

## **Winnipeg Free Press**

<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2024/09/17/jets-reload-heading-into-training-camp>

### ***Jets reload heading into training camp Time is now for next generation to make its mark***

By: Mike McIntyre and Ken Wiebe

Welcome to a new year of Winnipeg Jets hockey.

We've got fresh ice, a few different faces and a clean slate for a club with raised expectations coming off a terrific 2023-24 regular-season campaign (52-24-6) — and something to prove after crashing and burning in the opening round of the Stanley Cup playoffs (a five-game series loss to the Colorado Avalanche).

Say hello to first-year coach Scott Arniel, new assistants Davis Payne and Dean Chynoweth, goaltenders Kaapo Kahkonen and Eric Comrie, defencemen Dylan Coghlan and Haydn Fleury and forwards Jaret Anderson-Dolan, Mason Shaw and Brayden Yager.

Bid farewell to retired bench boss Rick Bowness, assistant Brad Lauer, goaltenders Laurent Brossoit and Collin Delia, defencemen Brenden Dillon, Nate Schmidt and Kyle Capobianco, and forwards Sean Monahan, Tyler Toffoli, Jeff Malott, Kristian Reichel, and Jeffrey Viel.

Training camp gets underway Wednesday with physicals, while the first on-ice sessions begin Thursday at the Hockey For All Centre. The Jets have brought in 53 players — five goaltenders, 16 defencemen and 32 forwards — and will have to cut down to a maximum of 23 in time for the start of the 2024-25 season on Oct. 9.

Starting this Saturday, Winnipeg will play six preseason games, where many of the questions surrounding the roster should be answered.

Here are the storylines and job battles to keep a close eye on over the next three weeks:

#### ***Cole's contract***

Restricted free agent Cole Perfetti remains without a deal as negotiations continue.

That the 22-year-old could miss part of camp shouldn't come as a surprise when you consider the history of Jets' first round picks in the 2.0 era, but the expectation is that the two sides will come to an agreement before things drag on too long.

Perfetti is set for his fourth NHL campaign and is in a position to solidify his status as an important core piece and key contributor in the Top-6 — a spot he held for more than half of last season.

It's been well documented that it was mostly a tale of two seasons for Perfetti, who set career highs in goals (19), assists (19), points (38) and games played (71). It's also true he endured a 23-game scoring drought (recording two assists during that stretch) and was a healthy scratch 15 times (including four of the five playoff games against the Avalanche).

The expectation is that Perfetti will benefit from the experience of battling through adversity to fuel him to take the next step in his development. His average ice time figures to be on the rise and he's in line for more power-play time as well, potentially on the top unit after the departure of Monahan in free agency.

One would expect that increase in the importance of his role to coincide with a significant rise in his production.

By all accounts, the negotiation has been an amicable one and the biggest question left to answer is whether this will be a bridge deal or a longer-term pact.

It says here a bridge remains the most likely outcome, probably in the range of US\$3.25-to-US\$3.75 million, though that could change if the Jets pivot and offer something in the range of five seasons at north of US\$6 million.

### *Kids these days*

General manager Kevin Cheveldayoff raised plenty of eyebrows this summer when he stated in no uncertain terms the time is now for some of Winnipeg's top young prospects.

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

The time is now. Over to you, Ville Heinola, Elias Salomonsson, Brad Lambert, Nikita Chibrikov and Brayden Yager, among others.

With the departures of Dillon, Schmidt and Capobianco on the blue line and Monahan, Toffoli, Malott, Reichel and Viel up front — and not much in the way of established veteran players signed to replace them — the door would appear to be wide open.

To be clear, the Jets are not rebuilding. They are trying to reload and clearly banking on some drafted and developed players to take big leaps beginning in camp.

### *Arniel's second chance*

As Arniel mentioned after getting promoted to the top job, he's spent more than a decade learning from his brief stint with the Columbus Blue Jackets and preparing for this second opportunity to be an NHL head coach.

We're about to see how he runs things as the bench boss.

Arniel is a strong communicator, which allowed him to establish some strong relationships with the core players during the past two seasons in the organization. He's taking over a team that won the Jennings Trophy and was one of the best regular season teams in the NHL.

Finding a way to maintain the commitment to playing sound team defence, while scoring a bit more without cheating for offence is a top priority for Arniel and his coaching staff.

The other obvious storyline is the Jets' need to improve both special-teams units, with the power play needing more consistent production and the penalty kill needing to get a few more clears and be a bit more aggressive. Whether those improvements come from personnel changes or the implementation of new ideas doesn't really matter, as long as the results are there.

The Jets were a four-line hockey team under Bowness and you can expect that to continue, though many eyes will be on what permutations and line combinations Arniel rolls out in both the workouts and in games. Finding optimal deployment is another way to ensure the Jets remain a playoff team in the highly competitive Western Conference.

### *Centre of attention*

It's the storyline that never seems to end around here. And once again, the Jets have an important job opening when it comes to the second-line centre.

We know the versatile Vlad Namestnikov can fill in effectively, as he did through stretches last season, but is that really the best solution? We're about to find out.

The Jets seem to prefer Perfetti and Gabe Vilardi on the wing, so they're likely out of the mix. That opens the door for Lambert or Yager to make things interesting.

It will be interesting to see how Arniel sets his lines during Thursday's first on-ice session. We'd expect both of these young players to be given a good look at this position in the preseason.

### *Heinola's time to shine*

At this time last year, Heinola looked poised to take the next step in his career, and following a strong training camp, he appeared to have done enough to not only earn a spot on the roster — but was on track to be in the opening night lineup.

