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Cool, Comrie and collected

Jets backup reaps rewards of staying positive and staying sharp with consecutive wins

By: Ken Wiebe

As he stood in front of a circle of reporters, grinning from ear to ear and oozing with enthusiasm, it came as little surprise Eric Comrie spent the bulk of his interview time praising others.

It's not that the Winnipeg Jets backup goalie wasn't relishing the moment after turning aside 29 shots to record his first NHL shutout in nearly two years, the thing about Comrie is that he's always complimenting those around him.

On a evening when he was the first star after blanking the Carolina Hurricanes 3-0 on Tuesday night, Comrie went through a lengthy laundry list of those who needed to be saluted.

Matt Prefontaine for being the "Connor McDavid of video coaches,"

Nino Niederreiter for blocking a shot late in the first period and for taking all the extra time to help keep him sharp between starts.

Even giving praise to goalie partner Connor Hellebuyck for doing his part to help inform the league office about the view from inside the crease on goalie interference through a powerpoint presentation that was done in the "pre-Coms era" — Comrie was heartfelt and genuine in every plaudit he dished out.

For a guy who recently powered through an eight-game winless skid (0-7-1) that had more to do with a lack of offence provided by the highest-scoring team in the NHL, it would have been relatively easy for Comrie to wonder when the goals would come.

That's just not the way that Comrie is wired.

While Jets players belaboured the fact they'd let their backup down on numerous occasions, Comrie kept up his positive attitude and simply put in the work.

"Hockey's a funny game," said Comrie. "You get run support, you don't get run support. It's not my business to worry about that stuff. It's my job to worry about playing my game and controlling my controlables, and I try and do that every single day."

Comrie closed out the session talking about the work that gets done before and after practice, given the lengthy stretches between starts, then paid homage to the fan base that celebrated when the clock hit zero after the shutout was secured.

"I love playing here," said Comrie. "I always come back, right? For the fans."

The Jets, who are riding a seven-game winning streak, face the New York Islanders on Friday at Canada Life Centre in what will be the final game before the break for the 4 Nations Face-Off.

Comrie's shutout bid was nearly gone with 4:23 left in the first period, when Jackson Blake's seeing-eye wrist shot through traffic found the back of the net.

With Jets defenceman Neal Pionk and Hurricanes forward Mikko Rantanen battling around the blue paint, it was one of those goals where the goalie wasn't at fault — even if the shot didn't come from a high-danger area.

By the way Comrie reacted, you got the sense he felt something was amiss.

Moments later, Jets head coach Scott Arniel chose to use a coach's challenge for goalie interference.

One of the angles used for the replay showed Rantanen's stick engaging with Comrie's, which impacted his ability to stay square to the shot — and after video review, the goal was taken off the board.

"I was pretty certain. The league's done a pretty good job of knowing what's black and white now, a better understanding," said Comrie. "The best they can. I mean it's still a judgment call at the end of the day. They're doing the best they can. I understand there's going to be some where you don't agree with and some you do agree with."

There was no argument with this call and it opened the door for Comrie to record his third NHL shutout in what was his 70th appearance and 66th start.

Tuesday marked the 13th start of the campaign for Comrie and he's back on track to hit or exceed the 20 he was expected to make after he edged out Kaapo Kahkonen for the second spot on the depth chart during training camp.

"Because with a guy like Connor I don't play as much as some guys, so I have to stay ready (in a different way)," said Comrie, noting that's where the work he puts in on and off the ice with goalie coach Wade Flaherty and the side sessions with Niederreiter come in handy.

Even when a team has an elite workhorse starter like Hellebuyck, the value of having a quality backup cannot be overstated.

The Jets had the luxury of employing Laurent Brossoit last season and he put together an incredible season.

By most measures, he was the best backup goalie in the NHL (though Anthony Stolarz gave him a run for the title).

Although he didn't formally get his name on the Jennings Trophy, Jets players and coaches recognized how important a role Brossoit played in being the team that allowed the fewest goals in the NHL.

Brossoit's individual numbers were phenomenal, including a 15-5-2 record, a 2.00 goals-against average and .927 save percentage in 23 games (including 22 starts).

It was always going to be nearly impossible for Comrie to match those stats, but he's done an excellent job of bridging the gap — especially after posting consecutive victories to get his record to 5-7-1.

If you look a little deeper, Comrie has shaved nearly a half a goal off his goals-against average (down to 2.58) during the past several weeks and raised his save percentage to .912 (which is 12 points above the league average).

Any way you slice it, Comrie has done his part to give his team a chance to win almost every single start that he's made so far.

To be clear, Comrie isn't simply on the roster for the positive energy he brings to the rink on a daily basis.

He's also getting the job done.

