

Winnipeg Free Press

Jets' young stars set to hit the ice

By: Mike McIntyre

We may still be in the final stages of summer, but that isn't stopping the Winnipeg Jets from gearing up for a new hockey season.

First up is rookie camp and the annual Young Stars Classic, which will be held next week in Penticton, B.C. A total of 26 skaters — 17 forwards, seven defencemen and two goaltenders — will participate in the event.

Players will gather next Wednesday at the Hockey For All Centre for a team practice, then head west to play games against the prized young prospects of the Calgary Flames (Friday Sept. 13, 6 p.m. CT), Vancouver Canucks (Sunday Sept. 15, 4 p.m. CT) and Edmonton Oilers (Monday Sept. 16, 1 p.m. CT).

All contests will be streamed online at www.winnipegjets.com.

Winnipeg's roster includes several recent top draft picks such as Chaz Lucius (2021, first-round), Nikita Chibrikov (2021, second-round), Brad Lambert (2022, first-round), Elias Salomonsson (2022, second-round) and Colby Barlow (2023, first-round).

Brayden Yager, the 14th-overall pick in 2023 recently acquired from the Pittsburgh Penguins in exchange for Rutger McGroarty, will also take part.

Seventeen of the players have been drafted by the Jets, while the other nine are free agent invites including many under AHL contracts with the Manitoba Moose.

Once the tournament is over, many of the players will take part in the full Jets training camp, which begins on Sept. 18. Winnipeg plays the first of six preseason games beginning on Sept. 21, with the 82-game regular-season beginning Oct. 9.

There are already plenty of established players back in town holding informal daily skates at the Hockey For All Centre.

NHL.com

3 questions facing Winnipeg Jets

By Derek Van Diest

NHL.com is providing in-depth analysis for each of its 32 teams from Aug. 1-Sept. 1. Today, three important questions facing the Winnipeg Jets.

1. Can the Jets put together another strong regular season and turn it into Stanley Cup Playoff success?

The Winnipeg Jets were expected to have a competitive team last season, but few envisioned they would take over the top spot in the NHL overall standings in January, match a franchise high with 52 wins and finish second in the Central Division, three points behind the Dallas Stars.

The Jets are returning the core of their roster and expectations are high once again.

“The regular season is hard, you have to make the playoffs, to do that’s obviously the singular focus going into training camp,” Winnipeg general manager Kevin Cheveldayoff said. “To a man, when we talked to the guys at the end of last season, we talked about how we need to be better, we need to find a way, whether it’s organizationally or individually, we need to be better somehow and all the players talked about that.”

2. Will they continue to get offensive contributions throughout the lineup?

Center Mark Scheifele led Winnipeg last season with 72 points (25 goals, 47 assists) in 74 games. To be competitive, the Jets will require offensive contributions from everyone in their lineup; they were able to do that last season with 14 players registering at least 30 points on the season, including forwards Sean Monahan and Tyler Toffoli, who were acquired in trades.

Monahan and Toffoli each left as an unrestricted free agent, which leaves a couple of holes to fill on the top two lines. Their departures will create opportunity for younger players such as the recently acquired Brayden Yager, along with prospects Colby Barlow, Chaz Lucius and Brad Lambert.

Center Cole Perfetti, who had 38 points (19 goals, 19 assists) in 71 games last season, is also expected to get an increase in ice time in 2024-25.

3. How will Connor Hellebuyck respond after winning the Vezina Trophy for the second time, yet struggling in the playoffs?

Hellebuyck had one of his best NHL seasons with a 37-19-4 record, 2.39 goals-against average, .921 save percentage and five shutouts, but that did not carry into the postseason; the 31-year-old was 1-4 with a 5.23 GAA and .870 save percentage. He gave up 24 goals in the Jets’ five-game loss to the Colorado Avalanche in the best-of-7 Western Conference First Round, and was pulled after two periods in a 5-1 loss in Game 4.

Though the playoff defeat cannot be blamed entirely on Hellebuyck, how he reacts coming off the disappointing showing will have an impact on Winnipeg’s success this season. Hellebuyck is going into the first year of a seven-year, \$59.5 million contract (\$8.5 million average annual value) he signed on Oct. 9, 2023.

Inside look at Winnipeg Jets

Seek to extend regular-season success, make Cup run with returning core under new coach Arniel

By Derek Van Diest

NHL.com is providing in-depth roster, prospect and fantasy analysis for each of its 32 teams from Aug. 1-Sept. 1. Today, the Winnipeg Jets.

The Winnipeg Jets feel they are heading in the right direction despite an early exit from the 2024 Stanley Cup Playoffs.

The Jets equaled the winningest season in their history in 2023-24, finishing 52-24-6 to match their victory total in 2017-18, but were not able to parlay that into postseason success, losing to the Colorado Avalanche in five games in the Western Conference First Round.

They hope to remedy that this season under new coach Scott Arniel, hired May 24 to replace Rick Bowness, who retired May 6. Arniel was Winnipeg's associate coach the past two seasons.

"We're excited about Scott Arniel coming in and getting a chance to be the head coach here," Jets general manager Kevin Cheveldayoff said. "He's developed a great relationship with a lot of the players on the team. We added several new assistant coaches that will have specialties in the power play and the penalty kill, but there's a lot of the same in some respects, because we really didn't want to change what we had."

