Samberg hitting stride on Jets' second D pairing

By: Ken Wiebe

SEATTLE — Dylan Samberg didn't need a road map to know what his next destination on the depth chart was going to be.

Long before frequent defence partner Nate Schmidt had the final year of his contract bought out and Brenden Dillon departed in free agency for the New Jersey Devils, Samberg had set his sights on a promotion and put in the work to ensure that he won the job on the Winnipeg Jets' second pairing with Neal Pionk.

It's been a methodical process for the defenceman, dating back to when the organization chose him in the second round (47th overall) of the 2017 NHL Draft out of Hermantown High School in Minnesota.

The three seasons spent with the University of Minnesota-Duluth Bulldogs — including a pair of NCAA Frozen Four championships — two trips to the world junior hockey championship with Team USA and parts of two seasons in the American Hockey League with the Manitoba Moose put him on this path.

Entering his third full season, Samberg felt he was prepared for the increased responsibility and the early returns have been promising.

"That's obviously something I want to continue to work on, something that I was looking to achieve this year," said Samberg. "The coaches have that trust in me, to put me on the ice in certain situations. I feel like I've been building to this point over the past few years."

After defeating the St. Louis Blues 3-2 on Tuesday to improve to 6-0-0, the Jets stayed off the ice on Wednesday in preparation for Thursday's game with the Seattle Kraken.

Samberg has seen a dramatic increase in playing time after the promotion, often being thrown over the boards with the top penalty killing unit to go along with his even-strength play.

He's up to just under 21 minutes per game and his steadying presence has been noticeable in all three zones.

"We all knew he was capable of it. But with a couple of guys (Schmidt and Dillon) leaving on the back end, it gives him a little bit of space to grow into that," said Jets forward Morgan Barron. "He's steady Eddy. You know what you're going to get out of him every night — and I mean that in the best way possible. He's always going to go out there and compete and block shots and do the little things. He's also done a great job chipping in offensively and creating opportunities."

When you're playing an additional five-plus minutes per game, often against more skilled competition, the degree of difficulty rises but that's part of the challenge Samberg enjoys.

Since breaking into the NHL as a regular, Samberg has been known for his ability — and willingness — to block shots but he's showing that he's more than just a stay-at-home defenceman.

"He's able to think his way around out on the ice and it always seems like he's in a great position," said Barron. "As time has gone on, there's been some layers of offence that you didn't see originally that he's continued to add to his own game. There are things you probably appreciate about him more the more you're around him."

Blues defenceman Scott Perunovich has been around Samberg a great deal on the road to the NHL.

They were teammates at Minnesota-Duluth and also with Team USA at the world junior hockey championship and a world men's hockey championship.

"He's always got a smile on his face. If you're having a tough day, he's the first person you see that normally makes it better," said Perunovich. "He's a funny guy and he's got a big heart. He's a special guy to have on a team."

Perunovich isn't the least bit surprised to see Samberg excelling, noting that his skill set is reminiscent of Tampa Bay Lightning captain Victor Hedman.

"Even when we were freshmen in college, I thought that once we got to the NHL, he was really going to shine," said Perunovich. "I don't think he's going to dangle four guys and then score all of the time, but he's got a great stick, he's super good positionally, he's physical and he's smart. Defence comes second nature to him."

Sound defensive play is what helped Samberg earn the trust of his coaches and his ability to process things at a high rate of speed has been critical to the development process.

"It's one of those things where you do it over and over and over again," said Samberg, noting that muscle memory plays a role along with the video study he does. "It's like anything, you see a certain play on the ice multiple times, so that's where you can get that anticipation going.

"When I'm at my best, I anticipate those plays and usually disrupt them."

That innate ability to read and break up a play is a big part of what has allowed Samberg to thrive.

"The good ones have a high IQ in recognizing what the next play is," said Jets head coach Scott Arniel. "I like the fact that Sammy started with the Moose and built his way up here. He's had two years of growing as a player, finding his game, finding his niche of what he's really good at and making sure he's doing that every night. Now he's taken on the next step."

Samberg is big, strong and mobile, which means he can provide a physical presence while not putting himself out of position when trying to throw a big hit.

"When it's available, take it," said Samberg. "If you're going to jump into the play like that (and throw a hit), take the puck or take the man. You have to make sure that you don't miss both."

As far as the offence goes, Samberg scored a beautiful goal in the season opener against the Edmonton Oilers, joining the rush and firing home his shot.

He also chipped in his first assist of the campaign against the Blues, getting the puck over to Kyle Connor for what turned out to be the game-winning goal.

"That helps. Hopefully I can shoot the puck more like that," said Samberg. "I want to continue to show more."

