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<https://www.nhl.com/jets/news/morrissey-connor-and-hellebuyck-react-to-4-nations-face-off>

***Morrissey, Connor, and Hellebuyck react to 4 Nations Face-Off
Three Jets will represent their countries in best-on-best competition in February***

By Mitchell Clinton

CHICAGO – Three members of the Winnipeg Jets are headed to the Four Nations Face-Off in February and are thrilled to be part of the first best-on-best international tournament that hockey has seen since the 2016 World Cup of Hockey.

Josh Morrissey will wear the red and white for Canada, while Connor Hellebuyck and Kyle Connor will don the red, white, and blue for the United States.

“It’s just a huge honour for me to have the chance to represent Canada again,” said Morrissey, who has won a World Junior title (2015) and a silver at the 2017 IIHF World Hockey Championship on his resume. “There’s a ton of great players in the league from Canada and to get that opportunity is something I definitely don’t take lightly. I’m just excited to have that opportunity to represent my country and to play alongside the league’s best and compete among the league’s best.”

Among all Canadian defencemen, Morrissey has the most even strength points (113) since the start of the 2022-23 season. His 25 points this season are the fourth most among NHL defencemen this season, even with his average ice time of 24:43 putting him 14th among his defensive peers.

He doesn’t know who his partner on the blue line will be just yet, but with Canada’s depth, he doesn’t think the coaching staff has many easy decisions ahead of them.

“We were joking around, if you’re a coach in the dressing room, looking at the white board and picking out lines, power plays, combinations and all of that, there are so many great options,” Morrissey said. “Whatever it ends up being, with how it all shakes out, you can’t go wrong any way.”

Hellebuyck, who currently leads the National Hockey League in wins with 16, participated in the World Cup back in 2016 with Team North America but didn’t see any action. However, he has played at the Worlds (in 2015 and 2017) and has a bronze medal from 2015, when he led the entire tournament in goals-against average (1.37) and save percentage (0.948).

“Getting to put the USA jersey on, that’s going to be a moment that I’ll remember and get to cherish,” said Hellebuyck. “I know I have a World Championships, but this feels a little bit different. This is a little closer to Olympic time and Olympic rosters. This is going to be fun. I’d imagine it will be a different style of hockey, maybe not, I could be wrong, but I’m excited to figure out what’s in front of me.”

As a goaltender, Hellebuyck vividly remembers Ryan Miller’s performance at the 2010 Olympic Games in Vancouver. Even though Sidney Crosby’s overtime winner slipped past the American through the five-hole, Miller’s 1.35 goals-against average and 0.946 save percentage stood out to Hellebuyck.

“He played phenomenal that entire tournament,” Hellebuyck said. “A moment like that is so big, I’m hopefully going to have my own moment like that - hopefully winning it - but those little milestones are what I’m going to be able to tell stories to my kids when they grow up.”

Hellebuyck learned he had made the American roster for the tournament after posting a 43-save performance in Minnesota against the Wild on November 25. It was also at that time he learned he’d have his teammate in Connor with him.

“I’m really excited to have a teammate there,” said Hellebuyck. “It’s going to be a really fun tournament.”

For Connor, this will be his first time representing his home country since the 2016 Worlds. That was when he was coming off his incredible freshman season at the University of Michigan, when he scored 35 goals and had 71 points in 38 games.

“Obviously, it’s close knit group between a lot of those U.S. guys and know each other so I was just looking forward to obviously having a chance to play with those guys and being able to represent my country,” said Connor, who is equally excited that a lot of familiar Michigan faces will be on the roster – like Jack Hughes, Quinn Hughes, and Dylan Larkin to name a few.

“It’s going to be awesome. We skate with those guys all summer,” said Connor. “To be able to get a chance to be in live competition and compete for something that’s going to be really fun.”

Jets head coach Scott Arniel is happy for the trio, but also didn’t rule out a fourth member of the team possibly making it into the tournament – Mark Scheifele.

While the Jets forward wasn’t named to the initial Canadian roster, there are still two months to go until tournament time.

“I’ve had the conversation with (Canada general manager) Don (Sweeney) and I’ve had a conversation with Scheif. He’s right there on the bubble,” said Arniel. “Don’t know where everything is going to be in February. Again, with this schedule you’re starting to see bodies drop around the league. You never know where things may shake out. He’s disappointed but he’s going to go out and continue to play the way he plays. He wants to be that guy if there is an opportunity for him to get on the team.”

The tournament, which features four teams – Canada, USA, Finland, and Sweden – gets underway on February 12, 2025 and will be played in Montreal and Boston.

And the jokes are already starting to fly between Morrissey, Connor, and Hellebuyck.

“The other day, we were in a warm-up drill and KC put (the pass) a little too far in front of me,” Morrissey grinned. “So I can see the gamesmanship is happening already.”

Global Winnipeg

<https://globalnews.ca/news/10905059/winnipeg-jets-analysis-sabres-overtime/>

ANALYSIS: Winnipeg Jets back on track after overtime heroics from key players

By John Shannon CJOB

There was some poetic justice that last night's game in Buffalo went to extra time. The Sabres and Jets, both on losing streaks. A night of two wounded teams trying to right their ship, and a preview of a goaltending match-up at the 4 Nations Face-Off — American Connor Hellebucyk against Finn Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen.

But for the Jets, it was far more than those storylines. In the simplest terms, the big boys came to play

Goals from Kyle Connor and Gabriel Vilardi, with help from Mark Scheifele, set the stage for some heroics in overtime by Josh Morrissey and Adam Lowry.

Lowry was the true depiction of a captain against the Sabres — scoring, hitting and dominating in the faceoff circle, winning 15 of 21 draws. And Morrissey, who played just six seconds short of 30 minutes in the game, really showed people outside of Winnipeg why he was picked to Canada's team for the February tournament.

Jets fans know, and now the rest of the league is paying attention.

But enough of next February. The Jets are in the midst of 11 of 13 games on the road. The overtime win in Buffalo marks the team's record at four wins and six losses in that span away from home, far from the pristine record the team accomplished earlier in the season. And certainly far from the style of hockey the team displayed at Madison Square Garden against the Rangers as this road journey started.

But like the New York game — which, by the way, put the Jets at 15-1 — last night's game was a night of stars doing their jobs. Which is what should happen when a team is struggling.

Hellebucyk, Scheifele, Conner, Lowry and Morrissey. The strength of this team in the best of times. This group, more than any other, gets the glory. And it's fair to think they are expected to pull their teammates out of the mud and back into the win column.

Winnipeg Free Press

<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2024/12/06/men-on-a-mission-2>

'Men on a mission'

By: Mike McIntyre

It is a gruelling stretch of schedule the likes of which the Winnipeg Jets have never seen.

