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The Jets made NHL history. How will they tackle the most difficult stretch of the season?

By Murat Ates

There was a quiet day at the Winnipeg Jets' practice facility in September, long before their 14-1-0 start to the season set an NHL record for best 15-game start.

The skate was finished. Whatever formal media that took place that day was over. And after a lengthy conversation about analytics, data and new metrics by which to measure team success, Jets coach Scott Arniel took a moment to talk about gratitude and joy.

Arniel had coached a lot of great players, even during his disappointing first stint as head coach in Columbus. He'd made it to the Eastern Conference final and Stanley Cup Final as associate coach of the New York Rangers. But sitting in an office chair overlooking the ice at Hockey For All Centre, Arniel said the satisfaction he got from being part of last year's Winnipeg Jets was even more impactful for him.

"I will say to you that the 82 games last year are among the most gratifying 82 games I've been in," Arniel said. "We did have some tough things that happened, but if we had a lull, the lull wasn't very long. We didn't get too high or too low, so for me, that was a gratifying (regular season)."

Jets achieve best start in NHL history at 14-1-0

Of course, that sentiment was followed by the inevitable playoff regret. Speaking in September, though — long after the playoffs and shortly before coaching Winnipeg to its historic 15-game start — Arniel spoke with a great deal of perspective. Gratitude was high on his list: gratitude to the Jets, to the players, and to his own hard work in reclaiming a head coaching job after his Columbus disappointment. It's well-documented now: Arniel has said he acted like he knew too much, too soon. On that quiet September day, seated on his office chair, Arniel reiterated he'd learned lessons from a decade spent working to re-establish himself as a head coach.

And then came the noise. Arniel won his first game as head coach — a 6-0 drubbing of last year's Stanley Cup finalists in Edmonton. Winnipeg started its season with eight straight wins, dropped a single match to Toronto, and then, on Saturday, with the NHL record for best 15-game start on the line, stood in awe as a sold-out Canada Life Centre crowd showed the ruthless genius that highlighted Winnipeg's early years after relocation. "U.S. backup!" the fans chanted at Dallas Stars goaltender Jake Oettinger after Winnipeg's third goal. "U.S. backup!" they chanted, louder this time, when Nikolaj Ehlers made it 4-0. There was a standing ovation when the game ended. Winnipeg had set its record, and it was announced in the building.

Thinking of the calm, quiet Arniel from his September office chair, I asked how Winnipeg's first 15 games ranked compared to the satisfaction and joy he'd previously expressed about last season.

"They're right there," Arniel said. "But I'm a downer. I'm the guy that's still worried about the next nine out of 10 on the road. I'm worried about the New York Rangers (on Tuesday). I never want

to put it down. It's been an amazing run. It's been fun. But we like winning a whole lot better than the alternative so I'd like to keep this going longer."

Chapter one of Winnipeg's 2024-25 season is now over. Acknowledge it. Enjoy it. Celebrate it.

Now, as Arniel has been telling us since that interview in September, the difficulty level is about to skyrocket.

The Jets played just five out of their 15 games against teams that made the playoffs last season. Nine of those 15 games were at home. Now, starting against the Rangers on Tuesday, eight of Winnipeg's next 10 games come against 2024 playoff teams. Nine of 10 are on the road. Two are against the defending Stanley Cup champion Florida Panthers, while a back-to-back against Pittsburgh and Nashville means Winnipeg will play a six-game road trip across three time zones in just 11 days.

Even great teams face difficult portions of their season. Winnipeg's is now. Arniel has had this stretch of games circled on his calendar since before the season began. When he talks now about taking pride in the multiple ways Winnipeg has found to win games, he does so with an eye on navigating the Jets through turbulent periods of their season, just like this one.

What can he do about it?

Before training camp and before Winnipeg was a league-leading team with the most goals per game, the fewest goals against per game and a 41.9 percent power play that's running almost 10 percentage points hotter than the best power play of all time, Arniel said special teams would help get the Jets through tough times.

"I've told all of our players, especially our leadership, that specialty teams are a priority," Arniel said. "The middle of November, 2-2 late in a game, our penalty kill can save us. Our power play can go out and score a big goal. That's the difference for me. Those are the things that can get us through the tough parts of the schedule ... If our defensive game is good and our specialty teams are doing what they need to do, they just keep you in those games on those tough nights."

