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<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2025/01/03/heinola-finding-his-stride>

Heinola finding his stride Jets blue-liner looking to add offence to steady defensive play

By: Ken Wiebe

Ville Heinola realizes his stat line is rather inconspicuous.

Although the sample size is relatively small with only 12 games played this season, Heinola knows the heat is on for him to do more as the jockeying for position on the Winnipeg Jets defensive depth chart continues.

“I don’t have any points or anything, so now I feel like I have to start doing something (offensively) if I want to play and want to stay in the lineup,” said Heinola. “But the first thing for me is taking care of the D-zone.”

Heinola has been taking care of that part of the equation, as he’s been on the ice for six goals for and just one against during five-on-five since he returned from an ankle issue that emerged on the first day of training camp in September.

After missing nearly half of last season, being sidelined right out of the gate wasn’t exactly a recipe for success for someone trying to establish himself as an NHL regular. Heinola worked hard during rehab and is finally starting to feel like himself again.

“The body feels better every day. It finally feels like I’m finally getting the game shape back and the legs underneath me,” said Heinola. “I didn’t even play since last May, so it takes a little time to get used to all of the things and the biggest thing for me is that when I do stuff on the ice, I don’t have to think about it. It comes naturally and the last couple of games, it’s been better.

“But I feel like inside of me, there’s a lot more that I can give. I just have to find ways to produce more. You have to be patient with it.”

The Jets will host the Detroit Red Wings on Saturday as this eight-game homestand continues at Canada Life Centre.

The Red Wings have won three in a row and seem to be finding their way since Todd McLellan took over as head coach from Derek Lalonde.

After the Jets held an optional workout Friday, assistant coach Dean Chynoweth was asked about patience and how much of it is required when it comes to expectations for a prospect such as Heinola, who was chosen 20th overall in the 2019 NHL Draft.

“Wow, that’s a good question,” said Chynoweth, who runs the defence. “I would say that every team goes through injuries like this so, depending on the depth of your minor league team... We’re in a situation where we have veteran NHL players that are the depth guys, so that made that transition probably easier, to bring those guys in and out that have NHL experience, than bringing up a young guy from the Moose that hasn’t played yet or is just starting out with it.

“But patience, that’s your call. I’ve got lots of patience.”

The same hasn’t been said for the fan base when it comes to Heinola’s development.

Because he made the Jets unexpectedly out of training camp in the fall of 2019 as an 18 year old and suited up for eight NHL games before he was sent to the Manitoba Moose of the American Hockey League and eventually returned to play the rest of the season in Finland, Heinola’s timeline got skewed.

Then the combination of the pandemic and the original ankle injury he suffered in the final preseason game of 2023 set things back further.

Although he’s still only 23 years old, it feels like Heinola should have established himself as an NHL regular by now.

That’s not really relevant to how this chapter of the story will unfold.

Even with Dylan Samberg (broken foot) and Haydn Fleury (lower body) sidelined with injuries, Heinola is trying to show he deserves more ice time and to be in the lineup regularly.

“I know my role on the third pairing. We don’t want to get scored on,” said Heinola, who has 47 games of NHL experience on his resume. “We’ll try to help as much as we can on the offensive side of things. You just have to make the right reads, as to when to play offence and when to maybe not jump or take the extra risk. You just have to know when is the right time to do that.”

This isn’t an easy balance to strike for any defenceman, especially an offensive one who has thrived on the power play at previous levels, but isn’t seeing any special-teams duty now.

“It’s hard. If you do too much, it’s probably going to cost you,” said Heinola. “When you know you can do it, it’s a green light to do it. It’s just finding the right time to do it and that’s probably the learning experience for me.”

No doubt that learning will continue, though Heinola knows there’s a level of urgency attached to his situation when you consider Samberg is inching closer to returning to the lineup.

Once that happens, there’s one fewer spot in the regular rotation available to him.

“When you’re injured as a young guy, you lose that development time, and you’ve got to find a way to get it back,” said Chynoweth. “We have to do a good job in trying to prepare him and get him ready for those situations. So, he’s been in and out at different times.

“There’s been stretches that have been good, and other stretches where I’m sure he’d like to be better. But that’s part of the learning process, especially when you miss that amount of time.”

When it comes to trying to make up for lost time, Dylan Coghlan did a great job of jumping back into the Jets’ lineup earlier this week when he suited up in consecutive NHL games for the first time this season.

“I honestly felt like my game was right where it needed to be and I’m trying to show (Jets head coach Scott Arniel) that I can do it every night,” said Coghlan. “I just trust myself and trust the people around me. That’s huge too, to be able to trust your teammates and having them know

that I'm going to make that play and me knowing that they're going to be in the right area for me to be able to make the play."