That plan was derailed by a fractured ankle in the final preseason outing against the Ottawa Senators. Heinola didn't return to game action until January and it took him a bit of time to find his form, which resulted in seeing no NHL action.

The 20th overall pick of the 2019 draft is no longer exempt from waivers, so he's a safe bet to be on the roster. Heinola has bigger goals in mind, he yearns to become an NHL regular and there could be an opportunity for him to run the second power-play unit on the horizon.

It feels like a long time since Heinola made the Jets out of camp as an 18-year-old in the fall of 2019 and scored his first NHL goal in his fourth NHL game. The 23-year-old figures to partner with Colin Miller on the Jets' third pairing, though there will be competition from the likes of Logan Stanley, Fleury and Coghlan.

Heinola's puck-moving ability should help his cause and it's up to him to earn the trust of the coaching staff through his play in the defensive zone.

### *Ehlers' future*

A year ago, major questions were swirling about the futures of Mark Scheifele and Connor Hellebuyck as they were about to enter the final year of their contracts. Those were quickly put to bed when the pair signed simultaneous seven-year extensions worth US\$59.5 million each (US\$8.5 million cap hit).

Could we see a similar situation with Nikolaj Ehlers?

The 28-year-old, fresh off helping Denmark qualify for the 2026 Winter Olympics, wasn't biting when asked on Monday at the team's charity golf tournament.

“There’s obviously a reason I’ve been here nine years, but there’s nothing new to tell,” said Ehlers, who grew increasingly frustrated at the line of questioning. “I know you guys are trying to get information out of me, but I literally have no information to give.”

Ehlers revealed his agent and Cheveldayoff did speak over the summer but wouldn’t go any further. However, he was happy to hear Arniel say several times in the off-season how important a role he expects Ehlers to play.

“It’s always nice to hear good things,” he said.

Will this become a season-long distraction, or will both sides find a way to put it to bed in the next few weeks? Stay tuned.

### *Bottom six battle*

Forwards Scheifele, Ehlers, Vilardi, Perfetti, Namestnikov, Kyle Connor, Adam Lowry and Nino Niederreiter have nothing to worry about when it comes to job security. There should be plenty of competition for the remaining roster spots and playing time.

Based on tenure and contract status, you’d assume Mason Appleton, Alex Iafallo and Morgan Barron are safe, too, which makes 11 forwards. But that trio shouldn’t get too comfortable.

The likes of Rasmus Kupari, David Gustafsson, Axel Jonsson-Fjallby, Dominic Toninato, Parker Ford, Anderson-Dolan, Shaw, Lambert, Chibrikov and Yager should all be in the running, too.

Add it all up and that’s as many as 13 players for what could be just five spots on the opening-night roster — or 10 for two spots assuming Appleton, Iafallo and Barron are locked in and there are no injuries.

### *Who’s No. 2*

The Jets had the best goalie tandem in the league last season, with Hellebuyck and Brossoit combining to allow the fewest goals in the NHL. Hellebuyck won his second Vezina Trophy in five seasons and Brossoit provided the perfect complement in the backup role.

The raw numbers were impressive — Brossoit was 15-5-2 with three shutouts, a 2.00 goals-against average and .927 save percentage — but the ability to push one another while supporting their partner was equally important.

Brossoit departed to the Chicago Blackhawks in free agency, leaving the first open competition for the backup job since 2018 (when Brossoit was signed by the Jets the first time).

Kahkonen and Comrie were both signed to one-year deals on July 1 and they’ll battle for the starts behind Hellebuyck. The Jets are likely banking on 20-to-24 games from the No. 2 netminder and it will be incredibly difficult for either Kahkonen or Comrie to match the quality of the performances Brossoit delivered. However, it’s imperative for them to provide a reasonable facsimile.

Kahkonen enters with a slight edge, despite Comrie’s familiarity with the organization, but let’s see what the preseason games bring.

Comrie played the best hockey of his career with the Jets prior to signing the two-year deal with the Sabres, delivering a 2.58 GAA and .920 save percentage in 19 games in 2021-22.

Kahkonen has shown flashes during stints with the New Jersey Devils, San Jose Sharks and Minnesota Wild and perhaps with Jets goalie coach Wade Flaherty's help, the 28-year-old Finn will find consistency.

## **Winnipeg Sun**

<https://winnipeg.sun.com/sports/hockey/nhl/winnipeg-jets/jets-preview-training-camp-opens-with-youthful-hope-no-perfetti>

### ***JETS PREVIEW: Training camp opens with youthful hope, no Perfetti***

By Scott Billeck

Adam Lowry capped Winnipeg's offseason by suggesting it was longer than the Jets expected and wanted.

Such is the plight of a 52-win team that drew rave reviews for its regular-season work and rotten tomatoes for its playoff efforts.

It all counts for nothing if you don't get it done when it matters most, and there was a big gap between the Stanley Cup champion Florida Panthers and the Jets, who allowed the same number of goals and posted the same record during the regular season.

Bridging that divide becomes job No. 1 for this season's new man in charge.

The team welcomes Scott Arniel, hired as its new head coach after Rick Bowness retired in the spring.

After getting his second chance as an NHL bench boss, Arniel brings a cast of new assistants, including Dean Chynoweth and Davis Payne.

The team returns a similar roster to the previous year despite losing a few key pieces over the last few months.

Defencemen Brenden Dillon is in New Jersey now, and Winnipeg bought out Nate Schmidt in June. Laurent Brossoit is now in Chicago, Sean Monahan is in Columbus, and Tyler Toffoli is in San Jose.

