

Winnipeg Free Press

<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2025/01/31/jets-meet-caps-in-showdown-between-nhl-front-runners>

Jets meet Caps in showdown between NHL front-runners

By: Ken Wiebe

WASHINGTON — Never mind the measuring-stick mentality, this made-for-primetime matchup has the top two teams in the NHL sharing the marquee on Saturday night.

Compelling storylines aren't hard to find, with the Winnipeg Jets riding a five-game winning streak and entering the battle with the most points in the NHL and the Washington Capitals maintaining the top points percentage going into Saturday's battle at Capital One Arena.

In case you haven't heard, Capitals captain Alex Ovechkin now needs 19 goals to pass Wayne Gretzky for the most goals in NHL history.

"Oh, it's amazing," said Jets centre Mark Scheifele, asked about what Ovechkin is doing after the 6-2 win over the Boston Bruins on Thursday. "He's (one of), if not THE best shooter to ever play the game. It's obviously really special to see. And very, very excited to play against him on Saturday.

"It's very, very cool to see and you know, I have Ovie's stick at home. It's one I will treasure forever."

That's the thing about Ovechkin's pursuit of Gretzky's record, it's leaving some of the best scorers in the NHL in awe — mostly because it's a record that many people thought could never be broken.

After scoring in Thursday's 5-4 overtime loss to the Ottawa Senators, Ovechkin is up to 876 career goals — thanks to 23 snipes in 35 games this season.

Had he not missed 16 games with a fractured fibula, Ovechkin would certainly be even closer to his historical moment.

"We know he's close. He's getting there," Caps forward Pierre-Luc Dubois said in Ottawa after the morning skate.

"Every time he scores, whether we're at home or on the road, there's excitement and energy in the building. We're all behind him, pushing in the same direction as him."

As impressed as Scheifele and many others around the league are by Ovechkin, the Jets can't be caught being spectators when they line up across from him.

Besides, the Capitals are far from a one-man show.

In moving to the top of the Eastern Conference so far, the Capitals have followed a similar formula to the one that's given the Jets so much success this season.

Goaltending has been a strength for both teams, the difference being Connor Hellebuyck has carried the bulk of the workload while former Brandon Wheat Kings netminder Logan Thompson (27) and Charlie Lindgren (24) have a similar number of starts.

Much like the Jets, the Capitals have sound defensive structure and feature ample depth, including nine players with double digits in goals.

For the sake of comparison, Vladislav Namestnikov became the eighth member of the Jets to hit 10 goals on Thursday.

While the Jets feature a pair of 30-goal scorers in Scheifele (31) and linemate Kyle Connor (30) and Gabe Vilardi north of 20 (22), the Capitals have the same number of players as the Jets do with 20 goals or more, with Aliaksei Protas (21) and Tom Wilson (20) joining Ovechkin.

The Capitals have also done a great job of helping get a pair of third-overall picks back on track in Dubois (2016) and Dylan Strome, who was chosen by the Arizona Coyotes in the 2015 NHL Draft and is now flourishing in his third NHL stop.

Strome is playing the role previously occupied by Niklas Backstrom alongside Ovechkin, while Dubois is up to 11 goals and 41 points in 51 games this season playing a valuable two-way role on the second line after arriving in a trade with the Los Angeles Kings this past summer.

Much like the Jets have with Josh Morrissey (44 points) and Neal Pionk (33 points) supplying some much-needed offence on separate defensive pairs, the Capitals' blueline features homegrown talent John Carlson (31 points) and a trade acquisition in Jakob Chychrun (33 points) who, like Pionk, happens to be a pending unrestricted free agent who is only boosting his value this season.

The similarities don't end there, as the Jets and Capitals are first and second in goals scored per game, with Winnipeg at 3.58 and Washington at 3.49.

Goals against?

You guessed it, one one-hundredth of a point separating them, with the Capitals allowing 2.39 goals per game and the Jets giving up 2.40 goals per game.

