

**Winnipegjets.com**

<https://www.nhl.com/jets/news/the-story-behind-the-mask-designs>

***The story behind the mask designs  
Hellebuyck and Comrie mask artists share their design stories***

By Jamie Thomas

As shown by his Vezina Trophy winning campaign in 2023-24 and his 6-0 start this season, it is not easy to beat Connor Hellebuyck.

Something that has become easy for artist Steve Nash, is reading Hellebuyck's mind when it comes to designing the paint job for his mask each season.

"I know pretty much the direction he wants to go, it's always an outdoor kind of theme," said Nash.

"He loves lots of white and keep it crisp so you can see it up in the third level. This year, that was his direction. He just wanted just like Winnipeg, Winterpeg, snow, mixed with the fishing and stuff."

Although Nash has painted a lot of different designs over the years for Hellebuyck, he has a couple that stand out in his mind.

"This current one is my new favourite. It's got lots of Stanley Cup steel on there, chrome," said Nash.

"But yeah, I like the big Buff (Dustin Byfuglien) too. He's like one of my favourite players. I loved watching him, he was amazing."

Hellebuyck has rewritten the franchise record book for goalies during his time with the Jets. He leads franchise goalies in career games played (511), wins (281), shutouts (38), and saves (14,277). Hellebuyck also leads the franchise in single season wins (2017-18: 44), shutouts (2017-18 and 2019-20: 6), and saves (2021-22: 1,962). Yet with all the accolades, he has remained humble.

"He's an awesome guy, awesome family guy. Great personality, we get along great, and I pretty much can tell all the time now what he wants even before he starts the conversation off. We get along well and it's awesome working with the guy. The guy just keeps getting better and better, it's unbelievable," said Nash.

"He just texts me his ideas. I do a couple of sketches for him, he approves them, and he lets me do my stuff and usually it works out, knock on wood. So far it works."

Nash, who has played hockey for over 30 years as a goaltender says he gets more enjoyment out of watching hockey and takes in as many Jets games as he can.

Hellebuyck and Eric Comrie have been reunited after a couple seasons apart when Comrie took a two-year contract from the Buffalo Sabres in the summer of 2022. The Edmonton native has

also been reunited with Jets goaltender coach, Wade Flaherty. It's the third time that Comrie has been a member of the Jets organization.

Comrie's mask design comes from artist Jason Bartziokas, who has worked with Comrie going back to his days in the Western Hockey League.

"He is a dream client in the fact that I get artistic freedom. I'll give him just an idea when we first start talking about a new mask and to him, it's the best idea right off the hop," said Bartziokas.

"I don't even have to go up my sleeve and pull out the other idea. It's like I'll wait for the response and it's always 'That sounds great, that sounds amazing, let's do that.' It allows the creative process to go a little smoother when you have somebody like him."

Like Nash, Bartziokas was a goalie, and he uses that to help him brainstorm ideas for his clients.

"I ask myself 'Would I wear this mask?' When you have creative freedom, you are living vicariously through him. It's going to be our mask and not his mask," laughed Bartziokas.

"It's good that way. Every goalie has those things that they want, those parameters, obviously there's logos, colours and that's no problem."

This year's primary mask played off the last time Comrie was in Winnipeg (the 2021-22 season).

"The last time we paid homage to Canadian aviation, this time the planes are more modern. I wanted to play off the logo this year and more special effects, more balance in the colours" said Bartziokas.

"This year both masks, I had the heritage and the primary at the same time. So, it was kind of having to think, juggling the two masks within a week and a half, two weeks."

Bartziokas grew up down the road from Edmonton with the Oilers being his favourite team, but his second team was Winnipeg. His best friends family was from Winnipeg, and he fell in love with the Jets because of their goaltenders Bob Essensa and Stephane Beauregard and their gear.

"I kind of have this special place in my heart for the Jets. For the heritage mask, I was looking at all the stuff that had been done in the past," said Bartziokas.

"I just got into the mindset, it needed to look like it came from that era, late 80's, 90's and just give it a modern touch. That was our play on the heritage mask."

On October 20, Comrie debuted the heritage mask in a 6-3 win over the Pittsburgh Penguins. The 29-year-old made 39 saves for the win. Bartziokas watched the game on tv and said seeing his mask, and Comrie play as well as he did, made it a special emotional night. Bartziokas watched the game with his eight-year-old daughter, Jayla.

"I took four years off from painting masks to focus on my oil paintings. I have a daughter, and she got to the point where a year and a half ago, she started playing hockey and so that passion came back and just the love of the game," said Bartziokas.

