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<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2025/01/13/cream-of-the-canadian-crop>

Cream of the Canadian crop Jets top of strong group with Stanley Cup potential

By: Mike McIntyre

The Winnipeg Jets are firmly entrenched in a playoff spot. So, too, are the Toronto Maple Leafs and Edmonton Oilers. Meanwhile, the Calgary Flames, Vancouver Canucks, Ottawa Senators and Montreal Canadiens are all sniffing around spring hockey as well.

All of which begs the question: Could Lord Stanley soon be trading a zip code for a postal code for the first since in 32 years?

“It is great for Canada,” Jets coach Scott Arniel said Monday when asked for his take on the current state of the NHL north of the border, where the passion flows like maple syrup and fierce hockey debates are as common as potholes.

“Everybody is improving. The teams have stayed competitive and as much as nobody wants to use the word rebuild, nobody has really done that. It is kind of restocking the shelves and up and running again. That is one thing Trump can’t take from us: we’ve got good Canadian teams.”

Zing!

You don’t need to remind fans around these parts that Montreal was the last Canadian club to win it all in 1993. Seven squads, most recently Edmonton last year, have made it to the Stanley Cup Final since, only to come up short.

A few things have changed during that long championship drought. The NHL has grown from 24 teams to its present state of 32. Minnesota’s team was still called the North Stars, having not yet relocated to Dallas. The Anaheim Ducks and Florida Panthers didn’t exist yet. The Hartford Whalers and Quebec Nordiques did. And Winnipeg, of course, had yet to experience the agony of losing its team.

Now? A real sense of coast-to-coast optimism with every team in the mix. Since the Atlanta Thrashers relocated to Winnipeg in 2011, there’s never been a season when all seven Canadian outfits made the playoffs. Nor has there been one with six.

The closest to date is five, last accomplished in 2016-17 (Winnipeg and Vancouver were the two who missed) and also in 2014-15 (Toronto and Edmonton were on the outside looking in). There have been four teams make it three times, three make it four times, two make it twice, one make it once and the ugly 2015-16 season in which none made it.

Since the Atlanta Thrashers relocated to Winnipeg in 2011, there’s never been a season when all seven Canadian outfits made the playoffs.

If the playoffs started today (using points percentage as the barometer because of uneven games played), Winnipeg, Toronto, Edmonton, Calgary and Ottawa would all be in. Vancouver

would be ninth in the Western Conference aka the best non-playoff team, while Montreal would be in the exact same spot in the Eastern Conference.

No doubt executives over at Rogers, who own the national broadcasting rights with Sportsnet, are salivating at the possibilities.

The Jets will see one of their northern neighbours on Tuesday as the Canucks come to town. After facing Seattle on Thursday, Winnipeg will close out its season-long eight-game homestand against 20-14-7 Calgary in another one-anthem game on Saturday night.

These meetings may not have the same “four-point” bite that they did a few years ago when everyone was grouped together in the all-Canadian division due to the global pandemic — Montreal ultimately stood tall that year before losing to Tampa Bay in the final — but there’s still plenty at stake including bragging rights among passionate fan-bases.

Right now, Winnipeg (29-12-3) can lay claim to being the cream of the 2024-25 regular-season Canadian crop as they trail only Vegas and Washington for best record in the NHL.

The Jets are 5-1-0 so far in games against Canadian rivals this year (wins over Edmonton, Calgary, Montreal, Ottawa and Toronto, and the lone loss against the Maple Leafs). They have nine more head-to-head battles remaining in the regular season, including the two this week.

“When I look at their team as a whole, when they’re healthy they have great depth up front,” Jets captain Adam Lowry said of the Canucks, who are 19-13-10.

“(Elias) Pettersson, (J.T) Miller, adding (Jake) DeBrusk, and then Quinn Hughes on the back end. An elite defender, he can move, he plays half the game. It feels like the puck’s always on his stick. Similar to how (Cale) Makar plays, he’s up in the rush. He’s creating on the blue line.”

Vancouver is coming off an impressive 3-0 win on Saturday night in Toronto and are true road warriors, with a 12-5-4 mark in enemy territory that is second-best in the NHL. In addition to trying to build some momentum off a big win, they could also be back to full health (Pettersson just returned, while defenceman Filip Hronek is now healthy, too).