<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2025/01/03/toews-comeback-in-the-works>

Toews comeback in the works

Three-time Stanley Cup champ would be a great fit on hometown Jets

By: Ken Wiebe and Mike McIntyre

There's no doubt that Jonathan Toews is serious about this comeback attempt.

The Winnipegger and former captain of the Chicago Blackhawks recently posted about his holistic healing journey on Instagram and then shared a more in-depth perspective in an interview with GQ.

Now comes the revelation from Frank Seravalli of Daily Faceoff that the three-time Stanley Cup winner is drawing interest from multiple teams, including the Winnipeg Jets, Colorado Avalanche and Toronto Maple Leafs.

Should Toews continue to progress on the health front, surely there will be others to reach out to Pat Brisson, as the 36-year-old centre could bring a lot to the table to a contending team.

For example, a team such as the Edmonton Oilers, who advanced to Game 7 of the Stanley Cup final last spring, could also use someone with Toews' skillset and leadership.

Is he a sure thing at this point? Of course not. Toews hasn't seen NHL action since facing the Philadelphia Flyers on April 13 of 2023, so that's an awful lot of time between games.

Seravalli, however, reported that Toews has started skating again.

Having chronicled a good chunk of Toews' journey since he was chosen third-overall by the Blackhawks in 2006, there's no way he's pushing himself like this unless he thinks that he's going to be able to find a way to make it work.

Toews is a highly-motivated individual and you can be sure that he's not happy with how his time with the Blackhawks ended, with both he and Patrick Kane being told they weren't really welcome to be part of the team's rebuild.

No team that signs Toews would need him to be someone who puts the team on his back, but there's little doubt he could at least be a complementary player — and probably more.

The Jets just so happen to be in the market for a second-line centre and bringing in someone with Toews' pedigree makes sense on a number of levels. He would provide secondary scoring, can be used in all situations and is fantastic in the faceoff circle. Having 137 Stanley Cup playoff games on his resume to go along with a Conn Smythe Trophy is an obvious bonus.

There could be a few twists and turns left when it comes to how this story eventually plays out, but having his hometown team among those in his pursuit of Toews' services only adds to the intrigue.

Let's see how this plays out in the coming weeks.

The envelopes please

With the NHL season hitting or nearing the midway point this weekend, it's time to hand out the NHL midseason awards.

The Jets led the NHL in wins and points as the calendar flipped to 2025 and that will be reflected in several of these categories.

Since there is still half a season left to be played, you can expect other strong candidates to emerge, but this is where things stand so far, as Free Press hockey writers Ken Wiebe and Mike McIntyre weigh in with their winners.

Hart Trophy

WIEBE: Connor Hellebuyck, Winnipeg Jets

MCINTYRE: Nathan MacKinnon, Colorado Avalanche

There are plenty of strong candidates in this field, but the Jets' workhorse goalie is making a compelling case, not only for inclusion, but to be at the head of the class.

Hellebuyck has started 31 of the Jets 40 games and leads the NHL in virtually every statistical category. Prior to allowing four goals on Thursday in an overtime loss to the Anaheim Ducks, his goals-against average was an even 2.00. Even after a rare off night, Hellebuyck is tops in GAA (2.06), save percentage (.927), shutouts (five) and wins (24).

He's on the verge of becoming the 30th goalie in NHL history to record 300 wins and more than 40 shutouts (he has 42) and is also the league leader in goals-saved above expected (23.9, according to Money Puck).

MacKinnon, the reigning Hart winner, is making a compelling case to go back-to-back as he leads the league in scoring with 64 points (an eight-point cushion). Sure, he's got Mikko Rantanen and Cale Makar to help his cause, but there's no question MacKinnon is the driving force of an Avalanche club that has shaken off a sluggish start and once again looks like a Cup contender.

Connor McDavid of the Edmonton Oilers is always in the mix and while he's still playing at an extremely high level, he dealt with an early injury and teammate Leon Draisaitl finds himself slightly ahead of the competition at this point.

Others in the running include Nikita Kucherov of the Tampa Bay Lightning and Jack Eichel of the Vegas Golden Knights.

Norris Trophy

WIEBE: Cale Makar, Colorado Avalanche

MCINTYRE: Cale Makar, Colorado Avalanche

It's hard to argue that there's a more impactful blue-liner in the NHL right now than Makar, who leads all D-men in points with 48 and is back to defending the way he did when he won his first Norris Trophy in 2021-22.

Josh Morrissey of the Jets was Ken's pre-season selection and there's no doubt that he's still very much in the running with the likes of Vancouver Canucks captain Quinn Hughes and Zach Werenski, who is having a renaissance season with the Columbus Blue Jackets.

