

## **Winnipeg Free Press**

<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2025/03/24/clash-of-the-nhl-titans>

### ***Clash of the NHL titans Capitals in town as Jets chase Washington for the Presidents' Trophy***

By: Ken Wiebe

Josh Morrissey remembers his welcome to the NHL moment fondly — even if it took place before he became a regular.

Fresh off being chosen 13th overall in the 2013 NHL Draft, Morrissey recalls getting the opportunity to suit up for the Winnipeg Jets in a Kraft Hockeyville game in Belleville, Ont., that October.

The 18-year-old was in the starting lineup for the Jets and caught himself staring across at Washington Capitals captain Alex Ovechkin.

“With those Hockeyville games, usually the teams will send some more of their stars to give the local fans a show,” Morrissey recalled. “When we’re standing out there for the opening faceoff and Ovi is out there, I was like ‘I’ve never seen a guy this big on the ice.’ I think I was kind of starstruck the whole game.

“Being a huge fan, as a kid growing up. When he came in the league, I was around 10 years old, so right in the peak of my hockey card collecting sort of era and everything like that. So that game, my first ever experience of wearing an NHL sweater and seeing him flying down the ice was pretty intimidating and definitely something I’ll never forget.”

Morrissey is no longer intimidated going up against Ovechkin, but still cherishes the opportunity to try and slow him down in his pursuit of Wayne Gretzky’s all-time record for goals.

As the Jets host the league-leading Capitals on Tuesday in a clash of the NHL titans, Morrissey took some time to appreciate what Ovechkin is doing in chasing down a milestone that most people thought would last forever.

With 35 goals in 54 games this season, Ovechkin is up to 888 goals and in the pursuit of 894, needing six goals to tie Gretzky and seven to stand alone.

“It’s one thing to have a good year, a couple of good years or extrapolate that out for a decade — he’s done it for much more than that. The consistency of his ability to score is why he’s going to break that record,” said Morrissey. “What I appreciate about him the most as a player is just the excitement that he brings to the game. For me, that’s what I think of when I think of his career. Of course, the goal-scoring ability, but you can just

tell that he absolutely loves to score goals and he brings that energy with the celebrations.

"It's been just great for the game throughout his entire career. Like I said, hopefully we don't let him break the record tomorrow. But definitely the whole league is in awe of what he's been able to do."

Ovechkin's pursuit of Gretzky's record has garnered plenty of attention around the NHL, and for good reason, but the Capitals ability to perform at an incredibly high level this season is a testament to their team game and commitment to defensive structure.

"You knew that it was going to be a huge focus all year long," said Jets head coach Scott Arniel, who spent four seasons with the Capitals as an assistant coach and worked closely with Ovechkin. "(The Capitals) have won a lot of hockey games and Ovi's continued to score. It isn't just about scoring goals. He's playing the right way, too. Kind of like 2018 when they won the (Stanley) Cup there, he was a big part of playing that way.

"They're a deep team, they're a big team, and they're getting a lot of contributions from a lot of people in that lineup. Some young guys have really stepped forward and obviously having Ovi out there... it doesn't take him much if he gets that puck on his stick. He makes teams pay."

The Jets enter the contest two points behind the Capitals (who hold a game in hand) in the chase for the Presidents' Trophy.

Washington is riding a four-game winning streak and has won nine of their past 10 outings, while the Jets will be looking to put a 5-3 loss to the Buffalo Sabres behind them.

"When you play those top teams, those are teams that you might have to go through if you want to get to the pinnacle of what we're trying to achieve," said Morrissey. "It's fun to get those big matchups during the year and test yourselves against the other best teams."

Although the Jets were happy with the quality and quantity of the scoring chances they generated on Sunday, they will be looking to clean up some of the defensive details as they meet the Capitals for the second and final time of the regular season.

"It wasn't so much about what we got but what we gave up, rather," Morrissey said. "We didn't give up a ton, but what we did, there was some quality there and some areas we can clean up and a little bit of emphasis that you might run into a game like that in the playoffs.

"On those nights, you just can't afford to have lapses when there's a goalie playing like that."

The Jets earned a 5-4 overtime win over the Capitals when the two teams played a highly-entertaining game on Feb. 1.

Jets goalie Connor Hellebuyck will be back between the pipes on Tuesday for his 54th start of the season.

Hellebuyck went through an on-ice session with Jets goalie coach Wade Flaherty on Monday to help sharpen up some of his details for the stretch run.

Former Jets centre Pierre-Luc Dubois is having an excellent season with the Capitals after they acquired him in an off-season deal for goalie Darcy Kuemper.

Dubois is up to 18 goals and 61 points (which is two behind his career-best, set in 2022-23 as a member of the Jets), while anchoring the second line with Tom Wilson and Connor McMichael.

Speaking to reporters at the Capitals practice rink in Virginia on Monday, Dubois said he was excited for his lone visit this season to Winnipeg.

Although his father Eric, an assistant coach with the Manitoba Moose, is on the road this week, Dubois was set to have dinner with his mom, Jill.

“To be able to spend the night with her and for her to be able to come to the game, that’s going to be really fun,” said Dubois, who spent three seasons with the Jets before he was traded to the Los Angeles Kings. “The fans, the people, the staff, the players, they treated me great and I have nothing but good memories from there.