Cheveldayoff said he wanted to maintain continuity after a successful regular season.

"It's not like we fired a coach and needed to switch the pendulum from one side to the other so to speak," Cheveldayoff said. "With 'Bones' [Bowness] retiring, it was a great natural progression for 'Arnie' [Arniel]. 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."

Arniel inherits a talented roster led by center Mark Scheifele and forwards Kyle Connor, Nikolaj Ehlers and Nino Niederreiter. On defense, Winnipeg returns Josh Morrissey, Neal Pionk and Dylan DeMelo. Connor Hellebuyck, the reigning Vezina Trophy Award winner voted as the top goalie in the NHL, heads into the first season of a seven-year, \$59.5 million contract (\$8.5 million average annual value) signed Oct. 9, 2023.

"We were in the race for the Presidents' Trophy so if you look at the whole year, I think we made some great progress," Niederreiter said during the NHL European Player Media Tour on Aug. 21. "And I think we had a good team and whenever you have a chance to reach 100 points it's good, because it's really hard to do."

"When it comes to playoffs, our first-round opponent was either Vegas [Golden Knights] Dallas [Stars] or Colorado [Avalanche] and that's a tough matchup. Now it's a matter of how can we get over that hump."

The Jets did lose unrestricted free agent forwards Sean Monahan (five years, \$27 million with Columbus Blue Jackets) and Tyler Toffoli (four years, \$24 million with the San Jose Sharks), and will look to make up the lost offense by committee.

“What we did (last) year was special,” Arniel said at his introductory media availability. “Two years ago, we started to build a foundation on how we wanted to look and how we wanted to play, how we wanted to go about our daily business and this year a lot of it came to the forefront. We had 52 wins, 110 points, which is obviously a great accomplishment in this league, but it’s something that we need to strive for every year. We want to be an elite team always.”

Winnipeg has qualified for the playoffs in six of the past seven seasons and built the core of its roster through drafting and development, which has proven a successful model.

A year ago, with Scheifele and Hellebuyck each heading toward unrestricted free agency, it was unknown whether the Jets would be able to keep their competitive window open. However, Scheifele signed an identical seven-year, \$59.5 million contract (\$8.5 million AAV) to Hellebuyck on Oct. 9, 2023, keeping the two cornerstones of the team in Winnipeg and setting the direction for the franchise.

“We have a core of players that have developed together and one thing that is abundantly clear is they want to win together and that’s a good thing,” Cheveldayoff said. “Last year going into training camp, there was a lot of uncertainty about Mark Scheifele and Connor Hellebuyck, but we were fortunate to be able to lock up two key pillars of our organization and we can build off that.”

Top prospects for Winnipeg Jets

By Derek Van Diest

NHL.com is providing in-depth roster, prospect and fantasy analysis for each of its 32 teams from Aug. 1-Sept. 1. Today, the top five prospects for the Winnipeg Jets, according to NHL.com.

1. Brad Lambert, C

How acquired: Selected with No. 30 pick in 2022 NHL Draft

2023-24 season: Winnipeg (NHL): 1 GP, 0-1-1; Manitoba (AHL): 64 GP, 21-34-55

Lambert is expected to get a long look during training camp, with an opportunity to earn a roster spot. The 20-year-old native of Lahti, Finland had a strong season with Manitoba of the American Hockey League in 2023-24.

Jets general manager Kevin Cheveldayoff said Lambert benefited from playing half a season with Seattle of the Western Hockey League after he was drafted. Lambert began that season in the AHL but was returned to his junior team following his third appearance at the World Junior Championship.

“For the first time he was playing against players his own age and his own peer group, and he really shot up,” Cheveldayoff said. “The team didn’t win the Memorial Cup and went far in the WHL playoffs and he was a big part of it. The big thing there is they transitioned him to center at that time and he took off there.”

Projected NHL arrival: This season

2. Ville Heinola, D

How acquired: Selected with No. 20 pick in 2019 NHL Draft

2023-24 season: Manitoba (AHL): 41 GP, 10-17-27

The 23-year-old was expected to make the opening night roster for the Jets last season but sustained an ankle injury in the final preseason game. The native of Honkajoki, Finland was allowed to go home to be with family during his recovery and returned to play the last half of the season with Manitoba of the AHL.

Heinola played well in the AHL after his return and will once again get an opportunity to battle for a roster spot in Winnipeg.

“It was a long road for him last year, the injury wasn’t just a simple injury,” Cheveldayoff said. “He missed essentially 40 games with that injury and spent the whole second half of that season trying to get back to form. Hopefully he’s had a great summer and we’re counting on him to take the next step.”

Projected NHL arrival: This season

3. Brayden Yager, C

How acquired: Trade with Pittsburgh Penguins on Aug. 22

2023-24 season: Moose Jaw (WHL): 57 GP, 35-60-95

The 19-year-old was acquired for forward Rutger McGroarty, who did not sign an entry-level contract with the Jets.

Yager, selected by the Penguins with the No. 14 pick in the 2023 NHL Draft, helped Moose Jaw win the Western Hockey League championship last season with 27 points (11 goals, 16 assists) in 20 playoff games. He also played for Canada at the 2024 IIHF World Junior Championship.