“They are still a good hockey team over there. They have some good players over there, and like any opponent you have to be at your best,” Arniel said following his team’s practice.

“They are not going to always hand you things, you have got to take it from them.”

As always, the Jets spoke Monday of keeping the internal focus on their own game. They are 2-1-2 so far on this homestand, including a tidy 3-0 triumph on Saturday over Colorado which was one of the best efforts of the year — the kind that makes you think the sky could really be the limit for this team.

“It’s a very mature group now. I think a lot of guys have bought into that system,” said goaltender Connor Hellebuyck.

“We’re all having fun winning, and we all realizing winning is how you have fun in this league. It’s not the hard days, it’s not the battle days, it’s when you win you enjoy it. And you make sure you enjoy it. Everyone in this locker room is starting to learn what their personal game looks like, and how they succeed is how this team succeeds.”

<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2025/01/13/hellebuyck-riding-high>

***Hellebuyck riding high
Jets goaltender credits teammates for helping him play best hockey of his career***

By: Mike McIntyre

Connor Hellebuyck would love to take former teammate Dustin Byfuglien up on his offer.

After the retired Winnipeg Jets defenceman sent a video message that was played during Hellebuyck's pre-game ceremony last Friday night — simply stating “keep kicking ass, I'll see you on the water”— the reigning Vezina Trophy winner sent him a thank-you text.

“First thing he said is ‘Let's go fishing.’” Hellebuyck said of the reply he got from his fellow avid outdoorsman. “I'm pretty excited and going to try and make that work. Hopefully it's late in the summer.”

Translation: He hopes to be tied up with hockey through June with his club on a lengthy playoff run. Those odds certainly increase if Hellebuyck maintains his current form, which includes being named the NHL's First Star of the week on Monday (veteran forwards Jordan Staal of Carolina and Patrick Kane of Detroit were the second and third stars).

It was a memorable few days, with Hellebuyck becoming the 30th goalie in NHL history with at least 500 games played/300 wins/40 shutouts last Tuesday in a 5-2 victory over Tuesday. That milestone was celebrated at Canada Life Centre, with Byfuglien and several other past and current Jets congratulating him.

He was joined on the ice by his father, and his wife and their two children who received a replica of the silver stick presented to him. Hellebuyck joked they loved their mini-versions “a little too much — we might have to get that re-polished.”

Even his dog, Tinley, got in on the act with a barking video message that included some English subtitles.

“I don't know who translated that, but they spoke dog perfectly,” said Hellebuyck.

“It was great. The cameos were great. Buff getting on there and saying seeing you on the water was hilarious. Just a little piece of everyone that helped me along the way.”

There were also multiple chants of “MVP” for Hellebuyck, who should be getting legitimate Hart Trophy consideration at this point in the season given the way he's lapping the field when it comes to goaltending statistics.

“It was pretty wild,” Hellebuyck said of hearing that.

“The whole experience was awesome. Fans made it great. I knew they would. The organization made it great. It was a really cool experience. I'm very grateful for everyone around me and they did a great job.”

Hellebuyck was back in net on Saturday night and picked up where he left off, picking up career win No. 301 (and shutout No. 43 in career game No. 539) as the Jets beat the Colorado Avalanche 3-0.

Ho-hum, another day at the office. Are we seeing the best hockey of his 10-year career right now?

“Absolutely,” said Hellebuyck.

“When I’m watching my games and I’m looking at how things play out in front of me, how much do I know what’s going on? How far ahead of it? Those are really good right now. And that only comes because the team is so predictable in front of me and playing such a good defensive hockey game. Everyone is pretty much where they need to be at all times and that makes my life extremely easy.”

To put things in perspective, Hellebuyck has as many regulation losses (six) as he does shutouts this season. He’s a huge reason why Winnipeg is currently tied with Los Angeles for the lowest team goals-against-average of 2.45 per game, in addition to being a sizzling 21-0-1 in games they are leading through 40 minutes.

“I think that’s the biggest thing this year. We’ve learned that our game is good enough and we need to stick with it and trust it,” said Hellebuyck. “It might take all 60 minutes, and there might be a night where it doesn’t work out. But the majority of the time, it’s going to give us the best chance to win.”