“So, I think every time for the rest of my career when I walk in that building and I play there, it’s going to be a little bit special.”

<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2025/03/24/injuries-shake-up-jets-lines>

### ***Injuries shake up Jets’ lines***

### ***Vilardi out with upper-body issue, Pionk still on the shelf***

By: Ken Wiebe

The Winnipeg Jets’ top line is getting an unexpected and forced makeover.

Jets head coach Scott Arniel told reporters on Monday that winger Gabe Vilardi will be sidelined with an upper-body injury.

Officially, Arniel said Vilardi was week-to-week, though it’s too early to have more of a definitive timeline for his prospective return.

Vilardi sustained the injury during Sunday's 5-3 loss to the Buffalo Sabres, but it wasn't the result of taking a puck to the ear after a clearing attempt from defenceman Bowen Byram during the first period.

Arniel got the news of Vilardi's injury on Sunday night and was devastated for him.

"It's really disappointing. We were so upset about (it) when we found out," said Arniel. "He's just done such a fantastic job of his summer training to do some specific things, so that he can hope to have an 82 game season.

"His training, his in season training, kind of looking after himself, doing all of the right things to get him here. Kind of what happened... it was a little bit of a freak situation. It is what it is, but it's really disappointing that he (is injured) because he really felt this was a year that he might be able to get 82 in."

On Vilardi's final shift, he took a hard hit along the boards from Sabres defenceman Mattias Samuelsson and eventually made his way to the front of the net as he looked for the equalizer.

But just before the empty-net goal was scored by Ryan McLeod, Vilardi fell awkwardly to the ice as he was dumped by Sabres forward Alex Tuch.

Vilardi is having a spectacular season, producing career-bests of 27 goals, 34 assists and 61 points in 71 games (which is also a career-high), spending the bulk of his time skating alongside Mark Scheifele and Kyle Connor.

Vilardi is also a key cog on the league's best power play, so his absence will certainly be felt.

The Jets will miss Vilardi's puck-possession prowess, his ability to win board battles and his silky smooth hands around the net.

Versatile winger Alex Iafallo will get the first chance on the top line on Tuesday when the Jets host the Washington Capitals in a battle between the top team in the Eastern Conference and the top club in the West.

"Those guys had such chemistry and that's probably why I'm kind of looking at AI, who's sort of a meat-and-potato guy — good in the corners, good at the net front," said Arniel, who wouldn't speculate if Vilardi would be ready for the opening game of the Stanley Cup playoffs. "So hopefully, (Iafallo) jumps in there and can help just pick that up a little bit."

Iafallo has some familiarity in the role, as he spent ample time last season playing with Scheifele and Connor when Vilardi missed action due to injury.

“Al’s been there before,” said Arniel. “We’ll start that way and kind of move forward. We’ll go game-to-game.”

Other options for Arniel to eventually consider include promoting Nikolaj Ehlers or Cole Perfetti, both of whom have been playing well.

The Jets also unveiled a minor tweak to each of the other three lines during Monday’s workout.

Captain Adam Lowry was skating between Ehlers and Mason Appleton, Vladislav Namestnikov was skating with Perfetti and Nino Niederreiter, and Rasmus Kupari was in the middle with Morgan Barron and Brandon Tanev.

Based on Monday’s workout, the Jets don’t figure to be making any changes on defence after Logan Stanley chipped in a pair of assists on the third pairing.

### *NIEDERREITER DODGES BULLET*

Jets winger Niederreiter found himself pulled from Sunday’s game for several minutes after he was on the receiving end of a jarring check in the neutral zone from Sabres defenceman Connor Clifton.

Niederreiter skated past the red line before dumping the puck in to avoid an icing call, but was rocked into the boards from a distance, slamming both his back and head on the play.

He was a bit wobbly making his way to the bench, so he made his way to the dressing room for further evaluation.

“Got hit pretty hard, and then went into boards and tried to get off the ice as quick as possible,” said Niederreiter, noting that it felt like he got hit by a bus. “Obviously (you) start seeing the stars for a minute (or) two, and then, you’ve got to go back to (do) the whole concussion protocol and obviously pass it and had a chance to come back.”

Jets defenceman Colin Miller said after Sunday’s game that he didn’t particularly care for the hit Clifton delivered and Niederreiter agrees with him.

“I don’t think it was a good hit, you should never hit a player in a vulnerable position, especially that far away from the boards,” said Niederreiter. “I think it is not a hit you should take during a game.”

After returning to action, Niederreiter was able to snap a 15-game goalless drought as his jam play around the crease during a Jets’ power play created a rebound that went in off the skate of Sabres forward Beck Malenstyn.

"I am glad it went in but at the same time my main focus was to get back out there and start feeling good and making sure everything was alright," said Niederreiter, who is up to 15 goals on the season. "Obviously, I was glad to get rewarded with the goal."

Despite the dry spell, Niederreiter remains tied for fifth in goals with Perfetti and has points in consecutive games after setting up Josh Morrissey's marker against the Edmonton Oilers on Thursday.

### ***PIONK NOT SKATING YET***

The other player on the Jets that is on the shelf with an injury is defenceman Neal Pionk and while not much of an update on his status was provided on Monday, it's safe to say his return is not imminent.

Arniel said that Pionk, who has missed the past five games with a lower-body issue, hasn't resumed skating yet.