“When Eric was playing, I got to share that experience of having a mask on tv. The onslaught of Pittsburgh in the first and he was able to hold them off and it was awesome. You hope they don’t pan the camera on him because of a goal, it’s because he stopped it. You get a bit of a rush, I got to share that with the girls, it was pretty amazing.”

## **The Athletic**

<https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/5869845/2024/10/26/winnipeg-jets-analytics-arniel/>

### ***What the Winnipeg Jets can address and improve by learning from analytics***

By Murat Ates

WINNIPEG — When Scott Arniel joined Rick Bowness’ staff in 2022, the Winnipeg Jets coaches believed the team faced two key problems.

The first problem was culture. Bowness spent that summer getting to know his leadership group, recruiting feedback from several players about what had gone wrong the previous season. Ultimately, Bowness took the captaincy from Blake Wheeler in year one, gave it to Adam Lowry in year two and put a lot of energy toward encouraging new leaders to emerge.

The second, more tactically obvious problem was Winnipeg’s defence. The Jets had given up the 13th most goals in 2021-22 — largely due to a lack of defensive structure and effort in front of their Vezina-calibre goaltender. Publicly available metrics showed that Winnipeg was a bottom-10 defensive team at five-on-five, a bottom-10 team on the penalty kill and that the Jets gave up way more shots than average from the middle of the ice.

But how was that happening? And what did Winnipeg need to change to fix it?

Arniel, Bowness and the rest of Winnipeg’s coaches addressed those topics in their first formal presentation to players.

“We used analytics to show them different areas — slot shots, loose puck retrievals, plays into dangerous areas off the rush and how many plays get into the slot,” Arniel said. “We were number 29 out of 32 teams (in inner slot shots against) so that was going to be our emphasis.”

Winnipeg’s coaches were armed with clips prepared by longtime video and analytics coach Matt Prefontaine. They combined proprietary data from Montreal-based analytics company Sportlogiq with video software called Sportscode and showed players how Winnipeg gave teams access to the middle of the ice, leading to slot shots against. Some of it was about in-zone coverage. Some of it was about backtracking. All of it required all five skaters to work together as a team to cut down on the most dangerous scoring chances.

The coaches’ presentation of data and video made an impression on Winnipeg’s players. Bowness, Arniel and their staff generated buy-in for the X’s and O’s changes that they wanted to make. Inner slot shots became a focal point for Winnipeg to stay in its defensive structure between the faceoff dots, to backcheck hard and to commit to outnumbering opponents in key areas instead of getting picked apart in the name of chasing offence.

“Bowness made us more aware (of analytics) than what you guys are led to believe,” Lowry told The Athletic at training camp. “Inner slot shots, that’s kind of become a good indicator for how we protect our side of the ice off of D-zone coverage.”

The Jets improved from 253 goals against the season Paul Maurice left to 224 goals against in Bowness’ first year, then 198 to earn the Jennings Trophy last season. Their commitment to the X’s and O’s that Bowness and Arniel taught them was obvious in the metrics they most liked to track: Winnipeg went from 29th in inner slot shots against in 2021-22 into the top 10.

“We improved after year one,” Arniel said. “Year two, we went to some offensive things. This year we’re going to have some areas that we’re fine-tuning now. What’s next this year? I can’t tell you. But our video will have analytics (in it).”

It sounds like such a happy story, doesn’t it? Team recognizes defensive problems, marries analytics to video to show what is important to change and then goes forth and makes those changes. In Arniel’s first season as head coach, Winnipeg hasn’t seemed to lose a step: The Jets are 7-0-0 and have given up the fewest goals in the NHL.

But what are the Jets’ next steps in their quest — not just to catch up but to get ahead of the curve? What happens when coaches or players think analytics have gone too far? And, despite this continued investment in analytics, why do the coaches keep playing a top line that gets outscored at five-on-five?

#### *The Connor, Scheifele and Vilardi question*

The Jets are undefeated and their top line of Kyle Connor, Mark Scheifele and Gabriel Vilardi has been outscored 6-2 during five-on-five play. The trio has won Winnipeg games, too, but those victories have been earned on special teams, at six-on-five and in three-on-three overtime.

Scheifele’s line hasn’t outshot or outscored its opposition — and didn’t do it last season, either — which leads to an obvious question: In a league where top lines are so good that getting 50 percent of the goals is below average, could the analytically inclined Jets be even better if they found a different combination?

I asked Arniel about Connor, Scheifele and Vilardi getting outscored together.