Starting on Nov. 9 and mercifully ending Saturday, the team will have played 14 consecutive games — 17 per cent of their entire 2024-25 campaign — for which they had to board a plane to head to a different city.

Their travels took them from Winnipeg to New York to Tampa Bay to Sunrise, Fla., to Winnipeg to Pittsburgh to Nashville to Minneapolis/St. Paul to Los Angeles to Las Vegas to Dallas to Winnipeg to Buffalo to Chicago and then back to Winnipeg.

Add it all up and that's just north of 25,000 kilometres covered by air over the last 29 days. If it felt like one continuous road trip, that's because it essentially was, with just a pair of one-game pit stops at Canada Life Centre among a steady diet of dates in enemy territory.

There's no rest for the wicked as the Jets open a four-game home stand on Sunday, but at least they'll finally get a chance to settle in and unpack their worn-out suitcases for the first time in a month.

The Free Press is one of the few newspapers in North America still covering its local NHL team on a full-time basis on the road.

Hockey writer Mike McIntyre got back earlier this week from the Jets' longest single journey in several years — 10 days, six cities, three time zones — and spent part of it digging into what it takes to keep a professional hockey team healthy, happy and performing at a high level while away from home for an extended stretch.

As he discovered, there is an entire team behind the team, one that doesn't typically make headlines or show up in the box scores but is vitally important to the daily operations.

PITTSBURGH — Mason Appleton is standing in the Jets' dressing room, sweat still dripping down his face after a vigorous morning skate.

He takes a deep breath as he's asked to unpack what is on the horizon.

As befitting the NHL team playing in the smallest market, the Winnipeg Jets' overall staffing complement is one of the smallest, if not the smallest, in the league.

On the recent road trip, the Jets' entire entourage totalled four dozen — 24 players and 23 to 24 coaches, management and support staff.

"It's tough on the body, but we'll be all right and find the perfect balance of recovery and rest," the veteran winger says on Nov. 22, a few hours before his team will hit the ice and down the hometown Penguins by a 4-1 score.

Appleton's confidence about his club isn't just due to the fact they've hit the road sitting No. 1 in the NHL standings thanks to a historic start that saw the team become the first ever to win 15 of the first 16 games.

It's also because there are more than a dozen dedicated support staff members ensuring every little detail is covered.

"What the trainers do and the equipment guys do kind of goes unnoticed, because they do such a good job of it. It's the exact same way every single time," Appleton said.

"It's obviously a job that they work their tails off (at) and a lot of it goes unnoticed. We try to thank them every day. It's a lot on them on these road trips. They're a huge part of it."

Most of us are creatures of habit. That's especially true for professional athletes.

Jets alternate captain Mark Scheifele is as particular as they come — from his smoothies and protein shakes to his game-day routines whether at home or away.

The first-ever pick of the 2.0 Jets, who will likely play his entire career in Winnipeg after signing a seven-year extension that kicked in this season, is quick to dish out the praise.

"The thing is, I don't think we even see half of it. They go and unload our bags, they sharpen skates, they're here an hour and a half before we even get here, and then they make sure everything's perfect, that you have everything you need," Scheifele said.

"Whatever you need they have it ready. And then obviously you're dealing with bumps and bruises and stuff like that.

"I think they have such a great camaraderie together that every time you come to the rink, they have smiles on their faces, they make you laugh and I think whether it's good times or bad times, it's very invaluable to have guys that are in your corner and can pick you up when you're down and keep you humble when you're a little too high.

"They do an amazing job and we can't thank them enough."

NASHVILLE — You would excuse Jason McMaster if he was fighting to keep his eyes open. But the Jets' head equipment manager never shows signs of slowing down, even when a challenging back-to-back wrecks havoc on his sleep schedule.

"People ask how do we do it with the crazy hours and always being at the rink. But it's in your blood. It's either in you or it isn't," explained McMaster, who took the head role in 2015-16. "If it isn't, you're not going to enjoy this line of work one bit."

Consider his last few days: the Jets flew into Pittsburgh on Thursday afternoon, but McMaster and his staff didn't go straight to the hotel with the rest of the entourage.

"Our path, as soon as we land, is rink, then hotel. Get everything set up. If it's in the afternoon like that, we're 100 per cent set up that evening," McMaster said.

Their job involves unloading the truck, bringing in approximately 2,100 kilograms of equipment, getting the dressing room and coach's room set up and making sure everyone's gear is accounted for.

After a solid night's sleep, McMaster got to the rink around 8 a.m. Friday to make sure everything was ready for the 11 a.m. morning skate. There's a lot of work to do, especially with players typically donning new gloves and skates every eight to 10 games.

"I talk to each player on these long ones and just work with them to make sure we're both organized to have what they need," he said.

As soon as the game in Pittsburgh ended, McMaster and his staff, which includes assistant equipment managers Rob Cook and Mark Grehan, were racing through the dressing room collecting bags to load up into a waiting truck that would take them from the arena to Pittsburgh International Airport.

Ideally, the plane leaves exactly four hours after the start of the game.

"The biggest stress is doing everything in our power to have the plane loaded before the bus gets there. You see how fast we get out of here post-game. We're men on a mission post-game," he said.

"You can see why. It's to get that truck to the airport as quick as possible, because we want to get the bird in the air. At the end of the day you want everybody to get as much rest as possible."

McMaster is quick to tip his cap to the players who routinely help carry bags to the truck to expedite the process. Players say it's the least they can do.

"It's a whole team effort. Everyone is doing their job and we appreciate them so much," said forward Alex Lafallo.

"Just putting in all the hours and all the work just keeps us alive and keeps us pushing to the next level. We owe everything to them. I know it's a grind for them."

The Jets landed in Nashville around midnight, thanks partly to gaining an hour during the nearly two-hour flight as they went from the eastern time zone back to the central, and then McMaster's crew was off to Bridgestone Arena into the wee hours to get things set up once again for Saturday's game against the Predators.

"So everybody's comfortable, we try to have everything in the exact same spot everywhere. Home and away," said McMaster.

"Same with where the guys sit. I keep a chart of each room so I remember where each guy sits."

This routine will play out for the entire trip, including Monday night/Tuesday morning when they'll fly more than four hours from Minneapolis to Los Angeles and be at Crypto.com Arena until well past 3 a.m.

“(That flight) is a good chance to get some sleep, because once you wake up and you get to work, you’re wide awake and don’t fall asleep for an hour or two when you get to the hotel,” said McMaster.

“So it’s like the players who can’t sleep after the game, we’re kind of similar in that we’re wide awake from exerting ourselves pushing heavy trunks around.”

McMaster tries to sneak in a game-day afternoon nap where possible, but sometimes the rink and hotel are too far apart to go back between morning skate and puck drop.

That can be tough, especially when you need to be alert at all times during games while on the bench.

“It’s hectic. We’re (drying) gloves, changing steel, switching sticks. It’s just non-stop,” he said.