The Jets brought in two goalies in free agency, with a familiar face in Eric Comrie joined by Kaapo Kahkonen in a fight to be Connor Hellebuyck's understudy. Meanwhile, Winnipeg ensured competition for spots lower in the lineup by adding defencemen Dylan Coghlan and Haydn Fleury and forwards Jaret Anderson-Dolan and Mason Shaw.

In August, prospect Rutger McGroarty was traded to Pittsburgh for Brayden Yager. Yager is unlikely to compete for a spot this season, but his strong showing last year in the WHL and impressive form at Winnipeg's recent rookie tournament in Penticton offers a lot of hope for the forward.

Training camp begins Wednesday with medicals. The first on-ice sessions will be held on Thursday, and the Jets have 53 players invited. The roster will eventually be shaved to 23, with the season opener on Oct. 9 in Edmonton against the Stanley Cup runners-up.

Here are six storylines, in no particular order, heading into camp.

### *1. Is Lambert the answer at 2C?*

He's done everything right leading into camp, voluntarily participating in the team's development camp earlier this summer and then in the Young Stars tourney last week.

Now, Brad Lambert has to perform when it matters most.

The 20-year-old Finnish-Canadian is expected to receive a long look for a top-six spot with the Jets.

With the team failing to re-sign Monahan, there's again a hole at the centre position on the second line.

With Perfetti not at camp yet and likely to feature on the wing when he does, it's Lambert's job to lose.

The runway should be pretty long.

Lambert possesses NHL speed, is a creative playmaker and can shoot with the best of them. He must show that his defensive game has improved and that the eight pounds of muscle he packed during the summer will help him win battles in all three zones.

If Lambert doesn't grab the job, Winnipeg's only other obvious option is Vladislav Namestnikov. He's a suitable option, but remember, the Jets saw the need to upgrade there last year, trading a first-rounder for Monahan.

### *2. Is it a Stanley Cup blue line?*

Buying out Schmidt's contract made fiscal sense. The Jets freed up a few million under the salary cap, most of which will go toward Perfetti's eventual extension.

But it left a veteran hole on the blue line, especially after the Jets made no attempts to re-sign Dillon, their best playoff defender, before losing him to free agency.

So what now?

Winnipeg was already thin on the right side, more so now unless Elias Salomonsson makes the opening-day roster. That's a possibility, but historically speaking — see Ville Heinola — the Jets aren't quick to promote a young prospect to the NHL, especially among their rear guards.

Cheveldayoff threw several depth signings at the wall over the summer. Who might stick?

Fleury, Coghlan and the re-signed Colin Miller will fight for spots in training camp.

Heinola should make the team, as he did last year before breaking his ankle in the final pre-season game.

He's finally free of his waiver exemption, too, meaning the Jets would have to risk losing him on the wire if they wanted to send him back to the Manitoba Moose.

Logan Stanley also re-upped over the summer. He probably opens camp with the edge on Fleury and Coghlan, but his right-side play wasn't anything special last season and Miller, who Rick Bowness seemed to neglect after being picked up at the trade deadline, is a capable right shot that should be explored.

### *3. Who will be the backup?*

When Cheveldayoff welcomed back then-free agent Eric Comrie to the organization on July 1, Winnipeg's backup job appeared to be sewed up.

And then Winnipeg's GM signed Kaapo Kahkonen a couple of hours later.

Kahkonen appears to be the favourite to win the job as Connor Hellebuyck's understudy, with Comrie down mentoring Thomas Milic with the Moose.

Comrie put up his best numbers as Hellebuyck's backup a few seasons ago, but Kahkonen has plenty of upside and will work with Jets goaltending coach Wade Flaherty to reach those heights.

Flaherty doesn't get enough credit for his work, especially with his backups. Comrie and Laurent Brossoit, twice, got nice raises after putting up quality years in Winnipeg.

It's Kahkonen's job to lose.

### *4. How long will the Cole Perfetti impasse last?*

There's been a lot of chatter about how amicable contract talks between the Jets and Perfetti have been.

So far, Perfetti's been the consummate pro, showing up early to Winnipeg and even going to Las Vegas to represent the team at the NHL's North American media tour.

But if things were as rosy as some have suggested, Perfetti should have been signed by now, the opening day of training camp.

We've reported all summer that Perfetti is open to a long-term extension. Other reports have said that the Jets prefer a bridge deal but don't want to pay Perfetti like Ottawa's Shane Pinto (two years, \$3.75 million AAV).

The truth is difficult to surmise. But the fact is, camp is open, and Perfetti doesn't have a contract.

Sources have suggested that while the Jets continue to say negotiations are ongoing. Others say there's not much going on between both sides at the moment.

Winnipeg's opening salvo, a bridge deal, has left a gap between the two sides.

The Jets risk angering a player who has publicly said he loves the city and the organization and backing that up with a willingness to commit long-term.

That's worth more than gold in a town that struggles to attract talent, let alone find good, young talent that wants to stick around.

Several league sources said this is consistent across the board for the Jets and not specific to Perfetti. It's not personal, that is. It's business.

However, the line between business and things becoming personal and fracturing a relationship differs for every player.

To be clear, there's been no souring for Perfetti, yet.

But if a bridge deal is a contract on the table, bickering over a few hundred thousand dollars seems like a mistake by the club, especially after saying so long to prospect Rutger McGroarty this summer.

Perfetti isn't the first to miss some (or all) of training camp. Josh Morrissey missed a few days. Kyle Connor and Patrik Laine missed the entire camp heading into the 2018-19 season.

#### *5. What will Arniel's vision look like?*

Will his philosophy look vastly different from his predecessor, or will Arniel look only to tweak what helped the Jets win 52 games last season?

The first on-ice day of training camp on Thursday will be as interesting as ever as Arniel's ideas start to take shape.

