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<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2025/01/25/teammates-happy-gustafssons-hard-work-pays-off-with-first-goal-of-the-season>

Teammates happy Gustafsson's hard work pays off with first goal of the season

By: Ken Wiebe

David Gustafsson jumped over the boards and was set to apply some pressure on the forecheck when a wild bounce off the stanchion forced the Winnipeg Jets centre to quickly alter his route and head directly to the slot.

As the puck was rolling towards him, Gustafsson wasn't thinking about anything other than making sure that his shot was going to find the back of the vacated net, since Utah HC goalie Connor Ingram had gone behind the goal to try and knock down the seemingly routine dump-in by Jets defenceman Dylan DeMelo.

Ingram scrambled back toward the crease and made a last-ditch, diving effort to get his goal stick on the puck, but Gustafsson buried his shot to give the Jets a 2-1 edge in what would become a 5-2 victory on Friday night.

The goal was the first of the season for Gustafsson and his fifth in 131 NHL games.

"When something like that happens, you can just kind of zone out. All that matters is getting the puck in the net and seeing a wide-open net, you should be able to do it. But, (Ingram) was close to getting a paddle or stick on it," said Gustafsson.

"It means a lot. I feel like I really deserved that lucky bounce that I got. I've been working hard now for a while without (seeing) any results for it. So, it was nice to get that one."

DeMelo, who made a smart defensive play in the neutral zone to get the play started, was quick to concede he didn't call his bank shot, but he was excited about how things played out.

"I've been on the other end of that and it sucks," said DeMelo. "I was just really happy for Gus to get that goal. He's battled hard, kind of been in and out (of the lineup), the injury and things of that nature. He's a guy that puts his head down and works every day.

"I'm sure it maybe wasn't how he thought he'd get his first (goal) of the year, but hopefully that kind of kickstarts him and gets that confidence going offensively."

You can understand why Gustafsson feels that way.

After suiting up against the Pittsburgh Penguins on Oct. 20 in the fifth game of the campaign, Gustafsson didn't see his next action until Dec. 1.

An extended stretch of healthy scratches can be tough to deal with for any player, but Gustafsson maintained a positive demeanour and kept working hard for the next time his number was called.

“Honestly, there’s no other option,” said Gustafsson.

“We’re doing really good as a team. And if I come in here being mad about not scoring points, that’s not (being) a very good teammate. And as long as we’re winning, I’m happy. That’s our goal.”

In just his third game of the season, Gustafsson got into his first NHL fight with Trent Frederic and suffered a concussion as he was knocked out by the Boston Bruins forward, causing him to miss four more games due to injury.

Gustafsson returned to the lineup on Dec. 21 against the Minnesota Wild and has seen regular duty since that point as the Jets dealt with a number of other injuries.

“It’s been a little bit of a rougher road for him, in the sense of trying to get in and stay in the lineup,” said Jets forward Morgan Barron, who often skates alongside Gustafsson on the fourth line.

“He’s one of the guys that puts in the work, whether he’s playing or he’s not playing, whatever it may be. It’s great to see him get it. He definitely deserves it. He makes a lot of plays out there that people don’t recognize.

“Defensively is what he’s depended on and it’s consistently for him, but he’s more than capable of chipping in offence. It’s great to see.”

Gustafsson is riding a modest two-game point streak after recording his first point of the season on Wednesday when he set up Barron for the game-tying goal just past the midway point of the second period against the Colorado Avalanche.

“I’ve been getting a lot more confidence with how I’m playing right now. Maybe earlier in the season, I would have just dumped that puck down, or not done anything with it,” said Gustafsson.

“But now, I saw an opportunity and I went for it. Those are small steps forward you’ve got to take.”

Up next: Flames at Jets

The Jets, who sit atop the Western Conference with 69 points, face the Calgary Flames on Sunday at 5 p.m.

It’s the third and final meeting of the regular season between the two clubs — and second in eight days, as the Flames got an excellent performance from goalie Dustin Wolf (who made 38 saves) in a 3-1 victory last Saturday.

“Wolf was really good,” said Jets head coach Scott Arniel.

“We did a good job of getting into Calgary’s zone and getting zone time, but probably us having multiple threats in the sense of whether it was traffic at the net or battling to get inside for the rebounds (would lead to more goals).

“I thought (Wolf) saw a lot of what was coming at him and we can do a better job of screening him and taking away his vision and that might help us get those numbers up.”

Arniel wasn’t ready to announce whether it would be Connor Hellebuyck or backup Eric Comrie between the pipes against the Flames on Sunday and with no morning skate scheduled due to an earlier start time, the answer won’t be known until we see who leads the Jets onto the ice for the pre-game warmup.

Jets defenceman Josh Morrissey skipped Saturday’s workout as he dealt with the flu bug that has been making its way around the team, so his status for Sunday is up in the air.

Given the implications in the Central Division of the blockbuster deal between the Avalanche and Carolina Hurricanes that sees Finnish winger Mikko Rantanen among those changing addresses, it wasn’t surprising that the trade caught the attention of several members of the Jets.

“It is always nice to see those guys leave, even though we have to play Carolina next week (Rantanen) is elite,” said Arniel.

“(Martin) Necas is one hell of a player himself coming into to play on that team, but Rantanen is one of those top five or six guys in the league when it comes to goal scoring. He is a big man, and you are never upset when you see those guys go to the east. It is an interesting move, but we won’t see Colorado the rest of the year.”

DeMelo isn’t disappointed to see Rantanen departing either.

“I’m happy I don’t have to see him four times a year. It’s a big trade and we’ll see how it unfolds for both teams,” said DeMelo.

“He’s a fantastic player and I’m sure he’ll do well in Carolina.”