The Athletic

https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/5863928/2024/10/24/scott-arniel-winnipeg-jets/

Inside Scott Arniel's analytics summit and his aim to elevate unbeaten Winnipeg Jets

By Murat Ates

WINNIPEG — When Scott Arniel was introduced as Winnipeg Jets head coach in May, his first bold statement announced the organization's plan to hold an analytics summit before the season started.

The Jets had made their first push into analytics under Paul Maurice, but Maurice's usage of data to drive his decision making was unclear. Dave Lowry and Rick Bowness were not perceived to invest in analytics, either, despite Bowness' use of five- and 10-game analytical overviews of Winnipeg's opponents before each Jets game.

Still, Arniel wanted Winnipeg to be better. The Avalanche had dismantled the Jets in the first round of the playoffs and Colorado's head coach Jared Bednar was loud and proud about his team's analytical advantages. Bednar said Colorado changed its forecheck as a direct response to its preparation for the series — explicitly naming analytics as a reason for the Avalanche's five-game win.

Winnipeg's wounds were still fresh when Arniel announced his intentions.

"(Analytics are) such a big part of the game," he said in May. "But the biggest thing for analytics for me is get ahead of the curve."

Arniel recently sat down with The Athletic to discuss the results of the summer summit. Winnipeg's approach to "get ahead of the curve" will be a long journey — if the Jets make it that far — but Arniel's priorities heading into his first season as head coach were clear: They're all rooted in improving communication amongst staff.

Arniel has big plans for the Jets, who opened the season 6-0-0, but none of them involve him leading the team alone. The other bold statement he made this offseason was about learning the lessons he needed to rebrand himself as a coach.

"Part of the problem in Columbus is that I did try to do everything," Arniel told The Athletic. "But when I hired Dean (Chynoweth) and when I hired Davis (Payne) … they had made their presentations and ultimately, I said to them: 'I like what you're thinking.'"

Arniel has done a lot of soul-searching since trying and failing to turn Columbus around in 2010-11 and 2011-12. He knows he tried to push for too much change before he'd built the kind of relationships with his players required for large asks. He's also studied under Alain Vigneault, Todd Reirden, Peter Laviolette and Rick Bowness for over a decade since that time. The result? A steadfast, foundational need to empower others in their roles.

Arniel was struck when Chynoweth explained Carolina's regular meetings between power play and penalty kill coaches and their interchange of ideas. Head coach Rod Brind'Amour would be in those meetings, too; Arniel admired the balance the Hurricanes hit between independence and collaboration.

"It wasn't 'all of the weight is on your shoulders because you run the power play. It's your fault if it doesn't work' … I don't ever want that and Bones was good that way too," Arniel says. "I want our whole staff, including Marty (Johnston) involved in everything that goes on. I want to let the coaches coach: You go do your job and I'll support you and we'll work this through together."

Part of the Jets' unbeaten start is directly attributable to special teams success: Winnipeg's power play, under Payne, is ranked first in the NHL with eight goals in 18 tries — a 44.4 percent success rate. Its penalty kill, under Chynoweth, is 8-for-10 and ranked 15th at 80 percent. Winnipeg has also won 14 regular-season games in a row dating back to last season. If you count winning streaks that span two seasons, the Jets are only three wins short of the 1992-93 Penguins for the record of 17 wins in a row.

This regular season success is gratifying to Arniel, but don't think for a second the sour taste Colorado left in Winnipeg during the playoffs has gone away.

The purpose of this summer's analytics summit
Arniel's career path as a coach connects him to some of hockey's more influential analytical thinkers. In Buffalo, Arniel worked with Jim Corsi, the Sabres' former goaltending coach after whom the Corsi stat is named. The Sabres staff were early adopters of Exos, a software package that allowed them to track game events, code them to video and make custom highlight packages based on the type of play or shift they wanted to view.

Arniel was an assistant coach in Washington prior to joining Bowness' staff in Winnipeg. Tim Barnes, Washington's director of analytics, is among the sport's more radical and ambitious thinkers; Capitals GM Brian MacLellan ensured Barnes' staff met regularly with coaches. Thus it was in Washington Arniel learned a lesson that informed this summer's summit: All the information in the world is meaningless if the human beings meant to use it don't communicate with each other. This is especially true in a sport like hockey, where analytics staff and coaches often have different definitions of simple concepts like "a scoring chance."

Think about it: If you watch hockey, you know what feels dangerous to you. In any given game, you're likely to have a good read on who has created the most dangerous scoring chances. You might not watch all 82 games your favourite team plays or remember things so perfectly that you can compare last night's game to one last year without watching it again. But the odds are astronomically low that you watch all 82 games every team plays, and remembering them well enough to make comparisons seems beyond even the most insightful viewer.