Arniel has been working hard behind the scenes to ensure his second kick at the can goes better than his first.

He's become a strong communicator and spent some of his off-season mending fences with Perfetti and Nikolaj Ehlers, with both players seemingly happy with the result of those conversations.

Arniel inherits one of the best defensive teams in the NHL, including the club that surrendered the fewest goals last year.

His challenges include prying more offence out of that and vastly improving special teams.

Winnipeg's penalty kill and power play were below average last year, and the Colorado Avalanche exposed both in their five-game first-round series win in the spring.

#### *6. Is there really an opportunity for young players?*

Lambert will get a long look on the second line, and Heinola will be on the roster because there will no longer be a waiver exemption.

But is there any room for anyone else outside of those two young players?

If the Jets are healthy, the chances seem pretty slim.

Chibrikov is expected to push for a spot, but he has to steal someone's to do so.

It won't be anyone's job in the top six. Mason Appleton is coming off a career year. So is Morgan Barron. And Alex Iafallo, used as a Swiss Army knife last season, is getting paid too much to sit in the press box every night.



As good as Chibrikov has shown, with an impressive rookie tournament in Penticton only adding to the hype, there may not be an opening to start the year.

Winnipeg's defence seems to be locked up already, with the only true competition coming on who will play on the right side of the third pairing.

Unless Salomonsson sets the world on fire, that battle will be between Fleury, Coghlan, Miller and Stanley.

Two of the three will make up the eight rearguards the Jets are expected to start the year with.

### **Sportsnet.ca**

<https://www.sportsnet.ca/nhl/article/jets-training-camp-preview-can-winnipeg-take-that-next-step/>

### ***Jets Training Camp Preview: Can Winnipeg take that next step?***

By Ryan Dixon

It's not quite deja vu all over again for the Winnipeg Jets, but — just like 12 months ago — there's an air of uncertainty around the team as it prepares to open training camp ahead of the 2024-25 season.

In 2023, two monster contract situations hung over the club as stud goalie Connor Hellebuyck and No. 1 centre Mark Scheifele entered camp on expiring deals. While we all wondered if they'd eventually depart as UFAs or be traded before that could happen, GM Kevin Cheveldayoff emphatically answered all questions on the eve of the season by inking both to monster, eight-year extensions.

So while the situations of restricted free agent Cole Perfetti and pending-UFA Nik Ehlers may seem like small potatoes relative to last year's speculation, their contract issues still very much colour the conversation around a Jets squad coming off an impressive 110-point campaign.

The status of Ehlers and Perfetti can obscure the fact this team will have its fourth head coach since the start of the 2021-22 season, as Scott Arniel takes the reins from retired veteran Rick Bowness. It's easy to say Arniel's job will be getting the Jets deeper in the playoffs — Winnipeg was bounced in Round 1 last season by the Colorado Avalanche and has made the second round just once since 2018 — but first things first; just getting into the top eight clubs in the West again will be a serious ask for a Winnipeg squad that has to deal with Colorado, Dallas and a loaded-up Nashville Predators team just in its own Central Division.

Of course, the fact Cheveldayoff did get Scheifele and Hellebuyck inked one year ago means there are still two strong pillars in place, especially the baseline support provided by last year's Vezina Trophy winner in the crease.

When coach Paul Maurice — who spent close to a decade in Winnipeg — won the Stanley Cup with Florida last year, he hadn't even departed the confetti-covered ice before looking into a Sportsnet camera and saying, now that he had his title, he hoped the Jets got theirs.

It's a wonderful thought, but there's a lot of work to be done between here and there.

Salary cap space: \$5,776,309

GM: Kevin Cheveldayoff

Head coach: Scott Arniel

Assistant coaches: Marty Johnston, Davis Payne, Dean Chynoweth

Unsigned players: Cole Perfetti

Key additions: Eric Comrie, Kaapo Kahkonen, Brayden Yager

Key subtractions: Sean Monahan, Tyler Toffoli, Brenden Dillon, Laurent Brossoit, Nate Schmidt, Rutger McGroarty

PTOs: None

### *CAMP BATTLES*

Second-line spots: Sean Monahan seemed like a nice fit at 2C for the Jets, notching 24 points in 34 contests with the team after arriving from Montreal in a swap just before the All-Star Game. However, Columbus jumped up and offered Monahan — who has an extensive injury history and turns 30 in less than a month — a five-year, \$27.5-million UFA contract. His departure leaves a clear need for a second-line pivot, which is likely what both the team and Perfetti hope he can eventually be. With Perfetti's contract status — and playing potential — still an unknown, though, Winnipeg will likely go with imperfect in-house options. That means bumping up natural bottom-sixers like Adam Lowry and Vladimir Namestnikov to the second unit.

One wild card to consider is Brad Lambert. The 20-year-old Finn had a strong rookie season in the AHL last year and, if he lights it up in the pre-season, could push his way into a scoring role with this club.

Backup goalie: Hellebuyck may be the best in the business, but he wasn't the only puckstopping savant in Manitoba last year. Laurent Brossoit had the highest save percentage (.927) of any goalie in the NHL who played at least 20 games. He parlayed that showing into a tasty UFA contract with the Chicago Blackhawks, leaving a hole in Winnipeg's crease. Enter old friend Eric Comrie, whose best NHL showing came two years ago when he posted a .920 save percentage in Winnipeg before a couple years of scuffling in Buffalo.

The Jets also signed Kaapo Kahkonen, who's been pelted with pucks the past few seasons while playing for the lowly San Jose Sharks. Kahkonen actually had a .923 save percentage in a short, six-game stay with the New Jersey Devils at the end of last season and was a .907 goalie in 54 games at the start of his NHL run in Minnesota.