It's why Winnipeg has worked on special teams since the beginning of training camp. It's why the Jets worked on their power-play entries and on transitioning from entries to various setups in the zone. They didn't limit themselves to starting from a stagnant, stationary place — they started their drills on the move. Subtle details like that have played disproportionate roles in Winnipeg's record-setting success.

On Saturday night in Winnipeg, Arniel showed another subtle sign of leadership that may have a lasting impact.

When he was asked about the record that Winnipeg set, Arniel rooted his answer in the repeated use of "they."

"These players, they do have to recognize that it's an amazing feat, what they've done so far," he said. "At the end of the day, they've got to be awfully proud of what they've done."

Arniel directed 100 percent of the credit toward his players, saving the use of "I" only to express his amazement.

It was a wise way to close chapter one, particularly in a league where a team's first 14 wins don't matter nearly as much as its final 16. Winnipeg's 2024-25 season has begun in spectacular fashion. From Arniel's promotion to the angst in some corners about "running it back" to Winnipeg's power-play explosion, its continued five-on-five strength, another round of elite goaltending, and game-winning impact from top to bottom of the lineup — this is a story with a special beginning.

But the rest of these Jets' history remains to be written. It is on them to write, and it seems likely to be a fascinating tale.

At 14-1-0, with such a difficult second act from Madison Square Garden on Tuesday through a rematch against the Stars in Dallas on Dec. 1, the stakes are going up.

New York Post

<https://nypost.com/2024/11/10/sports/rangers-need-show-they-belong-in-biggest-test-yet-against-nhl-best-jets/>

Rangers need show they belong in biggest test yet against NHL-best Jets

By Mollie Walker

The way it's gone for the Rangers the last two and a half weeks, Tuesday's game against the NHL-leading Winnipeg Jets at Madison Square Garden is shaping up to be as big of a game as it could be in November.

No, it's not in a make-or-break the season kind of way. Nor will it be a sound-the-alarms loss if it is one.

The Blueshirts do need show up in force at home – where they were embarrassed last week by the Sabres – and compete so much better and so much harder than they have lately if they hope to remind not only themselves, but the rest of the NHL, that they can go toe-to-toe with the best in the league because they are one of the best in the league.

Anything less than a complete and unwavering team effort will be a colossal disappointment.

"They're obviously playing well, so we're going to have to make sure that we clean up some things coming out of our end and making sure that we're playing straight forward," Braden Schneider told The Post after Jonathan Quick helped the Rangers steal a win over the Red Wings Saturday night in Detroit. "They're a big, heavy group that has the talent that we have to put pucks away. It's going to be our biggest test yet and hopefully we can come out on top."

The Rangers have lost touch with who they were to start the season – albeit the fact that it came against inferior teams. Everything from the way they attack the game, their structure and their fire has dimmed.

Now they are coming off a collapse against the Sabres, the fifth-worst team in the Eastern Conference last season. And getting caved in by the Red Wings, who the Rangers demolished twice in the first month of the season, despite a 4-0 victory.

Their rolling 10-game average Corsi percentage at five-on-five – which measures a team's puck possession and shot attempts – has been in a steady decline since late October, according to Natural Stat Trick.

After hovering around 50 percent through much of the first month of the season, the Blueshirts have dipped below.

They're putting less pucks on net, creating far less in the offensive zone and missing that bite that they had just last month.

It's a testament to how little they've had the puck lately, which means it's been on their opponent's sticks and the numbers indicate as much.

"I think continuing to work on our process," Chris Kreider said. "Continuing to improve our breakouts, I think there's still a few too many times where we gave up almost odd-man situations where our F3 is caught a little bit. It's forechecking effectively, but intelligently so we're not giving up odd-man rushes and putting so much pressure on our goaltenders to make stops for us."

After defeating the Stars 4-1 Saturday night, the Jets set a new NHL record with their 14th win in their first 15 games of the season. They're coming off two consecutive first-round exits in the playoffs and playing with the sort of chip on their shoulder that can carry a team through an 82-game campaign – kind of like the one the Blueshirts had last season after their first-round debacle against the Devils in 2023.

Might I remind you that the Rangers were the best team last regular season. It's essentially the same team and it's time they start resembling that again.

"They're No. 1 for a reason," Schneider said of the Jets. "We've got to make sure that we're ready to put our best foot forward. Because I think when we do, I think we're just as good. I think it's going to be a challenge and we have to make sure we're ready to go."

It doesn't necessarily have to be a resounding win, but the Rangers have to combat the Jets and show some consistency over 60 minutes against a red-hot team.

The turnaround must start now.

What better time than against the best team in the NHL?