With a bit more offensive support, Comrie's record could easily be above .500.

Even the affable Comrie conceded there was an element of frustration that crept in during the winless skid, but that only makes him appreciate the ability to reap the rewards when the wins are recorded.

"Results are always fun to get, aren't they? We're always worrying about the process to get the result," said Comrie. "When you get the results you've got to make sure you celebrate the results. Make sure you understand you worked hard for that and can achieve that and did the best you can. It just builds trust in yourself and trust in your game and trust in your process.

"You just have to trust that when you're doing stuff the right way that you will get rewarded and I think the last couple of games I've been rewarded very nicely."

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<https://winnipeg.sun.com/sports/hockey/nhl/winnipeg-jets/time-for-jets-to-spit-out-this-piece-of-thrashers-history>

Time for Jets to spit out this piece of Thrashers history

By Paul Friesen

The Winnipeg Jets cancelled their scheduled Wednesday practice, leaving just one commitment for players and coaches: The annual gala dinner that night.

We'll take advantage of the extra time to chew on a few noteworthy items as they reach the 55-game mark.

Mark, as in Scheifele, the Jets No. 55, missed his chance to set a franchise record for goals on Tuesday during his team's 3-0 win over Carolina, but it won't take long before he bumps Ilya Kovalchuk from that spot.

Kovalchuk remains a reminder of this franchise's mundane history in Atlanta, a period that can't be buried deeply enough for many Jets fans.

At times on Tuesday it seemed players were pushing to set up Scheifele so he could reach the milestone at home.

Their head coach disagreed.

"I don't think there's anything going down that road," Scott Arniel said. "It'll happen when it happens. I haven't seen it yet where everybody's deferring and trying to get him the puck. If we're later in the year ... you might see it."

For now, Scheifele remains stuck on 328, his next shot at the record to come against the New York Islanders on Friday, also at home.

It's definitely on the minds of teammates, even if it hasn't translated to their sticks.

"Very happy for him to be right on that doorstep," his good friend Josh Morrissey said going into that Tuesday game. "He won't talk about a lot himself, but it's very meaningful to him. You think back about the Jets returning to Winnipeg and he's the first draft pick. He's done so many great things for the city and the team on the ice. He's got that nice long contract, so he'll be here to extend on all those records ... it's awesome. He's earned it."

HISTORIC PACE

A seven-game win streak has the Jets on pace to set a high-water mark for points in a season, with 117. That would be seven more than last season and three more than they recorded in 2017-18.

Perhaps more notably, they're clicking at a rate of 33.8 percent on the power play, which, if they sustain it, would be the best mark in NHL history, or at least since the league started tracking it in the late 1970s.

Edmonton set the record two years ago, with a 32.4 percent success rate.

Improving Winnipeg's odds of keeping it going: The recent success of their second unit, which scored both power-play goals against Carolina.

"The mindset is that if it's a faceoff, we're attacking," Arniel said. "If it's an entry, we're trying to attack. That group, they all can make plays and that's what you're seeing. I like that their mindset is to attack."

Alex Iafallo set up Nino Niederreiter for one goal against the Hurricanes, Niederreiter and Cole Perfetti picking up assists on defenceman Neal Pionk's goal on the next power play.

"Our first unit is elite," Niederreiter said, referring to the Scheifele-Kyle Connor-Gabe Vilardi-Nik Ehlers foursome, with Josh Morrissey on the point. "It's a lot of great players making great passes. It definitely looks a lot prettier than what we do."

Unit 2 has to make do with the leftovers, often with limited time left in opposing team's penalties.

"We take a lot of pride in the minutes we get," Niederreiter said. "We know we can't take it for granted, so whenever we get out there we want to do the best with it. If it's changing momentum or getting a goal, we've done a pretty good job."

LINE 2 IN SYNC

Another positive development for the Jets has been the improved play of the second line, centred by Vlad Namestnikov, with Ehlers and Perfetti on the wings.

Arniel credits how much they study video and communicate.

“Now they’re up and running and you can tell they’re in sync with each other,” the coach said. “I really see it when they get in the offensive zone, how they make those 10-foot passes to each other and scissor-cycle ... they use the three of them close together and somehow they come out of that pileup and there’s one of them going to the net all by himself, and somebody gets a real good look.”

Namestnikov has eight points in his last seven games, Ehlers seven in his last six, Perfetti eight in six.

Perhaps the best thing about all four of his lines is the work-ethic standard Arniel has seen them set.

“It’s just been building during the last two-and-a-half years,” he said. “It’s something that you’re trying to implement, the buy-in from everybody, that everybody plays the same way when we don’t have the puck. The skill set is different for everyone, but we try to do a lot of similar things.”