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<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/sports/2024/11/21/jets-face-plenty-of-challenges-on-six-game-road-swing>

Jets face plenty of challenges on six-game road swing

By: Mike McIntyre

PITTSBURGH — Neal Pionk didn't shy away from revealing the secret formula that goes into planning for the longest trip of the season after an all-too-brief one-game homestand.

"Do the laundry, grab all the underwear you own and go back on the road," the veteran defenceman told the Free Press with a laugh.

Sound strategy, indeed, with the Jets set to play six times in six different cities — and three time zones — over the next 10 days.

"Quite the schedule we have," said forward Kyle Connor, who was taking a glass half-full outlook. "Road's a good time to come together as a team. You spend a lot of time with each other."

Who wouldn't want to be around these 16-3-0 Jets right now? They continue to sit on top of the NHL standings and will look to keep building momentum starting Friday night in Pittsburgh. That will be followed by stops in Nashville (Saturday), St. Paul (Monday), Los Angeles (Wednesday), Las Vegas (Friday) and Dallas (Sunday).

"It's going to be a busy one," said coach Scott Arniel, who is very much living in the moment and not getting too far ahead of himself.

"We can only worry about Pittsburgh. I know you guys don't want to hear it but that's what this group has been really good at. It's all about new business against a team there that's trying to find their way."

The Jets were road warriors until recently, rattling off seven consecutive victories in enemy territory until they hit the state of Florida last week and suffered consecutive losses to the Tampa Bay Lightning and Florida Panthers by a combined score of 9-1 which brought them back down to Earth a bit.

However, they followed that up with impressive 6-3 victory over the reigning Stanley Cup champions on Tuesday night during that quick pit stop at Canada Life Centre to finish off the home-and-home series.

"As much as we enjoyed that game... now we're moving on," said Arniel. "Once we get down to Pittsburgh it's all about new business against a team there that's trying to find their way. We've got to go in there and make sure we're just as good as we were (against Florida)."

Winnipeg hasn't had a stretch like this since April 2022, when they played six in a row in enemy territory. That journey started strong with victories over the Ottawa Senators and Montreal Canadiens, only to be followed by four consecutive losses to Florida, Tampa Bay, the New York Rangers and Carolina Hurricanes.

Their longest stint on the road last season was five games, which began with wins over the Columbus Blue Jackets and Rangers followed by three consecutive defeats to the New Jersey Devils, New York Islanders and Washington Capitals.

What will this one bring?

“We’ve gotta bear down,” Connor said of trying to start the trip off on the right foot and then keeping the pedal to the floor throughout.

Here’s six storylines to get you set:

1) Don’t play down to the opposition

On paper, the Jets would appear to be vastly superior to their first two opponents. Pittsburgh (7-10-4) and Nashville (6-11-3) sit 27th and 31st in terms of points percentage so far this year, whereas Winnipeg is No. 1.

In spite of that, expect a proud Penguins group that still has plenty of firepower will likely be seeking some payback after a 6-3 loss to the Jets on Oct. 20, and you know the severely underachieving Predators will be looking to pounce on a tired opponent 24 hours later inside the always raucous Bridgestone Arena.

In other words, take nothing for granted.

2) Tough tests on tap

Games three through six represent a major step-up in weight class.

Heading into action on Thursday night, Minnesota was tied for third in points percentage, Los Angeles 14th, Vegas ninth and Dallas sixth. That’s quite a gauntlet Winnipeg will have to run through some of the Western Conference heavyweights.

Just as the games against Tampa Bay and Florida were litmus tests, we should learn more about this Jets club based on how they perform in these outings.

3) The goalie plan

Expect Connor Hellebuyck and Eric Comrie to split these first two games, with Hellebuyck likely facing the Penguins and Comrie the Predators. Might Hellebuyck then get the next four? There’s a good chance, and you know he’d love the challenge. The Jets are also trying to manage his workload and must be careful not to burn him out.

With yet another one-game homestand after this trip (against the St. Louis Blues) followed immediately by two more games on the road (in Buffalo and Chicago, and then a home game the following night against Columbus), the schedule doesn’t lighten up at all.

Add it all up and Friday begins a stretch of 10 games in the next 17 nights.

4) All hands on deck

Defenceman Dylan Coghlan (19 straight healthy scratches) and forward David Gustafsson (18 scratches in 19 games) can’t get a sniff right now in what is a healthy lineup performing at a high level, but that could change if Arniel wants to try to inject some energy into what could become a weary lineup along the way here.

Keeping everyone sharp and maintaining some internal competition is sound strategy.

5) Ville's debut

At some point on this trip — perhaps as early as Monday in Minnesota — Ville Heinola is going to play his first NHL game since the 2022-23 season.

The 23-year-old defenceman broke his ankle in the final preseason game last year and never got into Winnipeg's lineup once he recovered. Then an infection that was discovered in training camp this year required going under the knife once again.

Heinola is currently with the Manitoba Moose on a conditioning assignment and logged big minutes in Thursday's 5-0 loss to the Chicago Wolves. Barring any unexpected developments, he'll play again on Saturday afternoon, then hop on a plane to join the Jets.

6) Final push for 4 Nations

The rosters for the 4 Nations Face-Off are set to be announced on Dec. 4, which means an increased spotlight on players in the mix.

While Connor and Hellebuyck are locks for the U.S. squad, Josh Morrissey, Mark Scheifele and Adam Lowry remain on the radar for Team Canada. All three are off to fantastic starts for the Jets, who no doubt hope that continues.

<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2024/11/21/heinola-solid-in-season-debut-with-moose>

Heinola solid in season debut with Moose D-man expected to join Jets on road trip

By: Joshua Frey-Sam

More than 20 minutes of ice time. A shot on goal and a couple of bumps and bruises to mark his official welcome.

All in all, it was a successful season debut for Ville Heinola.

