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Jets players staying focused in final 15 regular season games

By: Mike McIntyre

SEATTLE — The rain can get pretty relentless around here, and it was coming down in buckets on Saturday, with very little relief in sight. Such is life in the Pacific Northwest.

However, the forecast is quickly becoming clear for the Winnipeg Jets, who will kick off a three-game road trip on Sunday evening when they face the Seattle Kraken: A first-ever Central Division and Western Conference title is now theirs to lose.

With just 15 regular season games left on the schedule, Winnipeg enjoys a 10-point lead over Dallas after beating them 4-1 on Friday evening at Canada Life Centre. The Stars have 17 games remaining — they'll face the surging Colorado Avalanche on Sunday — and appear to be the only club with a chance to catch the high-flying Jets.

The task would appear to be about as tall as the impressive redwoods which dot the landscape in this part of the world. For example, if Winnipeg was to go just a mediocre 8-7-0 down the stretch, Dallas would need a stellar 13-4-0 finish. A 12-3-0 Jets run would require the Stars to go a perfect 17-0-0.

Add it up and the magic number is 25 points to clinch the No. 1 seed — either gained by Winnipeg or lost by Dallas. If we're simply talking about a playoff spot, that magic number is 10 points either gained by the Jets or lost by one of the Calgary Flames or Vancouver Canucks, who entered play Saturday night in a tie for the final wildcard spot.

Why is finishing on top such a big deal? In addition to the obvious sense of accomplishment over a marathon season, it would also mean the Jets avoid a first-round playoff matchup with the Avalanche, who would likely be facing the Stars in a battle between teams which loaded up at the deadline.

Winnipeg would then take on whoever grabs that final spot — likely one of Calgary, Vancouver, Utah or St. Louis.

Of course, Scott Arniel's crew isn't looking beyond the next two points that are available, ones they hope to take from a disappointing Seattle club that is currently nine points out of the final wildcard playoff spot and were very much sellers at the recent trade deadline.

"We're never comfortable with it," Jets forward Kyle Connor said Friday night of his team's current lot in life.

“We’re pushing onto the next one. I think that’s kind of been what’s made us so successful this year. We’re not resting, saying cruise control here. There’s a lot of hockey left, 15 or so games. You want to build this thing so that you’re peaking at the right time, so that’s definitely going to be an objective of ours.”

That type of mindset is why the Jets have managed to keep any storm clouds away this season and should serve them well with what is on the horizon.

The Jets have eight games left against teams not currently in a playoff spot — Seattle and then Vancouver on this road trip, Buffalo and then Vancouver again on the next homestand, Utah on the road in early April, St. Louis at home right after that, Chicago in their final road game and then Anaheim in their final home game.

They have seven games remaining against teams who would be competing for Lord Stanley if the season ended Saturday — Edmonton to wrap up this road trip, Washington and New Jersey on the next homestand, Los Angeles and Vegas to kick off April on the road, one more date with Dallas (in Texas this time) and then a home game against Edmonton.

“These are important games for us, this is a big push,” said Jets forward Morgan Barron, who finished off the scoring against the Stars.

“I think we want to hit the ground running when the playoffs start, I don’t think anyone wants to creep in. We’re trying to put our foot down here and really secure that first place. That’s a big step for us.”

Seven more wins over the final 15 games would set a new franchise record in that department, as would 19 points (a record of 9-5-1, for example).

Goaltender Connor Hellebuyck needs six more victories to smash his own franchise record for wins in a single season, and he’s 10 away from setting a new NHL record. Expect him to make 11-12 more starts, depending on how meaningful some of those final games may be. Backup Eric Comrie will get the others — including, we suspect, Sunday’s game against Seattle.

Connor, who had two goals and an assist against Dallas, is on his way to breaking his 2.0 Jets record for points in a year, needing just nine more to eclipse the 93 he had in 2021-22. Marian Hossa of the Atlanta Thrashers has the all-time franchise high of 100, and Connor is on pace to break that.

Both he and linemate Mark Scheifele are tied for the team lead with 35 goals, and both could hit the 40 mark for the second time in their respective careers. Several other players either have set new personal bests or are getting close.

