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Practice report - April 17

Pionk: "We have the chance to win here every year. We love it here."

By Jamie Thomas

WINNIPEG – For the second time in as many days, the Winnipeg Jets extended a key part of their core.

Wednesday, Alex Lafallo signed a three-year extension with an AAV of 3.67 million which will see him in the Manitoba capital through the 2027-28 season.

Today, it was Neal Pionk's turn. The 29-year-old inked a six-year extension with an AAV of 7 million. The deal was announced moments before the Jets took to the ice for their first practice ahead of the 2025 Stanley Cup Playoffs.

"We have the chance to win here every year. We love it here. And probably most importantly, my family loves it here too," said Pionk.

"So not only that, but the extended family is also pretty close. This feels like home to me. Didn't want to leave."

Pionk said that he was glad that the deal got done before the playoffs began but added that it wouldn't have been a distraction for him if it didn't. As good as a season that Jets have had so far, it appears the championship window could be open for a while.

"I mean, all these guys that I played with now for six years, like these are lifelong friends that we're creating. Not only that, but my wife's also created a lot of friends," said Pionk.

"So that was a big deal. And like I said, I'll be in touch with these people for rest of my life. And that's that was huge to me."

Jets head coach Scott Arniel knows Pionk going back to both of their time in the Big Apple.

"He's got an all-around game. When you have top four defenceman, you're playing against other teams' top players," said Arniel

"He's on the penalty kill, he's on the power play. It gives us an offensive edge, he's got some bite to him, and he also likes to get under the skin of the opposition."

Connor Hellebuyck had to be smiling when the news came out with regards to Pionk's extension, considering all the things Pionk does to make his life easier on a nightly basis.

"He is just a phenomenal player, and he has earned every second of it," smiled Hellebuyck.

"I am so proud of him and proud to play behind him, and having him there for another six years, it feels pretty good being the guy behind him."

HELLEBUYCK RESTED AND READY TO GO

Hellebuyck did not skate with the team today as Eric Comrie and Chris Driedger handled the goaltending responsibilities on Thursday afternoon. Ahead of seventh time playing in the Stanley Cup Playoffs, the two-time Vezina Trophy winner made sure to let people know he is rested and ready to go.

"I manage myself so well. I've been doing this for a while. I kind of have everything dialed in," said Hellebuyck.

"I've got the right people around me to make myself feel good every day. I've got a good rhythm. I feel rested, I feel ready for what's next."

THE SCHEDULE

The NHL released the dates for all eight opening round series and the times for at least the first four games of each matchup. Winnipeg will play game one on Saturday (5 CT), game two on Monday (6:30 CT), Game's Three and Four will be in St. Louis on Thursday (8:30 CT) and Sunday (12 CT). If the series goes five games, there will be three two-day breaks.

"I guess it can buy some time for your injured guys to get back. But if you do get up in a series, you'd like it to happen a lot quicker. But it is what it is. It's the league," said Arniel.

"The start times are all crazy as well. It will always be that way. Both buildings are busy. It is one of those obstacles, but you know what, both teams are facing it and you've got to make the most of it."

Winnipeg Free Press

<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2025/04/18/the-ice-is-right>

The ice is right

Since Jets' return in 2011, home rink's playing surface consistently ranks in NHL's top 5

By: David Sanderson

The National Hockey League Players' Association's annual anonymous player poll was unveiled on April 15, two days before the end of the regular season.

In addition to "who is the best overall player?" (the Pittsburgh Penguins' Sidney Crosby) and "which player has the best fashion sense?" (David Pastrnak of the Boston Bruins), one of the questions posed was which of the 32 NHL arenas has the most ideal ice?

The votes have been counted and once again, the playing surface at Canada Life Centre was ranked No. 3 behind Montreal's Bell Centre and Edmonton's Rogers Place, an acknowledgment that isn't taken lightly by Doug Neubauer, True North Sports + Entertainment's director of engineering and ice operations.

"Ever since the Jets returned (in 2011) we've finished in the top five in the player poll and since I want to say 2016, we've always been in the top three, which is something we're very proud of," Neubauer says, seated in the bowels of the downtown venue, where the Jets will enjoy home-ice advantage for as long as the Presidents' Trophy-winning club sticks around in this year's Stanley Cup playoffs.

"I can't tell you what the guys are looking for specifically but obviously consistency is key — that the ice holds up from period to period," he continues, listing "glide" — how much friction a player senses on their skate blades when they're darting to and fro — as another factor he hears about from NHLers.

"We hold ourselves to a very high standard here, trying to achieve the best ice at all times, whether it's a pre-game skate or a playoff game, and I believe that's what's given us success in these polls. Players know that when they come to Winnipeg, they're going to have a great sheet to skate on."

Although skilfully manoeuvring an ice resurfacer — members of Neubauer's full-time, seven-member ice-operations crew refrain from using the term "Zamboni" — is the most visible part of the job, that's just a fraction of what they do, says Jared Sinninghe, who started working for True North in 2007 at age 23, back when the Manitoba Moose were the rink's lone hockey tenant.

Creating and maintaining a professional-calibre sheet of ice for months on end is a continuous process, Sinninghe says, noting while one doesn't need a special licence to drive an ice resurfacer, those in his line of work do require Red Seal accreditation, similar to a plumber or welder, to help operate an ice-plant system comprised of 250 tonnes of refrigeration equipment.

"I often compare it to leaving an ice cube in your freezer for three months and then seeing what that looks like, how cloudy it gets," he explains, pointing out that like his co-workers, he got his start at a community club rink, in his case Gateway Recreation Centre.

“The ice here is a living, breathing thing — it moves, it dries out — and you have to keep on top of it at all times. We run an inch-and-a-half of ice, give or take, from the concrete and if we have enough time, there are occasions when we’ll peel the ice right down and build it back up again.”

Not only is Dave Wright, 58, the local crew’s senior member, he is one of the longest-serving ice engineers in the NHL. He chuckles, saying things were much different when he was hired at the Winnipeg Arena in the late 1980s, during the Jets 1.0 era.

“I come from a time when fans could smoke in the building, and I remember the effect that had on the playing surface,” says Wright, who cites sporting a tuxedo while flooding the ice between periods of the Jets’ annual black-tie affairs versus the Montreal Canadiens as a career highlight. That and being assigned to paint the locker of former Jets star Teemu Selanne.

“Also, that was back when there was only one (Zamboni) driver,” he goes on, mentioning that he immediately caught on with the then-International Hockey League’s Moose after the Jets left for Arizona in 1996.

“They eventually changed that to two drivers — mainly to speed things up so they could have more in-game, on-ice promotions — but there were definitely nights when I’d hear it from a person in the crowd if I missed a spot.”

If puck-drop is scheduled for 7 p.m., a typical game day goes something like this, Neubauer says.

There are two shifts, the first running from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m., and another going from 2:30 p.m. to 12:30 a.m. — later if a playoff tilt results in multiple overtime sessions, as was the case on May 21, 2021, when Kyle Connor scored the game and series winner at 1:06 a.m. local time, during the third overtime period of a first-round match against the Edmonton Oilers.