Morrissey is fourth in scoring among defencemen (36 points in 40 games) and has been leaned on heavily as the Jets have been without Dylan Samberg and Haydn Fleury. Morrissey's two-way game continues to grow and his inclusion on the penalty kill this season should bolster his candidacy down the stretch.

Vezina Trophy

WIEBE: Connor Hellebuyck, Winnipeg Jets

MCINTYRE: Connor Hellebuyck, Winnipeg Jets

This is one of the easier decisions on the docket — and not because goaltending around the NHL has been poor this season.

To this point, Hellebuyck stands head and shoulders above the rest and is primed to take a run at his third Vezina.

Jacob Markstrom's move to the New Jersey Devils has been a good one and he's provided stability between the pipes, with a 2.15 GAA and three shutouts.

Mackenzie Blackwood's trade to the Avalanche could make him a dark-horse candidate during the second half and one can't ignore the impressive bounceback season for Filip Gustavsson of the Minnesota Wild (2.28 GAA, .924 save percentage).

Prior to his knee injury, Anthony Stolarz was making a strong case for inclusion as well and it will be interesting to see how he fares once he returns to action. Given how much time he's already missed, it will be difficult for him to be a finalist.

Juuse Saros of the Nashville Predators was Ken's pre-season choice and while he's done his part, a slow start by the team that won the off-season has him on the outside looking in among the candidates here.

Jack Adams

WIEBE: Scott Arniel, Winnipeg Jets

MCINTYRE: Spencer Carbery, Washington Capitals

In his first NHL head coaching gig since 2012, Arniel has done an excellent job of navigating things during the first half of the season.

After taking over from Rick Bowness, Arniel has ensured the Jets remain committed to being sound in the defensive zone and he's helped improve both special teams units — including watching a power play that finished in the bottom third of the NHL last season improve to first overall.

Carberry is very much in the conversation, especially for how his team was able to stay in that Metropolitan race while playing without Alex Ovechkin for an extended period of time.

Ken's pre-season choice was Sheldon Keefe of the Devils and he's got his team in the thick of things in the Metropolitan Division in his first season with his new club.

One of our biggest pet peeves with this award is that it occasionally discounts the coach of a team that was expected to do well this season, so don't discount the likes of Bruce Cassidy of the Vegas Golden Knights, Craig Berube of the Maple Leafs and Paul Maurice of the defending Stanley Cup champions.

Jon Cooper of the Lightning and Travis Green of the Ottawa Senators are also in the mix.

Calder Trophy

WIEBE: Macklin Celebrini, San Jose Sharks

MCINTYRE: Macklin Celebrini, San Jose Sharks

He's still chasing Ken's pre-season pick Matvei Michkov of the Philadelphia Flyers in the points race (29 to 27), but the first-overall pick in 2024 has crept ahead by invigorating the Sharks team with his dynamic play.

Honourable mention to Montreal Canadiens D-man Lane Hutson. Mike's pre-season pick of Logan Stankoven of the Dallas stars has struggled in his first full season, with just 18 points (4G, 14A) in 35 games.

Lady Byng

WIEBE: Sean Monahan, Columbus Blue Jackets

MCINTYRE: Anze Kopitar, Los Angeles Kings

You'll have to excuse Ken for a choice that is somewhat sentimental, given the horrible circumstances of the tragedy involving Monahan's best friend Johnny Gaudreau and his brother, Matthew.

Monahan exudes the qualities that this award is handed out for and to see him do it with the grace he has shown makes him a natural choice here.

Kopitar, who never seems to age, has taken just one minor penalty in 37 games while also being a shutdown centre who has 39 points. That's impressive. Brayden Point (31 games, 43 points, two penalty minutes) is right there, too.

Jack Hughes of the Devils was Ken's pre-season pick and he's very much in the race, along with Eichel, Sam Reinhart of the Panthers, Mitch Marner of the Maple Leafs and Makar.

Selke Trophy

WIEBE: Aleksander Barkov, Florida Panthers

MCINTYRE: Anze Kopitar, Los Angeles Kings

There are many strong defensive players in the NHL, but there's no doubt that the Panthers captain sets the standard.

He was Ken's pre-season pick and he's currently the favourite, with Kopitar and Anthony Cirelli of the Lightning under consideration.

Winnipeg Sun

<https://winnipeg.sun.com/sports/hockey/nhl/winnipeg-jets/nobody-gives-a-crap-jets-keep-reminding-its-playoffs-that-matter>

'Nobody gives a crap': Jets keep reminding it's playoffs that matter

By Paul Friesen

Swallow the hurt, learn from it – and reload.