The initial timeline was that the Jets were hopeful Pionk would return before the end of the regular season.

### **Winnipeg Sun**

<https://winnipegsun.com/sports/hockey/nhl/winnipeg-jets/probably-get-booed-no-ukrainian-love-lost-as-ovechkin-visits-jets>

### ***'Probably get booed': No Ukrainian love lost as Ovechkin visits Jets***

By Paul Friesen

The soon-to-be greatest goal scorer in hockey history will pass through Winnipeg on Tuesday, carrying with him enough baggage to fill the entire belly of his team's charter aircraft.

Alex Ovechkin will lead his Washington Capitals onto the ice against the Jets needing just seven more goals to push aside Wayne Gretzky at the top of the mountain.

For many in Winnipeg, his appearance will feel more like the eruption of a volcano.

"Mentioning his name, for me, just brings negative notes, negative thoughts and negative pictures," Valerii Pasko was saying on Monday. "If I go to the game I would definitely not cheer for him in the stands. Obviously we always support Ukraine. I can't accept his position on this."

Pasko is a Ukrainian immigrant and hockey fan. As part of the group Canadian Friends of Hockey In Ukraine, he's helped organize charity events and the donation of hockey gear for kids back in his home country.

Stressing he was sharing his personal opinion on Ovechkin and the NHL and not as the spokesperson for CFHU, Pasko's feelings stem from Ovechkin's proud and continuing support of Russian president Vladimir Putin.

Ovechkin has refused to remove photos of Putin from his Instagram page and has been unapologetic of his support for the dictator, even since the invasion of Ukraine three years ago.

Winnipeg's Ukrainian population was already more than 100,000 at the time and has only swelled, since.

Its relationship with the Jets has been strong, highlighted by the annual Ukrainian Heritage Night celebration and appearances by the Hoosli Choir to sing the national anthems for a few games every season.

Hoosli is not singing the anthems on Tuesday, although an online petition called for the Jets to bring them in as a counter to the hype machine that follows Ovechkin around.

That hype machine is designed to draw in every sportswriter and hockey broadcaster who crosses No. 8's path in his pursuit of the record.

Its gears don't leave room for nuance. Hell, they don't even leave room for the entire truth. They just spit out the numbers and the platitudes with clear instructions: Celebrate the player, but don't dare touch on the person.

A younger me may have been drawn in by the machine. A younger me may have agreed to keep a wall between sports and politics.

But an older me recognizes this isn't just politics. It's far beyond that. It's invasion. It's mass murder. It's dictatorial. And its tentacles are drawing nearer, making inroads in North America.

Some in the hockey world, like former NHLer and adopted Winnipegger Wayne Babych, straddle the line a little better than I can.

Babych is of Ukrainian heritage, too, and has done considerable work with CFHU. He's also a one-time 50-goal scorer who marvels at Ovechkin accomplishing what was once the unthinkable.

"It's a great feat," Babych said. "Half of Winnipeg is either Ukrainian or wanna-be Ukrainian. A lot to do with the food. It's a sad thing. Really sad that we can't celebrate. Because he's Russian.

"He's going to break a Ukrainian's record."

Gretzky was Babych's Team Canada centre at the 1978 world junior championship. Mario Lemieux was his centre for a time in the NHL. He knows greatness when he sees it.

So part of him wants to cheer for it. Part of him wants to think Ovechkin isn't as pro-Putin as he seems, that he's simply afraid to speak out because he still has family in Russia.

A better part of him has a good idea how Winnipeggers will react on Tuesday night.

"Before the war people wanted to go see him play," Babych said. "I imagine every time he touches the puck he's probably going to get booed. Because of the war. I don't think it has anything to do with the hockey player. It's really sad. For any other player this is quite an accomplishment.

"People have big hearts. I have a big heart, too. It's torn."

Russia's invasion caused Babych to cancel a trip to bring kids hockey equipment to Ukraine. So instead of handshakes and hugs on the ground there, he was getting text messages from people he knew who were suddenly at war.

Ihor Barwinsky, another volunteer with CFHU, says those are the people he celebrates.

"They're willing to sacrifice themselves and their property... by staying there and putting up a fight," Barwinsky said. "And then we see someone come over here and literally ignore people's sacrifices or ignore the fact that this person's leadership and organization is inflicting these wounds... and saying, 'Hey, Putin's a great guy.' That really ticks me off."

Barwinsky predicts a few blue and yellow flags in the crowd on Tuesday. And very little cheering for the next goal on the road to hockey history.

"He's probably not going to get a warm welcome."

<https://winnipegssun.com/sports/hockey/nhl/winnipeg-jets/morrissey-recalls-meeting-ovechkin-march-25-2025>

### ***Jets' Josh Morrissey recalls first on-ice meeting with Ovechkin***

By Gordon Anderson

In terms of hockey memories and nightmares, Washington Capitals sniper Alex Ovechkin has delivered 888 individual units heading into a Tuesday night battle of the best teams, record-wise, in the NHL.



Jets defenceman Josh Morrissey took a long stride across the fresh ice of memory lane when conjuring his first recollection of the Capitals' uber-talented goal-scoring machine.