After ensuring everything is running smoothly on the mechanical end, one of them will measure the temperature and thickness of the ice before performing what they call a dry shave to remove any debris, especially if there was a concert the previous evening, which usually results in spilled drinks seeping through the protective floorboards.

They’ll shave and flood the ice before and after each team’s morning skate, and again at around 3:30 p.m., to get rid of footprints left behind by those assigned to polish the glass and dashboards.

“We’ll put another flood down around 5:30 (p.m.), 30 minutes before the doors open to the public, and of course, one more after the teams have gone through their pre-game warm-up,” Sinninghe says.

Although they would love to be able to kick back and enjoy the action once the game gets going, that definitely isn't the case, Wright pipes in. Besides attending to the ice resurfacers by dumping the collected slush and whatnot into a deep trough located in the southwest corner, they all need to keep their eyes open for occurrences such as if a player frustratingly slams his stick onto the ice after missing an open net, possibly chipping the surface in the process.

"Or sometimes we'll notice a puck taking an odd bounce in the neutral zone or along the boards, resulting in a scoring chance that wouldn't normally occur," Sinninghe says. "We take those sorts of things very seriously and if it's something we can address during a TV timeout, we're on it."

Back to the player poll, Sinninghe says there is actually a pretty thin line between what's deemed to be the best and least favourable ice in the league. Whereas individual crews used to keep the secret to their successes to themselves, they now have a summertime conference that brings representatives from all 32 NHL teams together, to compare notes and talk shop for a few days.

"We have this big network now where if somebody in, say, Raleigh or Buffalo has a monster-truck or Disney (on Ice) show coming through, and is worried what that's going to do to their ice, they can reach out to the rest of us in an email thread and, sure as heck, somebody else will have dealt with that type of problem before," he says.

Sinninghe notes another oft-discussed dilemma that occurs right here in Winnipeg, where "you have to be a meteorologist almost," to deal with the fluctuations in outdoor temperatures between October and — fingers crossed — late June, which can definitely have a ripple effect on what's happening inside the rink.

"This time of year we're challenged by high dew points, high humidity... and trying to cool the building while it's still warm outside."

Neubauer feels it is the dream of every child who grows up playing hockey in Canada to eventually make it to the NHL. And although his own skills were "few and far from getting there as a player," he thinks he can speak for his co-workers when he states how fortunate they are to have achieved that goal, albeit in another capacity.

"The way we look at it, we have to do our job to the best of our ability so the players can do theirs."

<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2025/04/17/jets-ink-pionk-to-six-year-extension>

"We love it here": Winnipeg feels like home, says Jets Pionk after signing six-year extension

By: Mike McIntyre

It's been a rough week for the "Nobody wants to play in Winnipeg" crowd.

First to debunk that widespread belief across the NHL was American forward Alex Iafallo, who signed a three-year contract extension with the Jets on Wednesday. That was quickly followed by American defenceman Neal Pionk inking a new six-year deal on Thursday.

"We love it here. And, probably most importantly, my family loves it here, too," said Pionk, who hails from Hermantown, Minnesota. "This feels like home to me. Didn't want to leave."

Pionk, 29, will be paid US \$7 million per year starting in 2025-26, which makes him the highest-paid blue-liner on the team. All-Star Josh Morrissey is making US \$6.25 million on an eight-year pact he signed in 2019. It's a bit of an apples and oranges comparison considering the salary cap is projected to soar after years of being stagnant.

A better comparable would be to current market value. For one example, the Washington Capitals recently signed 27-year-old defenceman Jakob Chychrun to an eight-year extension that will pay him US \$9 million per year. He has a career-high 47 points this year, which is eight more than Pionk in four extra games played.

Pionk had been earning US \$5.875 million and just tied his career high in goals (10) after scoring in Thursday's regular-season finale against the Anaheim Ducks. The undrafted right-shooting rear-guard also had 29 assists over 69 games and was a plus-21 on the NHL's No. 1 team, forming an effective second pairing with Dylan Samberg.

"Obviously, very exciting. I know he loves it here and he's starting a family, so it's important for him to be in one spot," said Samberg, who is a pending restricted free agent this summer.

"(We) complement each other well. He's got more of that offensive side, I'd say I am more on the defensive side. We're good with communication, we know where we're going to be on the ice and we're always looking to support each other. That's why we've been having so much success."

Pionk was thrilled to get the business done prior to the start of the Stanley Cup playoffs, saying it was a relatively painless negotiation between his agent and Jets general manager Kevin Cheveldayoff.

He would have been in demand had he hit the open market on July 1.

"He's extremely popular in our dressing room. He's one of our leaders, I know he doesn't have an 'A' on his jersey but he is one of those guys that has a strong voice in there. Real excited that he's decided that he wants to be a Winnipeg Jet for six more years," said head coach Scott Arniel.

“He’s got an all-around game. When you have top-four defenceman, you’re playing against other teams’ top players. He’s on the penalty kill, he’s on the power play. It gives us an offensive edge, he’s got some bite to him and he also likes to get under the skin of the opposition. He’s one of those guys who is well-rounded and brings a lot to the table in every game.”

Pionk was traded to the Jets in the summer of 2019 as part of the Jacob Trouba package. He put up a career-high 45 points in his first season in Winnipeg and likely would have eclipsed that this year if not for missing 13 games with a lower-body injury.

“To think when I got traded here at 101 (career) games coming off my entry level deal and to see that we’re here is pretty crazy to believe,” said Pionk. “You know, I was just breaking into the NHL. Really, I had one full season under my belt, and now we’re here and making a Cup run. So it’s really fun.”

Pionk said the fact so many core players are locked up long-term speaks to how the reality is different than the perception of Winnipeg. Lafallo, who is from Buffalo, New York, said essentially the same thing a day earlier. Like Pionk, he came over initially in a trade but has come to appreciate the organization and the city.

Other trade additions such as Nino Niederreiter and Vlad Namestnikov have previously re-upped with the Jets, as have numerous drafted and developed players.

“I mean, all these guys that I played with now for six years like these are lifelong friends that we’re creating. Not only that, my wife’s created a lot of friends. So that was a big deal,” said Pionk.

“Chance to win here every year. Family loves it here. Those are the two biggest things.”

From a Jets perspective, why not try to keep as many pieces of the band together consider the sweet music they’re making. Winnipeg just had its best regular season with a 56-22-4 record.

“Any time you see those in-season signings, I feel good about them with the direction of this team and knowing the future of this team is starting to get locked up for longer,” said Jets goaltender Connor Hellebuyck, who along with top centre Mark Scheifele are in the first year of seven-year extensions they signed in 2023.

“He is just a phenomenal player and he has earned every second of it. I am so proud of him and proud to play behind him, and having him there for another six years, it feels pretty good being the guy behind him.”

