

The Athletic

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What I'm hearing about the Jets ahead of the trade deadline: Joel Armia and other depth options

By Murat Ates

Kevin Cheveldayoff's best trades have often been untelegraphed.

The best team in Winnipeg Jets history — the one that made the 2018 Western Conference final — picked Paul Stastny seemingly out of nowhere, adding a contention-worthy No. 2 centre no one seemed to think was available. Nino Niederreiter was not the subject of trade rumours in 2023, either, and contract extensions for him and Vladislav Namestnikov have given Winnipeg great value for their trades.

If you're a Jets fan hoping for Winnipeg to land a big fish, it's Cheveldayoff's element of surprise that you're leaning on now.

The Jets are the top team in the NHL. They project to have \$12 million in cap space by Friday's deadline. They could use an upgrade to Namestnikov at second-line centre. They could really use a veteran defenceman who makes a good first pass after winning his battles, tying up sticks and controlling the middle of the ice in their zone — including on the penalty kill.

Based on what I've heard about the Jets at the deadline so far, it's looking like getting big names to fill those spots is a difficult task. Want Brayden Schenn? The Blues just climbed to within a point of a playoff spot. Brock Nelson has a 16-team no-trade clause and the New York Islanders are still five points outside the playoffs in the East. Winnipeg could help force their hand with a Tuesday win, but for now, it seems the Islanders are still holding on. In Nashville, Barry Trotz is treating Ryan O'Reilly as though he has a no-trade clause; the extra two years on his contract could make Winnipeg a tough sell after Nashville's warmth and low taxes.

Prices appear to be high. The Predators need to retain O'Reilly — or get a great package for him — if they're serious about winning with Steven Stamkos, Jonathan Marchessault and their other high-priced talent.

Even secondary players, like Scott Laughton — who told me this weekend that his "Last Supper" photo at 529 Wellington was just a little bit of fun — are commanding high prices. (If Laughton could be had for less than a first-round pick, he would have been moved by now.)

I'd expect Winnipeg to take care of in-house business this week before moving on to make other additions. As of Monday morning, I believe the odds favour depth acquisitions: perhaps Joel Armia on the wing or Carson Soucy on defence.

What are some other realistic possibilities for the Cup-contending Jets?

Here's what I've been hearing.

1. Kicking tires on previous models

This one's out there. Pierre LeBrun reported Winnipeg's interest in Armia earlier this week and the more I think about it, the more I like Armia relative to the various depth options I've heard connected to Winnipeg. He's a superior player to Brandon Tanev, who I expect Winnipeg has also checked in on with Seattle. I'm not sure Winnipeg should spend extra assets to add someone like Jake Evans to an Armia deal, as per Montreal's wishes, but I understand Winnipeg's desire to add PK help.

I'm reminded of reclaiming Mason Appleton in 2022, although I'm unsure as to whether the similarities extend beyond familiarity with the player. The Jets wanted to bring Appleton back "no matter what" as per Cheveldayoff and were going to make that trade regardless of what happened with pending UFAs Stastny or Andrew Copp. They believed in Appleton with Adam Lowry and signed him — at that time, a restricted free agent — in the offseason.

I'm not sure if Appleton is on track to sign a mid-season extension or not but fully expect Winnipeg to try to sign him before July 1.

2. The Jets are better with Appleton and Iafallo, but maybe not their next cap hits

Appleton's best hockey has been in Winnipeg. I have strong memories of him gluing himself to Lowry's side at Jets camp in 2021, working on drills together after practice, and I think that commitment played a big role in his emergence as a go-to third-line option. Winnipeg is going to want to keep the pending UFA beyond this summer. He'd have a case to earn somewhere between Lowry's \$3.25 million and Nino Niederreiter's \$4.0 million, though.

If he's game to sign, I wonder if it means Winnipeg loses a player like Alex Iafallo.\

Iafallo has had the impact of a third-line player while playing on the fourth line — ideal from a "depth wins" point of view, though not the most effective use of a \$4.0 million cap hit. He's also been one of Winnipeg's better penalty killers and usually plays with Lowry on Winnipeg's top PK unit.

Take a moment to consider Iafallo, Niederreiter, Namestnikov and Appleton: four of Winnipeg's most recent middle-six forward acquisitions. All of them are "no cheat" players in that they don't cheat a forecheck, backcheck or battle. When the playoffs get tough, the middle of the ice can be difficult to get to from both ends of the rink. I think Winnipeg would love to add one more player to this group of battlers and retain its own — if the cap hit is right.

Cap hit is a typical counterargument to "Winnipeg should keep Appleton and Iafallo." They're both a lot more palatable at Namestnikov money (\$3.0 million) than if they make the \$4.0 million Iafallo and Niederreiter do now.

The other counterargument is someone has to make room for Brad Lambert or Nikita Chibrikov next season. That's true, too, but I suspect that room comes from the absence of a much more impactful forward.

3. The Ehlers pickle

Keep Nikolaj Ehlers for the playoff run and the Jets risk losing him as a free agent this summer. Trade him now and you remove a big piece of the NHL's top power play and Winnipeg's second line.