Thursday night's blown late lead and subsequent overtime loss to Anaheim is not how the Winnipeg Jet wanted to kick off eight straight games at home.

But a Saturday night date with Detroit doesn't allow for much licking of wounds.

Or, as Nik Ehlers put it the next day: "Sh— happens."

"You move on," Ehlers said. "That's the beauty of the schedule that we have. About the only positive."

It's forced forgetting. The 2-0 first-period lead that disappeared, the Ducks' tying goal with 1:50 to go, their overtime winner – all erased by game tape of the Red Wings.

"I don't think you can dwell on anything in this league," defenceman Dylan DeMelo said. "Just because we have so many games, you've got to be able to not necessarily forget it and just totally dismiss it, but understand the lesson, be able to move on and try to be better from it."

"That's a game we feel got away from us, and we should have locked down."

Maybe the only thing worth carrying around from it is the anger.

"As long as you're using it in the right way," DeMelo said. "When you start to try to do too much or get outside of yourself, that's when you get in trouble."

So the Jets will just try to be themselves again, a more airtight version of the team that's put up more wins (27) than everyone else in the NHL.

Like Anaheim, who had Jacob Trouba in the lineup, the Red Wings will feature some former Jets, in forward Andrew Copp and defenceman Ben Chiarot.

Ehlers was planning to have dinner with Copp on Friday night, just like a few others got together with Trouba on Wednesday night.

Squaring off against former teammates ramps things up a little, they admit.

"Oh, it's fun. They're guys that I came into the league with," Ehlers said of Copp and Chiarot. "We miss having those guys around."

For two-and-a-half hours, though, it's less than friendly.

“On the ice there’s no friends – you’re trying to beat them,” DeMelo said of former teammates in general. “And sometimes there is a little extra motivation to try and stick it to them.”

The feeling is mutual.

Like Anaheim, the Red Wings may be another team buried in the standings. But nothing’s more fun than knocking off one of the teams at the top.

Those dinners the night before games touch on a lot more things than just hockey.

When the conversation does get around to wins and losses, I sometimes wonder if players on inferior or rebuilding teams express envy at how well the Jets are doing.

“No one has said, ‘Oh my god, you’re so good,’” Ehlers said. “We’re doing pretty well. We’re not where we want to be, yet. We’ve got 42 games to go. At the end of the day, it doesn’t matter how well you do in the regular season. Nobody gives a crap.”

It seems more and more the conversations I’m having with players eventually bring out a similar sentiment: none of this success will mean anything if the Jets don’t do something in the playoffs.

Most wins in early January?

They’d trade that for at least four or eight or even 12 in April and May.

“We’ve been in this position before and lost in the first round,” Ehlers said. “It all depends on how you play as a team. There’s so many scenarios that you can pull out, from St. Louis, that were not very good until Christmas and then they make the playoffs and win the Stanley Cup. You’ve got to find the right time to play as a team and play well together.”

Until then, this is simply laying the foundation. Recognizing the potential pitfalls, establishing the right habits and perfecting the systems that will carry them to their final destination.

“We have the system, we have the players to do it,” Ehlers said. “And it’s just a matter of getting the mentality completely right and getting everyone to doing the same things.”

That includes burying a tough loss and moving on.

Tied after two, it’s a coin flip

Closing out close games is something the Jets could actually be a lot better at.

Sure, their record when leading after two periods is a sparkling 19-0-1. But when tied after two, they’re just 7-6-1, the overtime loss to Anaheim the latest example.

“I had no idea,” DeMelo said of that stat. “Each team tries to play the same, no matter the score. At least you try to. I guess if it becomes a trend it might be something to think about.”

Ehlers was no more adept at putting his finger on this particular puzzler.

“You’ve got to ask smarter people than me,” he said. “That’s one of those if we had the answer obviously we wouldn’t be at 50-50.”

The last word

Assistant coach Dean Chynoweth, who handles the defence, was talking about the player rotation on the blue line that's seen Ville Heinola, Logan Stanley and Dylan Coghlan in and out of the lineup.

Asked how much credit the coaches get for making that work, Chynoweth didn't blink.

"We only take credit when we lose," he said.

Sportsnet.ca

<https://www.sportsnet.ca/nhl/article/why-timing-is-key-consideration-in-potential-jonathan-toews-nhl-comeback/>

Why timing is key consideration in potential Jonathan Toews NHL comeback

By Sportsnet Staff

Three-time Stanley Cup champion Jonathan Toews made waves this week when he expressed his desire to attempt an NHL comeback.

Toews, who hasn't played in the NHL since the 2022-23 season, said during an interview with GQ published Sunday that he'd like to try to play in the league once again.