Defence: Brenden Dillon's departure as a UFA this past summer is a ding, but righty Colin Miller — acquired from the Devils at last year's trade deadline — did stick around on a new two-year contract and will be a presence on the third pair. Last fall, 2019 first-rounder Ville Heinola was dealt a huge blow when he broke his ankle in a pre-season contest. The heady Finn returned to play half the AHL season with the Manitoba Moose and may finally be ready to push his way onto the big club for good five years after being taken 20th overall.

### *ONE PRESSING QUESTION*

It's easy to say Perfetti's predicament is the most pressing because he won't be at camp until he signs a new deal. If you were to put a nickel down, though, it still seems his situation will be resolved well before opening night versus Connor McDavid and the Edmonton Oilers on Oct. 9.

The real intrigue is how things play out with Ehlers.

Speaking at the team's annual golf tournament on Monday, Ehlers said his representation did talk turkey with the organization over the summer, but didn't exactly sound like a guy who was on the verge of putting pen to paper on a deal that would extend the marriage between player and team.

"I'm at the same point that I was at the exit meetings," he told reporters. "I have nothing new to tell. There's obviously a reason I've been here for nine years, but, again, there's nothing new to tell."

Cheveldayoff has a long history of taking situations that don't seem favourable for the Jets and finding good — and, in some cases, very good — solutions for the team. He didn't get jumpy with Hellebuyck and Scheifele and both wound up signing long-term deals. He's traded disgruntled players like Jacob Trouba and Pierre-Luc Dubois for strong returns in the past. And, just a few weeks ago, he sent prospect Rutger McGroarty — a 2022 first-rounder who did not intend on signing an entry-level deal with Winnipeg — to Pittsburgh for another first-round talent in Brayden Yager.

'Chevy' has come through before, so whether it's finding common ground with Ehlers or recouping a good return for a 28-year-old pending-UFA with 30-goal potential, the GM has earned the benefit of the doubt.

## **The Athletic**

<https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/5771665/2024/09/18/winnipeg-jets-training-camp-2024-obstacle/>

### ***Why the Winnipeg Jets will be defined by how they handle a recurring obstacle***

By Murat Ates

What stands between the Winnipeg Jets and excellence?

It's an important question, although it's also a vague one and a little bit cold. The implied premise, of course, is that the Jets are not currently excellent. Tell that to the standings, say devoted fans, as they point to Winnipeg's 52 wins and 110 points from last season: Fourth place in the NHL was an excellent accomplishment. Giving up the fewest goals in the league was even more impressive.

Florida's 198 goals against tied the Jets. Florida's 52-24-6 regular season record was also a perfect match. But one team hoisted the Stanley Cup while the other was outclassed in five games.

Jets captain Adam Lowry says there is a lesson in Florida's path to excellence.

"When they lost in the finals two years ago, they were really depleted at that point," Lowry said at Hockey For All Centre last week. "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."

Meanwhile, Winnipeg gave up 28 goals in five playoff games — the most it had given up in any five-game stretch of play all season. The Jets' woeful penalty kill wears a lot of that. The

goaltender wears some of it, too; the series was tied 1-1 and Game 3 was tied 2-2 when Connor Hellebuyck made his most costly error. He tried to block Mikko Rantanen's seam pass to Valeri Nichushkin, losing his balance on the play and giving up the net. Nichushkin's power-play goal put the Avalanche ahead 3-2 in the game and never gave the Jets another look.

The series was not all about Hellebuyck. In fact, the number of flurries in which Colorado shot, retrieved the puck, shot, retrieved the puck and continued the cycle for minutes on end was a credit to resilience against a torrent. Even if you believe in Hellebuyck to be elite in any random five-game stretch, it's clear that depending solely on a goaltender while getting dramatically out-chanced is not a guaranteed formula for success.

That series is long over. On defence, Winnipeg let Brenden Dillon go, bought out Nate Schmidt and re-signed Colin Miller. In goal, the Jets added Kappo Kahkonen and brought back Eric Comrie as backup Laurent Brossoit left in free agency. Veteran forwards and trade deadline pickups Sean Monahan and Tyler Toffoli signed elsewhere, too.

Younger players will get opportunities throughout the lineup this season. Cole Perfetti will get top-six minutes the moment he signs his next contract. Brad Lambert has a fighting chance to make the team. Nikita Chibrikov could also turn enough heads to earn NHL time. Dylan Samberg is the most likely candidate for top four minutes while Ville Heinola, Logan Stanley and even Elias Salomonsson will compete to round out the roster. On opening night, the Jets will look nearly as good on paper as the team that finished fourth in the NHL one year ago.

Rick Bowness has retired. Scott Arniel takes over and will lean on his new assistants, Dean Chynoweth and Davis Payne, along with returnees Marty Johnston and Matt Prefontaine. Arniel's mission will be to reproduce Bowness' defensive results and improve team play where he can. Based on his resume in Toronto and Carolina, Chynoweth will bring a much more aggressive approach to the penalty kill. Payne's power plays have historically seen more player movement, with players rotating into and out of the bumper spot high in the zone. Both Jets' special teams finished in the bottom third of the league last season; there is real opportunity for growth here.

It would be so easy, then — so painfully simple — to look at Winnipeg's 110 points, assume that improved special teams will make up for any growing pains at five-on-five, and plot the Jets' route to another playoff spot. The "biggest question" could be about Arniel's impact — what will the team's analytics "summit" add to team strategy? How has the second-time NHL head coach grown since his disappointing debut in Columbus all those years ago? We could also drill down into Hellebuyck and Mark Scheifele as their \$8.5 million contracts kick in, wonder about Nikolaj Ehlers' uncertain future, project Gabriel Vilardi's second-year growth and wonder about bigger roles for Perfetti, Morgan Barron, Lambert, Samberg and Heinola.

