

Winnipeg Free Press

<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/sports/2024/12/20/wheeler-opens-up>

Wheeler opens up Former Jet discusses disappointment at being stripped of captaincy

By: Mike McIntyre and Ken Wiebe

Blake Wheeler always seemed to have his game face on, whether he was lowering his left shoulder to make a powerful net-front drive, firing a perfect cross-ice saucer pass to a teammate or intensely staring down a media gallery.

So it was jarring — and dare we say refreshing — to see the former Winnipeg Jets captain let his guard down and really open up in a significant way this past week during a fascinating podcast appearance which felt more like listening in on a therapy session.

It was raw, reflective and, at times, remorseful.

“There were definitely teammates who’d say ‘This guy is too much. He’s cranky all the time, he’s in a bad mood.’ And I own that, for sure,” Wheeler said during the nearly 75-minute chat with his personal leadership coach, Dan Leffelaar of Novus Global Sports.

The Minnesota product, who was a Jets 2.0 original coming over from Atlanta really let loose as he discussed having the “C” stripped off his sweater prior to the 2022-23 campaign by incoming head coach Rick Bowness, who had been brought in by the organization to fix what was viewed as a dysfunctional locker room culture.

“My first instinct was to take the bait of being the victim. I just got screwed,” the 38-year-old confessed. “Embarrassed probably doesn’t do justice how I felt. I felt humiliated. I felt like everyone was staring at me. Every day, honestly, was hard.”

Wheeler said the decision really cut deep because he’d spent the previous few months working on himself, with the help of Leffelaar.

“I don’t think you had done much thinking on how your actions may have been impacting others, even though your intentions were full of care,” Leffelaar told him.

The pair had been introduced by another former Jets captain, Andrew Ladd, who was also a guest on the Your Finest Hour podcast titled How NHL Captains Build Unbreakable Teams. Wheeler was named captain in 2016 after Ladd was traded to the Chicago Blackhawks.

“I was in a real bad place and I became somebody who I was not proud,” Wheeler said of seeking out professional assistance, noting he was having panic attacks before games and professional issues were now seeping into his personal life.

“That was the worst year in a lot of ways for me.”

At Leffelaar’s urging, that led to a series of candid chats Wheeler had with Jets teammates during the summer of 2022 in which he was trying to right some admitted wrongs with the idea of becoming a better leader.

“And then the rug gets pulled out from underneath,” Wheeler said of Bowness’ decision.

“I was pissed off,” Ladd said of seeing the development from afar. “You’ve had this person in your organization who is actively working, like ‘Hey, how can I become a better leader for this group?’ And then he didn’t even get the chance to implement that.”

Fortunately, Wheeler said the progress he’d made with Leffelaar gave him the tools to stickhandle through the situation. He knew that, once his career was over, “How I handled this would dictate whether I was proud of this moment or ashamed of it.”

“When the most challenging moment of my career and life at that time happened, I was equipped with tools to handle it in a way that I can be proud of,” he said.

Wheeler ultimately had 55 points in 72 games and was bought out of the remaining year of his US \$8.25 million contract in the summer of 2023, ultimately signing a one-year deal for league minimum with the New York Rangers.

It’s clear that when it comes to regrets, Wheeler has more than a few of how he handled situations with some of his former Jets teammates.

“I always felt like I was looking around the room and trying to be like ‘Come on, somebody else, please say something.’ And it always ended up being me having to say something,” he said.

“My teammates weren’t entering into that conversation willingly, mostly because I probably wasn’t doing a good enough job of allowing them to, even though that’s what I really wanted the whole time.”

There’s no question Wheeler played the game the right way, and he felt that gave him plenty of runway when it came to being a captain.

“You bust your ass, every practice, every game, all the time, and then you can say whatever you want,” is how he described his mentality at the time. Learning that it didn’t always play well with several teammates was a bitter pill to swallow.

Wheeler repeatedly stated it was never personal with him, but always out of what may have been a flawed approach to try to get the best out of everyone with the ultimate goal of capturing a Stanley Cup — something the Jets came close to doing in the spring of 2018 only to take multiple steps backwards which had an impact on him.

“I was thinking about this 24-hours a day, being the captain of the Winnipeg Jets,” he said. “How can I be better? How can I make our team better? From the moment I wake up to the moment I go to bed, everything was structured around that.”

