

## **The Athletic**

<https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/5881456/2024/11/02/jets-attendance-perfetti-ehlers/>

### ***Analysing Jets attendance, Cole Perfetti's position and Nikolaj Ehlers' minutes: Mailbag, part 2***

By Murat Ates

The best team in the NHL is playing to some of the smallest crowds.

This is a topic I don't tend to weigh in on often, but one of this month's most popular mailbag questions demanded some thought.

Meanwhile, Nikolaj Ehlers is lighting it up again but his Jets future is in doubt and fans wonder whether Cole Perfetti is destined for a career at wing — could he be a solution down the middle?

Note: Submitted questions have been edited for clarity and length.

*Attendance is looking much stronger this year than it was last year. Despite this there have been no sellouts and the building was not full for the home opener and a visit from Sidney Crosby. A year after the organization woke up to their new reality regarding ticket sales, how would you evaluate their performance in bringing fans back into the building and what further steps could you see taken to bring the attendance back to full sellout levels? — Zach B.*

This is a timely question, Zach, even after the Jets sold out their game against Toronto last week.

Jets attendance has bounced back a little bit since Mark Chipman sounded the alarm on TSN and at The Athletic last season. But is that good? Is it enough?

My overall impression is meaningfully changing the momentum of public opinion in any field is a challenging feat to manage. There are so many factors that lead to any purchasing decision and some of them are beyond a team's control. For that reason, an increase in season seat sales from 9,500 to approximately 10,000 seems like a disproportionately large win to me. The Jets have managed to stop a boulder from continuing its roll downhill.

How have they done it?

As I wrote last season, I think it was important True North acknowledged it had a problem. Fans had reported poor customer service experiences for years during the sellout streak; it seemed clear Winnipeg didn't do enough to retain fans during that time. Chipman's acknowledgment of this fact was an important first step. There needs to be some amount of overlap between the story a fan base and an ownership group tells itself about their team.

I think it's also important that the Jets are a good hockey team. Playoffs blowout aside, we have a large sample of winning play: the fourth-best record during the season last year and the best one in the NHL right now. I love process-based discussion — and think it's fair to criticize elements of a winning team — but the Jets have won 62 games from the start of last season to

now. They're tied with the New York Rangers for most in the league in that time frame, so at least part of the bounceback could be connected to the quality of on-ice product.

No Jets home game has seen its attendance dip below 12,000 for the first five games, while four out of Winnipeg's first five games fell below that mark last year.

It's also worth noting the Jets didn't register their first sellout until December 30 against Minnesota last season but pulled it off against Toronto last week. Now, could that have more to do with the Maple Leafs' enormous Canada-wide fan base? Of course. You have to go back to December 2021 to find the last time a Maple Leafs at Jets game did not sell out. Pandemic fears and economic insecurity were hitting the league as a whole back then.

But Winnipeg's ticket-selling struggle is unique to Winnipeg now.

The NHL set an all-time attendance record last season (including outdoor games and off-site venues) and has played to an average of 96 percent attendance overall this season. Winnipeg's improvement to 13,977 represents 92 percent capacity — the 21st-highest percentage in the league — while playing in the smallest building in the league. If you use raw numbers, only Utah and San Jose have lower average attendance figures than Winnipeg does this season.

I don't think ticket-buying decisions are ever about just one thing, though.

The Jets have also invested in their game day experience over the past two years. I'd be curious to know how fans feel about the improvements to Canada Life Centre: improved food and beverage options, shorter lines, better sound, an in-house band and some unique lounge areas within the building. Whether you have season seats or you go every once in a while, do you feel like True North has improved your experience as a guest in their home?

As part of my homework for your question, I reached out to True North to ask about initiatives they run for season-ticket holders. Several fans had already messaged me about skating with Jets players at Canada Life Centre. It's rare for fans to email or DM me about initiatives the Jets run for them, and I think the opportunity to connect directly with Jets players struck a chord.

True North sent me a list of initiatives that connect players to fans:

- The aforementioned skate with players at Canada Life Centre.
- A few "hot stove" lunches each season, where select season seat members can watch a practice, have lunch in the Scotiabank Lounge and listen to Sara Orlesky have a hot stove with players and coaches.
- A photo day where about 3,500 season seat members come down and get their picture taken with the players.
- Players delivered mini-fridges to season seat members at the beginning of the season (please share your story with me if one of them was you!).
- After almost every game, a "Jersey Off Your Back" meet-and-greet with a season seat member and an individual player.

I'm highlighting these initiatives in part because I didn't know about all of them and in part because I think the decision to buy tickets is an intersection of economics, perceived joy levels, and connection to the team — its players, personnel, and in a broader sense its story.

