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<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2024/12/29/mailbag-stanleys-role-a-sore-point-for-fans-but-jets-havent-given-up-on-him-yet>

Mailbag: Stanley's role a sore point for fans, but Jets haven't given up on him yet

By: Mike McIntyre and Ken Wiebe

Gather 'round, folks, as Free Press hockey writers Ken Wiebe and Mike McIntyre are back for another edition of our monthly Winnipeg Jets mailbag.

There were a few common themes: Logan Stanley, the upcoming NHL trade deadline, Logan Stanley, some prospects with the Manitoba Moose, Logan Stanley, honouring some stars of the past and — did we mention this one? — Logan Stanley.

Dig in.

1A. Does Logan Stanley finish the year on the Jets roster? JOHN

1B. Would you be able to give an in-depth answer of why you think Logan Stanley is getting the role on this team he is? I'm not gonna get as upset as some people on social media but do you believe it is because of where he is drafted? Do they not want to admit they fumbled the pick? Do they see something the general fan isn't seeing? To me and some of my friends that are Jets fans, it seems like it's turnover and penalties like crazy and when we have better options such as a young player like Ville Heinola. Does it not make more sense to play him? BLAKE

1C. I understand why Jets coach Scott Arniel says we need Logan Stanley to be in our top six. I would rather Arniel say, "We need a player in our top six that plays like Brenden Dillon." Stanley has proven that he is not that player. What players are out there that the Jets may be able to trade for that could provide that missing role in our top six? LEE

McINTYRE: To be honest, we probably could have gone through the entire alphabet this month (1A through 1Z) with questions about the Jets polarizing 6-foot-7 defenceman. He's quite the hot topic, to say the least. So let's unpack these three related questions, which are representative of the general theme that came our way. Yes, I believe Stanley finishes the year on the roster.

They haven't given up on him yet — that should be crystal clear by now — and I don't expect that to change by way of a trade or placement on waivers. However, I would be surprised if he's seeing game action once the stakes get really high and the playoffs come around. Stanley should be relegated to a depth spot by then — like seventh or eighth or ninth spot — with the Jets hopefully healthy and also having added at the trade deadline. If he isn't, that's a big whiff in my eyes.

So why is he playing now? His draft position plays a small role, with the organization not wanting to pull the pin on someone they have invested plenty of time in trying to develop. But that's not the entire story. To me, it's as much about what the Jets don't currently have enough of — size and physicality on the back-end — that is giving Stanley plenty of rope.

At this moment, the coaching staff clearly views him as an asset in that department, and continuing to play him despite some of the faults you've accurately pointed out is as much an

SOS to general manager Kevin Cheveldayoff. Not replacing Brenden Dillon with a reasonable facsimile, and then losing Dylan Samberg to a broken foot, has created some holes.

I will be surprised if a serious attempt isn't made to try and fill them between now and the March 7 trade deadline. In terms of some targets, there are names such as Rasmus Ristolainen (Philadelphia), David Savard (Montreal) and perhaps Jamie Oleksiak (Seattle) out there who could potentially check the appropriate boxes, and perhaps some others whose names haven't emerged just yet.

One final thought from me: I truly don't believe success or failure of this team is determined by who the sixth defenceman is, and the fact so many are up in arms about Stanley's play on a team that is soaring high near the very top of the NHL standings would support that.

2. Do the Jets have a D-corps capable of a quality run in the playoffs? VERN

WIEBE: The Jets defence corps is still in a greater-than-the-sum-of-its parts phase and they deserve credit for how they've played to this point, especially when you consider Dylan Samberg has missed 16 games (and counting) with a broken foot. Josh Morrissey is having an outstanding season and would find his name on a lot of Norris Trophy ballots if the season ended tomorrow.

Neal Pionk is enjoying a bounce-back season, both defensively and in terms of offensive production and that was going to be important for this defence corps. There are some ongoing battles remaining and while Haydn Fleury has done a great job — especially during Samberg's absence — he's now week-to-week, which leaves more time for Ville Heinola, Logan Stanley and potentially Dylan Coghlan to try and improve their standing.

So, back to the original question — the Jets defence corps is capable of a quality run in the playoffs, provided they're all healthy. But there's little doubt that Cheveldayoff is going to explore the trade market and I will be surprised if they don't pursue an upgrade before the deadline.

3. Which do you think the Jets do first? 1. Trade for a No. 2 centre; 2. Trade for a top right-handed defenceman; 3. Try to get one of the Moose to make the jump to help the team out so they can re-jig the lines. STUART

McINTYRE: We've already seen a couple of Moose call-ups in Brad Lambert and then Nikita Chibrikov given a brief in-season audition, albeit one necessitated by the injury to Nikolaj Ehlers. I certainly wouldn't mind seeing a bit more from both players, especially Chibrikov who could potentially slide into a fourth-line role and add a bit more offensive punch.

However, I truly believe a second-line centre will again be a top priority. Not to discount the job Vlad Namestnikov has done in that role, but we know the organization tried to re-sign Sean Monahan last summer, which tells you they recognized it as a position of need. I think an ideal situation would see a Monahan-type add against this year, which would allow Namestnikov to slide down into a third or fourth-line role.

