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Jets at the World Juniors - Day 1 Canada beats Finland 4-0 to start the 2025 World Juniors.

By Jamie Thomas

Day one of the 2025 World Juniors kicked off in Ottawa on Thursday with four games. Canada opened the tournament with a 4-0 win over Finland, Brayden Yager is the Jets lone prospect at the event.

Yager centred a line with Porter Martone and Tanner Howe (Penguins), was on the power play and was part of the penalty kill unit that was a perfect 5-for-5 on the night.

The 19-year-old had one shot on goal and finished +1 and won 10 of his 11 faceoffs.

Canada (1-0) will face Latvia on Friday at 6:30 CT.

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<https://www.nhl.com/news/winnipeg-jets-connor-hellebuyck-named-unmasked-goalie-of-the-year>

Hellebuyck of Jets named Unmasked Goalie of the Year Vezina winner could be headed for repeat, leading NHL in wins, save percentage, GAA, shutouts this season

By Kevin Woodley

Connor Hellebuyck was an easy choice for the 2024 Unmasked Goalie of the Year Award, but not just because the Winnipeg Jets workhorse No. 1 also won his second Vezina Trophy as the NHL's best goalie and led -- or in some cases, almost lapped -- the field statistically during the calendar year.

It's how -- and how often -- Hellebuyck succeeds that makes him perfect for an award created to recognize not only individual excellence but also themes that dominated the conversation about goaltending during the previous 12 months.

For Hellebuyck, that starts with how well he thinks and studies the game.

"Helle's' hockey mind is better than anyone I've ever met," said Jets backup Eric Comrie, who is back for a third stint with Hellebuyck and the Jets in nine NHL seasons. "I don't think people realize that because he keeps it to himself, but he tells me things I would never have thought of in my life. It's unbelievable. The way he breaks down everything is incredible, and his positioning is perfect."

Hellebuyck's ability to anticipate plays based on subtle details is hard to quantify, but the results speak for themselves. From Jan. 1 through Christmas, he led the NHL in wins (42), and his .925

save percentage was 10 points higher than Linus Ullmark in second place among goalies that played at least 35 games.

Just as impressive is how often Hellebuyck plays at a time when most teams are trying to taper the workload of their starting goalies and trending more toward tandems. His 62 starts so far in 2024 trail only Juuse Saros (63) of the Nashville Predators and Andrei Vasilevskiy (63) of the Tampa Bay Lightning, and no goalie faced more shots (1,843) and made more saves (1,704) than Hellebuyck.

After winning the Vezina last season, Hellebuyck is again the frontrunner this year, leading the NHL (among goalies with at least 10 starts) in wins (22), save percentage (.927), goals-against average (2.07) and shutouts (four). The 31-year-old has a chance to become the first goalie since Martin Brodeur in 2007 and 2008 to be named the League's top goalie in consecutive seasons and just the fourth to win it three times since general managers started voting for the Vezina in 1981-82, joining Dominik Hasek (six times), Brodeur (four), and Patrick Roy (three).

Hasek's brilliance was often described as having a "brain like a computer and a spine like a slinky" for the way he was able to first anticipate what was coming before it happened and contort his body in unique ways to counter it. Hellebuyck, who has referred to his style as "big and boring," is the anti-Hasek when it comes to how he uses his 6-foot-4, 207-pound frame to stop pucks.

"When we're talking about elite goalies, he's probably the most physically limited flexibility wise," said Adam Francilia, an exercise physiologist who specializes in goaltending, has worked with Hellebuyck for the past eight seasons, and currently has 11 clients in the NHL. "He's the antithesis, so it's almost like when somebody loses a sense, all the other ones are elevated and because 'Helle' doesn't have that world-class, Cirque du Soleil flexibility and athleticism, it's almost like his other senses are heightened, but those senses are the ones that he happens to be very gifted at, so it's almost the perfect storm for him."

Hellebuyck's ability to foresee plays is very much at a Hasek-like level.