On special teams, Winnipeg has an edge of nearly 10 per cent in power-play efficiency (33.1 to 23.1), while Washington's penalty kill is third in the NHL (83.9) and the Jets sit in the middle of the pack at 16th (78.8).

The Jets improvement on both special-teams units is a big reason they continue to contend for the Presidents Trophy with the likes of the Capitals, Carolina Hurricanes, Edmonton Oilers and Vegas Golden Knights.

One reason the Jets continue to sit atop the Central Division and Western Conference standings is their play during January.

In going 9-3-2 in 14 games, the Jets scored 48 goals and allowed only 31, giving them a top-notch plus-17 goal differential that moved them to plus-63 for the campaign.

That's the best differential in the NHL.

Do you want to take a stab at which team is currently second in that category?

We'll save you the search, it's the Capitals at plus-54.

The next best mark is the Dallas Stars at plus-36, which again tells you just how good — and how consistent the Jets and Capitals have been this season.

After battling through the most exhausting portion of the schedule in late November and December, the Jets were able to take advantage of an extended portion of time in friendly Manitoba, including an eight-game homestand and a total of 10 home games.

Of the 29 games left in the regular season, the Jets have 13 at home and 16 on the road, so it's fairly well-balanced — just like their overall game has been.

Whether you're looking at the numbers or digging below the surface for some additional context, there's just not much that separates these two former Southeast Division rivals.

Perhaps the best news is they will meet one more time during the regular season, with the return match scheduled for Canada Life Centre on March 25.

Before jumping ahead nearly two months, why not just enjoy the first meeting and see where things go from there.

"It'll be fun," said Scheifele. "We haven't played them, yet, (but) they've been awesome all year."

So have the Jets, which makes the matchup — and the chase for first overall — even more compelling.

<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2025/01/31/dubois-finds-his-game-with-capitals>

Dubois finds his game with Capitals Well-travelled forward rebounds from disappointing campaign with Kings

By: Ken Wiebe Mike McIntyre

WASHINGTON – From afar, it looks like this latest shock to the system has resonated with Pierre-Luc Dubois.

Being involved in a blockbuster deal in consecutive summers was not something the former Winnipeg Jets centre would have had on his bingo card, but that's exactly what happened to the player chosen third overall in the 2016 NHL Draft.

Moved by the Jets to the Los Angeles Kings in June of 2023 for a package that included forwards Gabe Vilardi, Alex Lafallo and Rasmus Kupari and a second-round pick in 2024 that became Swedish D-man Alfons Frejs, last season didn't go anywhere close to as planned.

So rather than wait for a potential bounce-back campaign, the Kings decided to move on from Dubois, shipping him to the Washington Capitals, less than one year after he signed an eight-year extension (technically with the Jets).

Dubois is set to face the Jets on Saturday night for the first time with his latest new team.

Earlier this week, prior to the Capitals game against the Ottawa Senators, Dubois was asked about his departure from the Kings and the fit in Washington.

“A lot happens in hockey, people talk about a lot of things but I knew what kind of player I was from just the year before,” Dubois said, referring to the 27 goals and career-high 63 points he had in 71 games for the Jets in 2022-23.

“Last year (with the Kings), I know it wasn’t a great year for me but I knew it wasn’t who I was as a player. In those moments, when you’re at your low, you can’t really say anything and you can’t defend yourself. You just get piled on and you go out there the next season and go back to the drawing board and get back to work.”

Dubois shared his appreciation for the belief his Capitals teammates and coaches have shown in him.

So far this season, Dubois has done his part to silence some of his critics.

Although he got off to a slow start offensively, Dubois has been playing well and is up to 11 goals and 41 points in 51 games.

Has Dubois finally found the fit he’s been searching for with what is now his fourth NHL organization?

Only time will tell over the course of the six-plus years that remain on his lucrative, long-term contract, but the early returns have been positive for both the player and the team.