Toews made it clear wants to return, but is the interest mutual from NHL teams and their front offices?

To fully gauge the interest in Toews, the timing of his potential comeback is a key consideration in the whole equation, Sportsnet's Elliotte Friedman said on Friday's edition of the 32 Thoughts: The Podcast.

"The biggest question that's going to be: does he want to play this year or not?" Friedman said. "One of the things that happens is that if you play in any other league, you have to clear waivers, which could make the whole thing really interesting, but I just assume wherever he signs with, that's where he would go. That's one of the things everyone is wondering, Are we really talking about this season?"

If Toews were to play in the NHL this season, he would need to be on a team's reserve list by the March 7 trade deadline to suit up in the post-season.

Aside from the timing, and whether Toews wants to try to return in the 2024-25 campaign, there is no doubt teams are interested in what the two-time Olympic gold medallist could potentially bring to forward group.

"I think there is a lot of interest to talk to (Toews) and see what he's thinking, I just don't know how many championship-contender teams are going to want to do this this year," Friedman said. "That's still what's to be determined. But people are really curious, there's no question about him, there's a lot of respect for what he's done in his past, and if he feels healthy, people are going to look at it."

Daily Faceoff's Frank Seravalli listed three teams he thought could be interested in Toews' services during a Thursday appearance on Sports on Prime Canada.

"One of them is the Toronto Maple Leafs: a third-line centre has been on Brad Treliving's wishlist all season long," Seravalli said. "The other would be the Winnipeg Jets, the hometown team for Jonathan Toews. And the third would be the Colorado Avalanche, in desperate need of a third-line centre."

Toews missed the 2020-21 bubble season while recovering from COVID-19 and chronic immune response syndrome. He returned to play 124 more games in the following two seasons but announced in August 2023 that he was stepping away from hockey to give himself "the time and space to fully heal and enjoy life to the fullest once again."

The 36-year-old remained out of the spotlight until November, when he shared on Instagram that he had undergone an Ayurvedic Panchakarma detox in India. In the GQ interview, he discussed in depth the many layers of that detox, which included painful massages, meditative yoga and daily laxatives, among other treatments.

"Toews detailed his five-week healing journey in India as he's been suffering from chronic inflammatory response disorder. He's feeling the best that he's had in years," Seravalli said. "I can tell you that, at this point, that Jonathan Toews has indeed resumed skating, he's feeling the best that he has in years and he's also back down to his playing weight."

In his most recent season in the NHL, Toews scored 15 goals and recorded 16 assists in 53 games with the Chicago Blackhawks in 2022-23.

<https://www.sportsnet.ca/nhl/article/jets-storylines-to-watch-in-2025-can-perfetti-become-a-driving-force/>

Jets storylines to watch in 2025: Can Perfetti become a driving force?

By Jacob Stoller

WINNIPEG — Rewind to the fall of 2023, when the Winnipeg Jets locked up Mark Scheifele and Connor Hellebuyck.

The shocking rabbit-out-of-a-hat extensions silenced any chatter of a rebuild — something that many in this market had yearned for. And given the comments that came out of the joint press conference where the two put ink to paper, it was clear that Scheifele and Hellebuyck believed in what GM Kevin Cheveldayoff was selling. That Winnipeg could be a perennial contender with this core.

But retaining Scheifele and Hellebuyck was just one (giant) piece of the puzzle.

There's other factors — both internal and external — that'll define whether this team can establish (and sustain) itself as a legitimate contender. And a lot of those are going to come to a head during the 2025 calendar year.

We very well could be approaching the most high-stakes 12 months this franchise has seen in quite some time.

So, evaluating from that lens, let's take a look at four things that will define the 2025 calendar year for this franchise.

Will Winnipeg acquire (useful) size on backend?

A lot of people seem to think Logan Stanley is only in the lineup because of where he was drafted.

And while there's no denying the six-foot-seven defender has gotten all this leeway over the years due to him being drafted in the first round, that's not why he's in the lineup. His size is.

Winnipeg has one of the NHL's smallest blue-lines and their biggest minute-munchers — Josh Morrissey, Neal Pionk and Dylan DeMelo — make up an average height of six feet and 0.27 inches. That's the second smallest top-three in the league. Come playoff time, you're asking for trouble if you're rolling out a top-four that has just one player (Dylan Samberg) that's taller than six-foot-one.

When we talk about an upgrade on Stanley in the lineup, we're not talking about leveling up the bottom-pair. We're talking about a player who boasts a physical component to their game but, contrary to Stanley, can also shoulder top-four usage and the tough assignments that come with it while also being a presence physically.

