

## **Winnipeg Free Press**

<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/sports/2025/01/05/jets-prospects-yagers-speed-playmaking-on-display-for-canada>

### ***Jets prospects: Yager's speed, playmaking on display for Canada***

By: Mike McIntyre

It's mostly about the present for the Winnipeg Jets, who sit near the top of the NHL standings with 56 points through 41 games this season.

But the organization currently has 22 drafted and developing prospects playing in various leagues and levels who could one day work their way up to the big club. Ten of them are currently with the Manitoba Moose, one is in the ECHL while the other 11 are scattered around the Canadian Hockey League, college and European clubs.

To help you keep tabs, we'll check in on the kids each month over the course of the season.

Don't pin Canada's disappointing showing at the world juniors on its captain.

Brayden Yager certainly wasn't an issue, as proven by the fact he was selected as the team's top forward at the conclusion of the event. The 20-year-old Jets prospect had three assists in five games and was dominant in the faceoff circle while winning plenty of puck battles and showing off his speed and playmaking abilities.

Jets prospect Brayden Yager was Canada's captain at the world juniors with three assists in five games before a quarterfinal exit to Czechia.

No doubt failing to reach the medal round for a second straight year will sting on a personal level for Yager, who won't be eligible for the tournament next year due to his age.

"It sucks," he told a horde of media in Ottawa earlier this week following a quarterfinal elimination at the hands of Czechia.

On a Canadian team that couldn't get out of its own way by taking penalty after penalty, it's worth noting Yager didn't spend a single second in the sin bin.

"There's nothing we can change about it. There's no point in really dwelling on it," said Yager, who was asked about the pride he took in having the "C" stitched on his sweater above the Maple Leaf.

"It's really special to be able to represent our country and to be part of the leadership group," he said.

Now, the focus turns to finishing strong with his Western Hockey League club, which got off to a good start on Saturday as Yager scored his 13th goal of the year in his return to action.

The Saskatoon product now has 35 points (13G, 22A) in 24 games this year split between the Moose Jaw Warriors (21 games) and the Lethbridge Hurricanes (three games), who traded for him in December as they load up for what they hope will be a run to the Memorial Cup.

#### WHL:

-F *Markus Lopenen* (5th round, 2024): It's been a solid rookie season for the 18-year-old Finnish forward. Lopenen has 23 points (10G, 13A) through 36 games with the Victoria Royals.

-F *Connor Levis* (7th round, 2023): The 20-year-old winger is starting to heat up and now has 33 points (14G, 19A) in 35 games this year with the Vancouver Giants — including 12 points (6G, 6A) in 10 December contests.

#### OHL:

-F *Kevin He* (4th round, 2024): He had a terrific December which included signing his pro contract with the Jets and putting up 16 points (5G, 11A) in 10 games with the Niagara Ice Dogs. The 18-year-old from Beijing is up to 49 points (25G, 24A) in 35. That's only four fewer points than he had all last year — in 29 fewer games.

-F *Kieron Walton* (6th round, 2024): Like He, the 18-year-old might prove to be an absolute steal. The 6-6, 216 pound centre is now third-overall in league scoring with 62 points (23G, 39A) in 35 games. That includes an incredible December in which he had 19 points (7G, 12A) in eight games with the Sudbury Wolves.

-F *Colby Barlow* (1st round, 2023): The 19-year-old just hasn't really hit his stride this year, with 29 points (19G, 10A) in 35 games with the Oshawa Generals. A rough first training camp with the Jets, a snub by the World Junior selection committee and a step backwards in offensive production — he had 58 points in 50 games last year — is not ideal.

-F *Jacob Julien* (5th round, 2023): After posting 78 points in 67 games with the London Knights last year, Julien has just 23 points (8G, 15A) in 37 games this year.

#### COLLEGE:

-F *Zach Nehring* (3rd round, 2023): The 19-year-old from North Dakota has been a bit streaky in his first college season at Western Michigan but had a solid December (2G, 3A in four games) and is now up to 12 points (5G, 7A) in 18 games.

