

Winnipeg Free Press

<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/sports/2025/02/20/this-is-one-of-the-best-places-to-play>

'This is one of the best places to play'

Jets defend Winnipeg after anonymous poll finds city tops many players' no-trade lists

By: Mike McIntyre

First place in the NHL standings. Dead last in desirability.

Such is the perplexing state of the Winnipeg Jets these days, the team finds itself the butt of plenty of jokes after a recent anonymous player poll dumped all over the league's smallest market. The Athletic surveyed 111 skaters and a whopping 48.7 per cent said our little neck of the woods would be No. 1 on their no-trade list.

Buffalo was a very distant second at 19.51 per cent. San Jose was third (8.54 per cent) while Calgary and Ottawa (both at 3.66 per cent) rounded out the top five.

All of which raises an obvious question: If this is such a godforsaken place to play, why do so many opt to stay here long-term? Are they brainwashed? Suffering from Stockholm Syndrome?

We went looking for answers on Thursday, going through the Jets dressing room to speak with multiple players who had the opportunity to get out of Dodge only to double down and decide to plant even deeper roots by re-signing with the organization.

Dylan DeMelo rarely drops the gloves on the ice, with two career NHL fights to his good name. The veteran blue-liner was feeling pretty scrappy as he spoke off-the-cuff and straight from the heart about the sullied reputation of his current hockey home.

"I just feel like it's very narrow-minded," the 31-year-old from London, Ont., said of the poll results. "I feel like people who are coming to Winnipeg and overlooking it are missing out."

As DeMelo noted, the NHL lifestyle usually means a quick "in and out" of any particular city. Airport. Hotel. Arena. Rinse. Repeat.

"They're not getting a true representation of the city," said DeMelo, who was drafted by the San Jose Sharks in 2011, moved on to the Ottawa Senators in 2018 and was traded to Winnipeg in 2020.

A perfect example of that is one player saying Winnipeg's "bad food" was their biggest beef — a laughable notion for anyone who has spent any time here.

"If anybody needs food recommendations they can shoot me a text and I'll help them out. There's some great spots even around downtown, you don't even have to go far," said DeMelo.

"Obviously there are some things that are out of our control like the cold in winter and the taxes compared to other cities, but for me, this is such a fun place to play and live. Our kids are growing up in the community, the team is great, the organization is top-class. You see obviously we've been able to retain key players, a lot of players."

Indeed they have. DeMelo was a pending unrestricted free agent a year ago, coming off a career-best season both personally and for his defence partner, Josh Morrissey. Rather than test the waters to see what 31 other teams might offer him, he opted to re-sign with the Jets before July 1 at a very reasonable US \$4.9 million per season.

So, too, did Nino Niederreiter, who joined the Jets in a 2023 trade and then signed a three-year contract extension last season rather than see if the grass might be greener somewhere else.

“This is a way better city than a lot of people think it is,” said Niederreiter. “I feel like this poll is not fair for the city. Obviously you can’t change the weather, and that’s probably not the best-case scenario to be here. For a visiting team, you go to the hotel, you go to the rink and that’s about all you see. That’s not really fair.”

Sure, he comes from Switzerland, a place that is no stranger to cold and snow in the winter, but Niederreiter has very much embraced everything the city and province have to offer — even trying snowmobiling for the first time in December (and helping rescue a couple stranded motorists in the process).

“There’s a lot to do here, but a lot of teams, they are just in and out so they don’t see a lot of things,” he said.

“And it’s a tight-knit community here. You can tell the love they have for hockey, it’s always tremendous. The passion they have for us and the way they celebrate us when things are going well, and feel for us when things aren’t going well. It’s a cool city to play for.”

Goaltender Eric Comrie is part of a long list of drafted and developed players who remain in the organization. Connor Hellebuyck, the best goalie on the planet, signed a seven-year extension rather than test the free-agent waters. So did centre Mark Scheifele. Morrissey, Kyle Connor and Adam Lowry have done the same.

“I think people who do come and play here understand how much fun it is and how well they take care of you. When you play here it’s a whole different vibe,” said Comrie.

“First of all, the weather here is a lot better than people think it is. I see the sun every single day and I love it. We also have one of the best rooms in the league, I love every single one of these guys on this team. We have so much fun together.”

There’s another factor to consider as well, one which likely explains why Comrie’s hometown of Edmonton is no longer on the list. Star players (such as Connor McDavid) and success (the Oilers made it to the Stanley Cup Final last year) can quickly change a tune.

“I think some of the D playing on Team USA (at the 4 Nations Face-Off) are thinking, ‘Hmmm, playing in front of Helly is pretty good.’ I think a few might change their minds and say ‘Let’s all go to Winnipeg because we like playing in front of this guy, he’s pretty good.’”

