

Winnipeg Free Press

<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2024/09/23/jets-end-stalemate-sign-perfetti-to-two-year-deal>

Jets end stalemate, sign Perfetti to two-year deal

By: Ken Wiebe

The contract stalemate is officially over.

The Winnipeg Jets and restricted free agent Cole Perfetti found common ground on Monday night, agreeing to terms on a two-year bridge deal that will pay the skilled forward \$6.5 million (\$3.25 million AAV).

Perfetti will make \$3 million in the first year of the deal and \$3.5 million in the second.

The 10th overall pick in the 2020 NHL Draft missed the first four days of on-ice sessions while the two sides continued negotiations.

Jets general manager Kevin Cheveldayoff hinted last week that he would love to increase his offer to Perfetti, but emphasized the machinations of the salary cap made it challenging to do so.

“That’s the hardest part. Personally I’d give these guys the moon. They’re awesome guys and I’d love to have the ability to pay them everything they want and deserve,” Cheveldayoff said last Thursday. “In a salary cap world you have to make business decisions. It’s done through the back and forth, it’s done through comparables. Hopefully, you just try and find something that works for both sides.”

Ultimately, that’s what both sides were able to do, as the Jets raised their offer and Perfetti’s camp lowered the ask.

Perfetti is expected to be on the ice with the second group on Tuesday after completing some testing.

The Jets have four preseason games remaining, including Wednesday’s home game against the Edmonton Oilers, so there’s ample time for Perfetti to get acclimated with linemates and settle into his spot on the revamped power play.

In recent days, there were a variety of comparable deals signed by fellow first-round picks, ranging to a three-year bridge for forward Dawson Mercer of the New Jersey Devils (three years, \$4 million AAV) and centre Dylan Guenther of the Utah Hockey Club (seven years, \$7.143 million on a deal that kicks in next season).

A range of other comparables were brought up during the course of negotiations and eventually, the final term and number – which represents an increase from the entry-level deal Perfetti completed – was reached.

The AAV for the bridge contact is similar to the numbers reached with previous Jets' first-rounders Josh Morrissey (two years, \$3.15 million AAV in 2018) and Jacob Trouba (two years, \$3.06 million AAV in 2016) agreed to in their second contracts.

The most important development is that a deal with Perfetti was reached before the stalemate dragged on deep into training camp, as was the case with negotiations between Patrik Laine and Kyle Connor back in 2019 when both players missed all of the preseason.

Trouba's stalemate lasted the longest, stretching into early November before the aforementioned contract was signed.

Neither the Jets nor Perfetti were interested in a lengthy standoff, so efforts were made to close the gap and reach a deal.

There has been plenty of debate over whether the Jets would have been better off to offer Perfetti a longer-term deal, perhaps one similar to the one signed by Quinton Byfield with the Los Angeles Kings (five years, \$6.25 million AAV) earlier this summer.

That debate is sure to rage on and history has shown core players coming out of a bridge deal are often in line for another significant raise, but this outcome is one which will allow both sides to be in a much better position to establish Perfetti's long-term value.

Perfetti is coming off a season that saw him record career-highs in games played (71), goals (19), assists (19) and points (38), but he went through a scoring drought (zero goals, two assists in 23 games) and lost his job on the second line late in the season.

The lengthy offensive dry spell, combined with Perfetti suffering a pair of season-ending injuries during his first two seasons, may have been part of the reason the Jets were hesitant to go with a longer-term deal.

That isn't to suggest the Jets don't view him as a core piece, they just wanted to see a larger body of work before extending him the way that they did with players such as Mark Scheifele (eight years, \$6.14 million AAV in 2016) and Nikolaj Ehlers (seven years, \$6 million AAV in 2017).

Although Perfetti was open to a deal that included some of his UFA years, this two-year pact should provide him with a glorious opportunity to firmly establish himself as a primary scorer rather than a complementary one.

After averaging 13:35 of ice time last season, Perfetti figures to see that number increase steadily under head coach Scott Arniel, who expressed his appreciation for the forward's skillset on multiple occasions throughout the offseason.

"The biggest thing with Cole was that he missed a lot of hockey – and I had this conversation with him (this summer)," Arniel told the Free Press at the 2024 NHL Draft in Las Vegas. "For me, this is a great building block. He had two years of injury, had the Covid season (with the Manitoba Moose in the American Hockey League) and missed a lot of growth as a young player.

"At the end of the day, he came in, got to play, got some experience and had a heck of a year. Scoring 19 goals is hard to do in this league. Now, it's (about) the next step and where he goes next year with his game."

Winnipeg Sun

<https://www.nhl.com/jets/news/niederreiter-hoping-to-build-off-last-season>

Jets' Perfetti signs two-year, \$6.5 million bridge deal

By Scott Billeck

Cole Perfetti has a new contract.

The 22-year-old Winnipeg Jets forward, who missed the first six days of training camp, signed a two-year, \$6.5 million (\$3.25 million AAV) bridge deal on Monday, ending one of the longest-running stalemates with a restricted free agent in the NHL this season.

