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### ***Winnipeg Jets training camp 2024: Positional battles and 5 key questions***

By Murat Ates

The Winnipeg Jets begin their season with a new-look coaching staff, a diverse group of veterans and talented top prospects looking to claim NHL jobs for the first time.

Scott Arniel will seek to consolidate gains made under his mentor, Rick Bowness — better team defence, back-to-back playoff appearances — while putting his mark on a team that should make the playoffs for a third straight time. To that end, new PK coach Dean Chynoweth and PP coach Davis Payne will look to drag the special teams into the top half of the league.

Mark Scheifele and Connor Hellebuyck start their \$8.5 million contracts this season. Josh Morrissey looks to cement himself as a Norris Trophy contender while Kyle Connor should clear 30 goals — again — and could get close to 40 with good health. Gabriel Vilardi and Cole Perfetti will take their next steps, with Perfetti needing a new contract before what should be a breakout season. Meanwhile, top prospects like Brad Lambert, Nikita Chibrikov and Elias Salomonsson will strive to take NHL jobs from established veterans.

The Jets released their 53-player roster this week, along with a schedule that starts on the ice on Thursday at 10 a.m. Winnipeg plays exhibition games on Saturday at home and Sunday on the road.

This is a breakdown of the roster battles at the top and bottom of the lineup, key questions facing the forwards, defencemen and goaltenders, and an assessment of the Jets from top to bottom. It's going to be a fascinating season.

#### *Forwards*

Roster locks: Mark Scheifele, Kyle Connor, Nikolaj Ehlers, Nino Niederreiter, Alex Lafallo, Gabriel Vilardi, Cole Perfetti, Adam Lowry, Mason Appleton, Vladislav Namestnikov, Morgan Barron, Rasmus Kupari, David Gustafsson

Vying for spots: Axel Jonsson-Fjallby, Dominic Toninato, Jaret Anderson-Dolan, Mason Shaw, Parker Ford, Brad Lambert, Nikita Chibrikov, Henri Nikkanen, Daniel Torgersson, Fabian Wagner, Danny Zhilkin, Chaz Lucius, Colby Barlow, Brayden Yager, Kevin He, Jacob Julien, Kieran Walton, Connor Levis, Ben King\*

\*Free agent invite

Training camp battles: Stiff competition is the name of the game heading into this season.

Listing 13 roster locks is tough on top prospects like Lambert and Chibrikov. It's also unkind to veterans with NHL experience like Jonsson-Fjallby and Toninato, plus new signees Anderson-Dolan and Shaw. You might even think back to last year's exhibition games, with Ford's tenacity turning heads and keeping him on the roster until late in camp.

That's just how this game is shaped. Lambert and Chibrikov enter main camp with a ton of momentum. Each player scored three points at the Young Stars tournament while turning heads with speed and competitive fire. Lambert seems most likely to steal a spot outright but I don't expect Winnipeg to waive Kupari or Gustafsson just for kicks. Either Lambert's camp is so spectacular as to warrant the risk, the Jets build a 23-player roster of 14 forwards, seven defencemen and two goaltenders, injuries create space or even Winnipeg's best prospects will start the season in the AHL. Remember that Kyle Connor made the Jets at the same age that Lambert is now — after similar AHL production — but it took an early season injury to Mathieu Perreault to make room. Connor was ready but didn't make the roster out of camp. Lambert and Chibrikov will impress but they're in tough to win jobs.

There will be a battle among veterans to determine the depth chart. Arniel needs a second-line centre and could turn to Vilardi, Namestnikov, Perfetti or even Lambert for the role. We'll get a sense of Arniel's vision for the forward group when we see Thursday's line rushes; until then, it is my hunch that Lowry and Appleton are still two-thirds of a dedicated checking line.

If that's the case, then Niederreiter and Barron are the swing men. Niederreiter could find himself back on that tough minutes line or pushed up the lineup in search of a more physical element in the top six. Barron seems due for more opportunity but, with this kind of roster depth, even the most ambitious scenario lifts him only as high as Niederreiter's old job on the third line.

lafallo may have more in him than we saw last season; give some grace for the death of his close friend Adam Johnson. Perfetti and Vilardi are likely to show growth. Scheifele and Connor are locks to reprise their marquee offensive roles.

All in all, the Jets forward group offers a lot to like at all levels, with two major questions.