The Jets will face the Hurricanes for the first time this season on Feb. 4.

<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2025/01/26/jets-mailbag-fair-offers-logan-stanleys-detractors-selke-trophy-contenders-and-more-your-questions-answered>

Jets mailbag: Fair offers, Logan Stanley's detractors, Selke trophy contenders, and more — your questions answered

By: Mike McIntyre and Ken Wiebe

Variety is the spice of life, and this month's Winnipeg Jets mailbag may be our most diverse one yet.

We've got questions about the upcoming 4 Nations Face-off, the NHL trade deadline, Nikolaj Ehlers' future, Logan Stanley's usage (what else is new?!), Adam Lowry's Selke candidacy, the league's waiver system, slow starts and in-game adjustments, the use of sports psychologists, hip checks, the rapidly rising salary cap as well as injuries and contingency plans.

Dig in as Free Press hockey writers Ken Wiebe and Mike McIntyre provide some insight, analysis and answers.

1. In your estimation, what roster holes need to be filled from now until the trade deadline? And who might be leaving in these trades? -ED

WIEBE: It's tough to find many holes on the roster of a team that's been at or near the top of the Presidents' Trophy race this season, but there are certainly several places the Jets could — and probably should — be looking to upgrade leading up to the NHL trade deadline on March 7.

This is a topic we'll be delving into in the Free Press over the next few weeks, but it's never too early to look into the crystal ball and try to identify what could be on Kevin Cheveldayoff's wish list.

When the Jets have been in a similar position in previous years, they've made moves to improve the hockey club. So you can expect they will follow suit during the next five weeks or so. How big the swings will be and when they might occur remains to be seen.

There's little doubt the Jets would like to make a pre-emptive strike for a second-line centre, like they did last year when Sean Monahan was the primary target. Although injuries could still impact the final number, the Jets project to have more than \$11 million of cap space by March 7 — and they'll likely use most, if not all, of it — provided they find the proper fit.

The Jets also figure to look for an upgrade on defence, likely one with some size and snarl. The search isn't limited to the third pairing but is likely to be the primary focus. Luke Schenn is someone I've mentioned before. Another option could be Robert Bortuzzo of Utah HC. Both of those players play a physical brand of hockey, are strong shot-blockers, could help on the penalty kill and would bring championship pedigree.

A middle-six forward — and/or one that could supply secondary scoring and augment the penalty kill — would also be on the Cheveldayoff's wish list.

As for who could be going the other way, picks and prospects would be at the heart of most trades. The Jets likely aren't interested in moving many roster players. Depending on what is on the table, the only untouchables in the prospect pool are likely forward Brayden Yager and defenceman Elias Salomonsson, who has been sidelined by an upper-body injury since Dec. 6 and limited to 18 AHL games so far this season.

And for those folks curious if the Jets might follow the lead of the Colorado Avalanche and try to maximize some of the assets for some of their unrestricted free agents, that's unlikely to be the case.

2. Is it possible the many Logan Stanley detractors are missing a few key points? The abuse seems to be endless. Maybe Kevin Cheveldayoff and Scott Arniel are not clueless when it comes to deciding what the team needs. Just wondering. -GRAHAM

MCINTYRE: You mean is it possible the GM and the coach of the No. 1 team in the Central Division and Western Conference aren't trying to tank their chances of winning? I'm being sarcastic, of course, but it amazes me how many folks seem to feel this is the case.

Look, I'm on the record many times questioning Stanley's usage, especially because I feel his lack of foot speed is an issue for a Jets team trying to play faster. And, yes, myself (and other media colleagues) have asked many, many related questions about the subject. (No, we do not lecture or scold the Jets' brass, as some seemingly want us to do).

Heck, last week in Denver, myself and Murat Ates of The Athletic (the only travelling media members on the trip) sat down for a 65-minute chat with Cheveldayoff and — I'm not exaggerating — we easily spent 15 minutes on all things Stanley.

While I don't necessarily agree with everything Cheveldayoff said, the bottom line is this is Arniel's call to make, and the first-year Jets 2.0 coach clearly feels Stanley brings something they need to the table.

I suspect Cheveldayoff is going to address the blue-line at some point between now and the March 7 trade deadline, and I'll repeat what I've said before in this and other forums — I'll be shocked if Stanley is in the starting playoff lineup.

By the way, I placed a one-question limit on Stanley this month, so this is it!

3. What contract offer to Nikolaj Ehlers do you feel would be fair (market value) to both sides? Or has that ship sailed as Nik will sign where he will be provided a first-line role? -CRAIG

WIEBE: It's a topical question for the pending unrestricted free agent, especially after the Danish forward chipped in three points on Friday to reach the 500-point milestone for his NHL career.

It's hard to get a true gauge on what might transpire during the coming months, as both sides seem comfortable with riding things out and seeing where things go as they approach or reach July 1.

Ehlers figures to be looking for a raise from the \$6 million AAV he's carried during the seven-year deal he signed with the Jets in October 2017 when he was entering the final year of his entry-level contract. One would suspect Ehlers and his camp hope his next deal is north of \$8 million per season, but until we know how much the cap is going up, it's tough to accurately predict how high the offers could be for his services, or if the number might be closer to \$7.5 million.

Ehlers has enjoyed his 10 seasons in Winnipeg. On Friday, he spoke about how special it was for him to hit the milestone in front of the hometown fans. Being on the top power-play unit this season has been an important development, but not having a clear path to top-line minutes with the Jets is likely to be a consideration for Ehlers as he approaches the negotiation of his next contract.

