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<https://winnipeg.sun.com/sports/hockey/nhl/winnipeg-jets/friesen-trap-of-complacency-awaits-jets-over-last-dozen-games>

FRIESEN: Trap of complacency awaits Jets over last dozen games

By Paul Friesen

They have an even dozen games to go, spread out among the league's dregs and its darlings, against teams desperate for every point they can count, others counting the days to the end.

The Winnipeg Jets themselves are home and cooled as far as the playoffs go, but they have to play these 12 games as if they mean something. Even after top spot in their division and conference are clinched.

Because teams can't just flip a switch in mid-April and be playoff-ready. At least, that's what they say.

So over the next four weeks the Jets' biggest challenge might not be what happens between the whistles, but between their ears.

"You can definitely fall into that trap of getting complacent," is how Kyle Connor put it after Thursday's 4-3 overtime win in Edmonton.

Not every player would acknowledge that, but Connor shoots straight.

He also says the Jets have hit the mark on that front almost all season long, from their historic 15-1 start, on. It would have been easy, natural, even, to relax.

"That's been a focal point every single day for us," Connor continued. "Leave the game behind and focus on the next one. And the task at hand."

They haven't been perfect, even if they've been at or near the top of the NHL all year. The latest smirch came against the Canucks earlier this week.

"We've got to match the desperation," Connor said. "We were facing Vancouver, a team that was on the line there fighting for a playoff spot. And we weren't able to match it."

They laid an egg, instead. A hard-boiled one, 6-2.

This last dozen will contain a variety of challenges. Getting up for a potential first-round playoff opponent shouldn't be hard. Then again, Vancouver was one.

Facing division-rival Dallas or former playoff nemeses like Vegas and St. Louis should stir some feelings.

Washington comes to town next week in a tilt between the best in the west and beast of the east, a tussle for first, overall. Complacency shouldn't even be in the same area code for that one.

But also-rans Buffalo (on Sunday), Chicago, Utah and Anaheim further down the line are on the docket, too.

Connor surveys the coming landscape and sees all the potential traps and potholes.

"You can have teams that are out of it, teams that could be in a position like ours, that hopefully down the stretch here they're not looking to get injuries," he said. "So there's a lot of different games, different matchups. And at the end of the day, we've got to be able to compete. That's what we do well."

It's the one thing every pro athlete is supposed to do well: Hate to lose.

Something else this team has done well is operate the power play. At least, they had been.

This current four-game, 0-for-9 drought comes not long after a six-game, 0-for-16 period to close out February and kick off March.

Winnipeg still has the league's No. 1 unit, but not by much, as its fallen to an even 30 percent.

Going 0-for-4 alone, as they did in Edmonton, isn't cause for alarm. How inept it looked, especially with a chance to put the game away, was.

"Overall we were sloppy," Connor said. "That's something that we take pride in, to be able to close out a game. I mean, we got a five-on-three, don't score on that. We got one real late, don't score on that. I know results aren't everything... but at a certain time, it's timely goals."

Timely saves they got, from Connor Hellebuyck.

Their goalie has something in the back of his mind that's helping to keep him engaged: potentially reaching or breaking the NHL record of 48 wins in a season. He reached No. 40 in Edmonton.

He'll probably start, what, nine of the last 12? The margin for error there is slim and none.

Perhaps his teammates can tap into that stream of motivation, add it to whatever their others sources of juice are.

The goal is to be full to-the-brim of confidence going into the postseason. Healthy, too, as Connor pointed out.

It's a fine line to skate.

Before the Jets took off for this last road trip, I asked head coach Scott Arniel about the possibility of resting key players after they clinched first place in the conference.

He didn't even want to go there.

"I'm not getting too far down the road here," Arniel said. "There's too much going on... still too many games still to play. We'll worry about that maybe when we get in around the end of the year. But right now, the picture's too big."

In keeping with his habit, he'll focus on one thing when his players return to practice on Saturday: Buffalo.

Just another egg to crack.