Although his teammates don’t get a vote, Hellebuyck would be at the top of their Hart Trophy ballots.

“I think that certainly is a deserved chant, I think it’s certainly deserved that he belongs in that conversation,” said Jets captain Adam Lowry.

“Obviously, we have a long way to go and we’re far off from the end of the year, but he’s had an incredible start. He’s had an incredible stretch and he’s had an incredible career, so I think it’s fair that he finally gets recognized, kind of gets into that conversation and how that plays out down the stretch, who knows? But I think he certainly deserves that.”

INJURY UPDATES: Jets forward Vlad Namestnikov will miss a second consecutive game on Tuesday against the Vancouver Canucks as he deals with a lower-body injury suffered while blocking a shot in the third period of last Friday’s 2-1 overtime loss to the Kings. He tried skating prior to Monday’s practice but ultimately pulled the plug.

“We’re going to see how he feels every day,” said coach Scott Arniel, who doesn’t believe it will be a long-term issue.

Dominic Toninato made his season debut against the Avalanche and is expected to remain in the lineup, as the Jets don’t have any extra healthy forwards with Mason Appleton also sidelined with injury and not yet skating. A recall from the Moose — who are coming off a terrific 4-0-1 road trip — is possible.

“Great to see. It was a little bit like what they did last year where they got off to a slow start and now they are up and running with lots of new faces down there,” Arniel said of the AHL club, which had been struggling mightily.

“You don’t want them to make it a long year and lose a lot of hockey games, so it was a good road trip for them. There are people down there that we are maybe going to count on here and when they learn all the good lessons down there it is obviously positive for the organization.”

On the blue-line, Haydn Fleury shed his non-contact sweater for the first time Monday and is getting closer to a return after getting hurt Dec. 23.

“He has to do some more (conditioning) and maybe we will see by Thursday or maybe by the weekend,” Arniel said of a potential return to action.

Fleury will give the Jets eight healthy defencemen. That could soon grow to nine, as Colin Miller (out since Jan. 4) has started skating on his own and should join the main group later this week.

“We haven’t seen that all year,” Arniel said of the crowded back-end. “Right from day one of training camp losing Stan (Logan Stanley) and Ville (Heinola). We have tried to go by committee there and we have used a lot of guys. As I mentioned before, our depth has really helped us.”

Winnipeg Sun

<https://winnipeg.sun.com/sports/hockey/nhl/winnipeg-jets/mature-jets-winning-in-different-ways-and-having-fun-doing-it>

'Mature' Jets winning in different ways and having fun doing it

By Gordon Anderson, Winnipeg Sun, Postmedia News

The Jets are unbeaten in regulation (21-0-1) when leading after two periods of play, heading into Tuesday night’s matchup with the Vancouver Canucks.

“It’s a very mature group now,” Connor Hellebuyck said. “We’re all having fun winning, and we all realize winning is how you have fun in this league. It’s not the hard days, it’s not the battle days, it’s when you win you enjoy it. And you make sure you enjoy it. Everyone in this locker room is starting to learn what their personal game looks like, how they succeed is how this team succeeds.”

The only blemish on an otherwise clean complexion came in the Dec. 12 home game against the Las Vegas Golden Knights. The Jets carried a 1-0 lead into the final period but lost 3-2 in overtime when Ivan Barbashev beat Connor Hellebuyck at 3:47.

On Saturday, the Jets held the Colorado Avalanche in check, allowing seven shots in the third. Three shots came on a power play in the third. The Jets won 3-0.

The Avs have the third best goals for number in the Western Conference with 147. The Knights have 148, the Jets with 156.

“We don’t even look at it as a third period (stat),” head coach Scott Arniel said. “We push hard to get out in front in games and then it is a style of play, whether it is the second period, not

allowing the other team to get their game going. In the third period. Our group does a really good job most of the time, when we get ahead, we are resilient on how we play.”

Puck drop is 7 p.m.

Pomp and circumstance

The Jets honoured Hellebuyck prior to the Avs game for reaching 500 games played, 300 wins and 40 shutouts.