“Your lines change all year long,” he said. “Even (Leon) Draisaitl and (Connor) McDavid don’t stay together. When it comes to the big time, they go together, but at the end of the day, over 82 games, you’re going to change your lines.

“You’re going to have to trust your feel as a head coach. Is it time to make that change? Is it time to change it up a bit? And you’re right. There is chemistry built. A lot of history that you see with great lines is there’s always been two guys (who make it work). So who are those two guys? Is it KC and Scheif? I don’t know. Is it Gabe and Scheif? I don’t know. That’s part of what we’ve been trying to build. Injuries disrupt things sometimes, particularly with Gabe last year.

“And there’s the human element. The players like playing with each other. They have a feel for each other. They’ll make plays sometimes and the only reason they get away with it is because they’ve done it together a bunch of times ... You’re comfortable when you go into a high-pressure game and you know what your linemate is going to do. Sometimes there’s that, too. That’s where I don’t get carried away with analytics.”

My interpretation is that the decision comes down to human factors. It seems clear that they play together because they like playing together. It also seems as though they've shown Arniel enough via the eye test to convince him to bet on them getting better results.

On Thursday in Seattle, Arniel sat the line for a shift after they were caught watching Jordan Eberle's third-period goal. And now that they're down 6-2 in goals as a line, Arniel will have decisions to make. Does a 7-0-0 start mean he can give them more time to find their game, particularly in the defensive zone? Lowry's line is up 6-0, Vladislav Namestnikov's line is up 4-1 and Scheifele and Connor are still point-per-game players thanks to special teams success.

"It's all part of the process when it comes to decisions you make about your lines and your team," Arniel said at training camp. "How did you play last night? The next day, when you have practice, how mad are you? And yes, analytics will be a part of that. We'll be able to take a look at them and say, 'OK, we've given up a lot of stuff here.'"

Connor vs. Ehlers could be Connor and Ehlers instead  
Arniel smiled, anticipating the question.

"I know where you're going with this," he said.

My preamble was as follows. Nobody scores like Connor does. No Jets player has the hands, the speed and the finishing that Connor does. Does he short a backcheck sometimes or struggle to get the puck out along the wall? Yes. But you're not going to tear that player apart because he is a human being working to get better at those things. You need his offence to win games.

Meanwhile, Ehlers' defensive game isn't any better in his own zone than Connor's is but Ehlers is such a good player in transition that it helps keep Winnipeg out of its zone. But I understand the human element there, too: When Ehlers is zig-zagging in multiple directions, do his linemates have to eat hits in front of the net? Do they sometimes get confused based on the unpredictable nature of his play?

In the end, I asked Arniel how he planned to take those different playing styles, manage the human beings involved and get the most out of them for his team.

"That's the relationship part of this game," he said. "Those are probably the best two examples you can throw out there. Both of them have such strong qualities that they bring to the game. KC is in my top five guys in terms of goal scoring. His shot, the way the puck comes off his stick. Nik can't do that. KC has some of the best hands I've ever seen when it comes to shooting the puck. Then, the explosiveness, the game-breaking things that Nik can do that maybe KC can't do. Nik can take a 2-2 game and make it 3-2 in a heartbeat if he decides he's going to take off and go."

Arniel said it's his job to teach board play and defensive zone responsibilities. It's his job to make sure players understand when they need to be better in those areas. He also made a point of defending both players' commitment to backchecking, particularly in recent seasons. Connor's backtracking has been particularly noticeable early this season.

"Our top players all bought in," he said. "And maybe some guys do some of those jobs better but you don't win hockey games without that skill."

He then spoke to a concept that drives part of his perspective as head coach. The NHL's 82-game regular season is long. A quality regular-season performance, then, means finding several different ways to win.

"You need pure goal scorers at times. You need shutdown defencemen at times. You need fighters, at times. Specialty teams. You obviously need great goaltending for a lot of it. But every single game has its own quirks to it," he said. "We could be in November, playing in Anaheim and it's our fourth game in six nights and maybe we should be blowing them out of the water and we're not, but maybe that's the night Nik Ehlers goes all of the way down the ice, scores a goal, and wins us the game."

Sometimes I think Winnipeg's coaches and management see Connor do things that other players can't do — whether it's his release, the way he creates space out of a cutback, or the way he processes the game fast enough to stickhandle through some of the game's top defenders — and lose track of the results. His line needs to get out of its own zone for those marvellous things he does to pay off.