Fine, then. It's worth counting some things, but what if you don't agree on what they mean? You've heard commentators and analysts refer to "high-danger scoring chances." That's a catchy name that — in theory — should be easy to agree on, but not many people who use the

term know the high-danger scoring chance definition used by sites like Natural Stat Trick to count them. Agreeing on definitions gets even more important when you're talking about what constitutes a successful zone entry, forecheck or defensive impact.

Arniel remembers Washington's first meetings as a quest to get everybody on the same page.

"Nothing was coinciding," Arniel says. "Our scoring chances were at this level. Their scoring chances were at that level. Why are we so off? It kept going back and forth. We had a player at this level — we thought — and they had the same player at a different level. We went up and we sat in the room with those guys and they blew us away with analytics and we walked out of there for the first day more confused than we were going into it."

The groups kept talking. The conversations about "what is important to track" and "what it means" and "what we can do with it" got clearer.

"We ended up figuring out, 'OK. Now we got an idea about what you guys are talking about,'" Arniel says. "At the end of the day, they got to hear from us after we got to hear from them about why we wanted certain stats or analytics and we amalgamated our work."

This summer, Winnipeg's coaches and management gathered its analytics group — Matt Prefontaine, James Cochrane, Adam Konefal, Jordy Finnigan and Rozen Noureev — with a similar purpose. The Jets have used Sportlogiq data for years now, with Maurice, Prefontaine, Konefal and Finnigan building a system wherein coaches can link Sportlogiq's analytics — slot shots, as one example — to the team's video software. Anyone on staff can log onto the software and quickly pull all video with slot shots in them, or specific types of faceoffs, breakouts or forechecks. When there are hundreds (or, more likely, thousands) of data points to choose from, the very act of deciding what to look at becomes paramount.

"The summit was about getting our house in order," Arniel says. "Get those analytics that we feel are important. Make sure there isn't duplication — that upstairs and downstairs, we're not getting too much of the same thing … We streamlined what we want to do."

The problems Winnipeg wants to solve
Winnipeg's ultimate goal is to use good information to make smart decisions about what the Jets do on and off the ice — and that's true whether the information guiding those decisions comes from analytics, video, a combination of the two — or a simple phone call.

Arniel quickly became aware of Bednar crediting analytics in part for Colorado's series win. His players did, too, so Arniel made a bunch of phone calls in the wake of the Avalanche's dominance.

"I've talked to that staff (in Colorado). Players have talked. You're always wondering what happened. You're always digging," Arniel says. "And this will probably be the only time I talk about it."

Colorado believed it could beat Winnipeg by taking advantage of a defence corps short on footspeed and light on net-front presence. The Avalanche moved away from being a rush-first team to one that dumped pucks more often than they had all season. Eventually, when their dump-ins backed Winnipeg's defence off the blue line, Colorado dominated possession through the middle of the ice with speed, cutbacks and second-wave offence that got pucks into heavy traffic in front of the net.

"We ran into a beehive," Arniel says. "They knew that we had a Vezina goalie. They went after him, big time, with bodies. All five games, I've watched them twice. They had two or they had three guys on top of our goalie all night long. We didn't do a really good job with that. (And) I've seen the analytics — they dumped the puck more in that series than we dumped the puck. And that's not Colorado. They're a puck-possession team. They're a hold onto it and make plays team."

Colorado surprised the Jets with its dump-and-chase mentality. Instead of being able to play aggressive gaps, Winnipeg's defenders were made to turn and skate after pucks under heavy pressure. Not only did this serve to create a ton of offence for Colorado, it stifled the Jets' best five-on-five scorers.

"Their game plan was get that puck in, making sure that they didn't give us transition offence — that they didn't give us a chance, because we're pretty good defensively," Arniel says. "That was no secret, going in, that we'd been the best defensive team in the league."

Through its 6-0-0 start, Winnipeg has the best defensive results in the league — again. The Jets have given up only 10 goals, two better than the Rangers in the same number of games played. But Jets fans have watched Winnipeg roar out to incredible autumns and painful postseasons too many times to feel like a hot start guarantees playoff success. Some amount of fear will persist until the Jets win a round: If Colorado could use analytics to figure out the best defence in the NHL, was it really the best defence after all?

Arniel's mission is to combine analytics, video and communication so that it doesn't happen again.

"You look how we finished the year, we were 8-0 and we'd shut down some good teams. We were at the peak of our game and they knew what they were running into. And they did make changes against us … And our penalty kill sucked and their power play took advantage of it," Arniel says. "At the end of the day, to me, it was part analytics."

