

[Rutger McGroarty Trade Discussion](#) (VIDEO)

The NHL Tonight crew discuss the Pittsburgh Penguins as they acquire Rutger McGroarty from the Winnipeg Jets

[Winnipeg Free Press](#)

*McGroarty mum on Jets snub
Penguins prospect's reasons for wanting out of organization remain a mystery*

By: Ken Wiebe

Rutger McGroarty is quick to admit he still needs to work on his skating, but it's clear he's already adept at stickhandling on and off the ice.

The former Winnipeg Jets prospect met the Pittsburgh media for the first time since last Thursday's trade to the Pittsburgh Penguins and while he was quick to display his charm and enthusiasm, McGroarty wasn't interested in providing any details about why it didn't work out with the organization that chose him 14th overall in the 2022 NHL Draft.

"My agents talked to them and then I talked to them. I wanted to be up front and honest with them and I just told them that I wasn't going to be signing with them," McGroarty told reporters in Cranberry, Pa. "I've got nothing but respect for those guys. They handled it with a lot of class and I wish them nothing but the best.

"As I said, I'm fired up to get started here now."

Perhaps so fired up that he failed to answer the question about why he didn't want to sign with the Jets.

During a zoom call with reporters last Thursday after the deal was completed, Jets general manager Kevin Cheveldayoff lamented the lack of a direct answer from McGroarty and his representatives after they let the Jets GM know the player wasn't interested in signing.

Despite multiple efforts, the best answer Cheveldayoff could get was 'it didn't feel right.'

With that as a backdrop, perhaps it's no surprise McGroarty chose not to shed any additional light on the situation on Wednesday.

Whether or not he chooses to do so in October when the Penguins visit the Jets on the 20th remains to be seen.

McGroarty stood behind a podium and took questions for just over six minutes, raving about Pittsburgh being a great sports town and sharing that he took in a Pirates baseball game earlier this week.

When asked if he'd been given any assurances about that development path, McGroarty offered up a direct response that would surely bring a smile to the face of Penguins GM Kyle Dubas.

"I've been promised a spot at the rookie tournament and that's about it," said McGroarty, who wished Brayden Yager, the player the Jets got in return for McGroarty all the best with the Jets. "I feel like I'm going to get what I deserve and I'm going to come ready to work for camp. I like where my game is at right now. I'm excited to get to camp and hopefully leave a good impression on them."

McGroarty captained Team USA to a gold medal at the World Junior Hockey Championship last January and helped the University of Michigan Wolverines reach the Frozen Four last April.

At the conclusion of his season, McGroarty informed the Jets he planned to return for his junior season with the Wolverines rather than sign an entry-level contract.

Shortly after the trade was completed, McGroarty shifted his path and inked his ELC with the Penguins.

“I feel like everything is right here,” he said. “The development path, the veteran guys they have here, the organization that they have here.”

When the topic of his playing style was broached, McGroarty didn’t shy away from the gains required while accentuating his strengths.

“Speed, for sure, is something I’ve been working on a lot and I know that’s something I have to work on — just like I have to work on every aspect of my game,” he said. “But I feel like I definitely play a power type of game and I feel like I have a very good hockey IQ, so I can put myself into situations I can succeed in.”

Known for his enthusiastic approach, McGroarty gave a glimpse of that energy when he impressed Jets’ fans during development camp in July of 2023.

“I come to the rink every single day, I work extremely hard and do everything with intent and hopefully drag other guys with you and help them get better,” said McGroarty. “I’m also a very vocal guy. I’ve got a ton of energy. I’m always buzzing around, so hopefully some of that is contagious energy that other guys can feed off of.”

What about the potential to skate alongside Penguins captain Sidney Crosby down the road?

“Obviously he’s the best player in the world,” said McGroarty, noting he’s comfortable playing either left wing or right wing. “I’ve grown up watching him play, so it’s definitely crossed my mind. Yeah, that would be very cool if I could one day do that.”

Unsportsmanlike conduct as downtown Ducky statue vandalized

By: Chris Kitching

A bronze statue of late Winnipeg Jets icon Dale Hawerchuk was vandalized with graffiti over the weekend, drawing anger and disappointment from fans of the National Hockey League team.

A photo on social media showed graffiti on a puck and a bottom portion of the statue, which was unveiled in True North Square downtown in October 2022.

The pink writing was later removed, but additional graffiti was present on the puck when a Free Press photographer examined it at about noon Monday. The latter graffiti was removed later in the afternoon.

Jets fan Brad Harrison was disappointed when he saw a Facebook post that contained a picture of the pink graffiti.

“I think it’s pretty sad,” he said. “It may seem like a joke to (the vandal), but to others, it’s a hurtful act.”

Harrison was told the statue was tagged with graffiti Saturday night.

“Downtown Winnipeg gets a bad enough rap as it is, and this doesn’t help,” he said, noting he hopes there’s consequences for anyone who vandalizes the statue.

Winnipeg Police Service spokesman Const. Claude Chancy said it doesn’t appear the graffiti was reported to police.

True North Sports and Entertainment, which owns the Jets and True North Square, was made aware of the graffiti, spokesman Sean Kavanagh said.

“(True North) has a company under contract to remove this type of vandalism,” he wrote in an email. “They were contacted, and the statue was cleaned up shortly after that notice.”

Eric Hawerchuk, one of the NHL great’s three children, said his family doesn’t want to comment on the vandalism.

“Unfortunately, if you draw attention to it, it’s just more likely to continue or happen again,” he said.

Harrison runs a Facebook group, called Winnipeg Jets 1.0, dedicated to the history of the original franchise that was in the city from 1972 to 1996 before moving to Phoenix, Ariz.

Some of the group’s 4,000-plus members reacted to the graffiti with disappointment and outrage.

Harrison said Hawerchuk was a unifying person who remains one of Winnipeg’s biggest sports icons. Many fans are still affected by the former captain’s death, he added.

Hawerchuk was 57 when he died of stomach cancer on Aug. 18, 2020. Affectionately known as Ducky, he played nine NHL seasons in Winnipeg after being drafted first overall in 1981.

Hawerchuk became a beloved figure in Manitoba while racking up franchise records as one of the league’s top forwards. He was inducted into the Hockey Hall of Fame in 2001.

Thousands of people, including family members and former teammates, attended an unveiling ceremony for the statue before a pre-season game two years ago.

True North commissioned Illinois-based sculptor Erik Blome to create the artwork, which depicts Hawerchuk extending his stick for a puck.

The statue, at the corner of Hargrave Street and Graham Avenue (also known as Honorary Dale Hawerchuk Way), is positioned so that it faces the Jets’ home at Canada Life Centre.

[Perfetti’s contract status, Ehlers’ future are hot topics in Jetsville](#)

By: Mike McIntyre and Ken Wiebe

Rutger McGroarty is now property of the Pittsburgh Penguins. Patrik Laine is a member of the Montreal Canadiens. And the Winnipeg Jets have added Brayden Yager to their prospect pool.

All of which is to say it's been a busy stretch around here when it comes to news — both directly and indirectly — impacting the local hockey club.

And there could be more to come, with Cole Perfetti still in need of a new contract, Nikolaj Ehlers' future still a mystery and training camp now less than a month away.

