

Winnipegjets.com

<https://www.nhl.com/jets/news/pionk-bringing-fresh-perspective-into-training-camp>

***Pionk bringing fresh perspective into training camp
Jets defenceman became a father in late August***

By Mitchell Clinton

WINNIPEG – It has been an exciting summer for Neal Pionk, and if fans see him throwing his hip checks with even more force than in previous seasons, it could possibly be attributed to something he picked up in late August:

Dad strength.

Pionk and his wife, Kiera, welcomed Stevie Mae to the family on August 21.

“We couldn’t be more blessed to have a healthy baby and mom's healthy too,” said Pionk on Tuesday, following a one-hour skate at hockey for all centre. “You change your perspective. You know, before, you're thinking about yourself, or you think about you and your wife as a couple. Now it's basically surrounded around her for the most part - making decisions based on where to travel, what to do, what to eat, who's coming into town, who isn't coming into town. So it's all based around her right now.”

Just under a month before his daughter’s birth, Pionk was also a groomsman in Dylan Samberg’s wedding.

“It was great. We got to kick back and watch him take a million pictures,” Pionk laughed. “It was a good event and saw a bunch of the Jets guys there, a bunch of UMD alumni as well. So it was a great time.”

Pionk and Samberg’s friendship goes back to their hometown of Hermantown, MN, and the duo also spent time together as a defensive pair last season. They played 154:18 at five-on-five together, fifth most of any Jets combination on the blue line last season.

“We have the obvious chemistry. I see him all summer. I see him too much sometimes,” Pionk said, with his usual sarcastic tone whenever Samberg comes up. “We live at the same lake together, so we got that going for us.”

Like every summer in the National Hockey League, rosters all over the league change and evolve as free agency and trades send players to new locations. While Pionk is very familiar with Samberg, the partner he actually spent the most time last season was Brenden Dillon.

Of course, Dillon signed with the New Jersey Devils on July 1.

"I'm happy for him at the end of the day, happy for him, happy for his family," said Pionk. "So I'm sure we'll run into him, and I'll have something to say to him this winter."

While Pionk finished last season with the same 33 points last year as he did in 2022-23, he's always working on trying to find ways to improve his game.

A lot of the conversation following Winnipeg's exit in the first round of the Stanley Cup Playoffs was about the players on the squad not being satisfied and wanting to find ways to get a few percentage points better as a group and individually.

The one thing that he won't let stand in the way of that is the fact he's entering the final year of his contract.

"I've been through contract years before, been through two of them, so I didn't change anything," he said. "I did what I always do in the summer, and trained hard, played a little bit of golf, but more hockey than golf. So yeah, just go into the year and play your game."

This will be Pionk's sixth season as a member of the Jets. It's where he's set career-highs in goals (10, in 2022-23), points (45, in 2019-20), and hit personal milestones – like his 200th career point on January 5, 2024 against Anaheim.

He looks forward to continuing to collect those personal milestones on the ice, while celebrating different milestones at home with his new daughter.

"Especially once she starts interacting a little bit, you know, a few months into the year, that'll be really fun," he said. "Right now, she's just eating and sleeping a lot. I've gotten good at changing diapers, but, yeah, I think when they're able to interact and smile at you when you come through the door, I think that'll be huge."

Winnipeg Free Press

<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2024/09/10/the-boys-are-back-in-town-2>

The boys are back in town

Jets on ice for informal pre-camp workouts

By: Mike McIntyre

It may feel like the middle of summer, but it's starting to look like hockey season around here.

Two dozen members of the Winnipeg Jets organization earned a gold star for early attendance as they hit the ice Tuesday for an informal group practice despite the fact training camp is still a full week away and the new NHL campaign won't get going for another month.

"It's great to have a lot of guys in town," said alternate captain Mark Scheifele.

These so-called “captain’s skates” have become a staple in most big-league markets as players look for every edge when it comes to team building and bonding. The only veterans who haven’t arrived yet are goaltender Connor Hellebuyck and forwards Kyle Connor, Nikolaj Ehlers and Nino Niederreiter.

Not surprisingly, there was plenty of excitement and optimism in the air in what amounts to a “back-to-school” feeling complete with players catching up on what they did during their summer vacations.

Scheifele, for example, was front and centre getting to know some new faces such as depth forwards Jared Anderson-Dolan and Mason Shaw, who were signed as free agents over the summer. As the hour-long skate ended Tuesday, Scheifele remained on the ice with the pair, along with forward Gabe Vilardi, mapping out some bonus drills.

“I will not be coaching after my career, that’s for sure,” he said with a laugh.