I also believe a right-shot defenceman is equally high on the wish list — Colin Miller has gone from being a recent healthy scratch to on the second-pair in that role on Saturday night against the Ottawa Senators — so it's a bit of a coin flip in trying to predict which comes first.

4. Will Nikolaj Ehlers be gone by the deadline? I would love to see a Josh Anderson type added to the Jets' forward group? RYAN

WIEBE: With just over three months until the NHL trade deadline arrives on March 7, all the options remain on the table for Ehlers but the least likely of those options appears to be him being traded.

Signing an in-season extension also appears to be unlikely, though that could change with one phone call. Which means keeping Ehlers on the roster as a self rental appears to be the most logical outcome.

Ehlers is having an excellent season and has only enhanced his value, should he hit the open market as an unrestricted free agent on July 1. Ehlers has taken full advantage of the opportunity to play regularly on the top power play unit for an extended period of time for the first time in his career and his play-driving ability has been evident — despite missing nine games with an undisclosed lower-body injury.

After delivering a goal and two assists on Saturday, Ehlers is up to 11 goals and 30 points in 28 games.

For Ehlers to be moved before the deadline, the Jets would have to be blown away by an offer. As for Josh Anderson, the version of him in his prime would definitely be appealing to the Jets. All contenders will be looking for someone with power forward capabilities, but the 30-year-old has shifted to being more of a complementary player, not someone who could improve the top six.

5. I think the Jets need to add some muscle if they hope to go far. Having Adam Lowry off for five minutes was a much bigger loss for the Jets than it was for Boston to lose Nikita Zadorov. He is far too valuable as the captain to have to be the policeman, so to speak, yet the Bruins got by quite easily without the three guys that got majors. Someone such as a Chris Thorburn or Brenden Dillon would be nice to have. The days of Gord Donnelly and Tie Domi are long over. JONATHAN

WIEBE: To Ryan's point, someone like Anderson would bring some additional bite to the forward group. Having a heavyweight in the lineup like Donnelly or Domi isn't going to be an option, but if the Jets could find someone that occasionally drops the gloves and could also make the team harder to play against while having the ability to play a regular shift and contribute elsewhere, they would consider it.

You're absolutely right that losing Lowry for five minutes hurts the Jets more than losing Zadorov for five minutes would. Lowry is the best fighter and toughest player on the Jets, so bringing someone else in to help with that role is a consideration, though it's a lower priority than adding a 2C or a D-man.

6. I look at the Jets as having 4-5 very capable players of playing a middle-six role at forward (Mason Appleton, Morgan Barron, Vlad Namestnikov, David Gustafsson, Alex Iafallo) that they should consider as movable. These are all players that on a Cup contender are bottom-six type of forwards. Can you see them moving 2-3 of these players in order to get a middle-six player, but on that plays with more "bite/aggression" and who would be a better person to fight instead of our captain all the time? LEE

McINTYRE: I don't necessarily see the Jets moving any of the players mentioned above, but that doesn't preclude them from adding to the group, either. Adding a top-six forward (presumably a centre), would allow for someone like Namestnikov to slide down into a bottom six role, while also moving others another spot down the depth chart which isn't necessarily a bad thing.

I also think adding a player with some bite, as you point out, would be a smart move to help Lowry do some of the heavier lifting in that department.

But these adds don't have to come at the expense of deleting current contributing members of the club, who very much might all be needed should the Jets go on a long playoff run next spring. The more likely scenario is moving some draft picks and/or prospects to help bolster the roster.

Appleton, Namestnikov and Lafallo are all pending unrestricted free agents, and it wouldn't surprise me to see at least two of them re-signed by the organization.

7. Will GM Kevin Cheveldayoff ever go big game hunting? When elite players become available via trade (example Elias Pettersson) it doesn't seem like he is ever willing to give up anything for a game breaker. Like why go shopping for a 2C when you can get another 1C? MALLORY

WIEBE: First of all, big-game hunting is a relative term and sometimes the under-the-radar deals at the deadline are the ones that have the biggest impact. That's not to say bringing in high profile players doesn't work, but it's not a guarantee of success either.

Secondly, big-game hunting often costs draft capital, prospects and/or players off the roster and more than occasionally, if a top-line centre or top blue-liner is available, they may have trade protection as well. Should all of those hurdles be cleared, the Jets would require the cap space required to add that talented and likely highly-paid player into the financial restraints.

According to Puck Pedia, the Jets currently project to have just under US\$12 million in cap space available to them. Much like Cheveldayoff did last year in addressing the 2C position with Sean Monahan, adding scoring and Stanley Cup experience in Tyler Toffoli and a depth blue-liner in Colin Miller, the chances are good the Jets are going to be active in the trade market once again as they take a run at an extended playoff run. Obviously the cost of acquisition will be a factor.

The Jets have not been shy about shipping out first-round picks, but they haven't sacrificed a lot of top-end prospects in deadline deals previously — and that's probably what's going to be required to look at a second 1C or a top-pairing D-man.

8A. What do you think Nikita Chibrikov needs to do to become a regular NHLer and how soon do you think he'll be able to? IRA

8B. Beyond age, why are Rasmus Kupari and Morgan Barron ahead of Nikita Chibrikov? @mennoknight427

WIEBE: Chibrikov did an excellent job during his recent call-up and he's done what you have to do to put yourself on the radar to become a regular, which is to produce when given the opportunity.