"Actually, and it wasn't even a regular-season game," Morrissey said after practice on Monday. "It was my first pre-season game way back in (2013), the Kraft Hockeyville game in Belleville. My first training camp, I was 18 years old, and we were playing against Washington. Obviously, with those Hockeyville games, usually the teams will send some more of their stars to give the local fans a show."

At that point in his career, the Great 8 was sitting at 371 goals in 601 regular-season games.

Ovechkin, Nik Backstrom and Mike Green were part of the Capitals crew. Braden Holtby was in between the pipes for Washington. Green scored the winner in a shootout.

Along with Morrissey, Evander Kane and Zach Bogosian suited up for the Jets, Edward Pasquale was the netminder in the shootout for Winnipeg. At that time in his career, Mark Scheifele was considered a 'prospect.' The Caps won 4-3 at Yardman Arena.

"When we're standing out there for the opening faceoff and Ovi is out there, I was like 'I've never seen a guy this big on the ice.' I was kind of starstruck the whole game. I'll never forget that experience and kind of being in awe," Morrissey said.

Morrissey freely admitted he was not long past his hockey card collecting days. He was a fan, as much as anybody in the stands that night.

"When he came in the league, I was around 10 years old, so right in the peak of my hockey card collecting sort of era, and everything like that," said the longtime veteran of now 652 regular-season games. "So that game, my first-ever experience of wearing an NHL sweater and seeing him flying down the ice was pretty intimidating and definitely something I'll never forget."

Ovechkin enters the Capitals-Jets game on Tuesday six goals from tying Wayne Gretzky's record of 894 career NHL goals.

<https://winnipegssun.com/sports/its-not-his-ear-jets-winger-gabe-vilardi-out-for-the-foreseeable-future>

### ***'It's not his ear': Jets winger Gabe Vilardi out for the foreseeable future***

By Gordon Anderson

The Jets will be without forward Gabriel Vilardi for the foreseeable future after he sustained an upper-body injury during the 5-3 loss to the Buffalo Sabres on Sunday afternoon.

“He’ll be week-to-week, upper-body injury ... and it’s not his ear,” head coach Scott Arniel said on Monday after practice. “So, yeah, he’s out for a bit.”

What Arniel is referencing occurred when Vilardi was hit in the head with the puck on a weird bounce in the neutral zone. He logged 16:02 of ice time on Sunday.

Alex Iafallo will drift into the vacant position created by the injury, playing alongside Kyle Connor and Mark Scheifele.

“We’ll go into it tomorrow with Al,” Arniel said. “Al’s been there before, maybe not so much this year, but Al’s been there before. We’ll start that way and kind of move forward. We’ll go game-to-game. See how it goes tomorrow night.”

The 25-year-old Vilardi has 27 goals and 34 assists in 71 games played. Vilardi is tied for ninth in the league with 12 power-play goals. Jake Guentzel of the Tampa Bay Lightning leads with 15.

Arniel was asked what the No. 13 brings to the table.

“His puck possession skills, his ability to be around the net, obviously the power play, his net-front presence,” Arniel said. “But those guys had such chemistry, just the way, and that’s probably why I’m kind of looking at Al, who’s sort of a meat-and-potato guy — good in the corners, good at the net front. I think that the chemistry that K.C., Schief and Gabe have had, just kind of being on the same page every time they get into that offensive zone. And so hopefully, like I mentioned, that Al jumps in there and can help just pick that up a little bit.”

Arniel was also personally disappointed for the player, knowing how hard the 25-year-old has worked to improve his overall 200-foot performance and durability

“He’s just done such a fantastic job of his summer training to do some specific things so that he can hope to have an 82-game season,” Arniel said. “His training, his in-season training, kind of looking after himself, doing all the right things to get him here. It is what it is, but it’s disappointing that he couldn’t because he really felt this was a year that he might be able to get 82 in.”

Arniel was asked if they hope to have Vilardi back by the playoffs. The regular season ends on April 17, the postseason is scheduled to commence two days later.

“We’re just going week to week here for now,” Arniel said. “We’ll wait and see.”

Double feature

The Jets (48-19-4) play host to the Washington Capitals (47-15-8) on Tuesday night.

Not only do the Jets have a chance to tie the Capitals at the top of the NHL standings with a regulation win, but Alexander Ovechkin will make his only stop in town during the regular season in search of a record thought untouchable.

Ovechkin has 888 career goals. He is six behind Wayne Gretzky's mark of 894. Puck drop is 7 p.m.

Josh Morrissey was asked if the current media circus encircling the Great 8 would be distracting to the team.

"I'm sure it's a real point of energy for them," Morrissey said. "He's going to break the goal record and how can that not be an exciting time to be a part of that team. I bet you it's not a distraction at all."

Nino Niederreiter was asked his opinion on the Russian bear and his chase for hockey infamy.

"I think it's, it's great," Niederreiter said. "I mean, obviously whenever you have a chance to be, kind of the same era with a player like him, it's so much fun. He's done a tremendous job over the years, scoring a lot of goals, and it's very fascinating to see."

#### *Nino's light and dark*

Niederreiter scored for the Jets in the loss to Buffalo. His second-period power-play marker at 2:06, which tied the game one each, was his 15th of the campaign.

Niederreiter's goal bounced off the skate of Sabres forward Beck Malenstyn as he attempted to make a cross-crease pass to Vladislav Namestnikov, who was stationed alone near the right post.

