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<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2025/01/27/jets-prepare-for-home-stretch>

Jets prepare for home stretch Eastern swing includes showdown with first place Capitals

By: Ken Wiebe

MONTREAL — The Winnipeg Jets are about to hit the portion of the schedule when a marathon runner would need to separate themselves from the rest of the field.

To say the Jets are in the home stretch would be exaggerating, but it's not that far down the road.

With 31 games to go — including five before the two-week break for the 4 Nations Face-Off — the Jets are prepared to put the pedal to the metal.

“Now, we've got five (games) against the East, so we're going to see a whole different look,” Jets head coach Scott Arniel said after his team concluded a stretch of 10 home games in a span of 25 days with a 5-2 win over the Calgary Flames and a record of 34-14-3.

The Jets, who sit second in the NHL in points percentage, open a three-game road trip on Tuesday against the Montreal Canadiens.

The swing also includes what could be a spicy affair against the Boston Bruins and a finale that could be a showdown for first overall in the NHL with the Washington Capitals.

Let's take a look at five storylines to monitor as the trip unfolds:

STEPPING UP IN LOWRY'S ABSENCE

Arniel said on Sunday Jets captain Adam Lowry would be on the road trip, but just as a friendly face. Arniel doesn't think Lowry (who suffered an upper-body injury against Utah HC on Jan. 20) is going to be back before the break.

If Lowry is ready to go on Feb. 22 against the St. Louis Blues, that means the Jets' top-checking centre will have missed eight games.

Through the first three, the Jets' men in the middle have done an excellent job of picking up the slack in his absence. Fourth-line pivot David Gustafsson is riding a three-game point streak, Vladislav Namestnikov has chipped in three helpers, Rasmus Kupari is handling additional responsibilities and Mark Scheifele had a goal and an assist on Sunday.

“I mean, it's awesome,” said Gustafsson. “It shows the talent we have in this locker room, that we have guys that can step up to the next level and do it comfortably.”

Brad Lambert was recalled from the AHL's Manitoba Moose, but that's likely more to do with the Jets wanting to have an extra forward for the trip.

TURNING UP THE POWER

The power plays haven't been nearly as plentiful as they were earlier this season, but the Jets continue to get the job done when they go on the man-advantage.

Sunday's two-for-two showing helped bump that league-leading efficiency to 33.3 per cent, which is nearly five per cent better than the New Jersey Devils (28.7 per cent), who sit second.

"Every time they go out there, I tell them to score," said Jets defenceman Neal Pionk, who anchors the second unit and has three goals on the power play. "So, yeah, (the top unit), they're hot right now — and they're moving the puck really well. It's fun to watch."

The importance of getting production from both units has been important, though the top unit has cranked things up recently. Gabe Vilardi leads the Jets with 11 man-advantage goals, followed by nine for Kyle Connor, eight for Mark Scheifele and four for Nikolaj Ehlers.

"We just have so many threats, you've got to worry about different options," said Vilardi. "You've got to worry about KC on the half-wall taking that one-timer. We're doing a good job of interchanging. You saw Scheif's goal, we're attacking off the rush as well."

Jets assistant coach Davis Payne has done a great job of sparking the transformation of the team's power-play efficiency from 22nd last season to No. 1 this year, though he's looking to stay ahead of the curve rather than patting himself on the back.

"Well, you want to put each of your guys in the best position to use their skillsets," said Payne. "We feel like we've done that for the most part with both units. And a lot of times it depends on how the other team is going to defend situations where we feel we can attack with different options."

HELLO OLD FRIEND

The Jets are set to face Patrik Laine for the second time this season when they play the Canadiens.

The former Jets sniper is up to 12 goals (including 10 on the power play) and 18 points in 21 games since returning to the lineup on Dec. 3.

It's great to see Laine back on the ice, making an impact and enjoying the game after battling through some dark times last season that led him to spending time in the NHL/NHLPA player assistance program.

The Habs are battling for a wild-card spot in the Eastern Conference and will be hungry to earn a split in the season series after losing 4-2 on Dec. 14.

INTENSITY METER RISING

The Jets blasted the Boston Bruins 8-1 on Dec. 10 in what was an impressive display.

Things turned a bit ugly when Bruins forward Trent Frederic knocked out David Gustafsson in what was his first NHL fight.

Several players took exception with Frederic, who has much more experience as a pugilist, going after Gustafsson.

Jets defenceman Logan Stanley went so far as to question Frederic's choice of dance partners.