An influential person in Winnipeg recently told me there is a connection between media coverage and season ticket sales. Part of my job as a reporter is to connect you to players on the days you can't watch them. This connection is forged through storytelling, deep dives and analysis, like our feature on Scott Arniel's analytics summit, or our Connor Hellebuyck origin story that combined detailed analysis with insight into Hellebuyck's childhood.

Stories like that take hard work and collaboration between myself, Winnipeg's PR staff and, most importantly, the players. Opening up about one's childhood is not an ordinary thing — for public consumption at that — so it takes work to do the right research, ask the right questions, and ideally get buy-in from players and PR staff so the story that lands in front of you leaves you feeling more connected to your team.

As for what the Jets should do next, part of the answer depends on what their data is telling them. Season ticket memberships are one data point at one end of the sales funnel. How many minipack holders are buying season tickets? How many individual game attendees are considering minipacks? How many brand-new visitors does Canada Life Centre see each year? The economic health of a hockey team is a holistic thing. I'm intrigued by the early-season boost in sales but the Jets' attendance figures continue to show a lot of room for growth.

What would it take for you to buy tickets — or to increase the amount you already spend?

*How can the Jets have any hope to keep Ehlers on the team if they're going to play him career-low minutes? Hasn't the organization been preaching how important to the team he is? What exactly is going on with the Ehlers front right now? — Lyndon R.*

Lyndon was right to refer to Ehlers' minutes as a career low when asking this question, but things have changed a bit.

Ehlers' average ice time has increased from 14:43 through five games to 15:59 after 11 games played, which is the seventh-highest out of Ehlers' 10 seasons to date. He's rewarded them for that increase with a hat trick against Columbus and yet another elite points-per-minute rate. The biggest drop in Ehlers' minutes has occurred at five-on-five, where he's played the second-fewest minutes of his career. He's eighth among 12 regularly used Jets forwards, which helps cancel out his increase in power-play time.

I think there are three factors to keep our eyes on.

The first is that he's playing way more often on the road than at home. This makes sense if you see the game through Arniel's line-matching lens: At home, where Arniel has the last change, his priorities are getting Adam Lowry's line out against the big guns and Mark Scheifele's line against targeted opposition as often as possible. Ehlers' line, with Cole Perfetti and Vladislav Namestnikov, is a sort of "secondary scoring" line and it can get lost in the shuffle. On the road, Arniel doesn't have last change; it seems he might be rolling lines more than fighting for his matchups.

The second is that it's been only 11 games, so Ehlers' line's cold start could have cost them early. His offensive output has tracked upward with his minutes.

And the third comes from Ehlers himself, as told to Scott Billeck of the Winnipeg Sun.

“I’ve never, ever said I wanted to play 20 minutes,” Ehlers told Billeck. “I’m fine with 16. It’s when it gets down to 11 and 12, that pisses me off. And I said that many times. It’s not a secret. When it gets lower, that’s when it’s frustrating because I can’t get into the games. I’ve played in this league long enough and played well enough to deserve more.”

Ehlers’ minutes did fall as low as 12:57 against Pittsburgh but he’s up to the aforementioned 15:59 this season. Separately from this conversation, I understand Ehlers did voice frustration with his ice time last season — privately, mind you.

All of that said: If he’s sincere about wanting 16 minutes, he’s right on track. He’s received the seventh-most shifts among Jets forwards and is known for taking short shifts.

It’s the long game that seems worthy of concern. Winnipeg has explored trading Ehlers at various points in the past without feeling satisfied with the offers made for him. His increased power-play time may lead to the type of UFA payday Winnipeg is unwilling to pursue with an extension for Kyle Connor coming up next. And Ehlers will have his own feelings about his future, what kind of role he wants to play and where he wants to spend his time.

The Athletic’s Chris Johnston recently listed Ehlers on an early list of 2024-25 trade candidates. His reasoning, which I agree with, is that Ehlers’ situation is one to watch because of the degree of uncertainty. He could be a Jets self-rental, an 11th-hour extension or a trade piece, and all of those options are reasonable to explore.

*Cole Perfetti was a center through junior hockey. I remember when we drafted him, my immediate thought was, “We finally got our No. 2 centre of the future,” but he’s never really stuck at C, and I’m just curious as to why that is. Is it just because he’s short? — Benny W.*

Perfetti played centre growing up and starred for Saginaw in that position en route to being chosen 10th overall in 2020. He also played a lot of centre for Manitoba during his AHL tenure, along with a little bit of left wing. If he were to emerge as a dependable second-line centre option for Winnipeg, it would help the next generation of Jets build behind Scheifele and Lowry.

Perfetti hasn’t played a whole lot of centre in the NHL, though, as you point out. He made his NHL debut on a team with Scheifele and PL Dubois down the middle. Back in 2021-22, the only room in Winnipeg’s top six was at wing, so that’s where Perfetti played; almost 70 percent of his minutes were spent opposite Kyle Connor on a line centered by Dubois. In 2022-23, Perfetti joined a line with Scheifele and Blake Wheeler for the majority of his minutes. Another great group of linemates, another compelling reason to play wing.