The goal snapped a 15-game goal-scoring drought. His previous marker was Feb. 4 vs the Hurricanes. Niederreiter was named the third star.

Prior to the slump buster, Niederreiter left the game late in first period after he was blasted into the sideboards by Buffalo d-man Connor Clifton just seconds after dumping the puck into the Sabres zone.

He put himself into concussion protocol. Niederreiter says he suffered a couple of concussions prior to his arrival in Winnipeg.

"Obviously I got hit pretty hard and then went into boards and tried to get off the ice as quick as possible," the Swiss forward said. "Obviously, start seeing the stars for a minute or two, and then, you got to go back to the whole concussion protocol and obviously pass it and had a chance to come back."

In his post-game media session following the loss to Buffalo, Colin Miller said he didn't like the hit. On Monday, Niederreiter was asked for his opinion on the high-speed collision, which occurred at 16:58 of the opening period.

"I don't think it was a good hit, you should never hit a player in a vulnerable position, especially that far away from the boards," he said. "I think it is not a hit you should take during a game."

#### *Injury update*

Arniel was also asked about the status of d-man Neal Pionk.

Arniel said Pionk isn't skating yet and is still considered week-to-week with a lower-body injury

The Jets d-man last skated on March 11 against the New York Rangers. The 29-year-old blueliner has nine goals and 28 assists for 37 points in 66 games this season.

#### **The Athletic**

<https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/6227718/2025/03/25/winnipeg-jets-remain-stanley-cup-contenders/>

#### ***The Winnipeg Jets are still Stanley Cup contenders, even as adversity strikes***

By Murat Ates

I recently argued that the Winnipeg Jets needed a metaphorical "punch in the mouth" — an obstacle to overcome, so as to force the Jets to double down on their best 200 foot habits down the stretch. Gabriel Vilardi's upper-body injury isn't what I had in mind.

Vilardi was tripped by Alex Tuch at the end of Winnipeg's game against Buffalo, striking the ice with his left shoulder. Coach Scott Arniel didn't confirm that this wasn't the exact moment of Vilardi's injury — just that Vilardi is out week-to-week — but did make it clear that the injury wasn't related to the puck he took in the face in the first period. Either way, Winnipeg is missing a key piece of top line and the cornerstone of its league-leading power play.

Most troubling? Arniel couldn't promise that Vilardi would be ready for Game 1 of the playoffs.

It's adversity Winnipeg must overcome. The Washington Capitals are the Jets' next opponent — and the only team ahead of Winnipeg in the standings — making this week the ideal time to take stock of Winnipeg's playoff ambitions.

The Jets are a Stanley Cup contender, with strengths in most facets of the game, but Vilardi's injury eliminates an elite distributor from the power play. It's also the second

“week-to-week” injury Winnipeg has endured this month, with Neal Pionk yet to skate since twisting his leg in a collision with New York’s Brennan Othmann on March 11.

Meanwhile, the Jets have the 13th-best points percentage since the 4 Nations break — worse than Central Division rivals Colorado, Dallas, and St. Louis, the team they have the highest odds of playing in Round 1.

Is it time to prepare for a third straight first-round exit?

Not so fast. Here’s how the Jets stack up against the NHL’s top teams — even as they limp their way through the stretch.

*Offence: Mark Scheifele isn’t finishing, but don’t lose sight of the process*

Let’s start with a quick look at the Jets’ offense. Despite recent struggles, the power play has been the class of the league, but how has Winnipeg done at five-on-five?

Look at the season-long numbers and find that Winnipeg has scored the 10th most goals with the 10th most expected goals, as per Natural Stat Trick. How appropriate. Check the totals since the 4 Nations Face-Off, though. Compare them to your memory of recent games, whether it’s James Reimer channeling Dominik Hasek or Winnipeg’s snipers flat out missing the net from point blank.

Five-on-five  
Season  
149 (10th)  
150.2 (10th)

Since 4-Nations  
29 (22nd)  
34.8 (5th)

The Jets have created more five-on-five offence during their (relative) scoring slump than they did when everything was going in the net. They’re getting to dangerous areas of the ice and getting shots off when they’re there, but the Jets aren’t finishing at their usual rate. On an individual level, Cole Perfetti is 11th, Kyle Connor is 26th, and Adam Lowry is 36th in expected goal scoring since the break.

Connor, Perfetti, and Nikolaj Ehlers have done their part in terms of finishing, with six goals (Connor) and four each from Perfetti and Ehlers, but there are a lot of miserable shooting percentages. You’d like to see Mark Scheifele higher than 19th in shots per minute at five-on-five but at least he’s getting pucks to Connor for shots. Most of the goals drop-off comes from a nosedive in finishing — the Jets have created more chances from prime real estate since the 4 Nations break than almost any other team. Blame bounces, or the opponents’ goalies for their saves, or the Jets for not bearing down. Winnipeg’s five-on-five offence has been a strength down the stretch.

It's the power play that's concerning — especially with Vilardi gone.

Power play

Season

11.7 (1st)

8.7 (11th)

77.6 (13th)

Since 4-Nations

6.3 (23rd)

8.4 (15th)

77.9 (14th)

There are two competing interpretations available here. I tend to believe that a power play can outscore its expected goals numbers over the course of a season. The data leans heavily on shot volume and shot location, without including a goaltender's sightlines or movement. Meanwhile, power plays tend to take the shots that they want to take, influencing shot quality through puck movement with more control than is manageable at five-on-five. (This is my way of saying I don't think it's an emergency that the Jets have run hot over the course of the full season.)

