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Jets primed for second-half success Hellebuyck, well-rounded attack and improved special teams keys to success

By: Ken Wiebe

The Winnipeg Jets arrived at the midway point of the NHL season and are in prime position to take a run at the Presidents' Trophy.

After spending the bulk of the first 41 games first overall in the NHL standings, the Jets find themselves just behind the Vegas Golden Knights as they prepare to face the Nashville Predators to start the second half on Tuesday at Canada Life Centre.

Although the Jets have banked only one of a possible six points during the past three games, they've already checked off a number of important boxes on the arduous journey that is the regular season.

The Jets remain atop the Central Division, but even with the benefit of the best start in NHL history (15-1), there isn't a great deal of separation from the likes of the Minnesota Wild, Dallas Stars or the Colorado Avalanche.

That's not a bad thing either, as continuing to improve their structure and build their overall team game is essential for the Jets as they prepare to tackle a few playoff demons in April.

Jets head coach Scott Arniel has done an excellent job in his second crack as an NHL bench boss, pushing almost all of the right buttons to date.

There will be more tension on the horizon, but the Jets seem better equipped to handle it, as they've built a foundation they can lean on.

Many of the questions surrounding the Jets going into the campaign have been answered, so let's review some of the storylines that were identified in this space as the exhibition season came to a close and look ahead to what is on the horizon.

IDENTITY IMPORTANCE

After capturing the Jennings Trophy for allowing the fewest goals in the NHL last season, the Jets remain one of the top teams in this department again, going into Monday's action third in the NHL in goals against per game (2.54), behind only the Los Angeles Kings and Dallas Stars (who are tied for the lead at 2.50).

When the Jets are fully committed to their structure of being an aggressive team in all three zones, they've proven to be incredibly difficult to beat.

There have been some hiccups along the way, but team defence remains an area of strength for this group — even with Dylan Samberg, Haydn Fleury, Logan Stanley and Ville Heinola all missing considerable time due to injury during the first half.

Getting Samberg back in the near future should make the Jets tougher to score against.

Josh Morrissey has once again been a minute muncher for the Jets and remains very much in the thick of the conversation for the Norris Trophy.

Offensively, the Jets are finding the net with regularity, sitting third overall in goals per game (3.59), behind the Washington Capitals (3.72) and Tampa Bay Lightning (3.70).

The top line of Mark Scheifele, Kyle Connor and Gabe Vilardi has been exceptional and carried a good chunk of the load, while Nikolaj Ehlers got off to the best start of his career before suffering a lower-body injury but remains a point-per-game player.

The complementary scoring has been there as well, as the Jets already have six players into double digits for goals, with several others on the verge of hitting that mark.

HELLEBUYCK'S WORKLOAD

Connor Hellebuyck has basically done the unthinkable during the first half, finding a way to get even better after winning his second Vezina Trophy last season.

He's been a workhorse throughout his career and that's continued this season, as he's made 32 starts at the midway point.

That number might be slightly ahead of the projected target and the wrinkle for the second half is Hellebuyck is expected to be the starter for the United States at the 4 Nations Face-Off next month.

So finding a way to get backup Eric Comrie to — or even slightly north of 20 starts — figures to be a priority.

Comrie won the backup job in training camp and has done his part to keep the Jets in every game he's started, though a lack of offensive support has contributed to him being on a personal six-game losing streak after winning his first three starts.

Comrie's .904 save percentage is roughly .004 ahead of the league average, though he'd like to lower his goals-against average of 3.05 during the second half.

SPECIAL TEAMS

Arniel identified improvement of the power play and the penalty kill as being high on his to-do list when he was unveiled as head coach and those tasks were given to Davis Payne and Dean Chynoweth respectively during the search to round out the coaching staff.

Payne gets top marks for his ability to incorporate Ehlers on the top unit in the pop position, which is part of the reason the Jets currently have the top-ranked power play in the NHL. That the Jets are operating at 31.5 per cent efficiency after finishing in the bottom third in the category last season is a massive development and it's one of the reasons the Jets have been as successful as they've been to date.

There were times when the power play kept them in games and others when it actually won them games. Having two units contributing has also been important.

As for the penalty kill, it's been a bit of a roller-coaster.

Prior to Samberg's injury, there was a time when the Jets were near the top of the league, but the gradual dip has led to them back into the bottom third, (22nd going into Monday's action at 77.6 per cent).

This is an area that needs to get better during the second half.

CONTRACT YEARS

Motivation comes in many forms and it's always interesting to see how players perform when they're pending unrestricted free agents.

Going into last season, the Jets inked Hellebuyck and Scheifele to matching seven-year extensions, erasing the doubt about their futures and Nino Niederreiter inked a three-year extension in December.

Jets general manager Kevin Cheveldayoff hasn't got any of his pending UFAs to put pen to paper yet, but the bulk of them got off to a strong start and don't seem to be bothered about the future.

Ehlers is the best example, producing 11 goals and 32 points in 31 games.

Neal Pionk has delivered an impressive bounce-back season so far, chipping in five goals and 27 points while playing better defensively on the second pairing.