To help get you set, Free Press hockey writers Ken Wiebe and Mike McIntyre are back with another monthly edition of the Jets mailbag.

Turns out you folks had plenty of questions about both the present and the future — but also a few about the past, too.

Let's get right to it:

1. Is a Cole Perfetti deal coming? — Jesse

WIEBE: There's little doubt in my mind that a deal is forthcoming for Perfetti. It's simply a matter of when, not if.

While there has been ample debate over whether it's going to be a bridge deal or a longer-term extension, Perfetti is set to return to a top-six forward role this fall and he's poised for a breakout season. With that in mind, it would be in his best interest to get a deal done prior to training camp.

However, if this was an easy deal to get done, it would be done already. Although there's enough cap room to get a contract inked that goes five years or beyond, it says here that a bridge remains the most likely outcome.

While many observers anticipate a two-year bridge, I'm curious if a one-year deal could be something to consider. If that option is exercised, it's possible the season ahead could help both sides come to a quicker resolution on what that longer-term deal looks like.

2. What are the chances Nikolaj Ehlers gets used better and signs a new deal here? — Jason

MCINTYRE: When the off-season began, I admittedly thought there was a very good chance Ehlers might not be around when training camp began. With just one more year left on his contract, no extension seemingly in sight and trade rumours swirling, he seemed as good as gone.

I thought Ehlers likely wanted a change of scenery. And I felt the Jets might just be OK with that, too.

But then I heard Kevin Cheveldayoff and new coach Scott Arniel both sing his praises in multiple interviews over the past few months, including the new bench boss stressing what an important role Ehlers will play this season, and I began to wonder if this situation might have a different outcome.

A hot start by Ehlers and the hockey club could cause everyone to re-evaluate matters. But eventually everyone will reach a crossroads. Would the Jets truly risk having a prized asset walk for nothing in free agency next July 1 if Ehlers makes it clear he's not going to ink a new deal between now and then? That's a risky proposition, for sure.

There's always the trade deadline, but what happens if Winnipeg is in a playoff position at the time? Selling a star winger would be quite the message to send.

Could this all get resolved before the season begins, the way Connor Hellebuyck and Mark Scheifele's situations did last year? I wouldn't rule that out.

3. Do you predict Vladislav Namestnikov, Cole Perfetti, Brad Lambert or someone else will start the season as 2C? — Craig

WIEBE: The someone else option got another contender this week after the arrival of Moose Jaw Warriors forward Brayden Yager in the trade for Rutger McGroarty.

Now, he's still going to need an excellent training camp in order to force his way into this discussion, given the aforementioned contenders. But Yager is someone who could do just that and earn himself an extended look, given the skill set he brings to the table and his ability to play a dependable two-way game to go along with his talent, vision and heavy shot.

It's important to remember that Perfetti was the 2C to start last season for a brief period of time before Namestnikov moved up from the fourth line and Perfetti slid over to the wing. Lambert is coming off an all-star season in the AHL and will also be given an opportunity to step into the role.

While I don't expect Yager to stick around the NHL beyond nine games this season, it wouldn't shock me to see him get a chance in that role before a final decision is made. Lambert is also determined to show the Jets he won't need any more seasoning after his impressive season with the Manitoba Moose.

Namestnikov is the safe choice here, but I will go with Yager in the interim.

4. Plus or Minus on 29.5 games played for Ville Heinola at the NHL level this season? — Jay

MCINTYRE: I'll take the over. I have no doubt he would have surpassed that easily last season if not for the unfortunate broken ankle he suffered in the final pre-season game.

So with the caveat that he'll need to stay healthy, I believe Heinola has a good shot at becoming a fairly regular contributor on the blue-line. The Jets could sure use his puck-moving skills and I think both new head coach Scott Arniel and GM Kevin Cheveldayoff realize the time is now to give him a real opportunity.

Winnipeg's top four of Josh Morrissey, Dylan DeMelo, Dylan Samberg and Neal Pionk is fairly set — again, provided injuries don't rear their ugly head — but Heinola, Colin Miller and Logan Stanley should all be competing for bottom-pairing work.

We may see a bit of a rotation, especially early in the year to keep everyone sharp, but I expect Heinola to make an impact.

There are also some depth defencemen such as Haydn Fleury and Dylan Coghlan who will be fighting for looks, too, and rookie Elias Salomonsson — who I suspect at least starts the year with the Manitoba Moose — could make a compelling case at some point, too.

5. The Jets are stuck in the mushy middle. Not a contender, but also not bad enough to be a rebuilding team. Is there anything Kevin Cheveldayoff can do to get out of the mushy middle? — @Oaktree65472824

WIEBE: On paper, the Jets enter the season as a team that should be jockeying for position in the Central Division with the Dallas Stars and Colorado Avalanche, but could be pushed into battling for one of the two available wild cards in the Western Conference.

The beauty of projections is that they're just an educated guess (at least in most cases). At this time last summer, few people predicted that the Jets would finish tied for fourth in the NHL standings by eclipsing 100 points for the second time in 13 seasons since the franchise relocated from Atlanta.

Fewer had the Jets playing the type of committed defence that would lead them to winning the Jennings Trophy for allowing the fewest goals in the NHL last season.

The fact that didn't translate into playoff success was concerning, which is why it's understandable some view the Jets as a team in the middle.

This team has ample experience and they must learn from playoff disappointments of past springs. They've got the best goalie in the league, a Norris Trophy candidate in Josh Morrissey, a contender for the Rocket Richard Trophy in Kyle Connor, a point-per-game centre in Mark Scheifele, a Selke candidate in Adam Lowry to go along with plenty of offensive talent and scoring depth spread across their four lines.

With an improvement on both special teams, the Jets should be right in the thick of things once again — provided the commitment to team defence continues. Whether it's from internal candidates or trade acquisitions down the road, the defence corps needs to take a step forward for the Jets to go on a long playoff run. Time will tell if the Jets are going to be a contender or be stuck in the mushy middle.

6. What's your ranking in the West based on the off-season moves to date? — Cory

MCINTYRE: A great question. No doubt there are 16 teams in the Western Conference that believe they have improved since last season. But that's simply not possible. The fun of the off-season is trying to predict who goes forward, who goes back and who might be stuck in neutral.

With that being said, here is my very unofficial, please-don't-hold-this-against-me power rankings as of this moment.

1. Edmonton. 2. Dallas. 3. Colorado. 4. Nashville. 5. Vancouver. 6. Winnipeg. 7. Utah. 8. St. Louis. 9. Vegas. 10. Los Angeles. 11. Minnesota. 12. Seattle. 13. Anaheim. 14. Chicago. 15. Calgary. 16. San Jose (but improving rapidly).

Based on last year, this would have Utah and St. Louis replacing Vegas and Los Angeles as playoff teams. I also believe there will be much more parity in the West, as Anaheim, Chicago and San Jose are all trending upwards and should be much more competitive.

Let's check back in about eight months or so to see how close I was with these.

7. Who is Brayden Yager a good comparison to and when does he project to be in the NHL/AHL? — @rclosas204

WIEBE: It's a little early to draw comparisons for what type of player Yager projects to be, but he brings plenty of similar qualities to another player who suited up for the Warriors a few years ago, Brayden Point.

The two players are similar in stature and one thing they have in common is the ability to combine offensive ability with defensive awareness.