Then Kevin Cheveldayoff traded Dubois to Los Angeles in the 2023 offseason. Cheveldayoff told those of us who were in Nashville covering the draft that Dubois’ departure would allow Perfetti to grow down the middle, but that’s not how things have gone. Rick Bowness tried Perfetti down the middle for a moment but was dissatisfied, moving him back to wing on a productive line with Ehlers and Namestnikov before reducing his minutes down the stretch.

Arniel has gotten nine points in 11 games from Perfetti while keeping him on the wing. Here’s what Arniel had to say when asked about it at training camp:

“The hardest part for a centreman in the NHL is that you have to go from your defensive corner — you’re in the battle and 90 percent of the time, you’re the low forward — and you’ve got to get up out of the hole and get into the rush and get to the other end of the rink on the offence. And

he showed last year playing on the wing, I thought he was real good. He can play both left and right side. He was actually good on the walls.”

I take a lot from this answer. I don't think it's Perfetti's lack of size that keeps him on the wing in Winnipeg — or even his career 35.2 percent faceoff win rate. I think it's about his speed, just as it is for Gabriel Vilardi on the top line.

“(Playing wing) got the puck in Perfetti's hands a lot because he wasn't coming out of the hole from the corners,” Arniel said. “He was actually getting the puck either first or second touch, and now he's going from blue line to blue line, being able to make plays that way.”

Perfetti has been making a lot of plays on the wing and has gotten better as the season continues. He's already scored three power-play goals and on Friday in Columbus, his puck pursuit led directly to Ehlers' hat trick goal. I think it's working, as the line has outscored its opponents 6-1 (on 50 percent of shots and 38 percent of expected goals, mind you).

### **Winnipeg Free Press**

<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2024/11/02/jets-get-their-mojo-back-on-two-game-road-trip>

#### ***Jets get their mojo back on two-game road trip***

By: Mike McIntyre

You don't need to remind the Winnipeg Jets what happened the last time they enjoyed some home cooking.

A 6-4 loss last Monday night at Canada Life Centre left a bad taste in their mouths and is the lone blemish on an otherwise spotless record.

The 10-1-0 club will be trying to wash that disappointing tilt with Toronto away as they host the Tampa Bay Lightning on Sunday afternoon.

It's the first of four straight games at the downtown rink for the NHL's No. 1 team.

“What a difference a week makes,” coach Scott Arniel said following Saturday's practice at the Hockey For All Centre.

“The biggest thing for me was our response, how we went out on the road and played a great team game for both of those games. It was throughout our lineup, everybody stepped up. It was a heck of a lot better than what we were at home in the last one.”

Indeed, the Jets brushed off the setback against the Maple Leafs by reeling off consecutive 6-2 victories in Detroit and Columbus. What changed?

“Our leadership group took off and made sure they were the best players first, and everyone else kind of jumped on board,” said Arniel.

He explained how a candid chat following the Toronto game set the table. Essentially, they discussed whether “that's what we, as a group, want to be proud of.”

“We definitely weren’t. It was just everybody playing that much better themselves, first and foremost,” said Arniel.

“They took of their business and then as a group, that’s the biggest thing for me, is all the lines responded, all the D partners responded, obviously the goaltending. It was just a group effort and that’s a good sign for a hockey team at this time of year.”

The Jets have played five of the last six in enemy territory, so getting a chance to settle in, unpack the suitcase and get comfortable at home for the next week is a welcome development.

“It’s been a wild schedule so far,” said defenceman Dylan Samberg. “It’s gonna get even crazier coming up here, but I think all the fellows are pretty excited to be home and get to play for our home fans again.”

No offence to the teams the Jets have beaten so far, but they are about to step up in weight class over the next few weeks.

Although the Lightning are coming off a 5-3 defeat against the Minnesota Wild on Friday night, they are still 7-4-0 and led by the likes of Nikita Kucherov, Brayden Point and Victor Hedman, among others.

“They’re a well-structured team and a high scoring team, so we’ve got to be prepared,” said veteran Jets forward Vlad Namestnikov, who played parts of six seasons with Tampa Bay.

“They have a lot of weapons. We don’t want to get into a back-and-forth game with them, so we’ve got to play our Winnipeg Jet hockey, defence first, and then take it from there.”

Winnipeg is the NHL’s highest scoring team with 52 goals through 11 games, and they’re also one of the stingiest defensive squads, surrendering only 26 tallies so far. Their five-on-five play erupted on this two-game road trip, with 10 combined even strength goals against the Red Wings and Blue Jackets.