Winnipeg Free Press

<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2025/03/21/giving-dillon-his-due>

Giving Dillon his due Rugged blue-liner a natural leader for Devils

By: Ken Wiebe and Mike McIntyre

Brenden Dillon doesn't sound like someone who is holding a grudge.

That didn't prevent the former Winnipeg Jets defenceman from reiterating he was interested in sticking around before ultimately departing after he became an unrestricted free agent last July 1.

The New Jersey Devils blue-liner spoke fondly of his time with the Jets during an interview with the Free Press earlier this month.

He went so far as to compliment Jets general manager Kevin Cheveldayoff for getting one of his pending UFAs inked to a contract extension last month.

"I stressed my disappointment — Dylan DeMelo did too — with no offer during the regular season," said Dillon, whose Devils make their lone regular season visit to

Winnipeg next Friday. “So, I’m happy to see guys like Vladdy (Namestnikov) have signed an extension this year.”

That Dillon is outwardly happy for a former teammate comes as little surprise. The 34-year-old was a team-first guy during his three seasons with the Jets organization and has stayed in touch with a number of players over the course of the campaign.

To be clear, he’s not the least bit surprised to see the Jets atop the Western Conference standings, now at 48-18-4 as they get set to open a four-game homestand starting Sunday afternoon against the Buffalo Sabres.

Dillon also took time to applaud the job that head coach Scott Arniel is doing with a Jets team that is competing with the Washington Capitals for the Presidents’ Trophy (both clubs are tied with 100 points. The Capitals — who make their annual visit to Winnipeg on Tuesday — have one game in hand).

“The head coach, I got to know really well, in Washington and in Winnipeg. Scottie Arniel is as detailed a coach as you can find,” said Dillon. “He has a great pulse on that room.”

One of Dillon’s few regrets from his time in Winnipeg was that the team had consecutive disappointing early exits from the first round of the Stanley Cup playoffs in 2023 and 2024.

Compounding things last spring was that he watched the final two games of the series against the Colorado Avalanche because of a gash he suffered to his hand after an opponent accidentally stepped on him during a skirmish at the end of Game 3.

“That’s one of the biggest things for me is the frustration of having such an unbelievable year with how it went and then for the playoffs, just the disappointment of it,” said Dillon. “I just felt like we didn’t play anywhere near what we did for the five games (against Colorado). And then getting hurt at the end, which was frustrating to not be able to be out there helping.”

Dillon cherishes his time with the Jets, but also appreciates the interest he was able to generate on the open market as he was an unrestricted free agent for the first time last summer.

“I was very fortunate to have the amount of teams (interested). I don’t remember, but it was nine or 10 teams that I ended up talking to pretty seriously there and then you kind of weigh in with where the team is at in the cycle,” said Dillon, who has 166 hits and 94 blocked shots this season.

“What is your role going to be on the team? How are you valued? The biggest things for me were just that. Where’s the team at when it comes to contending? And then what would my role be? It was kind of a crazy time. Looking back at it now, I’ve been super

happy and really fortunate with how things have gone, for the team and for me. I'm also really happy that the Jets are doing as well as they are."

Dillon has settled in nicely with his new team and while his offensive production (he had two goals and 11 points in 69 games going into Friday's action) is down slightly, he's provided precisely what Devils general manager Tom Fitzgerald expected of him when he signed the popular veteran to a three-year, US\$12 million deal on July 1.

"On the ice, you see how much of a competitor he is. He does whatever it takes to win," said Devils head coach Sheldon Keefe.

"He's there for his teammates. A tremendous leader as well. Just coming in, for myself as a new coach, having a guy like him coming in as a culture carrier, you know that helps support the message from the coaching staff and the organization and then supporting his teammates. He's a tremendous guy to have (around). He knows exactly who he is at this point in his career."

Dillon has often been paired with Dougie Hamilton this season and he's averaging roughly 18:30 of ice time per game. The Devils have battled plenty of adversity and they'll be without star centre Jack Hughes for the remainder of the season after he suffered a knee injury, but they remain in third place in the Metropolitan Division.