As Comrie explained, players from other teams with no connection to Winnipeg are likely not seeing the city at its best if they are simply coming for 24-36 hours in the middle of winter to play a game.

“But if you’re winning, I think that’s going to change. People will want to start coming here,” said Comrie who also had had NHL stops in Buffalo, Detroit and New Jersey. “I truly believe this is

one of the best places to play. The people are unbelievable, the fans are unbelievable, and we are treated so well. It's top-notch."

Unfortunately for the Jets, perception can sometimes trump reality and head coach Scott Arniel has seen first-hand examples of players who have refused to come here during attempted trades and free agent signings. He admits Winnipeg can be a tough sell on some, at least at first.

"It goes back to when I played. But the biggest thing, honestly, is once a player does come here, they realize that it is special here," he said.

"We do everything first-class. We do not cut corners anywhere. How we travel, how we accommodate the guys here, all the amenities that are available to them, how we treat their families. It's just made it for the guys and their families so that when they do get here, if you just make it through a couple of these cold spells, everything else about it is great."

<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2025/02/20/samberg-flourishing-with-increased-ice-time-and-responsibilities>

Samberg flourishing with increased ice-time and responsibilities Jets D-man always adding to hockey knowledge

By: Ken Wiebe

When it comes to a question about where his hockey sense comes from, Dylan Samberg can't help being transported to the outdoor rinks of Hermantown, Minn.

The Winnipeg Jets defenceman has been praised numerous times this NHL season for his ability to anticipate where the puck is about to go — and that's one of the many qualities that has allowed him to make a dramatic jump up the depth chart onto the second pairing with Neal Pionk.

"A lot of it came from just playing," said Samberg, when asked if studying was at the root of his high hockey IQ. "We had outdoor ice and we were there every day. After school, we would skate for two hours on the outdoor rink with everyone, go inside for practice and come back out and skate for a couple more hours and then our parents would pick us up at eight or nine o'clock.

"Just playing so much hockey over the years. At this point in my career, I feel like I've seen everything, but every day there's something new that you can learn."

Samberg will continue his learning process as the Jets return to action Saturday in St. Louis against the Blues.

"I'd say it's just from looking at other guys' tendencies. Some guys have different tells, whether it be their upper body or their eyes or what-not — or just the way that they point their stick. Small little things that you pick up," said Samberg. "Sometimes, you'll see a rush coming at you and be like, 'I've seen this rush before. I've seen one guy go this way and one guy go this way.' A lot of it is quick thinking, not so much studying guys, but remembering from past experiences."

Heading into this season, the departure of Brenden Dillon to the New Jersey Devils in free agency left the Jets with a big vacancy on the second pairing.

Dillon not only delivered the most goals (eight) of his career, but he was a leader and physical force on a Jets' defence that didn't have an abundance of size even before he left.

One of the reasons the Jets didn't make a bigger push to keep Dillon around was that they felt it was time for Samberg to take on an expanded role.

He had graduated to full-time duty on the third pairing after the Jets chose him in the second round of the 2017 NHL Draft, playing mostly with Nate Schmidt (who also departed after the Jets bought out the final year of his contract) last season while averaging 15:38 of ice-time per game.

How Samberg handled the promotion was going to have a major impact on the Jets' fortunes and as it turns out, he's proven to be ready for his close-up.

Samberg is averaging just over 21 minutes per game this season — up nearly five-and-a-half minutes from 2023-24 — and he's flourishing.

Known more for his ability to defend, Samberg has upped his offensive game as well — already producing a career-high four goals to go along with 13 points in 35 games this season.

"I've always relied on my defence for most of my game," said Samberg. "With more minutes and playing with these top lines on our team, we're asked to join the rush more and build on the offensive side. Obviously it's not at the Pionk or (Josh) Morrissey level, but it's building. Hopefully, someday I get to that point, but if not, I'm trying to build that (part of his game) and create as much offence as I can."

Had he not missed 23 games with a fractured foot, Samberg likely would have eclipsed his career-high for points (18) as well.

"He's always been super steady. He's actually got more offensive upside than a lot of people think," said Jets goalie Eric Comrie, who also played with Samberg when he was a member of the Manitoba Moose in the American Hockey League. "He's just so steady. On the PK, he's a calming force back there. He does so much for us. I know that when he is on the ice, I feel very safe."

There are plenty of reasons Comrie — and Connor Hellebuyck — feel safe when Samberg is on the ice.