Yager is expected to represent Canada again at the 2025 World Juniors. If he does not make the Winnipeg roster, Yager has to return to junior for a fifth season.

“We are very excited to add Brayden to the organization,” Cheveldayoff said. “I think he’s a very talented player, a very skilled position at center where he can certainly make other players better around him. That’s kind of what we’ve watched and viewed throughout his draft year and obviously in subsequent scouting situations after that. Obviously, you never know what comes up, and just because you don’t end up drafting a player, you don’t stop keeping tabs on him. So fortunately for us, we were able to come to an agreement with Pittsburgh here.”

Projected NHL arrival: 2026-27

4. Nikita Chibrikov, F

How acquired: Selected with No. 50 pick in 2021 NHL Draft

2023-24 season: Winnipeg (NHL): 1 GP, 1-0-1; Manitoba (AHL): 70 GP, 17-30-47

The Jets were happy with Chibrikov's first season in the AHL and believe he has high potential to be a skilled NHL forward.

The 21-year-old from Moscow made his NHL debut last season and scored a goal against the Vancouver Canucks on April 18.

"We've been excited from the moment that we drafted him and trying to let him go through the process of playing over in Russia until his contract is done and he can come over here," Cheveldayoff said. "He had a great first year (in the AHL), he's got a real good attitude towards the game and wants to be a player. He's got good skill, he's not afraid to go into the corners, he's not afraid to go into the hard areas to score. He reads the play well and he's learned the defensive side of it."

Projected NHL arrival: 2027-28

5. Elias Salomonsson, D

How acquired: Selected with No. 55 pick in 2022 NHL Draft

2023-24 season: Skelleftea (SHL): 31 GP, 2-9-11

Salomonsson had a good season with Skelleftea of the Swedish Hockey League and was a member of its championship team. He also represented Sweden at the 2024 World Junior Championship.

The 20-year-old is expected to play with Manitoba of the AHL this season, getting his first taste of North American hockey.

"He's a right-shooting defenseman, skates real well," Cheveldayoff said. "He's got a little bit of an edge, has good size and is someone that we think plays a real mature type of game. Once he gets acclimated over here, I think it's going to excel more and more."

Projected NHL arrival: 2027-28

NHL EDGE stats for Winnipeg Jets

Hellebuyck's dominance, Ehlers' speed, Morrissey among highlights

By Pete Jensen

As part of NHL.com's 32 in 32 series, we will identify key EDGE stats for each team to preview the 2024-25 season. Today, we look at the impact of three advanced metrics for the Winnipeg Jets:

1. Goalie Connor Hellebuyck had the most games with greater than a .900 save percentage (39) in the NHL last season.

He won the Vezina Trophy as the NHL's top goalie for the second time last season after leading the League in both overall save percentage (.921 in 60 games) and even-strength save percentage (.933) among those who played at least 30 games. But the hardware certainly didn't come easily considering he made the second-most high-danger saves (411) in the NHL behind Jordan Binnington of the St. Louis Blues (414).

Hellebuyck weathering the storm and making nearly all the saves from long distance (.988 long-range save percentage; second in NHL behind Vegas Golden Knights goalie Adin Hill's .995) helped the Jets have the best goals for percentage at 5-on-5 (59.5) in the League last season.

2. Forward Nikolaj Ehlers was among the League leaders in top skating speed (23.44 miles per hour; 94th percentile) and speed bursts over 20 mph (215; 95th percentile) last season.

That speed translated to possession dominance, as Ehlers quietly led the Jets in shot attempts differential at 5-on-5 (plus-205) and was tied with forward Mark Scheifele for their most even-strength points (54). Among the 74 NHL forwards who played all 82 games last season, Ehlers ranked 14th in shot attempts percentage relative to when he wasn't on the ice for his team at 5-on-5 (4.9).

But a challenge new coach Scott Arniel faces after Rick Bowness retired this offseason is to maximize Ehlers' power-play role, especially with the fast forward being a potential difference-maker for zone entries with more time on the first unit. Last season, despite ranking second on the Jets in even-strength goals (25) behind Kyle Connor (29), Ehlers only had seven power-play points and was held without a goal on the man-advantage over the entire season. Although Ehlers is a three-time 60-point producer in the NHL, he's never had more than 13 power-play points in a single season; Winnipeg ranked 22nd on the power play (18.8 percent) last season.

3. Defenseman Josh Morrissey led the NHL in total skating distance at even strength (253.53 miles) and ranked sixth in the category at all strengths (293.07) last season.

Morrissey has been one of the League's best scoring defensemen, ranking fifth at the position in points over the past two seasons (145 in 159 games). And even beneath the surface-level stats, Morrissey ranked second on the Jets in shot attempts differential at 5-on-5 (plus-182) last season and was among the best in long-range shots on goal (87; 96th percentile). While Hellebuyck has twice been recognized as the NHL's top goalie, Morrissey has yet to be voted a finalist for the Norris Trophy, making him arguably the most underrated workhorse defenseman in the League.

The Athletic

Winnipeg Jets state of the franchise: Are they poised for a drastic step back?

By Murat Ates

The Winnipeg Jets won't win 52 games this season and pile up 110 points to finish fourth in the NHL regular season standings. They're destined to be much worse this year than last.