"The coaching staff is new this year too, so we'll all find out new stuff (together)," said Dillon.

"All in all, the way that the season started, up until Christmas, I would say we were one of the top five teams in the league. After that, (goalie Jacob Markstrom) went down for four to five weeks, (forward) Nico (Hischier) went down for a bit and we had to switch a few (things). We weren't the same team.

"Obviously we're facing some adversity now. We'll be battling."

Around the glass

Former Jets defenceman Johnathan Kovacevic recently earned a contract extension with the Devils after coming over in a trade with the Montreal Canadiens last summer.

Kovacevic inked a five-year deal worth US\$20 million (US\$4 million AAV), which is even more impressive when you consider he was claimed off waivers by the Canadiens from the Jets in October of 2022.

"He's a tremendous guy, good teammate, he works extremely hard and he's very coachable," said Keefe. "The size and reach and stuff that he has. It's great to see his growth. To your point (about) waivers, sometimes it's just time. Everybody has got a different path to their career.

“Some guys need time, some guys need a change of scenery. Sometimes it takes two, three teams, whether it’s a message to settle in or to really find your footing or your true identity in the league and try to clear your head. For every player, it’s different but for Kovy, it seems to have worked really well here.”

Kovacevic, who was chosen in the third round (74th overall) of the 2017 NHL Draft by the Jets, is a prime example of the way waivers are supposed to work.

The right-shooting blue-liner was limited to four games with the Jets during the 2021-22 season and when he could not earn a spot among the eight D-men on the opening-day roster the next fall, he was scooped up by the Canadiens.

After spending two full seasons with the Canadiens rounding out his reps with a non-playoff team, Kovacevic was moved to a contender and has taken full advantage of his opportunity to shine — and he’s since been rewarded for it with a lucrative contract that kicks in next season.

Speaking of former Jets defencemen, we caught up with another old friend this past week in Tyler Myers. The 35-year-old, who came to Winnipeg as part of the blockbuster Evander Kane trade and spent parts of five years with the organization, is now in his sixth campaign with the Vancouver Canucks.

He’ll be back in town next Sunday as the Jets close out the homestand in what could potentially be a first-round playoff preview should Jets claim top seed in the conference and the Canucks outlast the likes of St. Louis, Calgary and Utah to claim the final wild-card spot.

Myers was part of that magical march to the Western Conference Final in 2018.

“That was a lot of fun. It’s why a bunch of us are still really close,” Myers reminisced. “It doesn’t change the way we treat each other now in the corners, but we’re still good friends.”

Myers marvelled at the growth some of his former teammates — from Adam Lowry, Kyle Connor and Connor Hellebuyck, to Nikolaj Ehlers, Mark Scheifele and Josh Morrissey, who was just getting his feet wet at the NHL level with Myers as a bit of a mentor.

On Lowry, now in his second year as captain and on pace for a career offensive season: “Even as a young kid, when I was there, he displayed a lot of leadership qualities. To see him take his game to another level in terms of the plays he’s making... we all see it when we were there.”

On Connor, who leads the club with 37 goals and is on track to eclipse 100 points and set a new franchise record: “KC’s extremely quick, he knows how to find the open ice and you really have to make sure you know when you’re on the ice with him because in

a split-second he can be behind you. You almost have to play a little bit differently when you're out there. He's a great player, very elusive."

Myers likes what he sees from the current Jets, despite the fact his Canucks beat them 6-2 on Tuesday night inside Rogers Arena. He wouldn't be surprised to see them go on another long run this spring.

"I know what type of players they are," he said.

The Hockey News

<https://thehockeynews.com/news/latest-news/jets-connor-hellebuyck-keeps-winning-now-he-needs-a-stanley-cup>'

Jets' Connor Hellebuyck Keeps Winning: Now He Needs A Stanley Cup

By Carol Schram

On Thursday night, Connor Hellebuyck became the first NHL goalie to reach 40 wins in the 2024-25 NHL season when the Winnipeg Jets beat the Edmonton Oilers in overtime.