Perfetti will make \$3 million this season and \$3.5 million in 2025-26. He's slated to become an RFA with arbitration rights in the summer of 2026.

The Whitby, Ont. native, drafted 10th overall by the Jets, scored 19 goals and 38 points in 71 games last season.

The deal came together quickly on Monday after a quiet weekend between both sides.

Sources say Winnipeg came up on its initial offer, which was well below the \$3.25 million both sides finally agreed on.

The Jets scoffed at several comparables, including Ottawa's Shane Pinto (two years, \$3.75 million AAV) and the recent signing of New Jersey's Dawson Mercer (three years, \$4 million AAV).

Jets general manager Kevin Cheveldayoff leaned on his leverage in this case.

"The hardest part is that there's different levels of contract negotiations in this league," Cheveldayoff said. "RFAs (who) don't have arbitration rights. RFAs coming out of their first contract generally don't have arbitration rights and that becomes a sticking point sometimes. When players do have arbitration and they file, there's a deadline and there's a mechanism in place that contracts follow and you work towards that."

Perfetti did not hold arbitration rights and was coming off a tough third season in Winnipeg after being healthy scratched 11 times in the second half of the season, and missing all but one of Winnipeg's five playoff games for the same reason.

Perfetti's first two seasons were marred by back-to-back season-ending surgeries, limiting him to 69 NHL games.

Last week, when asked about Perfetti, Cheveldayoff said he'd give the "moon" to his players, but he said the reality is he has a salary cap to work with.

"That's the hardest part," he said. "Personally I'd give these guys the moon."

“They’re awesome guys, and I’d love to have the ability to pay them everything they want and deserve. In a salary cap world, you have to make business decisions. It’s done through the back and forth, it’s done through comparables. Hopefully, you just try and find something that works for both sides.”

The deal works out well for Winnipeg’s cap situation.

According to Puck Pedia, the Jets have \$2.526 million in current cap space with Perfetti signed, allowing the team to enter the season with some flexibility under the cap. They’ll have up to \$1 million more once they don’t carry three goalies when the regular season begins.

That will go well with what’s accrued over the regular season heading into the trade deadline.

Winnipeg’s defence, especially now that Ville Heinola is out indefinitely, isn’t as robust as last year—and it got torched in the playoffs.

The Jets will likely have to target some help at that position.

Perfetti, meanwhile, gets back into the fold beginning Tuesday after the Jets had Monday off. He’s slated to hit the ice at 11 a.m. at Winnipeg’s practice facility after going through testing before that.

He’ll look to lock down his spot on the second line, where head coach Scott Arniel has said he envisions Perfetti as a significant contributor to his top six.

What’s next?

A bit of a strange question, right? There’s nothing to worry about now for a couple of years.

Cheveldayoff mitigated risk with Perfetti’s contract. They’ll get a better idea over the next two seasons if Perfetti is truly past his injury-plagued days and slide last year was simply a part of the growing pains a young NHLer often faces.

Perfetti will be looking to outplay his new deal severely.

If Perfetti’s camp gave up more than they wanted to this time, without much leverage, they’ll be looking to have that favour repaid in full and then some in 2026.

Time will tell if Perfetti viewed these negotiations as simply business or if they crossed into the realm of personal, strengthening his resolve the next time both player and team are sitting across from one another.

One would suspect Perfetti, if he holds faithful to his end of the bargain, will asking for Cheveldayoff to send over a Brinks truck.

An uptick in minutes this year under a coach who appears to have more belief in him and an assistant coach who could very well use him in the bumper spot on the first-unit power play means Perfetti will have many tools to maximize his earning potential.

A big year from Perfetti, and judging by those who skated with him from the summer suggesting he’s poised to take the next step, the Jets might be wise to take things back to the negotiation table next July: the earliest Perfetti can sign an extension.

The burning question

Why did this take so long?

The weekend was relatively quiet on the negotiation front, and the deal came together quickly on Monday. Something in the process ignited a hasty resolution.

Winnipeg's opening salvo is said to have been well below the number both sides agreed to. Sources close to Perfetti's camp said something around the Pinto deal would have been met with interest.

The deal presumes that both sides gave in to each other to a certain degree.

But if there was a \$1 million gap initially—I'm speculating here as the numbers from both sides are fuzzy—it feels like this deal could have been consummated a lot sooner.

That's the part I struggle to wrap my head around. Why drag this out? Especially with a young player who's as well-liked as Perfetti?

The kid skates with Winnipeg's leadership group in the summer. He's got future captain material written all over him.

Again, why risk souring a great relationship with a player who wants to be here and actually shows it?

Some might look at that and feel the team tried to play hardball with a loyal employee.

Didn't work out well in the end with Andrew Copp.

One thing that remained true throughout was that Perfetti was a model professional, even representing the Jets at the NHL's North American media tour without a contract.