Every single one of these items is secondary. Even if this summer's changes (and the players' often-cited soul-searching) lead to inch-by-inch improvement, we would be missing the point of zooming in on something as specific as, say, Scheifele being plus-14 at five-on-five playing with Ehlers but a net zero with Kyle Connor.

None of this matters more than this season's second half and its stretch run. The single biggest question facing this year's Jets is about their ability to elevate their game down the stretch without getting too high on any early-season success.

There was an enormous difference in the quality of play between the team that was in first place in January and the one that lost in the first round again. Point at the Jets' eight-game winning streak or 8-2-0 finish to last season as suits you, but those stretch-run Jets got outshot and outchanced at five-on-five despite gaudy results. The flow of play was eerily reminiscent of Winnipeg's 2022-23 fall from first in the Western Conference to its wild-card spot (and its five-game loss to Vegas).

The Jets missed the playoffs entirely in 2021-22. The 2020-21 Jets, who swept Edmonton before being swept by Montreal, played a 56-game season — too short for a “second half” in any true sense. Rewind to 2019-20 and Winnipeg found itself struggling as the pandemic interrupted the season. Go back to 2018-19 — the last time the team started a season with a “Cup contender” label — and the Jets also led the Western Conference in January before an epic second-half slide led to an unceremonious first-round exit.

Call it a failure to elevate the team's play down the stretch. Call it a lack of resilience when the season gets tougher. Call it trying too hard for offence during the January and February doldrums, resting on laurels, a problem with the Jets roster or a series of flukes.

Whatever name you give it, the Jets have an obvious dragon to slay. Whatever heights they hit in the first half of the season, they must continue to improve in January and again after the All-Star break and throughout the stretch run. It won't matter if Connor scores 40 goals or Scheifele hits a point per game or Ehlers, Perfetti and Vilardi all post incredible offensive totals. The Jets can't afford to give up second-half ground the way they have done for so many years in a row.

“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 intensity ramps up that much more,” Lowry said. “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 postseason success.”

<https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/5771973/2024/09/18/canucks-jets-flames-oilers-prospects/>

### ***What we're seeing from Canucks, Jets, Flames and Oilers prospects in Penticton***

By Thomas Drance

PENTICTON, B.C. — Another Penticton Young Stars tournament is in the books, which means NHL training camps are right around the corner.

This year, it felt like the western Canadian prospect tournament had some sizzle again.

The Calgary Flames, amid a rebuilding effort, brought a top-10 pick from the 2024 NHL Draft in Zayne Parekh, and he was a clear standout.

The Vancouver Canucks brought sniper Jonathan Lekkerimäki, who electrified the crowd with high-voltage sorties carrying the puck through the neutral zone.

The Winnipeg Jets had several high-pedigree forwards, including Nikita Chibrikov and Brad Lambert, who performed well and looked primed to make an NHL impact this season.

And the Edmonton Oilers, fresh off of their run to the Stanley Cup Final, brought a young team featuring prized offseason acquisitions Sam O'Reilly and Matt Savoie.

There was a sense of excitement during games at the South Okanagan Events Centre, especially during the Canucks games and Saturday's prospect version of the Battle of Alberta. The event, which will need to be renewed by the four teams if it's to continue beyond this season, drew strong, loud crowds all weekend long.

"When we scored, it was like, 'Wow, this is loud,'" noted Canucks centre Max Sasson after his team's victory on the first night of the tournament. "The passion is there, the fans obviously love having us in Penticton and we love being here."

Here are a few items we observed at this year's tournament, and what it could mean for the various western Canadian teams and their prospects going forward.

#### *Calgary's youth holding its own should be exciting for the Flames*

The four teams at this tournament weren't evenly matched; they were assembled with disparate experience levels and ages.

The Jets and the Oilers, for example, leaned heavily on invited free agents to fill out their back end. The Oilers went with younger players, many of whom are still draft-eligible, while the Jets brought more seasoned professional invites to insulate their young forwards. The Canucks brought a handful of their American League veterans, while the Flames iced a team with eight players selected at the 2024 draft.

Those gaps in experience levels and age prominently shaped the run of play and the results of the tournament. Even though the games were mostly close on the scoreboard, it was evident throughout the tournament that the Canucks and the Jets were at a different level than the teams the Oilers and the Flames brought. Some of the higher-calibre AHL players, like Canucks forward and AHL All-Star MVP Arshdeep Bains, were able to seemingly impose their will on proceedings whenever they chose to.

There are no set rules for how a team should be assembled at this tournament, making it a good opportunity for newly drafted teenagers to take stock of the distance they'll have to travel to challenge for a spot on a 23-man roster at the NHL level. It's likewise a chance for young professional players of all stripes to make an impression while playing games in front of NHL scouts, coaches and general managers.

The unbalanced composition of teams, however, is context that has to be kept front of mind when evaluating the performance of players and teams.

The Canucks team, for example, won all three games they played. Taking nothing away from the standout performances of various Canucks prospects, or the way those performances engaged the home crowd, the Canucks were favoured to win every game they played. The only contest that was ever in doubt was their Sunday afternoon comeback victory over the Jets prospects. Even when Vancouver fell behind 2-0 to the Flames in the closing game of the tournament on Monday afternoon, its territorial edge was so significant that it was clear — even when Vancouver was trailing — which way the result would go.