The problem is partly that power plays depend on finishing — which can vary wildly in a small sample — while teams spend roughly 10 percent of game time with the man advantage. Sure, more goals get scored this way, but even then: The Jets have scored roughly three times as many even-strength goals as they've scored with the man advantage. Five-on-five play is still the heart of the game.

So why have the Jets stopped scoring, despite shooting just as often from similar places?

Connor hasn't scored a single power-play goal since the 4 Nations break, despite 16 shots. Scheifele has scored once in 10 shots. And that's basically the whole story: Connor and Scheifele have each taken (slightly) more shots per minute in this time frame; they just haven't buried.

Arniel defended Scheifele's scoring slump this week, saying we should focus on his scoring chances instead of his goals. I think Connor is getting the majority of the chances at five-on-five — often set up by Scheifele — but they've each been close with the man advantage. They just need to score, especially now that Vilardi's net-front creativity will be missing.

Alex Iafallo will take Vilardi's spot on the power play. As a left-handed shooter, he will spend more of his time on the doorstep than in Vilardi's playmaking position beside the net. Ehlers' role is going to increase — I expect the Jets to run more plays through him on the right flank, likely boosting Scheifele's shot totals. The two have connected for a lot of scoring chances and a few power-play goals this season.

If Lafallo is ineffective, then look for Perfetti as the most sensible alternative.

*Defence: Would you believe that they're improving here, too?*

Pionk has been injured. Logan Stanley and Haydn Fleury have been in and out of the lineup on the third pair.

And the Jets have been every bit as good defensively during this average-looking stretch of play as they've been all season long.

Five-on-five

Season

105 (1st)

150.2 (13th)

Since 4-Nations

21 (3rd)

27.5 (6th)

The trends hold if you look at rate stats: Since the break, Winnipeg is fourth in expected goals against and second in goals against. The team defence continues to hold, even as individual mistakes last disproportionately in memory.

If Reimer didn't stand on his head, for example, Dylan DeMelo's play on this JJ Peterka goal wouldn't raise the alarm that it did.

DeMelo is a candid, thoughtful speaker with a good read of the game. I asked him what a defenceman is meant to do on that play.

"I tried to fight through it," he said. "I easily could have ran into him and tried to draw (a penalty) but I tried to spin him. You're not thinking in that moment — you just react. He came and cut me off and I tried to stay loose and then try to get him. It's hard when a guy's got a step and you're in the midst of your spin move."

Teams run pick plays, including the Jets. Arniel said the Jets would have done better to stay patient in the slot, playing better help defence in the middle of the ice. DeMelo put his focus on the postseason.

"I'm going to look at it because that's going to happen in the playoffs," he said. "And we all know that, in the playoffs, the whistles go away. If there's any type of interference off the draw, you just have to find a way. Maybe I'll try to execute that spin a little bit quicker. Or maybe it's just me staying patient in the hole and letting the play materialize."

DeMelo has been beaten more often this season than in years past, but he and Josh Morrissey maintain excellent underlying numbers and are still winning their minutes by a

sizeable margin. Dylan Samberg and Pionk were in the same position, winning their minutes in terms of underlying numbers and real goals.

Samberg and his new partner, Luke Schenn, have some very different numbers. The Jets have won that pairing's minutes 3-1 in terms of real goals despite getting outshot. To me, the poor underlying numbers aren't about a lack of defensive ability — it's Winnipeg missing Pionk's play in transition. Schenn makes good five-to-10 foot passes that help key breakouts, but Pionk can stretch the puck up ice with accuracy and is a more dynamic offensive threat.

I think it's reasonable to wonder about the Jets' size and strength when the playoffs begin. Net-front battles were a huge part of Colorado's advantage last season. I also think Schenn was a sensible addition and gives the Jets a much-needed skillset in an important depth role.

Either way, it's clear that the Jets' defence is still a team strength. Watch out for St. Louis, though — they're the only team with better defensive numbers than Winnipeg in expected and real goals against per minute at five-on-five.

By the way: Did you have the Jets as No. 1 in any key PK category?

Penalty kill

Season

48.4 (8th)

8.3 (18th)

7.6 (15th)

Since 4-Nations

35 (1st)

6.8 (6th)

8.5 (21st)

The Jets have given up the fewest shots against per minute while shorthanded since the break. They're eighth-best in that regard this season.

In both cases, Winnipeg appears to be held back by its shorthanded goaltending — 19th-best throughout the season and second-worst since the break. When we're talking about a sample with 63 minutes and 37 shots in it, there's plenty of opportunity for individual moments to have an outsized impact on the final numbers. I still think that power plays dictate shot quality, mind you, and there could be an area for concern.

Only three goalies have faced more rebound shots than Hellebuyck has faced while shorthanded. There's plenty of room to advocate for better boxouts and netfront battles; that's part of why they got Schenn in the first place and, as we recently discussed, it's a big part of what Samberg does best.



There's been a bit of a "sky is falling" reaction to recent Jets losses to Buffalo and Vancouver, while Winnipeg didn't look to be at its best when it beat Edmonton last week. If the Capitals beat the Jets without Vilardi and Pionk on Tuesday, I suspect the fanbase's playoff worries will intensify.