Chibrikov has a shoot-first mentality and he's willing to go to the hard areas and mix it up — all excellent qualities. To make the leap on a full-time basis, Chibrikov needs to continue working on his skating and his defensive play, which is not a knock on how he defends, but something almost all young players (and many experienced ones) need before they're ready for consistent top-six minutes.

As for the second question, both Barron and Kupari are superior skaters — even if Chibrikov has shown more natural finishing ability in his small NHL sample size. Barron is one of the top penalty-killers over the boards and has a double digit goal-scoring season on his resume and is a diligent checking forward.

As for Kupari, he's improved his faceoff ability and is also used on the penalty kill, so those are some of the reasons he's not ahead of them on the depth chart right now. Could Chibrikov see time on the second power play unit right now? Absolutely, but I don't see him ahead of any of the guys currently logging time on the Jets' fourth line.

I do see Chibrikov getting another opportunity (or several) before the season is over, but I don't see him becoming a full-timer until next fall, provided he continues to develop the way that he has this season. The future looks bright for him.

9. Is there any talk about a tribute to Dustin Byfuglien for his past contributions? Even a salute and raising the flag for No. 33? PETER

McINTYRE: I haven't heard any, but that's not to say it couldn't happen one day. Byfuglien is truly an enigma, someone who literally walked away from millions of dollars for a quiet and extremely private life.

How many interviews have you seen with him since he retired? The answer is none. That's not for a lack of trying. He prefers to stay way out of the limelight, and I'm not sure that will ever change.

Having said that, no question the Jets recognize what a popular player he was, and I suspect the organization would love to give him a proper send-off at some point down the road. Knowing how Byfuglien thinks, I'm not sure I'd hold my breath waiting for that to happen.

10. What are the chances Blake Wheeler retires as a Jet like Bryan Little did? JACKIE

McINTYRE: Not unlike Byfuglien's situation, file this one under, "it's possible."

The former captain enjoyed the best years of his career here in Winnipeg, even if his tenure ended in less-than-ideal fashion with him being stripped off the C, then bought out of the final year of his contract.

Wheeler recently let his guard down in a fascinating, hour-long podcast appearance in which he candidly discussed the emotional roller-coaster he went on while taking plenty of responsibility for how things played out. Clearly, time is in the process of healing some wounds.

One little caveat: I'm not entirely sure Wheeler has played his final NHL game. While the 38-year-old admitted the rigours of a full season are no longer for him, he hasn't formally announced his retirement and a part of me wonders if he could sign with a team in a couple months from now as part of one final push for an elusive Stanley Cup.

It would be the ultimate form of load management, and there's some precedent for it, too, with Zach Parise joining the Colorado Avalanche for the final 30 games last year.

11. With the second Manitoba Moose forward being waived for the purposes of terminating contract (Henri Nikkanen and now Daniel Torgersson), what does that say about the Jets draft-and-develop philosophy and who will the Jets/Moose slide into those two spots? JOE

WIEBE: It's definitely abnormal for a draft-and-develop team like the Jets to be terminating the contracts of two players in the same season, but both Nikkanen (fourth round, 113th overall, 2019) and Torgersson (second round, 40th overall, 2020) were heading into similar territory — as in both players were pending restricted free agents who were unlikely to receive a qualifying offer this June and would have become unrestricted free agents anyway.

The development of both players had stalled and they'd been passed on the depth chart with the Moose and will pursue opportunities overseas. Nikkanen (6-foot-5, 215 pounds) and Torgersson (6-foot-3, 216 pounds) both brought some size to the organization's forward pool, but neither player was able to make a big enough impact offensively (Torgersson had 11 goals and 20 points in 69 games but was limited to one goal during the past season and change) and neither was overly physical either.

Missing on a draft pick happens as it's an inexact science, but not having a player chosen high in the second round get a sniff of the NHL is a tough blow for the Jets, for sure.

As for who replaces those players, in the short term it provides more opportunities for guys on AHL deals to potentially earn more ice time and eventually, a two-way NHL contract or for someone to come up from the ECHL level to come up and try to establish himself.

<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2024/12/29/nino-to-the-rescue>

Nino to the rescue Jets forward had assists off the ice on Boxing Day

By: Mike McIntyre

This has all the ingredients for the next heartwarming, made-in-Manitoba holiday Hallmark movie.

Winnipeg Jets forward Nino Niederreiter and two visiting buddies from Switzerland found themselves playing the role of Good Samaritans as they saved some stranded motorists from the side of a snow-swept road last week.

"You could just tell they weren't going to be going anywhere," Niederreiter told the Free Press on Sunday as he recounted the Boxing Day incident near La Salle in a one-on-one interview following his team's practice at the Hockey For All Centre.

"It was pretty windy out there, and some of the side roads were blown over and hadn't been plowed. We saw a couple cars had got stuck, someone was out shovelling, so we pulled one family out, and then went a different way and there was another guy who was struggling. We helped that guy out, too."

In the first case, a young couple and their mother had been trying to shovel their way out of trouble.

“The one guy recognized me immediately,” Niederreiter said with a laugh.

The 32-year-old is a true power forward who isn’t afraid to get his nose dirty in front of the opposing net, so his strength came in handy for this non-hockey related task.