-D *Garrett Brown* (4th round, 2022): Brown is finally healthy after suffering a torn ACL last year after just eight games with the University of Denver. The 20-year-old son of former NHLer Curtis Brown has been held without a point through 18 games this year.

#### EUROPE:

-D *Alfons Freij* (2nd round, 2024): He's the other piece from the Los Angeles Kings for Pierre-Luc Dubois (along with Gabe Vilardi, Alex Iafallo and Rasmus Kupari), and the 18-year-old defenceman has eight points (2G, 6A) in 28 games with Bjorkloven IF of the top Swedish men's league.

-F *Dmitry Rashevsky* (5th round, 2021): It might be time for Winnipeg to take its best swing at getting him out of the KHL, where his role has been greatly reduced this year on a Moscow Dynamo team. After posting 43 points in 67 games last year, the 24-year-old has 18 points (11G, 7A) in 38 contests this year.

#### MANITOBA MOOSE:

The AHL club is languishing near the bottom of the league standings with a 7-19-2 record through 28 games prior to facing the Calgary Wranglers on Sunday night. They also recently

terminated the contracts of two under-producing forwards — Daniel Torgersson (2nd round, 2020) and Henri Nikannen (4th round, 2019) — who have gone back to Europe to play.

-G *Thomas Milic* (5th round, 2023): A big sophomore slump for the young netminder, who is just 2-9-2 record, a 3.63 GAA and .865 SV%.

-F *Brad Lambert* (1st round, 2022): He got a brief look with the Jets (no points in four games) and currently leads the Moose in scoring with 14 points (3G, 11A) in 25 games. That's a big projected drop from the 55 points (21G, 34A) in 64 games as an AHL rookie last year.

-D *Elias Salomonsson* (2nd round, 2022): Winnipeg's top blue-line prospect has been out of the lineup since suffering a shoulder injury on Dec. 6 but is expected to return soon. He's been a bright spot on the struggling squad, with 12 points (3G, 9A) through 17 games.

-F *Danny Zhilkin* (3rd round, 2022): He's recently returned from an extended injury absence but has just one assist through 11 games.

-F *Fabian Wagner* (6th round, 2022): After going 16 games without a point for Linkopings HC in the top Swedish men's league, the 20-year-old defensive forward recently joined the Moose and is still looking for his first point after nine AHL games.

-F *Chaz Lucius* (1st round, 2021): He's finally healthy and playing a run of hockey, with six points (3G, 3A) through 14 games this year.

-F *Nikita Chibrikov* (2nd round, 2021): The young Russian had a nice stint with the Jets in December (2G, 1A in four games) but is now back on the farm where he has 13 points (5G, 8A) in 24 games.

-D *Dmitry Kuzmin* (3rd round, 2021): He spent some time in the ECHL last year after struggling at the AHL level but has shown some growth, with three points (1G, 3A) in 18 Moose games so far.

-D *Tyrel Bauer* (6th round, 2020): The rugged defenceman has one assist in 23 games this year to go along with 37 penalty minutes.

-D *Simon Lundmark* (2nd round, 2019): One of the final cuts from Jets camp has seven points (2G, 5A) in 25 games so far.

#### *ECHL:*

-G *Dom DiVincentiis* (7th round, 2022): He had impressive numbers this year as he began the season with the Moose — a 2-3-0 record, a 2.24 GAA and a .930 SV% — but was sent down to the ECHL affiliate (Norfolk Admirals) once the Jets reclaimed veteran Kaapo Kahkonen on waivers. The first-year pro has been terrific, with a 12-3-0 record, a 2.71 GAA and a .903 SV%. Given the struggles of Kahkonen and Milic with the Moose, perhaps a promotion will soon be in order.