Wheeler suffered a gruesome leg injury last season in his 54th game with the Rangers after putting up 21 points (9G, 12A). He returned just in time for one playoff game in the spring but was a healthy scratch the rest of the way. Although not officially retired, it would appear his playing days are over.

“My body, can I still go play a hockey game? Hell, yeah. I can still play,” he said. “It’s just the emotional (aspect), to get up 82 times. I don’t want to do that. There’s only so much gas in the tank for that.”

Wheeler is now coaching all three of his children’s hockey teams while also enjoying plenty of quality time with his wife, Sam, at their home in Florida.

AROUND THE GLASS

CAPTAIN CANADA: Jets forward prospect Brayden Yager was named captain of Team Canada on Thursday for the upcoming world junior hockey championship in Ottawa.

After Yager impressed at his first Jets’ trade camp following the trade for Rutger McGroarty — last year’s American World Juniors captain — Jets head coach Scott Arniel talked to him about being the best player on his team as he returned to junior and playing a leadership role for Canada.

“The other side was when he was going to get a chance to go play for Team Canada, that you’re playing against some of the elite of the elite there in junior hockey or college hockey from around the world, and try to be the best,” said Arniel.

“And now to have that responsibility of being captain, that’s an honour and something for him to kind of grasp and be proud of and hopefully they have great success.”

Jets defenceman Dylan DeMelo isn’t surprised to see Yager flourishing this season.

“When he was here at camp, you could tell he’s going to be a good player in this league. Once he gets the time and the opportunity to do so,” DeMelo told the Free Press on Friday. “So, he’s gone down there and done a great job in junior and being rewarded with the C on team Canada, that’s a great honour for any young Canadian boy.

“Growing up you always dream of playing on team Canada and being a captain and doing all that. He gets to be the captain on team Canada in Canada so that’s pretty cool. I’m really happy for him and I’m sure (Yager) and the team will have a great tournament.”

HOLIDAY HOCKEY: The other big holiday hockey tournament is the annual Spengler Cup, and the Canadian squad which was revealed on Friday includes a trio of players with local puck ties.

Winnipeg’s Madison Bowey, who has 158 NHL games under his belt and is playing this season with the Cleveland Monsters of the AHL, will be one of the blue-liners. Former Jets skaters Sam Gagner and Logan Shaw will be part of the forward group.

Winnipeg’s Kurt Keats is serving as the manager of hockey operations, while long-time University of North Dakota bench boss Dave Hakstol will serve as an assistant coach to Gerard Gallant.

The event begins Boxing Day in Switzerland.

LAINÉ WATCH: After being held off the board last Saturday night by Jets goalie Connor Hellebuyck, old friend Patrik Laine is now up to six goals and seven points in seven games since returning from a knee injury he suffered during the second game of the pre-season.

That includes a hat trick earlier this week against the Buffalo Sabres.

“He’s got six power play goals in seven games, it’s pretty impressive. You just know that as soon as that puck is going over from one side to Paddy’s side of the ice, it’s going in the back of the net,” said Jets forward Nikolaj Ehlers, a close friend and longtime linemate of Laine.

“Luckily, we had a pretty good goalie stopping those ones against us. But it’s good to finally see him back playing and you can see him having fun and the fans in Montreal are embracing him, which is what he loved here. That’s awesome to see and I’m excited for him.”

ROOKIE WATCH: With just a few days to go before the holiday break, the chase for the Calder Trophy appears to be heating up.

The Jets have got a close look at a couple of the prime candidates for the top rookie, with Macklin Celebrini of the San Jose Sharks and Lane Hutson of the Montreal Canadiens serving as opponents during the past week.

Celebrini and Hutson went into Friday’s action tied for second in rookie scoring with 22 points.

Hutson scored his first NHL goal against the Jets last Saturday and he’s up to 21 assists, while Celebrini has 11 goals to go with 11 assists despite missing 12 games due to injury (including a goal and assist against Winnipeg on Tuesday).

Leading all rookie scorers is Philadelphia Flyers winger Matvei Michkov, who has 11 goals and 27 points in 31 games this season. Michkov will make his one and only appearance of the regular season at Canada Life Centre on March 1.

<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/sports/2024/12/20/weve-got-to-be-better>

‘We’ve got to be better’

Sitting atop the NHL standings, Jets know slow starts won’t cut it against motivated opponents

By: Ken Wiebe

The sarcasm in the voice of Scott Arniel was impossible to miss.