"I was standing right there," Stanley said the following day, offering up a not-so-subtle invitation.

Stanley then got involved in a secondary altercation with Bruins forward Mark Kastelic and both players were ejected.

Without Lowry (who fought Nikita Zadorov on Dec. 10 in an effort to calm things down), it wouldn't be a surprise if Stanley and Frederic found each other at some point on Thursday.

SLOWING DOWN HISTORY

There will be ample time to discuss the duel between the top team in the West facing the top team from the East as the week goes along, but a subplot will feature Capitals captain Alex Ovechkin chasing Wayne Gretzky for the all-time NHL goals record.

"Incredible," said Pionk. "You would think at some point it slows down, but it hasn't. I mean, he almost seems to get better.

"You've always got to be aware of when he's on the ice and and it's pretty impressive to watch."

Ovechkin is up to 22 goals in 33 games this season, which leaves him 19 shy of tying Gretzky's record of 894.

"Ovechkin has defined how to score from that area better than anybody," said Payne, referring to his patented one-timer. "You'd be foolish to try to emulate that with your power3-play group if you can't shoot the puck like that. Not too many people can.

"That, to me, makes what Ovechkin is doing so incredibly special, because he's done it over and over and over again. And there's lots of times he goes to the hard areas and he scores the two-footers, tips pucks in the net. But the predictability of that one-timer is one thing, stopping it is another."

Winnipeg Sun

<https://winnipeg.sun.com/sports/hockey/nhl/winnipeg-jets/one-floor-down-vilardi-in-second-with-11-power-play-goals>

One floor down: Vilardi in second with 11 power-play goals

By Gordon Anderson, Winnipeg Sun

Jets forward Gabriel Vilardi resides in the penthouse of the league's best specialty team players. Well, maybe one floor down.

Heading into league action on Monday night, the Kingston, Ontario, resident is second in the league with 11 power-play goals scored.

Jets assistant coach Davis Payne, who guides the league's top-ranked powerplay, says Vilardi's net-front prowess is a combination of unique physical skills. At 6-foot-3 and 216 pounds, Vilardi won the genetic lottery and he's certainly cashing in at the highest level.

“He is a big body guy with a really good set of hands and, not only can he make plays in tight areas, but he can get the puck off his stick to different parts of the net,” Payne said. “Vilardi has got composure in those areas, and he has gotten comfortable in understanding the role inside the dots and below the hashmarks and around the net.”

Brayden Point. Dylan Larkin and Jake Guentzel lead the league with a dozen power-play goals apiece.

Vilardi led the Jets with nine PPGs in 47 regular-season game last year. That ranked him 43rd at the completion of the 82-game schedule.

Payne says familiarity with the league and its players, mixed with determination to improve are factors in his increased output through 51 games.

“He is learning the league and learning his capabilities, (while he continues) to work on his game,” Payne said. “He passes the puck extremely well and he has got great vision. He can also shoot the puck, and he is not afraid to go into the blue paint to score goals. That is a pretty good recipe.”

Points a plenty

The 5-2 triumph over Calgary concluded the heavy dose of home events in January. In a dozen games, the Jets earned at least one point in ten of them. They lost in regulation to the Red Wings and Flames and picked a loser point against the Ducks and Kings.

“Well, all in all, I think we did a great job,” said head coach Scott Arniel. “I really do. When you get that many (home) games in a month at home here, you have to take advantage of it. I like the way that we handled it. There were a couple there that maybe we would have liked to have, but at the end of the day, that was a lot of games in our building.”

‘More emphasis’ on the PK

After surrendering two power-play goals in a 4-2 setback to the Red Wings on Jan. 4, the club has somewhat tightened the screws on the penalty kill, repelling 23 of 27 chances in 10 games since the loss to Detroit. The PK units were letter perfect in six of them.

“Certainly, there is a little bit more emphasis on some things that we want to do,” Arniel said on the penalty kill’s recent run of success. “We obviously want to be a bit more aggressive and a bit more strike down, kind of more pressure.”

On Sunday, the Jets repelled two of three Flames opportunities. Mackenzie Weegar scored a power-play goal at 15:08 of the second, trimming the Jets’ lead to 2-1 at the time.

The Jets are 15th in the league with a 79.1 efficiency rating.

“Yeah, we’re making strides in it,” said d-man Neal Pionk. “I think that’s the one thing (that assistant coach Dean Chynoweth) said, a few times too, the percentage is what it is, but does it help you win games or lose games? So that’s the biggest thing. And we’ve had some timely kills.”