With Morrissey and Samberg manning the top two left-handed spots, any reinforcements would need to be right-handed. Now, that's a tall task, given that right-shot defencemen are always a highly coveted commodity. And for a franchise like Winnipeg, that hardly stands a chance at resigning rentals, they can't afford to pony up a plethora of assets for a stop-gap option. They need a medium to long-term solution.

The sooner Cheveldayoff can find that, the better. Otherwise, he'll have to go through the merry-go-round of trading a first annually to fill the team's gaping hole. Or, see his team get outmuscled in the post-season.

Preparing for life without Ehlers

After 10 seasons in Winnipeg, it's hard to foresee a world where Nikolaj Ehlers doesn't test the waters in Free Agency.

Be it his power-play usage, or linemates at even strength — Ehlers has always been second fiddle here. Even with his promotion to the top power-play unit this year, the Danish forward is logging a career-low 15:26 minutes per night.

Part of that can be attributed to Winnipeg's second line being such a black hole offensively. According to MoneyPuck.com, the Jets second line of Ehlers, Vladislav Namestnikov and Cole Perfetti has generated 2.14 expected goals per 60 minutes — that ranks 50th out of the 54 forward lines that have played at least 150 minutes together this season.

Teams will be lining up for the speedy winger, who's on pace for a career-high 75 points. Many of which will be promising him first-line deployment, too.

Winnipeg needs a contingency plan for life without Ehlers. Naturally, all eyes are going to turn to Brad Lambert and Nikita Chibrikov.

Lambert, 21, undoubtedly has the most upside of the two and while he went scoreless in four NHL games this year — his footspeed could conceivably soften the blow of Ehlers' departure.

Chirbikov, 21, is capable of being an everyday NHL player. Not only did the Russian forward provide a jolt to the Jets top-six in four games this year — registering two goals and three points — but he proved his worth away from the puck with his hard-nosed forechecking and intensity.

The thing is, even if both players take a step forward, assuming that one, let alone both, can solidify themselves as top-six forwards — ones that are capable of playing on a second-line of a contending team — is naive.

When sportsnet.ca talked to Scott Arniel back in November for a 1-on-1 conversation, the Jets coach spoke about the importance of not spoon feeding young players opportunities.

“If you look at some of the good teams around the league, they've had success because they've been able to mix their young guys in gradually,” Arniel said. “They've been able to let them grow.”

As hard as it may be — given the team's struggles to sign free agents and limited trade ammo — Cheveldayoff may have no choice but to go out and shop for a top-six forward.

Can Cole Perfetti become a driver?

Cole Perfetti is the x-factor to the Jets rounding out their top-six.

Quietly, Perfetti's game has really dropped off over the last calendar year. Around this time last year — during his mid-season press conference on January 11, 2024 — Cheveldayoff gave a really interesting statement about Perfetti and how the evolution of a young player is so key to a team's growth. At the time, Perfetti had recorded 29 points in his first 40 games and was coming off a three-point outing against the Columbus Blue Jackets.

Cheveldayoff conveyed his message through a story about Kyle Connor's formative years.

“I remember talking to Paul Maurice when Kyle Connor was going up and down and up and down up and down,” Cheveldayoff. “We sent him down at the beginning of the year and I said to Paul, ‘Ok Paul, we'll send him down. But, I'm going to tell you right now, if this team is going to do anything. It's going to be because a guy like Kyle Connor goes from here, to here, over the course of time.”

Perfetti's production tailed off after those comments, with the five-foot-11 forward recording just nine points in his final 31 games. He was a healthy scratch during that stretch, while also being relegated to press box duty for four of the team's five playoff games.

This past summer, when Perfetti was a restricted free agent, there was a narrative that the Jets wronged him in last year's playoffs. And that surely was Perfetti's camp's stance during his contract negotiation. But as we approach the midway point of the 2024-25 season, we're starting to see why this franchise wasn't gung ho about signing Perfetti long-term.

He's taken two steps back this year.

While Perfetti's raw totals — seven goals and 23 points through 40 games — has him on pace for a career-high 47 points, just 12 of his points have come during five-on-five play. And when

you dig a little deeper, his underlying numbers paint a picture of an underwhelming player. One that's a non-factor most nights. Just like the second half of last season.

The eye test backs those figures up.

Perfetti's two main weaknesses — size and speed — are two of the most coveted characteristics in a player. And his strengths — hockey IQ and playmaking— haven't been potent enough to offset his shortcomings.

The more you watch Perfetti, the more you start to question how you could reasonably expect him to produce in tight-checking playoff games. His lack of explosiveness is one thing, but really the crux of that aforementioned conclusion lies in his struggles to get into the 'guts' of the ice to create offence.

And while a lot of people in this market like to treat the baby-faced forward with kid gloves, he just turned 23. It's time for the training wheels to come off.