“To be honest, it’s more selfish than anything. I have thoughts about what I want to work on. Obviously with Gaber I have some thoughts for him, and for Shawsy and JAD to come in and join, I’m always welcoming guys to come and work on stuff and work on things in their game. I love when guys stay on late and try to work.”

Spoken like a wily veteran.

“I’m an old fart now,” he joked.

“I think that’s what’s exciting about the summer. You see spots open for new guys. I remember what that was like when I was younger, a spot that’s ripe for the picking and having to give it your all and everything in your power to better your game and be prepared to play in the NHL. It’s no easy feat. I think that’s what excites me the most, to see those guys, see what they’ve got and try to help as much as I can.”

Winnipeg bid farewell to free agent forwards Sean Monahan and Tyler Toffoli, defencemen Brenden Dillon and Nate Schmidt, and backup goaltender Laurent Brossoit. That’s opened doors for prospects such as Ville Heinola, Elias Salomonsson, Brad Lambert, Nikita Chibrikov and Brayden Yager to push for work.

How does a potential youth movement sit with the 31-year-old Scheifele, who starts his seven-year, US \$59.5 million contact extension this coming season? Could that mean a step back, even if temporary, for a team that finished the regular-season tied for fourth-overall last year and won the Jennings Trophy as stingiest defensive squad in the league?

“I think our core here for the most part is still intact,” said Scheifele. “We just need some guys to step into roles. Obviously there’s some spots available. Hopefully some of these young guys come into camp hungry and ready to take a spot and establish their NHL career.”

Several of those young players will be front and centre this weekend at the Young Stars tournament in Penticton, B.C. They’ll hit the ice for a formal practice on Wednesday at the

Hockey For All Centre before flying west to play games against the top prospects of the Calgary Flames, Edmonton Oilers and Vancouver Canucks on Friday, Sunday and Monday.

Scheifele has seen plenty of teammates come and go over the years, including good friends such as Andrew Copp (whose wedding he recently attended as a groomsman) and Jacob Trouba. Schmidt and Dillon are just the latest examples.

“That’s what happens in this business. You need guys to step up and fill that role. Obviously Dilly’s a big loss. He did a lot for us, tough guy, hard to play against,” said Scheifele.

“But at the end of the day you just wish them the best. They’re all great friends. We need guys to step in and take the bull by the horns and go from there.”

Speaking of business, the Jets still have some to take care of when it comes to restricted free agent Cole Perfetti. He has yet to sign a new deal, but the fact he’s in Las Vegas this week as Winnipeg’s representative on the NHL’s media tour is a promising sign.

“I’ve gone through it. So many guys have gone through it. It’s a matter of the business. He’s got a good head on his shoulders. I don’t worry about him at all, he’s doing just fine,” said Scheifele, who is good friends with Perfetti and trains with him during the summer.

Would he like to see the 22-year-old, who set career highs in goals (19), assists (19), points (38) and games played (71) last season, sign a long-term deal rather than a bridge contact?

“That’s up to him. You never mess with anyone’s business, that’s what I’ve learned in this league,” said Scheifele.

“Everyone’s business is their business, all you try to do is be there as a friend. You don’t ask for specifics, you just want to be a shoulder to lean on, and that’s all you can do.”

NHL coaches aren’t allowed to run these pre-camp skates, but Scheifele is eager to see what new bench boss Scott Arniel can do after taking over from the retired Rick Bowness. The Jets crashed and burned in the playoffs last spring, taking their opening game against the Colorado Avalanche before losing four straight.

“Because we had him kind of like for two months throughout the year (during medical leaves by Bowness), I think we kind of got used to what he’s like behind the bench. We had some pretty good stretches when he was there,” said Scheifele.

“Obviously it’s a little bit different when you have the head coach job, but I’m expecting him to be great and am excited to work with him. He was with the D last year so we didn’t get a lot of interaction with him, but I’m excited to see what he does as a head coach.”

On-ice training camp sessions begin Sept. 19, and the Jets start their six-game preseason schedule on Sept. 21. The 82-game regular-season begins Oct. 9.

<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/sports/2024/09/10/heinola-focused-on-claiming-spot-on-jets-blue-line>

Heinola focused on claiming spot on Jets blue line Departure of veteran D-men opens spot for versatile Finn

By: Mike McIntyre

The future has finally arrived for Ville Heinola.

“I’ve been waiting for this moment for a long time,” the 23-year-old Finnish defenceman said Tuesday following an informal Winnipeg Jets skate at the Hockey For All Centre.

Take a look at the current state of the roster and it’s clear there is a job opening with Heinola’s name on it once training camp officially begins next week. The organization bid farewell over the summer to veteran blueliners Brenden Dillon (signed with New Jersey) and Nate Schmidt (signed with Florida) without bringing in any established replacements.