It also seemed to me — although Arniel didn't say this — that Arniel viewed Ehlers' game-breaking excellence as a November thing, while Connor and Scheifele are viewed as a go-to duo that can be counted on in the playoffs. Connor's 32 points in 45 playoff games certainly trump Ehlers' 14 points in 37 playoff games, and it seems to be that the organization is all-in on one and still figuring out how it feels about the other.

Arniel says he views both players as game-breakers and believes it's his job to get the most out of them.

"That's the part where analytics don't matter," he said. "It's about the human element. Now it comes down to what can I get out of that guy and how can I get him to do it when I need him the most."

#### *Winnipeg's next steps, plus what its coaches are afraid of*

Winnipeg uses data in scouting, management and coaching. Arniel and his staff clearly sold the players on the importance of their defensive zone, using specific data like slot shots to drive home their points. Arniel is wise, though, to keep some analytics conversation between himself and the coaching staff. Players need to feel free to play.

"Sometimes you get shown all of these numbers and then you get caught — not every shift, but you get caught thinking — and now it takes out some of that free flow of the game," Lowry said. "If you're thinking too hard that 'OK, I have to be here, I don't want to give up these things' but now you're off in your read and they might get a chance somewhere else. I think it's about a happy medium of incorporating (analytics) while still allowing the freedom, the creativity of players to make the reads and trusting them to make the correct ones."

It's a vital perspective — and one that data analysts have understood for a long time. There's a difference between finding useful information that might help a team plan its strategy and the choices players make in real time as they play one of the fastest sports in the world.

It's also important to be careful with how we use the word "analytics" at all.

"I know the word analytics, by some of the players, gets looked at a certain way and they don't quite understand it," Kevin Cheveldayoff told The Athletic in September. "So one of the missions is to try and explain how we intend to use it with the players, as opposed to just putting it out there and letting everyone digest it. Because there's all kinds of numbers out there."

In a sense, all analytics are about counting things that happen during a game, gathering information about those events and then trying to make smart decisions with that data. Whether it's about how a team breaks the puck out of its zone, where a team likes to dump the puck or how different teams get into the slot for scoring chances, it's just information. Sometimes calling it "analytics" can distract from the point while overusing complex charts instead of communicating to NHL players like the elite athletes they are just gets in the way.

"It comes down to how we use it," Arniel said. "We have to make sure we don't get caught up on just one thing. Your eye test is still there. Your feel. Your relationship with your players. Are you still feeling the same way about them after that stretch of games? Do you have that confidence in him? And then you have your analytics side, too."

### **Global Winnipeg**

<https://globalnews.ca/news/10830235/analysis-patience-winnipeg-jets/>

#### ***ANALYSIS: Patience paying off for 7-0 Jets***

By John Shannon CJOB

If there's one word to describe the Winnipeg Jets right now, what would you say? Deep? Maybe. Physical? Maybe. Resilient? For sure.

For me, I think the best word to describe this version of the Jets is patient.

Thursday night, another tight game for the Jets. A 4-3 win in Seattle and Winnipeg is now 7 -0 in this early season.

That's now five times the Jets have won after the opposition has scored the first goal. There has been little or no panic in this team's game. Down a goal? Not a problem. Make an adjustment, stick to the game plan and the goals will come.

Allow two goals in the third? No problem. Don't panic. Stick with the plan. And win in overtime. Some would suggest that over 60 minutes, the Jets didn't deserve to win Thursday night — but they did win.

I would submit that this team has willed its way to this record with its patience, and should be 7-0.

And by the way, the patience goes beyond the players and coaches. After two consecutive disappointing playoff seasons, management showed patience with this roster. While many pleaded for the players to change, the Jets stayed the course with most of the team, particularly the forwards.

While many teams overspent on July 1 to get free agents, Kevin Cheveldayoff didn't waste dollars when people wanted new faces. And it would appear his patience has paid off.

What's interesting to note is that teams that did make big changes are still waiting for their teams to gel, while the Jets are banking points. The patience is paying off.

### **Sportsnet.ca**

<https://www.sportsnet.ca/nhl/video/which-nhl-players-hot-start-deserves-more-recognition/>

#### ***Which NHL player's hot start deserves more recognition? (VIDEO)***

In this edition of The Hot Seat The Hockey Central panel debates who had the best celebration of the week, which player's hot start deserves more recognition, which NHL players could play in the NFL, and more.

### **Winnipeg Free Press**

<https://www.tsn.ca/nhl/video/how-have-the-jets-continued-to-cook~3017544>

#### ***Morrissey pitches in with Wild FC Jets blue liner and wife invest in Calgary women's soccer club***

By: Ken Wiebe and Mike McIntyre

CALGARY — Josh Morrissey is joining the movement.

