

Winnipeg Free Press

<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2025/03/12/fleury-always-ready-for-the-big-stage>

Fleury always ready for the big stage

Jets blue-liner didn't miss a beat in return to lineup

By: Ken Wiebe

You start with equal parts scar tissue and perspective that isn't available until you travel a long and often meandering road.

For Haydn Fleury, getting comfortable with his lot in life has sometimes been an arduous journey, but it remains a fulfilling one.

Fleury is enjoying something of a renaissance season with the Winnipeg Jets that has included its own set of highs and lows, ranging from a regular spot in the lineup for a good chunk of the first half of the season and even a bump onto the second defence pairing when an injury sidelined Dylan Samberg for an extended period of time.

In December, Fleury had Neal Pionk as a partner and even found himself on the ice in overtime for some three-on-three action in multiple games.

Since suffering a lower-body injury on what appeared to be an innocent play against the Toronto Maple Leafs on Dec. 23 his fortunes have changed

Fleury missed a month with the lower-body injury and suited up in only three games during the past month before getting back in the lineup on Tuesday against the New York Rangers.

"Self confidence, taking care of what I have to take care of," Fleury said Wednesday. "I can't control if I play or not. I can control what I do when I'm at the rink to stay ready. That's what I try to focus on. Obviously, you want to play every game but for a lot of guys in this league, that's not the case. So what can you do to stay ready for when you do get that call?"

That's a whole lot of conditioning skates and not a lot of game action to try and stay up to speed at a time of the season when both the intensity and level of play is on the rise.

As important as work ethic is in this case, having the proper attitude is critical to handle the emotional toll of being in and out of the lineup.

“I’ve dealt with some injuries and that’s something I’ve learned to deal with — and how to come back and what I have to do to come back off of long stretches,” said Fleury, who has six assists in 36 games with the Jets this season. “What’s given me success is the preparation before the game. There’s always going to be things coming back from injury where there’s a little bit of rust on the ice but I do my best to avoid that as best I can.”

After the arrival of Luke Schenn in a deadline-day deal, Jets head coach Scott Arniel tapped Fleury on the shoulder to play with him on the third pairing.

The duo had a solid outing in Tuesday’s 2-1 victory, with Fleury showing off his skating ability on multiple occasions getting involved in the rush.

Schenn’s impact was felt in the form of five hits and five blocked shots, while Fleury’s stat line included one shot on goal, one hit and one blocked shot.

There was calmness to Fleury’s game, whether that was handling his responsibilities in the defensive zone, looking for an outlet pass or seeing time on the penalty kill.

“I get a little antsy when I haven’t played in a while. I get a little jumpy,” said Fleury. “So it’s just about finding ways to settle in and that comes from being in the game.

“Settling my brain down, my body down and just playing the way that I can play.”

Although it was only one game and Arniel went out of his way to say he needed to keep everyone fresh during the final stretch of the regular season, the early returns on Schenn and Fleury provided enough positives to think they could be used together again Friday in the Central Division battle between the Jets and Dallas Stars.

Schenn’s ability to use his size to kill plays and Fleury’s skating ability look like they could complement each other very well.

“You don’t want to force it. My skating is an asset, but I don’t want to skate into trouble,” said Fleury. “It was one of those games where it just flowed. I don’t know how else to describe it. There were a lot of good things to build on and take into the next game.”

The Jets currently have nine healthy blue-liners on the roster, so Fleury is essentially competing for playing time with Logan Stanley (who was a healthy scratch for the first time this season on Tuesday), Colin Miller (if the Jets choose to shift him over to the left side) and Ville Heinola (limited to 17 games this season and just one since Jan. 17).

Fleury recognizes his spot in the lineup isn't secure after one strong showing, that's why he's going to continue to do the things that keep his game as sharp as possible.

"Every game you're competing when you're one of those guys that come in and out," said Fleury. "You don't want to get comfortable but you take care of your business and keep going."

Jets assistant coach Marty Johnston is heavily involved in working with the healthy scratches who put in extra time on game days, so he has a great handle on Fleury's skillset and personality.