Pionk’s signing leaves forwards Nikolaj Ehlers, Mason Appleton and Brandon Tanev and defenceman Haydn Fleury as the remaining UFAs heading into this summer in terms of

regular roster players. Depth forward Dominic Toninato, who has served as captain of the Manitoba Moose this year, and third-string goaltender Chris Driedger are as well.

Samberg, along with forwards Gabe Vilardi, Morgan Barron and Rasmus Kupari are all RFAs who will need new deals but remain under team control.

<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2025/04/17/hellebuyck-ready-for-high-stakes-hockey>

Hellebuyck ready for high-stakes hockey

By: Ken Wiebe

Connor Hellebuyck, the stage is set and it's your time to shine.

The Winnipeg Jets' All-World goalie has completed his case for Hart Trophy consideration and the numbers are definitely compelling.

What Hellebuyck did during his 10th NHL season — and ninth as a workhorse starter — is nothing short of extraordinary.

Although he won't complete the clean sweep of leading the league in goals-against average (2.00), shutouts (eight), wins (47) and save percentage, that's more of a technicality, since Anthony Stolarz of the Toronto Maple Leafs edging him by .01 percentage points is more related to him making 19 fewer starts than Hellebuyck this season.

That doesn't diminish Hellebuyck's case when there doesn't appear to be a runaway winner from the impressive group of skaters under consideration.

It looks like a five-horse race — since Quinn Hughes of the Vancouver Canucks and Zach Werenski of the Columbus Blue Jackets are essentially eliminated by virtue of their teams being eliminated from playoff contention.

Those joining Hellebuyck in the discussion are Leon Draisaitl of the Edmonton Oilers, Nathan MacKinnon of the Colorado Avalanche, Nikita Kucherov of the Tampa Bay Lightning and Jack Eichel of the Vegas Golden Knights.

There is an argument to be made for each of those players as well, as their value to their respective teams is obvious.

It's important to note that Hart Trophy voting is very much a beauty-is-in-the-eye-of-the-beholder type of situation because the Most Valuable Player to his team means different things to different people.

Hellebuyck is the best player on the Presidents' Trophy-winning team and that has to count for something.

If you prefer to look at underlying numbers, Hellebuyck led the NHL in goals saved above expected in all situations with 39.6, according to Money Puck (with Vasilevskiy second at 29.2).

There's little doubt that the Jets' improved commitment to playing a far more structured defensive game than Hellebuyck saw in front of him when he first broke into the league helps to boost those numbers, but ultimately, the goalie still needs to do his part.

The evidence shows that Hellebuyck has gone above and beyond.

Jets head coach Scott Arniel was around Henrik Lundqvist during his prime with the New York Rangers and has a pretty good idea of what elite-level goaltending looks like, so he was asked on Thursday if he viewed Hellebuyck's season as Hart Trophy worthy.

"Without a doubt. Without a doubt," said Arniel.

"He certainly should be in that conversation for the numbers that he's thrown up this year, the different things that he's done to put himself in the, not only the Winnipeg Jets' record book but some league ones, too. Back-to-back Jennings, we'll see (about) back-to-back Vezina (Trophies). But at the end of the day, (considering) the meaning of MVP or that trophy, he checks an awful lot of those boxes for us."

No matter where you stand on this debate, it's something that will take a backseat for the next several months as ballots are counted, with the unveiling set for sometime in June.

Hellebuyck has other things to occupy his time with, beginning with what figures to be an epic matchup with Jordan Binnington and the St. Louis Blues that opens on Saturday at 5 p.m.

During his meeting with reporters last spring after exit interviews were completed, Hellebuyck explained that he was putting too much pressure on himself to perform.

Does he still feel that way nearly 12 months later?

"I scrapped that real fast," said Hellebuyck.

"Not saying that I am putting everything on my shoulders, but my goal throughout my entire career is to get a shutout every single night. That is what makes me me and that is what I feed off of. I am going to continue to do that because I know that gives this team the best chance to win.

“If that helps me be the best version of myself in a team sport like this, you need the best version of everyone and I know that it’s going to take for me to put my best foot forward so I am going to continue to do that because I know that is going to continue to help this team.”

Even if Hellebuyck didn’t particularly care for a pair of questions offered as an attempt to dive into past forays into postseasons where the Jets were unable to meet their expectations, he knows what is at stake for this group.

As gaudy as his numbers were during this past regular season, Hellebuyck recognizes that things haven’t gone smoothly for him during the playoffs in April of 2023 or 2024.

Nobody who watched those series with the Colorado Avalanche or Vegas Golden Knights is pointing the finger at Hellebuyck for the consecutive early exits.

Multiple areas of the Jets’ collective game simply weren’t close to good enough, but Hellebuyck allowed 42 goals during those 10 outings and that’s too many, regardless of the circumstances.

He doesn’t need to be superhuman during this postseason run, but Hellebuyck needs to be better than average and if he can continue to be elite — like he’s been all season — that will greatly enhance the Jets’ chances of a lengthy run.

“We’ve done some great things this year,” said Hellebuyck.

“We don’t need to go look at all the bad things that other people’s opinions have on us. I would say let’s ask questions about how our details are, how’s this team feeling, what’s right and what’s going well in this room? A lot of those questions are answered through our game every single day.

“Our details are phenomenal. We played every single game as hard as we can. Our compete level is very very high every single night. I really believe in this group and look forward to the next couple months.”

Hellebuyck made it clear he’s feeling fresh — and reducing the volume of high-danger chances he faces — is an important part of that equation.

So was maximizing his rest down the stretch, which allowed him to appear in 66 games so far (including the 4 Nations Face-Off), without running out of gas.

“I could have played a little bit more this year. It’s always a talking point,” said Hellebuyck.

“I manage myself so well. I’ve been doing this for a while. I kind of have everything dialed in. I’ve got the right people around me to make myself feel good every day. I’ve got a good rhythm. I feel rested, I feel ready for what’s next.”

That time with Team USA provided Hellebuyck with an opportunity to deliver quality netminding in a pressure-packed environment, as he helped his team get to overtime against Canada in the championship final of the first best-on-best tournament held in nearly a decade.

While it's true that Binnington was the goalie in the other crease that left the ice with a gold medal around his neck, that should only fuel Hellebuyck further in the quest for the one trophy that remains at the top of his wish list.

Hellebuyck plans to let his play do most of the talking once this series starts, but he shed some light on his mentality going into the series between Central Division rivals on Thursday.

For those wondering, he's not concerning himself with trying to exorcise any playoff demons — that's not how his mind works.

Hellebuyck isn't worried about the recent results of an NHLPA player poll that had him as the third-ranked goalie behind Andrei Vasilevskiy of the Tampa Bay Lightning and Igor Shesterkin of the Rangers.

"Those are other people's opinions," said Hellebuyck. "I know where I'm at. I play the game for myself. I like my game. I like our team. We've got a lot to look (forward) for here. It's just making sure my game is right and our details are right."