I think the Jets would trade Ehlers for a lesser version of himself with more of a playoff track record. I don't think they view him as the guy when the chips are down. I know they've explored Ehlers trades in the past — clearly never to their satisfaction, because they do value his contributions — and I think they'd listen to offers at this deadline, too. The problem is that Winnipeg wasn't satisfied by the offers it got when Ehlers had multiple years left on his contract. His value won't be higher now that he's a pending free agent, while a pre-deadline sign-and-trade seems beyond the realm of reasonable expectation.

Could you add to Ehlers to go big-game hunting? Would Carolina be a fit if the Hurricanes are unable to sign Mikko Rantanen but think they have a better chance with Ehlers? That kind of speculation goes beyond the purpose of this piece. I don't have certainty on what Ehlers' future holds. I think Winnipeg's odds of extending him are better now than they were last year at this time. I just think the risk of him walking as a UFA is substantial. And I think the uncertainty keeps Cheveldayoff up at night.

In the meantime, I think the Jets will lean on existing chemistry and retain Ehlers through the deadline, despite the risks.

4. Working on a Pionk extension

I think we might — might — see a Neal Pionk extension before the trade deadline.

Pionk has bought in on Winnipeg and the feeling from the organization is mutual. He's also on pace for a career season while playing big minutes with fellow Hermantown Hawks alumnus Dylan Samberg. The duo has been a big part of the Jets' success and both defencemen are part of Winnipeg's long-term plans.

Pionk's contract is the more urgent of the two. I think the Jets want clarity on his cap hit before the trade deadline, particularly as they're shopping for players with term. By this point in the season, Cheveldayoff should have a rough sense of Pionk's price, but cost certainty would help if the Jets are to make major deadline moves. Samberg is a restricted free agent with arbitration rights whose next deal can be handled later in the offseason.

Both players view Winnipeg as a great place to live and play. Here's what Pionk told *The Athletic* before the season began:

"I would love to play here. I would love to win here. I'm going into my sixth season now. Our daughter was born here. We have a house here. It's six and a half hours away from home for both of us. Our parents come up all the time. Our friends and family come up all the time. We feel like we're home here."

What will it cost, and will the 29-year-old Pionk live up to the billing?

If Pionk gets the same 7.21 percent of the cap he signed for in 2021, his next contract will carry an AAV of \$6.9 million. That strikes me as fair value for Pionk's current contributions, although it would be convenient for the Jets if they managed to assert Josh Morrissey's \$6.25 million as an internal cap.

I expect Pionk's interest in Winnipeg is long term — perhaps five to seven years — and that's where an element of risk comes in. Pionk will play through anything, including a broken foot, and has struggled when a lack of mobility has taken away his ability to play tight, physical gaps. This impacts his defensive performance and his offence, too — he hit a level of point production

in the two seasons before his current \$5.875 million AAV contract that he couldn't match until this season, four years later.

There is also the concern that Pionk's shot share dropped precipitously when Samberg was hurt. He was unable to carry Haydn Fleury or Logan Stanley to the same level of success he enjoyed with Samberg. That's an admittedly tall task, but it reminds us that Pionk's best work has come alongside his Minnesotan friend. Samberg deserves credit for his part in the pair's success — and should be seen as more foundational than Pionk, in my opinion.

If Pionk gets paid extra for his point production, the Jets may save some money on Samberg's deal. The younger defenceman is on pace for roughly 20 points, which shouldn't be enough to justify an enormous contract despite his excellent defence. Jaccob Slavin's next Carolina Hurricanes contract comes with a \$6.4 million cap hit and Slavin is the NHL's standard bearer for Samberg's defensive archetype.

The Jets will place value on Pionk's mentorship to Samberg and Winnipeg's other young players. Pionk is influential and respected in Winnipeg's dressing room. He was one of the players chosen to wear an "A" when captain Adam Lowry missed eight games with an upper-body injury. That wasn't by accident: He's a trusted voice by teammates and coaches alike. Vibes alone do not make a contending team, but I think the Jets are as bought in on Pionk as he is on them.

5. The Jets need to add a defenceman

I'd be shocked if the Jets don't add a defenceman between now and Friday's deadline. A deep playoff run requires it. Winnipeg also has fresh memories of getting beaten to pucks in the slot against Colorado last year and could use an upgrade. Assuming there's no star arriving to play alongside Morrissey on the top pair, I expect Winnipeg to add muscle further down the depth chart.

Watching Rasmus Ristolainen play for Philadelphia is a treat compared to his Buffalo days. He scans the ice better in his own zone. He doesn't chase hits for the sake of hits. On Saturday in Winnipeg, he was a force in the centre slot, tying up sticks and boxing out Jets in a way one imagines could translate directly to the Jets PK. He's probably more expensive asset-wise than Winnipeg wants to pay, although the extra two years on his deal would justify some of that cost.

Carson Soucy is the name I keep circling back to. The big, left-shooting defenceman played on the same University of Minnesota-Duluth Bulldogs team as Pionk, Lafallo and Dominic Toninato. Soucy has a no-trade clause and Vancouver has a fighting shot at a playoff spot, but his minutes have taken a big hit since the Canucks added Marcus Pettersson. His closeness with multiple current Jets eases the NTC concerns, and he would be an upgrade on Stanley on the Jets' third pair.