Pionk played 22:15 in 33 shifts on Sunday. The #4 in Jets silks logged 3:11 of PK time.

Wheels up and a ‘friendly face’

With the January slate of home games now cast aside, the Jets embark on a three-game eastern swing, starting Tuesday night in Montreal.

“Yeah, we got to keep that same mentality,” Pionk said when asked how the team parlays its home success into road success.

“I’m sure Arniel mentioned it before. You know, there’s not two ways to play. We have got to keep that same mentality. And I think our start is the biggest thing on the road. Get off to a good start and go from there.”

The Habs (24-20-5) are 6-2-2 in their last 10 games heading into league action on Monday night. The Canadiens are two points behind the Tampa Bay Lightning and Columbus Blue Jackets for the second wildcard spot in the east.

The Jets will get the opportunity to catch up with ex-teammate Patrick Laine. Laine has 12 goals in 21 skates so far.

“Yeah, of course, it’s always good playing against him,” Pionk said. “I am glad to see him back on the ice too.”

Adam Lowry will make the trip, but just as a friendly face.

The Jets are 3-0 without Lowry in the lineup. The way the head coach spoke about Lowry’s UBI, he is going to miss the next five games — at the very least.

“I don’t think so,” Arniel said when asked if Lowry would be back before the 4 Nations Cup. “I don’t think so.”

The club will face the Bruins on Thursday and the first-place Capitals on Saturday night.

TSN.ca

<https://www.tsn.ca/nhl/video/payne-points-to-play-off-of-puck-for-winnipeg-s-power-play-success%7E3069493>

Payne points to play off of puck for Winnipeg's power play success (VIDEO)

The Jets sit atop the NHL with a sparkling 33.3 power-play percentage, up from 24.1 from last season. Much of the success can be attributed to pp coach Davis Payne, who joined the club in the summer, who believes in staying with the process and working off of the puck.

<https://www.tsn.ca/nhl/video/perfetti-s-physicality-turning-heads-in-winnipeg%7E3069196>

Perfetti's physicality turning heads in Winnipeg (VIDEO)

Cole Perfetti addressed his 14-game goal drought last week by admitting he’s working on being ‘kind of a little prick to play against’. He followed that up by recording his first career hat trick against Utah. John Lu has more on Perfetti’s push to be more physical.

The Athletic

<https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/6026327/2025/01/27/winnipeg-jets-perfetti-kupari-lowry/>

What I'm seeing from the Jets: How Perfetti wins battles, Kupari's impact, avoiding a slump

By Murat Ates

Winnipeg has had every opportunity to dive headlong into its customary end-of-January slump. A flu bug has been running through the roster for weeks. Adam Lowry is injured. Mark Scheifele left the game twice during the first period of Winnipeg's 5-2 win over Calgary on Sunday night, briefly putting Vladislav Namestnikov and Rasmus Kupari at the top of the Jets' depth chart at centre.

How are the Jets avoiding their annual tailspin?

The standard-issue, out-of-market response heaps credit upon Connor Hellebuyck while ignoring the process in front of him. We're very much in-market here, though, and the Jets have improved to 34-14-3. They've won three straight games since their dizzyingly poor performance in Utah, so Winnipeg's success is worth a deeper look.

Imperfections exist, but today's article is a deserved series of positive storylines.

Cheveldayoff on Jets' second-half slides

I'm a big believer in the idea that identifying and understanding problems is the first step toward solving them.

Last year's league-leading Jets lost three in a row to end January, then extended their losing streak to five games on the February side of the All-Star break. They were able to right the ship for a little while, then dropped six straight in March before their season-ending eight-game win streak. The year before, the Western Conference-leading Jets dropped five of seven games to end January, then went 3-5-1 through February and 7-7-1 in March.

It goes on like that. A late winter slide ended Winnipeg's playoff hopes in 2021-22 after Paul Maurice stepped down; Maurice's team held on to a playoff spot, but Dave Lowry's team lost it in January and February. In 2018-19, when the Jets were thought to be Stanley Cup favourites, a second-half slide took the Jets from first in the West to their first-round matchup with St. Louis — the eventual Cup champion.

When the Jets dropped a dismal performance in Utah on Monday, Jets fans wouldn't have been out of place to feel a sense of "here we go again."

Two days after that performance, GM Kevin Cheveldayoff didn't shy away from Winnipeg's second-half struggles. Do the Jets also see these struggles, and could coach Scott Arniel's fiery postgame comments have been designed to nip them in the bud?