*Can Winnipeg's depth overcome its lack of top-end talent?*

Scheifele, Connor and company are great players but deliver below average results for elite teams' top forwards. Winnipeg didn't outscore its opponents with the two of them on the ice last season, with their individual defensive foibles — missed backchecks, failed zone exits — combining to erode their goal scoring exploits. Winnipeg was still a top team, finishing the season with 110 points, but any clear-eyed comparison of Scheifele and Connor to Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl, Nathan MacKinnon and Mikko Rantanen, Jack Eichel and Mark Stone shows the Jets coming up short. That's fine — every roster has strengths and weaknesses — but it asks a lot of Lowry's checking line plus secondary scorers like Ehlers, Vilardi and Perfetti. Few teams match Winnipeg's depth but the great ones have more to offer at the very top of the lineup.

*When crunch time hits, will Winnipeg's soft skill fade or find a way to win the vital battles?*

There is plenty of overlap between this question and the one that precedes it. One way — not the only way but one way — for Winnipeg's top forwards to gain ground on the rest of the

league is through more committed two-way play. Scheifele has taken strides in this regard. Connor made such a committed physical play on Casey Mittelstadt in Game 1 against Colorado so as to rattle the boards and set up Scheifele's first goal. That check was the exception and not the norm, particularly in the defensive zone where Connor gets beat on the walls during breakouts, leading to too much time spent defending. Ehlers is better in transition but has similar defensive struggles. Perfetti and Vilardi are still developing, with youth and health creating challenges that didn't seem to trouble Rantanen, Arturri Lehtonen or Valeri Nichushkin. If this team makes the playoffs, as I expect it will, then it will need to win more physical battles than it did one year ago.

### *Defence*

Roster locks: Josh Morrissey, Dylan DeMelo, Neal Pionk, Dylan Samberg, Colin Miller, Logan Stanley

Vying for spots: Ville Heinola, Haydn Fleury, Dylan Coghlan, Elias Salomonsson, Simon Lundmark, Tyrel Bauer, Dmitri Kuzmin, Ashton Sautner\*, Dylan Anhorn\*, Dawson Barteaux\*

\*Free agent invite

Training camp battles: I don't expect Arniel to veer away from the Morrissey and DeMelo top pairing. The results have been too good for too long and the duo was plus-27 together at five-on-five last season, showing an ability to face and beat top competition.

The battles get more interesting the further down the depth chart. Samberg is the most likely replacement for Brenden Dillon and shows promise, but the competition that top-four defencemen face is markedly tougher than third-pairing work. Samberg has the size, strength, mobility and read of the game to succeed but I'd expect there to be some growing pains. This could mean that Stanley gets an occasional push beyond his established ability as a longtime depth defenceman; it could even open up a top-four job for Heinola, whose acclaimed performance at last year's camp gave way to injury and another AHL season.

On that note, Heinola really should be a lock to make the Jets — he needs waivers to be assigned to the Moose this season — and it's easy to see him spending time on the third pair. This would mean (at least occasionally) displacing Stanley, who played 25 games last season. That battle will be one of the most compelling we see from day one of camp and well into the season.

It seems safe to pencil in Miller as a hard-shooting right-hander on Winnipeg's third pair. The Jets hold Pionk in too much esteem for me to imagine Pionk losing his top-four job. If I'm right, then Pionk will need to put together the same kind of performance in the final year of his \$5.875 million AAV deal that he did to earn it in the first place. Kevin Cheveldayoff recently confirmed a theory I've written about multiple times — that Pionk played 2022-23 with a foot injury — and I would interpret that Pionk finished that year second in time on ice as a sign the Jets remain heavily invested in him. Either way, his ability to re-establish top form — or not — will be a pivot point on which Winnipeg's season swings.

A great season from Samberg would go a long way toward alleviating that concern, giving both Hermantown, Minn., men extra importance from day one of training camp. Team defence will be the order of the day, with the trade deadline offering hope for help if the second pair is a long-term source of struggle.

### *Is Pionk a top-four defenceman anymore?*

Pionk's most effective seasons in a top-four role were his first two seasons in Winnipeg. It was enough to warrant an article explaining why we were wrong to limit him to a third-pairing ceiling when the Jets got him from the New York Rangers. Then he signed a four-year, \$5.875 million AAV contract and seldom excelled in the top four again. He received the team's second heaviest workload for the first two seasons of that deal, despite mobility issues that indicated a foot injury, before dropping to third last season. Pionk's mobility contributes directly to his confidence and aggression, helping him establish tight gaps and defend his blue line when he's on his game. If he can deliver, the Jets are a solid team from top to bottom. If he can't, then Dillon's absence will be doubly felt.