“We’ve got to be sharp while we’re doing the (pre-game) work, and then we’ve got to be sharp during the game for anything that’s needed.

“It’s equally as important to make sure we’re contributing to our department and making sure everything is being executed properly.”

Things get really chaotic when a player goes down with an injury, as defenceman Dylan Samberg did in Nashville when he blocked a shot that broke his foot.

“It gets real crazy when there’s a blood incident. You’ve got to clean all the gear, too, disinfect it,” McMaster said.

“But nobody needs to be told what to do. We plan things meticulously and make sure it’s executed properly.

“We all have our jobs and we know the precise situation of who is doing what.”

ST. PAUL — Al Pritchard is the hockey-player whisperer.

Poor sleep? Sore muscles? The beloved athletic therapist known as “Pritch” usually has the cure.

“The No. 1 thing is rest. And hydration. For guys after games, it’s hard to just settle down and relax and get the sleep they need,” said Pritchard, who makes a point of checking in with every player every day to see how they’re feeling.

“I think it’s communication, and we’ve expressed that all the time. We can’t read your mind, we don’t know what’s going on with your body,” he said.

Pritchard, who was recently celebrated for working his 1,000th game with the Jets, has his work cut out for him during a stretch of the season such as this.

It was evident how fatigued the players looked on the ice at times, including the 4-1 loss in Nashville and even in what will be a 4-1 victory in Minnesota thanks largely to the heroics of goaltender Connor Hellebuyck.

“Body language with them is huge. You can see a guy coming in in the morning and they’re just exhausted. You make sure you’re getting them back ready to play and giving them the best opportunity to succeed,” Pritchard said.

“You see them and you know them and you’ve been around them every day. Some of the guys now 10 years. You can see that.”

Pritchard’s main job is literally hands-on. Lots of massage therapy, working out aches and kinks, and taping guys up. He also oversees all kinds of other physical maintenance, such as riding stationary bikes after morning skates and practices, and before and after games.

He works with the entire medical party that is at every game — head athletic therapist Rob Millette, assistant athletic therapist Brad Shaw, strength and conditioning coach Jake Wolff, assistant strength and conditioning coach Kyle Vouriot.

However, the best medicine is winning, something the Jets have been doing plenty of lately. Pritchard credits the organization for giving players all the tools and resources they need to succeed.

“I always laugh and tell everyone I get to go to work with my seven best friends at all times.”
—Jets athletic therapist Al Pritchard

“Mark Chipman does an unbelievable job in this organization. You fly on charter flights, you stay in the best hotels and food is never (overlooked). It’s always the best food everywhere,” Pritchard said.

“Nutrition isn’t something we take lightly around here. Hydration is huge when they’re playing those minutes and things like that.

“That’s probably your biggest hurdle, just making sure you’re checking in with the guys, talking with them and communicating and seeing what they need. Everybody and every body is different.”

Pritchard began working for True North in 2006 with the Manitoba Moose and has been with the Jets since they relocated from Atlanta in 2011. Although the travel can be a grind, the cancer survivor wouldn’t trade it for the world.

“I always laugh and tell everyone I get to go to work with my seven best friends at all times. We do meals all the time together. You’re hanging out with your friends all the time and you’re at your job, so it’s the best of both worlds,” he said.

“Winning makes everything better, but I feel this group, even when we only had that one loss, there wasn’t that arrogance. And it wasn’t even a confidence. It was just even-keel, everyone came to work and they worked hard.

“It’s more of a team than I’ve ever seen. We have 25 guys that all get along and they all bring different personalities and they’re all great people.

“I feel like we’re all working for that end goal together, and no one has that individual mindset on anything.”

LOS ANGELES — The morning skate officially ended more than 30 minutes ago, with plenty of players already showered, changed and walking back to their nearby hotel located just steps away from the rink.

But assistant coach Marty Johnston is still on the ice, working with perpetual healthy scratches Dylan Coghlan (23-straight games) and David Gustafsson (22 of 23 games), along with backup goaltender Eric Comrie.

“It’s challenging. Everybody wants to play, and it’s really important they’re ready when we need them, and that they also feel valued,” said Johnston.

“I think that our group, starting from the leadership group, does a really good job making sure everybody is included.

“Rarely do you find the same group of guys together at the hotel or in the dressing room. It’s a mix of everybody being accepted, everybody being a part of this.”

As Gustafsson is coming off the ice, head coach Scott Arniel passes by: “How’d it go Gus?”

“Not fun,” the young Swede replies.

“Marty in a bad mood?” asks Arniel.

“I think he takes pleasure in it,” said Gustafsson, laughing.

Coghlan will make his season debut two days later in Vegas, while Gustafsson’s number will be called in Dallas after Nikolaj Ehlers can’t suit up because of a lower-body injury.

As much as coaching is about the Xs and Os, managing personalities is a big part of the job. Johnston said being on the road offers valuable opportunities to really dig deep.

“You have the ability to have meals together, you get to know each other a little bit better than at home. Certainly taking advantage of the opportunities like that creates a strong bond, and it’s one of the positives of being on the road,” he said.

Of course, there can be too much of a good thing, and this particular schedule has been taxing. It’s why the coaches decided to cancel a planned practice the day before in Los Angeles.

“It’s about trying to be as efficient as you can with your workload, with how we’re dealing with the players and at the same time that there’s not monotony setting in,” said Johnston.

“So there’s different days that we do different things so it’s not the same scripted day for the players and the coaches.

“I think Scott’s done a really good job of that so far this year, making sure we have themes for the day, and those themes are different based on what’s happened in the last game or what we’ve done in the last few days.”

Johnston tries whenever possible to get away from the rink and the “noise,” even if just for an hour or two.

An off-day walk down by the water in Los Angeles — on a day when folks back home in Winnipeg were being blasted with cold and snow — was the latest example.

“I feel very fortunate to have the opportunity that I do. Taking in those moments are a lot of the times where your family or your friends ask about,” he said.

“It’s not so much the hockey component but what do those cities look like. You can never forget how fortunate you are.

“I remember going back to Bones (former coach Rick Bowness), he said every day in this league is an absolute privilege. And I certainly take that approach.”

Johnston echoes others in praising Winnipeg’s support staff for being “off the charts in terms of what they do to make sure our players have a great environment to feel comfortable, to feel ready.

“The product on the ice is what everybody sees, but what happens behind the scenes is truly incredible. It’s a lot of hard work, a lot of early mornings, a lot of late nights for those guys.

“They’re the unsung heroes of our group, and they do it for eight, 10 months of the year.”

LAS VEGAS — Chris Kreviazuk is the man with the plan. And as the director of team services sits in the media meal room a few hours before the fifth game of this six-game road trip, there’s no outward sign of stress.

“I don’t worry about too much anymore. If something happens, we’ll just deal with it,” he says.