"From my perspective, certainly you have seen different trends like that ... where you've had dips like right around this area here," Cheveldayoff said in Denver last week. "I just think that it's about trying to set that standard and hold that standard. Every coach is different on how they handle it."

Cheveldayoff then opined that 82 games make for a long season — that it's hard to establish intensity, maintain it for the full season, and then find a way to elevate that intensity in the playoffs. He also wondered if player management played a role.

"Whether it's injury or whether it's burnout, sometimes you've got to be careful that you don't push too hard early because you get to that point where it's maybe 'I don't want to hear this anymore,'" Cheveldayoff said. "You have to be strategic. There's 20 (players in the lineup) at any given time — there's 20 individual elite hockey players there that (Arniel has to) massage and maneuver."

His closing statement was fascinating: "There's lots of competing interests for lots of different things. Hockey's a game played on the ice (but) it's a business off the ice. It's a passion, it's their job."

Read into that what you will but I've talked to enough players who have expressed similar sentiments that the season is long and maintaining league-leading focus is difficult. It may be that, once Winnipeg has cemented playoff spots in recent seasons, the focus has changed from 200-foot dominance to point-getting and self-preservation. Recall that former coach Rick Bowness explained his quotes about a lack of pushback in Round 1 against Vegas by saying he'd seen the Jets make the same puck management mistakes in January and February.

"It's the same crap we saw in February," Bowness said after Winnipeg lost to Vegas in five games. "As soon as we were challenging for first place and teams were coming after us, we had no pushback. This series, we had no pushback. Their better players were so much better than ours, it wasn't even close."

Bowness was much happier with Winnipeg's effort against Colorado last playoffs, despite the similar result. He talked about the pride he felt in his team for their growth in that regard. It seems to me the Jets have continued down that path of growth for most of this season. There is a law of diminishing returns, of course — it's not as simple as getting 5 to 10 percent better and putting things in cruise control — but elevated standards and a greater degree of consistency have been hallmarks of Winnipeg's season.

The Jets were awful in Utah. Arniel was livid. And now it seems as though the Jets have woken up. They fended off a potent Avalanche attack on Wednesday before back-to-back 5-2 wins against Utah and Calgary. Both teams had played the night before, so let's not get carried away, but this is a massive moment to mark in Winnipeg's season. It seems coaching and management are both aware of the risks to this portion of the schedule and that the players have responded in turn.

Kupari's impact, Lowry's irreplaceable role

Adam Lowry is not expected back before February's break for the 4 Nations Face-Off. It's a big loss that could be made much worse without the two-week pause; Lowry would miss eight games if he returns after the break as opposed to roughly 15 in a regular season.

Lowry is Winnipeg's de facto No. 2 centre. He plays a shutdown role against elite competition — and does so while starting three shifts in his own end for every shift he starts in the offensive zone. It's the kind of concentrated defensive usage that lends a whoa to Lowry's 44-point pace and suggests he, Nino Niederreiter and Mason Appleton might not get enough credit for their offensive abilities. Combine all of that with the way Lowry's line drives results — hardnosed play

from end boards to end boards, commitment to driving the net, and the most ardent forechecking and backchecking of all Jets lines — and Lowry's absence should be the stuff of misery for Winnipeg as it tries to replace his contribution.

Kupari has been good — mostly — in two games between Niederreiter and Appleton in Lowry's stead.

On Friday against Utah, his line split its minutes between Nick Bjugstad's line with Jack McBain and Lawson Crouse and Logan Cooley's line with Clayton Keller and Nick Schmaltz. The Jets outshot Utah 8-1 in those minutes, tilting the ice to the effect of a 22-5 lead in shot attempts. On Sunday against Calgary, Kupari's group got a heavy dose of Mikael Backlund and Nazem Kadri; it worked hard to create Mason Appleton's goal but got beat for Kadri's goal following a defensive zone faceoff. (Kupari won the draw but it hit the linesman's skate, going straight to Jake Bean at the point.)

"We've mentioned that people have to step up with Adam Lowry being out — (Kupari) being one of them, playing between Apple and Nino," Arniel said on Saturday. "He has the skill set — he can skate, he can shoot the puck, he has those things. The other things — faceoffs, penalty kill, playing against the other team's top six — (he's doing more) than he used to."

This will be Kupari's first season without any AHL time. He's already made the leap to an everyday player and we've watched him make reads that match his footspeed. Asking him to anchor a middle six line could be a stretch come playoff time but his early success is a clear win for Winnipeg.