"To me his game is built on his skating -- he's a hell of a skater for a 6-foot-4 goalie -- his ability to stay on his feet longer and his ability to read the play," said Jets assistant coach Wade Flaherty, who was previously Winnipeg's goaltending coach for seven seasons. "If you watch his head, he is breaking down every possible scenario. When a guy has the puck, he's scanning that ice all the time, and he's on it. He is so big on being in position and I call it calculated depth because he knows what the options are. It's amazing."

It shines through in video sessions with Flaherty and Comrie, when Hellebuyck is often able to detail where a shot or pass is going long before it happens and explain why based on a wide range of inputs that can include everything from how they're holding their hands, where the stick is relative to their body, whether their hips are open or closed or where they are looking -- or sometimes not looking.

"I'll be like, 'You're a little deep here,' and he'll say 'Yeah, but I felt that was going to go over to that guy standing over here, so I was kind of backing off a little bit,'" Flaherty said. "I'll never, ever take that away because his brain is special."

Hellebuyck will share those insights during the game with Comrie, whether it's at the bench during a TV timeout or in the locker room between periods.

“The way he talks about plays like ‘The screen was here, so I know he has to shoot there,’ and he just goes there, it’s unbelievable,” Comrie said. “He trusts himself and his instincts so much and that trust is a very big part of his success.”

Some of that instinct may be innate, but a lot is the consistent work Hellebuyck has put into his craft, from studying players' stick blades when he was younger to learn how the puck came off different curves, to fine-tuning his stance and how he moves with Francilia, to on-ice and video sessions with Flaherty.

“He’s very detailed in everything he does,” Flaherty said. “Before games with his warmup, from the [Francilia] core and stability work to the racquetballs, doing his juggling, throwing them against the wall, his eye exercises sitting on the bench. You wrap all that stuff into a box and is that what gives him the consistency night after night? Or is it his ability to go into those games with his experience of playing 60 games a season for the last eight years? I think it’s his attention to detail, to his practice habits, even the littlest detail has to be perfect. If we’re on the ice and he’s not feeling 100 percent, we’re doing something at the end of practice to make him feel ready to go in the sense of, ‘OK, there it is, I just got my sweet spot in my body.’ He’s so in tune with his body as a goaltender.”

All of that allows Hellebuyck to excel at a time when League-wide save percentage continues to decline and NHL forwards and offensive attacks have never been more dynamic or unpredictable -- at least to most goalies. All of which makes Hellebuyck a perfect choice as the 2024 Unmasked Goalie of the Year.

The Athletic

<https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/6011622/2024/12/24/winnipeg-jets-connor-defence-injuries-fleury-kevin-he/>

Jets storylines: Connor’s defensive impact, Fleury’s unlikely rise and He’s sensational year

By Murat Ates

Winnipeg beat Toronto 5-2 on Monday, ensuring top spot in the NHL standings to start the holiday break.

The Jets have the league’s top goaltender in Connor Hellebuyck, two skaters tied for sixth in league scoring with 21 goals each in Kyle Connor and Mark Scheifele, and a league-best power play. Josh Morrissey is fourth among defencemen in points. Neal Pionk is tied for eighth. The team’s goal differential is the best in the league, Nikolaj Ehlers is back at full health, Cole Perfetti is playing the best hockey of his career...

We could go on, but let’s take the holiday break to dive deeper into three storylines that might not get enough attention, starting with Connor’s career year, at both ends of the ice.

The story behind Connor’s two-way surge

The analytical book on Connor was similar for the first eight years of his career: Connor helped the Jets score goals but gave up so much defensively that he didn’t win his minutes.

Here was the Jets' best finisher — an elite scorer ranked eighth in goals and 24th in points from 2017-18 to now — and no matter how much he scored at five-on-five, other teams scored as much (or more) against Winnipeg. Take the power play, empty nets, four-on-four, and three-on-three hockey out of it, and Connor was a -12 in his career before this season. This was true even during his 93-point season in 2021-22: Despite Connor producing the best offensive season in Jets 2.0 history, Winnipeg's opponents scored three more goals when Connor was on the ice at five-on-five than Winnipeg did.

It was the sort of thing that seemed to defy public perception. Connor is so fast and so skilled, routinely making plays that other elite players can't make. He can accelerate out of a cutback faster than some of the league's best skaters, pick spots with his shot that trouble some of the league's best shooters, and plays a fast-paced, "twitchy" game that troubles the league's best defenders.