Hellebuyck also weighed in on the Jets capturing back-to-back William Jennings Trophies for the team allowing the fewest goals the past two seasons — and he was quick to shout out Eric Comrie and Laurent Brossoit, who made a big impact but don't get their names on the trophy officially because neither made 25 starts.

"It's pretty cool. But both my backups played a phenomenal role in that," said Hellebuyck. "They played 25 per cent of the games so, for me, it's a team award. A tandem award. There's just so much that goes into that."

"You can look back and it's going to be great to see your name, but I think the true memories are going to be from what it took this team to get that."

What type of memories will the Jets produce this spring?

That's a big question.

A big part of the answer will revolve around Hellebuyck leading the way and delivering when the stakes get higher, even if the Jets aren't nearly as reliant on him as they once were.

Canadian Press

<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/sports/hockey/2025/04/17/jets-hellebuyck-blues-binnington-set-for-sequel-of-goalie-duel-in-playoffs>

Jets' Hellebuyck, Blues' Binnington set for sequel of goalie duel in playoffs

By: Judy Owen, The Canadian Press

WINNIPEG – If hockey fans enjoyed the duel between the pipes in the 4 Nations Face-Off final, a sequel of sorts is just around the corner.

Winnipeg Jets star goaltender Connor Hellebuyck and St. Louis Blues veteran Jordan Binnington are feature performers when the teams' first round of the Stanley Cup playoffs begins Saturday.

Binnington backstopped Canada to a 3-2 overtime victory against Hellebuyck and the United States in the late February tournament.

Jets head coach Scott Arniel said the goalie matchup is an interesting storyline for the best-of-seven series.

"Binnington has been in this league, he's won a Stanley Cup," Arniel said Thursday after practice. "The 4 Nations, his spectacular play there. At the end of the day, they've been on a run and he's been a big part of it. He's experienced at this time of the year.

"On the other side with (Hellebuyck), that 4 Nations was a great opportunity for him to go head-to-head, not only against Binnington but against the other goalies from the other nations, and be in pressure situations much like playoff games. Those are all the kind of learning things for him."

Hellebuyck didn't show any downward trend after the tournament disappointment.

The Commerce, Mich., product was the backbone for a Jets team that claimed the franchise's first Central Division and Western Conference titles, as well as the Presidents' Trophy for the NHL's best regular-season record (56-22-4).

The reigning Vezina Trophy winner led the league in wins this season with 47 in 63 appearances (47-12-3), extending his franchise record. Only two other netminders in league history have registered more, a tie at 48 wins for Martin Brodeur in 2006-07 with New Jersey and Braden Holtby in 2015-16 for Washington.

Hellebuyck joked – or maybe not – that he could have "played a little bit more" this season.

"I kind of have everything dialled in," he said after taking Thursday's practice off. "I've got the right people around me to make myself feel good every day. I've got a good rhythm. I feel rested, I feel ready for what's next."

Hellebuyck had the league's best goals-against average (2.00) and most shutouts (eight). His .925 save percentage was just a smidgen behind leader Anthony Stolarz (.926) of the Toronto Maple Leafs.

His name was etched on the William M. Jennings Trophy for a second consecutive season after being the netminder who played a minimum of 25 games for the team allowing the fewest goals during the regular season. The Jets allowed 191 goals.

He became only the fifth goaltender in the league to capture the trophy in back-to-back seasons since it was first handed out in 1981-82. He joins Brodeur, Roman Turek, Patrick Roy and Brian Hayward.

"For me, it's a team award. A tandem award, a team award," said Hellebuyck, who's backed up by Eric Comrie. "There's just so much that goes into that."

Binnington, who hails from Richmond Hill, Ont., has been in top form since the 4 Nations tournament.

He ran up a 13-3-1 record after putting a gold medal around his neck and helped propel the Blues to the final playoff berth in the West (44-30-8) along with Manitoba-born backup Joel Hofer.

Binnington finished the regular season with a 28-22-5 mark in 56 games. He had three shutouts, a .900 save percentage and 2.69 goals-against average.

What he has that Hellebuyck doesn't is a Stanley Cup from 2019, which included eliminating the Jets in the first round in six games.

Winnipeg was also bounced out of the playoffs in the first round the past two seasons.

After last year's exit, Hellebuyck told reporters he shouldn't try to put everything on his shoulders. He said he needed to dive more into a team game to find "peace of mind."

When asked Thursday if he did that, he got out the eraser.

"I scrapped that real fast," Hellebuyck said. "Not saying that I am putting everything on my shoulders, but my goal throughout my entire career is to get a shutout every single night."

"That is what makes me me, and that is what I feed off of. I am going to continue to do that because I know that gives this team the best chance to win."

Associated Press

<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/sports/hockey/2025/04/17/what-to-know-about-the-first-round-matchups-in-the-nhl-stanley-cup-playoffs>

What to know about the first-round matchups in the NHL Stanley Cup playoffs

By: Stephen Whyno, The Associated Press

A month before NHL's playoff opener this weekend, Commissioner Gary Bettman was more than happy to defend the decision to not expand the bracket like other professional leagues around North America have done in recent years.

"If you look at the races that we're having for the regular season, playoffs have started already," Bettman said then. "We're in our play-in tournament, and I think it's terrific. What can be more compelling and exciting and entertaining than that?"

It took until the penultimate night of the season to lock in all 16 playoff teams and the eight first-round series.

The defending Stanley Cup champion Florida Panthers open against the cross-state rival Tampa Bay Lightning. The Toronto Maple Leafs and Ottawa Senators face off in the first Battle of Ontario in more than two decades. The Dallas Stars and Colorado Avalanche collide in a matchup of two of the top three betting favorites to win it all. And Connor McDavid's Edmonton Oilers open the postseason against the Los Angeles Kings for a fourth year in a row.

A look at the matchups, first in the East and then the West with division and seeding noted:

Toronto (Atlantic 1) vs. Ottawa (wild card 1)

The Maple Leafs and Senators last met in a playoff series in 2004. That was before the salary cap and rule changes designed to generate more offense.

Along came Auston Matthews, Toronto's captain who reached 400 career goals and teammate William Nylander, who scored 45 this season. Goaltender Anthony Stolarz has won his past eight starts, three of the past four with a shutout, and the Leafs look capable of making a run if Matthews, Nylander and Mitch Marner can keep scoring.

The pesky Senators are led by hard-nosed captain Brady Tkachuk. Retired Norris Trophy-winning defenseman P.K. Subban, who now works for ESPN, said the playoffs "are tailor-made for Brady Tkachuk and his game and his mentality."

Toronto is a slight series favorite, according to BetMGM Sportsbook. Ottawa has 2023 Vezina Trophy-winning goalie Linus Ullmark, and a rivalry like this has its ways of evening the scales.

Tampa Bay (Atlantic 2) vs. Florida (Atlantic 3)

The Panthers have won seven of their past eight playoff series since trading for Brady's brother, Matthew Tkachuk, and hiring Paul Maurice as coach. Their only loss came to Vegas in the 2023 final when injuries took their toll, and Florida beat Edmonton last year in seven games to capture the first title in franchise history.