“I can’t compare it really because they’re all different situations, but here is everything I’ve been looking for, really,” said Dubois.

As it turns out, this trade falls under the category of one that is benefitting both teams.

The Kings, who got goalie Darcy Kuemper, who is in the fourth year of a five-year deal that carries an AAV of US\$5.25 million.

Kuemper has been limited to 27 games due to injury, but he’s delivered excellent goaltending for the Kings in a tandem with former Jets backup David Rittich.

Kuemper, who helped the Colorado Avalanche capture the Stanley Cup in 2022, is 14-6-6 with a 2.13 goals-against average and .921 save percentage.

Around the glass

On the rise

The NHL and NHLPA released an updated salary-cap projection for the next three seasons and the ceiling and the floor are going up significantly.

For next season, the cap is rising to US\$95.5 million with a floor of US\$70.6 million, followed by a jump to US\$104 million (US\$76.9-million floor) in 2026-27 and US\$113.5 million (and US\$83.9 million) in 2027-28.

The press release said the projections will be subject to potential minor adjustments up or down for the 2026-27 and 2027-28 seasons

What does that mean for the Jets?

Well, if they continue to be a cap ceiling team, as they've been for multiple seasons, there will be additional space to provide raises to pending restricted free agents such as Vilardi and defenceman Dylan Samberg, retain some of their pending unrestricted free agents like Neal Pionk, Nikolaj Ehlers, Vladislav Namestnikov, Lafallo and Haydn Fleury or try and fill some of the spots on the roster on the open market in free agency or via trade.

It's also important to remember Jets sniper Kyle Connor can become a UFA in the summer of 2026 and you can be sure the organization wants to retain his services, so that will require some additional flexibility.

The landscape is definitely changing across the NHL and it will be interesting to see what — if any — impact the rising cap might have on the Jets and many other franchises.

An interesting list

Jets forward Parker Ford became the eighth player in Jets/Atlanta Thrashers history to score a goal in his NHL debut, notching the fifth goal in Thursday's 6-2 victory over the Boston Bruins.

He joins Bryan Little, Patrik Laine, Jacob Trouba, Nic Petan, Sami Niku, John Albert and Nikita Chibrikov.

Ford crashed the net and knocked a loose puck out of the air for the memorable marker that came at 5:57 of the third period.

Based on how glowingly Jets head coach Scott Arniel spoke about Ford's play, it's a safe bet that he's earned another look on Saturday against the Capitals.

Now it's up to Ford to show he can consistently provide energy on the fourth line while Morgan Barron is sidelined with an upper-body issue.

Banking on Saad

The Vegas Golden Knights have been on the lookout for winger depth and they found some on Friday with the addition of Brandon Saad on a one-year deal worth US\$1.5 million.

Saad, who cleared unconditional waivers, left a substantial amount of money on the table by agreeing to the termination — since he had an additional year on his contract with the St. Louis Blues with an AAV of US\$4.5 million and an actual salary of US\$3.625 million.

Rather than accept a move at full pay to play in the American Hockey League with the Springfield Thunderbirds after clearing waivers, Saad is joining a team that's chasing another Stanley Cup.

Saad, 32, brings a championship pedigree from his time with the Chicago Blackhawks (2013, 2015) and is a seven-time 20-goal scorer.

The latest move

There's nothing quite like a trade during a game to leave a hockey writer doing his or her best juggling act.

That's what happened to those who cover the Calgary Flames on Thursday night when Craig Conroy completed a transaction with Philadelphia Flyers general manager Daniel Briere.

The Flames, who continue to be right in the middle of the Western Conference wild-card chase, obtained a pair of youngish forwards in Morgan Frost and Joel Farabee while sending Jakub Pelletier, Andrei Kuzmenko and a pair of draft picks — a second and seventh rounder — the other way.

The Jets recently faced the Flames twice in an eight-day span and Pelletier and Kuzmenko showed well, though they've both endured some challenges previously.