No longer exempt from waivers, Heinola would surely be claimed by another club should the Jets try to send him down to the Manitoba Moose as they have for the past five years. The 20th-overall pick from 2019 has talent to burn while seemingly doing everything asked of him at the American Hockey League level while patiently waiting for his opportunity.

“Been grinding out every single day just to be ready when I get the chance to be in the top six. That’s my only goal this year and working towards it,” said Heinola.

He looked to have accomplished his goal a year ago, thanks to an impressive preseason showing which had him in line to not only crack the opening-night 23-man roster but likely be in the starting lineup for Game 1.

His big-league dream became a nightmare when he broke his ankle in the final preseason game. Heinola spent months recovering, then found his path to the Jets blocked by a healthy blue-line that ultimately went on to surrender the fewest goals in the league during the season.

The result was 41 games with the Moose trying to get back up to speed — and not a single contest with the Jets.

“It made me stronger mentally, for sure,” said Heinola. “Probably physically, as well. It’s never easy going through an injury and all the things that comes with it. But I think I handled it pretty well and am more ready now than I was last year.”

Winnipeg’s top four looks set with Josh Morrissey and Dylan DeMelo on the top pairing and Neal Pionk and Dylan Samberg likely on the second one. That leaves Heinola, Colin Miller and Logan Stanley in the mix for the third duo and an extra spot, which could involve a rotation of sorts.

The Jets did acquire depth defenders Dylan Coghlan and Haydn Fleury as extra insurance, and rookie Elias Salomonsson (2022 second-round pick) is also in the mix.

Heinola, who can play the left and right side, isn't taking anything for granted even if his change in waiver status should provide some security.

"If I think about last year, I had exactly the same mindset, that I have to steal someone's job to be on the top six. I feel like nothing changes this year," he said. "There's always going to be someone that I have to play better than. I feel that I'm ready for it and I know that I can do it."

Heinola has played a total of 35 NHL games over parts of four years (one goal, 10 assists) while skating in 152 AHL games (23 goals, 79 assists). As a smooth-skating, puck-moving pivot, he brings the type of skill-set the Jets could desperately use more of.

"I can play an all-around game. The last two years, I've been focusing on my defensive part of the game," he said.

"I feel like I can do it all. I know my strengths and I know what I'm good at. Of course, I want to do those things well. But I feel like if I play my game, I don't really have to worry about those things. It's more like proving to (the coaches) that I can do those other things, too."

Speaking of coaches, Heinola has had some good summer conversations with new bench boss Scott Arniel.

"I think the plan is pretty simple for me: I have to earn my job here and show what I can do and show them I can be in a top-six role," he said.

Like most young hockey players — particularly those who would be considered undersized by modern NHL standards — Heinola spent the offseason trying to get physically stronger. At 6-feet and 181 pounds, a little extra muscle can go a long way when it comes to board battles and net-front play.

"This summer, I spent way more time on the ice. Obviously, I missed a lot of time on the ice last year. That was my main focus, being on the ice, getting my skating back, hands and everything," he said.

He has also stayed in touch with Dillon and Schmidt, who were valuable mentors to him on and off the ice and have helped him keep a level head when the going got really tough. Now, he's hoping for a run of good health and good play with a golden opportunity directly in front of him.

"I feel like it also comes with age. I'm a little older now. I've been here for a little bit so I know how things work and what I have to do," said Heinola.

"I'm not nervous anymore around these guys. It helps a lot. I feel like the more experience you get, the more comfort you get. You get used to things. If you make a bad play, it doesn't matter. You just make the next one well and it's gonna help."

Sportsnet.ca

<https://www.sportsnet.ca/nhl/article/one-player-who-has-to-deliver-for-each-team-in-nhls-central-division/>

One player who has to deliver for each team in NHL's Central Division

By Rory Boylen

From top to bottom the Central Division has a wide variety of team types to offer. There are a couple of legitimate Stanley Cup contenders, a few teams that could finish on either side of the playoff cutline and maybe even steal a round, and another in the deepest of rebuilds at the bottom.

Still, each has something to play for and some players who have something to prove.

Each new season comes with a renewed outlook for franchises and individuals. Continuing our run through each of the NHL's four divisions, we look at the Central, and one player who needs to step up in some way for each team.

Dallas Stars: Jake Oettinger

As RFA Jeremy Swayman's contract talks with the Bruins drag out into September and training camps a little over a week away, we're wondering how Jake Oettinger's next contract will go. There is little doubt the Stars highly value Oettinger, and rightly so. He was considered a Vezina favourite by some heading into last season, is one of five goalies with 100 wins over the past three seasons combined, and is ranked eighth in save percentage among netminders with at least 100 appearances in that time. He'll be considered a Vezina contender again heading into 2024-25.