It was a summerlong declaration, but how much truth is there to the critique?

Winnipeg lost Sean Monahan, Tyler Toffoli, Brenden Dillon, Nate Schmidt and Laurent Brossoit. Rick Bowness retired, creating the opportunity for Scott Arniel to re-establish himself as the NHL head coach. The Jets signed Kaapo Kahkonen, Eric Comrie and trade deadline acquisition Colin Miller but there's a lot more talent at the departure gate than at arrivals. The Jets obviously got worse ... didn't they?

We'll dig into that question, the Jets' salary cap outlook, top prospects and more in this state of the union. Winnipeg is a team in transition with a brand new coaching staff, some exciting prospects and a talented group of veterans that have some obvious strengths — and obvious weaknesses, too.

What should we expect from the 2024-25 Jets?

Salary cap watch: Flexibility and opportunity cost

Winnipeg is projected to start the season with \$5.8 million in cap space, although that figure will change the moment Cole Perfetti signs his next contract

Projecting where the Jets and Cole Perfetti will land on a new contract

For now, the most important thing to keep in mind is that Winnipeg's cap space gives it opportunity. If they're having another strong season, the Jets will be able to be aggressive at the trade deadline. That's an appealing place from which to start the hunt for a battle-tested, playoff-ready top-four defenceman, assuming the Jets feel they need one. If Winnipeg falters, then it's conceivable — but less likely — that the Jets become a broker for cap-strapped contenders, retaining a portion of a deadline rental's contract before sending that player to his next team for draft capital.

If Perfetti signs a bridge deal — say, two years at a \$3.9 million AAV — then Winnipeg will start the season with almost \$3 million in space. (\$5.8 million minus \$3.9 million plus the cap hit of whichever player Winnipeg waives from its 23-player roster to make room.) If Perfetti signs a long-term deal — say, seven years at \$6 million per — things get tighter, but we've seen Cheveldayoff do good work with modest amounts of cap space in the past.

It might not make sense to go big at the deadline, regardless of available cap space. Winnipeg will pick its path based on its own performance and it's possible that it makes more sense for Winnipeg to move its pending 2025 free agents like Kahkonen, Alex Iafallo, Vladislav Namestnikov, Mason Appleton, Neal Pionk or Nikolaj Ehlers.

Depth chart analysis: Talented, dynamic, and lacking balance

Forwards

Mark Scheifele

Kyle Connor

Gabriel Vilardi
Adam Lowry
Mason Appleton
Nikolaj Ehlers
Alex Lafallo
Nino Niederreiter
Vladislav Namestnikov
Cole Perfetti
Morgan Barron
David Gustafsson
Rasmus Kupari
Axel Jonsson-Fjallby

The biggest takeaway from this forwards depth chart, which sorts every player who played 20 games or more for Winnipeg last season by their average ice time, is the inefficiency. Last year's Jets ran a scoring line, a shutdown line, a secondary scoring line and a secondary shutdown line. If you didn't fit on the first line (even if you had success there for much of the season) you finished behind Mason Appleton in workload.

There are lots of things to like about Appleton, including consistency of effort, defensive awareness and willingness to take a hit to make a play, but he's not Winnipeg's fifth-most effective forward. I'd argue that Arniel's Jets would do well to play Ehlers (and Perfetti and Nino Niederreiter, among others) more often than they play Appleton. I'd also argue they'd do well to rethink how they run lines, particularly on a team where the top offensive players don't defend very well and the top defensive players don't score a lot.

There are reasons to disagree with that assessment.

Appleton, Niederreiter and Adam Lowry outscored their opponents 23-15 despite a brutal workload. The specific brutality of those minutes helped Ehlers, Perfetti and Namestnikov win their minutes 11-6, and it's possible Bowness used Lowry's line so often as an example of the work ethic he wanted to establish for the rest of his lines. He clearly started most periods with Lowry's line on the ice for a reason.

One Jets problem was that Mark Scheifele, Kyle Connor and Gabriel Vilardi got outscored 13-11 while earning the team's worst portion of shots, shot attempts and scoring chances. Their playoffs were strong, in a small sample, and it's possible that Vilardi, now 25, will deliver a healthy season and a bigger all-around impact at five-on-five. It's also possible that Perfetti's year-over-year improvement is so strong that the Namestnikov line becomes a bigger weapon or that Lambert or Chibrikov makes an impact we can't guarantee from here.

The most obvious problem is the number of one-way players. You want a player who didn't cheat a backcheck all season? That's Niederreiter, Lowry or Appleton. You want one who was a consistent threat to score? That's Scheifele, Connor or Ehlers. Winnipeg could use more forwards who do both.

Defence

Josh Morrissey
Dylan DeMelo
Neal Pionk
Dylan Samberg
Colin Miller
Logan Stanley
Ville Heinola

Josh Morrissey's offensive explosion has been brilliant, evident to the world at large in the form of Norris Trophy votes at the end of two straight seasons. His defensive step forward in 2023-24 shouldn't be overlooked, either, as the agile skater made strong, aggressive reads and moved well enough in all directions to cut down scoring chances by top players.