"What jumps out is his skating ability. Right from training camp that was something that was very evident," said Johnston. "He's an unbelievable team guy, in terms of how he is in the dressing room, how he prepares, how he deals with not being in the lineup or whatever the case may be.

"He has also put in a lot of work maybe when he hasn't gotten into the lineup. That's a tough thing to do. When you're not playing, it's really hard to push yourself to the point to make sure you're ready to play."

Winnipeg Sun

<https://winnipegsun.com/sports/hockey/nhl/winnipeg-jets/real-arms-race-starts-now-jets-vilardi-connor-like-what-they-see>

Real arms race starts now: Jets' Vilardi, Connor, like what they see

By Paul Friesen

They play on arguably the best line in hockey, where going even a few games without scoring feels like a slump.

That doesn't mean Gabe Vilardi and Kyle Connor don't know the value of depth, of players who might only hit the scoresheet every couple of weeks.

The two sharpshooters took some time on Wednesday to take stock of what they have around them and how well their team is set up compared to division rivals Dallas and Colorado going into the final weeks of the season and into the playoffs.

The Stars and Avalanche may have won the NHL trade deadline, but they don't award a trophy for that.

"You look at years past where teams go big at the deadline, they'll make a big pickup, a couple big pickups, and then they lose in the first round," Vilardi said. "And you look at other teams that don't really do much, or maybe they do their work early in the season and then they go all the way. So it's tough to compare."

On paper, it wasn't close: the Jets added a hard-edged, stay-at-home defenceman to play on their third pair in Luke Schenn and a buzz-saw, fourth-line forward in Brandon Tanev.

Compare that to the Stars acquisition of 30- to 50-goal scorer Mikko Rantanen and Colorado's trade for two-way stud Brock Nelson.

Of course, those comparisons leave out one thing.

"We're in first place," Vilardi said. "So you've got to be pretty happy. We have really good depth. Two good additions. Luke's won a couple Cups before. He's been there, knows what it's about."

Connor meshes with his linemate's thoughts like they dish passes back and forth on the power play.

"It's different," Connor said of the Jets' approach compared to that of their rivals. "Yeah, you want to be aware of what the other teams are doing. But you just look at our team and what we've been doing. We've been at the top of the league throughout the whole year. So I don't know if you want to mess too much with that chemistry. We brought in two great pieces to compliment that."

"I like our team. I'm confident in this group."

They got their first look into the post-deadline mirror in Tuesday's rugged, 2-1 win over the New York Rangers.

Schenn did his thing, blocking shots, delivering hits, while Tanev did his.

“His motor doesn’t stop,” is how Cole Perfetti described it after the game. “It’s crazy how his legs keep going. It’s exhausting to watch.”

Vilardi used the word “relentless.”

“And then he’s obviously a good penalty-kill guy,” he added. “And with Schenner, just a steady presence back there. You saw how calm he is on the penalty kill. Blocking shots. Strong guy.”

The contributions of players like Schenn aren’t as easy to spot as those of, say, a Josh Morrissey.

In a playoff series where the little plays get magnified, it can be the difference between winning and losing. A lost corner battle here, a subtle outlet pass there, an extra second with the puck instead of a blind giveaway somewhere else.

“Simple plays that maybe go unnoticed to the untrained eye,” is how Connor put it. “But we notice them and appreciate them.”

The Stanley Cup tournament tests many things, depth among them. The Jets already took pride in theirs before the trades.

“Whether there’s been injuries or guys stepping in and out of the lineup, it’s been next man up,” Connor said. “And from Day 1 it’s been a whole team effort, every single line, every single D-pairing. It’s someone new scoring that game-winning goal. It’s everybody.

“We’re going to lean on our depth.”

It’s not as sexy as leaning on a 30-goal scorer, but the Jets already have three of them, potentially, in Vilardi (27), Connor (33) and Mark Scheifele (35).

Which brings us to the race for first place in the Central Division, a goal that’s only become more coveted since the Stars and Avalanche had their arms race.

Finishing first would allow those two, based on the current standings, to duke it out in Round 1, eliminating one of them.