For the sake of comparison, Point had 38 goals and 87 points in 60 games during his draft-eligible season while Yager had 35 goals and 95 points in 57 games last season with the Warriors as he helped lead them to the Western Hockey League championship.

Point, who was chosen in the third round of the 2014 NHL Draft, ended up being a steal and he's grown into one of the most effective two-way players in the league and he's already got two Stanley Cups on his resume. To expect Yager to be at the level Point is currently playing at is more than a bit ambitious.

But in terms of style of play, it's a good starting point. Point made the Lightning as a 20-year-old (not 19) and had 18 goals and 40 points in 68 games as a rookie. Because Yager is 19, he's not eligible to play for the Moose this season (until his junior season is over), so he'll either be with the Jets or be heading back to the WHL (which is the most likely outcome, even if he gets some regular-season games in this fall).

Look for Yager to play his first full pro season in 2025-26.

8. Chaz Lucius or Parker Ford — who is more NHL ready? — John

MCINTYRE: I'm inclined to say neither, but that's not what you're asking. For the sake of right here, right now, I would have to say Ford is significantly ahead of Lucius.

However, that has little to do with talent and potential and pedigree and everything to do with playing time.

Ford, 24, had a fantastic rookie season with the Manitoba Moose last year, appearing in 72 games and recording 41 points (18 goals, 23 assists) while bringing plenty of energy and speed and hustle. It will be interesting to see what he can do for an encore with the AHL club this coming year.

Lucius, on the other hand, has played a grand total of 29 pro games with the Moose over the last two years — 12 in 2022-23, 17 last season — thanks to multiple injuries he's suffered. The 18th-overall pick from 2021 just can't seem to stay healthy, and that has cost him big-time in the development department.

If we're talking about ceilings, there's no doubt in my mind Lucius would have a higher one than Ford, who went undrafted and signed as a free agent. But hockey history is filled with examples of talented players who never reached their potential for whatever reason.

Here's hoping Lucius enjoys a full season of good fortune and good health as he tries to make up for lost time down on the farm this coming season. He's still just 21, so it's way too early to give up on him or declare him a "bust," but he has miles to go here.

9. Did Winnipeg kick tires on Cody Ceci? Getting an asset and one year of him at \$3.25M seems like a slam dunk. We're going to give up a lot more for someone like him in March. — Bobby

WIEBE: Given the salary cap constraints the Oilers found themselves in — especially when the dual offer sheets to Philip Broberg and Dylan Hollway were signed with the St. Louis Blues — it's likely that every team in the NHL was in touch with GM Stan Bowman.

What level of interest the Jets had in acquiring Ceci is up for debate, though I would imagine Kevin Cheveldayoff would have put in a call to see if he could pressure the Oilers into sending an asset along with Ceci to bolster the right side of the defence corps (the Sharks received a 2025 third-rounder along with Ceci for fellow D-man Ty Emberson).

It's debatable that Ceci could play more effectively on the second pairing with Dylan Samberg than Neal Pionk will. Plus, when you consider the amount of cap space available and subtract a Perfetti extension (which likely falls in the \$3.25 to \$3.75 million range), adding Ceci would have forced the Jets to move someone else out in order to make the money work.

And while Ceci's cap hit is \$3.25 million, his salary is actually \$3.75 million this season (after he made \$4.5 million last season).

If Ceci has a strong season with the San Jose Sharks, he could be a player that contenders consider for a playoff run after he made it all the way to Game 7 of the Stanley Cup final with the Oilers. But his salary would be easier to absorb closer to the NHL trade deadline for teams that are able to accrue cap space over the course of the season rather than add him right now.

The Jets also could be aiming higher if they choose to add a blue-liner at some point this season.

10. Do you see Kristian Vesalainen ever returning to the NHL and what has his development in Europe been like in the last couple of seasons? — Jack

MCINTYRE: Now there's a name we haven't heard for a while.

The 24th-overall pick in 2017 hasn't been seen around here since headed overseas to continue his pro career. Vesalainen spent the rest of the 2022-23 campaign in Sweden and Finland (17 goals, 23 assists in 55 combined games), then played a full campaign last year with HIFK Helsinki (14 goals, 23 assists in 58 games).

In other words, his offensive production took a noticeable dip.

The Jets do still have his NHL rights, should a return be desired, but I wouldn't hold my breath on that. The now 25-year-old, who played a grand total of 70 big-league games (two goals, three assists), never really found his footing in North America and might just be content to keep skating much closer to home.

Winnipeg hasn't whiffed on many first-round picks, but this one definitely goes down in that category.

11. Has there been any update on Jonathan Toews' status this year? I don't think he has officially retired, and for many reasons he could be interesting to Jets fans if he was healthy. Just a thought no one has talked about. — Michael

WIEBE: If the former Chicago Blackhawks captain was fully healthy and capable of playing in the NHL, an update most likely would have been provided.

At this point, Toews has made no public comments on his future. Toews in his prime was one of the best players this province has ever produced and there's no doubt he would provide a perfect complement as the 2C beyond Scheifele.

He's a proven winner that hates to lose, he's defensively responsible, strong in the faceoff circle and makes players around him better.

There's been no indication that Toews is working on a comeback since he announced last season that he was taking a step back. A return to his hometown team would make for a storybook ending to an incredible career, but at this point, it seems highly unlikely a return to the NHL is on the table.

12. Any recent talk of organization getting records and history back for Jets 1.0? — John

MCINTYRE: Now that the Jets 1.0 are essentially on ice, with the Utah No-Names opting to start their own history rather than absorb that of the Arizona Coyotes, it would seem the door is open for all that history to come flooding back here to River City.

I'd be all for it. And it sounds like NHL commissioner Gary Bettman might just be too. Asked earlier this summer about the issue by Sportsnet's Eric Engels, Bettman called it "an excellent question, but said it was too early to say."

Hmm.

I'm not sure what exactly needs to happen, other than perhaps True North making an official pitch/ask of the league. But given the rich history of the Jets in Manitoba, it would make plenty of sense, no. (And maybe some cents, too — this would seem to be a slam-dunk PR and marketing move.)

[Samberg earns Jets bragging rights](#)
[Blueliner shatters Scheifele's team record at Manitoba Open](#)

By: Mike McIntyre

There's a proud new owner of the unofficial Winnipeg Jets "green jacket."

Defenceman Dylan Samberg opened plenty of eyes this week — and earned major dressing room bragging rights — as he fired rounds of 74 and 80 while competing as a special attraction in the CentrePort Canada Rail Park Manitoba Open.

“It was an awesome tournament to be a part of and I had a lot of fun getting to know some of the professionals,” Samberg said Friday after signing his scorecard at Southwood Golf & Country Club.

“Just being able to watch them play and see how they never miss and are always making putts, it definitely makes you elevate your game. But I was happy with how I scored and how I played.”

Sure, being a combined 10-over par puts him at the very bottom of the PGA Tour Americas leaderboard. That’s to be expected and simply reinforces how good the professionals on the PGA Tour Americas truly are.

“It makes me feel like I chose the right sport,” Samberg said with a chuckle.

His performance — three birdies, 22 pars, 10 bogeys and one triple bogey over his two days — is nothing to laugh at, especially when you put it in perspective.