Not only is the Winnipeg Jets defenceman showing his support, he's offering financial backing as part of his allyship to the new soccer team in his hometown, Calgary Wild FC.

Morrissey and his wife Margot were unveiled as investors in the team at a press conference in Calgary on Friday.

“Just having the support across different leagues and across different genders for sport really — and women's sports in Canada, that's important,” said Morrissey, whose Jets are in Calgary to face the Flames on Saturday. “I just love sports. I'm a huge sports fan. I can't get enough of everything sports-related.

“For me, it's exciting to have a women's league coming to Canada. With the success our Canadian women's team has had internationally over the last number of years, to think that we don't have a pro league in Canada is kind of crazy. For that to be starting here and for me to be a part of it, I'm excited to join on.”

Calgary Wild FC is one of the six teams in the Northern Super League, which is set for its inaugural season in 2025.

Morrissey was approached about the opportunity last summer and jumped at the chance to get involved with Alberta's only professional women's sports team.

“With my wife and I spending our offseasons here in Calgary, it was a natural fit,” said Morrissey. “Hopefully, I can experience sports on a little different side of the coin than what I'm used to as an athlete every day on the ice.



“If you take all of the different things out of it and look at it as the little kid in me, it will be exciting to go and watch the games this coming summer and for years to come and be part of it. There’s so much momentum with women’s sports and all sports.”

Margot Morrissey wants to help keep that momentum going, which was part of the appeal for her.

“It’s just amazing that for young girls, there is now someone to look up to and they can envision being able to play the sport that they love professionally, as their job,” said Margot, who stopped playing soccer at the age of 12 but was a competitive figure skater until she turned 18. “It will be really fun to be involved with it.”

Christina Litz, a Winnipegger who is the president of the Northern Super League, believes the support of athletes such as Morrissey can help this budding professional women’s league grow.

“The only way women’s professional sports are going to be successful is with the communities that support them and the allies that come to support,” said Litz. “Josh is a perfect example of an ally who is using his incredible talent and platform to support this club and as a result of that, women’s professional sports overall. It’s a difference-maker and his investment in this club is incredibly meaningful.”

Calgary Wild FC also revealed its first player signing on Friday, midfielder Farkhunda Muhtaj, who is the former captain of the Afghanistan women’s national football team and has done outstanding work as a social activist, using sport as a unifying force.

Muhtaj has an inspiring story, as someone whose family were refugees who immigrated to Canada from Afghanistan when Muhtaj was two years old.

Muhtaj is the protagonist of the documentary, *We are Ayenda* for the efforts she made to help the Afghan women’s youth national team and their family members successfully evacuate to Portugal after the Taliban returned to power.

“Her story is just incredible, I would encourage everyone to learn about it,” said Morrissey. “That’s something this league can really do for the amazing athletes, to be able to give them a platform in Canada to tell their stories. Fars’ story is mind-blowing and it’s hard to believe, to be honest, when you hear about it.”

Muhtaj recognized Morrissey’s genuine enthusiasm as they interacted on stage as part of a panel after the announcement was made at Platform Calgary.

“I’m so pleased to hear that Josh is on board. He’s obviously an incredible role model on and off the ice,” said Muhtaj. “Not only is he supporting us as an investor, he’s really behind the purpose behind us. For him, sport gave him so much and he wants to ensure that he can give back to sport as well.”

“To ensure that girls can see a pathway forward and can look at sport as a tangible career path. He’s going to be a huge ally and through sharing him and what he brings to the team, hopefully this will influence other athletes to get involved with this movement.”

Morrissey joked he didn't have a lot of success on the pitch during his youth but felt Muhtaj might be able to help him up his two-touch game, the warmup many hockey players go through before taking to the ice.

"He should definitely teach me some hockey skills because my hockey skills are way worse than his soccer skills," said Muhtaj. "I can assure you of that."

#### *AROUND THE GLASS*

*ARMSTRONG GIVES NO HINTS* — With the calendar almost set to flip to November, there's just over one month to go before teams will need to submit their final roster for the 4 Nations Face-off.

When the Jets were in St. Louis, earlier this week, Team Canada Olympic general manager Doug Armstrong shared some detail about how the management team has been scouting its potential players.

But when a follow-up question sought some clarity on how wide a net Team Canada would be casting when it came to players under consideration, he smiled and quickly deflected.