“We helped him shovel out the car, and then we all pushed him out. We got some good grip there,” he said.

In the second incident, Niederreiter used his vehicle to tow a stuck truck out of the snowbank.

“He had everything pretty much set up so we just hooked him on to my car and pulled him out that way,” he said. “It definitely was cold. The wind was really going. But we were ready for it.”

Indeed they were, since the purpose of this excursion about 30 kilometres south of Winnipeg was to go snowmobiling. Niederreiter’s financial planner, who lives in Winnipeg, had arranged for them to go on a guided tour.

Given that there was no way to go all the way home to Switzerland for what was just a three-day player break, this seemed like a perfect way to enjoy some time away from the rink — even if it didn’t initially go as planned.

“What should have probably taken 30 minutes to get to ended up taking about an hour and a half. We were way late to get there,” said Niederreiter.

“But once we did, it was a lot of fun. We snowmobiled down the rivers, and it was just awesome.”

Niederreiter is no stranger to snow and cold given his roots, but this was actually his first time on the back of a snowmobile.

“It was very cool. The first 30 minutes we were kind of really cautious, but then as you go along you start racing a little bit,” he said.

Niederreiter is now in his second full season with Winnipeg, and third overall, and said this really drove home what a tight-knit and hockey-crazed community this is.

“It was fun. And it’s probably also good for them to see that we are just regular people like everyone else,” he said. “Obviously we are fortunate to have certain talent to play in this league, so it’s kind of cool to see that everybody is the same.”

Niederreiter is under contract for two more years at US\$4 million and has become an integral part of the NHL’s No. 1 team at 26-10-1 following Saturday’s 4-2 victory over the Ottawa Senators as the post-Christmas schedule got underway.

While playing on a shutdown line with Adam Lowry and Mason Appleton, he has 19 points (10G, 9A) in 37 games so far this year, which has him on pace for his most productive offensive season since 2016-17 when he was a member of the Minnesota Wild.

Niederreiter will face his former team, the Nashville Predators, on Monday night at Canada Life Centre — career game No. 925. He's on track to hit the 1,000 game mark early next season.

While Winnipeg has been one of the league's biggest success stories so far, Nashville is the polar opposite. They limp to town with an 11-18-7 record — 30th overall in the 32-team league. This, despite adding prominent free agent forwards Steven Stamkos and Jonathan Marchessault in free agency last summer, along with defenceman Brady Skjei.

"I would say the whole league is surprised where they are in the standings," said Niederreiter, who was acquired by the Jets in a trade with the Predators in February 2023.

"If you look at some of the moves they made in the summer and if you look at them on paper, they're supposed to be a powerhouse. But they're kind of struggling. Who knows if they will find their way, find their groove, but obviously they have a lot of catching up to do if they want to get into the playoffs."

The Jets will fly to Denver immediately after Monday's game to face the Colorado Avalanche on New Year's Eve. They'll then return home to play eight straight games at Canada Life Centre, which should provide Niederreiter with plenty of opportunities to hit the trails another time.

"My girlfriend has never done it, so I'm definitely going to back there on a day off and go for a cruise for a couple hours down the river," he said.

"I'm into nature. It's so beautiful out there. Just have to make sure it's a day where it's not too cold."

Winnipeg Sun

<https://winnipeg.sun.com/sports/hockey/nhl/winnipeg-jets/spring-in-their-step-jets-saving-up-for-steep-price-of-playoffs>

Spring in their step: Jets saving up for steep price of playoffs

By Paul Friesen

You could hear it as the Winnipeg Jets piled up the wins in October and it's whispering in the background again now as they sit atop the NHL.

It's that little voice reminding everyone who'll listen: After the last two years, it's not what you do during the regular season, but what happens in the playoffs that matters.

Among those hearing it are the players.

"Absolutely," Neal Pionk said on Sunday.

"That's when the hockey really matters," echoed Morgan Barron. "We saw the same (thing) the last two years. Everybody knows that's going to be the next step for us. And we're all looking forward to taking it."

Two years ago, it was 46 regular-season wins, last year it was 52. A total of 98 victories, 86ed in the playoffs.

With virtually the same faces in the dressing room this year as last, it begs the question: What's different?

"We learn from all those moments," Barron said. "It's kind of a cliché, but you have to go through it, experience those things. And you've seen it with a lot of those (winning) teams."

One example Barron gave: The way the Jets have been able to close out games.

He remembers the feeling in the room after one of their 11 losses this season.

"Sitting in the room, it's like, 'Hey, those aren't games we lose ... those are the ones where we should come out on top.' It feels like we've been able to do that more often than not. It's going to be a couple more months proving it, and then it's really going to come to fruition in April, May, June."

If this team is still playing in June, the questions dogging it will have disappeared.

Until then, stretches like its current 8-2-1 run will always carry a bit of, Yeah, but.

Head coach Scott Arniel points to the team's depth as a reason to believe this year will be different.

But he knows spring is still a long way off. A lot can, and will, happen.

"Until you get into the second half of the season, get into the playoffs, the hockey changes, it becomes a different game," Arniel said. "We're just trying to build a product here, we're trying to build a consistency, that we know when we're at our best and we're doing it, playing it to a tee, that we will have success."

That product includes a top line that doesn't leak defensively like it used to.