Dylan DeMelo takes heat because he isn't a big, crushing player, but his track record of success with Morrissey makes him Winnipeg's most important right-handed defenceman. DeMelo's puck retrievals and exit passes remain a strength, giving Winnipeg a top pair that can beat top competition on a consistent basis.

Beyond that, it gets tricky. Dylan Samberg is a big, strong, positionally smart defender whose next season playing against elite competition will be his first. His most likely partner, Pionk, has mostly been outmatched in a top-four role since 2020-21. There's a version of Pionk that moves well in all four directions, gaps hard at the blue line and makes himself a pain for opposing stars, but he's looked more like a third-pairing player with puck skill than a top-four stalwart for multiple seasons now.

The rest of the workload will be shared.

There's Logan Stanley, whose size, reach and mobility have appeal but whose defensive zone coverage is sometimes left wanting. There's Ville Heinola, who made the team out of camp last season before fracturing his ankle. His positioning is good but he gives up size and strength, which lends the battles he does win a sense of desperation as opposed to a sense of control. In my opinion, Heinola's biggest challenge will be to make his retrievals, passes and pinches with NHL pace after so many dominant offensive years for the Moose.

Colin Miller is a 6-foot-1, right-handed defenceman who has played top-four minutes in the NHL and has a cannon of a shot. For whatever reason, the Jets didn't use him very much after picking him up at the deadline; he's probably good enough to be the No. 4 or 5 defenceman on this season's club.

Goalies
Connor Hellebuyck
Kaapo Kahkonen
Eric Comrie

Connor Hellebuyck is one of the best goaltenders on the planet — and possibly the very best one. He's won two of the past five Vezina trophies and earned the William Jennings Trophy with help from Brossoit last season. Goaltending stats aren't a completely safe bet, though. Even the

best in the world sometimes finish good seasons with bad numbers, and the wrong series of circumstances can make great ones seem awful in a playoff round. Still, Hellebuyck is still the league's best bet at greatness at the position in any given year.

Kahkonen has looked like a very good goaltender when playing behind quality defending, albeit in small samples on either side of two tough years in San Jose. Eric Comrie parlayed 19 great games for Winnipeg in 2022-23 into a shot at more starts in Buffalo but didn't equal that greatness in either of his two Sabres seasons. I see Kahkonen winning the backup job, with Comrie playing stalwart for the Moose, but performance will dictate results.

Biggest on-ice question: Will "team defence" be good enough?

I think we're going to hear a lot about "team defence" this season — perhaps so much we're sick of it. On paper, this is a defence corps that will have a lot of long nights. Defence is going to have to be a five-man effort and the goaltending is going to have to be great. From October through January of last year, Winnipeg did play great defence with a nearly identical roster to the one that will open this season and the goaltending was the best in the NHL, so there's hope. The penalty kill will need to be a lot better, though, and the second pair looks like a worry from here.

Biggest off-ice question: Could Ehlers stay in Winnipeg after all?

There was a time when it didn't look like Ehlers would be on this season's Jets roster. Winnipeg approached the idea of shopping him before the draft.

Ultimately, I don't know if the Jets came close to a trade, if the Rutger McGroarty situation derailed things, or if Winnipeg changed tack for other reasons. Now Ehlers is back, while he, his agent and Cheveldayoff have all said the right things from the end of last season until now: Ehlers loves his Jets teammates, Cheveldayoff has spoken to Ehlers' importance and Arniel appears to recognize Ehlers' impact.

Ehlers could be everything from a first-line force who signs a surprise extension to trade bait this season; either way, he'll have an outsized say in Winnipeg's fortunes.

In the pipeline: Lambert, Salomonsson and more

Last season, Brad Lambert's challenge was to star in the AHL, bearing the weight of those expectations, and to show resilience if and when the tough times hit. He did that, scoring 55 points in 64 games, looking dynamic as a centre and finding more ways to use his linemates than he did as an AHL rookie. He'll catch eyes with his speed at camp (again) and could be a full-time NHL player by season's end.

Nikita Chibrikov is known for his lethal shot. He should also be known for making hard plays at both blue lines to keep the puck moving in the right direction; I expect at least one more short-term look in the NHL.

Rookie camp will give us our first look at WHL star Brayden Yager, a fresh look at OHL star Colby Barlow, plus a hopeful glance at oft-injured 2021 first-round pick Chaz Lucius. Yager is an all-around centre with a good defensive conscience who projects to play in the middle six.

Barlow is a sniper with a pro-ready shot, whether off a one-timer or mid-stride. Lucius is a smart offensive player with good vision and three consecutive season-ending injuries.

Elias Salomonsson's North American arrival is the most exciting storyline on defence — and there's an angle from which he's the Jets' top prospect, period. Salomonsson was just 19 when he played an enormous role for Skelleftea's SHL championship team in May. In goal, Thomas Milic looks ready for another strong season in Manitoba and Domenic DiVincentiis could join him while getting ECHL games in Norfolk as needed to gain pro experience.

Final assessment

Winnipeg will be led by Hellebuyck, Morrissey, Scheifele, Lowry, Connor and Ehlers. None of those players are old enough to project a dramatic decline in performance, while there's a chance that Vilardi, Perfetti and Samberg take more than enough steps forward to make up for the departure of Dillon and Schmidt.