The Lightning beating the Panthers in the second round in '22 led to that series of changes, and this will be the fourth Sunshine State Showdown in the past five years. Tampa Bay went through Florida in '21 on the way to its second of back-to-back Cup championships.

Each team loaded up at the trade deadline. Florida added top-four defenseman Seth Jones and in-your-face winger Brad Marchand, while Tampa Bay picked up Yannick Gourde and Oliver Bjorkstrand, who is week to week with an injury.

The difference-makers could be in net. Russian goalies Sergei Bobrovsky for the Panthers and Andrei Vasilevskiy for the Lightning have already backstopped their team to the Cup before.

Washington (Metropolitan 1) vs. Montreal (wild card 2)

A rematch of the 2010 first round, when the Canadiens shocked the then-Presidents' Trophy-winning Capitals and made a surprise run to the Eastern Conference final. Washington did finish first in the East after a season that saw captain Alex Ovechkin set the career goals record.

The Capitals were on cruise control much of the second half of the season but they lost starting goaltender Logan Thompson and forward Aliaksei Protas to injuries. They have not won a playoff series since hoisting the Cup in 2018.

The Canadiens clinched a playoff spot in their 82nd and final game of the season. The underdogs have been red hot and can count on full and frenzied playoff crowds at the Bell Centre in Montreal for the first time since 2017.

Carolina (Metropolitan 2) vs. New Jersey (Metropolitan 3)

Carolina is a heavy favorite in large part because New Jersey is missing its best player, No. 1 center Jack Hughes, who underwent season-ending shoulder surgery last month.

The Devils' biggest strength is their goaltending, with Jacob Markstrom filling a void in net that hasn't quite been the same since Hall of Famer Martin Brodeur. They also are expected to have top defenseman Dougie Hamilton back from his extended injury absence.

Carolina does a lot of things right and defends incredibly well. The Hurricanes after some disappointing playoff exits hope they can put together a long run, though their biggest question might be in goal between Frederik Andersen and Pyotr Kochetkov.

“It’s been, I’m sure they would agree, up and down throughout the year for the goalies,” captain Jordan Staal said. “But the playoffs, you just ride whoever’s playing well and we’re very confident with both of them. We know both can win games for us and even steal games.”

Winnipeg (Central 1) vs. St. Louis (wild card 2)

The Presidents’ Trophy-winning Jets have been, in hockey terms, a wagon all season. They have the likely Vezina winner in goal in Connor Hellebuyck, a near-100-point producer in Kyle Connor and the kind of big, heavy game that wins this time of year.

“They don’t give up much,” Blues captain Brayden Schenn said. “They’re a good defensive hockey team with a good goalie. It’s going to be an exciting series, and we’re looking forward to the challenge.”

St. Louis, like Montreal, got in by winning its final game of the season. The Blues were eight points out when play resumed in late February out of the 4 Nations Face-Off break, and they won 19 of 26 to qualify.

Coach Jim Montgomery, hired in November to replace Drew Bannister fresh off being fired by Boston, turned things around even faster than he expected. The Blues with big-game goaltender Jordan Binnington, won’t be an easy out.

Dallas (Central 2) vs. Colorado (Central 3)

Under the old 1 to 8 conference playoff format, this easily could have been a West final. Instead, the Stars and Avalanche meet right away with one of them guaranteed to be going home early.

“Looking forward to the matchup,” Colorado coach Jared Bednar said. “You’ve got to get out of the gate, you’ve got to play well right away and you’re going to have to play your best hockey for two weeks in order to win.”

Both teams made significant trades this winter. Dallas acquired defenseman Cody Ceci and forward Mikael Granlund, then went even bigger by getting former Avalanche standout Mikko Rantanen from Carolina at the deadline.

Colorado had traded Rantanen to the Hurricanes in January, flipping the pending free agent for younger forwards Martin Necas and Jack Drury. The Avs also added centers Brock Nelson and Charlie Coyle and brought back veteran defenseman Erik Johnson.

Whoever wins this series likely becomes the Cup favorite.

Vegas (Pacific 1) vs. Minnesota (wild card 1)

The Golden Knights were nearly as dominant as Winnipeg but somehow flew under the radar. Jack Eichel surpassed 90 points and showed off his defensive prowess as part of the best, most well-rounded season of his career.

Vegas is only two years removed from winning the Cup. Adin Hill has grown into the starting role since, earning a long-term contract as the organization's goaltender of the present and future, and has valuable experience from 2023.

Minnesota clinched the eighth and final spot in the West by tying its last game of the season with 20.9 seconds left. The Wild struggled in recent months but have scoring winger Kirill Kaprizov back healthy and might get a spark from newly signed prospect Zeev Buium.

"It was up and down like crazy," defenseman Jake Middleton said. "There was times we thought the world was ending. There was times we thought that we'd already won the league."

Los Angeles (Pacific 2) vs. Edmonton (Pacific 3)

Yes, again. Connor McDavid, Leon Draisaitl and the Oilers won this series each of the past three years, but the defending West champs are banged up and won't have defenseman Mattias Ekholm at least for the first round because of injury. Edmonton let young Dylan Holloway and Philip Broberg go to St. Louis on offer sheets last summer and has missed that kind of play.

"I'm sure LA and Edmonton are sick of seeing each other," said retired forward Paul Bissonnette, now a TNT analyst. "It's going to be tough sledding for Edmonton, especially with all that turnover they've had, so we'll see what they've got."

Los Angeles is one of the hottest teams in the NHL since the trade deadline and has five 20-plus-goal scorers: Kevin Fiala, Adrian Kempe, Warren Foegele, Quinton Byfield and Anze Kopitar. Darcy Kuemper's bounce-back season gives the Kings a legit presence in net, and they have the offense to supplement a suffocating defensive system.

Sportsnet.ca

<https://www.sportsnet.ca/nhl/video/is-neal-pionks-contract-extension-good-value-for-the-jets/>

Is Neal Pionk's contract extension good value for the Jets? (VIDEO)

Sportsnet's Jacob Stoller joins Justin Bourne and Sam McKee to discuss Winnipeg Jets defenceman Neal Pionk's contract extension and his impact on the ice.

<https://www.sportsnet.ca/nhl/video/can-winnipeg-finally-get-over-its-first-round-playoff-struggles/>

Can Winnipeg finally get over its first-round playoff struggles?

Frank Seravalli joins Ken Reid to break down the top Stanley Cup Playoff matchups, including whether the Jets can finally get over the first-round bump, whether Montreal can make noise vs. Washington, the much-anticipated battle of Ontario, and more.

Winnipeg Sun

<https://winnipegsun.com/sports/hockey/nhl/winnipeg-jets/jets-hellebuyck-have-playoff-demons-to-exorcise>

Jets, Hellebuyck, have playoff demons to exorcise

By Paul Friesen

His bag of individual trophies will soon be busting at the seams, but the cold, hard truth is in his last two playoff series Connor Hellebuyck has been a bust, just like his team.