Prior to this week, Mark Scheifele had the best showing by a Jets player in terms of a single-round (78 in 2022) and 36-hole score (18-over). Samberg beat the first record by four shots, and the second by eight.

“We were chatting a little bit (on Friday). I think deep down now he’d probably want to try to beat it again,” said Samberg.

Morgan Barron in 2023 (22-over) and Kyle Connor in 2019 (40-over) have also played the event under sponsor’s exemptions.

“There’s been some support, and there’s been a couple chirps,” Samberg said of his teammates.

“Neal Pionk being the main one. He sent me a text (Thursday), I think I had three-putted one of the holes, and said ‘You can’t be three-putting on the tour.’ He was giving it back-and-forth, including some things I can’t say. But it’s all in good fun.”

Samberg said he has a newfound appreciation of the work these golfers put in — driving from city-to-city each week with no guarantee of a paycheck while chasing their big-league dreams.

“It’s definitely a grind. I talked to a few of them and they gave me what they go through in a year. It’s very impressive,” said Samberg. “After two days, my legs are tired. I’m like how do these guys do this for four (rounds) and do it back-to-back weeks?”

So who might be the next Jets player to take a swing at this event?

“(Josh) Morrissey is a pretty good golfer as well. I think he could do well at this. Same with Dom Toninato, he’s another good golfer,” said Samberg.

“We have a lot of good guys in our room that are pretty good golfers in that six-to-10 handicap range. I think they’d have a lot of fun at this, and I’d love to try and do this again in the future.”

Samberg, who got married earlier this summer, is headed back to Minnesota for a week, then returns to Winnipeg after Labour Day to begin on-ice skating sessions with plenty of teammates ahead of Jets training camp officially beginning Sept. 18.

Close call for Kuntz

Third time was not the charm for Braxton Kuntz.

The 20-year-old Breezy Bend member once again fell short of making the cut despite firing a personal-best five-under 67 at Southwood on Friday. Unfortunately, an opening-round 73 — which included a triple-bogey on the 16th-hole thanks to a lost ball and another that found water — sealed his fate.

“It was another big learning experience for me,” said Kuntz, who has won four straight Manitoba Amateur championships and was playing in this event on a sponsor’s exemption for a third time.

“I tend to focus a lot on the bad stuff, but at the same time I had a lot of great shots this week.”

That was evident by the eight birdies he made in his second round, offset by three bogeys which all came on par-threes.

“If I can clean up those errors I’m going to be shooting low scores and competing,” said Kuntz. “That comes with practice. I’ve got a lot to work on moving forward.”

Kuntz heads back to Indiana for his senior season at Ball University. He plans to turn pro next summer.

Copp out

Tyler Copp, the younger brother of former Jets forward Andrew Copp, won’t be playing this weekend either. He finished two-under after rounds of 71-71.

Jets trade not only lands Yager, but dozen of his fans from across the Prairies

By: Mike McIntyre

The trade was officially one-for-one, a swap of top forward prospects between a pair of NHL clubs.

But it would appear the Winnipeg Jets acquired much more than just Brayden Yager on Thursday in a deal that sent Rutger McGroarty to the Pittsburgh Penguins.

Turns out a segment of the Prairies may be coming our way along with the Saskatoon-born skater.

“I’ve gotten tons of texts. My Mom and Dad are super excited. My billet family in Moose Jaw. So many cousins and friends and family friends from different areas around Saskatchewan and Alberta,” Yager told the Free Press on Friday.

“Everyone is pretty excited to be able to come and watch games.”

Yager, 19, says he’s pumped, too, even if his initial reaction brought about a slightly different reaction.

“It was kind of a shocker,” he admitted.

"I answered the phone and (Penguins general manager) Kyle Dubas told me I had been involved in a trade. You don't really know what to say. But the more you think about it, having it be to Winnipeg, the more excited you get."

His phone also lit up with texts from Jets captain Adam Lowry and alternates Mark Scheifele and Josh Morrissey.

"They made me feel pretty welcome. That was pretty awesome," Yager said.

Parting ways with Yager, selected 14th-overall by Pittsburgh in 2023, was a tough pill to swallow for the Penguins. But you have to move quality to get quality, and the chance to land the disgruntled McGroarty from Winnipeg — he had indicated he wouldn't be signing with the club that selected him 14th-overall in 2022 for undisclosed reasons — did the trick.

"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 Thursday in a statement. "After much consideration, we decided that the opportunity to add Rutger McGroarty was ultimately in the best interest of the Penguins."

Now the focus in Winnipeg shifts to Yager, who tore up the Western Hockey League last season with 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.

"It was a really successful year. As a group it was really cool to kind of grow up together starting from the COVID year and go through the adversity of losing in the playoffs two years in a row to kind of pushing through it and winning the championship," Yager said.

"I think personally, there was a lot of times where we were playing on a big stage — whether it was TSN games, or during the playoffs — big stages, big moments, tight series, the World Juniors, the Memorial Cup —where I had tons of opportunity to show that I can play on a big stage. I think that can only help me make the jump to the next level."

Speaking of which, could that be as early as this coming season? At 19, Yager isn't eligible to play in the American Hockey League, so it's NHL or back to junior.

"The goal is to come into camp ready to make the NHL," he said.

"Make an impact on the team and try to help the team win. Coming into this summer, the goal was to do as much as I can, get as many gains as I can to prepare myself to play against men, and I think I've done a pretty good job of that."

Adding a bit more bulk to his 5-foot-11 frame has been a goal, and he's now sitting around 180 pounds.

"In the NHL you're playing against some good, strong players," he said.

"I think gaining weight while still maintaining your speed is the biggest thing. I think I've done a pretty good job of that. I feel really good on the ice. I'm excited to get to camp and try to make the staff's decision a hard one."

His current hockey idols are Colorado's Nathan MacKinnon and Brayden Point, who also played with Moose Jaw prior to getting drafted by the Tampa Bay Lightning.

"We're kind of the same height and weight. Hard-working player, can score goals and is fast and thinks the game really well. I think that's a player I can emulate my game after really well," he said.

Yager immediately goes near the top of a prospect pool that includes forwards Brad Lambert, Nikita Chibrikov, Chaz Lucius, who all spent last year year with the Manitoba Moose, along with 2023 first-rounder Colby Barlow.

"I think this past season, the experience I've gained in the playoffs and Memorial Cup...I think if I can come into camp and show that I can help the team win, then I think I'll set myself up for success," he said.

Barlow is one player Yager already knows from their time together in various Hockey Canada programs and camps.

"I talked to him (Thursday) when everything happened. I asked him a couple things about Winnipeg, and he had nothing but good things to say about the organization," Yager said.

Jets GM Kevin Cheveldayoff, speaking Thursday with media, envisioned a scenario where Barlow, a winger, one day is playing on a line with Yager, a natural centre.

"It's pretty sweet. Colby is such a good player and obviously he can score a lot of goals. I think it would be a really good opportunity and a lot of fun. It would be pretty cool to be a duo in the future," Yager said.

"There's a lot of good players and young prospects in the organization, and obviously a lot of good young players on the team. It's an exciting environment to be able to join."

One that, until now at least, he's only watched closely on television.

"That's one of the most exciting parts about it, just seeing the fan base that they have there," said Yager.