That's partly why the performance of the Flames prospects in Penticton was one of the major stories of the tournament. This was a team loaded with teenaged players, and some of

Calgary's top 2024 draft selections — specifically Parekh and second-round pick Andrew Basha — were among the most dynamic players in Penticton this past weekend.

This season likely won't have too many silver linings for the Flames and their fans. The performance of their 2024 draft class in Penticton, however, and the way they were able to hold their own against older and more experienced players, was impressive. It's something to be genuinely excited about for the future.

#### *Akey looks close to returning after double shoulder surgery*

The Oilers could've used top blue-line prospect Beau Akey at this tournament, but Akey is being eased back into action following a pair of shoulder surgeries that ended his 2023-24 OHL season with the Barrie Colts just 14 games in.

The good news is Akey is getting close to returning. Throughout the tournament, he could be seen on the ice ahead of the Oilers' prospect group practices, working hard and shooting a ton of pucks with good zip and velocity.

Akey told The Athletic it took him several months to rebuild his shot and that the surgeries were something of a relief. His shoulders had been somewhat bothering him for years before his season ended last fall.

"The Colts staff was great," Akey said. "They kept reminding me to keep a good perspective on it. They kept telling me you're looking at the long term, you're only 19, you have your whole life ahead of you.

"They also said that at the end of the year, it would feel like it flew by. Now that I'm on the other side of it, it really did."

The smooth-skating blueliner was a standout at the tournament last year, and given his speed and hockey IQ, could be a major factor for the Oilers in the not-too-distant future. After all, their blue-line group is desperate for a player with his skill set.

#### *Alriksson the most interesting project in Penticton*

Twenty years ago, there were only six NHL forwards listed at a height over 6-foot-5. Those six players combined to score 20 goals during the 2003-04 season.

Ten years later, there were seven NHL forwards listed over 6-5. Some of those players — playmaking centre Martin Hanzal and sniper Nick Bjugstad — were more skilled than the supersized forwards a decade earlier. This cohort combined to score 45 goals.

Last season, there were 12 NHL forwards listed at 6-6 or higher. Headlined by Buffalo Sabres star Tage Thompson, these 12 skyscraper forwards combined for 115 goals during the 2023-24 campaign.

This trend line was evident in Penticton. Jets forward Kieron Walton, a 2024 draft pick, stands 6-6 and was a standout performer in the two games that he appeared in. Flames 2024 draft pick Hunter Laing, who also stands 6-6, wasn't quite as dynamic but featured heavily for a Flames prospect side that punched well above its weight.

Meanwhile, the Canucks had their own towering presence up front in Vilmer Alriksson, who might've been the most difficult player to evaluate at the tournament.

As a mark of how polarizing the 6-6, 220-pound Alriksson's game is to evaluate, one scout suggested to The Athletic that some players make hockey look easy, and Alriksson makes it look near impossible. Another scout, however, pointed him out as "his guy" at this tournament. He went on to suggest that, in his assessment, Alriksson had the skill set and tools to "pop" as a potential NHL option within a couple of years.

Split opinion aside, Alriksson had a very good tournament overall. He scored two goals and had some stellar moments. There's really no questioning his potential upside if he's able to put it all together.

To watch him play, however, it's extraordinarily difficult to make sense of what he might be at the next level. Some of the difficulties of playing the wing at 6-6 were apparent. For example, there were instances when Alriksson would struggle to defend up high because his lanky frame made it difficult for him to get compact enough.

Opposition defenders seemed to be able to pass and shoot through him with relative ease when he was cutting off the top. It seemed like a physical limitation more than anything to do with defensive awareness or hockey IQ. His physical stature simply makes it easier for skilled defenders to play the puck through his legs than it would be against a 6-2 winger in the same position.

On one representative sequence, Alriksson leaned into a defender while using his frame to protect the puck off the rush. Before the viewer could marvel at how much space Alriksson was able to create in that manner, he'd lost control of the puck.

Then before one could conclude it was a low-skilled play that caused the puck to slip off of his stick, Alriksson had simply gone to the net after his team retrieved the loose puck and overpowered a defender at the net front completely.

As one of his teammates took a dangerous shot using the chaotic traffic Alriksson's sheer enormity created as a screen, the only reasonable thing to conclude is that his development could go either way.

I have no idea what Alriksson is or could be, but I'm absolutely fascinated to watch and find out.

#### *Scouting Notebook: Standouts, disappointments and 'only OKs'*

An exhaustive but necessarily incomplete list of players who stood out, disappointed or were only OK at the tournament. This is based on notes taken during the games and auxiliary conversations with various scouts and league contacts in attendance. Key standouts Parekh and Aatu Rätty are discussed at great length here.

*Matt Savoie, RW, Oilers:* Didn't stand out nearly as much as players with similar pedigree on other teams in Penticton. Lined up on the wing throughout the tournament, a strong indication of where he fits into Edmonton's plans long-term. Might have been hurt by the lack of quality puck-movers on the Oilers' back end, but aside from a couple of dynamic plays against the Flames prospect, was quiet on a team that didn't manufacture much offence this weekend.

*Danila Klimovich, RW, Canucks:* Still young enough and toolsy enough that he's got a chance to work it out. Showed some good signs on the power play, but there are still red flags in his processing. In Vancouver's first game against the Oilers, there was a rush chance where he



launched a feet-set clapper that missed wide when he had numbers and the sort of available space where you'd like to see a forward drive the net. Especially a forward with his size.

*Elias Pettersson, LD, Canucks:* Probably Vancouver's best defender at the tournament, which is wildly impressive for a 20-year-old player. Played solid, physical defense consistently. Showed off some uncanny maturity and awareness on the penalty kill, especially fronting shooters on the flanks. Authoritative defensive game and deceptive skating speed could give him a shot to play NHL games ahead of schedule.