"I don't want to get into specifics," said Armstrong, who was speaking to the media after completing a two-year extension for forward Jake Neighbours. "I just know that everyone is going to get a fair shake to be viewed."

Between Armstrong and the Team Canada management staff of Don Sweeney, Jim Nill, Kyle Dubas and Julien BriseBois, they should be able to witness roughly 180 NHL games in person through the first two months of the season.

"We want to give the players the great opportunity to show themselves, not only on video, but also live," said Armstrong. "It's starting to clarify itself in a positive (way) for some guys and a negative for others. We're still early, but the way that they've rolled this out....the window is short to evaluate for this event."

Given how previous rosters for best-on-best competition have been hotly debated across Canada, there will be ample time to dig into the decisions that were made regarding the final roster.

After that, the projections of line combinations and defence pairs will soon follow.

The best news is that the event will help set the stage for a return to the Olympics for NHL players — most of whom haven't had the opportunity to compete for their respective countries on that massive stage.

*MYERS JOINS SILVER STICK CLUB* – Former Jets defenceman Tyler Myers will officially be honoured by the Vancouver Canucks on Saturday after he played in his 1,000th NHL game last week against the Philadelphia Flyers.

In February of 2015, Myers was involved in the blockbuster trade that sent him, Drew Stafford, Joel Armia, Brendan Lemieux and a 2015 first-rounder to the Jets from the Buffalo Sabres for Evander Kane, Zach Bogosian and the rights to goalie Jason Kasdorf.

Myers spent parts of five seasons with the Jets before signing with the Canucks as an unrestricted free agent in the summer of 2019.

“I’m just really pumped for him,” said Morrissey. “When I think back, I played my first NHL game as his D partner. He was always great to me. When you look at his career, as a Calder Trophy winner and everything he’s accomplished, but also knowing it wasn’t easy with some family situations and injuries himself. To reach 1,000 games is a testament to your love for the game and the commitment to taking care of yourself to be able to do that. His impact on my career as a young D-man was massive.”

<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2024/10/25/razor-sharp-risk>

### ***Razor-sharp risk***

By: Mike McIntyre

In terms of hockey gear, it doesn’t look much — a tall, black adjustable collar consisting of cut-resistant fabric and high-impact foam.

Yet, to hear it from the majority of today’s NHL players, it’s a form of kryptonite.

For reasons that can be difficult to comprehend, athletes who are among the toughest on the planet — “warriors” as described by player agent Kurt Overhardt — and who routinely play through injuries and ailments, from broken bones and fractured faces to torn muscles and damaged ligaments, balk at wearing neck guards.

Unfortunately, all the grit, guts and pain tolerance in the world is still not always enough, as witnessed on Oct. 28, 2023 when Adam Johnson suffered a fatal neck wound during a game in England. The 29-year-old from Minnesota lost extensive blood on the ice and was rushed to hospital, where doctors were unable to save him.

“Sometimes we forget that we have knives at the end of our skates,” said Johnson’s best friend, Neal Pionk.

Johnson’s tragic death was seen as a sentinel moment in the sport, with most leagues that hadn’t already done so moving quickly to make neck guards mandatory.

Among them: The English Ice Hockey Association, the Western Hockey League, the Canadian Junior Hockey League, the IIHF, USA Hockey and, this fall, the ECHL and American Hockey League.

Notably absent is the NHL, although leaders vowed to study the issue and several players took it upon themselves to add protection in the immediate aftermath.

That was the case with Pionk and some of his Winnipeg Jets teammates, several of whom were flown by the organization to attend Johnson’s memorial.

Common sense would suggest it’s a no-brainer, especially with a vivid example of the worst-possible scenario so fresh. Just as helmets and visors have become the norm, a neck guard would seem to be a logical step.

“It’s just such a fast-paced game, bodies are flying everywhere. Accidents happen,” said forward Dominic Toninato, another of Johnson’s friends who began wearing a neck guard with the Jets following the tragedy.

“That’s all you can hope, that it prevents another one, for sure.”

The AHL has mandated neck guards, but Moose forward Dominic Toninato had already added the protective layer last year. “That’s all you can hope, that it prevents another (tragedy).”

But as we approach the one-year anniversary, a look around the NHL shows it is largely business as usual. The overwhelming majority of skaters are still exposing their bare necks on a nightly basis, and both the league and the player’s association seem content with leaving the decision to players.

It’s a battle between personal choice and player safety at hockey’s highest level — and the former appears to have the edge right now.

That includes the Jets, where Pionk is one of just a handful of players currently wearing a neck guard.

