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Jets face big test on blue line with Samberg injury

By: Mike McIntyre

ST. PAUL — The Winnipeg Jets don't have another defenceman like Dylan Samberg, who has stepped up to play a big role for the NHL's No. 1 team so far this season.

His extended absence due to a broken foot is looming large on a blue line that had, until Saturday night in Nashville, enjoyed a remarkable stretch of good health and good fortune.

"He does so much for us," said teammate Dylan DeMelo. "Not just shot blocking, but having a good stick and breaking up a lot of plays."

Playing on the second-pairing with the resurgent Neal Pionk, Samberg has been an unheralded shining star for the Jets. The 25-year-old Minnesota product is averaging a career-high 20:17 of ice time per game, which is fourth overall on the team behind Josh Morrissey, DeMelo and Pionk.

He and Pionk are both plus-12 this year at even strength, which is terrific when you factor in they're often paired against the other team's best. Although offence isn't his top priority, Samberg has already set a new career-high with three goals to go with three assists.

And while he's not at the physicality level of Brenden Dillon, the former teammate whose role he moved up to fill this year, the 6-4, 216-pound Samberg brings some size and grit to a back-end that doesn't have a lot of it, especially with Logan Stanley also sidelined with an injury.

Samberg can clear out the front of his net, be a menace on the penalty kill and get his hands dirty if needed.

Digging into the advanced stats, Samberg's Corsi For Percentage is 53.11, which tops all Winnipeg defencemen, according to the Natural Stat Trick website. That metric deals with a team's puck possession when the player is on the ice. Anything above 50 per cent is considered good. Anything above 55 per cent is considered elite. Samberg ranks 18th overall among NHL D who have played at least 350 minutes.

It's a similar story for the Expected Goals Metric, where Samberg's 53.52 per cent is second only to Pionk's 54.92 per cent. Both are inside the league's top 20 overall.

"It would be a big loss if he's out for any length of time," captain Adam Lowry said following the 4-1 loss to the Predators, which wasn't helped by the fact the Jets were playing for a second straight night and forced to go with just five defencemen for the majority of the contest after Samberg went down thanks to a Steven Stamkos slapper.

There's no clear timeline for Samberg, but a broken foot means multiple weeks, not days, for the team's second-best left-shot defenceman. So where does the club go from here to fill what

coach Scott Arniel says is a “big hole” on a roster that is surrendering just 2.43 goals per game, which is third-best in the league?

The Jets spent Sunday resting and recovering here in the Twin Cities and will return to the ice on Monday for a marquee matchup with the Minnesota Wild. It’s a battle of 1 vs. 2 in the overall NHL standings, and who would have predicted that at the quarter-point of the campaign?

Injuries are part of the game, and every team is going to deal with some key ones at various points. The Wild, for example, may not have leading scorer Kirill Kaprizov for a second straight game as he deals with a lower-body issue.

Looking at internal solutions, Ville Heinola immediately jumps out, with the planets seemingly aligned in his favour for a change.

The smooth-skating, puck-moving 23-year-old has been on the wrong end of some bad timing in his young career, dating back to training camp prior to the 2023-24 season when he was set to crack the opening-night roster, only to break his ankle in the final exhibition game.

Heinola spent months recovering, then never got a sniff of the NHL as the Jets were flying high and not a single regular defenceman got hurt during the 82-game campaign, which Winnipeg finished fourth-overall with 110 points.

This past September, with Dillon and Nate Schmidt both moving on in unrestricted free agency, the door was wide open for Heinola. But an infection in his surgically-repaired ankle forced him to go under the knife once again.

Now, he’s back, having resumed skating a few weeks ago and playing two games with the Manitoba Moose on a conditioning assignment. After being held off the scoresheet in Thursday’s season debut, he had the primary assist on Saturday’s game-winning goal against the Rockford IceHogs at Canada Life Centre.

Heinola flew to Minnesota on Sunday to join the Jets, and the 20th-overall pick in the 2019 draft seems likely to jump right into the lineup — perhaps beside Pionk. Arniel could opt to ease Heinola in by putting him on the third pairing beside Colin Miller and moving Haydn Fleury up to skate with Pionk.

Fleury, by the way, has solid underlying metrics — his Corsi For Percentage is second on the Jets behind Samberg — albeit in much less minutes and a more sheltered role.

The only other internal option right now is Dylan Coghlan, a 26-year-old journeyman signed as a free agent this past summer who has been a healthy scratch for all 21 games so far this year. As a right shot, it’s unlikely he slots in ahead of Heinola or Fleury at this point.

Stanley will factor in once he’s cleared, but he hasn’t played since Nov. 9 against Dallas and has only just resumed skating on his own, not taking any contact as he deals with an undisclosed mid-body injury.