Any major hand-wringing occurred months ago when the NHL schedule first came out and Kreviazuk sprang into action working the phones and email exchanges with hotel, bus and food partners to make sure everything would be pristine upon their arrival.

He admits to doing a bit of a double take when he saw this particular stretch.

“The first reaction was looking at the three time zones. You look at the map and realize we’re doing a letter Z across the entire country,” said Kreviazuk.

“Honestly, it just means you pack a lot more stuff. There’s nothing extra you have to take into account, other than it’s so long. The easiest trip for me is the one going home, because I know everything is done and I can kind of sleep well on the plane.

“Any time you’re going to the next city, you’re on the phone with the hotel, bus drivers, security screeners, so that just gets extended with each trip.”

Kreviazuk can finally see the light at the end of the tunnel, and he’s thankful no weather delays have caused issues for getting a travelling party, comprised of near 50 people combined, from city to city.

He’s quick to credit Air Canada aircraft mechanic Kevin Polonuk, a fellow Winnipegger who accompanies the team on all 41 road games and works closely with him to ensure the charter flights go smoothly.

"I don't worry about much with him at the helm. He'll let me know if there's any issues and we address it," he said.

Polonuk, now in his sixth full season, is responsible for some maintenance of the aircraft along with helping load equipment and baggage while also co-ordinating manpower and assisting in ensuring customs is cleared in both Canada and the U.S.

"I don't worry about too much anymore. If something happens, we'll just deal with it."
—Jets director of team services Chris Kreviazuk

It's not always the same plane — Air Canada works with 11 NHL teams along with the Toronto Blue Jays, utilizing four specialized aircraft.

"You can imagine the logistics of flying one team to a city and then sending the aircraft to pick up another team has a lot of moving parts," said Polonuk.

"When it comes to a long road trip like this, we changed aircraft five times to be able to co-ordinate this between Pittsburgh in the east and L.A. in the west as well as four other stops."

Polonuk said the on-board crew, while not employed by the Jets, deserves credit as well.

"The flight attendants are setting up the special catering to meet the needs of the team. The flight attendants are also dedicated to the team for the full season, which provides them with unmatched service as they quickly learn what the individuals like when they come on board," Polonuk said.

"The co-ordination of these flights is a challenge for the operation reps and flight attendants, and that does attract those who like the challenge.

"Being born and raised in Winnipeg, I'm a Jets fan from when I was a kid watching the games with my dad. So I feel some pride in travelling with the team."

Kreviazuk consults the players in terms of planning certain things, such as big team meals and outings while on the road.

He was originally going to do a U.S. Thanksgiving dinner at the team hotel on Thursday, as they've done in previous years when on the road for the holiday.

"I said to the players 'Look, a town like Vegas, do you really want to be holed up in a hotel from 4-6 p.m., or do you want to be able to do what you want as a team?' And they said we'll go and do our own thing," said Kreviazuk.

"I don't plan a whole lot for them. You don't want to monopolize their time any more than we already do, I guess."

Kreviazuk works with Arniel to coordinate the schedule, including any last-minute changes, and said flexibility is the key.

"Nature of the beast," he said.

“There’s a huge comfort level with just about every hotel company and every bus company we deal with. Every year out of the 31 cities, I’d say we maybe change three hotels and three bus companies.

“There’s a massive comfort level, whereas if that wasn’t in place and it was a new hotel every time for whatever reason, then I’d be even more grey than I already am now.”

DALLAS — They’ve reached the end of the road. And it’s safe to say this particular trip started better than it ended, with three straight losses to finish up 2-4-0 overall.

“This was an extremely mentally grinding, mentally taxing stretch of games. Not just with the routine, but with the travel,” said director of communications Scott Brown, who has a jack-of-all-trades type role in which he works with support staff, players, coaches, management and both in-house media (radio and TV broadcast crews, social media team) and external media.

“It’s a difficult stretch to try to manage for everybody. Them, physically; the support staff mentally and trying to stay in the sharpest of their games so you can be of assistance to everybody else.”

Taking the pulse of everyone involved is part of Brown’s daily routine. The 82-game season is a marathon, not a sprint, although everybody is feeling a bit winded right now.

“You have to monitor moods, you have to monitor momentum. And you have to manage what the message is. You’ve got to make sure, particularly in a grinding road trip like this, that everybody stays in the right frame of mind,” said Brown.

“You try to alleviate that, whether it’s being a sounding board for the players, whether it’s being a sounding board for the media, acting as a go-between. You try to alleviate a lot of the stress and a lot of the grind that there is. That can be a little taxing.”

Yes, players are richly compensated to play a game for a living, and in that sense nobody should feel sorry for them.

“But there’s not too many jobs that have this amount of travel, and then ask for peak physical performance in the middle of all that travel,” said Brown.

“I agree they’re paid a lot of money, but the money doesn’t help you sleep when you get in to the next city at two in the morning. It’s great, but it doesn’t provide that burst of energy.”

“We have to emphasize doing those things well, so the players enjoy their time in the city and around each other.”

—Jets director of communications Scott Brown

Brown speaks with his colleagues around the league, along with plenty of former Jets players who have moved on to other markets.

He states with confidence that Winnipeg goes above and beyond to roll out the red carpet in terms of the day-to-day life they provide.

“I don’t think I’m really telling stories out of school that Winnipeg isn’t New York, and Winnipeg isn’t Florida. So as an organization we have to do a lot of the smaller details that the players

probably don't realize, until they're experiencing them, or they're not experiencing them in other locations," he said.

"We have to emphasize doing those things well, so the players enjoy their time in the city and around each other. The more that we can do to make sure they enjoy each other and are having fun as a group with all of us, that's the type of thing we have to do.

"The buses and the flights have to go smoothly, the food has to be top-notch and has to be on time. The hotels have to be smooth along with our arrivals."

As he's speaking with the Free Press outside the team's locker room, Brown has his laptop open as he keeps an eye on his daughter's hockey game going on at the same time back in Winnipeg and being streamed on the LiveBarn feed.

The work-life balance can be tough when you're away from home for so long.

"You're not going to catch me complaining. But it's a long way away and a long time away from family, and it's hard on everybody, including the families," said Brown.

Being surrounded by good people — not to mention a team off to a great start despite some recent stumbles — certainly helps the cause.

"The thing I realized and witnessed this year, which has been enjoyable, is they're all having fun with each other. It's not a cliquey type group. Everybody sits with everybody in the meal room, it's not the same type of guys sitting at one table and the same type at another," said Brown.

"If there's seats available, everybody fills up that table before they drift over to another table. I think the group itself has been a real tight-knit group. The leadership has made it a point to make sure everybody is included."

Indeed, at every stop along the way we observed different players grouped together, whether it was strolling down the Vegas Strip or heading out for a bite to eat after practice in Dallas.