I still see the Jets' 52-win, 110-point season in 2023-24 as a bar too high for this season's team to clear, though. Winnipeg is in a state of transition, with a new coaching staff looking to make its mark on a quality team. The playoffs themselves should be a thoroughly attainable goal, even if questions about top-end talent, top-four defence and Winnipeg's second-line centre don't point to a deep run.

Would 98 points and growth from Perfetti, Vilardi, Lambert and Samberg satisfy Jets fans? Or does Arniel's new staff need to clear Bowness' first-round hurdle entirely to give Winnipeg a sense of progress?

Projecting where the Winnipeg Jets and Cole Perfetti will land on a new contract

By Murat Ates

Seth Jarvis' contract extension was always going to serve as an outer marker for Cole Perfetti's next deal.

Despite being taken three spots after Perfetti in the 2020 draft, owing to Perfetti's superior production throughout their junior careers, Jarvis' NHL totals (64 goals, 82 assists, 146 points) dwarf Perfetti's 29 goals, 46 assists and 75 points through the first three seasons of their career.

That's why Carolina bet big on Jarvis' future, signing the Winnipeg product to a creative eight-year, \$7.42 million AAV contract with \$15.67 million deferred in the form of signing bonuses — after the contract ends — to bring down the cap hit. It was a big swing for a Stanley Cup-competitive, cap-crunched team, and the Hurricanes took it on a player they believe will be a big part of their winning future.

Perfetti, meanwhile, is still waiting for the Jets to take their biggest swing. His contract is the single most pressing piece of business for Jets GM Kevin Cheveldayoff and, even though I expect a contract to get done before training camp, the 22-year-old forward is unlikely to receive the type of commitment that Jarvis did in Carolina.

There's a bit of chicken and egg involved in this change in each player's status. Jarvis has played 231 games in three seasons, compared to Perfetti's 140. During those games, Jarvis has been given more responsibility, playing higher up the lineup — most consistently with star centre Sebastian Aho. Perfetti's most frequent linemate has been Vladislav Namestnikov, but his total ice time is roughly half of what Jarvis' is to date. More time played in more games alongside more productive players will have a substantial impact on the end results. There's no way around that, just as there's no way around the fact that part of Perfetti's season-ending injuries in 2021-22 and 2022-23 deflate his games played total.

Did Jarvis pass Perfetti of his own accord? Or did he benefit from superior minutes in a better context, with greater thought given to his development?

The answer to both questions is yes, in my opinion, but it's an area open for debate.

What's not up for debate is that Jarvis scored 33 goals and 34 assists in the year leading up to his contract extension. This kind of production gets a player paid; the fact that Perfetti scored more goals per minute or more primary assists per minute than Jarvis did will not see him out-earn Jarvis on his next deal. Whether that's good or bad news is a matter of perspective, of course. Perfetti hasn't accomplished enough in his short career to warrant a \$7.42 million AAV deal no matter how much money he defers, but there's every chance he's worth that amount to the Jets in the long run.

There are still plenty of signs that Perfetti has top-six offence and first-unit power-play time in him — despite the reduced minutes and the not-so-shiny end-of-year point totals.

Where will the Jets go from here?

Perfetti's next contract: How long? How much?

I think Winnipeg will take its opportunity to sign Perfetti to a two-year bridge deal, keeping his cap hit low in the short term.

The advantages are obvious — a lower cap hit, a short-term window for Perfetti to prove he's ready for the top-six minutes and power-play time available to him this season, and the opportunity for Winnipeg to find out what it has in its talented 22-year-old forward. The Jets have done this with Patrik Laine, Jacob Trouba, Andrew Copp, Logan Stanley and Zach Bogosian going as far back as 2011.

Re-read those names and the risk should also be clear. Bogosian is the only player on that list who went on to sign a long-term contract with Winnipeg (and was traded less than two years after he signed it). Now, it's also clear that the Bogosian trade (moved with Evander Kane and Jason Kasdorf for Tyler Myers, Brendan Lemieux, Joel Armia and the first-round pick which became Jack Roslovic) was part of a positive turn for the Jets. Laine, Trouba and Copp all had their own experiences and preferences to play elsewhere.

But the trend is clear. If a player comes off his ELC like Perfetti and is seen as part of the core (like Kyle Connor, Nikolaj Ehlers and Mark Scheifele all were before him) the Jets sign that

player long-term and get great value for that contract. Sign a bridge deal and it's much less likely that you're around for the long haul.

Josh Morrissey provides the most compelling counter-argument, signing a two-year bridge deal on a cap-strapped Jets team in 2018 before the long-term extension he's on now. He's also an exception, though, because the Jets didn't have the cap room to pay him what he was worth, communicated that fact openly, and signed him to a \$6.25 million deal when they did.

I've argued before that Winnipeg's best work has come in the form of long-term deals — smart bets on the right young talent that led to great cap hits for top-six players. I think Perfetti fits the culture of the Jets, skating with Morrissey, Scheifele and Lowry as he's done this season. He's particularly close with Scheifele, who has gone out of his way to offer mentorship. This isn't a player preparing for the PL Dubois or Rutger McGroarty offramp to America.

So how good is Perfetti, really?