"During the playoffs you get the whiteouts going. The environment there and atmosphere there seems pretty incredible once the hockey season starts. It's definitely something I'm really looking forward to and can't wait to be a part of it."

Winnipeg Sun

[Former Jets prospect McGroarty reveals little on Winnipeg snub](#)

By Scott Billeck

Rutger McGroarty was about as interested on Wednesday in explaining his decision to snub the Winnipeg Jets as he was in actually playing for the team that made him a first-round draft pick a couple of years ago.

Speaking for the first time since being traded to Pittsburgh last week for fellow first-round prospect Brayden Yager, McGroarty was scant on details that ultimately led the 2022 14th overall pick to the Penguins last Thursday.

“I wanted to be upfront and honest with them, and I just told them that I wasn’t going to be signing with them,” McGroarty told reporters. “I’ve got nothing but respect for those guys. They handled it with a lot of class, and I wish them nothing but the best, but I’m fired up to get started here now.”

Speaking after the trade, Jets general manager Kevin Cheveldayoff could only fill in the blanks regarding a meeting between the GM and McGroarty’s representation at the NHL Combine in June, where it was made known that “it didn’t feel right” for McGroarty to sign with Winnipeg.

McGroarty spoke of the developmental path the Penguins had for him more than once on Wednesday.

In June, a source with knowledge of the situation suggested that McGroarty wanted out because of the path with Winnipeg.

“It’s not a Winnipeg (as a city) issue,” they said. “It’s a development issue and a relationship issue.”

McGroarty said Wednesday the only thing he’s been promised in Pittsburgh is a spot in the team’s upcoming rookie tournament.

“I feel like I’m going to get what I deserve and I’m going to come ready to work for camp,” he said. “I like where my game is at right now. I’m excited to get to camp and hopefully leave a good impression on them.”

On the Penguins as an organization, McGroarty said he feels they have everything right there.

“The development path, the veteran guys they have here, the organization that they have here,” he said. “It’s such a sports town. Even the couple days that I’ve been here, I went to a Pirates game on Monday, it’s been awesome. The sports-town atmosphere is unbelievable.”

McGroarty quickly u-turned on his decision to return to the University of Michigan for the 2024-25 season, signing a three-year entry-level deal with the Penguins shortly after he was traded.

“Just talking to (general manager) Kyle (Dubas) and Jason (Spezza), I feel like they’re two incredible hockey minds with a great development path for me. ... I love the University of Michigan, and it was very tough leaving there, but also, it’s awesome being here,” McGroarty said.

If McGroarty makes the NHL roster out of training camp, he’ll be in Winnipeg on Oct. 20 when the Penguins make their annual trip to Canada Life Centre.

[WINNIPEG SPORTS NOTEBOOK: McGroarty being gone, Blue Bombers on verge of first place](#)

By Scott Billeck

It's been a minute, folks.

It's nice to get a break, especially during the summer. It's also a good reminder that the sports machine never ceases its churn.

Rutger McGroarty is no longer aggrieved now that he's in Pittsburgh. The Winnipeg Blue Bombers are no longer a 3-6 football team, just two points out of last place in the West Division. And there's a new champion among Winnipeg Jets players who have teed it up at the Manitoba Open.

So, let's look back at the past couple of weeks on the Winnipeg sports scene, shall we?

McGroarty to Pittsburgh

You gotta hand it to Jets general manager Kevin Cheveldayoff. When he's backed into a corner, he doesn't usually wilt.

Cheveldayoff pulled another rabbit out of the hat last week, trading away prospect Rutger McGroarty to the Pittsburgh Penguins for 19-year-old centre Brayden Yager from the Moose Jaw Warriors.

Few believed Cheveldayoff would get a comparable return for McGroarty, who went 14th overall to the Jets in 2022 but managed to squeeze the 2023 14th overall pick from Pens GM Kyle Dubas.

The deal was a win-win for both teams, with McGroarty immediately signing his entry-level deal with the Pens and the Jets getting Yager, who already has a three-year ELCI of his own in place.

The move also helps Winnipeg shore up some centre depth in their prospect pool. Yager has a high ceiling. Is it higher than McGroarty's? Time will tell. McGroarty is a year older, captained the Americans to World Junior gold earlier this year and helped Michigan to the Frozen Four.

Yager should get another chance to play for Canada at this year's tournament after putting up two goals and five points in five games last time out, and is slated to be back with the Warriors after amassing 35 goals and 95 points in his third full season with the WHL club.

Also, I'm not buying the "don't draft Americans" rhetoric.

Connor Hellebuyck is the best goalie in the world at the moment. Kyle Connor is one of the best pure goal scorers of his generation. The Jets got quality years out of Jacob Trouba and Andrew Copp, and Dylan Samberg continues his upward trajectory. The argument falls apart pretty quickly.

Global Winnipeg

[Jets, Moose to kick off hockey season with annual Fan Fest event](#)

By Sam Thompson Global News

Fans of the Winnipeg Jets and Manitoba Moose who are counting down the days until the new hockey season have something to look forward to in a few weeks at the Hockey For All Centre.

The teams are hosting the annual Fan Fest celebration to kick off the 2024-25 season on Sept. 21, welcoming fans of all ages to a free day of events — including a live look at Jets players and prospects at one of three training camp sessions.

The event also includes family-friendly games, the opportunity to see live interviews with players, get autographs from Jets alumni and more.

Fan Fest, which runs from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., also includes free parking at the Assiniboia Downs lot adjacent to the Hockey For All Centre, which serves as the Jets' practice facility.

Although the tickets are free, fans are encouraged to get them ahead of time, beginning Wednesday at 10 a.m., from the hockey club's website.

Daily Faceoff

[Ranking every NHL team's 2024-25 prospect pool, from 1-32](#)

By Steven Ellis

During the dog days of summer (which suddenly became a bit more action-packed last week), we've been evaluating the prospect pools of all 32 NHL teams.

But what makes a strong prospect pool? High-end talent, for sure. Typically, only the bottom-feeders in the NHL standings excel there. Depth is huge, too. You need more than just one or two guys carrying the pipeline if you're going to build a successful future. Only a handful of teams can feel good about what they've got at every position, so it's a testament to your drafting abilities when you land at least one key forward, defenseman, and goaltender.

With that in mind, here's a look at how all 32 teams stack up with rookie tournaments just a few weeks away (while including every team's ranking from 2023):

17. Winnipeg Jets (2023: 18th)

Notable prospects: Brayden Yager, Brad Lambert, Colby Barlow

The Jets made a big splash, trading Rutger McGroarty for Brayden Yager earlier this month. While McGroarty is the better of the two prospects, I still think the Jets have a decent pipeline, and Yager's a solid addition. I'd argue the Manitoba Moose might be one of the most exciting teams to watch in the American Hockey League in 2024-25. The Jets might not be a real Stanley Cup threat as it stands, but if they can transition a few of their high-flying forwards from the AHL and make them impact NHLers, they might be able to strike gold.

Sportsnet.ca

[Looking at the teams, NHL players competing at Olympic qualifiers](#)

By James Madge

The Winter Olympics may be 527 days away, but for 12 national men's hockey teams, the five-ring dream will be front and centre this weekend.