The Athletic

<https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/5789860/2024/09/23/winnipeg-jets-cole-perfetti-contract/>

Winnipeg Jets sign Cole Perfetti to 2-year contract: Why it's a bridge deal

By Murat Ates

The Winnipeg Jets have signed Cole Perfetti to a two-year, \$3.25 million AAV contract, ending a stalemate that saw the 22-year-old forward miss the first five days of training camp.

It's a good deal for the Jets, who get Perfetti signed to a manageable cap hit — a contract less than teammate Gabriel Vilardi signed for last summer and oft-cited but imperfect comparable Shane Pinto. It's also a solid deal for Perfetti, who is a likely candidate to receive top-six minutes and power-play time under new head coach Scott Arniel. Perfetti scored 38 points in 71 games for Winnipeg in 2023-24 despite limited first-half minutes and a second-half slump that included time spent as a healthy scratch. A player of his hockey IQ and puck skill should be able to outproduce a \$3.25 million AAV with increased opportunity — his next deal should be much more expensive than this one — which may be the bet Perfetti is making on himself.

He will earn \$3 million in the first year of the deal and \$3.5 million in the second, making him a restricted free agent with arbitration rights two years from now. It's the sort of contract that, upon signing, seems so eminently fair that one wonders why it wasn't consummated earlier in the summer. The Jets and Perfetti's camp remained far apart on what constituted an apt comparable for Perfetti as recently as this weekend.

Why was it a bridge deal?

Despite Perfetti's interest in a long-term deal, the Jets' focus remained on a two-year bridge. From the team's perspective, the two most compelling reasons for such a contract are about cap space and mitigating risk.

Perfetti's bridge deal leaves the Jets with just over \$3 million in cap space to start the season. Cap space is calculated daily, with unused space early in the season available to be used later on, meaning that the Jets' \$3 million will grow throughout the season. This gives GM Kevin Cheveldayoff plenty of room to bolster or retool the roster as needed for a playoff run — especially valuable, given Brenden Dillon's offseason departure and the likely need to upgrade Winnipeg's blue line.

By signing Perfetti to a short-term deal, Winnipeg creates real but manageable risk: What if the 22-year-old forward, whose points per minute and primary points per minute rates imply top-six success, breaks out in a big way over the next couple of seasons? He seems like a surefire bet to play on one of Winnipeg's top two lines and is also a likely candidate to play the bumper position on Davis Payne's new-look Jets power play. There's a strong chance that Perfetti's next contract is an expensive one, creating a cap challenge in the future that could have been avoided by a long-term deal today.

One reason Winnipeg may not have been willing to commit to a long-term deal is that his first two seasons were interrupted by injury. Perfetti maintained full health in 2023-24, but it's possible that Cheveldayoff saw his 140 career games played as a reason to steer clear of a long-term contract.

Why did it take so long?

Given Perfetti's eminently reasonable \$3.25 million cap hit, it seems fair to ask why the contract took so long to iron out. Multiple sources conveyed that Perfetti's camp and the Jets remained far apart in terms of which players constituted fair comparables as recently as Saturday. The gap was closed quickly on Monday evening, with both parties arriving at a contract that — on the surface — looks like it could have been signed in July.

Perfetti will be speaking to media on Tuesday after his first session of training camp. Cheveldayoff, who said last week that he'd give Perfetti "the moon" if he could (and who also said he prefers not to discuss contract details with the media) won't be speaking. The contract dispute seemed amicable (as far as contract disputes go), owing to Perfetti's work representing the Jets at the NHL media tour in Vegas and again at a pre-arranged fishing trip with Dylan Samberg and fans before training camp. Cheveldayoff's "moon" comment was warm, too, but without further clarity it looks as though Perfetti's delayed start to camp could have been avoided.

The reason for the long delay will either come from Perfetti on Tuesday or not at all. It seems probable that Perfetti's performance and Winnipeg's in-season success erases the awkwardness of the lengthy timeline before too long. For now, it seems at least possible that the

Jets played hardball with a young player who skated with leaders like Mark Scheifele, Adam Lowry and Josh Morrissey this summer and has represented the organization well off the ice, too. It's also possible that the two sides were simply worlds apart; without knowing each party's initial ask, it's difficult to say.

Perfetti will be eligible for arbitration in 2026; Andrew Copp and Jacob Trouba, two previous Jets represented by KO Sports, were able to use that mechanism to fast-track early exits from Winnipeg. Perfetti is said to want to stay in Winnipeg — and other teammates, like Kyle Connor and Morrissey went through prolonged contractual impasses before ultimately committing to long-term pacts — but it will be a situation to watch the next time Perfetti's deal is up.

<https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/5784407/2024/09/23/winnipeg-jets-2024-preseason/>

Winnipeg Jets risers, fallers and question marks after 2 preseason games

By Murat Ates

Four on-ice practice days and two preseason games have given us fresh clues and new insight into the Winnipeg Jets' top prospects, fresh faces and battles for spots on the opening-night roster.