### *When will Cheveldayoff strike?*

If Pionk and Samberg and Heinola and Miller and Stanley excel, the Jets will be sitting pretty heading into the trade deadline. That seems like a big ask. I see a top-four defenceman in Samberg — but would understand a year of growing pains on his way. I remain cautiously optimistic about Heinola's game, especially in a third-pair role where his puck skill should shine. Stanley is a well-liked teammate who offers size that his teammates can't match. There are more than enough question marks here to warrant a top-four addition; I wonder if Cheveldayoff strikes early, as he did with the Sean Monahan trade last season. On paper, the need for a veteran playoff warrior in the mold of Chris Tanev or Mattias Ekholm is obvious even if everybody in Winnipeg has a tremendous year.

### *Goaltending*

Roster locks: Connor Hellebuyck

Vying for spots: Kaapo Kahkonen, Eric Comrie, Thomas Milic, Domenic DiVincentiis

Training camp battles: The only sure thing in goal is Hellebuyck, the reigning Vezina Trophy winner — and, even then, there is substantial interest given his personal reflection in last season's exit interview.

"When I got pulled to give me more rest, it was like a flood of emotions I had suppressed all series long and that was the realization that I can't do this alone," Hellebuyck said in May. Hellebuyck clarified that the feeling of doing things "alone" was an expectation he puts on himself — not an indictment of the team — and added that it's unrealistic for him to maintain.

"It's just the way my mentality is, I'm trying to put everything on my shoulders. I don't think that's the right way to go about playoffs anymore. I think what I need to do is just dive into a team game even more, and that will hopefully bring me peace of mind."

What Hellebuyck's newfound wisdom looks like is anyone's guess, but he will likely compete for yet another Vezina Trophy. Behind him, the battle is between Kahkonen and Comrie.

*Who wins the backup job?*

I see Kahkonen as the front-runner, owing to more NHL games (139) and a better save percentage (.899), including a strong end to last season after being freed from San Jose. Comrie is close with so many Jets players — Scheifele even officiated at Comrie's wedding — but has played to an .893 save percentage in 57 AHL games. Things didn't particularly work out for him in Buffalo after posting a stellar .920 behind Hellebuyck in 2022-23.

Winnipeg could carry three goaltenders but that would take a roster spot away elsewhere on the roster. It's so easy to imagine the affable Comrie mentoring Thomas Milic in Manitoba while Dom DiVincentiis starts his pro career with Winnipeg's ECHL affiliate in Norfolk. The ECHL was a great place for Milic one year ago; it should be no different for DiVincentiis this season. It will probably be a few years before the payoff of this development path but Winnipeg's goaltending pipeline has momentum and hype beyond Hellebuyck for the first time in years; the organization's goaltending will be exciting to track in all three professional leagues.

One development I don't expect to see is a tandem; Hellebuyck is a good bet to approach 60 starts again in 2024-25.

## **Global Winnipeg**

<https://globalnews.ca/news/10761755/winnipeg-jets-cole-perfetti-contract-2/>

### ***ANALYSIS: Perfetti, Jets need to come together on contract talks as training camp kicks off***

By Paul Edmonds CJOB

As the only unsigned player under team control, Winnipeg Jets forward Cole Perfetti will be absent from workouts and testing at the Hockey For All Centre on Wednesday, and until a new agreement with the team is reached.

It's a difficult situation for the 22-year-old, who posted 19 goals and 38 points last season, both NHL career single-season highs. And with the number two centre position still very much a question mark entering camp for a second straight season, it's even more difficult for the young Perfetti to compete for that spot in absentia.

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Now, what precisely is preventing Perfetti and the Jets from reaching a new agreement is unsure, but we can certainly speculate with some certainty that money, but most likely the length of contract, is creating the widest impasse.

Part of that gridlock might be created due to questions concerning Perfetti's durability, with the Jets not too inclined to offer a deal past two years and the player's side looking for more security beyond that.

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Since he turned pro four seasons ago, the Jets' first-rounder in 2020 has missed chunks of time seemingly each season with injury, a byproduct of being undersized but highly skilled. Therefore, to Winnipeg, the risk of offering a long-term contract might not be prudent just yet.

But at this point, whatever the Jets have tabled might be better than the alternative: Perfetti sitting out for any length of time during camp, the exhibition schedule and perhaps beyond. And that bit of advice has most certainly been uttered to the budding star from the likes of Josh Morrissey and Kyle Connor, two teammates – if you remember — who have historically been in the same situation.

For Perfetti, what's been offered might not meet his expectations, but some would suggest he's yet to meet his with the Jets either. Sitting out any longer than a few days makes it next to impossible to compete for, say, a second-line centre job in absentia.