"It's a little nicer when you have a couple days in a city and can kind of go do an excursion together or whatever, have a fun dinner," said Scheifele.

"This one's a little different, having a back-to-back to start it and pretty much travelling all across the world. You've got to find when's the time to get together as a team and when's the time to be a pro and get your rest and relax. It's just one of those happy-medium things.

"I think just being together on the plane, in the room, at the hotel, wherever it is, it's always valuable to have extra time with the guys."

As the old saying goes, teamwork makes the dream work.

"They make our life as easy as possible. The food's there, equipment is always ready to go," alternate captain Josh Morrissey said of the behind-the-scenes team.

"In the NHL we're pretty spoiled, and the guys we have here do a great job."

<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/sports/2024/12/06/hellebuyck-proud-to-represent-usa>

Hellebuyck proud to represent USA Jets goalie looking forward to playing in international spotlight

By: Ken Wiebe

CHICAGO — Connor Hellebuyck is looking forward to his Ryan Miller moment, though he's planning on making a key alteration to the ending.

The Winnipeg Jets goalie could barely contain his enthusiasm as spoke to reporters for the first time since being picked for Team USA for the upcoming 4 Nations Face-Off.

"The one that comes to mind is the gold medal game (in 2010) with Ryan Miller. He played phenomenal that entire tournament," Hellebuyck said after the Jets' workout at Fifth Third Bank Arena, the Chicago Blackhawks practice facility. "It was (Sidney) Crosby that scored (golden goal), five-hole.

"A moment like that is so big, I'm hopefully going to have my own moment like that — hopefully winning it — but those little milestones are what I'm going to be able to tell stories to my kids when they grow up."

It turns out Hellebuyck was told he is on the team by Team USA general manager Bill Guerin after the Jets defeated the Minnesota Wild late last month — which was why he offered a polite "no comment" when asked about the exchange by colleague Mike McIntyre following the game during.

"I was thrilled," said Hellebuyck. "I found out Kyle (Connor) was with me and I'm really excited to have a teammate there. It's going to be a really fun tournament. Different style of hockey I'd imagine, but it's going to be a good balance because a bunch of these players are coming in in mid-season form.

"It's a great precursor for the Olympics. It's going to be a lot of the same players and same teams. Getting to put the USA jersey on, that's going to be a moment that I'll remember and get to cherish. I know I have a World Championships, but this feels a little bit different. This is a little closer to Olympic time and Olympic rosters. I'm excited to figure out what's in front of me."

Much like Connor said, Hellebuyck wasn't fretting over whether or not he would be named to the 23-man roster that was unveiled on Wednesday.

"I didn't really worry a whole lot. I was just going to put the best version of myself on the ice every single day and let that process take care of itself," said Hellebuyck. "Now it's pen to paper and I'm going to be on the team. Now I'm looking forward to what the two weeks has to offer. It's not just games, it's going to be a bit of travelling, meeting players. I know a lot of players on the team. It's a different blend of things that's going to be really fun."

The Jets were in positive spirits Friday, one day after ending a four-game losing streak with a 3-2 overtime win over the Buffalo Sabres that opened this stretch of three games in four days.

Hellebuyck made 28 saves as he made his 21st start of the season.

“We played a great game. Everyone was doing their job and playing the way we want to play,” said Hellebuyck. “It’s always great winning in this league. The morale, you just have more fun — around the rink, at the hotel, the travel day, it becomes less of a grind when you’re winning.”

As the Jets were able to take a collective deep breath after winning for the fourth time in the past 11 games, things haven’t been going all that smoothly for the Blackhawks, who fired head coach Luke Richardson on Thursday and have replaced him with Anders Sorensen on an interim basis.

“We’re always auditioning no matter what role we’re in,” Blackhawks GM Kyle Davidson said Friday. “It’s a great opportunity for him to show what he’s got. We’ve seen it in the American League, it’s a bigger stage now for him to show.”

Blackhawks centre Connor Bedard discussed what it was like to be going through a coaching change so early in his professional career.

“Obviously mixed up (emotions). You’re excited with Anders coming in, but I had a good relationship with Luke,” Bedard said. “He’s a really good guy and in the end it’s someone losing their job. It helps that you build relationships with those guys and it’s sad seeing him go, for sure.”

Sorensen is the first Swedish head coach in NHL history and you can expect the Blackhawks to try and come out with some additional jump as they face the Jets for the second time this season.

“Any time you’ve got a new coach, you’re trying to impress, I guess would be the word,” said Jets forward Cole Perfetti. “Everybody is going to come out there and work really hard, I think we saw that from St. Louis the other day. They’re all just working really hard.”

“They have some skill and they’re a really good team. When you get that coaching change, there’s a little bit of extra desperation. Everyone kind of has a fresh start, so you have to earn what you get. I think we’re going to see that again (on Saturday).”

<https://www.sportsnet.ca/nhl/article/lowry-embodies-everything-jets-want-to-be-in-win-over-sabres/>

Fun and occasionally terrifying

Nevertheless, anthem chanteuse never misses a beat stepping up to the mic to sing to thousands

By: David Sanderson

If Beverley Wynne doesn’t seem like her normal, boisterous self at work early next week, there’s a good reason why.

Wynne, an executive assistant for the North West Company, moonlights as an anthem singer at Winnipeg Jets home games. On occasions when the married mother of two is scheduled to appear in front of 15,000-plus rabid hockey fans — as will be the situation on Dec. 10 when the Boston Bruins pay a visit to Canada Life Centre — she tends to clam up around the water cooler, in an effort to preserve her vocal cords.

“Even when we’re driving to the rink, my husband will start chatting and I’ll be like ‘you know I don’t want to talk right now,’” she says with a chuckle, seated in a coffee shop at The Forks, a five-minute walk from her desk.

Wynne, a natural talent with no formal training to speak of, has another rule she adheres to on game days. Before leaving the house, she takes a few minutes to warm up by singing along to the exact same pair of tunes.

“It sounds cheesy but the first one is Lost in Your Eyes by Debbie Gibson and the second is From a Distance by Bette Midler, mostly because both fall right in my range as an alto,” she says. “They talk a lot about athletes being superstitious and I suppose I’m the same way.”

Wynne (née Santos) was born in 1977 in the West End, a year after her parents and two older siblings immigrated to Winnipeg from the Philippines. She mock shudders, as she recalls her first “public” performance.

It was 1982, she was five years old and Laura Branigan’s Gloria was all over the radio. For a lark, she recorded herself mimicking the Grammy-nominated singer, using a portable tape player. A few days later, as she was strolling home from school with her classmates, her mother Rosita opened a front window and proceeded to blast her rendition of Gloria down the street, for all to hear.

“I was literally traumatized. It took years till I was finally able to listen to (Gloria) again.”