Why didn't he win his minutes? Some of the problems came from in-zone coverage. Sometimes it was a lack of backcheck. Often, it was a puck rimmed to Connor on the left wing boards that didn't get out of the zone and the chaos that came with turnovers in transition.

Put those stories on the backburner, though. Connor is writing a new chapter in his story right now — and if it continues as the sample size grows, it could come to define Connor's career almost as much as his offence does. Not only is Connor on pace to set new career highs in goals, assists and points, it's never been harder for teams to get a scoring chance against Winnipeg with him on the ice.

"It's nothing that I'm satisfied with," Connor told The Athletic in a recent interview. "I'm one of those guys that tries to grow in all aspects of the game. Playing on the defensive side of the puck, if you do a good job there, you spend less time there. You get to go play offence and play with the puck, which everyone likes to do."

Case in point, via Scheifele's shot block:

I tend to view a forward's defensive decision-making in three stages: tracking back from offence to defence, identifying which threat to cover, and then actually covering that threat. Connor's biggest strength in these regards is his foot speed.

"I think being able to use that speed and, like you were saying, track — work just as hard or almost twice as hard coming all of the way back, you're able to get that puck that much quicker," Connor said. "I think that's been a big part of our team's success — for me, too, but I think our whole team realizes that. Those first three strides when the puck turns over in the offensive zone or even in the D-zone."

There are times when a forward works his tail off to get back into Winnipeg's zone and perfectly eliminates a threat. I hold Nino Niederreiter as a gold standard in this regard; Niederreiter frequently backchecks all the way to the far post, eliminating passing options for other teams' rush attacks.

Connor is working to improve in all areas, including on rush defence. He explained Winnipeg's rush defence principles as follows.

"We have certain guidelines as a team. If you have pressure on a guy, you want to stay on them," Connor said. "We want our D to hold more of the middle of the ice, (not) getting pulled

across with two D on the same side of the ice. As a forward, if you're able to get speed and track the guy, then we want that to happen more times than not. We want to go to the guy with the puck, rather than going somewhere else."

Connor has the pace to outskate a lot of NHL players. Here he is stopping a three-on-two rush before it even begins — and it leads to a Jets goal.

Let's get back to Connor's overall improvement. Pick your model of choice; the news is positive. Evolving Hockey rates Connor's even-strength defence as a positive for the first time in his career. Dom Luszczyszyn's Game Score shows a positive defensive rating. Natural Stat Trick shows Connor on the ice for the second-best expected goals against rate of his career (second only to the 2017-18 Jets, when he mostly played beside Blake Wheeler in his prime in front of Dustin Byfuglien in his prime.) The Jets have still been outshot, but not from the most dangerous areas of the ice, and are winning the expected goals and high-danger scoring chance battles.

Don't let the nerd-speak undersell the importance of Connor's impact. Winnipeg is winning Connor's minutes in real goals that win hockey games by a score of 29-23 at five-on-five. When he, Scheifele and Gabriel Vilardi are all on the ice, the Jets are winning those minutes 26-21. There are still breakdowns and pucks that don't get out of the Jets' zone — but there are fewer of them.

Asked to explain his success, Connor downplayed his own achievements.

"No big epiphany," he told me. "It's normal business."

Could he say more? The Jets have been improving defensively since Rick Bowness arrived, but Connor's evolution seems more evident this season. Again, Connor pointed to his team.

"I think it comes from this room. It comes from the guys we have being willing to adapt and play that game," Connor said. "You can see a lot of the younger players coming in, maturing. Fetts' game has grown a lot. A lot of guys have stepped in, or taken their game to the next level — Pionk, you know, like, everybody has taken that next step. I think that goes into the offseason last year, just saying that everybody needs 10 percent more. Everybody's been doing the extra things and I think that's a big part of the success this year."

There are practical reasons why improved team play since Bowness' (and Scott Arniel's) arrival makes everyone's numbers look better. The Jets switched from Paul Maurice's man-to-man defence to a zone system that favours protecting the middle of the ice. In the old days, when a forward got beat, the player that beat him would often get a clear path to the net. If another Jets player stepped in to help, that would leave someone else open.