Pelletier, chosen 26th overall in 2019, cleared waivers in October but did an excellent job during an AHL stint with the Calgary Wranglers and was up on the top line with Nazem Kadri and Jonathan Huberdeau.

Frost, chosen 27th overall in 2017, has 11 goals and 25 points in 49 games but his numbers have dipped since a 19-goal, 46-point season in 2021-22.

Farabee, chosen 14th overall in the 2018 NHL Draft, is a two-time 20-goal scorer but has eight goals and 19 points in 50 games this season.

Conroy made a deal for a pair of forwards in their mid-20s who could benefit from a change of scenery and potentially grow into core pieces.

The Flyers are changing the mix of its group and figure to be involved in several more deals before the Mar. 7 deadline arrives.

Winnipeg Sun

<https://winnipeg.sun.com/sports/hockey/nhl/winnipeg-jets/for-the-w-hockey-heavyweights-winnipeg-washington-to-clash-in-d-c>

FOR THE W: Hockey heavyweights Winnipeg, Washington, to clash in D.C.

By Paul Friesen

What better way to ring in February than with a Stanley Cup final preview between the Winnipeg Jets and Washington Capitals.

The two top teams in the NHL go at it in Donald Trump's back yard on Saturday night, a taste of what's to come in June.

A little premature, you say? Well, drill baby drill into these numbers:

The Jets and Capitals are ranked first and second in enough categories to choke even the most cock-sure Republican.

Overall points: Winnipeg 75, Washington 74.

Wins: 36 for the Jets, 34 for the Caps. Regulation wins: 31-29, Winnipeg. Regulation and overtime wins, same story.

Do you prefer points percentage? They're the only two teams batting better than .700. Who saw all that coming?

Nobody scores more goals than these two, the Jets with 190, Washington 178 in two fewer games. Goals per game: Winnipeg is No. 1 with 3.58, the Caps No. 2 with 3.49, an Alex Ovechkin whisker better than Tampa Bay.

That doesn't mean they've left defence to chance, though. They're also the league's two stingiest teams, the Caps with a 2.39 GAA, the Jets at a nearly identical 2.40.

That double-whammy has produced the best goal differentials in the game: The Jets No. 1 at plus-63, Washington next at plus-54.

As for special teams, the Jets will throw the league's top power play at you, while the Caps will come back with the No. 3 penalty kill.

Still not impressed? They're pretty much the hottest teams in hockey right now, too, Winnipeg 8-2 in its last 10, Washington 7-1-2.

How likely is it that the Capitals-Jets showdown is a Stanley Cup preview?

It's a lock

It's a coin toss

Never gonna happen

So cue up the sound bites from the respective dressing rooms, as players and coaches look ahead to the marquee matchup, the first of the season between these two powerhouses.

Uh, maybe not. Despite the coming clash of titans, neither team was available for interviews on Friday.

Only the healthy scratches skated for the Jets in Washington, while the Caps, coming off a 12-day, five-game road trip, had the day off entirely.

So we're left to revisit what Mark Scheifele said after his team throttled the Bruins in Boston, 6-2, on Thursday.

"It'll be fun," No. 55 told reporters, looking ahead to Saturday's tilt. "We haven't played them, yet, and they've been awesome all year."

An added bonus for Scheifele: Lining up against Ovechkin.

Coming off a two-goal game against the Bruins that vaulted him into a tie with Ilya Kovalchuk for top spot in Winnipeg/Atlanta franchise history, Scheifele's 328 career goals are dwarfed by Ovechkin's 876, just 19 shy of Wayne Gretzky's record.

“Oh, it’s amazing,” Scheifele said. “The best shooter to ever play the game. Very, very excited to play against him on Saturday. Obviously it’s very, very cool to see. And you know I have Ovie’s stick at home. It’s one I will treasure forever.”

Actually, we didn’t know that.

More than seven years Ovechkin’s junior, it would make sense that Scheifele idolized the Great Eight.