When he took over, Arniel challenged his players to give a little more.

Nobody's upped the ante quite like Mark Scheifele and Kyle Connor, tied with 22 goals each and both on the plus-side of the ledger, Connor for the first time in five years, Scheifele for the second.

Arniel talks often about their buy-in. But the price goes way up in the playoffs.

The Jets believe they'll be ready to pay it.

They're saving up, as we speak.

"Yeah, it's pretty much the same guys," Pionk said. "That extra commitment to defence that we talked about ... that extra 10 percent that we can all give. And it's the little tiniest of tiny things that we can improve on, and carry that momentum into playoffs."

<https://winnipeg.sun.com/sports/hockey/nhl/winnipeg-jets/direct-demanding-and-winning-jets-coach-arniel-on-record-pace>

Direct, demanding and winning: Jets coach Arniel on record pace

By Paul Friesen

Direct and intense. High expectations. Demanding.

And a touch of the Irish temperament.

On Sunday I asked a couple of Winnipeg Jets players what qualities Scott Arniel has brought to the team in his first season as head coach, and those were some of the answers.

The bottom line: What he's doing is working. So far.

If they handed out ballots for the NHL coach-of-the-year award today, I'm not sure how many votes Arniel would get. After all, his Jets are only one point better today than they were at this same point last season, when they finished with 110.

But did anyone expect this team to match or even surpass that?

Most of the changes to the lineup were subtractions. When nobody notable wanted to come to Winnipeg in free agency, improving from within was the mantra.

Yet they're on pace for a team-record 57 wins.

With nine of their next 10 games at home, beginning with Nashville on Monday, the Jets could well re-set the franchise's regular-season bar.

If they come out flat against the eighth-place Predators, they'll probably get an earful.

"He's direct," defenceman Neal Pionk said. "He tells us exactly what we need to hear. Whether that's good or bad. He has high expectations for us. And he's demanding, too. In all the good ways."

From Day 1 of training camp, Arniel's mantra has been to compete. Every game has to have the same work ethic.

When one doesn't, Arniel walks into the dressing room and lets them know.

"He stays on top of us," is how forward Morgan Barron put it. "It's real intense. Every game. You see he wants to win just as much as everyone in this room, and he really wants to be a part of it."

"There's definitely times when if we're a little sleepy, between periods he comes in and wakes us up."

It's a combination of his tone and choice of words, Barron said. Emphasis on tone.

"We've talked about, for example, our slow starts," he continued. "It's not acceptable to have those, and we've had a few games now where we've been able to right the ship."

Barron and Pionk had plenty of experience with Arniel the last two years, as he coached the defence and the penalty kill under head man Rick Bowness.

Barron remembers one particularly fiery message from the then-associate coach.

“He was tuning us up doing penalty kill, and he said his O’Arniel came out, his Irish side,” Barron said. “That was one thing that stuck to me. The O’Arniel. That’s the one I remember. Just the tone. He comes in and demands a lot of us. As he should. It’s the best league in the world.”

Barron was quick to point out “O’Arniel” didn’t make a daily appearance.

“I don’t want to paint it like he comes in here every single intermission and just yells at us. He’s fair. And when we’re playing well he does a really good job of acknowledging that. Nobody wants the coach to come in, and even the coaches don’t want to come in and constantly be on top of you.”

The goal is to have enough leadership in the room to handle some of those tough moments without the coach.

Because if it’s always the same guy with the same grumpy approach, it’s not long before the tuning out begins.

“It can get old real fast if you do it all the time,” Arniel said. “Timing’s everything.”

So he changes things up.

A couple of times this season, Arniel says he’s stayed away from the dressing room even though he was doing a slow burn after a bad game.

“Sometimes ... you just let it fester,” he said. “And it’s been great, because our leadership has stepped in and taken over and maybe had their own little talk. There’s situations where you just have to read the room. Sometimes if you wait to the next day and they have to think about it for 24 hours, then you jump on it the next morning, and it sometimes has a little bit more meaning with video behind it.”

The 62-year-old says he’s learned to keep one priority in mind: Getting them ready for the next game.

He also knows not all players take criticism the same way.

“And that’s all part of being a head coach, is knowing which guys can take certain criticism,” Pionk said. “Sometimes you’ve got to pull a guy in a one-on-one meeting. Sometimes you can call him out in front of the team. That’s the art of coaching.”

One thing players won’t have to worry about is another appearance by their coach’s Irish alter-ego.

“O’Arniel” has left the building for the scrapyard of cultural stereotypes.

“I’m not allowed to say that anymore,” Arniel said.

He was grinning.

We'll see how he looks on Monday night.

CBC Manitoba

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/minor-hockey-players-winnipeg-jets-tournament-1.7419527>

Minor hockey players get to meet 3 Winnipeg Jets pros at mega tournament

By Nathan Liewicki · CBC News

The power of sport teaches kids lifelong skills and helps them craft friendships on and off the ice — benefits a former minor hockey player hopes will be impressed on participants of this year's Winnipeg Jets Challenge Cup.

Young athletes from across Manitoba, parts of Saskatchewan and Northern Ontario, and as far away as Rankin Inlet, Nunavut, descended on the hockey for all centre for one of the biggest minor hockey tournaments in the country.