The Winnipeg Jets goalie has a 2-8 post-season record the last two years, with a goals-against-average well above 4.00 and a saves percentage well below .900.

Maybe that helps explain the league-wide players poll released this week that pegged Hellebuyck as the NHL's third-best netminder. Memories of playoff failures are harder to smother than rebounds against a line of crease-crashers.

On Thursday I asked Hellebuyck if he's the type to place a chip on his shoulder if there's one handy. You know, use the poll for a little extra motivation.

"Not at this time of year," he said. "This time of year it's what is the team doing, and putting my best foot forward. Those are other people's opinions. I know where I'm at. I play the game for myself."

Jets captain Adam Lowry says the polling was done early in the season, before Hellebuyck put up league-leading numbers in nearly every category and got one mitt on a second straight Vezina Trophy as the league's best.

Not that playoff results aren't a factor.

"There's some recency bias," Lowry acknowledged. "You see guys that have won before, it alters your perception of things. All the goalies named, though, are great goalies. I voted for Helly. We're not too worried about whatever anyone says about our team."

At least the soon-to-be, three-time Vezina winner has company: his team isn't the sexy pick to win the Stanley Cup, either, despite its place atop the league after the regular season.

All due to the lack of recent playoff success?

“Both of your questions have a negative spinoff on them,” Hellebuyck said. “We’ve done some great things this year. We don’t need to go look at all the bad things, other people’s opinions on us. I would say let’s ask questions how our details are, how’s this team feeling, what’s right and what’s going well in this room.

“A lot of those questions are answered through our game every single day.”

Asking some of the difficult questions from time to time is what we do in this space.

Hellebuyck’s recent playoff numbers are in such stark contrast to his regular-season metrics they can’t be ignored.

This team has playoff demons to exorcise and he has to be the lead exorcist.

Which brings us to this year’s first-round series against St. Louis, beginning on Saturday.

While both teams are known for their 200-foot games, the matchup in the two blue-painted semi-circles, eight feet across at each end, is tantalizing.

It’s Hellebuyck vs Jordan Binnington. Team USA vs Team Canada in the recent 4 Nations Face-Off. Also a rematch of the first round in 2019.

Hellebuyck has two Vezinas and two Jennings Trophies, for the lowest goals against, on his counterpart, not to mention two inches and 35 pounds.

Binnington has the 4 Nations win, a better record in the playoffs and that 2019 Stanley Cup in which he stood tall.

“They’ve been on a run and he’s been a big part of it,” Jets coach Scott Arniel said of the Blues’ keeper. “He’s experienced at this time of the year. Helly, he’s proven how great of a goaltender he is. This is two guys going head-to-head, and I’m hoping our goaltender comes out on top over their goaltender.”

He has to if he wants to change the narrative.

In his exit interview after last year’s playoff collapse, Hellebuyck said he was putting too much on his shoulders, trying to carry the team by himself.

On Thursday, he was asked about that new mindset.

“I scrapped that real fast,” he said. “Not saying that I am putting everything on my shoulders. But my goal throughout my entire career is to get a shutout every single night. That is what makes me me, and that is what I feed off of. I am going to continue to do that because I know that gives this team the best chance to win.”

Finding a way to do that is really all that matters.

It might even change those poll results and spin those negative questions off into the corner.

<https://winnipeg.sun.com/sports/hockey/nhl/winnipeg-jets/i-want-to-play-here-neal-pionk-signs-long-term-extension-with-the-jets>

'I want to play here': Neal Pionk signs long-term extension with the Jets

By Gordon Anderson

Another prominent player nixes the narrative no one wants to play in Winnipeg.

"I'm not part of that crowd," rearguard Neal Pionk said, with a smile.

The Jets announced the signing of Pionk to a contract extension Thursday morning, keeping the top-flight defenceman from testing the tempting waters of free agency come Canada Day.

"I want to play here," Pionk said. "We have a chance to win every single year. My family loves it here... This feels like home to me. I didn't want to leave."

The average annual value of the contract is \$US 42 million spread out over six years.

"So the kind of money it blows me away," Pionk said. "Blows my parents away too. They can't even believe it. Yeah, so it's crazy, like I said, it's just a kids game that you play, and now we're here."

Winnipeg acquired Pionk prior to the start of the 2019-20 season. He was part of the trade that sent Jacob Trouba to the New York Rangers. Pionk played in 101 games with the Broadway Blueshirts, prior to the jet landing in Manitoba for, as it turns out, quite an extended stay for the 29-year-old.

The Omaha, Neb., native wanted to get the deal signed, sealed and delivered quickly as possible. He didn't want any distractions to bleed into his on-ice responsibilities, knowing full well a successful postseason is what the fanbase craves more than regular season accolades.

"A goal of ours was to get it done before the playoffs," he said.

Head coach Scott Arniel says Pionk's worth extends well beyond the 200 X 85 sheet of ice.

“He’s extremely popular in our dressing room,” Arniel said. “He’s one of our leaders, I know he doesn’t have an ‘A’ on his jersey, but he is one of those guys that has a strong voice in there. I am excited that he’s decided that he wants to be a Winnipeg Jet for six more years.”

Pionk scored 10 goals and picked up 29 helpers during the regular season. His 10 regular-season goals was a career high for the undrafted ex-University of Minnesota-Duluth Bulldog. Pionk was in the last year of a four-year, \$23.5 million contract.

“He’s got an all-around game,” Arniel said. “He’s on the penalty kill and he’s on the power play. It gives us an offensive edge, he’s got some bite to him, and he also likes to get under the skin of the opposition. He’s one of those guys who is well-rounded and brings a lot to the table in every game.”

Netminder Connor Hellebuyck says Pionk is worth whatever the going rate is for a top four defenceman in the national league.

“Pionk is just a phenomenal player, and he has earned every second of it,” Hellebuyck said. “I am so proud of him and proud to play behind him, and having him there for another six years, it feels pretty good being the guy behind him.”

The extension comes one day after the club announced the signing of Alex Lafallo. The club revealed the signing of the ex-L.A. Kings forward to a three-year \$US 11 million deal on Wednesday morning.

The Jets number one goalkeeper feels secure in keeping this particular competition window open for more years than just the current one.

“I personally feel good about the (in season signings) with the direction of this team and knowing the future of this team is starting to get locked up for longer,” Hellebuyck said.

<https://winnipeg.sun.com/sports/hockey/nhl/winnipeg-jets/weve-got-an-incredible-fan-base-jet-engines-make-some-noise>

'We've got an incredible fan base': Jet engines make some noise

By Gordon Anderson

The Jets are expecting an atmosphere to the stratosphere.

When the Jets taxi out to the runway of ice for the Stanley Cup playoff opener on Saturday against the Blues, the entire team expects manic panic from its supporters.

“We’ve got an incredible fan base, and an incredible community of supporters,” captain Adam Lowry said. “Just seeing the outfits, seeing the passion and the excitement they have for us, and the support they have for us is awesome.”