You may not have known this, either: the Jets haven’t won a game in Washington in more than 10 years. Their last win came in January, 2013. They’re 0-7-4 since.

Ovechkin, 39, has feasted on Winnipeg his entire career: 55 goals and 100 points in 73 games. He’s been only slightly less lethal against Connor Hellebuyck, with five goals in 12 games.

Scheifele against the Caps: eight goals, 15 points, in 20 games.

These days the 31-year-old is scoring more than Ovechkin, but of course he doesn’t have the one thing his counterpart got a few years back.

The Jets were a series win away from facing Washington in the 2018 Stanley Cup final, losing to an expansion team from Vegas, of all things.

Seven years later, they have their best chance, yet. Even better than last season, when they fizzled in Round 1.

Which reminds us of the one problem with all this hype: Top seeds often don’t live up to their billing in the post-season.

The most recent time the No. 1 teams from both conferences reached the Cup Final was 24 years ago.

Oh, well. A February game with two points and NHL bragging rights on the line will have to do.

Global Winnipeg

<https://globalnews.ca/news/10991610/analysis-jets-prepare-saturday-night-washington/>

ANALYSIS: Jets prepare for Saturday night heavyweight tilt in Washington

By John Shannon CJOB

As the Jets were in Boston dismantling the Bruins last night, the Washington Capitals were losing in overtime in Ottawa.

So now, without distraction, we can talk about the battle between the best team in the east against the best team in the west on Saturday night in the U.S. capital.

When the season started there probably weren’t many predicting that Winnipeg and Washington would be the best in their respective conferences on Feb. 1. But that is, in fact, the case.

There's a good chance we will see the two best goaltenders in hockey to head to head, in Connor Hellebuyck against Logan Thompson. We all know about the Winnipeg goalie, but Thompson, who played junior in Brandon, has lost just twice in regulation this season. We marvel at the Jets' depth scoring, and then acknowledge that the Capitals have nine players with at least 10 goals.

Story continues below advertisement

And make no mistake about it, these two teams really are the best in the league. The No. 1 goal-scoring team? Winnipeg. No. 2? Washington. The best defensive team in the league? The Capitals. No. 2? The Jets.

Coyote...well, you get the idea.

And there are so many subplots to tomorrow's game.

At season's end, both Spencer Carbery and Scott Arniel will be finalists for the NHL's Coach of the Year.

There's the Great Chase for Alex Ovechkin, now just 19 goals behind Wayne Gretzky. Mark Schiefele now has 31 goals, more goals than any player on any of the teams participating in the Four Nations Face-off, and Pierre Luc Dubois, once scorned by Winnipeg and then by Los Angeles, is now a solid contributor for the Caps.

Winnipeg vs Washington. The Best in the West vs the Beasts of the East.

It certainly could be a Saturday to remember.'

TSN.ca

<https://www.tsn.ca/nhl/video/tsn-s-top-25-nhl-players-this-season-jets-make-their-mark-among-nhl-s-best~3072041>

TSN's Top 25 NHL Players This Season: Jets make their mark among NHL's best

Connor Hellebuyck gets most of the attention in Winnipeg but the Jets have four players featured in TSN's Top 25 NHL players this season, more than any other team. What does this tell us about this squad? How important is it for the team to make this season count with a Stanley Cup run? TSN Director of Scouting Craig Button and OverDrive host Bryan Hayes join Gino Reda to discuss this and more.

The Athletic

<https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/6100767/2025/02/01/winnipeg-jets-trade-targets-defencemen/>

Winnipeg Jets trade targets: Which defencemen could cement Stanley Cup contender status?

By Murat Ates

The NHL's upcoming salary cap increases are official now, based on a memo circulated by the league on Friday. The numbers are set to soar.

The upper limit is set to increase from \$88 million cap this season to \$95.5 million in 2025-26, followed by \$104 million in 2026-27 and \$113.5 million in 2027-28.