It was early in Friday’s question and answer period when the head coach of the Winnipeg Jets fielded a query about what had not been going as smoothly during the previous two games in California, specifically pertaining to the slow starts in San Jose and Anaheim.

“It’s no secret. I don’t know if you guys have seen the standings, we are No. 1 in the league. I don’t know if you notice that,” said Arniel. “But teams are ready for us. And they’re coming out hard.”

There was a bit of an edge in Arniel’s voice as his team prepares to face the Minnesota Wild on Saturday.

With two games to go before the holiday break arrives, there’s little doubt that the Jets have put themselves in an excellent position.

The historic 15-1 start assured them of that.

It may have also skewed some of the external expectations.

While some observers are caught up in the fact the Jets have gone 8-9-1 since the 16-game mark, Arniel was quick to point out while the Jets are 5-4-1 during the past 10 games, the three teams closest to them in the Central Division standings were all 6-4.

This wasn't Arniel putting on rose-coloured glasses, he was trying to provide some perspective on the rigours of a long season.

"If we had started 9-6 and got ourselves to this (record), how would we feel and how would we be looking at it?" said Arniel. "It feels great to be sitting in first place, but that is not our goal. We've got to win this division, first and foremost. And then whatever happens moving forward."

"There have been sputters along the way. We had a four-game losing streak and it was like the earth shattered. Teams go through it and we knew it wasn't going to be roses all the way through. But we've gotten better in our last 10, in my opinion. We've played better."

Speaking of early in the year, Arniel pointed to an important reason the Jets haven't been simply running roughshod over teams lately.

"We need to get where all four (lines) are up and running, where all four are looking alike, all four are making hay each and every shift and creating chaos and forcing the opposition," said Arniel. "Right now, it's been a little bit of everybody being one night on, one night off. That's kind of the consistency shift to shift, game to game that we're hoping for and looking for."

Back to those slow starts, which sounds like an area the Jets want to address against the Wild and the Toronto Maple Leafs on Monday.

"We can't wade into games, we can't chase games early and maybe rely on our goaltenders to make big stops. We have to be better. That's an area that we do need to improve on, that we have to get out of the gate early," said Arniel. "At the end of the day if you give teams momentum, teams are prepared for us and we have to make sure that we come out and make it a little bit easier on ourselves."

"If they're expecting us to come out and play like a top team, let's do it and maybe we win a hockey game in the first period like we did early in the year."

The Jets are 2-0 against the Wild heading into the final meeting of the regular season, but both games were highly-entertaining and tightly-contested.

Facing a heated Central Division rival should help the Jets ensure they aren't coasting into the holiday break.

"Again, I can only speak for myself. I don't go out there, sitting before the game and get myself fired up because I hate the Minnesota Wild, that's not the way it goes," said Jets forward Nikolaj Ehlers. "But you want to go out and win that game. You know the crowd is going to get into it right away. Those games are played a little harder, a little more of a playoff style and that's what you want to get to by the end of the regular season and the quicker you can get there, the better chance you have of doing well. So these games are a lot of fun."

Jets defenceman Dylan DeMelo conceded his team isn't sneaking up on anybody these days and that brings with it an important responsibility that comes with the lofty position atop the NHL standings.

"So, there's a challenge in that and there's some pride in that. Obviously we want everybody's best because that makes us be at our best and it's a different role when you're the hunted instead of hunting," said DeMelo. "When you had a great start like us you are where you are in the standings, we are definitely the hunted. So, that's a responsibility that we have to take on our shoulders.

"Enjoy that moment, enjoy those battles. It's what we play for."

On the injury front, Arniel revealed that defenceman Logan Stanley has been sidelined by a foot injury and will be out until at least after the holiday break, so Ville Heinola will be shifting to his strong side on the third pairing with Colin Miller.

Heinola has played in eight games since returning from a foot issue and he's been working hard to get back up to speed after being on the shelf since the second day of training camp.

The Finnish blue-liner is still looking for his first point of the season, but he's been working hard at earning the trust of the coaching staff in his quest to become an NHL regular.

Speaking of injured defencemen, Arniel also said he's hoping that Dylan Samberg will be back on the ice with the Jets (most likely in a non-contact jersey) on Dec. 27 when the team returns from the holiday break.

The Jets have missed Samberg since he left the lineup with a broken foot after blocking a one-timer from Steven Stamkos on Nov. 23.