It's the second time in his career that the 31-year-old has reached that plateau, and it's quite a feat. The only other active netminder with multiple 40-win seasons is Marc-Andre Fleury, whose career has been 11 years longer.

There's no time like the present for Connor Hellebuyck to lead the Winnipeg Jets on a successful playoff run.

One other challenger could also get to 40 this season: the goalie who was also drafted 111 picks ahead of Hellebuyck in 2012, Andrei Vasilevskiy. The Tampa Bay Lightning have 14 games remaining, and Vasilevskiy currently sits at 33 wins.

Look back at the last decade, and Vasilevskiy is the only goalie whose body of work comes close to touching Hellebuyck's. He won 44 games in 2017-18 and hit 39 in two other seasons, and their career performances have been almost identical. Both have save percentages of .917, and while Vasilevskiy's career goals-against average is 2.53, Hellebuyck's is just a few ticks higher, at 2.57.

When it comes to Vezina voting, Hellebuyck holds the edge. He already has two wins under his belt, from 2020 and from last season, when he collected 31 of 32 first-place votes from the league's GMs. As well as his strong lead in the win category, which the GMs value highly, Hellebuyck is also first with his .924 save percentage, which ties his career high, along with his career-best 2.06 GAA and his 34.4 goals saved above expected per money puck.com.

Washington's Logan Thompson is the only other stopper over 30 GSAE, and Hellebuyck nearly doubles Vasilevskiy's 18.1.

Hellebuyck and Sergei Bobrovsky are the only active goalies with two Vezina wins. If the voters reward Hellebuyck again this spring as expected, he'll be just the 13th goalie in NHL history to win three times and the first to collect back-to-back awards since Martin Brodeur did it in 2007 and 2008.

But there's one notable achievement missing from Hellebuyck's resume: a Stanley Cup.

To date, his best playoff run was his first. In 2018, the Jets bested the Nashville Predators in a seven-game second-round slugfest before losing to Fleury and the first-year Vegas Golden Knights in the Western Conference final.

After last year's chaotic first-round loss to the Colorado Avalanche, the Jets look like they've done everything right in preparing to erase that memory. Thursday's win in Edmonton got them to 100 points for the second-straight year, and they're on their way to clinching their first division title since returning to Winnipeg and the first conference championship in the history of the Jets/Thrashers franchise.

That positioning will protect them from a first-round matchup against one of the Central's other strong contenders. Instead, they'll meet whichever bubble team ultimately snags the second wild card in the West.

Having home-ice advantage for at least three rounds should also pay big dividends. The Jets' record of 25-5-4 at Canada Life Centre is one of the best in the NHL, and that's also where Hellebuyck has played his best hockey. He's 22-3-3 on home ice this year, with a save percentage of .934 and a 1.74 GAA.

While most NHL players were re-charging their batteries in February, Hellebuyck was logging some of the most intense minutes of his career with Team USA at the 4 Nations Face-Off. And while there's always a risk attached when top teams shift into cruise control in an attempt to rest up for the playoffs, the Jets are comfortable enough that they don't need Hellebuyck to stand on his head over the next four weeks.

Right now, he's near the top of the list of total minutes played — as usual. But the Jets are one of nine teams that have already completed 70 games.

And while Eric Comrie's record is a moderate 8-8-1, he has delivered quality minutes, with a .914 save percentage, 2.39 GAA, and 2.4 GSAE.

Other than a 10-minute pull by the concussion spotter in Seattle last weekend, Comrie has delivered complete games in all his other starts this year — helping to keep Winnipeg's rotation stable and predictable, which Hellebuyck appreciates.

“The way that I usually handle it is telling the other guy, ‘You’re not coming out, no matter what,’ ” he said. “Make him feel good, that no matter what’s gonna happen, he’s in.”