Winnipeg will be deeply affected by this. The UFA and RFA numbers we detailed for Nikolaj Ehlers, Dylan Samberg, Gabriel Vilardi and company are going to go even higher than our projections — while Winnipeg will have approximately \$40 million to work with this summer, according to PuckPedia.

The impact will be even more immediate. Trade targets with term left on their contracts are going to be even more valuable than we've projected — and the importance of term has been no secret. Kevin Cheveldayoff has been clear on that subject for years and never more direct about it than in his midseason address. That's why players like Ryan O'Reilly — signed for an extra year at just \$4.5 million — were given so much extra value in our forward trade targets earlier this week.

That theme re-emerges as we shift toward Jets targets on defence.

A contract signed in the flat cap era that still has years on it? That's artificially cheap compared to what comes next in the NHL — and it will be worth a premium as Cheveldayoff, Larry Simmons and company go to work between now and March 7.

We're focusing on the NHL's top available defencemen in today's piece, using Chris Johnston's latest trade board as our guide. What would Rasmus Ristolainen or Ivan Provorov look like on Winnipeg's roster? What about less likely options like Seth Jones, if the timing isn't right for him with Chicago's rebuild?

Well in advance of the deadline, it's time to explore all kinds of options to upgrade Winnipeg's defence corps.

David Savard, RD, Canadiens

Age: 34

Contract: \$3.5 million cap hit, UFA 2025

Usage: Third pair at five-on-five, first unit penalty kill

Production: 1 goal, 9 assists, 10 points in 44 games played

David Savard isn't the most exciting name on this list. It's unlikely that he would be an upgrade to Colin Miller, who should already be getting more time on Winnipeg's third pair than he is on this iteration of the Jets defence. Savard's reputation, though, is that of a shot-blocking warrior, and his 2021 Stanley Cup win as a playoff rental for Tampa Bay increases his appeal. Savard

played a third pairing role on that Cup-winning Lightning team and didn't win his minutes while averaging just 26 seconds per game on the penalty kill. He's not winning his third pairing minutes in Montreal, either, but has the veteran status and work ethic to garner interest as a No. 7 or No. 8 option.

Ivan Provorov, LD, Blue Jackets

Age: 28

Contract: \$4.7 million cap hit, UFA 2025

Usage: Second pair at five-on-five, second unit power play, first unit penalty kill

Production: 3 goals, 18 assists, 21 points in 50 games played

Ivan Provorov provides an option of a player whose on-ice impact might exceed the Jets' needs. The club should be familiar with Provorov, given his 2016 WHL championship with Brandon, and he's played some of his Blue Jackets minutes with Manitoban Denton Mateychuk. Beyond those trivia items, I don't believe he's a player of interest for Winnipeg.

Now, if Damon Severson were available, I think there would be interest. But Severson has a full-no-trade clause and five seasons left on his \$6.25 million contract after this one.

Seth Jones, RD, Blackhawks

Age: 30

Contract: \$9.5 million cap hit, full no-movement clause, UFA 2030

Usage: First pair at five-on-five, first unit power play, first unit penalty kill

Production: 5 goals, 18 assists, 23 points in 33 games played

I seem to be alternating less-than-ideal fits with moonshots. Seth Jones falls into the latter category — a player thought to be untouchable in Chicago and whose full no-movement clause lowers the odds of a Jets acquisition.

So why talk about him?

Jones' defensive game has improved in Chicago, helping turn his five-on-five and power play offensive prowess into quality all-around performance. He's been part of the solution when on the ice, despite the Blackhawks' years of struggles, and his special teams impacts have been legitimately good. There are five-on-five defensive lapses that bring pause and I think Jones' impact in Winnipeg would be smaller than it is in Chicago — especially on a team with Josh Morrissey taking top power-play duties — but he can still help.