That's fine, but try not to lose sight of the big picture. Even as the Jets' points pace has fallen from best in the league to average, Winnipeg looks good by a lot of indicators since the break — and better in many of them. Adversity has struck the 2024-25 Jets and they remain among the NHL's top teams.

Winnipeg will clinch a playoff spot with a point against Washington or any form of Blues loss to Montreal on Tuesday.

### **Sportsnet.ca**

<https://www.sportsnet.ca/nhl/article/how-vilardis-injury-impacts-jets-heading-into-playoffs/>

### ***How Vilardi's injury impacts Jets heading into playoffs***

By Jacob Stoller

WINNIPEG — Gabriel Vilardi came agonizingly close to his first injury-free season.

Chronic back issues hindered him for three years after he was drafted. Last season, his first in Winnipeg, was shortened to 47 games due to an MCL sprain out of the gate, followed by an enlarged spleen later in the year.

From the start of training camp, Vilardi made it known that he was set on playing a full 82-game season.

And then poof. Out week-to-week with an upper-body injury.

"This is actually what we talked about (and) was so upset about last night when we found out," Scott Arniel told reporters Monday morning. "He's done such a fantastic job (with) his summer training, to do some specific things so that he can hope to have an 82-game season."

Arniel didn't provide any details on the injury, other than that it had nothing to do with Vilardi briefly exiting Sunday's game against Buffalo after taking a puck to the ear.

"You guys can go find it yourself but it was kind of a freak situation," Arniel said.

Vilardi did take an awkward fall in his final shift against Buffalo.

A vague week-to-week timeline is all the more ominous considering the Jets are approaching the final three weeks of the regular season.

Regardless of how long he ends up being out, losing the 25-year-old is a crushing blow for the Jets.

Vilardi has already registered career-highs in goals (27) and points (61) through 71 games — putting him on pace for 31 goals and 70 points across an 82-game season. The six-foot-three right winger is one of the NHL's most dangerous net front scorers — ranking in the 99th percentile for high-danger goals (22) — and is tied for ninth in power-play goals (12).

But the Jets aren't just going to miss him for his scoring ability.

What this means for Mark Scheifele and Kyle Connor

Scheifele and Connor's career years wouldn't be happening without Vilardi.

He's been instrumental to the top line's success.

Vilardi was the missing puzzle piece that the inseparable duo so desperately needed as a big-bodied winger who is elite at protecting the puck, capable of extending plays along the wall and sustaining offensive zone time off the cycle.

"He's a modern day power forward," one NHL assistant coach told Sportsnet.ca "Perfect complement to those two. Knows how to get open and uses his size to establish space in tough areas. His hockey sense allows him to read off smart players."

Vilardi's puck control in tight areas and strong stickwork have been key to many of Scheifele and Connor's goals.

"That's probably why I'm looking at (Alex Iafallo), who's kind of a meat and potato guy," Arniel said of Vilardi's replacement.

In Iafallo, Arniel provides the top line with an elite forechecker that can win one-on-one battles and crash the net. Iafallo ranks in the 86th percentile in five-on-five high-danger shot attempts per 60 minutes (4.27). He also spent some time alongside Scheifele and Connor last season after Vilardi went down with his MCL injury.

That said, there's a clear drop-off in playmaking ability from Vilardi to the 31-year-old Iafallo. It also doesn't help that Iafallo will be playing on his off-side, which makes it harder to make a seam pass after winning a battle.

Ideally, Winnipeg would have a right-shot playmaking winger that they could bump up the depth chart. But their only other right-shot winger is Mason Appleton, a player who has registered just four points over the last two months.

While Nino Niederreiter is a conceivable option on paper, the 32-year-old isn't as effective as Vilardi or Lafallo along the wall. He's not lauded for his passing, either.

What this means for the power play

Vilardi's playmaking and scoring down low have helped the Jets become a matchup nightmare on the power play, forcing opponents to spread their attention beyond just Scheifele and Connor.

Recently, teams have started to key in on Vilardi. Through the Jets' first 51 games, they were converting on 33 per cent of their power plays (first) and Vilardi scored 11 of his 12 power play goals through that time. Over the last 20 games, the Jets' power play has tapered off, converting on just 21.8 per cent of their chances (19th), which directly correlates with Vilardi being given less room to operate.

Lafallo is set to replace Vilardi on the top unit, though it remains to be seen how long that lasts.

One has to think, at some point, the Jets will elect to put a bigger forward in front of the net to create traffic and pounce on rebounds.

Niederreiter seems like a sensible Plan B to Lafallo for that very reason. Or maybe Adam Lowry, who can win draws and be a complete bully in front of the net. While those two options could generate a few garbage goals, neither player possesses the soft hands, passing or vision that Vilardi does.

One could argue that Cole Perfetti, who has started to really shine on the second unit, deserves a promotion. The problem with that, however, is that Perfetti being on the top unit could lead to them operating more on the perimeter and straying away from high-danger areas.

Whether they find a viable band-aid solution or not, there's no doubt the Jets' power play unit just became significantly less lethal.

What does this mean for the Jets' playoff chances?

Well, we don't know yet.

But any scenario where the Jets are playing meaningful games without Vilardi is a daunting task.