Three European cities will be hosting the final round of Olympic qualifying over the next four days, with a number of current and past NHLers, as well as draft picks, trying to lift their countries to a coveted spot in Milano Cortina.

While Canadian hockey fans can sleep securely in the knowledge that their invitation is already secured and ponder who will play on Connor McDavid's wing, or if Connor Bedard deserves a spot on the team (he does), for nations such as Latvia, Denmark and 2022 bronze-medallist Slovakia, this will be their last shot for a place at the 2026 Games.

Here is a breakdown of the events:

Who has already qualified?

The International Ice Hockey Federation gave spots to host Italy and the top-eight ranked nations after the 2023 world championship ... with one small caveat.

Russia is currently the third-seeded men's team, but its invasion of and war in Ukraine has it barred from international hockey. According to the Associated Press, the IIHF will decide in February if the Russians will be allowed to participate. If not, the next best team after the three tournament winners will get that spot, filling out the 12-team Olympic field.

1. Canada
2. Finland
3. Russia*
4. U.S.A.
5. Germany
6. Sweden
7. Switzerland
8. Czechia
9. Italy (HOST)

Who is trying to qualify

There are three tournaments that will concurrently kick off on Thursday in Bratislava, Slovakia; Riga, Latvia; and Aalborg, Denmark.

It's safe to say that the hosts of these three qualifiers can all be considered the favourites, with Olympic experience and deeper NHL-level talent in their favour. But that doesn't mean it will be easy.

Here are the three events, with the teams listed alongside their current world ranking in brackets. All the games are to be streamed on YouTube.

Bratislava, Slovakia

- Slovakia (9)
- Austria (13)
- Kazakhstan (15)
- Hungary (18)

Having made history two and a half years ago in Beijing with their first podium finish in Olympic hockey, it must feel like an insult for the Slovaks to have to go through the qualifying process. Yet here they are. Making it more difficult is that they will have to do so without star forward

Juraj Slafkovsky (Canadiens) and veteran defenceman Erik Cernak (Lightning), who have both been ruled out.

Instead the Slovaks will lean on the likes of veteran winger Tomas Tatar (Devils) and up-and-comers Martin Pospisil (Flames) and Simon Nemec (Devils), as well others with NHL and AHL experience.

Austria will be without Marco Rossi (Wild), but can at least boast Red Wings prospect Marco Kasper, who had 35 points last season in Grand Rapids (AHL) and Canadiens draft pick (fifth overall in 2023) David Reinbacher on its roster.

Riga, Latvia

Latvia (10)

France (14)

Slovenia (19)

Ukraine (27)

You need look no further than their historic third-place finish at the 2023 world championship and the celebrations that ensued to know how much the Latvians love their hockey. The star of that bronze-medal win was Canucks goalie Arturs Silovs, who was thrust into the starter's role during this past spring's Stanley Cup Playoffs when injuries took out Thatcher Demko and Casey DeSmith.

Silovs was listed on the Latvian camp roster, but did not feature in either of their tune-up games against Denmark and was not listed on the team's roster for the tournament on Wednesday, which would be a major blow for the hosts, who were already without Blue Jackets goalie Elvis Merzlikins.

Vancouver teammate Teddy Blueger had already been ruled out due to "personal reasons," but Latvia has other NHL-experienced players to draw upon, including defenceman Uvis Balinskis (Panthers) and veteran Zemgus Girgensons (Lightning).

Without Kings captain Anze Kopitar, the Slovenians will be in tough in the Riga qualifier, while the French will be captained by 39-year-old Pierre-Édouard Bellemare — a veteran of 600 NHL games, but currently out of contract — and leaning on lone current NHLer Alexandre Texier.

Aalborg, Denmark

Denmark (11)

Norway (12)

Great Britain (17)

Japan (24)

Is Denmark a rising hockey power? It seems strange to say when you consider the Danes have qualified just once for the Olympics, the most recent NHL-absent Beijing Games being the one. Still, Denmark won two games in its group at those Games, beating Czechia and Switzerland, and advanced to the quarterfinals, which shows it has some depth.

And in Aalborg the Danes won't just have home-ice advantage, they'll also have a deep roster laced with NHL players, including a pair goalies in Frederik Andersen (Hurricanes) and Mads Søgaard (Senators), and forwards Oliver Bjorkstrand (Kraken), Lars Eller (Penguins). They will

also have Jets winger Nikolaj Ehlers, who collected three assists in a pair of warmup games against Latvia.

Norway, however, will counter with Minnesota Wild veteran Mats Zuccarello, as well as a pair of top NHL draft picks in Micheal Brandsegg-Nygaard (15th overall by the Red Wings) and Stian Solberg (23rd overall by the Ducks), who made history for the country when they were both drafted in the first round this past summer. No Norwegian had ever been drafted in the first round prior to that.

As the 11th and 12th seeded teams in the world, the Danes and Norwegians look like the sure bets to be fighting it out for top spot in Aalborg, with Great Britain and 28th-ranked Japan facing long odds to upset either of them.

[32 Thoughts: A collection of late off-season notes](#)

By Elliotte Friedman

23. Winnipeg got a better return for Rutger McGroarty than many expected — especially when he didn't move at the draft.

Pittsburgh Tribune

[Despite no guarantee of cracking NHL roster, Rutger McGroarty excited to get going with Penguins](#)

By Justin Guerriero

Last week, Rutger McGroarty was a member of the Winnipeg Jets organization and weighing a potential return to Michigan for his junior college hockey season.

Much has changed for the 20-year-old forward, who was introduced by the Pittsburgh Penguins on Wednesday in Cranberry after a blockbuster trade of top prospects with the Jets on Aug. 22.

While it has been a whirlwind for McGroarty, chosen 14th overall in 2022 by the Jets, he is excited to get started with the Penguins, having recently signed a three-year entry-level contract worth \$950,000 annually.

"Everything's right here," McGroarty said. "The development path, the veteran guys that they have here, the organization that they have here and the talent here, as well.

"I don't want to say (signing with the Penguins) was a no-brainer because I love the University of Michigan and it was very tough leaving there, but, also, it's awesome being here."

The way McGroarty put it, he has been given no guarantees that he will crack the NHL roster coming out of preseason training camp.

But that will doubtless be the ultimate goal for him.

"I've been promised a spot at the rookie tournament, and that's about it," he said. "I feel like I'm going to get what I deserve, and I'm going to come ready to work for camp. I like where my game's at right now. I'm just excited to get to camp and hopefully leave a good impression."

In meeting with the Pittsburgh media for the first time, McGroarty addressed several items that had become lingering question marks since being acquired by the Penguins.

Notably, McGroarty discussed his departure from Winnipeg.

At the end of June, trade rumors heated up after McGroarty declined to attend the club's development camp.

After last Thursday's trade, which sent Penguins top prospect Brayden Yager to the Jets, Winnipeg general manager Kevin Cheveldayoff spoke with local reporters about the circumstances of the move.

McGroarty did not offer specifics as to why he opted not to sign with the Jets.

"My agents talked to them, and then I talked to them," he said. "I just wanted to be up front and honest with them and tell them that I wasn't going to be signing with them. I got nothing but respect for those guys. They handled it with a lot of class. I wish them nothing but the best, but, as I said, I'm fired up to get started here now."

Listed at 6-foot-1 and 205 pounds, McGroarty is a left-handed shot who said he is comfortable playing right and left wing.