At the same time, his 2023-24 was inconsistent, with a mid-season run through December, January, February and March where his save percentage dipped below .900. He rounded into form by the playoffs and was one of the best goalies all post-season, but there have been questions about how heavy of a workload the soon-to-be 26-year-old can handle.

Still, Oettinger is one of the best young players at his position and there's little doubt a deal will get done. On track for RFA eligibility next summer but one year away from UFA status, now is the time for a long-term extension. A Vezina worthy season would push his number higher, while any more inconsistency -- or even a playoff letdown -- would certainly make for interesting discourse.

Winnipeg Jets: Cole Perfetti

Still without a contract, there is some indication that it's not all bad on the Perfetti front. With NHL Player Media day beginning in Las Vegas, Perfetti is still set to represent the Jets, unlike Swayman, another RFA who was supposed to be Boston's rep before pulling back.

On the latest 32 Thoughts Podcast, Elliotte Friedman said all indications were that Perfetti was happy to continue as a Jet and that there was no problematic breakdown in the relationship to overcome. Assuming a deal gets done, Perfetti becomes an important player in Winnipeg's season. An argument could be made that he should have received more ice time last season, so that will be one of the main things to watch. Scott Arniel is the new coach, though he was previously on the bench as an associate under Rick Bowness.

There's also a question as to who Winnipeg's No. 2 centre will be, with Mark Scheifele locked in at No. 1 and Adam Lowry a better fit for No. 3. Perfetti has not played much there in his NHL career yet, but is one of the candidates to do so. It would go a long way for Winnipeg if he was able to establish himself as a productive young player in that position.

Colorado Avalanche: Casey Mittelstadt

The Avs paid a hefty price at last season's trade deadline to get Casey Mittelstadt, but as bright as Bowen Byram's future is on the blue line, Colorado was trying to fill a hole in its lineup. And the early returns of Mittelstadt as an effective second-line centre on the Stanley Cup contender were promising.

In 18 regular-season games with Colorado, Mittelstadt's line heavily tilted scoring chances in the opposing end at 5-on-5 and it continued into the playoffs, where he also contributed three goals and nine points in 11 games.

When the Avalanche won the Stanley Cup in 2022, they were paying Nazem Kadri \$4.5 million to be their 2C, and he provided immense value at that cost and stability at a critical position. They felt his loss the next season and it continued to be a weakness well into 2023-24. After signing Mittelstadt to a three-year extension with a \$5.75 million cap hit, they'll be getting similar contract value as the cap rises to \$88 million this season and perhaps up to \$92 million in 2025-26. With Gabriel Landeskog hoping to be on track to return to the lineup some time this season as well, having Mittelstadt in the middle of a second unit will bring far greater depth to their forwards.

Nashville Predators: Steven Stamkos

There are a couple good candidates here, from Juuse Saros bouncing back from a down year, to Jonathan Marchessault sticking it to yet another former team. But we've got to go with Steven Stamkos who, turning 35 years old in February, is out to prove to the Tampa Bay Lightning (and Team Canada) he's still got it — and to the rest of the hockey world that he can still stack up the goals away from Nikita Kucherov.

After a contract negotiation that never seemed all that pleasant, the Lightning did the unthinkable and turned away from their own first-overall pick from 2008. After years spent trying to keep as many pieces of the Cup-winning core together as they could, Tampa Bay chose to go in a different, younger direction up front, and signed Jake Guentzel with Stamkos' money.

Under GM Barry Trotz, the Predators have made an attempt to become a more explosive and offensive team. Head coach Andrew Brunette leans into that style and the aforementioned

signing of Marchessault should help accomplish the task as well. But can they take a step in the standings, or are they caught in the league's mushy middle?

Stamkos paying off at \$8 million, over a contract that will end when he's 38, will go a long way in ruling on Nashville's situation. He's 45 goals away from becoming the 22nd NHL player to reach 600 in a career (assuming Crosby, five away, gets there first). Heck, if Stamkos averages 36.25 goals per season over the life of this contract he'd reach 700 career goals, something only eight other NHL players have done before.

St. Louis Blues: Philip Broberg

All power to Philip Broberg for using his situation to maximize his earnings and get a \$4.58 million contract for two years in St. Louis that the Oilers weren't ever going to present. Money aside, the move to the Blues will also finally put Broberg in position to play on his preferred left side, something there wasn't room to do in Edmonton.

Torey Krug's season-ending injury even opens the door for Broberg to be a top four left-side defender all season long. However, part of the reason why Edmonton let him go, and why Broberg spent most of last season in the AHL, was that they still didn't really know what they had in the 23-year-old. Would he hit on the potential he had as the eighth-overall pick of the 2019 draft if put in the right position, or are there holes limiting that upside? We're about to find out the whole picture in St. Louis.

