

Winnipeg Free Press

<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/sports/2024/12/19/time-for-a-tune-up>

Time for a tune-up Road trip illustrates Jets' need to eliminate simple mistakes

By: Ken Wiebe

A missed opportunity?

Absolutely.

The late-game breakdowns that saw the Winnipeg Jets grasp defeat from the hands of victory also represent a valuable learning opportunity for a team that was largely fortunate to earn a split on the two-game California swing that featured games against the San Jose Sharks and Anaheim Ducks.

A red-hot power play helped mask some of the five-on-five deficiencies that crept up during the past two games, when the Jets stumbled out of the gate with extremely slow starts in both outings.

Now, this is one of those cases where two things can be true — it's a fact the Jets were less than five minutes away from taking home four points, had a pair of late-game — and mostly uncharacteristic — breakdowns not occurred in the waning moments of the 3-2 loss to the Anaheim Ducks on Wednesday.

With the Jets clinging to a 2-1 lead that featured a brilliant individual effort from Kyle Connor before Mark Scheifele ripped home a one-timer for his 18th goal of the season, Winnipeg was lined up for a defensive zone draw to the left of goalie Eric Comrie.

Ryan Strome won the draw cleanly, giving the Ducks possession. Frank Vatrano fired the puck from just inside the blue line with his shot changing direction off the stick of Jets centre Vladislav Namestnikov to even the score.

Then, with overtime less than 30 seconds away, Troy Terry dumped the puck into the Jets' zone.

After Jets defenceman Haydn Fleury completed a routine D-to-D pass to Neal Pionk, Vatrano came up with a sneak attack and poked the puck off Pionk's stick before he could make an outlet pass to Namestnikov.

That left Terry all alone in front and he deposited the puck in the net, leaving the Jets stunned after seeing a 2-1 lead turn into a 3-2 deficit with just under 26 seconds to go in the game.

This isn't about singling out players in the blame game, it's about shining a light on how the Jets' attention to detail just isn't as crisp as it was earlier in the season.

It would have been impossible to see the Jets continue humming along like they were when they were cruising with a 15-1 record.

There was always going to be a levelling off period and as the Jets prepare to welcome the Minnesota Wild to town on Saturday, it's safe to say the Jets have some areas of their game they'll need to clean up.

This isn't sky-is-falling stuff either, it's what coaches would refer to as regular maintenance.

To keep the engine running at peak efficiency, this group could use a bit of a tune-up.

An overhaul is certainly not required.

For the sake of providing context, the Jets have gone 5-2-1 during the past eight games — but with those outright losses coming to a pair of teams near the bottom of the standings (the Ducks and the Columbus Blue Jackets), it's raised a few eyebrows.

Cause for concern?

Well, it's probably too early for that, as the Jets haven't made a habit of taking opponents lightly.

However, the intensity and level of competition is only going to rise with the season approaching its midway point.

The next ramping up period is just around the corner and then the sprint to the finish line will take place after the conclusion of the 4 Nations Face-Off, which is why this is the time of the year when the video sessions can provide some solutions to the issues that have popped up of late.

As Jets captain Adam Lowry said during a conversation in training camp, the Jets have taken tremendous strides when it comes to defensive commitment, turning an area of weakness into one of the team's biggest strengths.

It's not like the Jets have abandoned that style, there's just been a little bit of erosion that has crept in.

Some poor puck management here, a blown assignment there and a casual play that ends up in the back of the net to round out this not-so-natural hat trick.

Hockey is a game of mistakes and there are times when those errors get magnified — especially in tight games.

Tampa Bay Lightning head coach Jon Cooper said month that one of the best attributes the Jets had shown in the first quarter of the season was that they don't beat themselves.

The statement was an accurate one, though those self-inflicted wounds have been a bit more prevalent as the Jets turned a 15-1 into an 8-9-1 stretch in the 18 games since the historic start.

The true measure of these Jets is that they probably belong somewhere in the middle of this tale of two seasons — and they've got plenty of time to show which version they are.

Of the six goals scored during the past two games, three of them came with the man-advantage that is back atop the NHL, operating at a 31.4 percent efficiency.

Although the Jets went into Thursday's action third in the NHL in goals per game (3.62), the five-on-five production has dipped a bit, with the bulk of the offence generated by the Jets' top line.

There's nothing wrong with having a top line that is effective, but the Jets have been praised all season long for their depth up front and the offence that's been chipped in by the defence.

Those are areas that could also use a boost — and the return of Nikolaj Ehlers on Wednesday should provide a lift as he gets back up to speed.

To play the aggressive style in all three zones that has led to much of the Jets' success takes a committed, concerted effort.

To do that consistently over an 82-game marathon is a big ask, as it's taxing both physically and mentally.