A solid offensive producer at Michigan as well as with the U.S. National Development Team for two seasons, McGroarty brings physicality and experience on the Wolverines' top-ranked power play into Penguins preseason camp, not to mention leadership.

McGroarty was set to assume the captaincy at Michigan and captained the U.S. to a gold medal at the World Junior Championships in January.

In terms of potentially less-refined aspects of McGroarty's game, some talent evaluators — as well as his coach at Michigan — have pointed to skating and speed.

McGroarty admitted those are areas that he is trying to improve but also emphasized several other strong facets of his game.

"I think speed for sure is something that I've been working on a lot and I know that's something I have to work on, just like I have to work on every other aspect of my game," McGroarty said. "I feel like I definitely play a power game, and I have a really good hockey IQ."

"I can put myself into situations that I know I can succeed in with — I don't want to say a lack of skating — but I think that I can think the game at a high level so I can put myself in better situations. I'm going to continue to work on my skating, as well."

The Penguins' upcoming preseason camp will be a new environment for McGroarty, who aims to prove he belongs.

Now and moving forward, McGroarty has more pressing matters to occupy his attention than speculating where he could slot into the nightly lineup.

That said, he, understandably, couldn't resist thinking about what it would be like to earn an opportunity to play alongside the Penguins' longtime franchise icon.

"Playing with Sidney Crosby, obviously, he's the best player in the world," he said. "I've grown up watching him play. It's definitely crossed my mind. I feel like that would be very cool if I could one day do that."

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Rutger McGroarty explains why he signed with Penguins, not Winnipeg: 'I feel like everything's right here'
McGroarty was dealt for Pittsburgh's previous top prospect, Brayden Yager

By Matt Vensel

One week ago, Rutger McGroarty wasn't sure where he'd wind up this winter.

He was back in Ann Arbor, Mich., preparing as if he would play his junior season with the Michigan Wolverines. And the 20-year-old heard from his agents that trade talks had begun to pick up, with Pittsburgh being among the possibilities.

But McGroarty was absolutely sure of one thing: He wasn't going to Winnipeg.

"My agents talked to them, and then I talked to them," he said Wednesday at a press conference at UPMC Lemieux Sports Complex. "I wanted to be up front and honest with them and just tell them that I wasn't going to be signing with them."

Why not? McGroarty was vague about that when asked — twice — about it Wednesday. But his grin came back as he gushed about being dealt to the Penguins.

Last Thursday, the Penguins boldly traded their top prospect, Brayden Yager, to the Winnipeg Jets for a new one in McGroarty, a rugged American winger.

"Yeah, obviously it means a lot that they were willing to make a trade like that for me," the Lincoln, Neb., native said. "And I'm very excited to be here now."

McGroarty had been the subject of trade speculation since before the NHL draft.

The Jets drafted him 14th overall in 2022 then watched him become a standout for Michigan and the captain of the U.S. team that took gold at the most recent IIHF world junior championship. But McGroarty declined to turn pro after his sophomore season, instead signaling he was prepared to return to Ann Arbor.

Winnipeg needed time to find the right deal and eventually brokered one with Kyle Dubas and the Penguins last week. McGroarty appreciated the Jets finding him a new home after his camp told the Jets that he wasn't going to sign there.

"I've got nothing but respect for those guys. They handled it with a lot of class. And I wish them nothing but the best," he said. "I'm fired up to get started here."

McGroarty declined to go into specifics about why he wanted a change of scenery. But he twice mentioned the “development path” the Penguins have charted out for him as a reason he is excited to come to Pittsburgh. That seemed to confirm reports that the Jets and he disagreed about his short-term future.

Unlike a few of his teammates, McGroarty was not signed after Michigan’s season, in part because the Jets were pushing for a playoff berth. Then, per Sportsnet, he wasn’t promised an NHL roster spot in Winnipeg for the 2024-25 season.

By late June, it was widely reported that the Jets were shopping the power forward, who had 16 goals and 52 points in 36 games for the Wolverines last season.

The Penguins, looking to put a younger supporting cast around Sidney Crosby, got the deal done last week by making Yager, another rising prospect, available.

“Last Monday, my agents called me and said this is a real possibility,” McGroarty grinned. “Obviously, I was fired up. It’s a great city. It’s a great organization.”

He showed that by signing with the Penguins hours after the trade, though he said it wasn’t easy leaving Ann Arbor. His entry-level contract is for three years.

So what was it about Pittsburgh that, unlike Winnipeg, made him want to sign?

“I feel like everything’s right here,” McGroarty replied. “The development path, the veteran guys that they have here, the organization that they have here and the town here, as well. ... And just talking to Kyle and Jason [Spezza], I feel like they’re just two great hockey minds with a great development path for me.”

Indications are that McGroarty will be given every opportunity to start the season in Pittsburgh. But he said Wednesday that he’s only been guaranteed a spot in the annual prospects challenge in Buffalo, N.Y. That takes place Sept. 13-16.

“That’s about it. So I feel like I’m going to get what I deserve, and I’m going to come ready to work at [training] camp,” he said. “I like where my game’s at right now. I’m excited to get to camp and hopefully leave a good impression on them.”

McGroarty is not the fastest skater but thus far has made his mark with his gritty game, high motor and infectious leadership. He is a left-hand shot who says he is comfortable on either wing. He lined up at both of those positions in college.

Coach Mike Sullivan and the Penguins won’t rush him. But ideally he would one day earn a spot next to Crosby, whom McGroarty called “the best player in the world.”

“I’ve grown up watching him play. So it’s definitely crossed my mind,” McGroarty said. “Yeah, I feel like that it would be very cool if I could one day do that.”

Without throwing shade at Winnipeg, he said the pedigree of the star players and the championship history in Pittsburgh are two reasons he is so pumped.

“I love it. I love winning. I love being part of an atmosphere like that. ... I love coming in [to the rink]. I love the grind every single day,” McGroarty said. “I love winning. So that makes me really excited, and hopefully I can be a part of that here.”

Owen Sound Sun-Times

Attack captain Colby Barlow to skip training camp in Owen Sound

By Greg Cowan

The captain isn't coming — at least not yet.

Owen Sound Attack GM Dale DeGray said Colby Barlow informed the team a few days before training camp that he's decided to stay and prepare in the Toronto area before the Winnipeg Jets meet for camp next month.

The Jets selected Barlow in the first round and signed him to an entry-level contract in the summer of 2023.

DeGray wouldn't comment on whether or not Barlow asked for a trade in the off-season, only saying that if the Orillia product is re-assigned to the Ontario Hockey League by the Jets, and then fails to report to Owen Sound, he'll be forced to make a tough decision.

DeGray, though admittedly disappointed by Barlow's decision, said the 19-year-old is one of a handful of NHL prospects who he expects won't attend training camp with their junior teams this year.

He said the decision to forgo junior camps to continue their off-season training program while hoping to jump to the professional ranks might be a “new normal” with teenage hockey players.

DeGray said he doesn't have to like the change but he'll have to adapt.

“If I'm stuck in the mud I'm going to get left behind,” he said. “We just have to deal with it.”

Barlow helped breathe new life into a struggling Attack team during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. As a 16-year-old, Barlow set the Attack record for goals scored by an underage player with 30. He was named the youngest captain in franchise history the next season.

