

Winnipeg Free Press

<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2024/09/12/jets-have-unfinished-business>

Jets have unfinished business Early playoff exit still a sore spot after successful regular season

By: Mike McIntyre

Here's the thing about being a professional hockey player and how it differs from the rest of us: You want your summer holidays to be as brief as possible.

Playing well into June is the ultimate goal — one the Winnipeg Jets came painfully short of. So how have these past few months been for members of the hockey team?

"Longer than we expected. Longer than we want," captain Adam Lowry said Thursday.

Indeed, vacation started early — April 30 to be exact — as the Jets were beaten in five games by the Colorado Avalanche during their opening-round series. A promising regular season in which they finished fourth overall and won the Jennings Trophy as the stingiest defensive squad was over in the blink of an eye.

Clearly, that development still burns with Lowry, who's been focused on more than just rest and relaxation while away from the rink.

"That's where the reflection comes in," he said. "(What) are ways we can tweak our game? (What) are ways we can improve and use that extended time off to get better so that, come the spring time... last year we put ourselves in a great position to have success, we had a great regular season, but now find ways to have success in the playoffs."

The search is already underway, with nearly the entire Jets team already in town for informal daily skates, which will continue until training camp officially begins with on-ice sessions next Thursday. They'll play six preseason games starting Sept. 21, then get the new 82-game campaign underway on Oct. 9.

Lowry, who is about to enter his second season with the C on the front of his jersey, has some ideas based on not only what his club experienced, but what he saw from watching far too much playoff hockey this past spring.

"I think you can certainly take things from teams that are able to go far," said Lowry.

"Even when you look at how Edmonton was able to, how their penalty kill wasn't one of the elite ones in the regular season, they go on that run. All of the way through the playoffs, they're scoring big shorthanded goals at big moments, winning games strictly on winning that special teams battle."

Ultimately it was the Florida Panthers standing tall, led by former Jets coach Paul Maurice. You don't need to remind Lowry that Winnipeg and Florida both had 110 points during the regular season last year before embarking on starkly different playoff paths.

“The intensity ramps up that much more. The importance of every shift,” Lowry said of what changes on a bigger stage.

“Last year, we took a big step forward in terms of our defensive game, five-on-five and limiting changes. We had another great season from (Connor Hellebuyck). Now, it’s building on that, building on that foundation we’ve established here. That’s our message, our feeling going into camp.”

Winnipeg’s roster will be similar to the one that started last season, with only defencemen Brenden Dillon and Nate Schmidt and backup goaltender Laurent Brossoit moving on. Trade deadline additions Sean Monahan and Tyler Toffoli weren’t re-signed, either.

Lowry is on board with the approach taken by general manager Kevin Cheveldayoff which should allow some younger players to take on bigger roles while also banking on internal improvements — particularly when it comes to the struggling power play and penalty kill.

New head coach Scott Arniel and new assistants Davis Payne and Dean Chynoweth will all play big roles in that.

“As we approach training camp, as we approach the start of the regular season, that’s our mindset — how can we improve on the solid regular-season success we had last year so it translates into post-season success,” said Lowry.

One big change from a year ago is how comfortable Lowry now feels as the face of the franchise.

“Last year around training camp time, it was a bit of a whirlwind,” he said.

“Fortunately, we didn’t have too many blips. It was a pretty smooth regular season. We have a great supporting cast. A lot of great leaders in the room that really makes my job easy. Approach it similarly to how I did last year. Try and bring the effort and show up for my teammates every day and every day, try and maintain our focus on our end goal, and that’s winning a Stanley Cup. There’s a little more experience that comes along with having done it for a year, but I don’t expect things to change a whole lot.”

As of Thursday, only Hellebuyck and forwards Nikolaj Ehlers and Nino Niederreiter have yet to arrive in Winnipeg. All are expected by this weekend.

Kyle Connor was the newest addition to the group after arriving from Michigan, where his busy summer included getting married.

“It was a great time. We had a lot of guys come out. Family, friends. It was a lot of fun,” he said. “It’s good to compete and push each other here in these skates before camp starts. It’s nice to see some of the new faces as well, catch up on everybody’s summer and kind of get that out of the way before camp starts.”

Connor, 27, will be trying to replicate a hot start he had last year, one that was then derailed by a serious knee injury he suffered following a dirty hit in Anaheim that cost him 17 games. Still, he finished with 61 points (34 goals, 27 assists) in 65 contests, then added three goals and two helpers in five playoff games.

“The playoffs are a completely different style. I think we’ve learned that the last couple years,” said Connor.