Before he was sidelined with an injury, Mason Appleton was doing a solid job on one of the best third lines in hockey, while Alex Lafallo continues to be a versatile forward who can move up and down the lineup while contributing to both special teams units.

Vladislav Namestnikov has handled the second-line centre role effectively and while his production has dipped lately as he deals with a nagging issue that's prevented him from taking draws, he's one of the players on the verge of reaching 10 goals and could challenge his career high in that category (20) with a strong second half.

Whether it means sticking around with the Jets or hitting the open market, a strong second half and playoffs will only mean raising their value on the open market, while likely helping the team in the process.

Sportsnet.ca

<https://www.sportsnet.ca/nhl/article/jets-mid-season-review-top-line-proving-doubters-wrong/>

Jets' Mid-Season Review: Top line proving doubters wrong

By Jacob Stoller

WINNIPEG — A dark cloud loomed over the Winnipeg Jets before the season.

They were coming off a 110-point regular season that amounted to an implosion in the first round. They swung and missed on several free agents — like deadline acquisition Sean Monahan — and let Brenden Dillon walk. And then there were the attendance concerns, with pockets of empty seats becoming commonplace in the NHL's smallest market.

There wasn't a whole lot to be excited about.

How could this team remain competitive? Would we even see a Whiteout in the spring? Would their attendance take an even greater hit? The angst in this city was palpable.

And that's what makes Winnipeg's first half of the season all the more gratifying.

Nobody wins the Stanley Cup in January — something this franchise knows all too well — but seeing this team sit second in the NHL standings at the 41-game mark has reaffirmed how viable of a contender this team is.

For the most part, everything that needed to go right has — and then some. Connor Hellebuyck is on track to secure his third Vezina Trophy. Mark Scheifele and Kyle Connor are playing the best hockey of their careers. The third line has remained elite. Neal Pionk is having a bounce-back year. Dylan Samberg has solidified himself as a top-four defenceman. And the team's averaging 14,124 fans per night (up from 13,490).

The sky isn't falling. At least for now.

Key Stats

Record: 27-12-2 (2nd)

Goals Per Game: 3.59 (3rd)

Goals Against Per Game: 2.54 (3rd)

Power Play: 31.5 per cent (1st)

Penalty Kill: 77.6 per cent (22nd)

Best Surprise: The top line has silenced critics

I'll be the first to admit I was against keeping the line of Scheifele, Connor and Gabriel Vilardi intact.

It had more to do with keeping Scheifele and Connor together than anything. Since Connor broke into the league in 2017-18, he and Scheifele have remained inseparable despite being continuously out-shot and out-chanced during five-on-five play. The offence they created wasn't enough to offset what they gave up the other way.

From Day 1 of this season, Scott Arniel made it clear that he was in favour of keeping those two together. And he wanted Vilardi riding shotgun.

His decision to stick it out with those three has paid off. After struggling mightily in their first nine games — where they controlled just 33.3 per cent of the five-on-five high-danger shot attempt share — the Jets top line has been fantastic over the last 32 games.

Night-in and night-out, Connor-Scheifele-Vilardi have put on a clinic in offensive-zone puck possession.

Connor and Scheifele have continued to cook off of broken plays and are virtually automatic on two-on-ones. Their respective world-class traits feed off one another so well — which is why the Jets have been steadfast on keeping them together — with Scheifele's knack for holding onto the puck and finding seams being a match made in heaven for a versatile scorer like Connor.

And Vilardi's the perfect complimentary piece for those two. Not only is he excellent at hanging onto the puck along the wall and making plays in tight spaces but he's also become one of the NHL's most dangerous scorers from the inner slot.

Now that they're able to exit the defensive zone and enter the offensive zone more efficiently — something they struggled to do in their first nine games — there's little doubt that this line has what it takes to be a difference-maker in the post-season.

Biggest Disappointment: The Jets' second line

The line of Nikolaj Ehlers — Vladislav Namestnikov — Cole Perfetti just ain't it.

Aside from the Nov. 3 game against the Tampa Bay Lightning, or Nov. 9 against the Dallas Stars, when has that line really delivered for this team? Sure, "a goal's a goal" but it should be noted that five of the 14 five-on-five goals they've scored came during beatdowns against the San Jose Sharks and Columbus Blue Jackets.

If you go back and watch the goals that line has scored, a lot of them have been a byproduct of individual efforts, rather than all three making positive plays to create offence. The underlying numbers aren't pretty, either. While they've generated 2.96 five on-five goals per 60 minutes, the Jets second line has only recorded 2.13 expected goals per 60 — that ranks 51st among 56 lines that have played at least 150 minutes this season, according to MoneyPuck.com.

There's just no cohesion.

Stylistically, this isn't an ideal combination of players to pair together. None of the three are overly effective at fishing out pucks along the wall, applying pressure on the forecheck or crashing the net.

In a way, each player is miscast on this line.

Namestnikov isn't a second-line centre. He's filled in the best he could but he lacks the creativity, offensive potency and size that you need from a '2C', which is why Winnipeg got Monahan last year.