4. What contributes to the changes we see in the Jets transforming from a team that was completely dominated for a period to one that takes over a game following (the intermission) break between periods? We've all experienced a completely different golfer after one night or a football team turning it around completely after half-time, but those are usually related to set plays and not free-wheeling hockey.-RODGER

MCINTYRE: It's a great question, and one for which there is no easy answer. If there was, you can be sure every single coach (and team) would be making these types of adjustments on a nightly basis with perfect results.

One big factor nowadays is the use of video technology, and how that's become such a major part of both pre-game but also in-game study. You've likely seen players looking down on their tablets right after a shift, and coaches going over certain things. That type of on-the-fly film study happens during the intermission, too, as teams try to find any little possible edge — be it a structural thing, a player or line that is cheating and can be exploited, etc.

To me, though, the biggest cause is one you can't really measure with a spreadsheet or a camera. It's about human emotions. A team maybe gets a big early lead and might get comfortable and sit back. On the flip side, a team in an early hole gets desperate and increases its risk profile.

Finally, don't discount a good, old fashioned paint-peeling speech by a coach or a captain or other players to wake everyone up. That's been proven to work at times, too. These wild swings in momentum are one of the things I love (and I suspect many others do, too) about the beautiful game of hockey.

5. Why does Adam Lowry never seem seriously (or at all) to be in the conversation for the Selke Trophy? It seems that he may very well be the premier shutdown centre in the NHL, plus he adds toughness and leadership, all the while providing at least some offensive threat. Yet, outside of Winnipeg, he seems to get little real recognition. -TODD

WIEBE: Both Mike and I are voters for this award and I can tell you both of us had Lowry second on our ballots behind winner Aleksander Barkov of the Florida Panthers. Barkov sets the standard for this award since Patrice Bergeron retired, but Lowry is forcing his way into the discussion.

Plenty of other voters from the Professional Hockey Writers' Association took notice of Lowry's season, as he finished seventh in overall voting — including 14 second-place votes, 19 third-place votes, 30 fourth-place votes and 15 fifth-place votes.

Prior to his recent upper-body injury, Lowry was on pace to eclipse his career high for goals (15) with 11 and points (36) with 26 through 48 games, while continuing to play a shutdown role at an elite level. The intangibles you mention also strengthen Lowry's cause, but it's fair to recognize that most players who finished ahead of him in the Selke race last season had a significantly higher point total.

While the award is supposed to focus on the defensive side of the puck, it's become more of a two-way award over the years. But to your point, Lowry should be central to the conversation again this season, provided he's not on the shelf for an extended period of time.

6. Just before Canada plays USA in the 4 Nations Face-Off, does the coach ask Josh Morrissey whether Connor Hellebuyck has any tells in net or weaknesses that they should try to exploit before going on the ice? Does Morrissey respond? -RYAN

MCINTYRE: All's fair in love and hockey war, right?

I can't see why Morrissey, in the example you cited, wouldn't try to give his Canadian club any potential advantage, although are we sure Hellebuyck actually has any weaknesses to exploit?

One of the things I'm most fascinated about is the energy and intensity there will be in these games. The players are all talking the talk, saying they will be laying it all on the line for their respective countries! This is the first best-on-best event for a whole generation of players (no, the All-Star games don't count!) so let's see how quickly things get ramped up.

I know there are some who believe this is still a glorified exhibition of sorts, with needless injury risk, but I don't get the sense the majority of players feel that way. No, it's not the Winter Olympics, but with a return to that forum coming next winter, I suspect many of these skaters will want to make a lasting impression.

7. If Josh Morrissey was injured, what D-man would step onto PP1? -CRAIG

WIEBE: This is one hypothetical the Jets coaching staff would prefer to avoid.

In addition to the incredibly high level of play Morrissey is delivering this season, the Jets No.1 D-man has been very, very durable during the past six years. If Morrissey misses any time, Neal Pionk would be first up for the promotion, not just because he is the quarterback of the second

unit, but because he did the job previously, upon his arrival in the trade with the New York Rangers.

Ville Heinola is someone that has run the top unit with the Manitoba Moose in the American Hockey League, so he's someone that could be on standby down the road.

Morrissey is doing a fantastic job on the unit that ranks first in the NHL. After collecting 19 of his 69 points with the man-advantage last season, Morrissey already has 17 points on the power play this season among his 42 in 50 games.

8. Who can and can't be sent down to the minors? Can a player be sent up and down a number of times and if so, do they have to clear waivers each time? Who qualifies for conditioning without having to be waived? When you lose a player on waivers and the team you lost the player to places the player back on waivers can you reclaim him? The big question I have is which team gets to claim a player? Is it first-come, first-serve or is there an order like the draft where lower-ranked teams get first opportunity at waived players?

-LORNE

MCINTYRE: It's a bit of a complicated issue, but I'll try to explain in the simplest way possible. Essentially, new players are exempt from needing waivers until they hit a target that is based on a combination of their age when they signed their first contract, how many games they've played, and how many years they've been in the league.

Jets defenceman Ville Heinola, for example, was exempt last year, but no longer is this year (which is why Winnipeg won't risk trying to send him down. He'd almost certainly be claimed).

The claiming order is based on current NHL standings. Which means the Jets, right now, would have the second-last crack at a player (only Washington has more points).

One a player has cleared waivers — defenceman Dylan Coghlan would be a recent example — they can be recalled and don't need to go back through waivers for a second time, as long as they are sent back to the AHL within 30 days and haven't played more than 10 games. (Coghlan checked off both boxes, hence his smooth return to the Moose).

To your other related questions, yes, a team that loses a player on waivers can re-claim that player should they hit the waiver wire at some point in that season. And, as long as they are the only team putting in a claim, that allows them to send that player right down to the AHL, as they originally intended. If there are other claims, they must keep them on the NHL roster or have the waiver process repeat itself.

