

Winnipeg Free Press

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Time for Jets to turn the heat back up Glimmers of season success in lacklustre game against Canucks

By: Mike McIntyre

EDMONTON — The Winnipeg Jets have come a long way since they last touched down here in Edmonton back on Oct. 7 and torched the reigning Western Conference champions 6-0.

Sixty-eight games have followed, scattered across the other 31 NHL markets, since that season-opening beat-down of the Oilers which helped set the tone for what was to come. It's been quite a journey so far, from a solid 1-0-0 start to a scintillating 47-18-4 that has them on top of the standings.

The sky might just be the limit for these Jets.

Their most recent stop in Vancouver on Tuesday included some unexpected turbulence. A 6-2 loss to the Canucks was easily one of their worst outings of the year, filled with defensive miscues and unforced errors. Winnipeg looked like a team that put its game on cruise control against a hungry, desperate opponent that was fighting for its playoff life.

We won't hold a rare rough night against them. Bounce back with a solid effort against the Oilers here on Thursday and it's simply a minor blip on the radar.

However, there are some areas of concern right now with the overall game that are going to need to be straightened out as the Jets head down the stretch and into what they hope will be a long playoff run.

A cold front for El Nino

There was a moment in the second period on Tuesday where Nino Niederreiter had just finished up yet another unproductive shift and, as he neared the Winnipeg bench, he lifted up his stick and briefly thought about smashing it over the boards.

It was a rare sign of frustration for the veteran Swiss forward, who plays the game hard but isn't prone to emotional outbursts.

You have to go all the way back to Feb. 4 — a span of 14 games — since Niederreiter last found the back of the net. He has just one assist in that time, which represents one of the worst offensive droughts of his 14-year career.

His defensive game is struggling, too. Niederreiter carelessly gave the puck away in the waning seconds of the first period against Vancouver, only to see Nils Hoglander score with three seconds left to give the home team a 3-1 lead. Head coach Scott Arniel, speaking with the Free Press after the loss, called that play a “back-breaker.”

Arniel took the unusual step of breaking up Niederreiter’s normally reliable shutdown line, which includes captain Adam Lowry and winger Mason Appleton, to start the second period.

“Have to do something,” is how the head coach explained it. Brandon Tanev and Alex Iafallo moved up to play with Lowry and they produced a goal a few minutes later and looked solid the rest of the night. Niederreiter and Appleton, meanwhile, were demoted to the fourth line beside Morgan Barron and weren’t nearly as effective.

Appleton is nearly as cold as Niederreiter, with just one assist over his last 10 games, and it will be interesting to see if Arniel sticks with the re-tooled bottom six. Regardless, the Jets need more from their depth forwards, in particular Niederreiter who has eclipsed the 20-goal mark seven times in his career but has been stuck on 14 for what feels like forever this season.

Special teams struggles

Much ink has been spilled this year about Winnipeg’s potent power play, but it’s been anything but since the 4 Nations Face-Off. The Jets are clicking at just 18.2 per cent in the 13 games they’ve played since, which ranks 22nd in the league. They are just one-for-12 over the last five games.

Yes, they still lead the NHL overall on the year with a 30.7 per cent success rate. But the recent trend should be raising some alarm bells. Have other teams started to figure out what the Jets are doing? If so, they need to make adjustments to the adjustments as they’ll want the PP to be in fine form once the playoffs begin.

Forward Gabe Vilardi is really fighting it. He has just one goal in his last 12 games (which did come on the power play) and has whiffed on several glorious chances in recent games. You’d expect his puck luck to turn at some point soon — he does have seven assists over the last dozen — but the Jets need him to get going.

Vilardi has scored 12 of his 27 goals this year on the power play, but only three with the extra man have come since the calendar flipped to 2025.

Meanwhile, all of this is happening at the same time the penalty kill has become rather porous, which isn’t exactly a recipe for success. Winnipeg has killed just 74.2 per cent since the extended hockey hiatus which ranks 23rd. The Jets have given up a power-play goal in four of their last five games.

Overall, they are at 78.7 per cent on the year, which is 15th, but heading in the wrong direction as we get ever closer to a time when special teams typically take on even

greater importance. Just ask the Oilers, who rode a ridiculously hot PK right into the Stanley Cup Final last year.

Playing with fire

Neal Pionk will miss a third straight game on Thursday with a lower-body injury that is said to be “week-to-week.” It’s noteworthy that he’s on this road trip and attended a comedy show last Saturday night in Seattle with Josh Morrissey and Connor Hellebuyck and was photographed wearing a walking boot.

The Jets are certainly missing him, as Colin Miller has come into the lineup and really struggled the last two games. There were also a couple scary moments against Vancouver Tuesday as Morrissey blocked a shot, came up limping and temporarily went to the room, while blue-line partner Dylan DeMelo crashed face-first into the boards and needed help.