## **The Athletic**

<https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/6036477/2025/01/06/dylan-samberg-jets-defence-pionk/>

### ***What Dylan Samberg's return means for the Jets defence in the short, medium and long term***

By Murat Ates

Dylan Samberg has been flying around the ice in a non-contact jersey at recent practices. He hasn't participated in battles and no one has been hacking at his broken foot, but the 25-year-old defenceman is moving in a way that suggests there's good news heading Winnipeg's way soon.

What does his impending return mean for the Winnipeg Jets defence corps?

"His importance is huge," Jets defence coach Dean Chynoweth said on Friday. "He's a big-body guy, he's played very well from the start of the year until the injury. Now he's in a process of getting stronger every day, getting his conditioning back, his footwork, his hands. ... He's looked like he's making some real good progress."

What Samberg's return really means is the Jets will go back to two pairs that can win their matchups against elite competition. It means the pending restricted free agent (with arbitration rights) gets a second swing at a career year that should see him signed as a long-term fixture in Winnipeg's defence corps.

And it means the Jets will get a much clearer look at their defence between now and the March 7 trade deadline — at which they'd do well to find another, more veteran player with a similar skill set, ideally on the right side.

Today, let's take a short-term, playoff-term and long-term look at the implications of Samberg's good health.

#### *Immediate term: What it means to return from a broken foot*

Neal Pionk knows a lot about what his defensive partner — and fellow Hermantown, Minn. product — is going through.

Two seasons ago, Pionk broke his foot blocking a shot in a road game against Dallas. Whereas Samberg's pain was immediate and obvious, the 6-foot-4 defenceman dragging himself around the ice in desperate search for another shot to block, Pionk's pain snuck up on him: a week went by before he realized he'd broken his foot at all. The Jets medical staff gave Pionk the opportunity to play through his pain, but there was one problem.

Pionk's skate didn't fit his swollen foot, so Jason McMaster and Mark Grehan were tasked with "punching out" Pionk's skate — using specialized tools to expand the boot. With careful management of his swelling, workload and pain tolerance, Pionk was able to get into and out of his skates.

Barely.

“I would take all of the laces out of my skate just to get my foot into my skate,” Pionk recently told *The Athletic*. “And then replace my skate for each game.”

Samberg can relate to the extra effort. He broke his foot in high school the night before hunting season opened, then begged his dad Mike to let him go hunting with him on the weekend. Samberg couldn't fit his foot into his winter boots, so the duo woke up early, took the felt liner out, fit Samberg's foot in and duct-taped a plastic bag around it to keep it waterproof through the snow.

Samberg completed the day's hunt just like he completed his penalty-killing shift against the Nashville Predators. He trekked through the snow as needed, climbed into tree stands as needed, and stayed out with his dad all weekend before conceding that his foot needed care.

“We hunt two days, get back home on Monday and it still bothers him,” Mike told *The Athletic*. “We go to get an X-ray and it was broken. I said, ‘Holy crap!’ The guys were saying, ‘You did that to your kid?’ But Dylan just didn't want to miss it.”

“Dyl's a true Northern Minnesota guy,” Pionk said on Friday. “I didn't know that hunting story but I totally believe it.”

What does this mean for Samberg this season?

Pionk played all 82 games the season he was hurt, but his performance took a hit. He posted the worst plus-minus, five-on-five goal differential and underlying numbers of his Jets career, skipping practices to manage the swelling and the pain. A couple of times, Pionk got special permission to wear sneakers to games instead of dress shoes — the extra cushion and lack of a hard shell spared him from unnecessary hurt. It seems like a difficult place from which to lead a Jets defence corps, particularly after Josh Morrissey's injury in the playoffs against Vegas, but Pionk found a way to go on with seven points in five playoff games.

It probably says a lot about Samberg's maturity, the nature of his current break, or both that he's allowed himself six weeks away from game action — especially in his much-anticipated breakthrough year as a linchpin in Winnipeg's defence corps. But it's possible Samberg takes some time to round back into form; Pionk remembers thinking his foot was healed, only to try skipping a step on the staircase in his garage to fresh new pain.