The Winnipeg Jets' Finnish-born defenceman, who is in the final stages of working back from a second ankle surgery, was given an opportunity to work in every phase in the first of a two-game conditioning stint with Manitoba Moose, which ended in a 5-0 loss to the Chicago Wolves at the downtown rink on Thursday.

A rare 10:30 a.m. puck drop before a raucous crowd of more than 5,000 — predominantly school kids — was an unusual setting for Heinola's first taste of game action, to say the least.

There were no eyebrow-raising plays, and there were times when he felt like a player who was playing his first game in seven months, but an overall uneventful outing might've been the best-case scenario given what he's been through the last two seasons.

The one blip on his stat line was finishing minus-one after being on the ice for two goals, one on the penalty kill and one at even strength.

“Obviously, it was nice to play again,” Heinola said. “That felt great. I think it took me a couple of periods to get into the game but in the third, my body was feeling pretty good and it was nice to play.”

“Conditioning is not there yet. Obviously, I haven’t played for seven months so it’s a long time, but, like I said, in the third period I started feeling pretty good.”

Heinola will get another run when the Moose host the Wolves again on Saturday at 2 p.m.

He explained what getting back into the swing of things looks like.

“I think it’s just getting used to those game situations,” he said. “It doesn’t matter what you are doing to practice, it’s not a game and you just have to do some things a little different in the game. And obviously, it’s a little faster, too. So just getting used to the speed, and getting my conditioning and skating back.”

The 2019 first-round pick has been skating for a month already, so the Jets want his ramp-up period to be quick to get him into an NHL game sooner rather than later. Winnipeg begins a season-long six-game road trip on Friday and the plan is for Heinola to meet the team in Minnesota on Sunday.

He started Thursday’s contest and it didn’t take him long to get involved, as he teed up a hard slap shot from the top of the circle on his second shift. The Moose went scoreless in three power play opportunities, but Heinola saw some important action on the top unit.

“I thought Ville was fine,” said Moose head coach Mark Morrison. “I thought he got better every period. Looked a little more comfortable with the puck every period. But I think the game did what it was supposed to for Ville. I think he got enough puck touches and enough D-zone, so it was good for him.”

Heinola looked like he had done enough to make the Jets opening-night roster last season before he fractured his ankle in the final preseason game. He never got another chance with the big club, instead playing 41 games in the American Hockey League, where he tallied a career-high 10 goals and 17 assists.

There was optimism he would compete for an NHL job again this year, but an infection and another surgery to the same ankle would stymie those hopes on the second day of camp.

“It’s been a tough two years for him. I’m probably his biggest fan here,” Jets head coach Scott Arniel said Wednesday.

Arniel later joked he told Morrison to give Heinola a hefty 30-minute workload while he was with the AHL club. Thursday didn’t yield those numbers, but there was still plenty of work for the 23-year-old.

“I don’t know exactly, but I’m sure it was in the 20-minute mark,” Morrison said.

“I think he played what he could handle.”

Fellow blue-liner Simon Lundmark has been paired with Heinola a lot over the last four years, and they spent the majority of last season matched with each other. Lundmark said he didn’t

say much to his playing partner in the lead-up to the game, noting his experience would allow him to succeed.

“It’s fun to be back playing with him and good to see him back playing,” said Lundmark.

“I think he played great. We all know he’s really good with the puck, solid defensively, so I think he did a really good job.”

Morrison, whose club dropped to 5-9 on Thursday and occupies last place in the Central Division, said Heinola’s involvement in his second game will look a lot like it did in the first.

“I think it’ll look the same. I mean, he ran the No. 1 power-play unit, he plays 20-plus minutes in all situations and I think it was what it was,” he said.

“I think Ville got everything he could out of that game.”

<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2024/11/20/old-time-hockey-hits-pionk-wallet>

***Old-time hockey hits Pionk’s wallet
Jets’ feisty blue-liner ready to move on after being fined for hip check***

By: Mike McIntyre

The Winnipeg Jets thought it was a good old-fashioned hip check, the kind you rarely see anymore. The NHL clearly disagreed, slapping defenceman Neal Pionk with a \$5,000 fine for clipping, which is the maximum financial sanction allowed.

“It’s over, it’s done with. Moving on,” Pionk said Wednesday when asked about the incident for the first time.

The veteran defenceman wasn’t penalized on the play, which happened in the third period of Saturday’s 5-0 loss in Florida and sent Panthers forward Jesper Boqvist flying.

“I just tried to throw a check, that’s all,” said Pionk, who clearly had been coached not to add any further fuel to the fire. “I’d try to do it again. You’ve got to be smart about it. I can’t take a penalty. Don’t want to take a penalty to put the team shorthanded.”

Jets coach Scott Arniel made it clear where he stands on the issue.

“I’m from the 80s,” he said. “I remember coming to training camp and cutting across the middle and some of our veteran players saying you cannot do that because you’re going to get knocked into left field. That happened all the time, but it’s different now.”

Arniel said he was happy Boqvist wasn’t injured on the play.

“It’s real close to being a real clean hit for me,” he said.

Morgan Barron was growing impatient.

“More than I probably cared to admit,” he confessed.

So you can file his two empty-net goals on Tuesday night against Florida under the “beggars can’t be choosers” category as the 25-year-old finally broke the goose-egg that had been staring him in the face for the first 18 games of the year.

While the other 11 forwards in the lineup had all lit the lamp at least twice already, Barron’s big fat zero was now in his head — and his hands.

“You try to just stick to your process and not focus on the results, but at the end of the day, you want to be able to contribute and eventually score a few,” said Barron, who had a career-high 11 tallies in 80 games last year.

“I was probably gripping the stick a little bit tighter than I wanted to, but it lets things relax a little bit.”