"He's become a top-four defenceman and those guys don't just fall out of trees," said Arniel. "He's learned how to become that. Him and (Neal) Pionk, (with) their chemistry. They're so good together. And he's one of our elite penalty killers. So that's an elite piece that comes out of your lineup when one of those top four guys comes out."

Jets forward David Gustafsson missed Friday's workout due to an illness, but he's getting closer to returning to action after being sidelined with a concussion since Dec. 10.

Winnipeg Sun

<https://winnipegsun.com/sports/hockey/nhl/winnipeg-jets/not-how-were-going-to-win-the-stanley-cup-jets-ehlers-wants-more>

'Not how we're going to win the Stanley Cup': Jets' Ehlers wants more

By Paul Friesen

He wasn't happy with his own play and he wasn't thrilled with his team's.

But Winnipeg Jets winger Nik Ehlers predicts an improvement in both as he plays his second game since returning from an injury that forced him to miss nine.

“Last game, it wasn’t very good,” Ehlers said of Wednesday’s 3-2 loss in Anaheim. “My legs felt fine, it’s just that everything else was a step behind. I didn’t like that, so I’m going to do everything that I can to be ready for the next game. Because I’ve got to be better.”

“That’s not how we want to play. That’s not how we’re going to win the Stanley Cup this year.”

If they’re going to reach that ultimate goal, Saturday’s opponent could well be one of the teams they have to get through.

The Minnesota Wild were just three points behind the Jets in top spot, overall – with two games in hand – going into their Friday night game against Utah.

It’ll be the Jets’ third meeting against the Wild this season. They’ve won both: 2-1 in overtime in Minnesota, 4-1 at home.

“The two games that we played against Minny, we battled our asses off,” Ehlers said. “And that’s what we’ve got to go out and do again.”

It’s Winnipeg’s second-last game before the Christmas break. Their last one is in Toronto on Monday.

Foot malfunction for Stanley

The Jets will be without defenceman Logan Stanley for both games before Christmas, as he went down after taking a shot off his foot in Anaheim.

That leaves Ville Heinola and Colin Miller as the third pair on Saturday, at least, as the Jets’ blue-line depth continues to be tested.

“That’s the depth we talked about when we talked about free agency,” head coach Scott Arniel said. “We didn’t have a whole lot of guys running to come to Winnipeg but we did try to really stockpile in certain areas... specifically our D, we felt we had a lot more depth than we’ve had in the past. And having started on the first day of training camp, where we lost two guys, we’ve had to rely on our depth and that’s what we’re doing right now.”

Transmission trouble

If you think of a team’s forward lines as gears, the Jets aren’t a fully-operating four-speed right now.

The top line has been hot at times, others not so much.

It’s a contrast from the way they were all clicking early in the season.

“We need to get where all four are up and running, where all four are looking alike, all four are making hay each and every shift and creating chaos and forcing the opposition,” Arniel said. “Right now, it’s been a little bit of everybody being one night on, one night off.”

Captain Canada

Seeing prospect Brayden Yager named captain of Team Canada for the World Junior Championship stirred a touch of pride in the Jets room.

“He’s having a fantastic season and when he was here at camp, you can tell he’s going to be a good player in this league, once he gets the time and the opportunity to do so,” defenceman Dylan DeMelo said. “He’s gone down there and done a great job in junior, and being rewarded with the ‘C’ on Team Canada, that’s a great honour for any young Canadian boy.”

From Saskatoon, Yager was Pittsburgh’s first-round draft pick last year.

The Jets acquired him for fellow prospect Rutger McGroarty, who captained the U.S. to a gold medal at last year’s World Juniors.

Sent back to the Western League after Jets training camp – he’s since been traded from Moose Jaw to Lethbridge – Yager has 12 goals in 23 WHL games.

“That was one of the things we had mentioned to him... going back there and being the best player on his team,” Arniel said. “The other side was when he was going to get a chance to go play for Team Canada that you’re playing against some of the elite of the elite there in junior hockey or college hockey from around the world, and try to be the best.

“And now to have that responsibility of being captain, that’s an honour and something for him to grasp and be proud of, and hopefully they have great success.”

The last word

“The schedule we’ve had until now has been insane.” – Nik Ehlers on the Jets’ just-completed run of 15 games in 27 days.

<https://winnipeg.sun.com/sports/got-to-win-this-division-date-with-wild-has-winnipeg-jets-attention>

'Got to win this division': Date with Wild has Winnipeg Jets' attention

By Paul Friesen

Either Scott Arniel got his back up a tad on Friday, or he’s really not sure the local media is paying attention.