Minnesota Wild: Filip Gustavsson

When Filip Gustavsson first arrived in Minnesota from Ottawa, it looked like the Wild stole a promising young goalie from the Senators. In 38 games two years ago, Gustavsson went 22-9-7 with a .931 save percentage and 2.10 goals-against average splitting the net with Marc-André Fleury. Last season was a different story, however, as both goalies finished with sub-.900 save percentages and Gustavsson's GAA ballooned to over 3.00.

While this coming season is set to be Fleury's last in the NHL, opportunity is there for Gustavsson to prove capable of being part of future plans when his contract expires in 2026, or he could take a backseat to the next goalie up. Jesper Wallstedt, the 20th-overall pick of the 2021 draft, has been improving over two years in the AHL and GM Bill Guerin has said it's time to start finding ways to give him more NHL looks. Gustavsson could play his way into a future tandem, or out of Minnesota and become trade fodder in March.

Utah Hockey Club: Mikhail Sergachev

With a fresh look in a different city, the NHL's "newest" club has so far taken a different approach. Where the Arizona Coyotes were salary-floor penny pinchers hoarding draft picks and patiently building, the Utah team used some of that capital and cap space to add NHL players.

The defence has been completely rebuilt, with Sean Durzi, John Marino and Ian Cole some headline names added via trade and free agency. But the new No. 1 in town is Mikhail

Sergachev, acquired from Tampa just before he heads into Year 2 of an eight-year deal. With the Lightning, Sergachev always played in the shadow of Norris winner Victor Hedman, and while that kind of mentorship will certainly help the 26-year-old in the next stage of his career, this is a much different challenge going from a Cup champion to a breakout hopeful. Utah will lean on Sergachev more than even Tampa did, and The Hockey Club is hoping to compete far more quickly than Arizona ever did.

Chicago Blackhawks: Taylor Hall

Heading into last season, the idea was for Taylor Hall to play alongside super rookie Connor Bedard and be the one offensively productive veteran next to him on a wasteland of a rebuilding roster. But Hall only made it 10 games into the season, scoring two goals and two assists, before an ACL injury ended his year.

The Hawks are only slightly more competitive in 2024-25 and Hall is expected to be able to return to the lineup, hopeful to pick up his original spot and hang with last year's Calder winner. While it's entirely possible that a productive season could lead to Hall becoming a trade candidate at the deadline the 32-year-old (turning 33 in November) also has a new contract to play for, as he's set to become a UFA in July.

<https://www.sportsnet.ca/nhl/article/nhl-division-rankings-predicting-how-the-atlantic-will-shake-out/>

NHL Division Rankings: Predicting how the Central will shake out

By Rory Boylen

If the Atlantic Division is regarded as the best collection of teams in the NHL, the Central might be the next in line to give it a run. Although there are a couple of obvious teams at the top above the rest, most of this division improved over the off-season — and you could make a case that just about any one of them could contend for a wild-card spot until the very end.

While Dallas and Colorado have represented the Central in each of the past three Western Conference finals, the Nashville Predators were one of the biggest winners of the off-season. And newly arrived Utah, doing business much differently than it did under Alex Meruelo in Arizona, could throw a wrench into the established order of things here.

The Central figures to be a highly competitive division once again in 2024-25. So how will it shake out? We take our shot at predicting the final finish.

1. Colorado Avalanche

After reaching 50 wins and finishing six points off Dallas' division-winning pace from 2023-24, we can definitely see a path back to the top for Colorado, which won this division in 2022 and 2023.

First, Casey Mittelstadt appears to be capable of filling the 2C hole the Avalanche have had since Nazem Kadri left as a free agent, which will go a long way over the grind of 82 games. Valeri Nichushkin, suspended for six months and placed in Stage 3 of the player assistance program, could be eligible to return in November, which could be a huge boost if it happens. In the meantime, rookie Nikolai Kovalenko arrives as one of the more intriguing, mysterious rookies. A 24-year-old, sixth-round pick from 2018, he's been near a point per game player for a couple years in the KHL and registered four points in six AHL games (regular season and playoffs) at the end of 2023-24.

An even bigger development, however, would be the return of captain Gabriel Landeskog, who seems to be making progress. A right-knee injury has kept him on the sidelines since Colorado's Cup win in 2022.

With a great mix of players in the top four on the blueline — including one of, if not the best, top pairs in the league — the Avs took a shot on Erik Brannstrom and Oliver Kylington, who could form the bottom pair. Not bad. If Alexandar Georgiev can be even a sliver better than he was last season, the Avs may not just win the Central, they could easily contend for the Presidents' Trophy.