The other option is via the trade route, and you have to believe bolstering the blue line was already on general manager Kevin Cheveldayoff’s wish list prior to Samberg going down. A right-shot defender is the more likely target, with the idea of upgrading over Miller (and

Coghlan), especially if the team believes top prospect Elias Salomonsson needs a full year to develop on the farm with the Moose.

The Jets may not have Samberg for a while, but they do have the benefit of some time and patience thanks to a sizzling 17-4-0 start. There's no reason to push the panic button or do anything rash, even if their resiliency is about to be tested in a big way.

The Athletic

<https://www.nhl.com/news/winnipeg-jets-nashville-predators-game-recap-november-23>

Breaking down Winnipeg Jets a quarter of the way into 2024-25: What I think and what I know

By Murat Ates

The second chapter of Winnipeg's season is going to be a little more turbulent than the first.

The six-game, 10-day road trip the Jets are on now was always going to be a challenge, but Dylan Samberg's broken foot adds another layer of complication. It was unlikely Ville Heinola would be capable of top-four minutes in his first full NHL season even if he'd been healthy and gaining experience this whole time. It seems wishful to think Heinola is capable of filling the void Samberg leaves behind after two months of absence and two games of AHL action. The same applies to Logan Stanley, who is travelling with the team but hasn't played since Nov. 9 due to a "mid-body" injury.

Fine, then. A little bit of adversity can be good for a team that's won as many games as the Jets have early in the season.

What should we expect? How much of Winnipeg's start is for real, and what's realistic to ask of the Jets as their season faces its first major test? To answer those questions, I thought it was time to take a different approach.

Here's what I think — and what I know — about the Jets a quarter of the way into 2024-25.

What I think: Despite their record, the Jets probably aren't one of the 6 best teams in NHL history

Winnipeg is one of only six teams in NHL history to start a season with 17 wins in its first 20 games. Yes, they lost to Nashville in Game 21, but the Jets' accomplishment deserves to be celebrated: Only five teams have ever started a season this well. Not "in the salary-cap era." Not "post-expansion." Ever.

Most of those teams went on to remarkable accomplishments. The 2022-23 Boston Bruins set a record for most points in an NHL season (although they lost to Florida in the first round of the playoffs). The 2012-13 Chicago Blackhawks won their second Stanley Cup in four seasons and would go on to win their third Cup just two seasons later. The 2005-06 Ottawa Senators only went as far as the second round, which is certainly disappointing, but if you're willing to go back nearly 100 years — because that's what it takes to match an accomplishment so rare — the 1925-26 Senators went to the Cup Final, as did the 1929-30 Bruins.

And that's the whole list.

The problem with comparing Winnipeg to teams throughout history is that the NHL has changed its shape, size and rules in striking ways over the last century. Those 1926 Senators played before the league allowed forward passes, for example, while the 1930 Bruins played before the league had sorted out its definition of offside. Whatever, you might say. Winning 17 out of 20 games is incredible no matter what the rules are at a moment in history. Sure, I might retort. But the NHL used to end tie games with actual ties, making any wins-based record easier to achieve since 2005-06 than before the shootout reigned supreme.

And then you'd talk about the salary cap, parity and Winnipeg's overtime wins — they didn't even need a shootout, you might say — and we could go back and forth. I just don't think the best 20-game start to a season defines greatness. If the 1987-88 Edmonton Oilers or 1976-77 Montreal Canadiens didn't do it, then it's probably more an exciting piece of trivia than the definition of all-time excellence.

What I hope, dear reader, is that you've arrived at this point of my argument thinking, "Do you know how ridiculous it is that you're splitting hairs while comparing these league-leading Jets to the greatest dynasties in NHL history?" I do know that. My hope throughout all of this is that we can all appreciate a remarkable run without assuming it means more than I think it means. Nobody talks about the 2006 Senators anymore, but the 2025 Jets still have the opportunity to be a team you'll never forget.

What I know: The Jets are legitimately a very good hockey team

I think the energy people spend tripping over themselves to define exactly what Winnipeg's start means comes from people's need to establish expectations. The Jets have accomplished X early this season, so we can likely get ourselves ready for Y down the stretch or in the playoffs.

The problem with that approach is hockey is beautiful chaos. It balances moments of spectacular speed and skill with brutal physicality. Players grind and battle for large portions of the game, fighting for the few feet of space that allow skill to take over — and, even then, enough goals go in off of shin pads, through traffic, and as a direct result of the chaos that skill is often outshone by determination and by luck. Imagine treating force of will and sheer chance as equals in any other sport. It's madness, but in hockey, we see some games won because teams are better, others because they worked harder and others still because the right player hit the wrong side of the post.

A hockey season's story gets written in real time but can only be understood afterward. If the Jets demonstrate resilience in the second half, avoiding some of the problems that have plagued them in recent seasons, and put together a playoff performance worthy of celebration, we will look back at this beginning as if it was always foundational to that success. If they falter, they were always an autumn darling at best.