I don't think he's a \$9.5 million player under the current \$88 million cap ceiling, but Jones is signed for five seasons after this one. He would be an upgrade on Neal Pionk, whose contract is projected to approach \$7 million under the new cap, according to AFP Analytics. Jones' case is one where the rising cap changes my perception of player value, but even then: I think that \$9.5 million will be too much for what he brings. The ideal fit is probably not with Winnipeg but with a team that can give him No. 1 power-play time and let him run.

Rasmus Ristolainen, RD, Flyers

Age: 30

Contract: \$5.1 million cap hit, UFA 2027

Usage: Second pair at five-on-five, first unit penalty kill

Production: 2 goals, 13 assists, 15 points in 52 games played

Philadelphia has recently promoted Rasmus Ristolainen to its top power play, a move which makes me a bit cynical about his value. Isn't that something a team looking to inflate a player's production would do? He hasn't been a consistent top-unit guy since he played for Buffalo (and that version of Ristolainen was an overworked defensive liability).

The Ristolainen that's playing in Philadelphia right now has retooled his defensive game and that's what makes him a legitimate player of interest. Ristolainen doesn't abandon coverage to chase hits anymore and keeps a clean defensive zone as a result. He makes smarter use of his 6-foot-4 frame now, winning battles on the boards and in front of the net.

Here's Hockey Viz's heatmap, showing where teams get more — or less — shots through when Ristolainen is on the ice:

It may be that \$5.1 million was too much to pay Ristolainen with an \$82.5 million cap maximum. With the cap going up as much as it is, Ristolainen's two extra years' worth of contract is less of a liability: his \$5.1 million is the same percentage of a \$95.5 million cap that a \$4.7 million contract is of this season's \$88 million maximum.

Cody Ceci, RD, Sharks

Age: 31

Contract: \$3.25 million cap hit, UFA 2025

Usage: First pair at five-on-five, first unit penalty kill

Production: 4 goals, 11 assists, 15 points in 53 games played

Cody Ceci has never been an analytical darling. His most impressive years show a few years of adequate top-four impact surrounded by third pairing performance or worse — including for the Sharks right now.

But Ceci's best years aren't particularly far behind him. The 6-foot-3 right-shot played a much bigger role for the 2024 Cup finalist Oilers than Savard did for the 2021 Lightning. Ceci didn't win his five-on-five minutes, either, but he played them against top-six forward competition and was a big part of the Oilers' successful penalty kill. It seems possible that Ceci could deliver value on the PK while succeeding in a third-pairing role at even strength.

I think his impact would be well clear of Savard's but behind that of Ristolainen. It's faint praise but still relevant: I see Miller as a viable third-pairing right-handed defenceman, but the Jets don't always use him as such. If they picked up a player like Ceci, I think he'd handle the third-pairing job just fine.

Ryan Lindgren, LD, Rangers

Age: 26

Contract: \$4.5 million cap hit, UFA 2025

Usage: Second pair at five-on-five, first unit penalty kill

Production: 2 goals, 10 assists, 12 points in 45 games played

Ryan Lindgren's decline in performance has been part of the problem in New York. Shayna Goldman broke down those struggles earlier this season, noting his injury history and ultimately concluding that Lindgren needed to simplify his play.

The reasons for his decline aren't clear, however, and the Rangers have been enough of a mess for me to think the problems go beyond one player. I'll put this one on the Jets' pro scouts.

If they were able to identify the areas where Lindgren is struggling and make an accurate assessment of how his performance could translate to Winnipeg, they'd have a better instinct as to his diamond-in-the-rough potential than I do. In the meantime, Lindgren is one of many Rangers who have been playing better during a 6-2-2 run. It's easy for me to imagine the heart-and-soul, physical defenceman delivering a better impact on Winnipeg's third pair than he does while playing tougher minutes in New York. He's a pending UFA without trade protection.