The annual event features 180 teams and an estimated 2,600 players, with more than 60,000 visitors expected during the two-week tournament, which wraps up Jan. 2.

"It's exciting to bring people together in connection of sport, especially around the holidays. Everyone likes that feeling of being together and kind of sharing something that we all love and enjoy," said hockey for all centre general manager David Sattler.

A trio of Winnipeg Jets players — defenceman Dylan DeMelo and forwards Mark Scheifele and Morgan Barron — paid a visit Friday to the multi-rink facility, located just west of the Perimeter Highway.

Members of a St. James Canucks under-13 team had the opportunity to meet the trio prior to their tournament opener.

Leif Rempel, one of the team's goalies, got all three NHL players to sign his glove. He said the chance to play in the tournament is a blast.

"It's really fun. It feels like a community of hockey, playing just a bunch of games," he said.

One of Rempel's teammates had DeMelo sign his right skate, and wants his skates to become a keepsake once he outgrows them. He said he's sure to have "bragging rights to my friends" after sharing his encounter with the Jets when he returns to school in January.

Experiences like this are what Sattler hopes resonates with Challenge Cup participants.

"These kids look up to those players. Some of them will be their hero. That one moment, you never know what spark it'll give. Maybe a kid was thinking about not continuing in hockey or maybe hadn't loved it as much, and this could be that one thing that changed that," he said.

Like thousands of Canadian adults, Sattler played hockey in his youth. He says the things he learned from playing the sport were invaluable growing up and hopes the next generation of players at the Challenge Cup feel the same way.

"The resilience and camaraderie that goes on in sportsmanship are lifelong lessons and it's a huge testament to everything that goes on in sport," he said.

Fans watch a hockey game from above.

Spectators take in a Winnipeg Jets Challenge Cup game on Friday. (Corentin Mittet-Magnan/Radio-Canada)

Jets hockey development coaches recently spent a weekend teaching an estimated 200 kids in Nunavut various hockey skills, Sattler said. The program has worked with Rankin Inlet regularly over the last five years, including sending equipment to kids who may not otherwise have access to it.

The Jets tournament series has had several kids that were later drafted into the NHL, including Manitobans and a Jets prospect from Sweden who played in a similar tournament a decade ago, Sattler said.

CTV Winnipeg

<https://winnipeg.ctvnews.ca/thousands-of-hockey-players-descend-on-winnipeg-for-annual-holiday-competition-1.7158863>

Thousands of hockey players descend on Winnipeg for annual holiday competition

by Devon McKendrick

Around 2,500 players, 170 teams, and a few Winnipeg Jets have taken over the Hockey for All Centre to mark an annual tournament over the holidays.

The Winnipeg Jets Challenge Cup has been running since Dec. 21 and will be played into 2025.

Kids from Manitoba, Ontario, Saskatchewan, and even Rankin Inlet have travelled to Winnipeg to compete in one of Canada's biggest minor hockey tournaments.

"So about 14 years ago, there was a need to keep people busy during the holidays as the minor hockey season takes a pause to celebrate, but also get kids out and interacting with each other," David Sattler, the general manager of the Hockey for All Centre.

Sattler said hockey is all about bringing people together for the love of the game, and that is exactly what this tournament does.

"It's nice that we get to see competition against teams and kids who wouldn't ever play...So it's just a different experience to be able to enjoy the holidays together with people who enjoy the sport like you do.

"It's fun to have healthy competition, and sport teaches so many life skills that are really important, and this is a prime opportunity. You get to see it. You get to witness it and have a great time as well."

While this is a chance for the kids to grow and develop as people and players, they also got the chance to meet some of their hockey idols.

Winnipeg Jets' players Mark Scheifele, Morgan Barron, and Dylan DeMelo all stopped by to hang out with the kids Friday morning between games.

The Athletic

<https://ottawacitizen.com/ottawa-senators/takeaways-ottawa-senators-miss-injured-linus-ullmark-in-loss-to-winnipeg-jets>

Winnipeg Jets deep dive: Mark Scheifele and Kyle Connor's chemistry, an update on defence

By Murat Ates

The day Scott Arniel was introduced as Winnipeg Jets head coach, he was asked about his failure in Columbus. What lessons had he learned from one and a half losing seasons behind the Blue Jackets bench — and his ultimate firing — all of those years ago?

“There’s a few. I think I went into Columbus as a young, green coach. You think that maybe you have all the answers,” he said.

Arniel reiterated his early stubbornness when speaking to The Athletic in September.

“Part of the problem in Columbus is that I did try to do everything,” he said.

There were other lessons — Arniel has said he didn’t build enough rapport before making big asks of his Blue Jackets squad — and they all pertained to that same stubbornness.

How easy it would have been to talk about learning those lessons and then revert to old ways when shifts didn’t go as planned.

Instead, Arniel’s development has continued since the season started. He can identify times wherein he would have gotten a bit more heated in his approach in the past but has run with new ideas instead. After Sunday’s optional practice, Arniel spoke about the nuance of knowing when to push his players harder and when to take a different approach.

“There’s situations where you just have to read the room and (understand) when the timing is right,” Arniel said. “Sometimes if you wait to the next day and they have to think about it for 24 hours, then you kind of jump on it the next morning and it sometimes has a little bit more meaning with video behind it.”