It’s not easy being Dylan Coghlan and David Gustafsson these days. The two Jets skaters find themselves on the outside looking in, unable to crack a lineup that is healthy and successful.

So the scratches keep adding up, now at 19 consecutive games for Coghlan and 18 of the past 19 for Gustafsson.

Arniel said he is having regular talks with the duo just to make sure they stay sharp.

“You have to. You have to make sure everybody’s a part of it. As much as I say, ‘I need to get them in the lineup,’ sometimes it’s... whatever, we’re just kind of looking at things, we’re doing a lot of good things right now,” he said.

“I certainly don’t want this to continue, but I do have to continue having conversations with those guys. And I do. They know where they stand and how we go about things. I love the fact that they’re both upbeat guys. They practice hard. They do the extra work that they have to do.”

Forward Mark Scheifele and defenceman Dylan DeMelo missed Wednesday’s practice for maintenance but will be ready to go when the Jets start a six-game road trip on Friday in Pittsburgh.

The NHL coaching fraternity is a tight-knit one, with bench bosses regularly reaching out to each other via phone calls and texts to talk shop. Safe to say the firing of Jim Montgomery by the Boston Bruins on Tuesday led to a flurry of chatter.

“Like, why am I in this business?” Arniel joked.

“There’s certainly lots of stuff going back and forth when you’re having success, or when you’re having a tough go. Because we see each other at the draft, there’s lots of guys that have worked with each other over the years. There’s a real good camaraderie and you know when the games start, we don’t like each other. But at the end of the day, guys work together well.”

Montgomery led the Bruins to the best regular season in NHL history two years ago and had an overall record of 120-41-23 in his time with the Bruins. But a 8-9-1 start this year led to the stunning move.

Arniel, who coached Montgomery for one season with the Manitoba Moose in 1999-2000, was quick to reach out.

“He’s got a .714 winning percentage — he’s a great coach, he’s going to be back in the game,” said Arniel.

“Every team, every circumstance, is different. I talked to Monty. He’ll be up and running here I think fairly soon. At the end of the day, it just comes with the territory. This is the job you take on. You hate to see it, but it is part of it.”

<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2024/11/20/response-to-florida-debacle-shows-jets-are-for-real>

Response to Florida debacle shows Jets are for real Team tames Stanley Cup champs after back-to-back losses in Sunshine State

By: Mike McIntyre

A lengthy and rather quiet plane ride home. An eye-opening video session. Some candid conversations and soul-searching, the big stars rising to the challenge and shining bright.

That, in a nutshell, describes how the Winnipeg Jets were able to shake off a season-high losing “streak” and quickly get back to their winning ways.

Head coach Scott Arniel and several players have pulled back the curtain a bit to provide an inside look at how they rebounded from back-to-back defeats in the state of Florida by a combined score of 9-1. Any concerns this could snowball into something bigger were put to rest with Tuesday’s impressive 6-3 triumph over the Panthers at Canada Life Centre.

In the process, we’ve got a glimpse into the mindset and culture of the now 16-3-0 hockey club, one which has significantly raised the bar internally to chart a course straight to the top of the NHL standings.

“That is part of our identity and what we’re building: Don’t get comfortable,” Jets forward Kyle Connor told the Free Press on Wednesday following the team’s practice to prepare for a season-long six-game road trip which begins Friday in Pittsburgh.

“Listen, we got a really competitive group here. We know we want to win here, and everybody is striving for that goal. I just think it’s part of how we approach things every day here. It’s a real identity kind of mentality switch for that. We can feel that coming and put a stop to it right away. Grab the guy next to you and realize we’ve got to turn this thing around.”

Dropping two consecutive games is typically no big deal for a hockey club. The 82-game season is a marathon, not a sprint, and you’re not going to be at your best for every outing. You get the sense this version of the Jets took the flop in Florida rather personally, beginning with the 3,500-km charter flight home following Saturday’s 5-0 setback in Sunrise.

“Our players weren’t real happy with what happened. Coming home, that was a long flight home for us from Florida,” said Arniel, who opted to listen to some calming music rather than immediately go through the video as he normally does.

Connor admitted the normal card game at the back of the plane didn't have the same joy level.

"It felt like a loss, put it that way," he said.

The Jets took Sunday off to clear their heads away from the rink, then came back Monday for a spirited practice and a fairly revealing look at what went wrong as the coaching staff broke down film in front of them.

"Everybody was involved in the video. Every guy got to be a star," said Arniel.

How bad was it?

"I think every one of us got called out on something that we did wrong, whether we were out of position or mismanaged the puck," said defenceman Neal Pionk.

"But that's good. That's good for us to hear, and you've got to reset that once in while."

Arniel also had some individual conversations with his star players, who admittedly weren't very good in the losses to Tampa Bay and Florida and wanted a chance to respond.

It's why he took the unusual step Tuesday night of starting the line of Connor, Mark Scheifele and Gabe Vilardi, rather than the traditional shutdown trio of Adam Lowry, Nino Niederreiter and Mason Appleton.

"They wanted the challenge," said Arniel.

"I love the way they went out and went after it. They knew we weren't at our best in Florida. They wanted to turn that script around. I just thought starting those guys would be a way to get them into it right away."

Make no mistake: A little thing like that can go a long way in the world of pro sports. And Scheifele (three goals), Connor (one goal, one assist) and Vilardi (one assist) all responded with fantastic efforts, along with plenty of other teammates.

"(Scheifele) is one of our most dedicated players off the ice when it comes to eating, when it comes training. I mean he's a machine, whether it's getting ready prior to practice," said Arniel, noting how the No. 1 centre literally went down swinging on Saturday night by dropping the gloves with Aaron Ekblad in the third period of the lopsided loss.

"Even at the start of practice, in practice. Him and KC drive our practice, they want it to be hard, they want to be pushed, and they push themselves to be good in practice. He's just a true pro. He's easy to coach in the sense that you know that he's coming every night."