“Just from a home-ice standpoint it’s huge,” Connor said. “We love playing in front of this crowd. The way it’s shaping up it seems like that matchup between the two-three, it’s going to be a really good team getting bumped in the first round.”

Vilardi takes over and fires the thought home: “You definitely want to avoid one of those two in the first round.”

His team has the inside track, leading Dallas by eight points. Take a closer look, though, and the Stars have two games in hand.

Plus, the teams square off twice, including in Winnipeg on Friday.

That eight-point gap could quickly become 10, or it could shrink down to six. The games Dallas has in hand are worth four. And they play each other again in Dallas next month.

Do the math.

“Exciting time,” Connor said. “That’s one of the teams that’s been there every single year. You’ve got to go through them, it seems like. Them, Colorado, especially in the Central. A chance to set that tone, any chance you can in the regular season. These games are only going to get more intense.

“There’s no doubt this team’s going to get up for that one.”

The real arms race starts now.

<https://winnipegssun.com/sports/you-cant-make-rivalries-jets-vilardi-says-nhl-playoff-format-flawed>

You can’t make rivalries: Jets’ Vilardi says NHL playoff format flawed

By Paul Friesen

Gabe Vilardi isn’t a fan of the NHL’s playoff format.

What the Winnipeg Jets forward doesn’t like is the forced divisional matchups for the first two rounds, which risks top teams eliminating each other rather than meeting deeper into the playoffs.

Vilardi would prefer going back to conference matchups, instead: 1-vs-8, 2-vs-7, etc.

"It's just ridiculous that if we finish first or second, maybe in the NHL, we have to play Colorado or Dallas," he said on Wednesday. "You see L.A.-Edmonton every year in the first round. Is that really good for the league?"

This isn't a new debate. From players to team presidents, Vilardi's is a common view.

The league took its current approach to cultivate and emphasize divisional rivalries, switching from the conference format a decade ago – but only after the NHL Players Association initially turned it down.

"You can't make rivalries," Vilardi said. "They just happen naturally. That's my opinion. They probably won't change it, honestly. I brought it up at the PA meeting or dinner earlier in the year and it was like, 'Ah, whatever.'"

"Maybe we should have a talk about it in the summer."

If the conference approach were in effect, the current standings would produce the same Winnipeg-Calgary matchup in the first round, but Dallas and Colorado would play outside the Central Division: the No. 2 Stars against No. 7 L.A., the No. 4 Avalanche against No. 5 Edmonton.

The Eastern Conference playoff matchups would be identical in either format, based on the standings going into Wednesday's games.

Vlad Underrated

Jets GM Kevin Cheveldayoff may have been trying hard to get a second-line centre at the trade deadline, but the one the Jets have, Vlad Namestnikov, probably doesn't get enough credit.

That from assistant coach Marty Johnston on Wednesday.

"His versatility is quite something," Johnston said. "You're talking about a player that's involved in our power play, our penalty kill and our second line. Maybe the value isn't stated enough of how important he is to our group. It was nice to see him score (Tuesday) night."

Namestnikov's goal in a 2-1 win over the New York Rangers opened the scoring and ended a 12-game drought for the 32-year-old.

He has 11 this season, matching the total he posted in 78 games last year.

"For a coach, it's what you see away from the puck as well," Johnston said. "He's a big part of our success so far. He will be moving forward as well."

Head coach Scott Arniel pointed to the play of Namestnikov's line, which includes Cole Perfetti and Nik Ehlers, after Tuesday's win.

"They won the majority of the ice battles," Arniel. "They spent a lot more time in New York's end than our end. That's a good sign when that can happen."

The Hockey News

<https://ca.sports.yahoo.com/news/jets-prepare-critical-home-test-154510790.html>

Jets Prepare for Critical Home Test Against Dallas

By Carter Brooks

The Winnipeg Jets and Dallas Stars will square off on Friday night at Canada Life Centre in what should be a highly-entertaining divisional matchup.

Not only is the game between the two top clubs in the Central, but it is the first of two remaining affairs between two of the three teams expected to go the furthest in the Stanley Cup Playoffs this spring.

"I think we are excited about it, for sure," Jets' assistant coach Marty Johnston said on Wednesday. "We understand that it's a divisional game, those are important. But at this point, we just have to make sure that we're prepared and ready for puck drop."