Neal Pionk is in his sixth year with the club, and he never gets bored with the titanic noise levels, like jet engines screaming full throttle in the downtown hanger.

“It is the best atmosphere in hockey,” Pionk said. “I’ve played in a lot of places, played internationally, played in some gold medal games, whatever, state championships. And this is the best, but the best it gets is the whiteout.”

The Jets will have home ice advantage all the way through the Stanley Cup final, should the team be fortunate enough to arrive at that destination with their fans firmly in tow.

“I know our crowd is going to bring it,” goaltender Connor Hellebuyck said. “They’re elite at in-game chants. I just feel like our crowd chants at the right moments and that is maybe just the penalty kill clearing the puck. They get the game. They know that little moments have a big impact on a game. I think just playing the game and having the crowd there, they’re a huge advantage.”

Puck drop is set for 5 p.m.

“There’s going to be a lot of anticipation, excitement even,” forward Cole Perfetti said. “I only got one taste of it last year. It was one of the coolest things ever, to play in front of a whiteout, so I’m excited.”

“Yeah, there’s nothing like the whiteout,” Lowry added.

<https://winnipeg.sun.com/sports/hockey/nhl/winnipeg-jets/takin-care-of-business-aint-seen-nothin-like-jets-round-1-schedule>

Takin' care of business: Ain't seen nothin' like Jets' Round 1 schedule

By Paul Friesen

The Winnipeg Jets first-round playoff series against St. Louis features start times that are all over the map and plenty of time between games for teams to tweak their strategy – or lose momentum.

As the better team during the regular season, the Jets host the first two games, Saturday at 5 p.m. and Monday at 6:30.

After two days off, the series shifts to St. Louis for Game 3 on Thursday at 8:30 p.m., Winnipeg time. There are another two days off before Game 4 on Sunday, April 27 at noon.

If neither team has been swept, they’ll wait another three days before playing Game 5 on Wednesday, April 30, back in Winnipeg, the start time still up in the air.

Jets coach Scott Arniel sees good and bad with all the time off.

“It can buy some time for your injured guys to get back,” he said. “But if you do get up in a series, you’d like it to happen a lot quicker. But it is what it is. It’s the league. The start times are all crazy as well. It will always be that way. Both buildings are busy.

“It is one of those obstacles, but both teams are facing it and you’ve got to make the most of it.”

The series resumes a more normal every-other-day pace after the fifth game, with Games 6 and 7, if necessary, on Friday, May 2, in St. Louis and Sunday, May 4, in Winnipeg, respectively. Those start times are also to be determined.

As usual, arena availability and TV network preferences are the main factors in scheduling.

Because Sportsnet wanted a Canadian team to feature on Saturday, the Jets had to reschedule a Saturday concert by Bachman-Turner Overdrive, moving it to Sunday with the blessing of Winnipeg product and front man Randy Bachman.

“I’m excited to return to my hometown with BTO this weekend,” Bachman said on a social media video posted on Thursday. “And even more thrilled that I’ll be catching Game No. 1 of the Jets’ 2025 playoff. I’ll see you at the rink... come with me and the Jets and take care of business.”

Takin’ Care Of Business, Round 1

Game 1: Saturday, April 19, 5 p.m., Winnipeg
Game 2: Monday, April 21, 6:30 p.m., Winnipeg
Game 3: Thursday, April 24, 8:30 p.m., St. Louis
Game 4: Sunday, April 27, noon, St. Louis
Game 5*: Wednesday, April 30, TBD, Winnipeg
Game 6*: Friday, May 2, TBD, St. Louis
Game 7* Sunday, May 4, TBD, Winnipeg

*if necessary

TSN.ca

<https://www.tsn.ca/nhl/video/button-believes-jets-are-primed-for-a-deep-run-they-ve-shown-they-can-beat-anyone%7E3116802>

Button believes Jets are primed for a deep run: 'They've shown they can beat anyone' (VIDEO)

After Neal Pionk became the latest player to sign an extension in Winnipeg, TSN Director of Scouting Craig Button joins Jay Onrait to discuss the work GM Kevin Cheveldayoff has done and how he sees the Jets' series with the Blues playing out.'

<https://winnipeg.sun.com/sports/hockey/nhl/winnipeg-jets/jets-iafallo-contract-extension-apr-17-2025>

Will the Jets avoid the Presidents' Trophy 'curse' and make a Cup run? (VIDEO)

The Jets begin a new playoff series filled with cautious optimism with the wounds of past failures still fresh. TSN's John Lu as well as the TSN Hockey panel take a deep dive into the storylines heading into Winnipeg's first-round clash with St. Louis, including the battle between the pipes.

<https://www.tsn.ca/video/button-grades-pionk-extension-with-jets%7E3089106>

Button grades Pionk extension with Jets (VIDEO)

The Jets have signed defenceman Neal Pionk to a six-year contract extension worth \$42 million. TSN Director of Scouting Craig Button examines the deal and discusses whether or not it was a good one for the Jets.

The Athletic

<https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/6285194/2025/04/17/jets-nhl-playoffs-blues-series-scouting/>

Scouting the Jets' enemy: Breaking down the Blues with Jeremy Rutherford

By Murat Ates

Winnipeg Jets fans have long memories. When it comes to the St. Louis Blues in the playoffs, those memories are painful.

You'd better believe the Jets fans I interact with were annoyed when Joel Eriksson Ek scored for Minnesota, giving Winnipeg the Blues to worry about starting Saturday at 5 p.m. Central at Canada Life Centre instead of the Wild. Whereas Winnipeg dismantled Minnesota in five games back in 2018, the Blues stunned Winnipeg in six games to the tune of "Gloria" in 2019.

Jets fans spent that season (rightfully) thinking of Winnipeg as a Stanley Cup contender. Instead, Kevin Hayes stopped his own breakaway attempt and Jacob Trouba tried to eat the puck in the buildup to Jaden Schwartz's last-minute Game 5 winner. The Blues dominated Game 6, sending Winnipeg home early, on the way to their Stanley Cup win.

Now the Blues appear to be following the same script: a midseason coaching change, renewed commitment to defensive structure and a stretch run so dominant that St. Louis put up the best record in the NHL from the 4 Nations break onward. This might sound dangerously familiar for Jets fans. How is it happening? Which players and what parts of the game do the Presidents' Trophy-winning Jets need to worry about?

To answer those questions and more, let's turn to Jeremy Rutherford, one of my favorite teammates and mentors. Nobody covers St. Louis as well as JR does; follow him on X, Bluesky and right here at The Athletic to find out more (if you're not following him already).

What do Jets fans need to know about St. Louis?

Ates: I thought the Blues were retooling? For most of the season, it looked like a "one step back now for two steps forward later" type of season. How did they make the playoffs? Was it Jim Montgomery taking over?

Rutherford: Let me put it this way: I didn't take any vacation time during the 4 Nations Face-Off because I thought I'd be going on vacation this week. I don't think anyone can say they saw this coming, and that includes Montgomery and general manager Doug Armstrong.