He also shared that he doesn’t go into the dressing room after every game.

“Sometimes after a game, you just let it fester ... And it’s been great, because our leadership has stepped in and taken over and maybe had their own little talk,” Arniel said.

There haven’t been too many opportunities for Arniel to rage against the machine he’s built. Winnipeg is 26-10-1, tied with Vegas for a league-best 53 points but ranked second by way of

points percentage. The Jets' late-November, early-December angst appears to be history, too: Winnipeg has won three straight games and, while this week presents a back-to-back against Nashville and Colorado, the Jets' schedule gets easier soon afterward.

Let's start the week with a look at an item Arniel is getting right, a confusing depth chart on defence and the top line.

In defence of the old school: The top line in top flight

When a player takes a centring pass and banks the puck off the endboards to himself instead of shooting, he's either made a bold decision or something has gone wrong. When that player is in the middle of a 10-goal, 18-point run in his last 12 games, it's Mark Scheifele playing at the height of his powers.

"I was going to shoot it and then it kind of hit their stick," Scheifele said. "I just wanted to keep the possession going. (Kyle Connor) does what he does best and got open. He's obviously fantastic, and I'm always happy to find KC in the slot."

There is an obvious, old-school truth to Scheifele and Connor — the two of them have chemistry — which has irked some people who take a new-school, analytics-heavy approach. If they have chemistry, the math-folk argue, then Connor and Scheifele should consistently outscore their opponents — and, in most seasons, they haven't.

Scheifele and Connor are enjoying the best five-on-five goal differential of their careers together, allowing us to bridge the gap between analytics and the eye test. Because of course they have chemistry. They think the game in a similar way, sharing a mutual understanding of who will be where and when. Connor is great at jumping into space and Scheifele is great at protecting the puck until the right moment to make his pass. Scheifele in particular will tell you about their chemistry any time you ask — and often when you don't — and, if you've played any amount of hockey and gotten an "I know what my teammate is going to do" vibe, you can see that Scheifele and Connor have it.

The sticky wicket has been their defensive impact. Add up all seven seasons they played together before this one and Winnipeg lost their minutes. Most often, this is because their defensive weaknesses — chasing offence in transition, even when the puck was not safe — compounded to put their defencemen on their heels, creating rush chances for opponents.

We've seen it this season, too, but mostly we've seen them cook.

This analysis is partly Gabriel Vilardi erasure; Vilardi is having an excellent year, helping a line that was outscored last season win its minutes. Give Scheifele and Connor their due, though — each is on pace for career highs in goals and points and they're doing it while driving wins, too.

An update on the defence: Stanley and Heinola

It would be wise to start this section with some stats that put this heated debate in context.

The Jets have outscored their opponents 6-1 with Ville Heinola on the ice and 10-6 with Logan Stanley on the ice at five-on-five. Each player has his limitations. Stanley has struggled mightily on the penalty kill and Heinola made a few inexperienced mistakes in Saturday's game against Ottawa. It's possible (and probably for the best) that neither plays big minutes in the top six come playoff time.

But neither is setting Winnipeg's playoff ambitions on fire. Third-pairing defencemen are supposed to have weaknesses. They're also supposed to be sheltered — protected from top competition as Stanley and Heinola have been — and deliver positive results because of that sheltering. Stanley and Heinola have done that.

Give Winnipeg's coaching staff credit here.

According to PuckIQ, Arniel and Dean Chynoweth have kept Stanley, Heinola and Dylan Coghlan as far away from elite competition as possible. When Arniel references a "big three" on defence, he's talking about Josh Morrissey, Dylan DeMelo and Neal Pionk — and would be talking about Dylan Samberg, if he were healthy — because those are the defencemen trusted to play the most amount of time against the Nathan MacKinnons and Connor McDavids of the world.

This is good bench management and it shows you who the Jets do and don't trust. Whether or not you agree with them dressing Stanley or Heinola, the Jets are using them in as sheltered a role as possible. This is also why we should be cautious when praising them too heavily for their plus-minus, even as Haydn Fleury has been torched — Fleury's job on the second pairing with Pionk was a lot harder than the role played by Winnipeg's third pair on any given night.

It's also a great reminder that Samberg has had a phenomenal start to his season, not only climbing the Jets' depth chart but delivering the best shot share of any Jets defenceman. Pionk's numbers fell off when Samberg got hurt and Fleury was asked to play a more difficult role than was ideal for him.

What does all of this mean for Stanley and Heinola, though?

At five-on-five, they're two of the coaching staff's least-trusted defencemen to play top competition — yet they've also earned some of the lowest shot shares on the team. Back when Fleury was limited to a sheltered, third-pairing role, his shot share was closer to 50 percent — well clear of Stanley or Heinola. If the playoffs started today — and if Samberg were healthy — Winnipeg would probably be best suited by a Fleury-Miller third pair. This would make Stanley and Heinola Nos. 7 and 8 on Winnipeg's depth chart, and they'll likely be lower after deadline day.

Enough stats for a moment.