Luckily, Wynne wasn’t so shaken up that she ceased singing altogether. Rather, she became a regular participant in her school and church choirs, and also entered various Filipino talent contests, a few under the direction of Joy Lazo, a vocal coach who was the first Filipina-Canadian to be inducted into Rainbow Stage’s Wall of Fame.

In the spring of 1996, during her first year of studying business administration at Red River College Polytechnic, an acquaintance of hers associated with the Winnipeg Blue Bombers mentioned the CFL club was hosting open auditions for anthem singers, for the upcoming season.

Figuring what was the worst that could happen, Wynne threw her hat into the ring. A few months later, she was belting out O Canada for 30,000 fans at the team’s former home, Winnipeg Stadium, ahead of a Bombers tilt versus the Hamilton Tiger-Cats. Besides the fact the Bombers tamed the Tabbies 33-15 that September afternoon, Wynne also recalls how discombobulated she was, owing to that venue’s various idiosyncrasies.

“There was a three-second reverb at the old stadium. You’d sing, hear an echo and get trapped into going along with that, which could turn your minute-and-a-half anthem into three minutes,” she says, shaking her head at the memory. “I eventually got the hang of it, but yeah, even professional singers from out of town would comment how messed up it was there.”

Appearances at Bombers games led to regular dates with the Manitoba Moose and Winnipeg Goldeyes. In 2015, she sent a recording of herself singing The Star Spangled Banner to the Minnesota Twins a few weeks before she, her husband Michael and their two kids, now 20 and 22, were planning to catch a set of Twins baseball games at Target Field, in downtown Minneapolis.

Not only did the Twins respond affirmatively by inviting her to sing the anthem when she was in town, before she headed back to Winnipeg, a person associated with the club reached out to let her know the Toronto Blue Jays were due there in a few weeks, and was she interested in a return engagement to sing both the American and Canadian anthems? You betcha, came her reply. (Her remuneration for making the 1,400-kilometre round trip, plus meals and accommodations? A pair of free tickets.)

In 2017 the Jets' regular anthem singer Stacey Natrass was expecting her third child. It was highly likely she'd need a night off here and there, so the team held a series of pre-season tryouts for interested parties, Wynne among them. One game for her that season led to a couple more the next, and also the year after that. Nowadays, she averages between six and eight games, not counting — here she crosses her fingers — playoffs.

"It's funny because by the time I did my first Jets game, I'd already been doing Bombers and Goldeyes games for 20 years or so," she comments. "But now that I was on TV, people started stopping me to say 'hey, you're that anthem singer' or 'I never knew you did that.'"

Wynne, who has also sung for Brandon Wheat Kings hockey and University of Manitoba Bisons football (her son Zachary is a Bisons wide receiver), is steadfast about one thing when she takes the microphone: unlike artists who tend to put their own spin on a country's anthem at glittery events such as the NFL Super Bowl and NBA All-Star Game, she feels it's her duty to stick to the script, so to speak.

"To me, it's important that people can sing along, without me going off in trills or changing keys every 10 seconds," she says, mentioning she records every game she appears at, to critique herself the next morning. "In a sense I am performing but I believe it's my role as an anthem singer to lead, not to be up there doing my own thing."

If anybody knows a thing or three about leading an arena-size choir, it's Jennifer Hanson, the Jets 1.0's primary anthem singer for the last six years of the team's existence, in the 1990s.

Hanson currently keeps herself busy fronting Jenerator, a pop-rock outfit that packs dance floors all over town with spot-on renditions of everything from Aretha Franklin's Respect to Love Shack by the B-52s. From time to time, she invites Wynne, who belongs to a group of her own called Ruby Cap, to join her on stage.

"I met Bev when we were the house band for the Bombers and she was singing the anthem. We immediately had a connection and I've hired her whenever I've had the chance," Hanson says, when reached at home. "She's a really good singer, but more importantly she's a team player and a lovely human being."

Given their shared experience at sporting events, are we to assume the two of them talk shop when they find themselves in the same room? So far, that hasn't been the case, Hanson reports.

"We don't really discuss singing the anthem much because we all feel the same: it's fun and occasionally terrifying."

Back at The Forks, Wynne says some of her favourite moments include the Jets' inaugural Filipino Heritage Night in November 2022, when she presented a Filipino cultural song during intermission, a Jets International Women's Day event in March 2023, when she sang the

Canadian and American anthems together with Natrass, Sarah Baxter and Ashley Klimpke, and a Goldeyes game in June 2023, when she was accompanied by her daughter Madeline, who plays basketball for the women's team at Canadian Mennonite University.

"I was also lucky enough to sing the anthems before a Minnesota Timberwolves-Chicago Bulls NBA exhibition game held here in Winnipeg in 2015," she continues. "Fun fact: the only major league I have not sung the anthem for yet is the NFL."

Last question: given her victorious sounding surname, is the home side pretty much guaranteed a "W" when she's the designated anthem singer?

"I am 4-0 this year, including an exhibition game, but unfortunately that isn't always the case," she says, in regards to her Wynne-ing percentage. "There was a guy I used to see at Goldeyes games who knew all my stats. One time I was on a losing streak and when he saw me before the game he went 'uh-oh, we're in big trouble tonight.'"

Winnipeg Sun

<https://winnipeg.sun.com/sports/jets-notes-connor-hellebuyck-looks-for-a-ryan-miller-moment-but-with-a-u-s-win>

Jets notes: Connor Hellebuyck looks for a Ryan Miller moment, but with a U.S. win

By Paul Friesen

He's suited up for Team USA in a pair of world championships, but Winnipeg Jets goalie Connor Hellebuyck says the upcoming 4 Nations Face-Off might be on another level.

"Getting to put the USA jersey on, that's going to be a moment I'll remember forever, and get to cherish," Hellebuyck told reporters after a short practice in Chicago on Friday. "I know I have at world championships, but this feels a little bit different. This is a little bit closer to Olympic time and has Olympic rosters. So it's going to be fun. And I would imagine a different style of hockey."

The Vezina Trophy winner as the NHL's best goalie for a second time last season, Hellebuyck is expected to get a chance to carry the load for the Americans.

He'd love to create a lasting memory the one U.S. goalie Ryan Miller created at the Vancouver Olympics, carrying his team to the gold-medal game against Canada.

"Just a moment like that, so big, to hopefully have my own moment like that," Hellebuyck said. "Hopefully winning it."

The U.S. settled for silver in 2010 when Sidney Crosby scored the overtime winner for Canada.

"I know a lot of players on the team," Hellebuyck said of this latest American team. "Its going to be really fun. The skill level is going to be really high, and I'm looking forward to that."

Reviews got it right

Hellebuyck is coming off a game, the Jets' 3-2 overtime win in Buffalo Thursday, that saw reviews for possible goaltender interference on both sides.

Critical of the NHL's handling of the rule in the past, he says they nailed it this time: allowing a Jets goal by Gabe Vilardi to stand in the first period, disallowing a Sabres goal in the second.