2. Dallas Stars

Jim Nill's team earned the label of being the "deepest" lineup in the NHL last season and, among the forwards at least, that could be true again in 2024-25. Last season's breakout from Wyatt Johnston unlocked another threat for the Stars as he attained 30-plus goals, and this season they're adding two more young players who could be vying for the Calder Trophy: Logan Stankoven and Mavrik Bourque. At the time the former was called up to the NHL midway through last season, these two players were 1-2 in the AHL scoring race. Bourque ended up winning it, with 77 points in 71 games.

That will have to make up for the loss of Joe Pavelski, who retired after a 27-goal, 67-point season.

In net, Jake Oettinger is one of the best players in the game at his position and there's little concern about him, beyond wondering if he should play a little less often in the regular season. Just in case, the Stars acquired Casey DeSmith to back him up.

Where Dallas could be exploited — and was in last season's playoffs — is on the blueline. While the Stars do have a great leading talent in Miro Heiskanen and a very promising young partner in 23-year-old Thomas Harley (who is still an RFA), the depth boasted up front is not there on the back end.

Ilya Lyubushkin, Matt Dumba and Brendan Smith will make up half of this unit, which won't be able to replace the lost excellence of Chris Tanev. When injuries hit last season, Dallas didn't have the same horses on defence to make it up, and that's even more true in 2024-25.

3. Nashville Predators

From 99 points to over 100? There are lots of reasons to believe things could break right for Nashville this season.

To begin, the Predators were one of the biggest winners over the summer, signing both Jonathan Marchessault and Steven Stamkos, two highly dangerous players on offence who should help propel head coach Andrew Brunette's desire to push on that side of the ice. Brady Skjei was also added to the blueline, which was already pretty good to begin with, and his skillset leans into Brunette's style as well.

The X-factor will be Juuse Saros, signed to an eight-year extension after probably the worst season of his career — a .906 save percentage and 2.86 GAA. Still just 29 years old, though, he's a great candidate to have a bounce-back season. He's carried worse Predators teams into the playoffs before, so a top-five performance behind this year's version could deliver the franchise's best season in years.

4. Winnipeg Jets

With all that was lost over the summer, there's some consideration for putting the Jets even lower on this list. Sean Monahan's departure leaves a big hole at second-line centre where, perhaps, Cole Perfetti could jump into, but he's still without a contract so close to training camp. Tyler Toffoli's goal-scoring ability acquired at the deadline is also gone from the lineup. Brenden Dillon and Nate Schmidt were lost from the blueline, and Laurent Brossoit's departure means a downgrade from one of the best backups in the NHL.

Meantime, Nikolaj Ehlers is a pending UFA who just hasn't been able to maximize his ice time while with the Jets. Should they struggle, or he indicate he wants out, that could be another loss to deal with.

In turn, the Jets didn't make any notable improvements to the lineup and require big years from returning vets, or some others in the system to step up. Can Brad Lambert make the team and have an immediate NHL impact after leading the AHL's Manitoba Moose in scoring?

5. Utah Hockey Club

This new team has such a big climb ahead of them to make the playoffs, or catch the group of teams ahead of them in this division, that it's difficult to expect more than this. It's not impossible, however, since Utah was much more aggressively adding to their team in the off-season than it was in Arizona, plus the likes of Logan Cooley, Josh Doan and Dylan Guenther have only just begun to show what they have in store for their careers.

The key changes — and reason for optimism — here is that the blueline has been completely rebuilt and upgraded by every measure. Mikhail Sergachev, John Marino and Ian Cole give Utah solid partners to anchor each pairing, while Sean Durzi is coming into his own heading into Year 4. All of this should make life somewhat easier for goalie Connor Ingram, who took over the starter's job last season and is maybe a dark-horse candidate to be one of Canada's three goalies at the 4 Nations.

6. *St. Louis Blues*

The middle of the pack in this division could all be pretty close together, and the Blues are in the thick of that. On paper, there are things to like here. Robert Thomas was a better than point-per-game player last season and Jordan Kyrou hit 30 goals for the second straight season. The top of the group is strong and the depth should even be better this season, with Mathieu Joseph able to provide secondary scoring and Dylan Holloway coming over by way of offer sheet full of potential and ability to play on the PK.

With Torey Krug out for the season, Philip Broberg will get all the opportunity he wanted but couldn't get in Edmonton and while overall the back end doesn't flash, you can't complain about its depth. In net, Jordan Binnington finally had a bounce-back season in 2023-24 after seeing his numbers decline a couple years in a row, and he's the favourite to man Canada's net heading in.