That's the type of effort that is going to be required when the chips are down and with two games left against high-end opponents, the Jets are going to need to raise their level if they want to go into the holiday break on a high note.

Sportsnet.ca

<https://www.sportsnet.ca/nhl/article/jets-notebook-adjustments-needed-amid-slip/>

Jets Notebook: Adjustments needed amid slip

By Jacob Stoller

WINNIPEG — Don't let the standings fool you: the Winnipeg Jets are slipping.

Sure, they were bound to regress from a historic 15-1-0 start, and injuries to Dylan Samberg and Nikolaj Ehlers — but it doesn't make their 8-9-1 record, or what's led to it, any less alarming.

Wednesday's 3-2 loss to the Anaheim Ducks — where they were embarrassed by a lottery-bound team and failed to register a shot until the 8:30 mark of the first period — wasn't a one-off. It was the tipping point of a five-week span where Winnipeg has struggled to impose its will on a consistent basis.

"We've got to hold each other accountable for what we're doing out there. And we're not doing that," Ehlers told reporters after Wednesday's game, his first game back after a nearly three-week-long absence. "So we've got some work to do."

And changes to make.

They can't rely on Connor Hellebuyck and their power play to bail them out every night. The defensive lapses we've seen — be it Neal Pionk's giveaway on Wednesday's game-winning goal, or the poor line change before the Vegas Golden Knights' overtime winner last week — have been jarring, albeit not totally surprising for a blue line that's got several players punching above their weight with Samberg sidelined.

What about the five-on-five offence drying up? Sure, part of it can be attributed to Ehlers' absence. But not all of it.

At their peak, this was a team that was getting contributions from all four forward lines. When the top six had an off night, the bottom six was there to score a couple of goals and keep the team afloat.

During the vast majority of the first 16 games, each line, in its own way, could be counted on to spend prolonged periods in the offensive zone. Their defencemen were active, keeping plays alive at the blue line and joining the rush at opportunistic times. Everything was in sync.

But that hasn't been the case over the last 18 games.

Aside from the top line of Mark Scheifele, Gabriel Vilardi and Kyle Connor the Jets' forward lines aren't winning their minutes. Yes, even Adam Lowry's line.

The second line — even with Ehlers — is more of a middle-six 'soft skill' line than it is a bonafide second line. And the fourth line of Alex Lafallo, Morgan Barron and Rasmus Kupari has lost its mojo.

Scheifele's line — or really, any NHL top line — isn't good enough to carry the load offensively on its own. The Jets need more from their other three and they'd be ill-advised to rest on their laurels and say 'Well, we had success with these lines before, so let's give them some time to figure it out.'

Look at the chart above. Even when the Jets were playing their best hockey, the team's underlying offensive metrics were average or slightly below average.

Head coach Scott Arniel has been hesitant to bring out the line blender — only doing so for short spurts mid-game, as opposed to trying something new to start a game — but something's got to give.

Take this into account: No forward line has spent more time together this year than Mark Scheifele's line. Adam Lowry's line has spent the second most time together. And even with Ehlers missing nine games, the second line ranks ninth.

Given that the Jets a virtual lock to make the playoffs, now, more than ever, is the time to experiment with different things. This team has talked a lot about last spring's early exit against Colorado, where they failed to elevate their game after a strong regular season. It was a stark reminder of how much things change in the playoffs. And better yet, the difference between a Stanley Cup contender and a strong regular season performer.

Albeit to a lesser degree, Winnipeg had a similar measuring stick game last week against the Vegas Golden Knights, who edged them out 16-4 in five-on-five high-danger shot attempts. Mind you, all but one of the Jets' high-danger attempts came from Nikita Chibrikov, a player who was reassigned to the AHL on Thursday.

If Chibrikov's brief NHL stint showed us anything, it's that there's value to having some 'jam' to compliment your top-six players. And perhaps that logic could help solve the Jets' scoring woes. In order for that to happen, Arniel and Co. need to be comfortable with being uncomfortable. In this case, that starts with breaking up the first and third lines.

He makes history

Kevin He just might be Winnipeg's fastest-rising prospect.

And he'll forever have a place in history.

On Monday, the 2024 fourth-round pick became the first Chinese-born player to sign an NHL contract. It's not often that you see a mid-round pick sign an entry-level deal just five months removed from being drafted. But the 18-year-old is off to an eye-opening draft year—plus one season with the OHL's Niagara IceDogs, recording 23 goals and 43 points in 29 games this season.

According to Byron Bader and HockeyProspecting.com, players that produce like He has so far this year — compared to his counterparts, past and present, and scaled using NHL Equivalencies — have a 21 per cent chance of becoming NHL stars. (Bader defined a 'star' as a player that averages 0.70 points per game).

Captain Yager

Speaking of prospects, Brayden Yager was named captain of Team Canada for the 2025 World Juniors.