Asked if he could put a finger on why his team has looked asleep at the wheel to start games recently, the Winnipeg Jets coach began with what seemed like a bit of a poke.

“It’s no secret, I don’t know if you guys have seen the standings, we are No. 1 in the league,” Arniel said. “I don’t know if you notice that.”

Sure we do.

We also notice his team’s record in the last 18 games is 8-9-1.

Here’s something else we noticed: The No. 1 team in the league came out dazed and confused against one of the NHL’s worst teams in Anaheim the other night, out-shot 10-0 on the way to a 3-2 loss.

It’s not as if Arniel has his head in the sand on this. In fact, the slow starts of late had been the focus of a video session with players that morning.

“Teams are ready for us,” the coach continued. “And they’re coming out hard. We have talked about it. If they’re expecting us to come out and play like a top team, let’s do it.”

That Friday morning video session would have shown two different teams wearing Jets colours on Wednesday: the one that lollygagged through the first period, one that meant business in the third.

“We talked about the differences,” Kyle Connor said. “Everybody’s got to be accountable. We’re well aware of it. We’re sitting first in the standings in the whole league right now. At the same time we have so much more to improve on. So that’s the optimistic look.”

The pessimistic look: That 15-1 start was a mirage and their record since then more accurately reflects who they are.

The truth is probably somewhere in between.

“We’re 22-10-1,” Arniel said. “If we had started 9-6 and got ourselves to this, how would we feel? How would we be looking at it? We’re looking at the fact that, right now, we’re 5-4-1 in our last 10. Colorado is 6-4. Dallas is 6-4. Minnesota is 6-4. That’s what we’re zooming in on right now. It feels great to be sitting in first place but that is not our goal.

“We’ve got to win this division, first and foremost.”

That brings us nicely to the easiest prediction in the world to make for Saturday, aside from the sun coming up: The Jets will be a different team at home against the Minnesota Wild.

It’s not supposed to matter who the opponent is, but these are people, not machines.

And not one of them, from the coach on down, pretends strapping on the blades against the Ducks or Sharks is the same as against Minnesota.

“You see them so often ... maybe a bit of dislike grows into the game,” is how Arniel put it, even using the word “contempt” at one point. “You butt heads against some of the same guys all the time and it has a tendency to fester.”

Connor says the Wild “seem to bring out a different edge.”

“That’s just the nature of sports. If you play a team more often there’s going to be more battles.”

One stall over from Connor in the locker-room, Nino Niederreiter was singing a similar tune.

“It’s a lot more at stake... a divisional opponent, they’re right in the mix for first, like we are,” Niederreiter said. “That’s something we’re all aware of. But you can’t make the game bigger than it is.”

No, but you can make it bigger than the last one.

“It’s basically four points on the line,” Niederreiter acknowledged.

Niederreiter described his team’s early play in Anaheim as sloppy and uncharacteristic.

“That’s not us,” he said.

Being on the road yet again and playing back-to-back games was no doubt a factor. Bottom teams like the Ducks jump on it and get an injection of confidence.

“When you have a hot start like we had, an historic start, we’re not sneaking up on anybody,” defenceman Dylan DeMelo said. “We’re getting everybody’s best games... it’s a different role when you’re the hunted instead of hunting. And when you had a great start like us you are where you are in the standings, we are definitely the hunted.”

Getting everybody’s best has a potential benefit, though, DeMelo added. It can push the Jets to be even better. Not just better now, but better prepared for what’s to come.

Saturday, though, none of that applies. It’s just two teams that know each other all too well and don’t like what they’ve seen.

This time it’s the Wild who’ll be playing on back-to-back nights, with travel from Minnesota in between.

“We know what that feels like,” Connor said. “Going into a game for them having to travel, coming in late to a hotel, having to deal with all that. We’ve got to be prepared and come out the right way.”

Not how they came out against Anaheim, San Jose or even Montreal before that.

If they do that again, in Arniel’s words: “It’s going to be a long night.”

Not only that, he may be a little less eager to point to the standings.

“They’re sitting right behind us,” the coach said.

Yeah, we’ve noticed that, too.

Global Winnipeg

<https://globalnews.ca/news/10928248/analysis-winnipeg-jets-critical-games-holiday-break/>

ANALYSIS: Winnipeg Jets face critical pair of games before holiday break

By John Shannon CJOB

So here we are, just days before the holiday break, when the NHL takes three days off to allow everyone to spend time with friends and family.