Both players quickly returned, but with 13 regular season games remaining and general manager Kevin Cheveldayoff only adding two players at the deadline in defenceman Luke Schenn and forward Tanev, keeping everyone on the roster healthy takes on added importance.

The Jets enter play Thursday with a nine-point lead over the Dallas Stars for top spot in the Central Division and Western Conference. Finishing first is a priority — it would mean not having to face the Colorado Avalanche in the opening round and instead getting the second wild-card team — so they need to keep pushing hard.

If they can accomplish that goal sooner rather than later, some added rest and so-called “load management” could be employed for key players to ensure they are as close to 100 per cent entering the playoffs.

First up is an Oilers club that just thumped Utah by a 7-1 score on Tuesday night. They are currently in a three-way race with Vegas and Los Angeles for top spot in the Pacific Division and will likely have revenge on their mind given the way Winnipeg rudely welcomed them into the new season last fall.

It will be another good test for a Jets team that has handled brief bouts of adversity well this year. Their last real stinker, a 5-2 loss in Utah on Jan. 20, was followed up with a franchise-record 11-game winning streak.

“You’ve got to move on. Obviously, if it was more frequent, it would be more of a concern,” DeMelo said of their play in Vancouver.

“We’ll have to put a good effort next game against a really good Edmonton team. We know that and I think we can all look in the mirror and know that was a lot of self-inflicted wounds and not the style of play that we want to be. I think we’ll be able to learn a lot from that and hopefully put in a better effort in the next game.”

Winnipeg Sun

<https://winnipeg.sun.com/sports/hockey/nhl/winnipeg-jets/they-know-what-we-did-jets-go-from-desperate-team-to-vengeful-one>

'They know what we did': Jets go from desperate team to vengeful one

By Paul Friesen

In the aftermath of one of his team's worst games of the season, Winnipeg Jets coach Scott Arniel made an interesting comment about one of its best.

The Jets had just been handed their lunch, 6-2, by Vancouver on Tuesday night when the coach was asked about his team's ability to bounce back in Edmonton on Thursday.

In his response, Arniel brought up the only other time the Jets have faced the Oilers this season.

"We'll soak this one in, look at the video and use what we need to use," Arniel began. "Our opening game against them, we know what we did, they know what we did. So we have to make sure that we're at our best."

Proving hockey types have better memories than sportswriters, Arniel was referring to a game that goes back as far as you can go this season: the first game for both teams.

Squaring off in Edmonton, the Jets delivered a 6-0 public spanking to a team that had reached the Stanley Cup Final a few months earlier.

Arniel's comment, "We know what we did, they know what we did," suggests there will be some residual feelings at play on Thursday. From a game on Oct. 9, more than five months ago.

Are hockey players' memories really that long?

Whether or not the Oilers still have their dander up from the season-opener, the Jets will have their hands full.

Edmonton is coming off a 7-1 home win over Utah and have won three in a row. They remain one of the NHL's deadliest teams off the rush, which is what killed the Jets in Vancouver.

"Very unlike our group," is how defenceman Dylan DeMelo described it, calling it a combination of missed reads, communication breakdowns and getting caught on long shifts. "We go east-west, can't get enough guys off, they're fresh and coming on, guns a'blazing, and they just beat us to areas."

The other theme that came up post-game in Vancouver: the Canucks, fighting for their playoff lives, played a more desperate game.

“They were first to pucks, they beat us back to the net,” DeMelo said. “It’s not a recipe for success from our group.”

A lack of internal desperation, though, will be a consistent ingredient in the rest of the Jets’ regular season.

They’ve all but mathematically clinched a playoff spot. They have a firm grip on first place in their division and in the Western Conference, which would bring home-ice advantage through three playoff series.

The only tangible fight they’re in is one they never mention: the fight with Washington for first place, overall.

The reward for that is a trophy nobody remembers from year to year and home-ice advantage in the Stanley Cup Final. The latter came in pretty handy for Florida in Game 7 last June, but only after they’d blown a 3-0 series lead over the Oilers.

We suspect home-ice advantage for a potential Cup Final is not a tangible source of motivation in March or early April.

Personal pride, though, is.

The Jets have dipped into that well on a regular basis this season. Only five times have they allowed one loss to become two in a row. It’s become three in a row just three times.

“You’ve got to move on,” DeMelo said, taking one last look at the loss in Vancouver. “If it was more frequent, it would be more of a concern. We’ll have to put a good effort next game against a really good Edmonton team. We know that. We can all look in the mirror and know that was a lot of self-inflicted wounds and not the style of play that we want.

“We’ll be able to learn a lot from that and hopefully put in a better effort in the next game.”

That’ll have to start in goal, where for the first time since mid-November Connor Hellebuyck was beaten five times – this time in just 40 minutes.

Arniel didn’t even sound tempted to pull Hellebuyck for the third period, nor did he try to hide which goalie he’ll start in Edmonton.