7. *Minnesota Wild*

The good news is that this is the last year the Wild have to endure the extreme cap penalties they inflicted on themselves with the Ryan Suter and Zach Parise buyouts. Those charges lighten up considerably next season, which might allow the team to get much more active and creative in the trade and free-agent market soon (though a Kirill Kaprizov extension looms two years away).

In the meantime, much of last year's team returns with a roster that finished with 87 points, which was 11 out of the playoffs. Neither of their goalies had a particularly strong season a year ago, but Jesper Wallstedt is the wild card this time around.

The whole team will be playing this one for Marc-Andre Fleury, who announced this will be his last go-around in the NHL. The Wild have their vets mixed in with some young players in Matt Boldy, Brock Faber and Marco Rossi who have each shown some special element but are still so early in their careers.

There is a chance that slotting the Wild here could look terrible in April but, again, we see a big crunch in the middle of this division where not much will separate each team.

8. *Chicago Blackhawks*

Improvements were made this summer that should make the Blackhawks a tougher team to beat, at least. Tyler Bertuzzi and Teuvo Teravainen especially help make for a better top six, while "backup" Laurent Brossoit has the potential to earn most of the starts. Even the bottom of the lineup has better veteran depth throughout.

Outside of Connor Bedard going absolutely nuclear — like on a Connor McDavid level — it's still hard to imagine the Hawks passing other teams in this division quite yet. Last season, they finished 25 points back of Arizona, which, as discussed in the Utah section, has only improved itself. It should start to get better, but the rebuild goes on.

TSN.ca

<https://www.tsn.ca/nhl/video/jets-ice-chips-i-m-an-old-fart-now-scheifele-embracing-role-of-mentor%7E2990934>

Jets Ice Chips: 'I'm an old fart now' - Scheifele embracing role of mentor (VIDEO)

As the Jets' longest tenured player, Mark Scheifele's importance to the team goes far beyond being the No. 1 centre. TSN Jets reporter John Lu has more on how Scheifele is growing into his role as a mentor.

Winnipeg Sun

<https://winnipeg.sun.com/sports/hockey/nhl/winnipeg-jets/jets-heinola-has-same-attitude-ahead-of-training-camp>

Jets' Heinola has same attitude ahead of training camp

By Scott Billeck

Defenceman Ville Heinola's attitude toward the Winnipeg Jets' training camp this year isn't deviating much from last season's.

And why should it?

If not for a freak accident that resulted in a fractured ankle, surgery to repair it, and a half-season stint on the sideline, he would have his first season as an NHLer under his belt.

"If I think about last year ... I had exactly the same mindset: That I have to steal someone's job to be on the top six," Heinola said. "I feel like nothing changes this year. There's always going to be someone that I have to play better than. I feel that I'm ready for it and I know that I can do it."

On Tuesday, the Jets prospect skated with nearly two dozen players informally at the team's practice facility.

Among those were several blueliners he will compete with when training camp kicks off next week, including summer signings and re-signings Colin Miller, Haydn Fleury, Dylan Coghlan and Logan Stanley.

"I've been waiting for this moment for a long time," Heinola said. "Been grinding out every single day just to be ready when I get the chance to be in the top six. That's my only goal this year and working towards it."

But the 23-year-old, who signed a two-year bridge deal in July, knows nothing can be taken for granted, even heading into a season down two veterans from their defensive corps in Brenden Dillon and Nate Schmidt.

“It doesn’t matter what I did last year or two years ago,” Heinola said. “What happens now matters, and that’s what I’m focused on.”

The Finn, who spent his off-season back home skating, fishing and golfing, said he had a couple of chats with new head coach Scott Arniel.

The message from the coach to the player was a simple one.

“I have to earn my job here and show what I can do and show them I can be in a top-six role,” Heinola said.

Having missed so much time on the ice last season, the 2019 first-round pick spent a lot more time on it during the summer months, ensuring his impressive skating was where he wanted it to be.

“I feel like I got where I was last year by the end of the season,” Heinola said, after finishing the year with the Manitoba Moose. “I felt like I could have been ready to play (in the NHL) last year, too, but didn’t get the chance.”

Winnipeg’s structure and philosophy aren’t expected to deviate greatly from what worked under former bench boss Rick Bowness.

There will once again be an emphasis on team defence, something that, along with Connor Hellebuyck’s Vezina-winning form, helped the Jets field the stingiest defensive team in the league last season.

Winnipeg’s rearguards were also given the green light to move the puck up the ice, something Bowness instilled from the moment he arrived.

Heinola’s game seemingly fits that mould as a puck-moving defender with vision and offensive instincts.

“I can play an all-around game,” Heinola said. “The last two years, I’ve been focusing on my defensive part of the game. I’ve gotten better at it, last year especially, and the year before. I feel like I can do it all. I know my strengths and I know what I’m good at.