Now, there are usually two defencemen and one other forward protecting the middle of the ice. Take Monday's first period against Toronto, for example, when William Nylander briefly looked like a cheat code dancing through first two forwards but ran into traffic in the middle of the ice. Nylander didn't get a scoring chance; Ehlers skated away with the puck.

A substantial piece of Connor's defensive impact will always be tied to his puck management. Sometimes he still gets caught during breakouts, with an opposing defenceman pinching down and eliminating him from the play. But the Jets don't need Connor to be perfect defensively.

They need him to be good enough that his offensive contributions win them games, and they're getting that.

If Connor keeps up this level of performance, we're witnessing a career year. Give Scheifele, Vilardi and the full team a piece of that credit — as Connor was quick to do — but don't miss the little victories he's helping turn into big wins.

Haydn Fleury has been a great story. Can it continue?

Haydn Fleury left Monday's game with a lower-body injury, forcing the Jets to lean on five defencemen en route to their 5-2 win. Scott Arniel told reporters in Toronto Fleury is day-to-day, creating the potential that the Jets return from the break without Fleury, Dylan Samberg or Logan Stanley available at left defence.

For Fleury, it threatens to end — or at least interrupt — his against-all-odds surge up the Jets' depth chart.

When the season began, it would have been absurd to view an injury to Fleury as a loss to the Jets' top four. He'd chosen to sign with Winnipeg partly because the Jets share a city with their AHL team and partly to stay in Canada, in touch with his prairie roots. Fleury's wife, Jaid, was pregnant with their second child, and it would be a lot easier for the family if Fleury didn't have to swap cities every time he was called up or sent down.

"My kids and my family come first," Fleury told *The Athletic* in a recent interview. "I only had one son at the time but now we have two. They're the most important things in my life and to do whatever I can to spend the most time with them was really big."

Another part of the decision, as Fleury himself admits? His phone wasn't ringing off the hook on July 1. When Jets assistant GM Craig Heisinger (traditionally responsible for Winnipeg's minor-league signings) called, Fleury jumped at the opportunity, signing on July 5.

"I didn't have much (but) I decided I was good with however it went," Fleury said. "I made peace with the fact that it could be the end of the road if I didn't have a good camp."

There's a reason the stakes were so high. A slew of injuries including a hip, a glute, a broken finger and two concussions — among others — had limited Fleury to 29 and 24 games in his two previous seasons. The 28-year-old arrived in Winnipeg with something to prove and he knew it.

"I was fully aware of the situation I was coming into," he said. "I thought I had a good camp and started to build momentum. You have to take advantage of opportunities when they're given and I feel like it's gone well so far."

Fleury spent the last three months turning a strong training camp into an NHL roster spot, a strong performance on Winnipeg's third pair and a promotion to Pionk's left side when Samberg broke his foot. Even as a strong start in the top four eventually gave way to some tough nights for the Fleury-Pionk pairing, Fleury maintained his sense of joy throughout the ups and downs.

"I'm just playing hockey. I get to come to the rink every day and do what I love," he said. "I try to keep it simple, talk a lot, use my feet as best as I can and let the game come to me."

Arniel had previously said Stanley is likely to return after the holiday break and Samberg aims to resume skating on December 27. There's a chance Fleury gets squeezed out of his current job even if he returns home from Toronto to good health news. He's shown well enough to keep him in the mix for a third-pairing job even after Samberg's return — and one hopes he has the fitness to attempt it.

In the meantime, the Jets might promote Colin Miller into a righty-righty pair with Pionk or take a longer look at Ville Heinola, who is coming off his two best games of the season.

Winnipeg's fastest-rising prospect still doesn't get enough credit

Kevin He was the highest draft pick among players born in China — ever. Now he's the first player born in China to sign an NHL contract.

The Jets signed He to a three year, entry-level contract last week, adding to a storybook season that saw He go in the fourth round, impress at Jets camp, become the captain of his OHL team and double his scoring rate, all at 18 years old. The Athletic reached out to the Niagara IceDogs for more insight into He's historic year, with head coach Ben Boudreau saying He probably deserves even more credit than he's getting.