Finally, the conditioning assignment you mention is slightly different. A player who requires waivers can bypass them for a brief period as long as few conditions are met. They typically are coming off an injury or lengthy stint at a healthy scratch, and the player must agree to be sent to the AHL for what can be no more than two weeks. They also continue to receive their NHL pay and count against the team's salary-cap and 23-man roster limit.

9. Concerning Jets injuries and when they occur, what period has the most and is there a correlation of why it is so? My blind guess is the first period. -KETCHESON

WIEBE: This is an interesting question and it got me thinking, but I'm not sure there is a hard and fast answer, especially considering there are times when a player suffers the initially injury and plays through it, either within the game itself and leaves later (like Morrissey did in the second period on Jan. 7 against the Nashville Predators) or finishes the game or several and eventually is forced to take a seat.

Mason Appleton falls into this category and has recently returned to action. Things are further complicated this season by the Jets losing Ville Heinola on the first day of training camp from complications related to the ankle injury he originally sustained nearly one year earlier.

For the sake of trying to get a rough idea from recent injuries, Jets captain Adam Lowry was injured in the first period of the game against Utah HC last Monday, defenceman Colin Miller took a deflected puck in the throat in the first period of a game against the Detroit Red Wings on Jan. 4, blue-liner Haydn Fleury suffered a lower-body injury late in the second period against the Toronto Maple Leafs on Dec. 23 and D-man Dylan Samberg suffered a broken foot while blocking a slapshot from Steven Stamkos in the first period of a game against the Predators on Nov. 23.

For additional context, Vladislav Namestnikov blocked a shot in the third period against the Los Angeles Kings on Jan. 10 and missed four games and Ehlers sustained his lower-body injury in the second period against the Vegas Golden Knights on Nov. 29.

This is an incomplete list, but it supports my theory injuries are mostly random and occur at various points in games. Not sure there is any correlation between time of game or even at what point they might occur during a shift.

10. I would like to know if the Jets use a sports psychologist? If Vancouver is suffering from dissension among players and if Columbus players are motivated by the tragedy the family of Johnny Gaudreau suffered, are sport psychologists consulted in such cases? Do the Jets use them? If so, how? Do they usually speak to individual players or the team as a whole? - RAYMOND

MCINTYRE: Absolutely, they do. At last check, there were two in the fold (working with both members of the Jets and the Moose), and players are well aware of their services. I know for a fact they've been utilized.

I remember several years ago, a young player was reeling at the sudden loss of his father, and this service became extremely valuable.

Same with last year, when Adam Johnson died tragically in an on-ice accident in England, which really hit home for several Jets players who were friends with him.

Winnipeg also has a team chaplain, Lorne Korol, who is an outstanding human being and terrific support for players and staff.

There will also be players who have their own personal resources.

In this day and age, with more focus than ever on mental health — and that's a very good thing — I can't imagine running a sports team without this type of assistance at the ready.

11. In the past few weeks I've heard a couple of Sportsnet commentators suggest that not all teams are happy with the cap rising so fast and one of those teams is the Winnipeg Jets. The premise appears to be that they won't be comfortable spending to the cap because the building is not sold out every night. Do you think that's true? Do you think the Jets are going to stop spending to the cap as it rises up to and above \$100M? -@AavcoCup

WIEBE: It's natural that not all teams are thrilled about the prospects of a salary cap that reaches and eventually exceeds \$100 million. League revenues are obviously on the rise, but so are salaries. To add context to the discussion, when the Atlanta Thrashers relocated to Winnipeg for the 2011-12 season, the salary cap ceiling was \$64.3 million and the floor was \$48.3 million. It won't be long until we're seeing an increase of roughly \$40 million USD. That's a substantial rise, especially when you consider teams are not far removed from dealing with the long-lasting impact of the pandemic.

In terms of the Jets not being able or willing to spend to the cap as it continues to rise, that remains to be seen. They've firmly established themselves as a team that has been a cap ceiling team for an extended period of time. Obviously, it will be easier for them to be able to continue to do that if attendance is on the rise.

Attendance is up this season at Canada Life Centre and so are the number of sellouts, though further gains will likely be required. It seems pretty obvious Jets ownership is committed to putting a winning product on the ice.

12. Wondering what your thoughts are on the Nikolaj Ehlers' tripping penalty in the third period of the Colorado game? To me, it looked like what Josh Morrissey attempts and sometimes gets away with and sometimes he doesn't. I'm wondering why there is no consistency on this call (as well as others). I get reffing is a hard job. The game is so fast. -GLORIA

MCINTYRE: I was in Denver at that game last week and, in real-time, I admittedly thought Ehlers very much tripped Nathan MacKinnon. But upon seeing the slow-motion replay, I changed my mind. It looked like a pretty textbook hip check, the kind you used to see all the time in the NHL.

Not so much anymore, and as you point out, the game is so fast, which is why I suspect the officials quickly had their hands up. It could have been a costly judgment call against the Jets, but they ultimately killed the minor, got it to overtime and then won it in dramatic fashion. No harm, no foul.

Put me in the camp of people who don't mind hip checks coming out of the game. Because it is faster than ever, I just feel there's far too much injury risk (for both the person on the receiving end of the check, but also throwing it), so I don't mind them going the way of the Dodo bird. (As

you point out, Morrissey used to throw them early in his career. Not really anymore, and that's probably a good thing).

The Hockey News

<https://ca.sports.yahoo.com/news/winnipeg-jets-top-prospect-making-152218596.html>

Winnipeg Jets Top Prospect Making Waves After Slow Start; Has Incredible Four-Goal Performance

By Jared Brown

The Oshawa Generals took on their biggest rivals in the OHL the Peterborough Petes on Friday, Jan. 24, and unsurprisingly, it was a very chippy affair. They combined for an astonishing 54 penalty minutes.