With Dallas and Colorado heavily retooling their respective rosters in advance of the NHL's trade deadline, all eyes will be on Winnipeg and its minor additions to see if the No. 1 Jets can keep up with the reinforced Stars and Avalanche.

Do the coaches and players keep tabs on the changing landscapes around them? Sure, but not with heavy scrutiny, according to Johnston.

"We have never really talked about that as a group. I think tomorrow and Friday will be about maybe some of the new looks that (the Stars) have, based on the fact that it was maybe Game 25 that we played them in the regular season. So there will be some

different players in the lineup. But our structure and how we play is going to provide us the ability and success."

Star winger Kyle Connor knows the Friday night showdown will be entertaining, but isn't quite ready to call it a measuring stick game.

"Exciting times," he chuckled. "That's one of the teams that's been there every single year. You've got to go through them, it seems like. Them, Colorado, especially in the Central. They've been at the top of the league for a long time. And we're familiar with them. We know them obviously. Getting a chance to kind of set that tone, any chance you can in the regular season. These games are only going to get more intense and obviously a big division matchup. When the time comes it'll ramp up and you'll feel the energy. There's no doubt that this team's going to get up for that one."

With GM Kevin Cheveldayoff bringing in veteran defenceman Luke Schenn and former Jets winger Brandon Tanev, the mentality from the front office is that of slight additions rather than a major overhaul on a roster that has been the wire-to-wire leader across the board.

"You want to be aware of what the other teams are doing," Connor added. "But you just look at our team and what we've been doing, we've been at the top of the league throughout the whole year, so I don't know if you want to mess too much with that chemistry. We brought in two great pieces to compliment that. I like our team. I'm confident in this group. Guys are proven throughout the year it's been able to get it done. So to be able to get that chance in the playoffs, prove that we can take that next step as a group is huge."

Having fallen short of the prize all too often, a strong postseason showing is the hope for Winnipeg this spring. With a 45-17-4 record, the Jets are currently tied with Washington for the top spot league-wide, but Alexander Ovechkin and the Capitals have one game in hand (but two fewer wins) on the year.

With eight points separating the Jets and Stars, Friday's four-point challenge with Dallas should bring about a playoff atmosphere at Canada Life Centre. Connor and his mates are ready for the challenge.

"There's still a lot of games left, and we're not resting, saying the job's done," he said. "We want to get that first seed. Just from a home-ice standpoint it's huge. We love playing in front of this crowd. The way it's shaping up it seems like that matchup between the two-three, it's going to be a really good team getting bumped in the first

round. We're focused here to play the best hockey we can and we'll let the result take care of itself."

Puck drop is set for 7:00 PM central time, while the game can be viewed live on TSN.

Sportsnet.ca

<https://www.sportsnet.ca/nhl/video/which-team-will-represent-western-conference-in-stanley-cup-final/>

Which team will represent Western Conference in Stanley Cup Final? (VIDEO)

The Hockey Central panel makes their case for who they believe will win out the West and represent the conference in the Stanley Cup final.

New York Post

<https://nypost.com/2025/03/13/betting/why-the-winnipeg-jets-team-could-make-a-stanley-cup-run/>

Why the Winnipeg Jets could make a Stanley Cup run

By Michael Leboff

The best team in the NHL is not the favorite to win the Stanley Cup. Far from it.

The Winnipeg Jets are tied with the Washington Capitals for first place in the entire NHL entering Thursday.

The Jets and Caps have each collected 94 points, eight more than the third-place Dallas Stars and 16 more than the Edmonton Oilers, who spent most of this season as the consensus Stanley Cup favorite.

Edmonton's price has drifted slightly — the Oilers are sitting around +800 at most sportsbooks — but it's not the Jets who have jumped to the top of the board.

There are seven other teams in the NHL with shorter Stanley Cup odds than Winnipeg's 12/1 mark (BetMGM Sportsbook), and four (Dallas, Edmonton, Vegas and Colorado) are in their conference.

One reason that the Jets have slipped through the cracks is that they were relatively quiet compared to their rivals during last week's trade deadline.