If the 2020 10th-overall selection can't amplify his game down the stretch, Winnipeg's in real trouble. The cupboards are bare as it is.

Can they make Kyle Connor a Jet for life?

If Kyle Connor walks, the validity of Winnipeg's cup pursuit goes out the window.

That's why when July 1 strikes — when Connor is eligible for an extension — Cheveldayoff's first call will likely be to his star winger before anything else.

Connor has been the epitome of consistency for this franchise.

Since the 2019-20 season, only Auston Matthews, David Pastrnak and Connor McDavid have scored more even strength goals than Connor (144). And the 28-year-old has elevated his game to a whole new level this year. Not only does his 52 points in 40 games place him sixth in NHL scoring — putting him on pace for over 100 points — but Connor's elevated his defensive game and become a trusted penalty killer for the Jets.

It's a no-brainer that Winnipeg will do everything they can to get him back. But will Connor want to stay?

The odds seem in the Jets favour. Not only has Connor made it known that he's not bothered by Winnipeg's climate — in fact, he's an outdoorsy person and seems to enjoy a lot of what the city offers, even when it's cold — but he's got strong bonds with the team's core. Scheifele is his longtime running mate and a huge driver behind his success. Hellebuyck is also one of his closest friends on the team.

This time around, contrary to when the Jets were trying to sign Scheifele and Hellebuyck, the Jets have a lot more bargaining power when pitching a superstar.

But the Jets can't get into their own way. They shouldn't blink twice to give Connor more than \$8.5 million on his next deal, even if it surpasses Hellebuyck and Schiefele and completely mucks up their 'internal cap.'

Ultimately, there really shouldn't be any hesitation to give Connor a blank cheque. But the ball isn't entirely in the Jets court.

<https://www.sportsnet.ca/nhl/article/friday-four-jets-connor-hellebuyck-making-case-for-hart/>

Friday Four: Jets' Connor Hellebuyck making case for Hart

by Michael Amato

The Friday Four is a collection of thoughts and information on some intriguing player storylines from around the NHL. On deck this week is:

- Hellebuyck deserves to be in the Hart conversation
- The future is now for Cooley
- Blackwood a perfect fit for the Avs
- Roslovic stepping up in Carolina

Connor Hellebuyck, Winnipeg Jets

On the surface, there wasn't anything particularly special about the Anaheim Ducks beating the Winnipeg Jets 4-3 on Thursday night. Just an underdog catching the Jets on an off night in early January. The kind of upset that happens dozens of times across the league throughout the season and something you wouldn't typically think twice about.

The only unusual thing was the play of Connor Hellebuyck. The Jets goalie has been so good this year that when he has just a mediocre performance, it really stands out. Hellebuyck has been incredibly dominant in 2024-25 and elevated his game even higher than the lofty standards we're used to seeing from him. Perhaps even to an MVP level.

It's extremely rare for a goaltender to win the Hart Trophy.

Carey Price was the last goalie to do it in 2015, but he was only the second in the 21st century. In fact, only three netminders have won since 1961-62 when Jacques Plante captured the Hart. That said, there have been a handful of netminder nominees in the last 25 years, though winners have been scarce.

Part of that is because the Vezina Trophy already crowns the league's best goaltender and the Norris is for the league's best defenceman, so you need to have a really exceptional season to work your way into the conversation when there are a handful of stud forwards exceeding 100 points annually. There's still a long way to go in the 2024-25 campaign, but Hellebuyck may very well be having one of those seasons.

The Jets goaltender has been spectacular this year, sporting a 24-5-2 record with a ridiculous .927 save percentage and a goals-against average of 2.06. He already has five shutouts and we're barely into January. To put that in perspective, the league leader in shutouts in each of the previous two seasons had only six and Hellebuyck is one off that mark with still well over three months to go.

Those are Hellebuyck's numbers in the generic categories we grade goalies in, but let's look a little deeper. Hellebuyck also leads all goaltenders with 26.5 goals saved above expected, nearly eight goals saved better than the next closest goalie. Winnipeg has also made it tougher on Hellebuyck this season. The Jets rank 21st in shots allowed per game in 2024-25 and 23rd in high danger chances against, compared to 11th and 18th, respectively, a year ago. Hellebuyck was excellent in 2023-24 but he's been even better this season under tougher conditions.

The 31-year-old also has been incredibly consistent. Of his 31 starts, 24 of them have been quality with only seven games coming with a save percentage below .900. He's also allowed more than three goals just four times all year. That's been critically important lately when the Jets lost defenceman Dylan Samberg to injury in late November. Samberg is a key member of the Jets blue line, averaging more than 20 minutes per night and leading the team in short-handed ice time. Hellebuyck has remained rock solid without Samberg, though, posting 11 quality starts in 12 appearances during the month of December.