The club presented Hellebuyck with a silver goalie stick, commemorative puck and a framed piece of art, while the NHL also grabbed a primary assist, chipping in with a gold stick for becoming the third-fastest goalie to reach 300 wins.

Monday’s practice was the first occasion to get the goalie’s reaction to the celebration.

“It was pretty wild, pretty cool,” he said. “The whole experience was awesome. Fans made it great. I knew they would.”

So, did anything stand out? Did something grab your attention amid the bells and whistles accompanying such elite milestones.

“There’s nothing I can pick out,” the goalie said. “Just the whole thing. I was literally just a fly on the wall. It took me a full day just to really sit back and realize what happened and soak it all in. I’m very grateful for everyone around me and they did a great job.”

Here come the Canucks

Vancouver comes in for the first time this season, fresh off a 3-0 win over the Leafs on Saturday night. The win against Toronto snapped a four-game losing streak.

Two of those losses came in overtime. The Canucks have played a league high 10 extra session games.

“I feel they have been in a ton of games with a lot of overtime losses and shootout losses,” Adam Lowry said. “Easily, they could have flipped the script on some of those. When I look at their team as a whole, when they are healthy, they have got great depth up front like Petterson and Miller, adding Jake DeBrusk and then Quinn Hughes, an elite defender who can move and plays half the game.”

The Van City club is 12-5-4 on the road and 7-8-6 at home.

“They have the second-best road record in the league,” Arniel said. “They are playing well. I know they are on a long trip and won one in Toronto under tough circumstances with the late arrival. They are still a good hockey team over there. They have some good players, and like any opponent you have to be at your best.”

The Canucks lost 2-0 to the Carolina Hurricanes on Friday. The post-game charter to Toronto was cancelled due to icy conditions in the Raleigh area. The Canucks stayed overnight and arrived in Toronto around 11 a.m. CST. They received a police escort from the airport to the team hotel. The team didn’t get to their lodgings until approximately 1 p.m.

Bumps and bruises

Vladislav Namestnikov was absent from practice on Monday morning.

The forward picked up a lower-body malady during the second period of the 2-1 OT loss to the Los Angeles Kings on Friday. He left the game momentarily, before returning to finish what he started. He logged 14:47 of ice time.

The Russian forward did not play on Saturday. He has appeared in 43 games this season, adding nine goals and 11 assists.

He is listed as day-to-day.

“We are going to see how he feels every day,” Arniel said.

Haydn Fleury joined the regulars in practice on Monday, wearing a full contact jersey.

The 28-year-old d-man was injured during the second period of the Dec. 23 game against the Leafs.

“He has to do some more (conditioning) and maybe we will see by Thursday or maybe by the weekend,” Arniel said. “I am not sure yet. (Monday) was his first day going full bore.”

Forward Colin Miller continues to solo skate.

“He is getting closer to joining us,” Arniel said. “He has to get clear to make sure everything is OK.”

Miller suffered a fractured larynx when he got dinged by the puck during the first period of the Jan. 4 game against Detroit.

The Sault Ste. Marie, Ont., resident has 34 extended skates with the Jets this season, recording two goals and six assists.

Arniel did not give a definitive timeline for Miller’s return.

TSN.ca

<https://www.tsn.ca/video/domino-s-that-s-hockey-does-any-player-deserve-mvp-more-than-hellebuyck%7E3061647>

Domino's That's Hockey: Does any player deserve MVP more than Hellebuyck? (VIDEO)

Connor Hellebuyck made 22 saves against the Avalanche to pick up his sixth shutout of the season. The Jets goaltender leads the league in goals against and save percentage, begging the question, is there anyone who deserves MVP more than Hellebuyck? Bruce Boudreau joins Domino's That's Hockey to discuss.

<https://www.tsn.ca/nhl/video/hellebuyck-generating-hart-trophy-buzz-in-winnipeg-he-belongs-in-that-conversation%7E3061619>

Hellebuyck generating Hart Trophy buzz in Winnipeg: 'He belongs in that conversation' (VIDEO)

Connor Hellebuyck was serenaded with MVP chants last Friday while he was being honoured for earning his 300th NHL win. The Jets netminder is setting career bests in goals against average, save percentage and goals saved above expected, and his Hart Trophy case has only gotten stronger. TSN's John Lu has more.