“I just found it was very itchy,” veteran forward Vladislav Namestnikov explained of his decision to stop using one after a few practices last year.

“I understand it’s protective, but I think everyone is different. It’s more of a comfort thing. I’d put it on and everything was just very hot and itchy, for me personally.”

He’s hardly alone. According to a poll of 181 NHL players conducted by The Athletic, 78 per cent stated they don’t want the league to mandate neck guards. With only about three or four players from each team visibly wearing one in recent games we’ve observed, that would seem to be an accurate representation of the current reality.

“I think it will remain an individual choice,” predicted Namestnikov, who added that you “try not to think about” what could happen as a result.

That type of thinking doesn’t come as a surprise to Dr. Adrienne Leslie-Toogood, a Winnipeg-based sports psychologist who is past chair of the Canadian Sport Psychology Association and has worked with professional and amateur athletes in multiple sports for the past three decades.

“When you look at how the brain works, we don’t live with and spend time with those really, tough things (that occur),” she said.

“It would be very hard for us to function. Like we experience a lot of really tough things in our lives, so we kind of deal with them, but then we get back to dealing with our day-to-day.”

Whether it’s speeding, texting while driving, smoking cigarettes, abusing alcohol and drugs or not wearing a helmet while cycling or riding a motorcycle, there’s no shortage of everyday examples of people doing things they know aren’t good for them.

“From a human perspective, humans don’t necessarily like being told what to do,” said Leslie-Toogood. “We like it when we’re provided options.”

In hockey, that may mean not wearing a visor — there's a handful of players whose birthdates allow them to play without one — or even things that are not currently mandated in the NHL such as wrist, ear and neck guards, consequences be damned.

"When you look at what it takes to become a professional athlete, there's so much passion, and you have to make a lot of decisions and override a lot of things," said Leslie-Toogood.

"And you do have your habits and tendencies and processes, right? And athletes really make a lot of choices that prioritize their sport over — gosh, there's just so many examples. You know, you look at the literature around concussions."

In that sense, it's tough to change what's essentially ingrained in their DNA.

"They will push themselves to limits that don't make sense to a lot of other humans, and that's why those humans aren't high-performance athletes," she said.

"We absolutely love that they're willing to do that. We love watching it. And they aren't necessarily thinking of their safety. They're not cautious, because every time they go out there, they have to push the limits of what's possible and what they do, and that's also their fuel and how they're wired and it's what they love doing."

Overhardt, who represents several of the NHL's biggest stars, said he often speaks with his clients about the importance of protecting themselves, noting he's had many players who have had careers cut short by skate cuts.

Former defenceman Kevin Bieksa, for example, suffered two different Achilles cuts that cost him a chance at playing in 1,000 games.

"Warriors get ready for battle. They should wear every piece of equipment that helps benefit them from a safety standard," said Overhardt.

"For better, for worse, it's an evolution for health and safety. And the one thing about our game is it certainly continues to get quicker.

"The edge work that these players have, and the speed that they have and the power they have, it's a significantly different game than it was 10 years ago. It's probably an unrecognizable game to what you saw 30 years ago. I think we always like everything else in our lives, we have to keep up with the times."

Admittedly, that advice often goes in one ear and out the other.

"Most are not going to wear them unless they're told to wear them," he said.

Which raises a question: at what point to players need to be protected from themselves by having the neck guard decision taken out of their hands?

While speaking with media earlier this fall at an NHL event in Las Vegas, deputy commissioner Bill Daly was asked if a day will come when the league steps in.

"I hope so, on some basis. I think we're moving in that direction," he said, noting the experiment in the AHL which is being watched closely, the way previous rule and equipment tweaks have been tested out in the past.

"Look, they're the highest level of the game. NHL players don't want to be told necessarily what to do and what not to do, particularly when it could affect performance on some basis. We did propose a mandatory rule, but we clearly understand where the union is coming from and some of the difficulties they have with their constituents. It's a process."

Meanwhile the NHLPA said in a statement the league and the union work jointly on ensuring players have the necessary information to make informed choices about their equipment.

Its members, however, "continue to feel strongly that wearing cut-resistant equipment is a matter of individual preference."

Pionk said every player likely has had a close call or two in their career, and there's no question the issue hits close to home in Winnipeg.

"I had a skate get me in the chest one time, that's a foot away (from his neck)," he said.

Last April, defenceman Brenden Dillon had his hand stepped on by a skate during a scrum in a playoff game against the Colorado Avalanche, resulting in a nasty injury that sidelined him for the rest of the series.