“You have to peak at the right time. You look at Colorado, we beat them every game them in the regular season but couldn’t find a way to beat them in the playoffs.”

After scoring a career-high 47 goals in 2021-22, Connor believes his best is still to come following his action-packed summer that included training back home in Michigan with numerous NHL players.

“Obviously we’ve got a new head coach this year with Arnie taking over. For me, it’s just getting better at what I can control. Want to get faster, stronger, working on shooting the puck, all the stuff that I’ve continued to work on every year,” he said.

Cole Perfetti, who is a restricted free agent currently without a contract, was back on the ice Thursday with teammates after being the Jets representative at the NHL media tour in Las Vegas earlier this week. He has yet to speak locally but told reporters in Sin City he’s optimistic a deal will soon be worked out between his agent and the team.

Winnipeg Sun

<https://winnipeg.sun.com/sports/jets-prospect-brayden-yager-opening-eyes-at-rookie-camp-with-his-wicked-shot>

Foundation laid to build on this season, Jets' Adam Lowry says

By Scott Billeck

The foundation was laid last season. But untested against post-season elements, it buckled under the pressure of playoff hockey.

The Winnipeg Jets want to build on what they achieved during the regular season—those 52 wins and the stingiest defence in the NHL—so come April, similar success through 82 games can be replicated when it matters most.

“That’s where the reflection comes in,” captain Adam Lowry said Thursday. “How are ways we can tweak our game? How are ways we can improve and use that extended time off to get better so that, come the springtime... find ways to have success in the playoffs.”

Few would have analyzed Winnipeg’s five-game series against Colorado more than Lowry.

He spent time watching the subsequent rounds, seeing what worked for teams like Edmonton and Florida, the latter of which came up short a year prior in the Finals, to clear that final hurdle this past June.

“When they lost in the finals two years ago, they were really depleted at that point,” Lowry said. “They took those lessons, found how tough it is to win at that time of year, and became a great defensive team, and that’s the reason why they’re the champions.

“Even when you look at how Edmonton was able to, how their penalty kill wasn’t one of the elite ones in the regular season, they go on that run. All of the way through the playoffs, they’re

scoring big shorthanded goals at big moments, winning games strictly on winning that special teams battle.”

Lowry praised Winnipeg’s defensive play, which improved dramatically last season—enough to win the William M. Jennings for allowing the fewest goals against in the regular season.

He bemoaned the Jets’ power play and penalty kill, both of which struggled for much of the season and never got a handle on it against the Avalanche.

“There’s area of our games last year during our regular season, if you look at special teams, how critical those play in the postseason,” Lowry said. “We really struggled with Colorado’s power play. That’s an area where it’s a big part of my job. How can we find ways to get better on the penalty kill?”

“Talking to (head coach Scott Arniel), I’m sure we will make some tweaks. Bringing in (assistant coaches) Davis (Payne), bringing in Dean (Chynoweth), I’m sure they will have some input on special teams.”

Kyle Connor was also paying attention.

After scoring 34 goals in 65 games, a season that was halted at one point due to a knee injury, Connor talked of peaking at the right time.

“You can’t win a Stanley Cup at the beginning of the year or towards the end of a year—you can work and get better,” Connor said. “But the playoffs are a completely different style. I think we’ve learned that the last couple years. You have to peak at the right time. You look at Colorado. We beat them in every game in the regular season but couldn’t find a way to beat them in the playoffs. It doesn’t really matter what you do (during the regular season). You can work on things but you’ve got to peak at the right time.”

The Jets started the 2023-24 season strong, peaking in the first half of the year before being unable to find a different gear when the intensity ratcheted up.

Connor isn’t looking back.

“That was completely different,” he said. “I’m focused on this year. I’m not going to look back on what I did or what I could have done. My mind is always going forward.”

<https://winnipeg.sun.com/sports/foundation-laid-to-build-on-this-season-jets-kyle-lowry-says>

Brad Lambert looking to park himself in Jets' second-line garage

By Scott Billeck

If Brad Lambert wants it, there’s a parking spot on Winnipeg’s second line wide enough to fit a ‘Lambo’ in the coming weeks. He’s well aware of the vacancy.

“I’m super excited,” he said. “I’m going in taking it a day at a time and trying to do everything I can, work hard and try and earn a spot like I have the last two years that I’ve come here.”

The man, whose nickname is derived from the legendary supercar manufacturer, has the high-horsepower engine coveted in the NHL.

With a full season of AHL hockey under the hood, Lambert's chance at cracking Winnipeg's opening-night roster appears better than anyone's.

"I know it's going to take a lot of hard work, but I feel like I'm ready to put in the work," he said.