“This isn’t on him,” the coach said. “Let’s get right back on the horse. He’ll go back at Edmonton.”

After all, he'll want to redeem himself.

The thing is, the Oilers might feel that way as a team.

Because we all know what happened there five months ago.

Daily Faceoff

<https://www.dailyfaceoff.com/news/stanley-cup-ingredients-part-3-top-10-goalie-connor-hellebuyck-winnipeg-jets>

Forget last year: Jets have huge edge in Stanley Cup chase with Connor Hellebuyck

By Matt Larkin

Welcome to part 3 of Daily Faceoff Stanley Cup Ingredients 2024-25. I've developed a formula consisting of seven common ingredients among recent Stanley Cup champions, using the previous 10 seasons as the sample to study. You can click here for a more detailed breakdown of the inspiration for the formula and how accurately it has predicted teams going deep in the playoffs.

So far, we've explored how championships correlate to team weight and top-10 scorers. Next, we examine whether elite goaltending remains as important as ever in the hunt for Lord Stanley's Mug.

Stanley Cup Ingredient #3: TOP-10 GOALTENDER

How many times have we seen a powerhouse team fall short in the postseason because their goaltending lets them down and/or they run into an opponent whose goaltending gets hot? It feels like goalies' impact on playoff success is disproportionate compared to the regular season. A dominant Winnipeg Jets team fell apart in Round 1 last year because its all-world netminder Connor Hellebuyck had one bad week. The season prior, Sergei Bobrovsky almost singlehandedly willed the Florida Panthers to multiple playoff series wins, leading them to the Final, and his consistent showing last spring helped them finish the job.

How strong is the correlation between a top-10 regular-season goalie and winning a Cup? Let's have a look at the past 10 seasons. We define a top-10 goalie as one who played at least half his team's games and posted a top-10 save percentage in that sample. We go with regular-season numbers as it's the best sample size you can ask for if you're a contending team hoping for sustained success in the spring. And even though save percentage is more of a team stat than goals saved above expected, we want the team stat factored in here, as we're measuring how well an elite goalie works in conjunction with an elite team.

Season	Champion	Top-10 Goaltender?
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2014-15	Chicago	Yes (Crawford, .924)
2015-16	Pittsburgh	Yes (Fleury, .921*)
2016-17	Pittsburgh	Yes (Murray, .923)
2017-18	Washington	No
2018-19	St. Louis	Yes (Binnington, .927*)
2019-20	Tampa Bay	Yes (Vasilevskiy, .917)
2020-21	Tampa Bay	Yes (Vasilevskiy, .925)
2021-22	Colorado	Yes (Kuemper, .921)
2022-23	Vegas	No
2023-24	Florida	Yes (Bobrovsky, .915)
Stanley Cup correlation: Very strong		

Eight of the past 10 champions and five of the past six have sported an elite goaltender. Drilling deeper, five of the past 10 have carried a Hall of Fame grade goaltender heading into the playoffs. While even the best puck-stoppers can go cold, it's more common for them to sustain their stellar play on championship teams. The likes of Binnington, Vasilevskiy and Bobrovsky all played major roles in backstopping their teams through the playoffs en route to the Cup.

What does the leaderboard look like this season in terms of elite goaltenders? Which top contenders have one?

(through games March 18)

2024-25 NHL leaders, save percentage (min. half team's games played)

1. Connor Hellebuyck, WPG, .924
2. Andrei Vasilevskiy, TB, .920
3. Darcy Kuemper, LA, .918
4. Logan Thompson, WSH, .917
5. Mackenzie Blackwood, COL, .915
6. Filip Gustavsson, MIN, .915
7. Dustin Wolf, CGY, .912
8. Linus Ullmark, OTT, .911
9. Joey Daccord, SEA, .909
10. Pyotr Kochetkov, CAR, .909

Eight of the top 10 stop pucks for teams currently occupying playoff positions, meaning half the field would have top-10 workhorse goaltenders if the postseason started today. That includes the conference-leading Jets and Washington Capitals, who have probable top-two Vezina vote-getters in Hellebuyck and Logan Thompson.

About Hellebuyck: the ugly performance last spring stings, but the historical stats suggest the Jets are still better equipped than anyone in net heading into the playoffs. The much larger sample size tells us Hellebuyck is arguably the top goalie of his generation, poised to win a third Vezina Trophy, something only three other netminders have done since 1981-82, when the Vezina became a voted-on award rather than going

to the goalie on the team allowing the fewest goals. Also: Hellebuyck's choker narrative is overblown. He struggled last April but still carries a .911 career SV% in the playoffs, 11th best among active goalies with 30 or more career postseason appearances. The Jets are thus strongly positioned to make a serious run at the Stanley Cup.

That said: don't sleep on the Tampa Bay Lightning. Vasilevskiy is an all-time clutch goalie, a Conn Smythe Trophy winner, and he's playing his best hockey in years.