“Of course, I want to do those things well. But I feel like if I play my game, I don’t really have to worry about those things. It’s more like proving to (the coaches) that I can do those other things, too.”

Heinola said his confidence has grown, attributing that to age and experience.

He also credited departed former teammates Schmidt and especially Dillon for their help.

“I talked a lot with those guys, and I still talk a lot to Dilly,” Heinola said. “It’s just having someone there and you know you can say whatever you want and they’re going to understand and listen to you.”

<https://winnipeg.sun.com/sports/hockey/nhl/winnipeg-jets/jets-scheifele-not-worried-about-perfetti-excited-for-youth-injection>

Jets' Scheifele not worried about Perfetti, excited for youth injection

By Scott Billeck

Winnipeg Jets forward Mark Scheifele has offered some advice to the still unsigned restricted free agent and friend Cole Perfetti.

And that's as far as he's going to go with it.

"You never mess with anyone's business, that's what I've learned in this league," Scheifele said after skating Tuesday with nearly two dozen teammates at the team's practice facility.

"Everyone's business is their business, all you try to do is be there as a friend. You don't ask for specifics, you just want to be a shoulder to lean on, and that's all you can do."

The 31-year-old veteran centre, who joked about being an "old fart," is entering the first year of a seven-year, \$59.5-million extension he signed last summer with the Jets.

He knows the drill.

"I've gone through it," Scheifele said about contract negotiations. "So many guys have gone through it. It's a matter of the business. (Perfetti's) got a good head on his shoulders.

"I don't worry about him at all, he's doing just fine."

Perfetti, meanwhile, is in Las Vegas this week as Winnipeg's representative for the NHL's North American media tour.

The 23-year-old, despite lacking a new contract with a week and a half until training camp opens, is showing what it means to be a pro.

Negotiations on a new contract for Perfetti have yet to begin in earnest. However, Jets general manager Kevin Cheveldayoff reached out to Perfetti's camp a few weeks ago to ensure he hasn't forgotten about the 2020 first-rounder.

Perfetti is open to signing a long-term deal with the Jets, something Winnipeg's core players would favour.

Perfetti is well-liked by his teammates, and those who have watched and skated with him over the summer feel that he's poised to take a big step this coming season.

A long-term commitment feels like a lay-up for the organization, especially after the off-season in which 2022 first-rounder Rutger McGroarty was traded from Winnipeg to Pittsburgh after letting the team know he had no interest in signing with the club.

Cheveldayoff also missed on a couple of bigger names on July 1, losing out on re-signing centre Sean Monahan and then centre Adam Henrique, among other swings he took on the day.

Scheifele, meanwhile, said he's excited about the team's youth injection after a quiet summer of signings.

"There's obviously some spots there for young guys to step in and play a key role," Scheifele said. "That's probably what I'm most excited about, seeing some of the young guys and what they worked on, how they grew. At that age, it's so important to grow so much each and every summer."

So, who has stood out?

"Probably watching (Brad Lambert) at the end of the year, seeing what he did in that last game," Scheifele said. "I feel like you don't see him all year and he grew a lot. Just physically. I think he's an exciting one."

"Obviously, (Nikita) Chibrikov, (Elias) Salomonsson. I'm excited to see (Brayden) Yager. I don't watch too many WHL games, but he obviously had a fantastic year in junior, so I'm excited to see what he has. There's a lot of spots available. It's on them to reach out and grab it. I'm excited to see them push for more."

The team lost Brenden Dillon and Monahan to free agency and bought out the remaining season on Nate Schmidt's contract.

"Dilly's a big loss," Scheifele said. "He did a lot for us, tough guy, hard to play against. But at the end of the day you just wish them the best."

Winnipeg's core group of players has remained largely unchanged, which offers hope that the team, despite its losses, isn't taking a step backward this season.

"When you've got a goalie like (Connor Hellebuyck) in net you've got a chance every single night," Scheifele said. "With (Josh Morrissey), one of the best defenders in the league. With (Kyle Connor), (Nikolaj Ehlers), (Perfetti) coming into his own, (Adam Lowry), our core is still intact."

"We just need some guys to step into roles. There's some spots available. It's ripe for the taking. Hopefully, some of these young guys come into camp hungry and ready to take a spot and establish their NHL career."

Scheifele feels the transition from the retired Rick Bowness to Scott Arniel behind the bench should go smoothly.

“Because we had him kind of like for two months throughout the year, we kind of got used to what he’s like behind the bench,” Scheifele said. “We had some pretty good stretches when he was there.

“It’s a little bit different when you have the head coach job, but I’m expecting him to be great and am excited to work with him. He was with the D last year so we didn’t get a lot of interaction with him, but I’m excited to see what he does as a head coach.”