Based on what we've seen at practice and in Winnipeg's two exhibition games, these are the Jets at all levels of the depth chart making a name for themselves at training camp — plus a few key question marks and players for whom it's better to show patience than to keep building the hype.

Here's what we're seeing after two preseason games, with a small round of cuts on the immediate horizon.

Making bigger and better cases Nikita Chibrikov and Brad Lambert

Nikita Chibrikov's wrist shot is a rocket. His footspeed isn't that. His feistiness is often undersold, although I think the market has caught up to that fact after his Young Stars curmudgeonliness. He's more than "just" a pain to play against, though: Chibrikov has been absolute money at both blue lines throughout camp and showed great work on entries and exits again on Saturday against the Minnesota Wild.

What do I mean?

On Chibrikov's first shift, he made a tough play to get the Jets out of their zone with possession, spinning off his check and passing to his defenceman for an outlet. Chibrikov then bolted up the ice, picked up a return pass at the red line and timed an entry pass perfectly, leading to a shot for Dylan Samberg.

At the end of a shift early in the second period, Chibrikov was under pressure in the neutral zone. He kept his head up, stickhandled the puck away from a check and set up an entry that led to shots by Connor Levis, Jacob Julien, Tyrel Bauer and Alex Lafallo in a 30-second flurry. It was one of Winnipeg's most dangerous shifts of the game and it wouldn't have happened if the 21-year-old forward hadn't kept his head up in the neutral zone.

There's a part of me that wonders if talking about entries and exits is boring. There's another, more stubborn part of me that thinks entries and exits are among the most important parts of hockey. They don't make highlight reels but they help decide where the game gets played; players who are consistently great at them drive play for their teams, leading to more shots, goals and wins.

Chibrikov also made a third-period cut to the net and then dropped into the slot for a one-timer opportunity. It was a perfectly timed play that he fanned on. If he can make the most of those opportunities at an NHL level, he's a top-six player. If he helps drive possession and chips in more occasional offence, I think there's still a top-nine player in him. Sometimes I'm reminded of Mikey Eyssimont and sometimes Vladislav Namestnikov. Either way, the 5-foot-9 Chibrikov punches well above his weight as an NHL prospect.

Lambert didn't take over Saturday's game the way the hype machine says he should. Instead, he made several effective plays that led to scoring chances for Gabriel Vilardi and Lafallo. He found time and space in the offensive zone, getting onto pucks and then keeping his head up to make use of his linemates. Don't mistake the lack of essay on this subject for a sign it's not crucial; in fact, I think combining his speed and puck skill with a better read of the game that makes better use of his linemates is exactly the ingredient that rounds out Lambert's offensive game into a sustainable, NHL-level meal. I'm not sure he makes the Jets out of camp; whether it happens on Oct. 9 or sometime afterward, I still think this is the year Lambert makes the jump.

Thrust into the spotlight *Haydn Fleury*

Haydn Fleury's pregnant wife, Jaid, woke him up at about 10:45 p.m. on Friday: It was time to go to the hospital. Her contractions had begun earlier in the day but now it was go-time, so the couple hustled to the hospital, where their son Ledger Duke Fleury was born at 1:07 a.m. Saturday.

The Fleury family got a couple of hours of sleep from 3:00 to 5:30 a.m. when Ledger woke up. Shortly after that came the call from Jets head coach Scott Arniel: Fleury had a decision to make. He could play Saturday in Winnipeg, Sunday in Edmonton or take the weekend off altogether and get into his first preseason game on Wednesday.

"I'd barely gotten the options out of my mouth and he said 'I want to play tonight,'" Arniel said of the call.

There are logistical reasons why it was the best play. Jaid was scheduled to be released from the hospital on Sunday; Haydn wanted to be there to take her home instead of in Edmonton for a game. Jaid had her mom with her, so Haydn wasn't leaving her alone to play in the game. There are practical, career-based reasons, too — Fleury hadn't played a game since an injury sustained last April, while Ville Heinola's ankle infection has opened the door to an NHL roster spot.

There was also a bit of classic hockey player mysticism.

"I thought it would be cool to play on the day my son was born," Fleury said. "It's something I'll remember for the rest of my life."

Ledger is the couple's second child, his first name a tribute to the actor Heath Ledger and his middle name an homage to the Duke Blue Devils basketball team. His birth made Fleury's Jets

debut a fatigued effort, more dedication than dominance. Even then, Fleury was effective, partnering with Colin Miller to control the flow of play against less-than-NHL competition. Winnipeg doubled up on Minnesota in shots (13-7) and goals (2-1) when the duo was on the ice, offering hope that they could be a solid third pair when the intensity of competition ramps up.

The 6-foot-4 left-hander chose Winnipeg in the first place, in no small part because the Jets and Moose share a city. That decision could lead him to an NHL job.

“I have two kids now, and I don’t want to be away from them,” Fleury said. “Family comes first to me. I really want to be around my kids as much as I can. That was a huge decision in it. Having friends and my wife having friends in this city, her just coming off a pregnancy, I think the support system is huge.”