According to Natural Stat Trick, Samberg has been on the ice for 34 goals for and 23 goals against at five-on-five, while the Jets have generated 288 scoring chances, while surrendering 239 (54.65 per cent).

Along with his hockey sense, Samberg shows no fear whatsoever when it comes to blocking shots.

In 35 games this season, Samberg has 44 blocks, including the one from Nashville Predators forward Steven Stamkos in November that put him on the shelf for 23 games.

"You have to be willing to do it," said Pionk. "If you look at the best shot blockers in the league, the willingness is there and then there's a bit of a technique to it as far as timing (goes). Timing

and if you're in the lane. If you go down too early, good players are going to pump it around you, fake it, pull it around you. Then it's too late and you missed it already."

When asked about his shot-blocking prowess, Samberg simply shrugs it off as an important part of the job, even if it's an occupational hazard.

"I did love playing street hockey as a goalie. Anytime I could strap on the pads, I loved to do it," said Samberg, who won a pair of NCAA Frozen Four championships with the University of Minnesota-Duluth Bulldogs. "It could come from that. I don't know. It's part of the things you've got to do on the PK or as a defenceman, one of the sacrifices you have to make."

Samberg was quick to credit Pionk with helping him adjust to the enhanced role, but he hasn't allowed complacency to sneak into his game either.

"You're not guaranteed that. One day you're playing in the top-four and the next day, you could quickly and easily be moved to the third pair or be out (of the lineup)," said Samberg. "You've got to make sure that every day you're working your hardest and continuing to build and grow."

Pionk, who also hails from Hermantown (which is just outside Duluth, Minn.), isn't the least bit surprised to see Samberg taking such a big step forward this season.

"I just let him run. I've seen him play at the high school, junior, college level, even the pro level. I know he can do it, it was just a matter of him doing it with confidence and doing it," said Pionk, asked if he offered any advice to Samberg. "The biggest jump is with his confidence in breaking up pucks. The puck will get dumped in his corner and sure, he'll slide it over me and make a simple play, but once in a while he'll just shake a guy by himself and make a stretch pass. Little stuff like that."

Winnipeg Sun

<https://winnipeg.sun.com/sports/hockey/even-arizona-is-buzzing-over-canada-usa-showdown-hawerchuk>

Even Arizona is buzzing over Canada-USA showdown: Hawerchuk

By Paul Friesen

The state of Arizona isn't known for hockey, most recently making headlines as the last place to watch an NHL franchise pull up stakes and move out.

Yet it seems tonight's 4 Nations tournament final between Canada and the U.S. is even causing a buzz down in the desert.

That observation comes from Eric Hawerchuk, son of Dale Hawerchuk, the late Winnipeg Jets legend.

"I have been living in Arizona for 12 years," Hawerchuk posted on social media on Thursday. "Never before have I heard more people here talk about a hockey game than USA vs Canada tonight. This could be one of, if not, the most watched hockey game in the history of the sport."

Hawerchuk, living in Scottsdale, says from what he's heard, the interest isn't tied to the political climate – US President Donald Trump's threats to make Canada the 51st state – but about the hockey.

The fireworks from the earlier matchup between the two hasn't hurt, either.

In a follow-up text message, Hawerchuk says the fierce patriotism on display reminds him of what his father used to tell him.

“Something my dad used to say when he would play in big games, was to play for the logo on the front and not the name on the back. I think that's what those boys on both teams will be doing tonight and it's gonna make for an incredible hockey game.

“Everyone here is really excited... which is great for the sport.”

Thursday's game has its work cut out for it to match the all-time high of 34.2 American million viewers for the “Miracle on Ice” – team USA's win over Russia in the 1980 Olympic semifinal.

Next up for American viewership is the U.S.-Finland gold-medal game that year, at 32.8 million.

Ranked No. 3 is the Canada-USA Olympic final in 2010, with 27.6 million viewers in the U.S.. Add the 16.7 million average audience in Canada and you get a North American total of 44.3 million.

Last Saturday's Canada-U.S. game at the 4 Nations event drew 10.1 million North American TV viewers, according to the NHL.

Three fights at the start has fans from Arizona to Manitoba wondering what they'll do for an encore.

“There are two countries now that are really excited about it,” Jets head coach Scott Arniel said. “That game last week, really the popularity, not just from people in hockey – you're seeing it from other athletes in other sports saying, ‘Did you catch that game? That was wild. Love hockey.’

“Everyone is waiting to see what happens in this one.”

Arniel, a close friend and former teammate of Dale Hawerchuk, had his own ultimate patriotic hockey moment at the 1982 World Junior Championship in Minnesota: a tilt with Czechoslovakia that earned Team Canada the gold medal.