First up in the team's annual trip to Penticton for the Young Stars tournament.

Like the team's development camp in late June, Lambert didn't need to attend this week's events. He wanted to.

"It's good to get games under my belt and try and get a feel for the game before main camp," Lambert said. "That kind of gives you a head start, so I'm happy to play some games."

According to Manitoba Moose head coach Mark Morrison, it's another show of leadership from a player who's experienced a lot of growth in that department.

"He feels like (being here) is important to him, and it is," Morrison said. "I have a lot of respect for the decision he made to come back here."

Morrison oversaw Lambert's rise from junior hockey standout to the AHL's all-rookie team last year. The 20-year-old finished second in rookie scoring with 20 goals and 53 points and was named to the league's all-star game.

He made his NHL debut alongside fellow prospect Nikita Chibrikov in Winnipeg's final regular-season game, grabbing his first NHL point on Gabriel Vilardi's 22nd goal.

"I've got my opinion on it, but I don't want to throw it out there," Morrison said about whether or not Lambert is ready to make the next step, leaving that up to Jets head coach Scott Arniel and his staff.

It wasn't too hard to read between the lines. Morrison thinks he's ready.

His future teammates seem to share the same opinion. On Tuesday, Lambert's name was the first out of Mark Scheifele's mouth when asked about the injection of youth that could enter the NHL fray this season.

"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."

Lambert spent his off-season tuning his motor, putting on eight pounds of lean muscle to his frame while working with former NHLer Gary Roberts in Toronto — someone Scheifele once worked with to achieve similar results.

Being in Ontario also allowed Lambert to skate with several NHL stars using Roberts' services.

"I feel I had a good summer, got stronger, put on a little bit of weight," Lambert said. "But still was able to keep my speed and quickness out there."

The other improvements have come on the ice.

Morrison's work last season included making Lambert, a player blessed with offensive gifts, better in his own zone.

"Be aware," Lambert said. "On the defensive side of the puck, make sure I'm engaged in the battles. Win one-on-one battles. If I'm able to win the majority of my one-on-one battles, the team will have the puck more and I will have the puck more, which will help me use my speed and skill."

<https://winnipeg.sun.com/sports/hockey/nhl/winnipeg-jets/connor-has-been-in-perfetti-shoes>

Winnipeg Jets' Kyle Connor has been in Cole Perfetti's shoes: 'Just be patient'

By Scott Billeck

Kyle Connor's advice for Cole Perfetti is not to take it personally.

"You never know how you're going to respond until you're in that situation," Connor said Thursday, skating for the first time in Winnipeg since the spring. "Just be patient.

"Hopefully, he doesn't take it the wrong way from (Jets general manager Kevin Cheveldayoff) and realizes it's a business."

Perfetti is the lone restricted free agent on Cheveldayoff's to-do list and one of the few left across the NHL.

According to sources, contract negotiations have been minimal between both camps, with a week to go until training camp opens next Thursday.

Perfetti is open to negotiating a long-term extension with the club and it's unclear what is keeping the Jets from pulling that trigger.

Winnipeg has roughly \$5.78 million US in salary cap space, according to PuckPedia.

Connor was in a similar spot ahead of the 2018-19 season and missed training camp. He signed his current seven-year deal with a few days to spare before the regular season began.

"I've talked to him, shared my experiences," Connor said. "You're relying on your agent a lot for their expertise and what you're worth. You know what you're worth, and what (similar players in the league) are worth.

"You stick to your guns."

Connor's experience differed as he elected to stay home and train at his alma mater, the University of Michigan.

Perfetti skated informally with some of his teammates in Winnipeg before he headed to Las Vegas to represent the team at the NHL's North American media tour this week.

“It’s a personal decision,” Connor said. “I had a great group around me, still skating with the Michigan hockey program. So I had access to good ice.

“You don’t have a contract. I didn’t see the need to come here at all.”

Connor said the whole team understands the situation, as many of them have experienced it in the past.

“Some have held out for a couple of days, others more than that,” he said.

And as Mark Scheifele said on Tuesday, no one is worried about Perfetti. It will all work out.

“He’s a really smart kid,” Connor said. “He knows what to expect.”

TSN.ca

<https://www.tsn.ca/nhl/video/the-talking-point-players-to-watch-at-canadian-team-rookie-camps%7E2992335>

The Talking Point: Players to watch at Canadian team rookie camps (VIDEO)

As rookie camps gear up across the National Hockey League, TSN Director of Scouting Craig Button takes a closer look at some young talent to keep an eye on from each Canadian team.