That's astonishing because no fighting majors were assessed. There were a total of 40 infractions. Referees Andrew Willmetts and Jesse Wilmot had their work cut out for them, making plenty of roughing signals to the scorers box when making their penalty calls.

Penalties aside, this game was dominated by the Gens and their star players, despite having to mount a comeback.

We recently wrote about Oshawa and their chance of repeating as Eastern Conference champions, highlighting that their star players will need to lead the way offensively down the stretch and into the playoffs considering the team's lack of depth scoring.

In their 6-3 Friday night win over the Petes, their three NHL first-rounder forwards — Beckett Sennecke, Calum Ritchie, and Colby Barlow — combined for 12 points.

Barlow, Winnipeg Jets 18th overall pick in the 2023 NHL Entry Draft, did what he does best. Put the puck in the back of the net.

After scoring the first goal of the game, Peterborough rattled off three unanswered from Brady Stonehouse, Caden Taylor, and Colin Fitzgerald.

Barlow led Oshawa's comeback, scoring the team's next three goals, and helped set up Sennecke's powerplay marker in the third, capping off an incredible four-goal, five-point performance.

What's remarkable is that he scored a goal on the powerplay, penalty kill, and even strength. Here's his second of the night, the shorthanded goal, which kickstarted the Gens' comeback.

His hat trick goal was a thing of beauty by Anaheim Ducks third overall pick Beckett Sennecke, who made a no look behind the back backhand pass behind the net that fooled everyone on Peterborough.

His game-winning fourth of the night was the easiest of them all, as he had a wide-open 4x6 to shoot at.

The Generals had to part ways with many draft picks and two promising young players to acquire Barlow from Owen Sound earlier in the year. And at first, their lustrous new toy struggled out of the gate with his new team.

Related: Oshawa Generals Complete Massive Deal With Owen Sound, Acquire Winnipeg Jets First-Rounder Colby Barlow

In his first 21 games with Oshawa, Colby had eight goals and 14 points. Not great for a first-round NHL draft pick and a player in his fourth OHL season.

However, the former Toronto Marlboro is catching fire. In his last 21 games, he has posted 18 goals and 30 points and is four goals away from a fourth consecutive 30-goal season. Additionally, Barlow is currently on an eight-game point streak.

Not only are the Generals happy to see Barlow produce on a nightly basis, but I'm sure the Winnipeg Jets are too.

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The Athletic

<https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/6071918/2025/01/25/jets-nhl-prospects-rankings-2025/>

Winnipeg Jets are No. 15 in 2025 NHL prospect pool rankings

By Scott Wheeler

Welcome to Scott Wheeler's 2025 rankings of every NHL organization's prospects. You can find the complete ranking and more information on the project and its criteria here, as we count down daily from No. 32 to No. 1. The series, which includes in-depth evaluations and insight from sources on nearly 500 prospects, runs from Jan. 8 to Feb. 7.

The Winnipeg Jets have a really unique pool in that they don't have a premium prospect and don't have depth in quantity like some of the other teams in this range. But they do have half a dozen or so really solid prospects and two or three others of moderate interest, giving them a very respectable top eight or nine prospects.

They added to that group in a 2024 draft class that didn't include a first-rounder, too, so credit to their scouting staff for nabbing a couple of players that look like finds.

2024 prospect pool rank: No. 16 (change: +1)

NHL prospect pool rankings 2025: Scott Wheeler evaluates all 32 farm systems

1. Elias Salomonsson, RHD, 20 (Manitoba Moose)

Salomonsson has become a really nice development story for the Jets and looks like he's going to be a good NHL player now.

He was off to a really positive start to his post-draft season in the SHL two seasons ago and was bound to make Team Sweden for the World Juniors before a late November ankle injury halted his year. It was particularly noteworthy after he was just OK in his draft year and didn't take the steps many hoped he would, sliding out of first-round consideration and into the second round where the Jets took him. You don't often see teenage defensemen play 16-20 minutes per game in the SHL, but that's how much Salomonsson was playing before he got hurt and how much he continued to play last year. He was just two weeks away from eligibility for the 2023 draft with his Aug. 31 birthday, too, so had his pre-injury play in the SHL been in his draft year, he would have been viewed differently. He then became an important defender for the 2024 SHL champs and made the Swedish World Junior team. Though he was sidelined with an upper-body injury in mid-December, he was having a really strong first season in the AHL as a 20-year-old before that as well, driving impacts at both ends on a bad Moose team.

He's a tremendous north-south skater who can join the rush with ease off the puck, skate it down ice when he has it and close gaps quickly to play a physical and tight-defending brand of hockey and funnel opposing carriers wide into rub-outs along the wall. If he does get caught down ice trying to involve himself, he tracks back easily.

His decision-making does need some tightening up at times and has gotten him into suspension issues both in Sweden (in the SHL and J20) and internationally (at the U18 and U20 worlds) but his reads in other areas of the game have improved. I like his comfort level under pressure and confidence for a player as young as he is. He moves really well in all four directions, he involves himself in a lot of plays offensively, he's got a pro frame and build, and most of his finer skills (including his shot and his handling) get good grades. He closes and snuffs out a lot of plays and projects as a two-way top-six defenseman at five-on-five who may be able to help out on either special team. It doesn't hurt that he's a 6-foot-2 righty, either. His problem at times in the past has been that his actual tools were better than the way he utilized them. That was something I was comfortable betting on when I ranked him 39th on my final draft board for 2022 (the Jets took him 55th), though, and I think he has figured out what he needs to be at the next level. He looks like more of a first-rounder than a second-rounder now and looks like how most teams want their D to look. Big, strong, highly mobile.

I think all of the Jets' top three prospects here had a case for No. 1 and I thought about them in any order but Salomonsson has the most comfortable projection now.