The Stars added Mikko Rantanen, the Colorado Avalanche acquired Brock Nelson and Charlie Coyle, while the Oilers made a shrewd move for Jake Walman.

Winnipeg was expected to be in the hunt for a No. 2 center — it reportedly had plenty of interest in Nelson — but ultimately just nibbled around the edges by acquiring bottom-six forward Brandon Tanev and veteran defenseman Luke Schenn.

Neither of those additions glisten like the ones made by Winnipeg's rivals, but the Jets added more length to a roster that was already considered to be among the deepest in the circuit.

Are the Jets the team to beat in the NHL?

Nothing gets money to flow in on a team like a blockbuster trade, so it's not surprising that sportsbooks were quick to shorten the prices on Dallas and Colorado, but that's also caused bettors to overlook the Jets, who also got better at the deadline.

It's also quite possible punters just don't have the appetite to back this Jets team in the playoffs again.

Winnipeg was dumped out in five games in the first round in each of the past two postseasons and hasn't won a game in the second round since 2017-18.

For all the good work that Vezina Trophy-favorite Connor Hellebuyck has done in the past two regular seasons, he has wilted in the spring and that has caused bettors to question his big-game ability and tread lightly when it comes to backing him in the playoffs.

The most obvious reason why this team isn't getting much love from the markets is that they are the Winnipeg Jets.

They are the smallest market in the league and aren't exactly a public darling like the Golden Knights, Oilers, Avalanche or Panthers.

This may sound like an indictment of the Jets, but it's the opposite.

All of these market forces have kept Winnipeg — the team with the top goal difference, most points and best goals-against average in the NHL — at a very palatable price.

One that becomes even more tempting when you consider their path.

While Dallas and Colorado will likely face off in Round 1 of the playoffs, Winnipeg will draw the team that finishes in the second wild-card spot.

This means that one of Winnipeg's biggest rivals in the West will be golfing by Round 2, while the other will be recovering from what would certainly be a hard-fought series before facing the Jets.

And yet, the Stars (+300) and Avalanche (+500) are sitting with considerably shorter odds than the Jets (+600) to win the Western Conference.

The Athletic

<https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/6190938/2025/03/12/nhl-central-division-stanley-cup-checklist/?onboarded=true>

Which team has the edge in the NHL's ultra-competitive Central Division?

By Murat Ates

Take a look at the standings and the Central Division is the Winnipeg Jets' to lose. Zoom in on the deadline and Colorado and Dallas have all the momentum.

But who's best built to win the Stanley Cup?

The Jets' grasp of the No. 1 spot — not only in the division but the league — is built on a record-setting start to the season, Connor Hellebuyck's goaltending, the league's top power play and middle-six depth that has overpowered opponents while Kyle Connor, Mark Scheifele and Gabriel Vilardi help the top line run hot.

The Avalanche have shipped out Mikko Rantanen but added Martin Necas, Brock Nelson and Charlie Coyle to a group that already includes the division's best center in Nathan MacKinnon and defenseman in Cale Makar. The Stars won the second Rantanen sweepstakes, bolstering a lineup that already included Jason Robertson, Wyatt Johnston, Matt Duchene and Roope Hintz — plus Miro Heiskanen and Tyler Seguin, hurt now but with hopes for the playoffs.

There's powerful history here, too. The Avalanche dominated the Jets in five games to open last year's playoffs, leaving Winnipeg to stew in an extra-long offseason that helped ignite the "five to 10 percent better" mantra that's helped them this year. Dallas beat Colorado in Round 2 but didn't have enough left to stop Edmonton from winning the Western Conference.

So who's best built to win this year?

Let's sort through the Central Division powerhouse teams using The Athletic's Stanley Cup contender checklist. It's a tool originally put together by Dom Luszczyszyn that evaluates recent Cup-winning rosters, studies them position by position and says, "This is how much better than everybody else you need to be to win the Cup." This year's version incorporates every Cup champion from Florida last season through Boston in 2011.

Not every Cup winner is identical. Florida's strengths were different than Vegas' before it or Colorado's before that.