Revisionist history is unfair but unavoidable in sports.

In an effort to avoid that, here is what I know about the Jets: They have perhaps the best goaltender on the planet. Their power play (33.9 percent) is operating at greater efficiency than the best full-season power play of all time (Edmonton, 2022-23, 32.4 percent).

A quick numbers paragraph: At five-on-five, they take the ninth-most shots and give up the 11th-most shots, balancing out to a slightly above average 50.9 percent. I'm not terribly concerned that they've turned that into a 46-34 lead in five-on-five goals. Connor Hellebuyck and Eric

Comrie have provided some of the best goaltending in the league, yes, but their combined .931 at five-on-five isn't any better than what Winnipeg has gotten for the past three years. Put another way, I don't think it's fair to expect Hellebuyck to regress toward league average; I expect Hellebuyck's numbers to regress toward Hellebuyck's average — which, as it turns out, is excellent.

What I think: You miss out on a lot of enjoyment if you define a season only by playoff success
The Stanley Cup trumps all else, and I say this as a mathematically inclined person who understands that a playoff series is so fast and such a small sample size that puck luck plays an enormous role. The biggest glory of NHL hockey comes from the Cup. Legacies are defined by whether or not players have lifted the Cup. That reality isn't changing.

But you have to be able to enjoy the moments along the way — and Winnipeg has provided a ton of them.

What I think: Mark Scheifele is nursing an injury

Gabriel Vilardi has been taking an awful lot of faceoffs lately: five against Florida on Tuesday, 16 against Pittsburgh on Friday, 14 against Nashville on Saturday. Scheifele, who is still averaging 16 faceoffs per night, took only two each against the Penguins and Predators.

It seems reasonable to wonder if Scheifele is battling something right now, especially after Scott Arniel played coy in response to Mike McIntyre's questions on the subject in Pittsburgh. "Gabe's really good at faceoffs," was how Arniel explained it in Pittsburgh, after a pause. He was right — Vilardi won 12 of 16 faceoffs against the Penguins and then eight of 14 in Nashville — but this is a curious development. Vilardi took 59 faceoffs last season.

To be clear: This is speculation. Scheifele scored a hat trick against Florida on Tuesday and his ice time hasn't taken a notable dip. I just think it's a situation to watch, given Scheifele's importance to the Jets and his potential to play for Team Canada at the 4 Nations Face-Off in February.

What I know: The top line has delivered results, vindicating Arniel's belief in them

Scheifele, Kyle Connor and Vilardi were outscored at five-on-five last season and badly outshot, leading to legitimate questions about how they stacked up to other top lines in the NHL. When they were outscored 9-5 and outshot 79-58 through the first 10 games of this season, it seemed as though Winnipeg's top line was headed for a humbling five-on-five scoreline.

Arniel stuck by his stars and the results have been excellent. The trio has won the flow-of-play battle more often than not, outshooting opponents 74-67 and beating them 9-4 in real goals since the 10-game mark. They've gotten the puck out of their own zone more effectively and shown better execution at their blue line. Defensive effort has seldom been in question — even in tough outings like Winnipeg's 5-0 loss in Florida.

The Jets don't need Connor, Scheifele and Vilardi to be threats for the Selke Trophy. They do need them to win their minutes. They're doing that now while continuing to score on the power play, which vindicates Arniel's confidence in them. Meanwhile, the Jets' second and third lines are dominating on the scoresheet, with Adam Lowry's and Vladislav Namestnikov's lines combining for a 24-8 lead in goals.

What I think: Arniel did well to assert himself in small doses early

In some ways, Winnipeg's top-line struggles gave Arniel the perfect opportunity to assert himself as head coach. He values his top line, believing in them to win their minutes on a consistent basis against the game's top players. I have no doubt Connor, Scheifele and Vildardi are Plan A and I see the logic in it, given the consistency of Winnipeg's other lines.

But it's not always perfect. Sometimes, there are stretches of poor puck management. Arniel hasn't gone as far as to start a game with reorganized lines but hasn't been afraid to mix things up mid-game when things aren't working. I think there's a balance to walk between demanding accountability from a team's top players and making sure those top players have bought in on the big picture. A gentle "that wasn't good enough, here's a new look" at key moments — while also going back to the big guns and working alongside them in meetings, as Arniel has done — has been a solid approach.

What I think: The power play is good, by design

We've been through this already. The Jets' power play has shown an ability to attack from all areas of the ice this season. They don't reset to the same guy in the same spot every time; instead, players have options whether they're at the top of the zone, below the goal line or on either flank. Winnipeg's power-play puck retrievals have also been furiously effective this season. The speed at which the Jets attack loose pucks and get those pucks back onto attackers' sticks has been a treat to watch.