Scheifele and Connor are currently tied for the team scoring lead, each with 24 points (12G, 12A) through 19 games, putting them on pace for career bests offensively.

"After a loss like that, we look internally and how we can improve and not have that happen again," Connor said of rising to the occasion.

"Listen, we want to make a difference every single night, our line. The type of minutes that we play, the type of impact we believe we can have. When it doesn't go your way like that you're

pissed off. Lucky enough we were able to play that same team again, and I think there was a lot of motivation behind it to prove that going up against a team like that, the Stanley Cup champions, that we could play with them.”

There will be more losses on the way, and likely streaks of two defeats or more down the road. That’s life in the NHL, even for the best teams in the league. The Jets believe they’re better equipped than ever to weather whatever storms come their way, put everything in perspective and keep the focus on the ultimate prize.

“This is all building to the playoffs for us,” said Connor.

“Moments where we can look back on and how we handled that. Lessons that everybody can learn in our room here. It’s about building your identity, and I think we’ve done a pretty good job of that over the last couple years. We know what it looks like. We go into Florida and for whatever reason it wasn’t there that night. We knew exactly what to do it and turned it around with a really good effort.”

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https://www.espn.com/nhl/story/_/id/42487524/nhl-2024-25-winnipeg-jets-surprise-standings-playoffs-stanley-cup-analytics

Are the Winnipeg Jets really this good? Inside their hot start

By Kristen Shilton & Greg Wyshynski

One of the most impressive things about the Winnipeg Jets this season is how unimpressed they are with their record-breaking start.

"You can't get caught up in what you've just done. You've got to worry about your next opponent," said Scott Arniel, in his first season as the team's head coach. "This group has been awesome with just 'reset, go to the next game.'"

Start the season with eight wins -- and reset. Become the first NHL team to win 15 of its first 16 games -- and reset. Dominate the first month and a half of the season both offensively and defensively while posting a points percentage that would be a new NHL regular-season record if they're able to sustain it -- and reset.

In a season of surprises, none have been more shocking than the sudden ascent of the Jets. They were a 110-point team last season that was eliminated in the opening round, saw talented players defect as free agents and made its most significant change behind the bench, as Arniel stepped in for a retiring Rick Bowness.

Just 19 games into the 2024-25 season, the Jets are a juggernaut.

How did Winnipeg become so dominant? What's changed from last season? Is it possible this is sustainable and the Jets should be a Stanley Cup favorite?

Here's a deep dive into all things Winnipeg Jets, and whether this sensation will last.

What has changed from last season?

The Jets were already considered a strong defensive team. Most of that credit went to goalie Connor Hellebuyck, who captured his second Vezina Trophy last season while helping the Jets to a share of the NHL lead in goals against average (2.41 per game). But the team in front of him was tied for 10th overall in expected goals against per 60 minutes last season.

It's their offense that's the biggest change season-over-season. Through 18 games, the Jets were averaging 4.11 goals per game, after averaging 3.16 in 2023-24. That's after a Florida swing that saw them muster just one tally against the Tampa Bay Lightning and nothing against the Florida Panthers. They earned a little revenge on Tuesday, besting the Panthers 6-3.

The Jets became the fourth team since 1967-68 to lead the NHL in goals for and against per game through their first 15 games. Their 73 goals in 16 games was the third most by a team in its first 16 games over the last 30 seasons.

Winnipeg has 11 players with 10 or more points this season. While offensive stars like Mark Scheifele (24 points in 19 games) and Kyle Connor (12 goals) have done their part, the Jets are also getting huge contributions from players like Gabriel Vilardi (seven goals) and Nino Niederreiter (seven goals).

"Everybody's involved in it and that's what makes it so dangerous, so lethal. It's not just a one-trick pony," Connor said. "If one line has an off night, we usually have two or three going that can pick it up. So I think that's what makes us so dynamic."

Connor said that the team's offense comes from that aforementioned defensive prowess.

"It starts in our own zone," he said. "When we defend well, the team's going to give us all the chances that we need and I think that's where we're focused on coming into every single game."

The team's 5-on-5 scoring numbers aren't all that different from last season, as the Jets had the same goals-per-60 minutes average (2.67) through 18 games as they had all of last season. Their expected goals have ticked up from 2.43 in 2023-24 to 2.61 per 60 minutes this season.

What's helped fuel the Jets' offense is a power play that led the league at a 36.5% conversion rate, producing a league-high 19 goals in 18 games. Winnipeg had a power-play success rate of 18.8% last season.

The biggest change here is assistant coach Davis Payne, hired in the offseason to run their power play. He got the Jets to incorporate more movement in their man advantage, and installed Nikolaj Ehlers in the "pop" position in the slot. Ehlers didn't have a power-play goal in 82 games last season. He has three power-play goals in 18 games this campaign.

Of course, Payne isn't the biggest change to the coaching staff from last season. Scott Arniel was elevated from associate coach to head coach after the retirement of Rick Bowness, and that's been as much a factor in their success as anything.

How Scott Arniel lifted up the Jets

Scott Arniel had plenty to discuss about his own team when the Jets rolled into New York to face the Rangers earlier this month.

But he couldn't help reminiscing too, about his time spent with the Blueshirts from 2013-18 as an assistant coach under then-bench boss Alain Vigneault. It was Arniel's first big league

opportunity following his inaugural NHL coaching job with the Columbus Blue Jackets from 2010-12.

Arniel called the Rangers gig "a real reset" after the firing in Columbus, helping New York to a Stanley Cup Final in 2014 and three more postseason appearances from there. The experience left an indelible mark.

"We had a chance to go to the Stanley Cup," Arniel said. "We didn't win it [against the Los Angeles Kings], but the opportunity to be in the Eastern Conference and see the rivalries that are out here, it was a great learning curve for me. I got to work under some good people that springboarded me forward to where I am today."