Perfetti explains the how of his battle-winning

Cole Perfetti scored his first career hat trick on Friday after making waves for his word choice at morning skate.

Perfetti said he wanted to be "a little prick" to play against. That word choice has gotten a lot of play but the substance behind the conversation is more interesting. At 5-foot-11, 185 pounds, Perfetti is not going to overpower his opponents along the boards or in front of the net. He needs to outwit them to do that — and that's been an area of emphasis for Winnipeg's coaching staff and of frequent conversations between Perfetti and Arniel.

"One of the things we talked about in the summer and then we talked about throughout the early part of the year is that he's not going to win (physical battles) against some of these big defencemen or some big centremen," Arniel said on Friday. "It's all about him using his stick, using his quickness or getting inside faster or anticipating being on the right side of the puck before the other guy gets there."

Perfetti gave us an example of that on his own hat trick goal.

If Nikolaj Ehlers held on to the puck at the end of Friday's game and scored himself, Perfetti would have gotten an assist. Watch the full shift before his empty net goal; Perfetti is aware of pressure in front of him and behind him during Neal Pionk's battle on the boards.

He sees Nick Schmaltz in front of him, is aware of Michael Kesselring's pressure behind him, and makes a quick play to get the puck to safety outside the zone. This isn't a "playing through hands" play but is an example of a fast read and fast hands that ensure a safe zone exit. The empty net goal is gravy — and yes, the hat trick probably has a bigger impact on his long-term

confidence — but little plays like this are part of helping the team win, even on nights pucks don't go in.

Anriel was clear in his praise — he said this is an aspect Perfetti's game that has grown a lot over his time in the NHL — but how is a smaller player supposed to win those physical battles?

"It's about getting in on (opponents') hands," Perfetti told *The Athletic* in a recent one-on-one interview. "When a guy comes to take my body out of the play — like, hit me — I can still make a play. I just have to make it before he hits me. But if a guy is into my area and on my hands and then he comes in and puts the body on me, then I don't have a play to make."

You see it all the time in other contexts: A defender swats at an opponent's stick just as they're shooting, thus disrupting the shot. Here, Perfetti is talking about playing through the opponents' hands as he battles along the wall — something he's having more success at this season, despite his lack of size.

"I've learned that it doesn't have to be a massive hit. I just have to get a stick on his stick — either on the blade or in his hands — and then get my body on the inside of his hands," Perfetti said. "I don't have to kill the guy — I just have to get a bump on him and now he's on my back and then I can make a play, beat him up the ice or whatever the case might be, I now have the advantage. I've been learning that and getting better at it, slowly."

What does that look like in a game?

Watch how Perfetti handles a battle with Anze Kopitar in the first period of their game on Jan. 10. Kopitar is bigger, stronger and a Selke Trophy winner — he has the credentials to win this moment — but Perfetti takes the puck in a blink-and-you'll-miss-it battle along the boards.

Did you catch it? As Perfetti goes into the corner with Kopitar, his first move is to swat at Kopitar's stick, knocking it out of the way. His second move is to spin off of Kopitar before he can get pinned and it works, leading to a point shot by Logan Stanley.

It's not a play you notice if you're only focused on goal and assists. It's the kind of play Perfetti is learning to make more often, and it's making him a better all-around player.

"I feel like I'm playing some of the best hockey I've played since entering the league," Perfetti said. "A lot of that has come from being around the puck more, getting in a little dirtier. Getting your nose overtop of it — that's something for me that we've talked about with the coaches. Even though I'm not the biggest guy, I can get in there, disrupt pucks, get in a good stick."

Perfetti will be measured in terms of his production. That's a reality for No. 10 draft picks. Before his hat trick on Friday, he was helping his team outshoot and outscore opponents when he was on the ice. Even though he still does get pinned sometimes, he's learning to cope with bigger opponents and that's a big development.

The first line's first slump ends with a bang-bang

Winnipeg's two games against Calgary present a perfect bookend to this item.

Matt Coronato opened the scoring for the Flames on Jan. 18 via a puck Kyle Connor couldn't get out of the Jets zone. It's the sort of play Connor has struggled with in the past but hasn't been haunted by as many times this season as last.

Connor had a few great offensive opportunities that game but couldn't score, beginning a four-game stretch with zero points and five goals against at five-on-five. It seemed for a moment as though the January doldrums had begun, with the top line's defensive shortcomings outshining its offensive brilliance for the first time all season. Gabriel Vilardi scored a goal and an assist during those four games while Scheifele managed one assist but those are not the numbers Winnipeg's top line is used to.