But before that break, the Winnipeg Jets might be facing their most important weekend of the season so far — and we might just get a real feel for what the Jets really are.

Are they a reasonable facsimile of the 15-1 Jets? Or are they closer to the 8-9-1 Jets that were outplayed in Anaheim, Calif., on Wednesday?

The next two games are against NHL heavyweights. Saturday night at home versus Minnesota and Monday afternoon in Toronto against the Maple Leafs. If this team is able to win both games, then many will buy in on the Jets.

If they lose both, that would mean three consecutive losses — and would certainly not be the way you want to celebrate the holidays.

Much of the funk that has surrounded Winnipeg can evaporate with quality games against Minnesota and Toronto. But it won't be easy...Boldy, Hartman, Kaprizov on one day...and then Matthews, Marner, Nylander two days later.

But it's not about the opponent right now. It's about the Jets. As well as Kyle Connor, Connor Hellebuyck and Josh Morrissey have played. It's about the mental errors at the wrong time, like (26 seconds to play) that have hurt the most.

And while it appears the powerplay has returned to its early season form, it's the attention to detail — the speed, the forecheck, the intensity — that is eluding this team.

And it really is fascinating to be talking about the team that is at the top of the NHL standings facing a watershed weekend, but that just might be the case.

It truly isn't time to panic, but a couple of victories would certainly calm many of those nerves.'

Sportsnet.ca

<https://www.sportsnet.ca/nhl/article/blake-wheeler-opens-up-about-losing-jets-captaincy/>

Blake Wheeler opens up about losing Jets captaincy

By Sportsnet Staff

Blake Wheeler has opened up on the emotions he was feeling after losing the captain role in Winnipeg in a new interview.

Wheeler was the captain of the Jets from 2016-2022 but was stripped of the 'C' by new head coach Rick Bowness ahead of the 2022-23 season.

"Embarrassed probably doesn't do justice how I felt," he said in an interview with leadership coach Dan Leffelaar on the Beyond High Performance Podcast. "I remember the first time I went out for our first game of the season, and I didn't have the 'C' on my jersey anymore. That was a bad feeling, I felt humiliated. I felt like everyone was staring at me."

"Every day honestly was hard, every day was hard. Because what I felt and wanted for that team and organization didn't change."

Wheeler said part of the humiliation came from the fact that he had worked hard — with Leffelaar — to improve his leadership skills in the year before he lost the 'C.'

He admitted that the 2021-22 season was a challenging one as the stress of being a captain became all-consuming.

"That was the worst year for a lot of reasons for me," he said. "The worst year in the sense of having panic attacks before every game. I was in a really bad place and I became somebody who I was not proud of."

For those reasons, Wheeler sought out Leffelaar's mentorship. One of Leffelaar's suggestions was to speak to some teammates who hadn't responded well to Wheeler's past leadership tactics to learn how he should act differently.

Wheeler said that the experience of putting himself out there with his teammates was "horrifying" at first but it led to some very productive conversations. Which made losing the 'C' when he arrived at training camp all the more deflating.

"I'm on a really good trajectory," Wheeler said of the experience working with Leffelaar. "And then the rug gets pulled underneath. 'Oh, by the way, you're not the captain anymore.'"

However, despite the humiliation he felt, Wheeler credited Leffelaar's lessons for helping him stay grounded after the captaincy change.

"For sure my first instinct was to take the bait of being the victim, I just got screwed, all these different things. But because of the previous year and a half working (with Leffelaar) I was able to slow all that down," Wheeler said. "I'm eternally grateful that you came into my life when you did and we went through all that stuff together because when the most challenging moment of my career and life happened, I was equipped with tools to handle it in a way that I could be proud of."

Wheeler played one more season with the Jets before his contract was bought out. Last season he suited up for the New York Rangers but missed the majority of the year with a broken leg.

Now 38, Wheeler is coaching his kids and enjoying time with his family that he missed during his playing career. While he hasn't announced his retirement, he admitted it's hard to imagine getting emotionally ready for another long NHL season.

"My body, can I still go play a hockey game? Hell, yeah. I can still play," Wheeler said. "It's just the emotional, getting up 82 times, I don't want to do that. There's only so much gas in the tank for that."