2. Brad Lambert, C/RW, 21 (Manitoba Moose)

After an up-and-down couple of seasons for Lambert who — across five teams, four levels, three world juniors, the pandemic, injuries and illnesses — showed some really nice flashes of the skill and skating that made him one of the biggest names in his age group growing up but also played extended stretches where he looked like he didn't know who he was or how to impact a game, things started to click last season. He was pretty consistent (not a term often used about him) for a player his age in the AHL, all told. This season has been a little more up-

and-down on a Moose team that has really struggled to generate offense, but he has been one of their more productive players.

Lambert's gifts are undeniable. He's a beautiful skater. His hands flow in sync with his feet. When he's feeling good, he's fearless with the puck, makes a ton of plays in control and looks to dictate in possession. He's got excellent control of his outside edges which allows him to carve up coverage on cutbacks and carries. He's slippery because of his ability to spin away from his man and make a play. He's a good passer off his backhand. He's capable of playing pucks into space, getting to the interior, splitting lanes and cutting off the wall aggressively, and has a low base to his stride that allows him to extend plays (though he does have a bit of a hunch to his posture, which can put him off balance). He's capable of playing the point and half-wall on the power play because of his puck skill, dangerous wrister off the flank and playmaking instincts.

But there's a difference between ability and know-how or execution. Some scouts have worried about Lambert's game without the puck in terms of both his intensity off it and his ability to make things happen offensively when he's not getting a ton of touches (I actually think playing him at center full-time both in the WHL and then with the Moose, instead of bouncing him between the wing and the middle, helped to keep him more involved). Others have worried about how often he has skated the puck into trouble and made his decisions too late at times during his career. I've wondered at times whether he goes to the net enough to score up levels.

With the puck, though, Lambert's a multifaceted threat who blends impressive puck skill with standout all-around skating mechanics and an attack mentality that can complement a dangerous curl-and-drag shot (which also complements the short stick he uses).

There has been a boom-or-bust prognostication for him because of some of the inconsistencies and the requirement that he's going to have to play in a top-six role in the NHL. But I still believe in his ability with the right development/coach and he has slowly begun to build more of an identity to his game. It can feel like he'll follow a shift where he has the puck four or five times with one where he's not processing things quickly enough or making bad decisions, but those brain cramps and bad habits have also begun to show up less. He's a fascinating case study.

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

Yager has been on the radar in western Canada for a long time, and he's got some real pedigree to his profile and cachet to his game to support it. He was the No. 3 pick in the 2020 WHL Bantam Draft. He was the CHL Rookie of the Year (on 34 goals). He was an alternate captain and second-leading scorer at the Hlinka Gretzky Cup. He was Canada's second-leading scorer at the World Juniors as an 18-year-old and their captain and most-used center as a 19-year-old. He was an alternate captain and one of Moose Jaw's leading scorers for two consecutive seasons, which included centering the first line to a WHL title with 49 goals and 128 points in 81 games split between the regular season, playoffs and Memorial Cup last year. And now he's joined Lethbridge to push for another WHL championship in the final chapter of his junior career.

His actual statistical profile is good without being great. Still, he has been a consistent offensive player in his age group while playing a detail-oriented off-puck game (he's also a dangerous and active penalty killer and is decent in the faceoff circle).

Yager plays a threatening, attacking game with skill in straight lines and in cutting sequences in transition. He's got smooth-skating mechanics. He's dangerous inside the offensive zone from the top of the circles in with a quick-release wrister that comes off his blade hard and with a slight, goalie-fooling adjustment pre-shot. He's got good puck skill in congested areas, an ability to attack in bursts and make something happen out of dead plays, and an equal ability to play off coverage and make himself available as a shooter for his linemates.

He's a natural scorer who plays a direct style, but he's also got vision and good touch (though I wouldn't say his creativity is necessarily a strength). I like the way he supports the puck defensively as a center. He's very intentional with his routes, offensively and defensively, which should help him stick at the center position long-term. He's a decent though not standout skater (his skating hasn't taken a step to add a separation gear in the last couple of years). He's a smart player who finds ways to get open and supports his linemates well (he's got the smarts and the instincts). I like his work rate. He doesn't have a star quality but he's going to play in the league and projects as a middle-six C with PP2/PK2 potential.

4. Kieron Walton, C, 18 (Sudbury Wolves)

One of the stories of the 2024 NHL Draft so far, Walton was drafted in the sixth round and has found an entirely new level (or two, or three) this season, producing at the top of the OHL as a 6-foot-6 center.

Walton's a massive forward with impressive handling and feel on the puck for a player his size. And while he's not a natural mover, his skating has come along enough to give him a real chance at becoming a pretty unique NHL player. Teams wanted to see him impose himself more last season on and off the puck given his skill level and he has really taken charge this year. He doesn't have the big, mean streak that you might expect out of a player his size but he's got some other qualities that pop, including some sneaky power-play utility around the net and good playmaking feel/puck skill. He's not the big man prototype but I think he's even more interesting because of the offensive acumen he has. He has been impossible to contain on many nights this season, generating a ton of offense and looks not just for him but for his linemates as well.

He was one of the final cuts for my top 100 and I'm kicking myself for not including him. He certainly doesn't look like a No. 187 pick and I slotted him in front of a couple of Jets first-rounders here.

5. Chaz Lucius, C, 21 (Manitoba Moose)

After lacking continuity in his health across his two years at the program due to a bone lesion in his knee which eventually required surgery, the injury bug has followed Lucius from the NTDP to the University of Minnesota, Portland and Manitoba, stunting and maybe even jeopardizing his development. Whenever he has begun to look like a top prospect again, it has felt like he's had another injury (the season-ending shoulder surgery he had with the Winterhawks right as he was catching fire and regaining his confidence might have been the worst of the bunch and it was followed by a season-ending ankle injury with the Moose).