“Those elimination games, when it becomes winner-take-all, it is a special moment,” he said. “Listening to the comments of the players, these guys that haven't won Stanley Cups... that's how they feel about this game tonight. They know how important it is not only to themselves but their families, their countries.

“It just drives up the anticipation of the game and the pride that's in each and every one of those players.”

<https://winnipeg.sun.com/sports/in-wake-of-bobby-hull-cte-diagnosis-jets-players-weigh-risks-rewards-of-violent-game>

In wake of Bobby Hull CTE diagnosis, Jets players weigh risks, rewards, of violent game

By Paul Friesen

The news rippled through the hockey world this week, landing with a bit more of a thud in Winnipeg: Bobby Hull, the Golden Jet, had CTE when he died.

The diagnosis came from Boston University's CTE Center and was announced by the Concussion Legacy Foundation, an advocacy organization, on Wednesday.

Hull's family donated his brain to the university's CTE Center after he passed away in 2023 at age 84.

"He insisted on donating his brain, feeling as though it was his duty to help advance research on this agonizing disease," Hull's wife of 39 years, Deborah, said in a statement by the Foundation.

Symptoms of the degenerative brain disease linked to concussions were part of Hull's life for his last 10 years, the statement read.

The man who put Manitoba on the pro hockey map is the most high-profile former NHLer to be diagnosed with chronic traumatic encephalopathy.

In Winnipeg, current Jets defenceman Haydn Fleury was paying attention.

"I've had my fair share," Fleury said on Thursday, referring to the four concussions he's been diagnosed with during his eight-year NHL career. "I've had two bad ones, and both ended my year. It's our job, but we can't play forever. And we've got a long life to live after we're done playing, so you want to be in the best position you can be... in retirement."

Fleury's most recent brain injury came last April, when he ran into an official while playing for Tampa Bay. Given his history, the 28-year-old goes out of his way to stay on top of the latest research around the disease. So he also saw the results of a Boston University CTE Center study released in December.

The largest study of deceased hockey players to date, it found more than half of the 77 brains it examined, from youth players to professionals, had CTE.

Even more troubling: Of the 28 who played professionally, 27 had the disease, including 18 of 19 who played in the NHL. Hull was one of them.

The research also concluded the odds of developing CTE increase by 34 percent with every additional year of playing.

"That's scary numbers," Jets forward David Gustafsson said. "I want to believe that the game and the helmets are so developed right now that we have better protection of our heads and our brains. The game was a lot different back then, too. Probably a lot more hits to the head than there is now."

“But it’s still a scary number.”

Hull was a scorer, not a fighter or hitter. He didn’t wear a helmet, but that doesn’t always matter.

Gustafsson, 24, suffered the first concussion of his career this season when he was knocked cold in a fight with Boston’s Trent Frederic in December. The punch he took was to his jaw, but it rattled his brain enough to leave him unconscious. Concussions can also be caused by whiplash.

While Gustafsson says he doesn’t walk around worrying about the potential long-term effects of his job, he’s not blissfully ignorant of them, either.

“Guys are different,” he said. “I want to know what I’m getting into, what could possibly happen and what I can do to protect myself from concussions. And what to do to help your brain heal from it. There’s a lot of new info coming out the last few years that you can really benefit off if you actually learn about it.

“If you play hockey, you’re putting your body on the line. Something might happen. You know that going in. Hopefully you have fun enough that you want to do it.”

Weighing the risks with the rewards, Gustafsson and Fleury take what steps they can. There are vitamins and supplements for brain health. They both work on strengthening their necks.

“I’ll be doing those things for the rest of my life,” Fleury said.

Perhaps as importantly as anything, they don’t play the tough-guy act when they’re hurt, taking the time to heal.

“Nobody can see it,” Fleury said. “It’s not a broken bone. Every single one is different. You see guys bounce back really quick, you see some that linger. It’s such a personal thing. Hockey players are really proud people. We don’t want to be out with anything.”

Fleury says the game has come a long way in its culture. Players and coaches never question a teammate who’s not feeling right upstairs.

“They’re really careful about your head and concussions,” Gustafsson said of the Jets’ approach. “All the testing and scans that we’re doing, it’s a lot. It’s really taken seriously here.”

The rules have changed since Hull’s days, too. Players who make head contact will likely find themselves suspended.

As for the equipment, players get their heads digitally scanned for the ideal helmet fit.

NHL commissioner Gary Bettman still hasn’t acknowledged there’s a connection between the game and CTE, a “charade” the Concussion Legacy Foundation wants to see end.