Media and communications manager Erik Lomax asked Boudreau a few questions on our behalf, including what non-obvious things He should be known for among our readers.

"I think one of the things is just how involved he is in the community," Boudreau said. "If someone is asking for an autograph, He's the first one there. You see him firsthand in the community, on the ice with the kids. Whether it's a parade, whether it's delivering teddy bears at the hospital as the captain here, he's making sure he shines a positive light in the community ... I don't think he gets enough recognition for his involvement in the community and how he interacts with the kids. Just as far as who Kevin is as a person, I think he is the right person to help lead this turnaround for our organization."

Boudreau sees Niagara as an organization in the midst of a turnaround. The IceDogs haven't made the playoffs in six seasons but are currently fourth in the OHL, with He leading the way on and off the ice. He's consistently the first one at the rink and the last to leave it. He's second in team scoring, with 24 goals and 23 assists for 47 points in 31 games.

He's off-ice habits impress Boudreau the most.

"He's always on the optional ice. He's always at the gym. He's usually the first one here, a lot of the times the last one off, and those are principles in terms of his dedication to his own development which are going to carry him a long way," Boudreau said. "The success that you see on the ice is often a result of the preparation that he puts in off the ice. That's all self-motivated ... And that's just who he is."

He impressed me at training camp in Winnipeg, showing tenaciousness reminiscent of former Jets like Mikey Eyssimont. His offensive game looked ready to take off as well, and if He ultimately hits as a prospect, one imagines him having a substantial impact in his role.

Boudreau thinks He's experience at Jets camp was particularly impactful for him and is paying dividends for Niagara, too.

“Seeing NHL players, one of the things you’re going to be able to tell from camp is how far you really are — or how close you really are,” Boudreau said. “I think that when Kevin returned, he felt that he was really close to being at that NHL level ... He’s been one of the main drivers in the Niagara IceDogs’ organizational turnaround. This team hasn’t seen the playoffs in six years and the biggest draft pick for the IceDogs in recent years is leading the way to a franchise-record start in the last 13 years since the IceDogs have been here in St. Catharines.”

<https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/6018520/2024/12/27/nhl-trade-board-matchmaker-granlund-ristolainen-hall-borgen-tanev/>

NHL trade matchmaker: Predicting where top targets go by the deadline, part 2

By Pierre LeBrun and Chris Johnston

We are now exactly 10 weeks away from the NHL’s March 7 trade deadline.

That leaves enough runway for the needs of buyers and sellers to shift before the biggest decisions are made — or for buyers and sellers to switch places. But in a season where there’s already been plenty of trade action, it’s not too soon to try to find some fits between teams and players available on our latest NHL trade big board.

With that in mind, here’s part two of trade-board matchmaker.

Rasmus Ristolainen

Team: Philadelphia Flyers

Position: D

Shoots: R

Age: 30

Contract term: 2027 UFA

AAV: \$5.1 million

LeBrun: Winnipeg Jets

It wasn’t too long ago that Ristolainen’s contract scared teams, but it’s funny what happens with a 20-minute-a-night, top-four defenseman finds his game more consistently, as he has this season. Suddenly, with the salary cap going up, a \$5.1 million cap hit for the next two and a half years isn’t so bad at all. That’s why league sources say the Flyers have indeed received calls this season asking if they would be willing to move Ristolainen. The answer from the Flyers is yes — if there’s a certain price met. They would want a good prospect or young player in return or a combination of a prospect and a pick. And while trading for a player with term on his contract isn’t your typical deadline deal since most contenders prefer rentals, I can see it appealing to a few teams. For example, the Jets. I’d like to see the Jets add the kind of size on the right side of their defense that Ristolainen would bring. And after giving up a first-round pick last season for rental Sean Monahan only to see him leave July 1, and keeping in mind how difficult it is for the Jets to attract free agents to Winnipeg, I like the idea of acquiring a player under contract. So there you have it, I’ve got the Cup-contending Jets taking on Ristolainen.