Team success never followed. Owen Sound has been bounced from the first round of the playoffs the past three seasons and swept in the first round the last two years.

Last season, the Attack fired former head coach Greg Walters just a few weeks into the season. The league later suspended Walters for six months following an investigation into what officials called an inappropriate verbal altercation with a staff member.

The Windsor Spitfires named Walters their new head coach a day after his suspension was lifted.

Meanwhile, as interim head coach Darren Rumble took over the reins, Barlow suffered a nagging back injury and needed time to rehab in Toronto.

The talented winger still scored 40 goals in just 50 games with the Attack.

The tumultuous season, mixed with the perception Owen Sound will be a youthful club with low expectations this year, have some wondering if Barlow is looking for a change of scenery in the OHL.

"I want Colby Barlow to be in Owen Sound," DeGray said. "I wish he was here."

The Athletic

Winnipeg Jets rank No. 24 in NHL Pipeline Rankings for 2024

By Corey Pronman

After using four first-round picks in a row on forwards, Winnipeg has a strong group of young forwards coming up. There are NHL players in this group who will help the team, but I do wonder where the high side is coming from. Some may say it could be from Cole Perfetti.

Key additions: N/A

Key graduates: N/A

2023 ranking: 19

2024 NHL Draft grade: C-

Player Ranking

1. Cole Perfetti, C

January 1, 2002 | 5-foot-11 | 185 pounds | Shoots left

Drafted: No. 10 in 2020

Tier: Middle of the lineup player

Skating: Below NHL average

Puck skills: Above NHL average

Hockey sense: High-end

Compete: NHL average

Analysis: Perfetti was a regular middle-six forward for Winnipeg last season, scoring 19 goals and 38 points. His hockey sense is tremendous. Perfetti sees plays others don't and can pick apart defenses with his playmaking. He has a ton of natural skill and creativity and is lethal on the power play. The knock on Perfetti is a lack of athleticism. He's not big or fast, and while he competes fine and can create at the net, it's not a major asset. There's a concern about how much he can create at even strength given those limitations. He looks like he will have a long and productive NHL career, but he may never drive the bus for a team at even strength.

2. Brad Lambert, C

December 19, 2003 | 6-foot-1 | 173 pounds | Shoots right

Drafted: No. 30 in 2022
Tier: Middle of the lineup player

Skating: Above NHL average
Puck skills: NHL average
Hockey sense: NHL average
Compete: NHL average
Shot: Above NHL average

Analysis: Lambert had a great season, bouncing back after a few years of up-and-down play to become an AHL All-Star and a major driver of Manitoba's offense. Lambert has clear NHL speed and skill. When he winds up with the puck he can fly by opponents. I don't think Lambert is the most natural playmaker, but he sees the ice well enough and has a strong wrist shot, too. The biggest issue in Lambert's game historically has been his compete. He can drift to the perimeter a bit too much and has a history of being inconsistent. The perimeter player was still there but the consistency wasn't an issue last season. He's trending as a legit middle-six NHL forward and could potentially play the middle.

3. *Brayden Yager, C*

January 3, 2005 | 5-foot-11 | 166 pounds | Shoots right

Drafted: No. 14 in 2023
Tier: Middle of the lineup player

Skating: NHL average
Puck skills: NHL average
Hockey sense: Above NHL average
Compete: Above NHL average
Shot: Above NHL average

Analysis: Yager is a tough evaluation. He's been a great junior player and scored 95 points this past season. Despite his production, he wasn't truly a standout player in the WHL like his draft slot would suggest. He's clearly a talented forward. He skates and handles the puck very well, can make plays and has a big shot from range. 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 hard-working 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.

4. *Colby Barlow, LW*

February 14, 2005 | 6-feet | 190 pounds | Shoots left

Drafted: No. 18 in 2023
Tier: Middle of the lineup player

Skating: NHL average
Puck skills: NHL average
Hockey sense: NHL average
Compete: Above NHL average
Shot: High-end

Analysis: Barlow was injured for the first part of the year, but he was very good in the OHL upon returning. He scored 40 goals in 50 games. It's not much of a novel take to say Barlow can shoot a puck. His wrist shot and one-timer are both legit weapons for the NHL level from midrange. Barlow has good speed and skill but I wouldn't call him a true play-driver. He relies on his effort and shot to generate a lot of his offense. His speed can get him to the right spots though, and he has good enough sense to make tough plays. He projects as a two-way middle-six forward who can play on both special teams.

5. *Chaz Lucius, C*

May 2, 2003 | 6-foot-2 | 177 pounds | Shoots right

Drafted: No. 18 in 2021

Tier: Projected to play NHL games

Skating: Below NHL average

Puck skills: Above NHL average

Hockey sense: NHL average

Compete: NHL average

Analysis: Lucius' development has been an unfortunate sequence of injuries. He is a highly talented goal scorer who just can't seem to stay healthy. When on the ice, he has excellent 1v1 skills and finishing touch and shows courage to create offense in the tough areas. His skating is just OK though, and given his other issues, there are reservations on whether he is going to have an NHL career despite having NHL talent.

Has a chance to play

Elias Salomonsson had a big season in the SHL, playing a big role on Skelleftea as they won an SHL title. He's a very competitive defenseman who skates well and can make a first pass, although his puck-moving for the NHL is a question for me. Alfons Freij is a strong skater with a high skill level and a big shot from the point. His hockey sense is just OK, though. Nikita Chibrikov played well in the AHL in his first year in North America. He has great hands and vision and is a threat inside the offensive zone due to his puck play and strong motor. His skating is average though, and not great for his size.

Nikita Chibrikov, RW

February 16, 2003 | 5-foot-10 | 170 pounds | Shoots left | Drafted: No. 50 in 2021

Alfons Freij, D

February 12, 2006 | 6-foot-1 | 197 pounds | Shoots left | Drafted: No. 37 in 2024

Connor Levis, RW

October 5, 2004 | 6-foot-1 | 187 pounds | Shoots right | Drafted: No. 210 in 2023

Thomas Milic, G

April 14, 2003 | 6-feet | 175 pounds | Catches left | Drafted: No. 151 in 2023

Elias Salomonsson, D

August 31, 2004 | 6-feet | 172 pounds | Shoots right | Drafted: No. 55 in 2022

Kieron Walton, LW

April 22, 2006 | 6-foot-6 | 211 pounds | Shoots left | Drafted: No. 187 in 2024

Danil Zhilkin, C

December 19, 2003 | 6-foot-1 | 192 pounds | Shoots left | Drafted: No. 77 in 2022

* Listed in alphabetical order

Player eligibility: All skaters who are 22 years old or younger as of Sept. 15, 2024, regardless of how many NHL games they've played, are eligible. Player heights and weights are taken from the NHL.

Tool grades: Tool grades are based on a scale with six separate levels, with an eye toward how this attribute would grade in the NHL (poor, below-average, average, above-average, high-end and elite). "Average" on this scale means the tool projects as NHL average, which is meant as a positive, not a criticism. Skating, puck skills, hockey sense and compete for every projected NHL player are graded. Shot grades are only included if a shot is notably good or poor.

Tier definitions: Tiers are meant to show roughly where in an average NHL lineup a player projects to slot in.