One of the other stories about the Jets' playoff losses — against Colorado, Vegas and Montreal in recent seasons — is a lack of resilience when playoff intensity picks up.

"If you go back and watch the Avalanche series, every game had a six- or eight-minute (stretch), in my opinion, where we lost the games. We were up in Game 2, took the four-on-four, we gave up two quick ones at the end of the second. Game 3, we were up, we took a couple of penalties, and again, it was these segments of 60-minute games where … not that we lost our focus, but Colorado went after and that's where the game was won, in my opinion."

So what happens if the Jets run into another "beehive" of a team that wants to play a heavy, physical, dump-and-chase game? Winnipeg's team defence is well-structured — again — six games into the season but its defencemen haven't gotten any bigger or more mobile since last season's playoff disappointment.

"Without the puck, our mindset has always been outnumber," Arniel says. "You don't have to be big to do that. You have to be quick and you have to have the mindset that you're always outnumbering. Two versus one, three versus two, five versus three, so to speak. That won't change no matter how big or small we are, how tough we are, how quick we are … On the other

side, there are things offensively that I think we need to drive up our analytics — drive up some areas that I think we can be good at."

The road between today and a playoff series win is a long one, with 76 games separating the team's perfect start and its quest to slay postseason dragons. Arniel is familiar with long roads, grateful to be back at the helm of an NHL team, and has largely empowered his staff to address the areas Winnipeg most needed to address. Promoting the associate coach as Bowness' successor wasn't the most exciting play available to the Jets; early in 2024-25, it looks like the right one.

TSN.ca

https://www.tsn.ca/video/flames-or-jets-which-will-come-back-to-reality%7E3016775

Flames or Jets: Which will come back to reality? (VIDEO)

Bryan Hayes and Jeff O'Neill are joined by ESPN Hockey analyst and host of the Ray and Dregs podcast host Ray Ferraro to discuss which team will most likely regress as the season goes on, the Flames or Jets and what's wrong with the Oilers early in the year.

Sportsnet.ca

https://www.sportsnet.ca/nhl/video/whos-had-a-more-impressive-start-flames-or-jets/

Who's had a more impressive start: Flames or Jets? (VIDEO)

On this edition of Take Your Pick, the Wednesday Night Hockey panel looks ahead to the 4 Nations Face-Off, two Canadian teams starting the season red-hot, and more.

The Hockey News

https://ca.sports.yahoo.com/news/winnipeg-jets-prospect-becomes-icedogs-230542182.html

Winnipeg Jets Prospect Becomes IceDogs' Nineteenth Captain

By Rowan McCarthy

Earlier today, the Niagara IceDogs announced that Kevin He will be the nineteenth captain in franchise history. This announcement comes a day after the team traded former captain Gavin Bryant to Peterborough.

"I was super honored and excited when I found out," said He. "It has been a busy couple of days."

Drafted early in the second round of the 2022 OHL Priority Selection by Niagara, He is a skilled forward who works hard and leads by example.

"If you're around Kevin you see how hard he works," said GM Wes Consorti. "Every day he has shown the commitment and dedication that is required at this level."

He's ability to lead by example will be very important for the young core in Niagara. Consorti says that young players in the organization should look to He's example to understand what is expected from players at the OHL level.

The team is off to a hot start boasting a 7-2 record which places them at the top of the Eastern Conference. He's individual performance early in the season has been nothing short of spectacular.

The young star averages a goal and an assists per game having amassed nine goals and nine assists for a total of 18 points. That point total places him fourth in OHL scoring.

According to Head Coach Ben Boudreau, He is the only Niagara IceDogs player to be taken in an NHL Draft over the last six years. The Winnipeg Jets drafted Kevin in the fourth round of the 2024 NHL Draft.

"I think going to Winnipeg gave him a lot of confidence," said Constanti. "He got a little taste of pro hockey and he is bringing that here."

However, individual accolades are not on He's mind. His focus in on trusting the process and ensuring that he and his teammates concentrate on the details and continue to play the right way.

Joining He in a leadership position will be Jack Brauti who will have a shiny new A on his jersey come the next game.

Many were shocked by Niagara's success to start the season. They struggled last season and finished near the bottom of the league. He attributes this year's success to how close this year's team is.

"I couldn't be here without my teammates, they are the ones who mean the most to me," said He. "I am super proud of this group right now."

Led by their new captain, the IceDogs will play three games in three days. Their opponents in order are the Oshawa Generals, Sarnia Sting and the red-hot Windsor Spitfires.