Brayden Yager, Colby Barlow and Kevin He

Brayden Yager is an above average skater, an above average shooter, an above average passer and — on at least one occasion Saturday — an above average puck thief. Against the Wild, one of Yager’s backtracks along the boards in the offensive zone ended a Minnesota breakout and put the puck on Morgan Barron’s stick for a scoring chance that went off the side of the net. Arniel was impressed with Yager’s work off the puck, too, which will bode well for Yager’s long-term future. For now, though, the NHL pace is a bit beyond him, with a few offensive opportunities taken away from him before he made up his mind about a play. Overall, Yager has made a good first impression and I’d expect his WHL stardom to reach another level this season.

Colby Barlow doesn’t drive play — not at this level, anyway, and that’s fine for a 19-year-old OHL star. He doesn’t have Chibrikov’s awareness at the blue lines or Yager’s propensity for puck thievery. On one occasion, he was drilled to the ice by Wild defenceman Carson Lambos. Barlow misfired on a one-timer pass from Chibrikov that I expect he’d have buried in the OHL. He did make a clever power-play fake, putting a slap pass towards Yager for a backdoor attempt but it was into Yager’s feet. In the end, little of that mattered though: Barlow pounced on a puck following a scrambled offensive zone draw and wired a rocket past Jesper Wallstedt that highlighted his biggest strength. It’s possible that Barlow adds a play-driving dimension to his game by the time he’s an NHL player; he’ll probably help drive wins with that shot alone.

Kevin He isn’t in the mix for an NHL job and I have spilled enough ink about his feisty play and competitive disposition. I think he’s done himself a lot of favours in the long run — and he also made this great play on Dominic Toninato’s goal against Edmonton.

That’s a hard, well-angled forecheck, a steal and a perfect pass for Toninato’s goal.

Eric Comrie vs. Kaapo Kahkonen for the backup job

Based on past performance, there seems to be a clear depth chart in Winnipeg’s net: Connor Hellebuyck, Kaapo Kahkonen, Eric Comrie, Thomas Milic, and Domenic DiVincentiis. Based on one preseason game each, Comrie has a better training camp resume than Kahkonen. Could Comrie’s calm, confident-looking 25-save performance in a 3-2 OT loss help him catch up after Kahkonen’s 23-save night in a 5-2 loss to the Wild?

I think it’s too soon and the sample is too small. Kahkonen was in tough with some of the Jets’ poor PK work on Saturday. We also understand that small samples lead to bad goaltending

conclusions. Hellebuyck's five games against Colorado are not likely to predict his long-term performance, for example.

Keep an eye on this, though. Comrie is doing his part to turn this into a proper race.

"The special word here is compete," he told reporters in Edmonton on Sunday. "I'm just going to make sure I compete as hard as I can and do everything I can to make the decision as hard as I can."

Caution is the name of the game

Elias Salomonsson

Elias Salomonsson is Winnipeg's top defensive prospect, likely well clear of the injured Heinola. This can lead to an expectation that he'll dominate preseason competition — something he simply hasn't done, whether at the Young Stars tournament or in his two weekend games. The sense I have is that he's playing things a bit safe, choosing to chip pucks off the glass and out instead of making the calm, controlled plays that will be his hallmark.

I also think Salomonsson is a player whose game depends heavily on his hockey IQ and the level of his reads. The timing and angles are different between the SHL and NHL; I think it's natural to assume he'll show much better after half a season or so of AHL time than early at camp. It's also possible that he looks more impressive as cuts get made and some of the chaos is removed from the preseason game. He was on the ice for Edmonton's first goal on Sunday but was in position; he had his man at the Jets blue line.

Chaz Lucius

Chaz Lucius is skating in a regular jersey, a full participant at Jets camp after playing at the Young Stars tournament in Penticton. That's the good news. The tough news is that Lucius has missed key developmental time due to three consecutive season-ending injuries. It shows, both in the form of rust (Lucius is a creative, incisive offensive player when he's at his best but perhaps a step behind at this camp) and playing time. He's yet to play in a preseason game — a fate shared with surefire Jets like Mark Scheifele and Josh Morrissey and with surefire minor league players like Henri Nikkanen and DiVincentiis.

I think the organization is taking a long-term view of his recovery to full health, too. He's a smart, skilled player but the rust seems evident to me. A best-case scenario sees the 21-year-old play a healthy AHL season, navigating its rigours, and making it to the 2025 Jets camp in full health. He's been productive when healthy but needs patience and a long runway to re-establish himself as a top NHL prospect.

Neal Pionk

"There's no dumbbell that's going to fix whatever happened in the playoffs," Neal Pionk said in a one-on-one conversation last week.

Our conversation was about the Jets' commitment to getting "5 to 10 percent better" and the soul-searching that comes with it. Pionk had already spoken to needing a mental reset over the course of the summer. He didn't share his training secrets, choosing instead to focus the conversation on his mindset entering a big season for the Jets.