There were more stops along the way before Arniel secured his second head gig. He was let go -- along with Vigneault and most of his staff -- in 2018 and moved onto an assistant spot with Washington. In 2022, Jets' coach Rick Bowness brought Arniel to Winnipeg. When Bowness had to step aside for medical reasons during his tenure, it was Arniel who took the reins. So when Bowness retired last summer, Winnipeg GM Kevin Cheveldayoff didn't have to look far for his replacement.

"He's got intimate knowledge of a lot of different things," Cheveldayoff said of tapping Arniel. "I was around when he made a couple of phone calls to some of the captains and [Connor Hellebuyck], and then talking to them [after], they were already talking about the season, they were already talking about next season; there wasn't that kind of get to know you conversation. It was, 'damn right, let's get going.' That passion definitely came through."

Cheveldayoff also noted positive player feedback on the structure put in place with Arniel on the coaching staff. There was a desire from the team to maintain consistent messaging, something Arniel has delivered. The Jets are flexible under his eye, as capable of winning a tight-checking 1-0 affair as they are a 6-5 shootout. Arniel preaches discipline from the defensive side on out, and it's served Winnipeg in becoming the multi-faceted powerhouse they've so often been throughout this season.

It goes back to a trust in those relationships between players and coach, a product of Arniel's time learning from Bowness.

"It's coaches pushing players," Arniel said of his philosophy. "It's players pushing players. It's just kind of that mindset."

The players said having Arniel step in when Bowness was away during the last two seasons helped the transition.

"We had a preview of him as a head coach," defenseman Josh Morrissey said. "We saw how he ran the bench in games and stuff like that. He's an intense guy, but he's calm back there and I think our team feeds off that and kind of plays with that identity."

Success can allow for that kind of serenity, but the Jets coaches want to make sure it doesn't lead to complacency. They've been pleased to find that the players have an appetite for scrutiny despite stacking wins.

"Us coaches, we're never happy. It doesn't matter what the record is," Arniel said. "We're always finding things that maybe you want to work on, but that's where this group has been good: We

know what our structure is and if we continue to lead with that first, that usually helps us have success."

Arniel said his phone has been blowing up with messages from NHL peers commenting on his team's historic start.

"There's been some funny ones, some real good ones," he said. "There's so many good coaches in this league. They're gunning for us, so you've got to be ready because these guys are always at their best."

The Connor Hellebuyck effect

Connor Hellebuyck is delivering one heck of an encore.

The league's reigning Vezina Trophy winner is better now than he was last season. Hellebuyck made it look easy as he cruised to a league-leading 12-1-0 mark with a .924 save percentage and 1.92 goals-against average to open this campaign. And despite a hiccup against Florida -- where Hellebuyck stopped 26 of 31 shots in a 5-0 Jets loss -- he has rarely been short of spectacular manning the Jets' crease.

Hellebuyck has three shutouts already, including in back-to-back outings against Colorado (1-0) and Utah (3-0). Surprisingly, it marked the first pair of consecutive shutouts in Hellebuyck's career, and gave the netminder 40 total.

Winnipeg leans on its goaltender to be a difference-maker, and the 31-year old embraces that pressure by demanding a heavy workload. He's started more games (484) than any NHL goaltender since 2016-17 and is tied for the fourth-best save percentage (.917%) in that stretch among goalies with at least 50 starts.

"I like to play a lot," Hellebuyck earlier this month. "Once you get your rhythm, you can just kind of maintain it ... [things] just kind of click and you see the game, and you kind of get ahead of the game. The more and more shots you get, the better you get ahead of that game."

Putting too much weight on his own shoulders has derailed Hellebuyck in the past, though. He followed up that Vezina-worthy regular season with a shockingly poor first-round playoff effort against the Colorado Avalanche; Hellebuyck was 1-4, with an .870 SV% and 5.23 GAA.

What Hellebuyck said post-series was even more jaw-dropping, all things considered: "You're probably not going to believe when I say I was playing the best hockey of my career."

That's Hellebuyck, though; never short on confidence. He mused that instead of trying to win games on his own he had to be part of the full team's undertaking.

"There's two ways to go about it," Hellebuyck said before the season started. "Try and do it yourself, or try and rely on a team. The way I've gotten to where I am today is really digging into myself and doing everything I can, which really helps the team in the long run. [But] don't deviate from what I've given myself [either]."

Hellebuyck has clearly struck the right balance this season. He's recorded at least a .900 SV% in 10 of his 14 appearances, and allowed two or fewer goals against in seven outings. That's been a complement to what the Jets are achieving as a whole, with consistent scoring, vastly improved special teams and impressive buy-in defensively.

"Everybody knows if you don't have goaltending, it makes for a long year. So Helly gives us that foundation," Arniel said. "But the biggest thing too is that we're not just sitting and waiting on him to make 50 saves for us. We know there's going to be breakdowns, where he's going to have to stand up and make the save for us. But at the end of the day, our play in front of him has probably helped us not spend so much time on our end of the rink."

Hellebuyck hasn't single-handedly fueled Winnipeg's historic start, but his impact is undeniably significant. After all, they didn't coin the man "Vezina-Buyck" in Winnipeg for nothing.

And speaking of the Vezina, the league hasn't had a goalie win in consecutive seasons since Martin Brodeur did it in 2007 and 2008. Will Hellebuyck be next?

The psychological impact of playoff disappointment

Last season, the Jets were tied with the Panthers for the fourth highest points percentage in the NHL (.671). They had identical 52-24-6 records, but that's where the similarities ended: The Panthers went on to win the Stanley Cup for the first time, while the Jets were eliminated in the first round by the Avalanche.