“It’s a tough league to score in,” said Namestnikov, who watched linemate Nikolaj Ehlers record a hat trick against the Blue Jackets on Friday.

“We’ve got to keep to our structure. I think the main focus is on defence and then everything opens up from there. As long as we pay attention to the way we play, it will be all good.”

Connor Hellebuyck will be back in net on Sunday for the 2 p.m. puck drop after backup netminder Eric Comrie got the spot start against Columbus.

Based on how line rushes looked Saturday, it appears no other changes will be made.

The rest of the homestand includes games against Central Division foes, with Utah, the Colorado Avalanche and Dallas Stars coming to town.

“I don’t even want to get past Sunday, but just looking at next week, we got all of our division big hitters coming in here, too,” said Arniel. “Like I’ve said for a couple of weeks, it does not get any easier and Tampa, they’re a tough, tough hockey team.”

“They’ve got some top-end skilled players, guys who have (Stanley) Cup experience. It’s going to be another one of these games where we gotta be good to go right off the drop of the puck, making sure we’re like we were on the road where we had good first periods that I really liked. Need to do that again here on Sunday.”

The Jets will then play nine of the next 10 games on the road where they are a perfect 6-0-0 so far. But their opponents include some of the league’s most potent teams, including the reigning Stanley Cup champion Florida Panthers and the reigning Presidents Trophy winning New York Rangers.

“We’re excited for the challenge,” said Samberg. “It’s a long season but this is where it starts.”

### **Winnipeg Sun**

<https://www.sportsnet.ca/nhl/article/ehlers-scores-hat-trick-to-lead-jets-to-win-over-blue-jackets/>

### ***JETS NOTEBOOK: Lessons learned from Maple Leafs loss reminder ahead of Tampa test***

By Scott Billeck

Not one to spend much time looking back, Scott Arniel was nevertheless impressed with the difference a week can make in the NHL.

A week ago, his Winnipeg Jets were left licking their wounds after a 6-4 loss to the Toronto Maple Leafs.

On Saturday, and with a pair of 6-2 victories distancing themselves from their only blemish of the season, the head coach seemed confident that the lesson learned against the Leafs would serve them well Sunday at home to the Tampa Bay Lightning.

Arniel said the team had a big group meeting after the loss. There was nothing to be proud of in that game.

“And we weren’t,” Arniel said Saturday. “We definitely weren’t.”

The Jets were coming off a road trip when Toronto came to town on Monday, just as they’re coming off of one to face Tampa to begin a four-game homestand.

“I think the Toronto game helps us,” Arniel said. “We gotta come home and you can’t be different than we were on the road. I’ve said it before: There isn’t a different way of playing. We have a Winnipeg Jets style to play that we have to continue to play. That’s us taking to the opposition right from the drop of the puck. We need to do that against Tampa.”

The Lightning won’t offer the Jets a softer landing, either.

They are second in the Atlantic Division entering Saturday’s action and still have several top-tier NHLers, including Nikita Kucherov, who has nine goals and 18 points through 11 games.

“They’re a well-structured team and a high-scoring team, so we’ve got to be prepared,” former Lightning forward Vladislav Namestnikov said. “They have a lot of weapons. We don’t want to

get into a back and forth game with them, so we've got to play our Winnipeg Jet hockey, defence first, and then take it from there."

Namestnikov said Winnipeg's focus needs to remain on its structure and the defence-first mindset that has served it well early this year.

"As long as we pay attention to the way we play, it will be all good," he said.

Meanwhile, Namestnikov didn't know how close his face came to contacting Columbus Blue Jackets goalie Elvis Merzlikins' skate during a scary spill into his crease on Friday.

"I didn't actually see the skate," he said. "The trainers told me after that it was pretty close. So many things happen. My leg got caught so I didn't even notice the skate."

Namestnikov isn't far removed from taking a puck to his cheek last spring, an injury that forced him out of the playoffs and took most of the summer to heal fully.

#### *Halloween costumes a hit*

After seeing it in a store, four of the team's players decided to dress up as the Scooby-Doo gang for Halloween this year.

Namestnikov went as Fred, Nikolaj Ehlers was Shaggy and Alex Lafallo was Scooby-Doo.

And Velma?

"Nino (Niederreiter) wanted to be Velma for some reason," Namestnikov said. "I was like, 'OK.' He rocked it, for sure.

"It was all good and fun, as long as you have a good time that's all that matters."

Dylan Samberg and his wife went as players from Purple Cobra from the movie Dodgeball.

"That was honestly a last-second thing," Samberg said. "We weren't entirely sure what we were going to do. We found that at Spirit Halloween, last second, and decided to rock with it."

If you've peeked around the Jets' social media pages over the past two days, it seems there was a clear winner: David Gustafsson, who went as Dwight Schrute from The Office.

"That was good," Samberg said. "That was pretty spot-on."