"They've made it very clear that you can't touch the goalie in the blue paint," Hellebuyck said. "That was the difference in the two calls: one was in the blue paint, one wasn't. They've done a great job of making that very clear to us. I would have stopped that puck if he didn't run into my skate.

"So it doesn't shock me one bit that call got reversed."

Familiar bump

For the second time in three games the Jets on Saturday will face a team fresh off a coaching change, the Blackhawks canning Luke Richardson on Thursday.

Players expect the same bump in effort they saw from St. Louis on Tuesday.

"Every time you've got a new coach... you're trying to impress," Cole Perfetti said. "There's a little bit of extra desperation. Everyone is trying to get a fresh start, so you've got to earn what you get. We're going to see that again."

Chicago, like Buffalo on Thursday, is coming off four straight losses.

The Athletic

<https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/5969432/2024/12/07/winnipeg-jets-top-prospects-brad-lambert/>

Winnipeg Jets prospect tiers: Reviewing the top-10 players in the pipeline

By Murat Ates

Kevin Cheveldayoff has acquired NHL talent for draft capital every year the Winnipeg Jets have been competitive. He struck early last season, trading a first-round pick for Sean Monahan, and then sent more draft picks to New Jersey in exchange for Tyler Toffoli and Colin Miller.

It's a reality that has cost Winnipeg draft capital in the name of bolstering a playoff-bound roster since Cheveldayoff acquired Paul Stastny back in 2018. It is also a scenario that is likely to repeat itself: Winnipeg remains near the top of the NHL standings and projects to have plenty of cap space. If Cheveldayoff can find a deal for a top-four defenceman or second-line centre, it seems likely he'll send more draft picks away to make it happen.

The Jets' prospect pool is depleted by those trades. Winnipeg has made five or fewer picks in five of the past six drafts, asking its scouts to work at a deficit as they try to restock Winnipeg's "draft and develop" franchise. As a result, the Jets have several draft day wins on their top prospect list but lag behind the NHL's best prospect pools in depth and top-end talent.

It's time to talk about some of Winnipeg's biggest wins, starting with Brad Lambert, whose potential the Jets saw clearly despite league-wide concerns, and continuing through Kevin He — the fastest-rising prospect in the system.

Please note: All stats were collected before Friday's matchups.

Tier 1: The blue-chip prospects

1. Brad Lambert, C, 20 (Winnipeg Jets, NHL)

Brad Lambert is proving to be a steal for the Jets in the 2022 draft. You might remember Lambert being heralded as a top talent heading into that draft year — and then his precipitous fall from the top 10 all the way to No. 30. Give Winnipeg credit: The Jets weren't fooled by the noise about Lambert's character and compete level. They've been rewarded with a blue-chip prospect and a person who's impressed Moose and Jets staff alike with his drive to improve himself.

He's NHL-ready to the point of playing in his second and third big-league games this week. Scott Arniel has prioritized him, playing Lambert mostly on the second line and giving him an opportunity on the Jets' second power play.

Will he stick, though?

It's funny how these things work. Lambert is the same age that Kyle Connor was when Connor turned his 2017-18 call-up into a 31-goal NHL season. If Lambert finds a way to stay on the big club after Nikolaj Ehlers returns to full health, then he and Connor will have broken into the NHL in the same way, at the same age and with some of the same attributes.

Connor's ability to explode out of a cutback is tough to match and his finishing ability is unmatched — I'm not saying Lambert will equal Connor — but Lambert's top speed is elite and his puck skills are strong. If Ehlers gets traded midseason — a nonzero if unlikely possibility — then Lambert would be the automatic call-up. In the meantime, Lambert's defensive game is the area that needs the most work. Arniel bumped him down the lineup Thursday for veteran Alex Lafalzo after a few too many defensive zone shifts against Dylan Cozens' line.

In the end, Lambert tops this list because he's close to permanently NHL-ready and because he has the tools to become an impactful top-six forward (or better if everything breaks right.) There's a chance the all-around abilities of the next two players help them surpass Lambert's career arc ... but we're deferring to his top-end talent.

2. Elias Salomonsson, RD, 20 (Manitoba Moose, AHL)

Elias Salomonsson is a 21-minute per night, all-situations, right-handed defenceman in the AHL and he's very good at his job. He's tracking ahead of expectations for a 20-year-old playing his first season on North American ice.

What makes him so good?

It's his hockey IQ. Salomonsson has a strong sense of where the primary threat is in the defensive zone — and secondary and tertiary threats, too. He's great at scanning the ice and anticipates plays quickly. He doesn't get beat backdoor or lose coverage. In fact, Salomonsson often steers traffic for his more veteran teammates, communicating who he's taking and where he wants his partner or a backchecking forward to go.

Everything about him feels safe — one step ahead of the play, with the physical tools to play the body, tie up a stick or knock down an entry attempt with confidence. Salomonsson appears to understand exactly what type of pressure he has on him when he goes to retrieve a puck off of

a dump-in. He consistently makes the right decision about whether to use a nearby outlet, try a distant option or keep the puck himself.

I don't see elite offensive ability — he's fast without being an elite rusher, smart with the puck without being an elite passer — but he makes such good decisions that I imagine he'll drive play at the NHL level when he gets there.

Binge-watching Salomonsson's AHL shifts reminds me of Jets defenceman Dylan Samberg — albeit a little smaller at 6 foot 2, 190 pounds. I don't get the same fear of physical struggle that I do with Ville Heinola or of coverage concerns that I do with Logan Stanley. The Jets see Salomonsson as a blue-chip prospect, and the more I watch him, the more I agree.

3. Brayden Yager, C, 19 (Lethbridge Hurricanes, WHL)

Brayden Yager caps off the Jets' top prospect tier. He's set to play a top-six role for Team Canada at the world juniors, scoring at will in the WHL and picked up an empty net goal for Lethbridge in his Hurricanes debut.

Yager was initially lauded for his scoring ability but has progressively added more dimension to his game. He's fast, plays a responsible 200-foot game and managed 30 points in 21 games for a badly outmatched Warriors club — a nearly identical scoring rate to Lambert's 38 points in 28 games for Seattle just two years ago. Now that he's playing for Lethbridge, a playoff-bound team that will look to add yet more talent, the 2023 WHL champion will get the chance to help lead a second team on a deep playoff run.

You can watch Yager's first media availability with Lethbridge below.

I think Yager projects as a second-line centre who provides enough scoring to justify top-six minutes and enough defence to help his team win hockey games. I enjoyed his performance at Jets camp and got a particular kick out of the time he put in with Mark Scheifele at the end of this practice.