The Athletic

<https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/6010113/2024/12/21/nhl-winnipeg-jets-stanley-cup-contender/>

The 2 biggest questions facing the Winnipeg Jets' status as Stanley Cup contenders

By Murat Ates

"I don't know if you guys have seen the standings," Scott Arniel reminded us at Friday's Jets practice. "We are No. 1 in the league. I don't know if you notice that. But teams are ready for us. And they're coming out hard."

It's clear that Winnipeg has not matched its record-setting start to the season.

The process hasn't been there, with the Jets losing the flow-of-play battle at five-on-five. The results have flagged, with a 15-1-0 start giving way to a late November losing streak and a 5-4-1 December record. The Jets say they're not rattled by recent results, although it seems as though they're feeling an increased sense of urgency with games against Minnesota and Toronto between now and the holiday break.

"We can't wade into games," Arniel said Friday. "We can't chase games early and rely on our goaltenders to make big stops. We have to be better."

Gone are the days when Winnipeg would roll one line after another into multiple, consecutive offensive-zone shifts. The Jets aren't leaning on other teams like they used to, with Mark Scheifele's line handing an offensive-zone shift off to Vladislav Namestnikov's line, who then does the same thing for Adam Lowry's group and so on down the lineup.

Other teams are doing that to Winnipeg now, including teams Winnipeg should expect to beat.

I put the concept of hand-off shifts to Arniel on Friday.

"Anaheim had four shifts in a row against all four of our lines where we got stuck in our end or there was a rush coming the other way. That's exactly the type of thinking that we have to have — that we come out in the first period and we do that one right after the other," he said. "And you're right, part of our success is that we steamroll people, we keep coming at them, we get them on their heels, force them to make mistakes."

The Jets have been the ones making mistakes lately, and while their first-place status is well-acknowledged — this is not a lottery team on a five-game slide, or close to it — Winnipeg has work to do to reclaim its well-earned swagger from earlier in the season.

Today, we're looking at two of the biggest questions facing Winnipeg's Cup contender status — one intangible, one very clear — and how the Jets might approach solving them.

Do the Jets have the mental toughness to stay at the top?

Winnipeg's biggest on-ice needs are a right-handed Dylan Samberg clone (or a prime-aged Dustin Byfuglien) and a truculent, shift-disturbing forward who can play elite opposition and beat it while also scoring like a top-six forward. Yes, those are enormous asks. No, the Jets don't need either to be competitive. Airlift either player onto this Jets roster and I would immediately perceive it as more playoff-ready than it already is.

There is also a lingering concern about the team's mental toughness. Winnipeg led the league last January, too, before a drop in quality of play led to poorer underlying numbers (despite an eight-game win streak to end the season) and red flags before the playoffs. The Jets led the Western Conference in 2023 before a poor second-half led to a first-round loss against Vegas and have been known for second-half struggles going as far back as 2018-19 when they led the West before a second-half collapse led to a first-round exit against St. Louis.)

In some ways, this discussion is unfair. The Blues and Golden Knights won the Cup. It can't possibly be as simple as "the Jets were good but lost, so they must lack mental toughness."

But there have been signs. Winnipeg does revert back to an indirect, skill-heavy, find-the-seam-passes type of game when things aren't going well. The Jets haven't won a postseason game after losing one since the 2020 qualifying round against Calgary (or, if you prefer to think in

terms of a 16-team playoffs, since 2019 against St. Louis — the last playoff games of Byfuglien and Bryan Little's careers.)

Perhaps the worst way in which this critique is unfair? If you use Winnipeg's past to paint this year's team with broad strokes, then there's nothing it can do — other than win the Stanley Cup — to overcome the criticism. It doesn't matter if Winnipeg is in first place now, through January, or into the stretch run: If you decide the Jets are not resilient and then they lose in the playoffs, then you were right all along.

It's more likely that the Jets' core, which has struggled to play the right way and maintain its 200-foot stubbornness at times in the past, is doing its best to learn from those past struggles. Their history belongs to them, whether fair or not, so I can't help but keep this question front of mind as the league catches up to Winnipeg's hot start. I don't mean to ask it as if I know the answer.

Arniel told me Friday that the Jets aren't worried about their spot in the standings.

"We're 23-10-1. If we had started 9-6 and got ourselves to this, how would we feel? How would we be looking at it?" Arniel said. "We're looking at the fact that, right now, we're 5-4-1 in our last 10. Colorado is 6-4. Dallas is 6-4. Minnesota is 6-4. That's what we're zooming in on right now. It feels great to be sitting in first place, but that is not our goal. We've got to win this division, first and foremost, and then whatever happens going forward ..."