"For myself, it's the mindset. There's no special drill on the ice that's going to fix everything overnight," Pionk said.

It's no secret that this season will turn in part on Pionk's ability to re-establish himself as a bona fide top-four defenceman. His best seasons in that regard were his first ones in Winnipeg: 2019-20, partnered with Dimitry Kulikov, and 2020-21, alongside Derek Forbort. That's when he signed the four-year, \$5.875 million AAV contract that hasn't always gone the way he'd hoped. Pionk was injured against Toronto in December 2021, taking Jason Spezza's knee to his head. He was injured again against Dallas early in 2022-23, blocking a shot that broke his foot.

He didn't know it was broken until an MRI confirmed the source of his pain a week later.

"I was playing on it so the trainer gave me a choice. I said, 'As long as I can skate, I'll play,'" Pionk said. "I don't want to blow it out of proportion, because so many other guys are playing with that kind of stuff. It's not a 'poor me' kind of thing."

The eye test in those seasons did suggest injury. I speculated about a foot injury multiple times, including in writing for *The Athletic*, because Pionk's mobility appeared to have taken a hit. He's at his best when he gaps tightly and protects his blue line with aggression, breaking plays up before they turn into long D-zone shifts and net-front battles. This depends on mobility — forwards, backwards and laterally — and Pionk's was failing him during those seasons (to the point where it's stunning that his coaching staff gave him the second-most minutes on that 2022-23 Jets team, broken foot and all).

Pionk is back to full health and has a calm confidence about himself and his team entering this season. I'd hesitate to say he's having an obviously dynamic training camp in the way that Morrissey did prior to taking a massive step forward two years ago. I think Pionk's battle to establish himself as a top-four defenceman, particularly with Samberg likely bumped up instead of veteran Brenden Dillon, will be just that: a battle.

Still, he has a good mindset and has taken care of everything he can in terms of preparation for the season. I expect the Jets to want to sign him, although the \$5.875 million annual cost of his current deal seems beyond the level of performance he's delivered to this point, injuries and all.

I asked Pionk about his approach to his contract season — especially because 2020-21, his last contract year, was probably his most effective year.

"You just play the game. The contract will sort itself out. That's why you hire an agent. You can't overthink it. You can't lose sleep about it. You just play your game and everything will fix itself in the end," Pionk said. "I would love to play here. I would love to win here. I'm going into my sixth season now. Our daughter was born here. We have a house here. It's six and a half hours away from home for both of us. Our parents come up all the time. Our friends and family come up all the time. We feel like we're home here."

Global Winnipeg

<https://globalnews.ca/news/10771035/winnipeg-jets-and-cole-perfetti-bridge-the-gap-on-two-year-deal/>

Winnipeg Jets and Cole Perfetti "bridge" the gap on two-year deal

By Kelly Moore Global News

The contract stalemate is finally over between Cole Perfetti and the Winnipeg Jets.

The club announced on Monday night that an agreement had been reached on a two-year bridge deal that will pay the 22-year old forward \$6.5 million for an average annual value of \$3.25 million.

Perfetti will still be two years away from gaining unrestricted free agency when this current contract expires at the end of the 2025-26 season.

According to CapWages, the Jets will have just over \$3.3 million of cap space available heading into the start of the 2024-25 regular season.

The 5-11, 185-pound forward had a great start to his third pro season in 2023-24, scoring 14 goals and adding 15 assists for 29 points in the Jets first 40 games. But the offensive well ran dry for the Whitby native during the second half of the schedule when he managed to score just one goal along with two assists over a 25-game span from January 11 through March 26.

During that stretch, the Jets 2020 first-round pick was also made a healthy scratch on five occasions.

Perfetti did have a strong finish to his season, scoring four goals and adding two assists for six points in the five final games he suited up for. Perfetti played 71 games last season with 19 goals and 19 assists for 38 points.

His first two years in the NHL were cut short by injuries that limited him to just 18 and 51 games respectively.

It would be fair to presume it was the Perfetti camp that eventually had to accept a lesser dollar figure in order to get a deal done on day six of training camp.

Perfetti will be at practice on Tuesday and will speak to the media afterwards.

<https://globalnews.ca/news/10769490/winnipeg-jets-mason-shaw-haydn-fleury/>

ANALYSIS: New Jets Shaw, Fleury set to strengthen Winnipeg's depth

By Kelly Moore CJOB

The first weekend of the pre-season is now in the rearview mirror for the Winnipeg Jets, and as much as surprises have been minimal to this point, a few things were learned about a couple of new faces in the mix.

Hands up, Jets Nation, if before training camp began last Thursday, you could have held your own in a trivia contest on the pro careers of forward Mason Shaw and defenceman Haydn Fleury.

Take Shaw, for example. The 25-year-old from Wainwright, Alta., endured four major knee surgeries during his six years with the Minnesota Wild. If Ville Heinola is in need of a "big brother" who has been there, done that when it comes to battling through the latest setback for the young Finnish defenceman, there's no doubt Shaw can be that guy.