Here are the 10 categories we're looking for:

- Elite first-line center who's among the very best players in the world
- Elite first-line winger to support the elite center
- Two other top-line wingers on each of the top two lines
- Top-line center to play behind the elite center
- Two more top-six forwards for depth in the middle six
- Elite No. 1 defenseman
- A second No. 1 defenseman to play behind him
- A top-pairing defenseman to help anchor a strong second pair with the No. 2
- Another top-pairing caliber defender to crush soft minutes on the third pair
- A top-10 caliber starting goaltender

Now that everyone's deadline shopping is done, who checks off the most of these key Cup categories?

Jets, No. 1 in the Central (45-17-4, 94 points)

The Jets are the top team in the division, so we'll use Winnipeg as a reminder of how to read these charts.

- Red “X”: Indicates a player who falls below the Cup winning standard for his spot on the depth chart.
- Grey checkmark: Indicates a player who meets the minimum requirement for his spot on the depth chart.
- Black checkmark: Indicates a player who is right on target compared to the average player in his role on a Cup-winning team.
- Gold checkmark: Indicates a player who is even better than the average player in his role on a Cup-winning team

Hellebuyck is on pace for his second straight Vezina Trophy-winning season. As you might expect, the best goaltender on the planet grades out as exceptional — even when compared to starting goalies on the last decade’s Stanley Cup champions. Note that we’re taking an analytical approach. You may have your own views of “clutch” or hold Hellebuyck’s Round 1 against Colorado against him. This model does no such thing.

Notice that there are columns of checkmarks. The first one (labeled “This Year”) is meant to show how each player has performed until this point in the season. The second one (labeled “Projection”) uses a player’s performance over the past three seasons to predict where he’ll grade out by season’s end.

Whereas Hellebuyck, Josh Morrissey, Nikolaj Ehlers and Dylan Samberg get gold checkmarks in both columns, some other Jets’ ratings change. Scheifele’s performance to date shows a grey checkmark — good enough for a Cup winner but below the average in our sample. By season’s end, it falls below the standard entirely.

This happens because the model gives weight to the most recent seasons of Scheifele’s career. They drag him down — largely because of poor defensive impacts in recent years. The same is true of Connor, who has been so good this season that he’s been better than elite wingers from our Cup-winning sample but whose historical defensive impact drags him down to “below average” for his spot. Vladislav Namestnikov, Neal Pionk and Cole Perfetti all experience some of the same decline — not surprising if you understand the sheer volume of Jets players having the best statistical seasons of their careers to date.

So, how does Winnipeg stack up?

This is an exceptionally good hockey team, led by the best goaltender in the world but bolstered by Morrissey — the second-best defenseman in the division — and a group of middle-six forwards who are better than those on most Cup-winning teams. Samberg’s

breakout season as a minute-eating, shutdown defenseman shines brightly, while the Jets also get solid results from Pionk and Dylan DeMelo.

The Jets' biggest weaknesses are Connor and Scheifele — if their poor history of defensive results derails the great start to their seasons — and Namestnikov, who just doesn't live up to the requirement for Cup-winning teams to have two elite centers. It makes sense that Winnipeg tried as hard as it did to get Brock Nelson.

Finally, when considering the hits and misses of our Stanley Cup checklist, keep two things in mind:

1. Players aren't being compared to league average; they're being compared to Stanley Cup champions
2. The Game Score Value Added model we're using gives more weight to primary points (goals and first assists) than anything, but also includes impacts on expected goals, penalty differential and small adjustments for quality of competition. Underlying numbers matter, too

Stars, No. 2 in the Central (42-20-2, 86 points)

Dallas projects to have more better-than-Cup-winning players on its roster than either Winnipeg or Colorado — and that's with or without Miro Heiskanen and Tyler Seguin. That reflects an astonishing amount of high-end depth.

Jake Oettinger gives up ground to Hellebuyck but is still viewed as an elite goaltender. Robertson combines elite offense with strong enough defensive metrics to grade out as better than the average Cup-winning top-line winger. At 23 years old, Thomas Harley is having a spectacular season. Roope Hintz drives play while generating more than enough offense to outrank Adam Lowry. Esa Lindell contributes little offense but is so tough to get chances against — at five-on-five or with Dallas short-handed — that he grades out similarly to Samberg.