The growing injury history worries me, for sure. Lucius is a talented player and finisher who has shown some scoring upside when healthy. I grew fond of the player and the kid in his time at the

program, and there have been real stretches in every season where he looks like a talented offensive player.

He's a multifaceted shooter. He's got natural, midrange finishing ability. He's got the ability to change his angles in a split second (thanks to lightning-quick hands) and shoot around sticks and feet. And he's got an opportunistic sense for spacing and timing/instincts so that he scores his fair share of goals — like every good goal scorer — by simply sliding into scoring areas, finishing rebounds or getting open into pockets of space around the net just as his linemates are looking to pass. He's got an underrated nose for the net and used to be all around the crease when he played against his peers — something that should come in the pro game as he gets stronger/if he stays healthy as well. He gets the puck off so quickly. He's also an underrated playmaker and passer who understands how to play pucks into space when he draws pressure. He can find pockets inside the offensive zone to get open into when he doesn't have the puck and uses opposing defenders as decoys when he does.

He's not an explosive skater, though, which leads to apprehension among some scouts as to how his finishing ability would translate at the NHL pace. I think his feel for the game and talent could get him back on track if he can put together an extended stretch of healthy, uninterrupted development, but the clock has started to tick.

There are times when I'd like to see him create more of his own looks but with the right linemates and good health, I wouldn't rule him out of becoming a top-nine, secondary scorer. We may never know where he could have got to, though.

6. Colby Barlow, LW, 19 (Oshawa Generals)

One of the more impressive 2005s in the OHL for a couple of seasons, Barlow scored 35 goals in 66 combined regular-season and playoff games as a rookie in the OHL, was named captain of the Attack for his draft year, scored 49 goals in 63 combined games that season (rare goal scoring for a player his age, and a rare honor for a player his age) and then played to a 51-goal, 68-game pace in the OHL last season after starting slow and missing time with a back injury (after a disappointing under-18 worlds while also dealing with a nagging injury). He also looked good from what I saw of him in his first three AHL games with the Moose last spring. He has struggled to really take his production on a whole to that next level, though, and got off to a brutally slow start this season after a trade from Owen Sound to the contending Generals, where he's below a point per game (which took him out of running for Canada's World Junior team).

Barlow plays a direct, intentional game built around good hands, a physically mature pro frame and an NHL shot (he can cleanly beat goalies from midrange). He's also an able penalty killer, which could give him all-situations upside at the next level. Whether he becomes a middle-six secondary scorer at the NHL level will be determined by his skating because outside of his lack of pace, he has a high floor or tools. It's also fair to ask if his advanced growth gives him less runway for improvement (he really does look like a man already). He does at times look powerful in straight lines once he builds speed (he moves just fine through his crossovers and can build momentum that way) but he's slow out of the blocks from a standstill. I would like to see him tunnel-vision a little less and open up his plane of sight a little more as well. Even though he can score on them, he takes low-percentage shots a little too much for my liking off

the rush (maybe because he feels he can't take the D one-on-one so he shoots through them instead?). The pro build, mentality, competitiveness and scoring are appealing, though, and he brings it shift to shift.

7. Nikita Chibrikov, RW/LW, 21 (Manitoba Moose)

Chibrikov, like Lucius, Lambert and Salomonsson before him here, was a kid who ranked higher on my board than where the Jets grabbed him at the draft. He's one of the kids whose stock would have likely been higher post-draft and pre-AHL had Russia been able to participate in the two World Juniors he would have been a part of as well (he impressed in his brief showings at the first iteration of the 2022 World Juniors, where he looked like Russia's second-best forward for my money through two games after Matvei Michkov before it was shut down mid-tournament due to the spread of COVID-19). Though he never quite broke into the KHL before coming over, Chibrikov, who turns 21 in a few weeks, was a top player in his age group at the MHL and VHL levels and has been immediately productive as an AHLer the last two seasons. Though his results defensively haven't been at the same level, Chibrikov finished fourth on the Moose in scoring with 47 points in 70 games as a rookie and was their leading scorer this year as a second-year player (he also has four points in five NHL games to date) when he went down with a lower-body injury a couple of weeks ago that ended his season.

He's a talented offensive player who, when he's involved in the game and playing confidently, looks to take and has the tools to do so. Chibrikov plays a direct, intentional game that looks to attack at and through pressure, create his own chances and drive play to the inside when he has the puck. When he's engaged in the fight and keeping his feet moving, there's a lot to like about his ability to impact a shift (both by ramping up the pace with his skating or slowing the game down to play a little more calculating) in a variety of ways as an equal part finisher and playmaker. His play off the puck as a 5-foot-10 winger might never be a strength, but he has shown more of a willingness to engage in battles and compete against pros in the AHL even if he's not winning the majority of his engagements or providing defensive value. He projects as a middle-six winger with some skill, but there might also be some risk that he becomes a tweener as an AHL producer who doesn't quite have the chops to stick in that kind of a role in the NHL. I thought about ranking him higher here, though.

8. Kevin He, LW, 18 (Niagara IceDogs)

He, drafted in the fourth round by the Jets, is a 6-foot, 180-something pound winger who I identified as a potential breakout candidate coming into this season. He then got off to one of the hottest starts in the OHL. And while he has cooled off a little, He, who was also named IceDogs captain, is still top 20 in OHL scoring. He also had a primary assist in his lone preseason game with the Jets.