And while Shaw committed the turnover that led to Minnesota's fifth goal on Saturday night, he also blocked a shot on the PK, won some key defensive zone faceoffs, and even dropped the mitts.

As head coach Scott Arniel said afterwards, the versatile forward "played to his identity."

And then there was Fleury. The Saskatchewan-born, Edmonton area-raised rearguard was not only playing his first game in more than five-and-a-half months on Saturday night after getting injured in an accidental collision with referee Steve Kozari in early April, but he was also suiting up just after the birth of his second son earlier that same day.

The veteran blue liner was given the option of taking the weekend off — but was having none of it. And following the latest misfortune for Heinola, the 28-year-old former No. 7 overall pick by Carolina is now very much in the conversation for a starting job in the D rotation.

While neither of these Prairie boys figures to make or break the fortunes of the Winnipeg Jets this season, both should be more than capable of making contributions that strengthen the depth, the character, and the culture of the organization.

NHL.com

<https://www.nhl.com/news/scott-arniel-enjoying-transition-as-winnipeg-jets-coach>

Arniel enjoying 'smooth transition' as Jets coach Has comfort level after 2 seasons in associate role, was promoted to replace Bowness on May 24

By Derek Van Diest

EDMONTON -- Scott Arniel has transitioned nicely as coach of the Winnipeg Jets.

Arniel was promoted to replace Rick Bowness on May 24 after he was Winnipeg's associate coach for two seasons. Bowness, 69, retired shortly after the Jets were eliminated in the 2024 Stanley Cup Playoffs in the Western Conference First Round by the Colorado Avalanche in five games. Bowness coached Winnipeg for two seasons and worked in the NHL for 38 seasons.

"I'm starting to bring my own ideas and thoughts in," Arniel said Sunday. "We've been building something here for the last couple of years and I'm able to continue to move forward with that. 'Bones' was great for me in the sense that he gave me a lot of responsibility the last couple of years, so the transition and all that has been pretty smooth."

Arniel stepped in on three occasions over those two seasons for Bowness, who had to take leave for health and family reasons. The Jets went 15-7-3 over that time, including 10-5-2 last season when Bowness had to leave after his wife, Judy, suffered a seizure and was hospitalized.

Winnipeg finished second in the Central Division last season (52-24-6).

"I got to be able to coach when Rick was away, which was unfortunate, but I got to be behind the bench, so the players know me," said Arniel, who turned 62 on Sept. 17. "So, I [have] a relationship, so it's not like I'm coming into an organization where I don't know anybody."

Arniel has worked as an assistant in the NHL since joining the Buffalo Sabres in 2002. He was hired as coach of the Columbus Blue Jackets in 2010 and had a 34-35-13 record in his first season and was fired after 41 games of his second season after going 11-25-5.

Since then, Arniel has worked in the Vancouver Canucks organization as their American Hockey League coach in Chicago, and as an assistant with the New York Rangers and Washington Capitals

“With Bones retiring, it was a great, natural progression for ‘Arnie,’” Jets general manager Kevin Cheveldayoff said this summer. “Having said that, he had to earn that right and went through a different kind of interview process that we did with Bones, but we went through an interview process. Arnie had the lead because of all the relationships he had built, so we’re excited about that.”

As a Jets associate, Arniel was often the go-between for players and Bowness. He is comfortable now as coach and will have assistants Marty Johnston, Davis Payne, Dean Chynoweth and Wade Flaherty to lean on.

“Scotty is a lot younger than Bones, and I think he probably learned a lot from Bones over the last few years,” Jets forward Nino Niederreiter said at the NHL European Players Media Tour in Prague, Czechia. “He knows the team very well, when Bones had to leave for a little bit, he took over and I think he did a very good job with it.”

Expectations will be high for Arniel and the Jets this season. They will be looking to build on a strong 2023-24 regular season, when Winnipeg briefly held first place in the NHL standings for the first time in franchise history.

“It’s a tough league and you have to eliminate eight teams in the West, and that’s a tough task every year -- it doesn’t matter what team you are,” Arniel said. “Our division has gotten stronger, there are teams that have certainly made some big improvements, so you have to put the work in. What we did last year, our 82 games [were] pretty rewarding, we didn’t like what happened in the playoffs, but we bought in to how we had to play especially without the puck and the last two years we’ve really improved our defending.

“We have a great goalie (Connor Hellebuyck) that’s helped us, and we have a great group that’s played together for a while and now we have some young guys that will step in and probably be a part of that mix. We have to make sure we do all the right things early on in the year to make sure we get off to a good start.”

The Jets lost their first two preseason games, 5-2 against the Minnesota Wild on Saturday and 3-2 in overtime at the Edmonton Oilers on Sunday. Arniel used a young, inexperienced lineup in each but will begin utilizing his veterans as the preseason continues, perhaps as early as Wednesday against the Oilers at Canada Life Centre in Winnipeg (8 p.m. ET).