Yager, who was recently traded from the WHL's Moose Jaw Warriors to the Lethbridge Hurricanes, has recorded 34 points in 23 games. The 19-year-old projects to be a top-six fixture for Canada and he'll probably get a healthy dose of usage on the penalty kill, too.

It'll be interesting to see how Yager fares in a best-on-best tournament. From what we saw at training camp, Yager's probably two or three years away from being an NHL regular, although a strong world junior showing could change that.

The Hockey News

<https://thehockeynews.com/news/world-juniors-team-canada-names-jets-prospect-brayden-yager-captain>

World Juniors: Team Canada Names Jets Prospect Brayden Yager Captain

By Jonathan Tovell

Team Canada selected three first-round NHL draft picks for the leadership group heading into the 2025 world juniors in Ottawa.

Brayden Yager was named captain for this edition of the annual holiday U-20 tournament. Tanner Molendyk and Calum Ritchie are the alternate captains.

"I am honored to be named captain of Team Canada for the world juniors on a team with so many great leaders, and I am excited for our group to take the ice in Ottawa and continue working towards our goal of winning a gold medal on home ice," Yager said in Hockey Canada's announcement.

"Tanner and Calum are great players and teammates that are deserving of this honor, and I look forward to serving on the leadership group with them and wearing the Maple Leaf with pride in front of Canadian fans."

Thursday's news comes ahead of Team Canada and Team Switzerland's pre-tournament exhibition at TD Place in Ottawa at 7 p.m. ET.

Yager, 19, began the WHL season as captain of the Moose Jaw Warriors, where he played for the past five seasons before they traded him to the Lethbridge Warriors. He has 12 goals and 34 points in 23 games, with his 1.48 points per game ranking 17th in the WHL.

The Pittsburgh Penguins drafted Yager, a center, 14th overall in 2023. But in August, Pittsburgh traded him to the Winnipeg Jets in exchange for 2024 Team USA captain Rutger McGroarty, who wanted a move. While McGroarty is a physical tactician, Yager is a smoother skater who creates offense on the fly.

Yager played on Team Canada at last year's world juniors, recording two goals and five points in five games. After Canada was eliminated in the quarterfinal, Yager and the squad will aim to return to gold medal glory this time.

Ritchie, 19, started this season in the NHL with the Colorado Avalanche. The No. 27 pick in the 2023 draft earned a seven-game trial in The Show, recording one goal. Since rejoining the Oshawa Generals, Ritchie has eight goals and 26 assists for 34 points in 18 games. The center's 1.89 points per game rank fourth in the OHL.

While Ritchie wasn't on last year's world juniors squad, he did get three goals and nine points for Canada at the World Men's Under-18 tournament in 2023, winning bronze. He also had four goals and 10 points in five games en route to gold at the Hlinka Gretzky Cup in 2022.

Molendyk, who had four points on that Hlinka Gretzky Cup squad, is also making his world juniors debut. The Nashville Predators drafted the defenseman 24th overall in 2023.

The 19-year-old has four goals and 21 points in 21 games for the Saskatoon Blades as an alternate captain.

The 2025 World Junior Championship runs from Dec. 26 to Jan. 5, 2025.

<https://thehockeynews.com/nhl/winnipeg-jets/latest-news/winnipeg-jets-ranked-second-last-in-big-four-valuations>

***Winnipeg Jets Ranked Second-Last in Big-Four Valuations
The Winnipeg Jets are officially valued at \$1.1 billion.***

By Carter Brooks

Sportico has unveiled its all encompassing top-to-bottom big-four North American franchise valuations. The original list also included Major League Soccer.

To the surprise of very few, the Winnipeg Jets are right near the bottom.

With the list sorting itself out in its typical football, basketball, baseball, hockey ranking, there were no major surprises in terms of overall values gained or lost for the 2024 calendar year.

Of 124 NFL, NBA, MLB and NHL teams, the Jets rank No. 123, at a total value of \$1.1 billion USD, sitting just ahead of last-place Columbus (\$1.06 billion). For the first time, all 32 NHL clubs have hit the \$1 billion valuation mark.

For Winnipeg, the Jets made a 19 percent gain from 2023, which was higher than the club's 15 percent increase the year before.

The NHL's average franchise value is \$1.79 billion, which is placed well below the three other big-four sports: NFL at \$5.93 billion, NBA at \$4.6 billion and MLB at \$2.64 billion.

The Toronto Maple Leafs are the highest valued NHL franchise at \$3.66 billion, while the NFL's Dallas Cowboys top the overall list at \$10.32 billion.

The Toronto Raptors (\$4.66 billion) are ranked No. 46 on the overall list and are the NBA's 10th highest seeded franchise. The Toronto Blue Jays (\$2.27 billion) sit 84th on the list and are 14th within the Majors.