What I know: Power-play production is volatile and it's a problem to rely on it

The Jets are scoring on roughly one out of every four shots they take on the power play right now. Even the best power play in league history managed "only" a 19.7 percent shooting percentage over a full season. The Jets are cruising near 24 percent right now and let's be real — they're good, but cold streaks can happen at a moment's notice.

In one example Jets fans won't hate too much, last year's Toronto Maple Leafs went from the seventh-best regular-season power play to a horrible 4.8 percent efficiency against Boston in the playoffs. Special teams help win series, but Stanley Cup champions need to be great five-on-five teams, too.

What I think: The Jets have enough ways to win to insulate against cold snaps

There are going to be tough stretches this season. Winnipeg's current road trip was already going to be a challenge before Samberg broke his foot. The Jets will need to be able to absorb the tough times and stay in the fight.

Their goaltending and power play are as good as it gets in the NHL. They're also a strong five-on-five team, although not the league's best. This variety of ways to win should help insulate the Jets when their power play goes cold or the bounces just aren't going their way.

What I know: Five-on-five is still the most important part of the game

The Panthers scored 45 five-on-five goals en route to their Stanley Cup last season, taking 1,130 minutes to do so. They added 15 on the power play in 140 minutes with the man advantage. Both goals they scored in their decisive Game 7 victory came at even strength, as did 17 out of 18 goals they scored in the Stanley Cup Final.

This is an extremely anecdotal way of making a point that most readers will probably already understand. Still, it seems worth noting Winnipeg's torrid start does leave room for improvement. NHL Edge data shows Winnipeg isn't in the top half of teams in terms of offensive

zone time at even strength. The Jets are also spending more time in their own zone this year than last.

What I think:

The Jets' odds of a playoff spot are stratospheric.

What I know:

It's still going to be a heck of a ride.

Minneapolis Star Tribune

<https://www.startribune.com/minnesota-wild-winnipeg-jets-meeting-of-two-of-nhls-top-teams-karill-kaprizov/601186230>

Wild clash with Jets in a battle of NHL's top two teams

By Sarah McLellan

The long-standing rivalry between the Wild and Jets has been upgraded to a battle for first place in the NHL.

That's the race these Central Division foes are in approximately a quarter of the way through the season, jockeying that will make their clash on Monday night at Xcel Energy Center a litmus test for both teams.

"It's a chance to showcase yourself against the best," Wild alternate captain Marcus Foligno said.

Since No. 1 Winnipeg has a four-point lead over the second-seeded Wild, the Wild can't overtake the Jets, but they can climb closer to the top and secure their first statement victory against the division.

In their first meeting on Oct. 13, the Wild lost 2-1 in overtime at Winnipeg, with the Jets scoring the game-winner on the power play. But considering the Wild were finishing off a back-to-back and playing without captain Jared Spurgeon and center Joel Eriksson Ek because of injuries, the performance still ranks as one of their most admirable of the season.

"We thought we kind of got the short end of the stick when we played them on a back-to-back in less than 24 hours," Foligno said. "I don't think we played as connected in that game because a little bit of tiredness."

Since then, Winnipeg continued a historic start, becoming the first team in league history to win 15 of its first 16 games.

This is the longest the Jets (17-4) have sat atop the NHL standings in their history, and they're thriving because of their offense and defense: Not only has Winnipeg tallied a league-high 85 goals, but only four clubs have given up fewer goals than the 51 the Jets have allowed.

One of those teams is the Wild (50), who was also one of three opponents to push Winnipeg to overtime before the Jets suffered their first regulation loss in their ninth game.

Each squad has also received elite goaltending, with Filip Gustavsson and Winnipeg's Connor Hellebuyck carrying identical 2.13 goals-against averages to tie for first in the NHL alongside matching .924 save percentages.

For the Wild (13-3-4), this will be their most anticipated matchup against a division rival since they faced the Stars on Nov. 16.

The Wild lost 2-1 to Dallas while again missing key players to injury, and they won't be at full strength in their rematch vs. the Jets.

Mats Zuccarello remains out after getting hit by a shot on Nov. 14, and it's unclear if Kirill Kaprizov or Marat Khusnutdinov will be ready to return after both were sidelined for the 4-3 shootout loss at Calgary on Saturday because of lower-body injuries.

Both are considered day-to-day, and it's believed Kaprizov avoided a serious injury from the unpenalized knee-on-knee hit by the Oilers' Drake Caggiula during a 5-3 victory at Edmonton on Thursday.

But regardless of who's in the lineup, what's at stake won't change.

"I just like our demeanor," Wild coach John Hynes said. "Our focus is there. It's what's next, what can we control, keeping our energy and mindset in the right place, and that's what ultimately gives you the opportunity to be successful."