K'Andre Miller, LD, Rangers

Age: 24

Contract: \$3.8 million cap hit, RFA 2025

Usage: First pair at five-on-five, second unit power play, second unit penalty kill

Production: 3 goals, 8 assists, 11 points in 44 games played

K'Andre Miller is the only pending restricted free agent on this list. If you ask me, the fact that he's under team control dramatically reduces the likelihood that he's moved. The Rangers have a lot of good players despite their struggles so, if there's a problem, why not trade the pending UFAs and retool with quality young players like the 24-year-old Miller?

That said, Miller is 6-foot-5, good in transition, and has played more of his minutes against elite competition than any other full-time Rangers defenceman. There's a lot to like if he could be pried free, although one wonders where his long-term fit would be on a team with Morrissey and Samberg on the left side.

Brian Dumoulin, LD, Ducks

Age: 33

Contract: \$3.15 million cap hit, UFA 2025

Usage: Second pair at five-on-five, second unit penalty kill

Production: 0 goals, 12 assists, 12 points in 50 games played

Brian Dumoulin is a two-time Stanley Cup champion who hasn't been able to help the Ducks stay afloat in his minutes this season. The appeal comes from size, mobility, two Cup rings from a long time ago and an analytical wrinkle: Anaheim has been bad with Dumoulin on the ice and a lot worse with him on the bench. If he's doing anything at all to stem the tide in heavy usage on a bad team, Dumoulin could be perfectly adequate on Winnipeg's third pair.

Mario Ferraro, LD, Sharks

Age: 26

Contract: \$3.25 million cap hit, UFA 2026

Usage: Second pair at five-on-five, first unit penalty kill

Production: 5 goals, 6 assists, 11 points in 53 games played

Mario Ferraro broke into the NHL on the Sharks team that traded Brenden Dillon to Washington and has blocked the 18th most shots in the league since that time.

This isn't automatically a good thing — in many cases, it's an indication that a player is spending too much — but Ferraro's a gamer who is willing to put himself on the line for his team. He's underwater as a top-four defenceman on the Sharks but a decent bet to upgrade Winnipeg's third pair, as are many players on this list. Ferraro's \$3.25 million contract has one year left after this one.

Connor Murphy, RD, Blackhawks

Age: 31

Contract: \$4.4 million cap hit, 10-team no-trade-clause, UFA 2026

Usage: Second pair at five-on-five, second unit penalty kill

Production: 1 goal, 12 assists, 13 points in 38 games played

Connor Murphy is about to return to action after missing 13 games this season — and 36 games in 2023-24 — due to a recurring injury condition called osteitis pubis.

Nothing about that sentence screams “must add” at the trade deadline, but Murphy has been a strong contributor in Chicago when healthy. His underlying numbers are the best among Blackhawks defencemen (when adjusted for usage). The difference between Chicago with Murphy on the ice and without him is enormous, implying he has been one of the few players who’s worked out for the Blackhawks this year.

It’s nice when big defencemen with stay-at-home reputations suppress shots and make big hits, too. Murphy threads that needle, making him and his \$4.4 million AAV contract an appealing right-shot defenceman who has experience playing either side.

Cheveldayoff has done a great job of avoiding UFA overpayment in his career. It’s possible that I shouldn’t be as worried about soaring contracts in the new cap era as I am. I still think that acquiring players with term remaining could be one way of making his life a lot easier, given raises due to Vilardi, Samberg, and others — perhaps including Ehlers, definitely including Kyle Connor — in the years to come.

That’s one of the reasons I’d prefer a Ristolainen-type acquisition to patchwork like Savard or Ceci. Leaving MacKenzie Weegar off the list leaves a pang in the name of realism: Calgary seems to be all-in on him. Beyond that, the widely discussed names don’t immediately appear to be rich in the “fit” that Cheveldayoff prioritizes so highly. The big names like Jones don’t seem realistic (or ideal, given the amount of his value that comes from the power play.) Capable top-four options like Murphy (and once-capable options like Lindgen) come with injury concerns, while Miller seems like the player New York should keep.

If there’s a big swing coming on defence — bigger than Ristolainen, that is — Cheveldayoff might have to deliver a surprise.