The Score

<https://www.thescore.com/news/3162812>

Attendance decline leaves Jets vulnerable to uncertain future

By Scott Stinson

When the NHL finally abandoned its 30-year quest to make pro hockey viable in the Arizona desert, one obvious conclusion was that the league had wasted a lot of time and effort wooing a market resistant to its charms.

The related part of the story was that commissioner Gary Bettman's laser focus on expansion in the American South ignored swathes of the country that he could've counted on to welcome top-level hockey with open arms. Or any hockey, really.

I know because I made some of those arguments myself: Why keep trying to cram a square peg into a round hole when there remained markets in Canada desperate to add an NHL franchise? Some even had arenas in place!

Recent events in Winnipeg, though, have at least given pause to this line of thinking. As much as it pains to concede something to the world's most condescending commissioner, Bettman might've, just maybe, had a point.

The Winnipeg Jets are having attendance issues. To be clear, these aren't Arizona-style attendance problems, with their vast sections of empty seats game after game, or even the shorter-term issues that have cropped up in Sun Belt markets like Carolina and Florida in the recent past.

The Jets are still popular. But what was once the hottest ticket in town, with the team selling 13,000 season-ticket packages within minutes of them going on sale in 2011 after the team

relocated from Atlanta, is now closer to lukewarm. The average attendance at the Canada Life Centre is a little under 14,000 through 15 games, or third lowest in the NHL behind only the rebuilding San Jose Sharks and the Utah Hockey Club, which can cram just over 11,000 fans into its building for now because the Delta Center was designed for basketball, not hockey.

The Jets are also playing to just over 90% capacity, better than only seven teams in the league. That's not disastrous, but a little alarming when the Jets started the season white-hot and won 22 of their first 32 games, tops in the league. Most of those clubs with wide-open spaces in the rafters also languish near the bottom of the standings.

(As a point of comparison, the Winnipeg Blue Bombers averaged more than 31,000 fans for home dates at Princess Auto Stadium.)

It's also worrisome when it's been well-known for a while now that the team has struggled to put enough bums in seats. Bettman alighted on Winnipeg last year to make clear that the attendance figures concern the league. Ownership went on an unusual media blitz to explain that they had perhaps taken the ticket-buying public for granted following the boom times of the Jets' return to Manitoba.

Bettman went to some length to explain that the franchise wasn't at a crisis point and that he still viewed Winnipeg as a "strong NHL market," but that gentle note of worry didn't spark a stampede to the turnstiles. Put simply, the Jets play in a small market, which means less room for error.

A report in the Winnipeg Free Press last week said the Jets have about 10,000 season-ticket holders, up from last season's record low of 9,500 but still well short of the 13,000 the league and ownership believe is required to keep the team sustainable. The Free Press also reported that corporate sales account for only 20% of the existing season-ticket base, a number that's closer to 50% for a lot of franchises. One of the more surprising quotes in that article came from the president of the Business Council of Manitoba, who said it's "incumbent on big and small and medium-sized enterprises to play their part" in supporting their community by supporting the Jets.

Is it, though? Businesses of any size had more than a decade to assess the value of Jets tickets as an expense, and the Jets themselves are a for-profit enterprise. Asking companies to support the franchise isn't like asking them to donate to the local food bank.

It's also possible Jets fans are taking a bit of a wait-and-see approach to a team that, while generally competitive, hasn't seen much postseason success. When playoff hockey finally returned to Winnipeg a decade ago, almost 20 years after the original Jets had decamped for Phoenix, the arena was thunderously loud. Then-coach Paul Maurice spoke about how random people would approach him in the grocery store and thank him for being part of the reborn franchise.

But the Jets were swept in that series and missed the playoffs in the following two seasons. The team has managed just three series wins in the 10 years since that postseason return.

You can see why fans might be a little leery about investing in the Jets: monetarily, emotionally, or otherwise.

There's a good chance all of this will eventually be worked out. One of the side effects of having a high demand for tickets, as the Jets had for years, is that people get used to thinking they're unattainable.

That is plainly no longer the case, even as the Jets have re-signed their star players and started this season on a 15-1 heater.

Good seats, as they say, are available.

TSN.ca

<https://www.tsn.ca/video/domino-s-that-s-hockey-is-hellebuyck-the-most-dominant-connor-this-season%7E3050395>

Domino's That's Hockey: Is Hellebuyck the most dominant 'Connor' this season? (VIDEO)

Is Connor Hellebuyck the most dominant 'Connor' in the league? Will either the Avalanche or Rangers miss the playoffs? Will the Sabres finish dead last in the league to put themselves in prime position to pick first overall in the draft again? Bruce Boudreau joins That's Hockey to share his thoughts in this edition of Fantasy or Reality.