“It’s been awesome, I know the guys love him,” Jets forward Dominic Toninato said. “He stepped in last year for a bit and did heck of a job. We kind of knew what to expect with that. The guys love him, and it should be a good year.

“It’s been a smooth transition. I think he’s been doing a great job so far, and we’re only going to continue to keep building and hope we have a great season.”

Sportsnet.ca

<https://www.sportsnet.ca/nhl/article/ville-heinola-injury-exposes-jets-lack-of-defensive-depth/>

Ville Heinola injury exposes Jets' lack of defensive depth

By Jacob Stoller

Man, Ville Heinola just can't catch a break.

Last year was supposed to be his year.

After three years of being slow-cooked in the AHL — where he evolved as one of the league's best defencemen — he was a virtual lock to make the Winnipeg Jets' 2023-24 opening night roster following a strong pre-season showing. But that long-overdue opportunity would disintegrate after he broke his ankle in Winnipeg's final pre-season game, shelving him for three months and killing his chances of securing a full-time gig.

Then, two days into this year's training camp, Jets coach Scott Arniel announced that Heinola had an infection on the same ankle he broke last year. There's no telling how long he'll be out.

And now, the elephant in Winnipeg's dressing room comes to the forefront — their defence corps. While Heinola wasn't a lock to be a saving grace for the team's top-four, his potential emergence provided a glimmer of hope for a Jets team that had lost Brenden Dillon this summer. Even with Dillon the Jets' lack of depth on the blue line was the crux of their first-round implosion against a star-studded Colorado Avalanche team last spring.

Last year, the Jets prided themselves on being a stingy 5-on-5 defensive team throughout a 110-point campaign where they finished tied for first in goals against per game (2.41) and their goaltending tandem of Connor Hellebuyck and Laurent Brossoit won the William M. Jennings Trophy. But under the hood, the team's defensive play tailed off in the second half of the regular season and spiralled in the post-season, where they surrendered 5.60 goals per game.

That series laid bare what many had bit their tongue on throughout the Jets' strong regular season — Winnipeg needed another top-four defenceman to be a legitimate playoff threat.

An uneventful free agency forced the Jets to look internally, with Heinola being a prime candidate to earn some of the extra minutes that were up for grab. Now, they'll have to look elsewhere.

Replacing Dillon With Dylan

Naturally, Dylan Samberg is the number one candidate to grab hold of Brenden Dillon's old role, as he did in Games 4 and Game 5 against Colorado, when Dillon got hurt.

Samberg, 25, is coming off an encouraging sophomore year where he recorded 18 points and posted solid underlying numbers in a third-pairing role. The 6-foot-4 stay-at-home defenceman doesn't jump out to the naked eye, but he's got high-end defensive awareness and a knack for killing plays. And he's got plenty of believers within both the Jets' boardroom and dressing room.

“He does a really good job of closing off space and he’s good with his stick,” Jets defencemen Dylan DeMelo told Sportsnet.ca on Saturday morning. “With the physical tools he has, I don’t see why he can’t be like a Jaccob Slavin or a Gustav Forsling. I think he can be that type of big, rangy guy that moves well and can defend. The next level for him would be to [produce] more offence. But to me, he’s got all the makings to be a quality top-four D-man.”

While Samberg isn’t a gifted offensive talent, his poise with the puck came a long way last year and he can make a good first pass to facilitate a zone exit. You shouldn’t expect Samberg to replace Dillon’s eight goals last year — he’s scored just three goals in 156 career NHL games — but that won’t matter if he can shoulder heavy 5-on-5 usage and continue to be an asset on the penalty kill.

The Chibby Show

Nikita Chibrikov could very well become a fan favourite one day.

Chibrikov, 21, was one of the few bright spots during the Jets’ first pre-season game against the Minnesota Wild, which they lost 5-2. The five-foot-nine Russian winger generated four shots — a few of which were scoring chances — was unrelenting in board battles, and never shied away from delivering a hit.

“He’s a competitive guy. He doesn’t care how big the opposition is. He has a little bite to his game, which I like,” Arniel said after Saturday’s game. “But you can tell he has a lot of confidence.”

Chibrikov is coming off his first pro season in North America, where he recorded 17 goals and 47 points with the AHL’s Manitoba Moose and scored his first career NHL goal during an end-of-year one-game audition. On top of his motor, the 2021 second-round pick has a cannon of a shot and he’s got the tools to be a valuable secondary scorer at the NHL level. But even if he has a lights-out camp, will the Jets give him a serious look to crack the roster this year?

The Jets have been reluctant to separate their third-line trio of Nino Niederreiter, Adam Lowry and Mason Appleton, but one ought to wonder if Chibrikov will get some reps alongside Lowry during exhibition play. While it’s hard to envision the Jets demoting Niederreiter to the fourth line, Chibrikov’s snarl would be a perfect complement to Lowry and Appleton — who are exceptional at shutting down opponents’ top lines and sustaining offensive zone pressure — and he’s capable of producing a high volume of shots, like Niederreiter.