Remember, too, that this was Samberg's first season as a top-four defenceman. He excelled right out of the gate but is still learning the rigours of the job.

“There was a stretch where he was playing phenomenal,” Pionk said. “He was breaking pucks out by himself, he was shaking guys — stuff you hadn't quite seen yet at the NHL level. I had seen it at the youth level, high school level, junior level, college level, so I knew he had it in him. I'm hoping he can pick up right where he left off when he comes back.”

*What can we expect up to and including the trade deadline?*

It seems likely Pionk is hoping that he can pick up right where he left off when Samberg comes back, too.

Pionk was nearly a point-per-game player at the moment of his partner's injury, with 17 points in 20 games prior to Nov. 23 in Nashville. He's managed 10 points in the 21 games since that time. Points aren't everything, to be clear — and they can fluctuate quite a bit for defencemen based

on context and luck — but the Jets were much more successful when they ran Samberg and Pionk as a duo. Winnipeg won their minutes 18-14 at five-on-five, while dominating flow of play and outshooting teams 172-126 in their shared ice time.

Samberg is capable of getting the defensive stops that help Pionk wheel up the ice. Pionk is a more consistent outlet passer. Either way, the pair works in a way that other options don't. Pionk and Haydn Fleury have been outscored 9-5 since Samberg's injury. Pionk and Stanley have tied their minutes 2-2 while getting outshot 38-22, and Pionk and Colin Miller have won their minutes 3-0 in a small but encouraging sample. Miller, who was struck in the throat by a puck against Detroit on Saturday, was set to receive further evaluation on Sunday. We'll get an update on Tuesday, as the Jets are scheduled to take Monday off.

The potential of an extended absence for Miller would leave the Jets with Morrissey-DeMelo, Samberg-Pionk, and some combination of Logan Stanley, Ville Heinola, and Dylan Coghlan as healthy short-term options. Stanley has been more ambitious of late in the offensive zone — a positive sign — and Heinola recently played his career-high 13th game in a season. But Stanley's lack of pace has been exposed on Winnipeg's penalty kill, while Heinola's inability to tie up Alex DeBrincat contributed directly to Detroit's game-winning goal on Saturday.

Even if they help in the long run, Stanley and Heinola haven't done enough to convince me they're top-six options for a team in search of a deep playoff run. Even in the scenario above, where Fleury and Miller are Winnipeg's third pairing, the Jets could use an upgrade in their top four.

Samberg is clearly the Jets' best option to help Pionk against elite competition. Add a big, mobile right-handed defenceman who gives Winnipeg an upgrade on DeMelo on the top pair and the Jets would look a lot better prepared to handle things the next time Colorado, Vegas or some other team runs a bunch of net-front plays after burning up the ice with speed.

I know the Jets liked Rasmus Ristolainen prior to him resuscitating his career in Philadelphia. I expect they'd be kicking tires on him again now. Marcus Pettersson is a left-handed option ranked highly on our trade board, while Alexandre Carrier is a good penalty killer, David Savard is likely on the market and Cody Ceci made it to Game 7 of the Stanley Cup final last year. Not all of these options are ideal but most of them are moves Winnipeg could make without sending another first-round pick out the door.

Remember, Winnipeg isn't loaded with draft capital this year: its second-round pick belongs to New Jersey via last year's Tyler Toffoli trade, while their fourth-round pick belongs to San Jose thanks to the Vladislav Namestnikov trade in 2023.

*Next year and onward: What will the blue line look like going forward?*

"Are you contributing to wins? That's the biggest thing that I care about," Pionk said. "I don't worry about (points and money). That's why you hire an agent."

Pionk is a pending UFA and needs a new contract, too, though. I expect Winnipeg is the team to give it to him, implying this depth chart to start 2025-26:

All of the ages and contracts you see are as of Sept. 1, 2025. Fleury and Coghlan are also pending UFAs whose futures could continue in Winnipeg.