Ehlers is at his best when he's creating off the rush but neither Perfetti or Namestnikov thrive at that.

Perfetti is at his best when he is facilitating along the wall in the offensive zone but his linemates have struggled to make themselves viable shooting threats. Ehlers, for all his raw talent, is an unpredictable player that's hard to read off of — which is part of the reason why those two haven't meshed.

Something's got to give. Winnipeg won't be making a meaningful playoff run if they're relying solely on their top line for five-on-five offence.

Big Question: When will Kevin Cheveldayoff start wheeling and dealing?

The sooner the better.

Aside from when they acquired Monahan just over a month before last year's deadline, most of Cheveldyoff's big splashes — Paul Statsny, Kevin Hayes and Tyler Toffoli — have come on deadline day. Mind you, sellers typically hold onto their assets right up until the 11th hour as a means of driving up the price.

Three months out from the deadline, it still remains to be seen which teams are selling — which makes things tricky for Cheveldyoff to get a head start on acquiring reinforcements. But there should be a sense of urgency, though.

It's a quick turnaround when you acquire a deadline rental and the more time you can have to amalgamate a player and figure out where he'll slot into your lineup, the better.

Especially for a team like Winnipeg — who projects to have \$9,716,622 in cap space on deadline day, according to PuckPedia.com — that could be in the market for both a second-line centre and top-four defenceman.

While it may be out of their comfort zone to pony-up a big package this early on out of fear that they overpay and end up looking silly, making a move earlier could pay dividends. There's no doubt that the amount of extra time Monahan got — he played in 16 more games than Toffoli — played a big role in him becoming such a key piece for the Jets at five-on-five and on the power play.

Global Winnipeg

<https://globalnews.ca/news/10944324/winnipeg-jets-disappointing-start-homestand/>

ANALYSIS: Should Jets be concerned over mid-season stumble?

By Kelly Moore Global News

The Winnipeg Jets have stumbled a bit into the midway point of their schedule.

But a disappointing start to a much-anticipated eight-game homestand should not overshadow what has still been a very strong overall first half.

I know the 'here we go again' feeling starting to emerge after the Jets followed up the New Year's Eve loss in Colorado with an overtime defeat to Anaheim, and then Saturday's lackluster 4-2 setback to Detroit.

Will this follow the path of the previous two seasons when Winnipeg roared out of the starting gates, but come January, the engine started to misfire?

There haven't been too many games this season when special teams have worked against the Jets. Most of that success has been the result of the NHL's most productive power play.

But for only the second time this season, Mark Scheifele, Kyle Connor and company have been held off the sheet in back-to-back games. Now, you can't include Colorado because Winnipeg didn't have any cracks at it with the extra man advantage in that 5-2 loss.

So how much concern should there be over this current 0-2-1 slide?

Well, I would counter with balancing whatever level of angst there might be with the Jets' established staples for success.

The best goaltender in the NHL. One of the best forward lines in the league. A power play that's cashed in 26 of the first 41 games. Winnipeg's record in those games is 22-4.

Despite the perplexing results of the past two games, the Jets have won most of those they're supposed to. They're 15-5-1 against the 16 teams currently below the playoff line. And Canada Life Centre remains among the most difficult for visiting teams to enjoy any type of success.

But the NHL always has and always will be governed by the mantra of 'what have you done for me lately.'

So with that in mind, the Jets have opened the door to doubt.

The question now: How long will it take to restore confidence they remain the real deal?

The Hockey News

<https://ca.sports.yahoo.com/news/jets-reportedly-interested-veteran-defenseman-172442888.html>

Jets Reportedly Interested In Veteran Defenseman

By Julian Gaudio

David Pagnotta of The Fourth Period reported that the Winnipeg Jets could be one of the teams interested in Anaheim Ducks veteran defenseman Brian Dumoulin.

The 33-year-old defenseman is a two-time Stanley Cup Champion and a two-time NCAA National Champion listed at 6'4 and 214 lbs. He's played 665 regular season games and 81 playoff games, providing him the experience that could be vital to playoff success if the Jets did in fact make a trade for him.

The Jets currently have a logjam of defenders on their blue line. When everyone is healthy, the four consistent defenders who are in the lineup nightly are Josh Morrissey, Neal Pionk, Dylan DeMelo and Dylan Samberg. The final two spots have seen a rotation of sorts with Haydn Fleury, Colin Miller, Logan Stanley, Ville Heinola and Dylan Coghlan.

The Jets don't necessarily need Dumoulin but his skill set would be a valued addition to the organization. Dumoulin owns a 10-team no-trade list as part of his contract, which comes with a \$3.15 million salary cap hit and other possible suitors such as the Edmonton Oilers, Dallas Stars and Ottawa Senators.

What the Ducks are looking for in return for Dumoulin is unknown but the Biddeford, Maine native was traded from the Seattle Kraken to the Ducks for a 2026 fourth-round pick in the offseason.

Kevin Cheveldayoff has a lot of difficult questions to answer with the trade deadline just two months away.