In the first period against Ottawa, Heinola made a smart play that showed his limitations and then made a mistake that showed his inexperience. The smart play was establishing a boxout against Senators forward Ridly Greig early in a defensive zone shift. Multiple Jets coaches and defencemen have told me they like to start a boxout early — well in advance of a shot — and it's easy to see how digging in early helps tie players up sooner while keeping them further away from the net. In this case, Greig got a stick on the point shot all the same; Heinola's decision-making was excellent and his battle level was high but he wasn't strong enough to eliminate Greig from the play.

Later in the same frame, Heinola got caught on the ice for a 1:19 shift, partly because Rasmus Kupari dropped the puck to him on his way off the ice. Heinola sought to key a breakout, then curled to the left wing boards — the far side from the bench — before trying a pass that didn't work. The scramble play that followed led to Nick Jensen's penalty and no harm in the end; just a moment of danger a 23-year-old defenceman will likely learn from.

Later in the game, Stanley was victimized for both Senators power-play goals. He's been on the ice for eight five-on-four goals against in 38 and a half minutes, which is the worst goals-against-per-minute rate on the team.

This is Ottawa's first goal — a great passing play, first and foremost, exacerbated by Stanley's slow attempt to block the pass. I don't see a shoulder check that might give him a view of Tim Stützle darting into open space, but the problem is that Ottawa makes a great play and Stanley is slow to react.

"That whole play, you have to be ready for that," Arniel said after the game. "Those low plays, you've got to be down and take that ice away."

Stanley can be a mean player in front of the net at times, at one point cross-checking Brady Tkachuk to the ice while fighting for space in the same game. On Ottawa's second power-play goal, I don't think Stanley realized Thomas Chabot's shot was coming in. Instead of tying up Greig's stick, Stanley pushed off of Greig and left him space to make his play. It came with the secondary effect of screening Connor Hellebuyck by playing so close to him.

"That was a quick shot — I don't know if everyone was expecting that to come," Arniel said. "I don't think Helle even saw any of that as it came in."

Greig had gotten free from Heinola at five-on-five, despite Heinola's battling; he got free from Stanley on the power play, despite being the only threat in front of the net at that moment. Neither scenario is ideal and neither defenceman is excelling in his sheltered role. I continue to have higher hopes for the 23-year-old Heinola than the 26-year-old Stanley but neither is likely to be a key contributor this season.

In the third period, Heinola took a penalty by taking himself out of position in trying to pick off a pass and Stanley made a good heads-up pass slightly behind Nikolaj Ehlers that led to Winnipeg's fourth goal.

The season-defining stretch between today and 4 Nations

"We're still first in the league, so we're doing alright."

That was Cole Perfetti, to me, before Winnipeg's back-to-back wins against Minnesota and Toronto. I'd asked Perfetti to share his views on the team's fall from record-setting excellence to its slightly above .500 early December slump. I didn't think it was fair to overreact to the losses, just as I didn't think it was fair to hand the Jets the Stanley Cup when they were 14-1-0.

About the schedule then. You may roll your eyes now, just be clear that you're rolling them at me. According to HockeyViz, Winnipeg's schedule overall is average in difficulty. It's about to get a lot simpler, with 10 of Winnipeg's 14 games in January coming at home, so let's keep that in mind if the Jets start 2025 with a bang.

For a while, though, it was miserable — 13 games in 22 days, with 10 of them involving travel. I wanted to know how the fatigue of playing 13 games in 22 days between Nov. 22 and December — a span in which the Jets went 6-6-1 — actually affects a hockey player. Plenty of data shows teams fare poorly on the second night of a back-to-back or at the end of three games in four nights.

“We were working hard, but sometimes you make a couple of mental errors or your brain slips for just half a second,” Perfetti said. “That’s all it takes in this league for someone to make a play around you and for them to put the puck in the net.”

“That’s what happens when you get tired. It’s human nature,” he said. “When you get tired, mentally you start to ...”

At this, Perfetti gestured with his head as if to hesitate, thinking about a play.

“Now, all of a sudden, in that half second of me thinking about it, that guy’s gone. It’s such a fast league that half a second means the world.”

I was reminded of Perfetti’s words when Ehlers described the highlight-reel play he made to Vilardi on Saturday night.

Ehlers told me he saw the lane to Vilardi open up on the shift before this one.

“It started on the shift right before that. I took it to the net and got two, three whacks at it, but I also saw Gaber was back door,” Ehlers said. “If I could get it there I knew that we had a good chance of putting it in the back of the net, so I told Gaber to be ready for it.”

How often do midgame reads like that lead to big plays?

“All the time,” Ehlers said. “You study video before the game, but situations change all the time. One guy might be a step lower, a step higher, a step more to the left or right. It’s different all the time. When you get out there you obviously want to get the power play going right away, but you also learn every single shift you go out there for the power play.”

Whether it’s a half-second faster or slower or a single step to the left or right, Perfetti and Ehlers are each talking about the tiny details that lead to huge moments in a hockey game. I sometimes think that we in the media, or I as a writer, don’t do a good enough job conveying how the little things work — how a subtlety in stick angle, body position or a fraction of a second can dictate results.

The Jets might be in tough against Colorado on the second half of this week’s back-to-back. After that, though, Winnipeg plays 17 games in 38 days leading up to the 4 Nations Face-Off — 12 of them are at home, there’s only one back-to-back and there’s no stretch of three games in four nights.

If the Jets are for real, if we’re truly watching a contending team, then they will win those half-seconds and half-steps between now and the February break.