The table is also a good reminder that the Jets don't spend a ton of money on their blue line compared to other teams. This season, with Pionk making \$5.875 million and Samberg at just \$1.4 million, the Jets spend the eighth-smallest percentage of their salary cap on their defencemen. They could retain Pionk at his current cap hit and pay Samberg \$5 million without making it into the top half of league defence spending.

The point isn't to spend the least, though — it's to have the best, or as close to it as possible. The Jets defence corps hasn't changed a whole lot since it couldn't handle Colorado's speed or net-front presence during last year's playoffs. DeMelo has looked a step slower this year than last, while Stanley's emergence as an everyday player further contributes to a lack of pace. The Jets' penalty kill has struggled, with defencemen slow to move from the net front into the shooting lanes on the flanks.

In a perfect world, Winnipeg's trade deadline acquisition would be a top-four player with term. This would give the Jets flexibility on Pionk's next deal; they don't need to sign it if the ask is out of reach. It would also insulate the Jets against the possibility that the highly touted Salomonsson, 21 in August, needs a moment to get up and running as a top-four defenceman in the NHL.

Ristolainen makes \$5.1 million for two seasons after this one — it's tough to see him as ideal without substantial salary retention — so my blue sky continues to be someone like MacKenzie Weegar in Calgary. Weegar, 30, makes \$6.25 million forever until 2031, so he comes with his own challenges, and Calgary would likely do well to keep him if they can.

I think Winnipeg would do well to win a Mattias Ekholm, Chris Tanev-type sweepstakes at one point given this upgrade conversation springs up annually, but it's a big ask for a club also looking for help down the middle.

#### *What will Samberg and Pionk earn going forward?*

NHL players tend to get paid based on their role, the number of years they've succeeded in that role, and their point production. This helps the Jets with respect to Samberg; even though he has arbitration rights (and could theoretically leverage them into UFA status as early as 2026) he doesn't have multiple seasons of top-four success at this point in time.

Samberg's 37 points in 177 career games don't scream big-ticket payday, either, although watching the Jets' penalty kill falter without him reminds us of his value on that front. Evolving-Hockey projects a \$2.8 million AAV on a four-year extension, which strikes me as low. DeMelo signed his four-year, \$4.9 million contract as a UFA last summer and I expect Samberg to deliver superior value over the next four years. Samberg's market value, according to Dom Luszczyszyn's Game Score model, is expected to be close to \$5 million in that same time frame — even if Samberg can't secure that big of a payday, I expect something much closer to it than the \$2.8 million projection.

Pionk's longevity inside Winnipeg's top four, combined with his power-play duties, multiple 30-point seasons and 56-point pace this year make him a more expensive proposition. Evolving Hockey projects a \$6.1 million AAV over five years for the pending UFA, while Dom's Game Score estimates a value closer to \$5 million. Those numbers will be updated in the coming weeks as we cross the midway mark for most teams.

Signing Pionk long-term would come with risk for Winnipeg. He's played a big role for the Jets but most give Samberg (and Brenden Dillon) most of the credit for his even-strength success.

He'll also be 30 next year which adds the risk of age to any particularly long-term contract, giving the Jets two veteran righthanders with the potential for inefficient long term deals.

I still think player and team are keen to extend their relationship. Pionk fits in well in the locker room, plays big minutes, and told me in September that Winnipeg is a place he'd love to raise his family.

"I would love to play here," he said. "I would love to win here. I'm going into my sixth season now. Our daughter was born here. We have a house here. It's six and a half hours away from home for both of us. Our parents come up all the time. Our friends and family come up all the time. We feel like we're home here."

Wanting to play in Winnipeg is worth something. If Pionk signs with the Jets this summer, I suspect we're in for quite a bit of discussion about the cap efficiency of his contract. Thinking from the organization's point of view, I think Winnipeg will be willing to explore those tradeoffs in the name of keeping players who view the city as home.