This is an area where there's room for debate. The prevailing wisdom in the NHL is that an impact player needs to be big or fast or both. Perfetti is not big. His speed is improving, perhaps approaching NHL average. (Perfetti's top speed, according to NHL Edge data, might surprise you. He was eighth among Jets skaters last season, although his frequency of speed "bursts" was toward the bottom of the Jets table.)

Stylistically, it's hard for some observers to believe in a forward listed at 5-foot-11, 185 pounds unless he skates or shoots like a rocket. Appreciating Perfetti's game takes an eye test that values the way he processes time and space, making reads faster than his opponents and moving pucks into dangerous areas of the ice at precisely the right times.

If you don't see it when you watch Perfetti, it's made clear by the numbers. Since becoming a full-time NHL player two seasons ago, Perfetti is third among Jets in primary assists per minute — the pass leading most directly to a goal — per minute, trailing only Ehlers and Blake Wheeler. His most frequent linemates in those two years have been Namestnikov, Wheeler, Scheifele, Ehlers, Dubois and Alex Iafallo, in that order. Most of those players are good finishers, to be clear, but this isn't anything out of the ordinary for a top-six player. I'm more than comfortable saying that Perfetti is likely to produce points like a top-six player at five-on-five.

If you go beyond primary assists and look at points per minute, Perfetti looks like he belongs with the Jets elite. At five-on-five, he's produced as often as Laine and Connor did before signing their second contracts. On the power play, he's put up points at a rate comparable to Scheifele and Ehlers. There are different systems, different teammates, and different styles of play that contribute to the following numbers. Offensively, though, Perfetti fits in perfectly.

Here's a comparison of the Jets' star young players at the time they signed their second contract.

All of Scheifele, Ehlers, Connor, Laine and Perfetti had (or have) the profile of a player who will go on to first-line offensive production in the NHL. Perfetti's disadvantage isn't in his production but in people's perception of that production. He doesn't have Laine's shot, Connor's hands,

Ehlers' speed or Scheifele's ability to protect the puck along the wall. He's not arriving at the moment of his second contract with momentum or hype. Instead, he sat for four playoff games before looking dangerous in 11 minutes of action the night Winnipeg was eliminated against Colorado.

And there will always be people who look at him and prefer bigger, stronger players. (Jarvis, who is listed as being smaller than Perfetti, has produced 1.90 points per 60 minutes at five-on-five so far in his career — similar to Connor, Perfetti and Laine.)

It's possible that Perfetti may be limited to a Bryan Little-type perception in Winnipeg — a complementary star player, certainly not the most celebrated of his line with Wheeler and Andrew Ladd. I also suspect Perfetti will produce enough through the heart of his career to help his team win games.

So what will he make on this contract?

If it's a two-year bridge deal, then there are two obvious comparables. The first is 23-year-old Senators centre Shane Pinto, who signed a two-year, \$3.75 million contract with Ottawa this summer. Perfetti, 22, has outscored Pinto by five points with much less ice time in his career. The second is Winnipeg's own Gabriel Vilardi, who signed a two-year, \$3.4 million AAV bridge deal last summer. Perfetti is two years younger than Vilardi was when he signed that contract, with marginally better offensive production than Vilardi had when he signed. The salary cap has also increased to \$88 million this summer — if Perfetti gets the same percentage of the cap that Vilardi did, his AAV will be \$3.625 million.

If Winnipeg were facing a short-term cap crunch, there would be a compelling argument to sign the bridge deal and sort things out in two years' time. I suspect the Jets want Perfetti to prove himself, scoring a lot over multiple consecutive seasons before committing to a long-term contract. He's been injured, he's interspersed his excellence with prolonged slumps, etc. There is truth to those arguments but it comes with risk.

Perfetti is going to get more opportunity this season than he did one year ago. There's an obvious top-six forward job available now that Sean Monahan and Tyler Toffoli are gone. Monahan's departure opens up a power-play job and I think Perfetti is first in line. He's a leading candidate to get power-play time — and not just time but the frequency of puck touches that lead to point production.

I think the end result of all of this is a bridge deal below \$4 million. I think the Jets would match just about any offer sheet and don't expect teams (or Perfetti) to go down that route. It's also my opinion that Perfetti is a strong candidate to score more than enough in the next two seasons to earn quite a bit more when his bridge deal is done. There should be an opportunity here — say, six years at a little over \$6 million — to sign a talented young player to a contract that he outscores through the heart of his career. I'm not sure if the Jets will take it, but I'd like to see them try — even if I understand some of the arguments to wait and see.

CTV Winnipeg

'Stanley Cup colours': Connor Hellebuyck's new mask honours Whiteout, shows desire for hockey's ultimate prize

By Devon McKendrick

It was a trophy season for Connor Hellebuyck in 2024 winning both the Vezina and William M. Jennings trophies and now his newest mask alludes to the prize he is trying to get his hands on.

The Winnipeg Jets unveiled Hellebuyck's mask for the season, which has an ode to the Winnipeg Whiteout.

"Connor really wanted to do a Whiteout theme," said Steve Nash, the mask designer and owner of Eye Candy Air in Ontario.

'He always has neat ideas': A look at Connor Hellebuyck's newest goalie mask
"Lots of snowflakes, lots of white and lots of bling on there. He wanted to keep it clean so you can see it from far away."