Let's also not forget Hellebuyck has done all this after the Jets endured a coaching change this off-season. Rick Bowness retired at the end of last year and Scott Arniel went from an assistant to head coach. That's not a seismic shift, but still a significant adjustment and many felt Winnipeg may take a step back this season. Instead, the Jets sits first overall in the NHL in the standings, as well as first in goal differential and second in points percentage. All in no small part thanks to Hellebuyck.

As good as Hellebuyck has played, there are a number of players that deserve consideration if you had to vote for the Hart today. Martin Necas got off to a torrid start, Kirill Kaprizov is arguably a top-five player in the league, Quinn Hughes has taken his game to an even higher level and Mitch Marner has been unbelievable with Auston Matthews sidelined. Then there's usual suspects Connor McDavid, Nikita Kucherov, Leon Draisaitl and Nathan MacKinnon, all of whom could make a case to claim the award. It won't be easy for Hellebuyck to overcome all these talents, but he does have an argument that he's been the most dominant at his position.

Both Igor Shesterkin and Sergei Bobrovsky have been nominated for the Hart in the past 10 years, but Hellebuyck feels like the goaltending fraternity's best shot to win in quite some time. Hellebuyck leads all goalies in games played, wins, saves, save percentage, shots faced, goals against, shutouts, goals saved above expected and minutes played. If he can guide the Jets to a Presidents' Trophy, that will only bolster his case.

If he keeps playing like this, it's going to be very hard to leave Hellebuyck's name off the Hart ballot.

The Athletic

<https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/6030146/2025/01/04/nhl-grades-teams-midway-season/>

NHL report cards: Grading every team's season as we near the midway point

The Athletic NHL Staff

The NHL season is nearing its midway point, with all 32 teams playing between 35 and 41 games. By now, we generally know what each team is and isn't and whether the rest of the season should be focused on title contention, short-term progress or the long-term future.

What better time to break out our red pens and hand out some grades? That's exactly what The Athletic did this week when it asked its NHL staff to assign a grade to every team with expectations in mind. You'll definitely want to show some of these to your parents (or general managers). Others ... maybe not.

Winnipeg Jets: A+

When the season began, I thought last year's 110 points were out of reach but that an improved power play could make up for any trouble at even strength. I thought the Jets would be a playoff team, but the chance of finishing first in the standings is beyond my expectations. Connor Hellebuyck is having another fantastic, Vezina Trophy-caliber season, Davis Payne's power play is firing on all cylinders, and Winnipeg's top skaters — Mark Scheifele, Josh Morrissey, Kyle Connor, Nikolaj Ehlers and Gabriel Vilardi — are all playing like game breakers. Jets fans know second-half slides all too well, but for now, this season is beyond most fans' wildest dreams. — Murat Ates

Global Winnipeg

<https://globalnews.ca/news/10941341/analysis-winnipeg-jets-reality-check-ducks/>

ANALYSIS: Jets get a reality check after 2nd loss to Anaheim Ducks

By John Shannon CJOB

For the second time in two weeks, Troy Terry's last shot on goal defeated the Winnipeg Jets.

The bigger picture about the Anaheim Ducks' victory Thursday is that they are pointed in the right direction after years of wallowing at the bottom of the Western Conference. But it's also an indication of a real trend throughout the NHL. The gap between the best teams in this league and the worst teams is as narrow as it has ever been. Just look at the trouble San Jose gave the Jets 16 days ago, and Tampa last night, too.

The NHL is faster and deeper than it ever has been. The talent pool of players is so good when you consider the skill level of even the youngest players is exceptional. Bedard, Celebrini, Carlson, Hutson, Geekie and Michkov are all names that will echo through the league for more than a decade.

There was a time during the regular season schedule when any of the better teams could coast to a victory. But that just isn't the case in this 32-team league. Every night is up for grabs, and even a team as good as the Jets can't afford any lapses.

So the reality of losing twice in recent weeks to the Anaheim Ducks really isn't that bad. Disappointing? For sure. Embarrassing? Not anymore.

Thursday night's overtime loss was a reminder to everyone that as good as the Jets are, there are no easy games. And as this long home stand starts, it should be a warning to everyone you can't take any teams lightly. Every team skates well. Most have depth, and all are well-coached.

The docket reads Detroit, Nashville, Los Angeles, Colorado, Vancouver, Seattle, Calgary. The Jets have more points than all of them. But when the puck drops, that doesn't matter.

Welcome to 2025, and welcome to the NHL. Where anyone can beat anyone, on any given day.