It was the second straight season Winnipeg was unceremoniously dumped in five games by an opening-round opponent. In 2022-23, it was the Vegas Golden Knights steamrolling a 95-point Jets team en route to the Stanley Cup. But last postseason's dismissal left the team more frustrated, after amassing 110 points in the regular season -- six of them against the Avalanche, against whom the Jets were 3-0-0 with a plus-7 goal differential.

"We were on an eight-game winning streak. We played Colorado so well in the regular season and it just didn't go our way in the playoffs," winger Kyle Connor said. "This group's been together for quite a long time now and the overall message was that we've got to get better as a group. Every single person in here has to take another level."

Teams respond to playoff disasters in different ways. The series loss to Colorado -- a 7-6 Game 1 win, followed by four straight defeats -- didn't lead to a panicky overhaul of the roster or a crisis of faith for the franchise. It did lead the Jets to look inward as to why their regular-season success hadn't led to postseason glory, both for the players and the coaches.

"I think it's two years in a row that you lose at five. Two great regular seasons in back-to-back years and then early first-round exits is not what we're looking for," said forward Cole Perfetti. "We know we have the group that can go a long way. We've proven to have a lot of regular-season success now. We're just trying to build day after day to find that next level, next gear and hopefully propel us deep into the playoffs."

When Arniel was elevated to head coach, one of his offseason objectives was to look under the Jets' hood analytically to better understand how Colorado flipped the script on them. It was clear the Avalanche had changed tactics offensively in the series, using a dump-and-chase attack that impacted Winnipeg's defense and hindered its offense, and the Jets hadn't reacted quick enough to that.

Rather than building up a reserve of rage and discontent, Winnipeg channeled that frustration into a teachable moment for the group.

"It was a big thing that we talked about the start of the year and then we put behind us," Arniel said. "There's a process that we got to build. We're trying to build that resiliency now that makes us good then, because it wasn't good last year."

He said the Colorado loss has also helped the team manage its emotions during this historic start.

"It's why we're not over the top, living the high life right now, because we know what happened last year," the coach said. "We had a fantastic season, so we're not going crazy here in November. I don't think the Stanley Cup's ever been handed out in November."

The consistency of roster

There are some prominent names from last season's playoff roster that are no longer in the Peg. Trade deadline additions like Sean Monahan and Tyler Toffoli left through free agency, to Columbus and San Jose respectively. Veteran defenseman Brenden Dillon signed with New Jersey.

Connor said that part of being a Winnipeg Jet is knowing that reinforcements might not arrive from elsewhere.

"You don't typically get those big free agents. We have to improve in this room and I think everybody took that to heart," he said. "You can kind of see the fruitions of that today."

For the most part, this roster has been together for two seasons. You have to go back to the end of the 2022-23 season to find the last time this roster was really shaken up: That's when former captain Blake Wheeler had the last year of his contract bought out and controversial center Pierre-Luc Dubois was traded to Los Angeles for Alex Iafallo, Rasmus Kupari and Gabriel Vilardi -- all of whom are contributors on this current Jets team.

Arniel said that having consistency with the roster helps "when you have to go through big changes" as a team.

"There's a growing period, and I think that we've kind of been through that already as a group over the last couple of years," he said. "Whether that's players playing amongst each other, whether it's defensive partners, whether it's line combinations, they've had the ability to do it for the last few years."

Another thing happened in 2023: Both Scheifele and Hellebuyck committed to remain with the organization long-term. They both signed seven-year, \$59.5 million contracts to end any speculation about becoming the next prominent names putting Winnipeg in the rear-view mirror.

"We're all just jelling really well together," Perfetti said. "And I think guys get along really well off the ice. So I think that adds to a lot of the team's success. We found a good groove and we're just sticking to it right now."

What the analytics tell us

Some of the Jets' analytics at 5-on-5 aren't exactly harbingers of dominance. Natural Stat Trick has their expected goals percentage at 48.2%, which is 22nd in the league. It ticks up a bit when adjusted for score: 49.1% when the game is within one goal. The same goes for their percentage of shot attempts.

But while the Jets' 5-on-5 numbers are a bit average, the NHL data analysts we surveyed marveled at the Jets' power play this season.

"They are scoring at an incredible rate on the power play, shooting 14.1% vs 10.4% last season," said Meghan Chayka of Stathletes. "They are doing this while averaging a similar shot quality: 15.6 scoring chances per game to 15.4 in 2023-2024."

Chayka notes that through Nov. 15, Winnipeg was scoring a goal every 4:09 of power-play time, when the NHL average is 8:03.

ESPN's Rachel Doerrie said the biggest difference for the Jets year over year is special teams, with the power play clicking around double the rate that it did last season.

"Their power-play shooting percentage is sky-high," she said.

But Doerrie expects their numbers on the man advantage will come back to earth at some point. "I'd expect their power-play percentage to level off around 25% -- still top 10 in the NHL, but not historical," she said.

At 5-on-5, the Jets appear to be creating more off the rush and causing chaos in front of the opposing goal.

"They seem to be generating more scoring opportunities with traffic, which have a higher likelihood of conversion," Doerrie said. "They are also the type of goals that get scored in the playoffs -- a very translatable style of offensive play."

Doerrie was not only impressed with how often the Jets score this season but when they score. Winnipeg was 25th in the NHL last season in first-period goals. This season, they're averaging more than a goal per game in the first period.

"Giving Hellebuyck a lead and allowing the bottom-six guys to go to work plays right into their hands," she said. "If you're scoring in the first and you aren't giving up that lead, that's a good sign."

But for all of their offensive fireworks, the Jets remain most consistently impressive on defense.

"The Jets are the top team in the NHL in expected save percentage. They are structured defensively and that isn't a surprise, as they have been top seven the last two seasons as well," Chayka said. "Only 21.6% of shot attempts against are scoring chances, which is the third lowest in the NHL."