*Kirill Kudrayvtsev, LD/RD, Canucks:* Played his off side throughout the tournament and looked enormously comfortable making passes behind his body and adjusting on the right side. Consistently broke the puck out cleanly. Not flashy, but looks like he has a chance to be a transitional defender with NHL upside.

*Hunter Brzustewicz, RD, Flames:* Had a rough first period of the tournament, as most of his teammates did, and then settled in very well. Still has some work to do in the corners and along the wall, but played as a flanker on the Flames power play and made some high-end skilled play — with a brilliant finish on Saturday against the Oilers being a standout sequence.

*Brad Lambert, C, Jets:* One of the best forwards at the tournament, Lambert still has the speed game and the wild horse elements that made him so exciting when he debuted at this tournament three years ago. His game looks far more controlled and layered than it has in the past, however. If Lambert isn't NHL-ready to start the season, he isn't far off.

*Lucas Ciona, LW, Flames:* By far the toughest player at the tournament, he struggled to find opponents willing to drop the gloves against him, which is a sign of the times in its own right. Exercised some pretty solid restraint when he fought Oilers camp invite Nate Corbet. Balanced giving the opponent no real choice in the matter, while still making sure that his younger opponent was ready before engaging. Looks like a player with a shot to play NHL games based on leadership, physicality and impact.

*Nate Corbet, LD, Oilers (invitee):* An Oilers invite, Corbet showed a ton of toughness in Penticton. Performed well outside of the martial stuff and was probably the Oilers' standout defender at the tournament, but it was his performance with the gloves off that likely put him on the radar for talent evaluators. A player to watch as a potential late-round pick in the 2025 NHL Draft process.

*Andrew Basha, RW, Flames:* One of the most consistently creative forwards at the tournament. The 2024 second-round pick played with an inexhaustible motor — he actually may need to find a change of pace gear to maximize his offensive ceiling — and made something interesting happen on almost every shift basis. Really impressive.

*Jonathan Lekkerimäki, RW, Canucks:* Should've scored a goal or two, but couldn't get the bounces. More dynamic than advertised as a puck carrier through the neutral zone. Looks dynamic when attacking downhill, but far less dynamic when supporting the build-up in possession.

*Arshdeep Bains, LW, Canucks:* One had the sense that Bains was focused more on being a good leader while finding his feet and legs before main camp. Had the ability to dominate in this environment at will. Whenever the Canucks trailed by multiple goals, he'd singlehandedly change the momentum of the game by winning several races and puck battles. One suspect he

likely could've maintained that level on an every-shift basis if it was exhibition play or the regular season.

*Max Sasson, C, Canucks:* Sasson can flat-out play. Might top out as a bottom-six contributor at the NHL level, but has a real chance to get there, perhaps as soon as this season.

*Brayden Yager, C, Jets:* Didn't really get to see the high-end shot at this tournament and there's still some growth for Yager as a playmaker, but the speed and two-way game were evident. Jets trusted Yager to hold leads late and play in all situations and he acquitted himself well.

*Nikita Chibrikov, RW, Jets:* Can run a bit hot emotionally during games, but that edge is a nice dimension. Skilled and disciplined about working the puck to the dirty areas of the ice, but also has the size, demeanour and physical assertiveness to potentially play in an energy-line role.

*Sam O'Reilly, C, Oilers:* Quiet tournament for O'Reilly, like most Oilers forwards. He plays bigger than his listed dimensions. Has good feel for a teenaged player at the net front on the power play, and watching him closely in practice, it was clear that his hands in tight are potentially exceptional.

*Sam Morton, C, Flames:* The 25-year-old hasn't played very much in the AHL to this point, so it's a good sign that he has AHL-level details in his game already.

*Artem Grushnikov, LD, Flames:* Some nice moments as a hitter and shot blocker. Fun to watch. Not sure his defensive IQ is NHL level yet, but his willingness to do the dirty work certainly is.

*Elias Salomonsson, RD, Jets:* Wasn't especially dynamic this weekend and still looked the part of a potential NHL defenseman from Day 1.

## **The Hockey News**

<https://thehockeynews.com/news/young-nhl-players-needing-a-strong-training-camp-in-the-central-perfetti-rossi-and-more>

### ***Young NHL Players Needing A Strong Training Camp In The Central: Perfetti, Holloway And More***

By Tony Ferrari

The young players in the Central Division are among the most intriguing in the NHL heading into the season.

They have the reigning Calder Trophy winner in Connor Bedard as well as the runner-up, Brock Faber. Even still, neither of them is the most intriguing young player for their team heading into training camp.

There's the duo in St. Louis that signed offer sheets, an unsigned piece of the puzzle for a contender in Winnipeg, a couple of rookies looking to assert themselves in the top six in Dallas and Chicago, a goalie looking to take hold of the starter gig and a few second-year NHL players who want to take on bigger roles.

Let's dive into the NHL's exciting Central Division and look at some of the young players looking to make their mark.

*Winnipeg Jets: Cole Perfetti, C*

This one is a bit tricky. Perfetti could head into training camp without a contract, which means he won't be on the ice. The unfortunate part about that, beyond the obvious delay in getting ready for the season, is that this will be an incredibly important training camp for the center. Perfetti is on the precipice of breaking through as a truly effective offensive player.

Perfetti's intelligence and playmaking have always flashed at every level he's played at, including the NHL. He hasn't quite broken through consistently, though, at the sport's top level. The 22-year-old is right where you would want to see that jump in production and assertion as one of the team's better players. With some of the Jets' core getting toward the end of their prime, Perfetti will be looked at to supplement the loss of production. First, he needs a contract, though.