The Jets pride themselves on being a hard-nosed, defensively sound team that aims to edge out opponents in 2-1 games. Their first line and power play will be key in any playoff series but the pressure now rises even more on the second unit of Perfetti,

Vladislav Namestnikov and Nikolaj Ehlers. Frankly, much of the offensive burden will fall on Connor and Scheifele, who are at their best with Vilardi.

Losing Vilardi for the playoffs would weaken their most effective offensive weapons. And indirectly, it'd put a lot more pressure on Connor Hellebuyck to steal games.

### **Canadian Press**

<https://www.sportsnet.ca/nhl/article/jets-to-host-capitals-as-ovechkins-pursuit-of-gretzkys-goal-mark-continues/>

### ***Jets to host Capitals as Ovechkin's pursuit of Gretzky's goal mark continues***

By Canadian Press

Josh Morrissey is both hockey nut and student of the game.

The Winnipeg Jets defenceman has a keen appreciation for storylines that capture the sport's attention.

Alex Ovechkin's relentless pursuit of Wayne Gretzky's all-time NHL goal mark — a quest that's now into single digits — is one such narrative.

Morrissey just doesn't want the Russian superstar inching any closer Tuesday.

Winnipeg hosts Ovechkin, who sits just seven goals back of eclipsing Gretzky's all-time record of 894, and the Washington Capitals in a marquee matchup packed with intrigue.

The teams are in a dogfight atop the standings for the league's best regular-season record. The Capitals (47-15-8) enter with 102 points, two better than Jets (48-19-4) in the Presidents' Trophy race.

Winnipeg will also have a reimagined top line because of injury, while Washington's campaign under Spencer Carbery has the second-year bench boss looking like the runaway winner of the Jack Adams Award as the league's top coach.

Ovechkin, however, is a storyline that trumps all.

The 39-year-old winger sits at 888 career goals, including 35 across just 54 games in 2024-25 after missing 16 contests with a broken leg earlier in the schedule.

"How can that not be an exciting time to be a part of that team?" Morrissey said of Ovechkin's pursuit following Monday's practice. "I assume it's a point of energy for them."

Ovechkin, with 13 games left on the 2024-25 schedule to catch Gretzky, has energized the Capitals for the last two decades.

The top pick at the 2004 draft owns nine separate 50-goal seasons, including the 65 he scored in 2007-08, and has reached at least 40 a jaw-dropping 13 times as part of run that included the lockout-shortened 2012-13 schedule and two pandemic-stunted campaigns.

"Whenever you have a chance to be (in) the same era with a player like him, it's so much fun," Jets forward Nino Niederreiter said. "It's very fascinating to to see."

Ovechkin looked to be slowing down when he bagged just 33 goals in 2016-17 before emphatically striking back with a combined 148 over the next three seasons to put him 41 short of the Great One's record — once thought unattainable — heading into training camp.

"It's one thing to have a good year, a couple of good years or extrapolate that out for a decade ... he's done it for much more than that," Morrissey said. "The consistency of his ability to score is why he's going to break that record.

"The whole league is in awe."

Jets head coach Scott Arniel has been impressed with how the Capitals have managed the circus around Ovechkin's chase.

"It was going to be a huge focus," he said. "They've won a lot of hockey games ... Ovi's playing (and) it isn't just about scoring goals. He's playing the right way."

In his first season as Winnipeg's head coach, Arniel was an assistant with Washington immediately after the Capitals' secured the franchise's first Stanley Cup victory in 2018.

The veteran bench boss sees a lot of similarities between the current group and the one that ground through four rounds just over seven years ago.

"(Ovechkin) was a big part of playing that way," Arniel said. "They're a deep team, they're a big team, they're getting a lot of contributions.

"And having Ovi out there ... it doesn't take him much if he gets that puck on his stick."

The Jets, meanwhile, will be minus top-line winger Gabriel Vilardi (upper-body injury, week-to-week) after he was hurt in Sunday's loss to the Buffalo Sabres. Alex Iafallo will take his spot Tuesday.

"Really disappointing," Arniel said of losing the 25-year-old Vilardi, who's meshed well with Mark Scheifele and Kyle Connor. "Bit of a freak situation."

Winnipeg and Washington played a wild 5-4 overtime affair Feb. 1 that saw Ovechkin tie things 4-4 in the third period with his 877th goal before Morrissey clinched the extra point with his second of the night.

"I don't know that we'll see the fireworks again or more of a true-to-form matchup," the blueliner said of clubs that largely rely on defensive structure. "Just goes to show that when both teams are near the top of the standings, you can play multiple styles."

Morrissey's first taste of NHL hockey, coincidentally, came in 2013 against Ovechkin when Winnipeg faced Washington in pre-season.

The 18-year-old, peach-fuzzed Morrissey couldn't believe what was lining up on the other side.

"I was like, 'I've never seen a guy this big on the ice,'" he said of the Capitals' No. 8. "I was kind of star-struck."

Going further back, Morrissey was 10 when Ovechkin entered the league a flashy rookie in 2005.

"Peak of my hockey-card-collecting era," said the 29-year-old from Calgary. "My first-ever experience of wearing an NHL sweater and seeing him flying down the ice was pretty intimidating."

"Something I'll never forget."

The Jets are aiming to make Tuesday a night no one remembers on Ovechkin's march to history.