"Connor Hellebuyck is performing at an exceptional level again this season, so it's not a surprise with him being top three in goals saved above expected the last two full seasons. They are a structured defensive team with a strong goalie."

Is this sustainable?

Perfetti admitted that the Jets' scorching start has probably made him more superstitious than usual.

"Just because we got such a good thing going. Everyone's playing so well, our team's finding so much success," he said. "You don't want to change too much up. You just want to ride the high and keep going with it."

Through 18 games, the Jets have an .833 points percentage. Maintaining that pace would obliterate the best 82-game regular-season ever, set by the Boston Bruins (.823) in 2022-23.

Is that possible? Is this sustainable?

"Honestly, we know what we're doing, but we don't take too much stock in it. It's move on to the next one. It's 'how can we improve, how can we be better?'" Connor said. "I think that's what made us successful to this point. Nobody's satisfied."

So many things have gone right for the Jets thus far. They've used just 20 skaters this season, the second fewest in the NHL, according to Chayka. While other teams have juggled their lineups due to early-season injuries, the Jets fly on.

"Even if the Jets continue to avoid the injuries, there are questions about how sustainable this run is," she said.

Chayka points to the Winnipeg offense as a point of concern. Through Nov. 15, they led the NHL in goals scored above expected, at plus-19.9 in all situations. Chayka believes that if they regressed to the NHL average, the Jets "would be near where their goals per game was last season."

That offense has allowed them to win even when they've dug themselves a hole. Chayka notes that the Jets have won seven of 10 games when giving up the first goal to an opponent -- a .700 winning percentage.

"Winnipeg has allowed the first goal in 10 of 17 games, including being down at least 2-0 five times. But it is 7-3-0 in those games," she said. "There have only been four teams with a winning percentage above .600 when trailing first in games over the last five seasons."

Doerrie is also skeptical about the Jets avoiding the injury bug and remaining as good on the power play as they've been. She has faith in Hellebuyck, but notes that he's in the top six for high-danger saves per 60 minutes. "His high-danger save percentage is stable, but you don't want your goalie facing the same number of high danger chances as Anaheim, Chicago and Nashville if you're a contender," she said.

In general, Doerrie believes Winnipeg is punching above its weight.

"Winnipeg's record is better than they are, but they are a solid team. They are middle-of-the-pack in predictive stats like expected goals and percentage of shot attempts, and that is more indicative of their true talent. They are actually performing marginally worse in those categories than they were last season, a sign of that regression is likely on the horizon," she said.

"They are likely to outperform those stats compared to other teams because of Hellebuyck, but not to the extent that has occurred this season. They've given themselves a cushion, but the statistical profile has some red flags that should give people pause before declaring them as a true Cup threat."

But for the Jets, the cushion is the key. If there is regression, if these recent duds in Florida become more frequent, if Winnipeg's early-season dominance wanes, they feel they've captured significant points in the first two months of the season to weather that.

"Whether you win in October or even March or April, the points are worth the same. So it's nice to have been able to bank so many early on," captain Adam Lowry said. "It's been fun. Winning is a lot more fun than losing. But we're going to have to hope to continue it."

Winnipeg Sun

<https://winnipeg.sun.com/sports/hockey/nhl/winnipeg-jets/thicker-skin-lesson-learned-jets-felt-playoff-vibe-against-champion-panthers>

Thicker skin, lesson learned: Jets felt playoff vibe against champion Panthers

By Paul Friesen

Somebody asked Winnipeg Jets coach Scott Arniel on Wednesday about the firing of Jim Montgomery, his counterpart in Boston and someone he coached with the Manitoba Moose back in the day.

It seemed the question was going to be about the reminder NHL coaches get every time one of their own gets the axe.

The reporter hadn't even finished it when Arniel jumped in with an answer.

"Why am I in this business?" he suggested.

When the laughs died down, Arniel continued.

"The trend has been like this for the last five, six years. He's got a .714 winning percentage, or whatever. He's a great coach. He's going to be back up and running here fairly soon.

"It just comes with the territory."

Arniel was close. Montgomery's points percentage with the Bruins over the last three seasons is .715.

But that only tells one side of the story. The left side.

Look down the right side of Montgomery's online resume and you'll find his playoff winning percentage in Boston: A meager .450.

Which brings us right back to the Jets and their sparkling 16-3 mark so far this season.

The hottest start in NHL history has this team on pace for the best regular-season record the league has ever seen.

The current holder of that record? Montgomery's Bruins, two years ago.

Loading...

On the verge of being named the coach of the year for 2022-23, Montgomery and his team became the flop of that year when they were ousted by Florida in the first round of the playoffs.

Last year they lost in the second round, again to Florida.

Where are we going with all this?

The Jets just played a back-to-back set with Paul Maurice's Panthers.

Skinned alive to the tune of 5-0 in Game 1 on the road, they came out firing in Winnipeg for Game 2 and skated off with a 6-3 win.

Ending a modest two-game slide, they regained their shine atop the NHL.

But none of this October and November polish will mean a thing if they tarnish it all again in April.

Just a columnist pouring cold water on the party?

Nope. That theme came from Kyle Connor just seconds into his Wednesday media scrum.

"This is all building to the playoffs for us," Connor said. "Moments where we can look back on how we handled that. Lessons that everybody can learn in our room."

This was the Jets' only back-to-back set of the season.

It seems that gave it a playoff feel. So did the fact it was against the Stanley Cup champs.

"It's rare to play a team back-to-back in the regular season," defenceman Neal Pionk said. "So that's a lesson that you can take from November into the playoffs ... get beat up pretty good in their building and we respond well."

Like they didn't against Colorado last spring.

One loss led to another, and to another — and then it was over.

A regular season to remember, a first round to forget.