Tier 2: Players with a chance to play in the NHL

4. Colby Barlow, LW, 19 (Oshawa Generals, OHL)

Colby Barlow is not having a strong 19-year-old season in the OHL and he will not play for Team Canada at the world juniors. He's scoring fewer goals, generating fewer assists and taking fewer shots for Oshawa than he did as an 18-year-old in Owen Sound. There are concerns that his lack of foot speed hampers his ability to control the flow of play in junior hockey.

We wrote one year ago: If he can add a bit of quickness or creativity in terms of finding space, he'll be a dangerous scorer as a pro. If not, some of his elite shooting ability will go underutilized. The current concern is that Barlow isn't building those dimensions, with his foot speed causing most of the difficulty. He's competitive and unafraid to go to the tough areas of the ice, but he's 38th in OHL goal scoring so far this season after finishing ninth last season.

Barlow picked up three points Thursday, including two on the power play, and took seven shots on goal. I expect 19-year-old first-round picks to be impact players in the OHL; more games like that would ease the fears.

5. Nikita Chibrikov, RW, 21 (Manitoba Moose, AHL)

Nikita Chibrikov leads the Moose with 12 points in 17 games, a scoring rate that highlights how hard it's been for Manitoba to produce offence. He's shooting more often this season — so

much more often than one might expect more than four goals so far. Chibrikov's wrist shot is a problem for AHL goaltenders, but he's not getting inside the top of the circles with enough regularity to post big scoring numbers.

This is a teamwide issue. Manitoba isn't leaning on opponents, chaining shifts together in the offensive zone to open up scoring areas in the middle of the ice. Chibrikov's increased shot totals come partly from hopeful, distant shots against goaltenders who are well-prepared to handle them.

I still hold his AHL game in high regard — he does a lot of the hard, heavy, forechecking and backchecking things that help teams win games — but his production is running in place on a Moose team that's struggling to score.

6. Thomas Milic, G, 21 (Manitoba Moose, AHL)

Part of Winnipeg's impetus to establish an ECHL affiliation in Norfolk was to give its goaltending prospects professional opportunities. Milic validated that decision last season, earning 18 starts and outplaying most of his older competition. He also developed the mental toughness that comes with the rigors of minor-league professional hockey, earning a call-up to the Moose and playing a big role in Manitoba's playoff run.

His .866 save percentage in nine AHL games this season is underwhelming. Dom DiVincentiis posted superior numbers (.930) in five games. There is also the matter of Milic's smaller, 6-foot size, but the Jets have confidence in his approach to his development. Milic lived out of a suitcase last season, moving between Norfolk and Manitoba, but didn't question or complain about the plan. Instead, he just dug in and worked on his game.

Here's one of my favourite Milic saves from his stellar, gold medal-winning performance for Team Canada in 2023.

Milic has been described to me as a mentally tough, patient goaltender who has enough athleticism to overcome his lack of size. At his best, he holds his feet really well, reading the play without taking the bait or moving himself out of position in chaotic situations.

7. Dom DiVincentiis, G, 20 (Norfolk Admirals, ECHL)

Dom DiVincentiis is on the Milic program, moving to the ECHL after the Jets claimed Kaapo Kahkonen on waivers. He's had a strong start, posting a .907 save percentage in four games, and Winnipeg believes he can follow Milic's path through the ECHL and up to AHL success.

DiVincentiis has been described to me as "obsessed" with being the best goaltender he can be. When he was drafted, the 6-foot-2 goalie played smaller than he is, using a wide stance that took away from his coverage of the net, but DiVincentiis worked with Drew MacIntyre, Manitoba's goaltending development coach, to build a bigger, more patient posture. He was rewarded with OHL goaltender of the year honours in 2022-23.

Living up to that hype proved to be a challenge. DiVincentiis missed the chance to play for Team Canada at the world juniors despite being thought of as a potential starter for that team. DiVincentiis has been resilient since that time, continuing to improve his game. He's been impressive in the AHL and ECHL early in his first pro season.

8. Chaz Lucius, C, 21 (Manitoba Moose, AHL)

Chaz Lucius once ranked as high as No. 1 in my books, with the caveat that he needed to stay healthy to take the next step in his development. His surgically repaired ankle has limited him to just three games this season (and he's been shut down due to injury in four consecutive seasons) but Lucius is doing his best to maintain optimism.

"Now I'm at a point where I can play games consistently," Lucius told reporters at Moose practice Thursday. "I feel good about where my ankle's at."

The hope is that he's ready to take a consistent role with the Moose, adding a scoring punch to a team that's tied for the fewest goals in the AHL. If he delivers on that hope, Lucius will do so via his hockey IQ. When he's healthy, Lucius makes clever, well-timed cuts into space and fast, accurate reads of opposing defenders, frequently making just the right shot or pass to exploit his coverage.

I worry when players for whom hockey sense is the leading skill miss playing time. I think 18-23 is a critical age for the brain when it comes to processing time and space in competitive sports.

9. Kevin He, LW, 18 (Niagara IceDogs, OHL)

Kevin He is a tenacious, talented, dynamic winger who forechecks hard, backchecks hard, bulldozes his way to the front of the net and is tied for third in OHL goal scoring. That's an excellent resume for He, the highest NHL draft pick born in China (No. 109), and it puts him ahead of Barlow and fellow 2024 draft pick Kieron Walton in goals.

We voted He as Winnipeg's fastest-rising prospect and believe the Jets are thrilled with his development this season. He reminded me so much of Mikey Eyssimont at Jets camp — with a better shot, mind you — and I'll admit to an optimistic, NHL-bound impression of his future. The best-case version of He's career sees him surpass Lucius, both goalies and even Chibrikov and Barlow, but we'll try to remain patient with the impressive 18-year-old.

10. Kieron Walton, C, 18 (Sudbury Wolves, OHL)

Kieron Walton, Winnipeg's sixth-round draft pick in 2024, leads the Sudbury Wolves in goals (16), assists (23) and points (39.) He's on pace to more than double last season's OHL career high in all of those categories, already just two goals and two assists shy of last season's totals.

Walton is listed at 6-6, 215 pounds, giving Winnipeg a big, rangy, talented centre in its pipeline after years of smaller forwards. He's leapfrogged a lot of players taken much higher than him in the draft to debut at 10 on this list, including players who have professional experience. It's also fun to note that, if the OHL playoffs started today, Walton and He would play against each other in the first round.

Tier 3: Longer NHL odds, with lots to like all the same

Alfons Freij, LD, 18 (IF Björklöven, HockeyAllsvenskan)

Danny Zhilkin, C, 20 (Manitoba Moose, AHL)

Fabian Wagner, C, 20 (Manitoba Moose, AHL)

Dmitry Kuzmin, LD, 21 (Manitoba Moose, AHL)

Connor Levis, RW, 20 (Vancouver Giants, WHL)

Zach Nehring, RW, 19 (Western Michigan University, NCAA)

Garrett Brown, RD, 20 (University of Denver, NCAA)