Sunday's rematch put an end to all that noise — and Connor was the one to kick it all off. Vilardi ate a check to get the puck to Connor in the neutral zone and then Connor scored his 27th goal in all kinds of style.

There were shifts in this game wherein Connor and Scheifele couldn't get the puck out, but Eric Comrie had answers for those. As a result, Connor's goal was just the beginning of a dominant offensive performance; he finished with a goal and two assists, Scheifele scored a goal and an assist, and Vilardi led the way with four points.

Asked about Connor's wizardry on the 1-0 goal, Vilardi put it succinctly.

"Pretty nasty," he said. "That's what he does."

Ehlers' brilliance and Perfetti's hat trick got the job done on Friday. The top line was offensively dominant on Sunday, as it's been for so much of the season. Connor, Scheifele, Ehlers and Perfetti are all on pace to set new career highs in points — and Vilardi has already done so. If Winnipeg avoids its annual February trouble, plenty of teammates will join that list.

<https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/6092161/2025/01/28/nhl-western-conference-stanley-cup-signature-strengths-fatal-flaws/>

Analyzing the West's Stanley Cup contenders: Signature strengths and fatal flaws

By Dom Luszczyszyn

Who are the league's absolute best teams? Great question, one that feels harder to answer than previous seasons.

Ask any hockey fan which five teams have the best shot at the Stanley Cup, and chances are you'll get many different answers. This year feels wide open, and that's because there is a large group of great teams, but not many teams truly separating themselves in either direction. Parity!

There's a reason for that. Every team in the seemingly large contender's circle has a unique reason they can win it all — a signature strength that sets them apart. But they also have a fatal flaw that could just as well be why it all comes crashing down. There are a plethora of reasons these teams are good or not good enough, but each team does seem to have a unique signifier compared to the other contenders — both good and bad.

The West has six teams with a chance to win the Stanley Cup north of 2.5 percent (sorry Minnesota). These are each team's signature strengths and fatal flaws.

(Data as of January 27.)

Winnipeg Jets
Stanley Cup chances: 8.5%

Signature Strength
A Hall of Fame goalie at the peak of his powers

The Jets are a good team without Connor Hellebuyck in net. This season they've shown more substance in front of him than in the past with the league's best power play and solid work at five-on-five.

But if we're talking signature strength, the Jets are still defined by having the league's best goalie. Hellebuyck is Winnipeg's cheat code, giving the Jets a chance to win every single night and almost peerless in his consistency at that level. Every season, like clockwork, Hellebuyck is right at the top. That's hard to do for a goalie; Hellebuyck is built differently.

This season might be his best work yet. During the 2022-23 season, Hellebuyck saved 0.53 goals above expected per game and upped that to 0.66 last season. This year he's managed to up the ante further with 0.88 goals saved per game, which would be the best mark in the analytics era.

Somehow, the best got better. If Hellebuyck can channel that dominance in the playoffs, the Jets can go extremely deep.

Fatal Flaw
A just good roster in front of him

Depending on goaltending as a signature strength in a playoff series is scary. Just ask these very Jets, who have been ousted in the first round in back-to-back seasons. Both series were lost in five games. Both series saw Hellebuyck uncharacteristically struggle, allowing 0.8 goals above expected per game.

No matter how great a goalie is, small-sample randomness can make him look ordinary. A great goalie can steal a series on his own, but it's imperative for the team in front of him to be good enough to not need to. In the last two playoffs, Winnipeg's skaters also weren't good enough.

That brings us to this season where the roster looks a lot better — clearly, considering they have the second-best odds in the West. The Jets are not just Hellebuyck and 18 guys.

Josh Morrissey is legitimately one of the best defensemen in the league. Mark Scheifele and Kyle Connor's stronger commitment to defense and elite power-play work has the duo looking like legit stars. Both Nikolaj Ehlers and Gabriel Vilardi have been stellar. Add some strong depth pieces to that and Winnipeg's skaters look well-positioned to make the most of another excellent Hellebuyck season.

The roster is good... but is it great enough? We're not trying to move goal posts here, but if we're talking fatal flaws, can the team's skaters stack up to the other contenders? Will Winnipeg's stars shine bright enough relative to the other superstars? Will the holes the team has (2C and the third pair) add further pressure to the stars? Despite improvement, those questions still persist.