"That happens in playoffs. You have a bad game and you've got to put it behind you," Arniel said. "It was great that we got to be against the Stanley Cup champions and be fortunate enough to play them after a not-so-great game. How we went out and got after them and got back to playing Jet hockey."

Arniel likes to say regular-season games are meant to grow callouses.

"Our skin gets thicker," he said.

It's all aimed at being grittier and more resilient when it matters most.

Not just less quit, but no quit.

Not even when going into a third period down 4-0, as they were in Florida on Saturday.

“That’s something we talked about at the end of the second period,” Pionk recalled. “No matter what the score is, don’t ever give up, don’t ever lose that compete, don’t lose the edge.”

Having that in their back pockets should come in handy in April.

Having it in their hearts, even better.

“It’s all being pushed towards what happens when or if we get in the playoffs,” Arniel said. “It’s why we’re not over the top here. We’re extremely happy and excited about what we’ve done so far. But we haven’t even got to the 20-game mark, yet.”

That’ll come in Pittsburgh on Friday.

Until then, Arniel’s Winnipeg points percentage through 19 games is a lofty .842.

Include his two years in Columbus, though, and his career percentage still hasn’t reached .500.

More telling will be the playoff side of his resume, where so far there’s not a single entry.

As Montgomery and every coach eventually finds out, that’s why they’re in this business.’

<https://winnipeg.sun.com/sports/hockey/nhl/winnipeg-jets/id-try-to-do-it-again-fine-wont-stop-jets-neal-pionk>

'I'd try to do it again': Fine won't stop Jets' Neal Pionk

By Paul Friesen

Five thousand bucks can buy a lot of memories, but Neal Pionk would rather forget all about his latest splurge.

Actually, it was more like a purging.

Of his wallet.

The Winnipeg Jets defenceman was hit with that maximum fine for his hip check on Panthers defenceman Jesper Boqvist in Florida on Saturday.

He submarined a question about it four days later.

“It’s over, it’s done with,” he said on Wednesday. “Movin’ on.”

A bit of a Pionk specialty, the check wasn’t penalized, yet the NHL saw fit to hit him where it hurts.

The league obviously wants to dissuade what used to be an accepted and well-regarded move by a defender.

Perhaps Pionk went a little low and through Boqvist’s legs (he wasn’t hurt).

And perhaps the hip check is an endangered species in today's safety-conscious game.

"I don't know. Maybe," Pionk said. "I just tried to throw a check, that's all. I'd try to do it again. You've got to be smart about it. I can't take a penalty."

Asked about his understanding of what made Pionk's hit wrong, Jets coach Scott Arniel took a few seconds to find an answer that wouldn't result in his own wallet taking a hit.

"I'm from the eighties," Arniel began. "I remember coming to training camp and coming across the middle, and some of our veteran players telling me you cannot do that, because you're going to get knocked into left field. And that happened all the time. But it's different now. They call it clipping. It's a different rule, a different way of going about it."

"That's real close to being a real clean hit for me."

Slam the door, hit the road

Ending their first two-game slide with a 6-3 win over Florida at home on Tuesday, winger Kyle Connor says the Jets have a good handle on their identity.

"We've done a pretty good job of that over the last couple years," Connor said. "We know what it looks like."

That identity includes slamming the door on losing streaks.

"We can feel that coming and put a stop to it right away," Connor said. "Grab the guy next to you and realize we've got to turn this thing around."

A fair bit was made of a team meeting going into Tuesday's game — and a video session that highlighted screw-ups — and how top players like Connor and Mark Scheifele reacted: they combined for four goals on Tuesday.

But Arniel, who took over from Rick Bowness this season, says this has been an open, coachable bunch for a couple of years now.

"The buy-in that we get from our leadership group, it starts right there," the coach said. "If they don't want to play this way, you're going to be pounding your head against the rocks. I probably didn't have to have the meeting. They all knew. I knew there was going to be a better product on the ice."

"Our leaders took charge... first they led by example, and then they dragged a lot of other guys along with them."

After travelling to New York and Florida for three games last week, returning home for one, the Jets begin a season-high, six-game, 11-day trip in Pittsburgh on Friday.

Pionk summed it up like this: "Do the laundry, grab all the underwear you own and go back on the road."

The Hockey News

<https://www.sportsnet.ca/nhl/article/jets-mark-scheifele-belongs-on-team-canada-at-4-nations-face-off/>

NHL's Biggest Pleasant Surprises At The Quarter Mark: Jets, Capitals, Wolf And More

By Adam Proteau

The NHL is full of pleasant surprises, but five teams in particular have soared above expectations and demanded attention.

Six NHL clubs completed the first quarter of the regular season, so it's a great time to look back on the first 20 games or so and pick out the biggest surprises and letdowns at the quarter mark in 2024-25.

We'll start the process with five teams – and a couple of players in particular – that have been the biggest surprises in a positive way this season.

1. Winnipeg Jets

Many, if not most, people had the Jets as a playoff team after finishing fourth in the NHL last season. But even those most optimistic about Winnipeg would not have expected them to roar out to a 16-3-0 start to the season.

The Jets have already pulled off an eight-game win streak and a seven-game win streak. While they did have a two-game losing streak in Tampa Bay and Florida, Winnipeg turned around and defeated the defending Stanley Cup champion Panthers 6-3 on Tuesday.

The Jets have the league's second-best offense, averaging 4.21 goals-for per game. Their defense is almost as dominant, currently ranking fifth in the NHL at 2.41 goals against per game.

Their three losses came against above-average teams, but they've otherwise handled their business admirably and given themselves a cushion at the top of the NHL. They're five points ahead of the Washington Capitals and Minnesota Wild in second place, and they're 12 points ahead of the Central's No. 4 squad, the Colorado Avalanche.

They're better than anyone hoped, and they're the gold standard for teams right now. Let's see how they keep up for the rest of the season and playoffs, where the Avalanche upset them in the first round last year.