Arniel then changed direction.

"There has been sputters along the way. We had a four-game losing streak and it was like the earth shattered, but teams go through it. We knew it wasn't going to be roses all of the way through, but we've gotten better in our last 10," he said.

I don't think it would be realistic to view Winnipeg's growth from missing the playoffs to 2023 versus Vegas to 2024 versus Colorado as a straight line. Perhaps we should keep the same perspective as the first-place team does its best to ward off familiar problems. Winnipeg has been a decidedly middling team at five-on-five over its last 10 games, relying on big-time moments from its stars — and its league-best power play — to keep itself in games. Perhaps Winnipeg's power play (and goaltender) are buying it time to find itself at five-on-five, the same way its 15-1-0 start bought it some runway at No. 1 in the NHL.

Do the Jets have four top-four defencemen — and so what if they do?

Samberg's emergence as a top-four defenceman is one of the best stories of Winnipeg's season — and it shouldn't have been a surprise. We've projected top-four potential for Samberg since he was a college star in need of an NHL contract, watched him succeed as a rookie in a sheltered third-pair role, and then doubled down on his top-four trajectory prior to last season.

The plan is for Samberg to start skating on December 27 with a return in the new year.

Not every defenceman manages the leap from the third pairing, though. We've seen Logan Stanley struggle to consolidate third-pairing results to the point where he can be relied upon or force his way higher up the lineup. Ville Heinola continues to work toward everyday NHL status, getting fresh opportunity now that Stanley is out for at least two games after hurting his foot after blocking a shot against the Ducks. Haydn Fleury had excellent numbers in spot duty on the Jets' third pair but has been outscored 9-5 alongside Neal Pionk and outshot at a similar rate.

When Samberg got hurt, we warned against underestimating his massive loss but may have understated the consequence.

It seems clear that Winnipeg needs Samberg in its lineup to properly handle elite opponents. He's great in defensive coverage, blocks shots, kills penalties and protects the middle of the ice with brains and brawn in a way befitting his rise up the Jets depth chart.

Arniel is proud of that depth chart but acknowledges Winnipeg's challenge without Samberg in the lineup.

"Haydn hasn't played this much in a long time, let alone the last couple of years," Arniel said. "It just drives up Stan's minutes, drives up, whether it's Ville or Millsy, everybody sort of has to take on a little more of a role and that's just sort of what happens. Like you said, next man up. It also puts a big strain on your top with Mel, P, Mo."

Note the way Arniel separated Stanley from Heinola and Colin Miller. Despite results, it seems as though the 6-foot-7 defenceman is in a tier of his own, behind the Jets' established top four of Josh Morrissey, Dylan DeMelo, Samberg and Pionk.

That's fine if the Morrissey-DeMelo pairing crushes its minutes like it did last year and if the Samberg-Pionk pairing maintains its early season excellence when back at full health. ... But that brings us to the next question about Winnipeg's top four defence.

DeMelo has gone from "coach's porn," in the words of Paul Maurice, to dominant results under Rick Bowness for two seasons, to a tougher-than-expected first half of this season. The Morrissey-DeMelo pairing is winning its minutes by a score of 20-17 in real goals but giving up too many chances; I see DeMelo as a big part of that. He's been beaten in open ice for scoring chances and a step behind in his net front battles, too, including on the PK.

DeMelo has a strong enough track record with Morrissey to earn a little bit of patience. At the same time, it's easy to see a world in which a higher-end, more physical, more dynamic player delivered even better results on Winnipeg's top pair. If the Jets could snap their fingers and add Byfuglien, Chris Tanev, MacKenzie Weegar, or someone of that ilk, bumping Pionk and DeMelo one rung down the depth chart, it would insulate the Jets against injuries and increase their playoff chances.

The Jets' blue line needs work, whether or not in that form: Pionk is scheduled to become a 2025 UFA, while Samberg is going to be a restricted free agent with arbitration rights. Samberg's earliest UFA year is 2026, meaning he'll have plenty of leverage to negotiate a raise if the Jets want to extend him long-term — as they should, particularly given what we've seen from him this season.

Ideally, the Jets' blue line gets work done in time for the playoffs, though, lest Winnipeg get beat in the middle of the ice on those scramble plays and rebounds as in its recent playoff efforts.