And even more importantly, he has imposed his will on games, using his blend of skating and skill to really push and prod defenses. He's a great athlete, he's got legit speed and when you talk to his peers in the OHL about him, his puck skills are commonly lauded. When he gets going, he can be a lot to handle for junior defensemen. I don't think he's got high-end hockey sense but he plays with pace, can make things happen and has good overall skill and a natural release (that he can get off in motion). I expect him to have a good pro career. I'm not sure there's NHL upside but I could see him eventually making the jump with his skating and intuition on the ice.

9. Alfons Freij, LHD, 18 (IF Björklöven)

Freij is a smooth-skating, strong-on-his-feet-and-his-edges defenseman who thrives in transition both ways, handles the puck comfortably and confidently on exits and past pressure, walks the line beautifully and will roam and maneuver when opportunities present themselves inside the offensive zone (sometimes to his detriment defensively). There's some give and take with how active his game tilts (he's highly involved off the line and in transition) but his confidence is admirable and he has learned to make his game more applicable. He's an aggressive and skilled defenseman who learned to defend better as last season progressed and played big minutes for Sweden at U18 worlds, making plays off the line. This season has been moderately disappointing, though. Växjö loaned him to Björklöven so that he could play more in the second-tier HockeyAllsvenskan and after playing good minutes early on in the year he has slowly seen his usage reduced on a good team, often playing under 10 minutes in December and into January as he adjusts to the speed and physicality of the pro level. He still needs to buckle down a little more defensively and make better decisions with the puck (I think he reads play well, he's just a little overzealous on both sides and it comes with some mistakes) at times but his ability to be highly involved in offense, his skill level and his confidence on when to jump in and out of space and play in and out of give-and-gos are appealing (his on- and off-puck movement offensively is a real strength). If you work with him and encourage him to play, his style may be able to develop into an interesting, very involved prospect. But there's some bust risk as well.

10. Dom Divincentiis, G, 20 (Manitoba Moose/Norfolk Admirals)

Drafted with one of the final picks in the 2022 draft, DiVincenziis was one of the more consistent goaltenders in the OHL from his rookie season in 2021-22 through to the end of his post-draft season two years ago, which earned him a CHL Second All-Star Team nod and the OHL's goaltender of the year award. Last year was a bit more of a challenging one, though. Despite a winning record with the Battalion, he really fought it in some of my OHL viewings and had a tough go at Canada's selection camp for the World Juniors. This season has been a more positive one and he has played well as a rookie pro in time split between the AHL and ECHL.

DiVincenziis is a fairly mobile 6-foot-2 goaltender who moves to pucks to make his saves but doesn't have to scramble as much as young goalies who play that style typically do, and then battles to stay in plays when he has to (though I wouldn't call him an ultra-competitive type). His tracking and focus can get the better of him and I've seen goals squeak through him and moments where he doesn't look set and ready. I find he goes down early, too. He's got good technical tools, though, and is a sound goalie in terms of habits (sealing posts, closing the five-hole, playing the puck, steering rebounds into the corner, etc.). I could see him becoming a No. 3 but I'm not sold on him having full-time NHL goalie upside.

11. Thomas Milic, G, 22 (Manitoba Moose)

After building a strong statistical track record as a 6-foot goalie, the Jets drafted Milic in the fifth round as an overager. In 2020, he was named the top goaltender in the CSHL's U18 loop. In 2021, he played well in a small sample due to the pandemic for both the Seattle Thunderbirds and Team Canada at U18 worlds (as the backup). In 2022, he was named to the WHL's U.S. Division Second All-Star Team. In 2023, he won the WHL's goaltender of the year award, was named to the CHL's First All-Star Team, backstopped Canada to gold at the World Juniors and

backstopped the Thunderbirds to a WHL title as the league's playoff MVP. That's a pretty compelling case that he's a solid, worthwhile goalie prospect. Last year, he followed it up by playing well in his rookie season at the pro level split between the AHL and ECHL. This season, behind a leaky Moose team, his numbers have really taken a hit. Though I'm not sure how much of that is questions some had about whether he would be as successful at the pro level at his size and how much you have to attribute to the team in front of him, it hasn't been a good season even in full context.

He's nimble on his feet. He really battles in the net. He tracks pucks well through traffic and finds pucks on scrambles. He holds his outside edges well one-on-one with shooters. Despite his size, he covers the posts and corners well from bad angles. He controls his rebounds in front of him or into the corner really well. He's a good goalie. But he will occasionally get beat by good shooters and his lack of size has been exposed at times by pros. I won't be surprised if he plays himself into NHL games at some point down the line, though. He's a fighter.

12. Connor Levis, C/RW, 20 (Vancouver Giants)

Levis was a point-per-game player on a deep Kamloops Blazers team that hosted the Memorial Cup two years ago while playing on both special teams and showing particular proficiency on the penalty kill. Last season, after his numbers took a predictable dip on the rebuilding and low-scoring Blazers, he was traded to the Giants at the deadline and played well down the stretch for them. This year, though, I was hoping to see an uptick in his production above the point-per-game level he has hovered at and that hasn't happened. Now he's committed to Bowling Green State as one of the early players who has decided to go the CHL-to-NCAA route in order to try to get signed.

Levis has pro size (6-foot-2, 190-something pounds), a well-rounded toolkit of average or above-average skills, good sense around the offensive zone, the work ethic you look for in a potential bottom-six player and just a pretty complete game. He has also played a good amount of center and wing, which could help him find a role in the AHL someday. His skill level and skating aren't dynamic but he has worked to improve his skating and pace, he's a smart player, he can occasionally show some creativity as a facilitator and he checks some boxes as a player whose game will work better at the college/pro levels than in junior (similarly to fellow former WHLer Fraser Minten's). He's a solid player who uses and plays off his linemates well. I question whether he has NHL upside after he has struggled to grow in junior, but he's worth following still to see how it works in college.