Jets forward Morgan Barron suffered a huge cut to his face during a playoff game against Vegas two years ago when the skate of then-Golden Knights goaltender Laurent Brossoit caught him under the visor near his eye, resulting in more than 70 stitches.

Former Jets defenceman Zach Redmond had his femoral artery sliced by teammate Antti Miettinen's skate during a practice in 2013. He lost half his body's blood and needed emergency surgery to repair arteries, veins, tendons and muscles, along with about 200 stitches.

Incredibly, most goaltenders don't wear neck guards either, despite being subjected to plenty of crease traffic and errant skates, sticks and pucks. Buffalo Sabres goaltender Clint Malarchuk had his carotid artery and jugular vein cut by a skate in 1989. One of his teammates at the time was current Jets head coach Scott Arniel.

Neck guards can also protect against pucks, especially with players now shooting harder than ever. Montreal Canadiens forward Trent McCleary nearly died in 2000 after taking a shot to the throat, which required an emergency tracheotomy.

"I can't believe we don't have more incidents that are as tragic as last year," a league source told the Free Press, referring to Johnson.

"I can't believe we don't have more incidents that are as tragic as last year." Among members of the Jets' AHL club, the neck guard mandate has gone over without a hitch.

"There's no issues. Guys have been good about it. There's always things you can alter with your equipment, but I think everyone has been good," said second-year Manitoba Moose forward Danny Zhilkin.

The 20-year-old, who was born in Russia but has spent most of his life in Canada, began wearing a neck guard in minor hockey, then had to wear one while playing junior on the Ontario Hockey League.

He turned pro last season and initially shed the protective piece, but put it back on immediately after Johnson died.

“My family kind of put a little bit of pressure on me to keep myself safe. They don’t want to see me hurt,” he said.

Zhilkin wore it the rest of the year and now has no choice, which is fine by him.

“I think it was only a few of us who started to wear it right after the accident. But I think it’s a huge thing, for sure, just being safe and having the confidence when you’re on the ice that nothing is going to happen to you,” he said.

Toninato continued wearing a neck guard when he was sent down to the Moose last year. He has started this season in the AHL where he admits to having mixed feelings about the mandate despite his close connection to Johnson.

“Obviously, you’re really happy that everyone is being protected, but at the same time, it’s tough. Guys want to make decisions for themselves. Where’s the fine line?” said Toninato.

While comfort is often cited as a cause, the 30-year-old said habit is a big one, too — especially for American-born players like himself who never had to wear one growing up, unlike Canadian kids where it has been mandated for the past three decades.

“Guys are so used to doing the same routine, doing the same stuff. I mean, you’ve got guys wearing some of the same gear for 10 plus years, right?” said Toninato. “I think it might be feel and how they’ve always played the game and what they’ve worn.”

Peer pressure can be a powerful thing, but Pionk said he isn’t going around the Jets room preaching to teammates about neck protection despite how much the Johnson tragedy hit home.

“I’m OK with (the lack of a mandate) right now,” he said.

“We’re at the highest level, we can make our own choice. Guys are educated on it. We have a tutorial on it every training camp, so I’m OK with it. Will it come around eventually? Maybe. I think the technology is getting a lot better, even in the last year. Imagine five years from now what the options will be for neck guards.”

To that extent, Pionk said his current garb, which is essentially a thin turtleneck-style undershirt made by the Warroad company in Minnesota — owned by Washington Capitals forward T.J. Oshie — is a “huge improvement from last year.”

“The first one I wore last year was extremely hot. It was so hot. I got used to it eventually. But then when I put this one on, this is paper-thin and this covers your wrist and this covers your neck,” he said.

“And that’s only in a year. In five years from now, and if there’s a ton of options, maybe they’ll revisit the idea. But that’s kind of where I see it.”

Although hockey players have no shortage of pride, Pionk doesn’t believe personal ego is standing in the way.

“It’s a comfort thing. I grew up in USA hockey and we didn’t have neck guards, but we had to wear mouth guards. When I went to Thunder Bay to play hockey, the whole team had to go to the pro shop store to get neck guards,” he said.

“And vice versa, when the Canadians came down and played in Duluth, they all had to go get mouth guards. We never ever wore neck guards. Now, have I gotten used to it? Yeah. I don’t even notice it anymore. I don’t notice it all.”

Pionk, who spent extensive time with Johnson’s family during the summer and continues to grieve such an immense loss, hopes some light will eventually come out of this darkness — even if it may still be tough to see right now.

“They would probably take some comfort knowing that guys were starting to protect themselves and make themselves more aware,” he said.