Showcased on the white mask is the Jets logo, along with several other jets scattered throughout. There is also the patented bass on the dome of the helmet to recognize Hellebuyck's love of fishing.

While many of the designs are outlined in a dark blue, they are also covered in reflective chrome, a nod to hockey's ultimate prize.

"Nice little hits like the Stanley Cup colours, stainless steel chrome. We got the chrome snowflakes in there too. It turned out really cool looking...it'll pop on the ice with the lights."

Nash noted there are also some Easter eggs hidden on the helmet that people might not be able to see but are personal to Hellebuyck.

Nash has been working with Hellebuyck since 2015 and said he has really got to know how he likes his masks.

"It's really fun for me to get into people's imaginations and bring their creation to life on the mask. I live for that. We'll sketch it out and try to rough out the edges. Connor and me work great together, I know what kind of style he likes and he gives me his ideas. We go back and forth a little bit and it's usually pretty easy at this point."

It won't be the only helmet Nash does for Hellebuyck this season as he is also designing one for when the Jets wear their retro jerseys.

He said it will have the classic original Winnipeg Jets colours and style.

"I always try to keep the masks like the '80s goalies paint jobs. (They) look the best when you go retro."

Winnipeg's preseason starts Sept. 21 against the Minnesota Wild and the regular season starts on the road in Edmonton on Oct. 9.

ESPN.com

Gaudreau, trades, CBA among hot topics at NHLPA rookie event

By Greg Wyshynski, ESPN

McGroarty, Gauthier happy to move on
The NHLPA rookie showcase was the first time many players had a chance to put on their teams' jerseys.

For Cutter Gauthier, that meant donning the Ducks' new sweaters in vibrant orange with a classic "Mighty Ducks" logo on the front.

"I think they're sweet. I like them a lot. I think they did a good job with the logo," said Gauthier, admiring the jersey.

There's a certain amount of irony to Cutter Gauthier ending up draped in orange as an NHL player.

He was drafted fifth by the Philadelphia Flyers in the 2022 NHL draft, wearing an orange Flyers jersey as he expressed his excitement about joining the franchise.

But the Flyers ended up trading Gauthier to the Ducks in early January for defenseman Jamie Drysdale and a second-round selection in the 2025 NHL draft. It had become apparent that, in the words of Comcast Spectacor chairman Dan Hilferty, "his mind was made up that he didn't want to be in Philadelphia."

The reaction to his decision from some fans was lamentable. Gauthier claimed there were death threats made among the hundreds of messages he received. Fans showed up in Flyers jerseys to his Boston College games. Hilferty himself offered a vitriolic farewell, saying, "I don't really feel bad for Cutter when he comes to Philadelphia. It's going to be a rough ride here and he earned it."

And yet here was Gauthier this week, still wearing orange.

"Yeah, all-orange too, after they switched jerseys," he said of the Ducks' new look. "But no issues against the orange. It looks good."

The Ducks are scheduled to visit the Flyers on Jan. 11, 2025. From the moment the trade happened, Gauthier has been asked about that first visit to Philadelphia.

"It'll be a fun game. Obviously, lots of excitement and lots of buzz around it. I'm not really too worried about it. Just go out there and play my game and do my thing and we'll see what happens," he said.

He doesn't feel the controversy with the Flyers will impact his rookie season with the Ducks.

"I don't think that [situation] has any pressure on me whatsoever," he said. "Things didn't work out. I'm excited to be a Duck now and move forward with them and hopefully do whatever I can to help them win."

While it wasn't nearly as contentious, Rutger McGroarty made a similar decision with the team that drafted him.

The Winnipeg Jets selected him 14th in the 2022 NHL draft, but he declined to sign with the team after citing concerns about his "development path" with the franchise. The Jets decided to trade McGroarty and found a fit with the Pittsburgh Penguins in August in exchange for forward prospect Brayden Yager.

That's not to say there wasn't backlash from fans toward McGroarty on social media.

"Yeah, I won't dive too deep into that, but there is some stuff for sure. I'll go scroll through Instagram and something pops up. It's there. It's always going to be there. You just have to live with it, learn from it, and just kind of move on," he said. "But when I got to Pittsburgh, I got some really nice messages from some fans and I feel like they're excited, so it was really cool to see that."

Those fan interactions are part of being a pro athlete. So is having private talks with a team suddenly become public information, which was another learning experience for McGroarty.

"The media does such a good job finding stuff out," he said to reporters. "I mean, for me, I'm happy that it was in the middle of the summer instead of during the season. When everything came out at first it caught me off guard a little bit, but it happens. It's where we live in nowadays. It didn't bother me too much."

Like Gauthier, McGroarty is happy how it all turned out. The NHLPA showcase was his first time in a Penguins jersey -- albeit one that didn't have his name or number on it yet. He praised the organization's championship history. He called GM Kyle Dubas "an incredible hockey mind" after having talked with him this summer. And, of course, he's "pumped" to become a teammate of Sidney Crosby's.

"Obviously I'm an American. I love the USA. But that golden goal he scored [in the 2010 Olympics]? That's so cool. It gives you chills when you watch it to this day," he said. "I mean, who isn't a Sid guy?"