Just don't tell any of that to these Jets, who continue to focus on the proverbial trees, rather than the forest.

"We're in a playoff spot heading down the stretch and you just learn that as soon as you start looking ahead, whether it's looking ahead to the playoffs or looking ahead to the game next week or looking ahead to your next shift, you kind of get lost there," said Barron.

"I think it's been really good for us to stay in that present moment. Just staying level-headed and staying present in every shift goes a long way."

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<https://winnipegsun.com/sports/hockey/nhl/winnipeg-jets/i-like-the-way-our-crowd-responded-capacity-crowd-watches-jets-topple-stars>

'I like the way our crowd responded': Capacity crowd watches Jets topple Stars

By Gordon Anderson

In a regular season filled with statement games, one seemingly bigger than the next, what was the takeaway after a 4-1 win over the Dallas Stars on Friday night.

"This is one of many big games that we've played so far this year," head coach Scott Arniel said. "We've still got a few more down the road before we get to the end of the season. I liked the way our group responded and again, I like the way our crowd responded."

With the win, The Jets (46-17-4) jumped 10 points ahead of Dallas (42-21-2) in the race for Central Division and Western Conference supremacy.

Dylan Samberg and Kyle Connor staked the home team to a 2-0 lead after 20 minutes.

The Jets are 29-3-3 when scoring first and 26-0-3 when leading after the first period.

Connor's 35th goal of the year gave the Jets a 3-0 lead after two.

The locals are 36-0-1 when leading after 40 minutes.

Morgan Barron and Mason Marchment exchanged goals in the third.

Connor Hellebuyck stopped 24 of 25 pucks. Jake Oettinger turned aside 18 of 22 shots in the loss.

Perhaps the paying public also felt the game took on extra significance given the Stars heavy move at the trade deadline, acquiring Mikko Rantanen from the Carolina Hurricanes.

Even the NHL jumped on board the hype train created in the wash of the deal, the league's website proclaiming the Stars as 'frontrunners' for the Stanley Cup after the deal was completed on March 7.

Apparently, the sold-out crowd of 15,225 felt the implications in this late-season battle for conference and league supremacy. The last sell out was the Jan. 2 game against the Ducks. The previous was Dec. 30 vs. Nashville.

"It was real electric, especially when we scored early," Arniel said. "It really got the crowd going. They've been good all year, they've been watching a real good hockey team play good hockey throughout the season. To have them behind us for that one, that's a big boost."

And with one month remaining in the regular season, expect more of the same intensity at the downtown rink as teams strive to make late season charges for a postseason spot or to further secure positioning in the standings.

"Well, that's going to be it the rest of the year," Connor said. "Every game now is going to be the next big game, right? It's going to keep getting bigger. So, we were able to rise to the task on Friday, and hopefully we learned some lessons and what that looks like and kind of our foundation of how we were able to come out on top and play such a good game tonight. And we take that on to the next one."

And with just 15 games remaining in the regular season, it is possible the Jets are starting to develop snippets of successful habits for, what the organization hopes is a long playoff run.

"We hammer it down in videos after wins and losses. And you can ask different guys, they take different things," Connor said. "But overall, as a team you kind of see the maturity, I think, the way, coming into this game, just being calm, not panicking, playing our structure, not getting out of it, frustrating the other team."

Schenn stretched out

With Neal Pionk out in the near term, Luke Schenn started on the second pairing with Samberg. Arniel leaned into the Saskatoon resident with 19:57 of even-strength minutes on 26 shifts. Schenn played the third most even strength minutes on the squad. Schenn came as advertised on Friday night.

"To watch him shift in and shift out, you see it," Arniel said. "He's a physical presence. When he uses his smarts, when he uses his hockey savvy, or he can use his body to get those pucks, that leads to us exactly, puck possession. Maybe it's a faceoff that's a 50/50 that he leans in and gets that puck and it's a breakout for us."

Pionk is listed as week to week.

The Jets are in Seattle (29-34-4) on Sunday night. Puck drop is 8 p.m.