“NHL families deserve to know that CTE can be a consequence of the head impacts they receive while playing the game,” Chris Nowinski, head of the Foundation, said as part of the release on Hull. “The NHL still shamelessly refuses to acknowledge this scientific truth, so we hope this message reaches current players so that they, at a minimum, can play with informed consent.”

In Winnipeg, at least two of them are doing just that.

In Hull's era, they didn't get that chance.

Winnipegjets.com

<https://www.nhl.com/jets/news/americans-confident-with-hellebuyck-behind-them>

Three things - McDavid delivers at 4 Nations Hellebuyck makes 24 saves for Americans in 3-2 OT loss

By Jamie Thomas

BOSTON MA- Canada is on top of the hockey world again after beating the United States 3-2 in overtime at the 4 Nations Face-Off championship at TD Garden. Connor McDavid scored the winning goal at 8:18 of overtime to give Canada its fourth straight win at a best-on-best tournament. McDavid was named the championship game MVP and Nathan MacKinnon was given tournament MVP honours.

MCDavid OT HERO

The United States had done a great job containing the world's best player throughout the night as McDavid had just two shots on goal heading into the extra period. But in overtime, Cale Makar rimmed the puck around the board into the corner where Mitch Marner grabbed it, spotted McDavid in the slot and he wristed a shot over Connor Hellebuyck's glove to end the game.

"Really exciting. Just found a way. I thought everyone played solid," said McDavid.

"I wasn't great all night, but we just found a way tonight."

HELLEBUYCK CLOSE TO CHAMPIONSHIP

The Jets goaltender came into the championship game having allowed just two goals in the two games he appeared in. Hellebuyck made 24 saves in the defeat and came close to becoming the first goaltender since Mike Richter in 1996 to lead the USA to victory at a best-on-best event.

"This is a tight group. Quickly, it got to be a tight group," said Hellebuyck.

"It would have been real nice win this one and celebrate it with this group."

Hellebuyck is the front runner for the Vezina Trophy and is in the conversation for the Hart Trophy as well. His American teammates were in awe of his performance over the past eight days.

"Best player in the world in my opinion. You got a guy like that back there, X-factor and he's so calm," said Dylan Larkin.

"I know he's kicking himself right now but like I said before, this will make this group stronger, and it will make Helle stronger."

NO GO FOR MORRISSEY, CONNOR

Josh Morrissey was a late scratch for Canada, and it was revealed by GM Don Sweeney that the Jets defenceman woke up from his nap and wasn't feeling well. Morrissey was replaced by Thomas Harley.

As for Kyle Connor, he was scratched from the lineup even though he leads all American born players with 30 goals in the NHL. Chris Kreider went in for Connor on the U.S. fourth line with Vincent Trocheck and Brock Nelson.

Yahoo Sports

<https://ca.sports.yahoo.com/news/jets-goaltender-proves-world-himself-130717543.html>

Jets Goaltender Proves To The World And Himself That He Can Perform On The Big Stage

By Julian Gaudio

Winnipeg Jets goaltender Connor Hellebuyck has faced his fair share of criticism throughout his career and most recently after the Jets' early exit in the playoffs last year for "crumbling" under the pressure of big games.

Hellebuyck was named USA's No.1 goaltender at the 4 Nations Face-Off, and they were going to live and die by his performances. The decision paid off for USA HC Mike Sullivan, as Hellebuyck was elite from start to finish. In three starts, the 31-year-old finished with a 2-1-0 record, posting a .932 SV% and a 1.59 GAA.

Although the stats look great, Hellebuyck followed it up by coming up with clutch saves.

In the tournament opener, the Jets netminder let in a weak shot to give Finland a 1-0 lead but quickly shut the door en route to a 6-1 win. Against Canada in the round-robin, Hellebuyck allowed just one goal on 26 shots. In the final, a rematch against Canada, Hellebuyck once again did everything in his power to keep the Americans in it.

The Americans outshot the Canadians 33-27 and carried the play in the third period and overtime, but Canada was timely with their chances. Nathan MacKinnon's icebreaker was a shot that found the top corner through a maze of bodies. Sam Bennett's was another shot placed with pinpoint accuracy and Connor McDavid, the leagues best player was left wide open in the slot and put everything he had into the shot.

Ultimately, Hellebuyck won't be happy with the result. No player wants to lose any game, let alone the most highly anticipated final between the USA and Canada. No amount of praise he'll receive will make him feel any better about the loss, but the steps Hellebuyck needed to take to prove to himself and others that he can be the goaltender to get the Jets to where they want to be were there.

The two-time Vezina Trophy winner already had an abundance of confidence, but his performance at the 4 Nations Face-Off should only increase it.