If the Stars do get to add Heiskanen and Seguin in any combination, they're almost comically overpowered.

But what of Rantanen?

If the current playoff seeds hold, Rantanen would be at the heart of the Stars/Avalanche series. He's on pace for his third straight 100-point season despite a forgettable 13-

game stint in Carolina. The last time he fell short of that mark, he won the Cup with Colorado — who almost certainly wouldn't have traded him directly to Dallas if it had the choice.

Rantanen grades out in the lower end for Cup winners, but still in the range. That seems low for a consistent 100-point player; if he stays as productive in Dallas as he's been to kick things off, then the Stars have an X-factor on top of the biggest group of top-end talent in the West.

The Stars also have more players who miss the mark completely than Colorado or Winnipeg. Johnston falls below the cut for elite first-line center, Mikael Granlund could use a smaller role, and Cody Ceci grades out so poorly defensively that he's an outright liability.

Interestingly, neither Dallas' nor Winnipeg's top line was in the top half of the NHL in terms of goal differential or expected goal differential when Harman Dayal dug into the topic last month.

Colorado did — and that's where we'll start our look.

Avalanche, No. 3 in the Central (39-24-3, 81 points)

The Avalanche have retooled down the middle, adding Nelson and Coyle — in addition to Necas being a perfect fit on the wing — while Mackenzie Blackwood has been excellent since arriving from San Jose.

It would make sense if there was some amount of real-world challenge to the chemistry of an Avalanche team that's undergone this much upheaval. We're not factoring that in here, though, nor does it appear that Colorado is having that kind of trouble. The Avalanche are 7-2-1 in their last 10 games played, surpassed on that front only by Dallas and Florida, who have won eight games each.

The bigger problem appears to be that Colorado's secondary elite players don't match up to those of Dallas or Winnipeg. Nelson, Artturi Lehkonen, Valeri Nichushkin, Jonathan Drouin and Ross Colton all meet or exceed the Cup-contending mark — as a group, they're quite strong — while falling short of the Stars' and Jets' versions of the same. Devon Toews gets great marks playing alongside Makar, giving the Avalanche four total players who are better than average for their position even when compared to Cup winners, but the drop-off after Toews is steep. Ryan Lindgren and Josh Manson are

tough to play against in their own ways but don't measure up to the Cup-winning standard.

Real-world impacts matter. Last year, Colorado was able to run rampant with its speed against Winnipeg in a way that didn't work against Dallas. In both cases, the Avalanche would have had the superior top-end talent.

Great players give teams more opportunities to have magical moments. So who has the most great players?

This chart goes through the checklist one category at a time and lists the best player at that position, whether he plays for Winnipeg, Dallas or Colorado.

Elite first-line center

Nathan MacKinnon

COL

Elite first-line winger

Kyle Connor

WPG

Elite defenseman

Cale Makar

COL

Elite goaltender

Connor Hellebuyck

WPG

Top-line winger 1

Jason Robertson

DAL

Top-line winger 2

Nikolaj Ehlers

WPG

Top-line center

Matt Duchene

DAL

Top-six forward 1

Roope Hintz

DAL

Top-six forward 2

Tyler Seguin

DAL

A second No. 1 defenseman

Thomas Harley

DAL

A top-pairing caliber defenseman

Esa Lindell

DAL

Another top-pairing caliber defenseman

Dylan Samberg

WPG

This is a Stars-heavy table. Seguin probably won't be able to achieve his elite form right out of the gate if he returns. Even without him, Dallas gets an edge from Robertson, Duchene, Hintz, Harley and Lindell that's tough to match. If top-end talent wins out, then it's MacKinnon and Makar for Colorado or Hellebuyck for Winnipeg — all three of whom could be considered the best player at their position in the world.

Here are the top teams sorted by how many gold checkmarks they have.

	Gold	Black	Grey	Red
Dallas	7	1	1	2
Winnipeg	4	4	2	2
Colorado	4	4	2	2

It's an incredibly competitive division and the Stars seem to have the edge.