The Blues were eight points back of the second wild-card when they returned from the break with only 26 games to go. Montgomery used the first few practices to work on the forecheck and the penalty kill. The thought was, "Let's try to make some improvement, and if it doesn't come together this season, at least we're building for the future."

All the Blues did in those 26 games was go 19-4-3, including a franchise-record 12-game winning streak. It was good for 41 points and a .788 points percentage, which were both No. 1 in the NHL in that span. That shows you how dire the situation was. They needed a run like that to make the postseason on the final day of their regular season.

Give Montgomery a lot of credit. Captain Brayden Schenn said it best Tuesday: Montgomery's presence and care for his players made a huge difference. But give the players their props, too. They began playing for each other, not just with each other, and when the wins started piling up, the confidence continued growing and growing.

The Blues turned their season around after hiring Jim Montgomery, but he's not the only factor. (Jeff Curry / Imagn Images)

Ates: I'm looking at the roster, and Jordan Kyrou had 36 goals, Robert Thomas had 81 points, and the Blues have one of the highest-scoring groups of defensemen in the NHL, including Colton Parayko with 16 goals. Who should Jets fans be most concerned about?

Rutherford: Just like in 2019 when these two teams played, the Blues are a sum of their parts. I don't think they're as talented as they were six years ago, but the roster construction is the same in the sense that their success comes from up and down the lineup.

If I had to pick an MVP, I'd give it to Thomas, who finished the regular season on a 12-game point streak in which he had 25 points (four goals, 21 assists). With 81 points, he became the first Blue with back-to-back 80-plus-point seasons since Brett Hull, and with 60 assists, he's just the fourth Blue to post multiple 60-assist seasons, along with Bernie Federko, Adam Oates and Craig Janney.

Thomas did leave Tuesday's game against Utah with a lower-body injury, but with the Blues leading 5-1, Montgomery said he was taken out for precautionary reasons. The team didn't practice Wednesday, so perhaps we'll get an update Thursday.

The MVP conversation, however, has to include Dylan Holloway, Parayko and Jordan Binnington, and Kyrrou would get some votes, too. Thomas has perhaps been the most electric, while Holloway and Parayko have been the most consistent. Parayko has been his usual self defensively, but offensively, he's having a career year with 16 goals and 36 points. The Blues' defense ranks third in the league with 46 goals.

Ates: Armstrong pulled off quite the heist, getting Philip Broberg and Holloway on offer sheets from Edmonton. It looks like both have been good, but Holloway especially with 26 goals. I loved Holloway's playoffs for the Oilers last season, too, but he's been out with a lower-body injury. What's his status?

Rutherford: It's easy to say now because Broberg and Holloway have been even better than expected, but in St. Louis, Blues fans still can't believe the Oilers let them go. The Blues desperately needed a left-shot defenseman who could play in the second pair and Broberg has been perfect for the role.

Holloway has been dynamite, finishing second on the team in goals. But as you mentioned, he's missed the last five games, and while the Blues are listing him as week-to-week, Montgomery said recently that he's not close to returning. That's a shame for the Blues because not only are they missing what he brings to the lineup — tenacity being at the top of the list — but also the club has been forced to mix and match forwards to find the chemistry they had with Holloway in the lineup.

Ates: The Blues didn't do anything at the trade deadline — and I remember Jets fans asking me about Brayden Schenn at the time; that's how much St. Louis seemed like a seller — but they did make a trade for Anaheim's Cam Fowler in December. That acquisition seems to have flown under the radar, but Fowler has put up good numbers. How's he been up close — and he is somebody to keep an eye on?

Rutherford: Armstrong has a knack of making trades at odd times in the season, and it's done by design. He usually doesn't have to pay the inordinately high prices that come at

the deadline, and that was the case with Fowler. They sent Anaheim a second-round pick in 2027 and prospect Jeremie Biakabutuka for Fowler and a fourth-round pick in '27. They also had the Ducks retain some salary on Fowler, giving him a cap hit of \$4 million this season and next.

I'm not trying to oversell anybody on the 33-year-old veteran defenseman, but he's been really good. In 51 games and over 900 minutes of five-on-five ice time, he's been on the ice for 56 goals for and 33 against. He's chipped in a lot offensively, too, with nine goals and 36 points.

Ates: OK, time for a Binnington question. People here in Canada were wondering how he'd perform at the 4 Nations Face-Off, and he won a lot of us over by winning a gold medal. Every time I thought he was out of a play, he found a way to make the save. How's he been since that tournament — and do you think he's playing well enough to steal the series?

Rutherford: The goalie matchup is a focus going into almost every playoff series, but that will certainly be the case with Binnington and Connor Hellebuyck. It's not lost on anyone that these were the two netminders who played for the gold medal at 4 Nations.

The confidence Binnington gained from his performance seemed to carry over. Before the tournament, he was 15-19-4 with a 2.89 goals-against average and .897 save percentage. After it, he was 13-3-1 with a 2.10 GAA and .910 save percentage. While his numbers are much improved, it bears repeating that the Blues have been playing much better since the break in front of Binnington.

He is definitely capable of stealing a series, though. He lives for these moments.

Ates: Is there an X-factor — a player we're not talking about but might be at some point during the series?

Rutherford: The player to watch is Zack Bolduc, a 22-year-old winger who was the Blues' first-round pick (No. 17) in 2021. He made the team out of camp, but the team took it slow with him, including five healthy scratches under former coach Drew Bannister. In 16 games under Bannister, Bolduc had no goals, five assists and was a plus-2.

When Montgomery came in, he didn't have Bolduc in the lineup every night, but you could see Montgomery gain trust in Bolduc and see his skill take off. In 56 games under Montgomery, Bolduc had 19 goals and 12 assists and was a plus-18. He's got the best shot on the team, and positioned in the bumper spot on the power play, he leads the unit with seven goals.

Ates: Finally, plain and simple, how do the Blues beat the Jets? What has to happen? What has to go right?

Rutherford: The Jets are a Stanley Cup contender and backed it up with a Presidents' Trophy. They are the team to beat, and as a result, they are going to have the pressure on them in this series. So, for starters, the Blues have to do something to make them feel that pressure. Whether it's taking Game 1 or splitting the first two games, they have to create some doubt in the Jets' minds.

But to do that, the Blues will have to rise to the occasion in a couple of areas:

- They'll have to find a way to get to Hellebuyck, who is well aware that he needs to follow up another Vezina-worthy season with playoff success.
- The young forwards will have to learn how to handle playoff hockey. Bolduc and Jake Neighbours have no postseason experience, and that's not even to mention that Jimmy Snuggerud has played just seven regular-season games.

The way I see it, the Blues' best path to winning the series is playing the way they did the last couple of months of the season. They don't have to be perfect, but they need to stick together, get contributions from as many players as possible and, again, create some doubt in the Jets' minds.

<https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/6285193/2025/04/17/blues-nhl-playoffs-jets-series-scouting/>

Scouting the Blues' enemy: Breaking down the Jets with Murat Ates

By Jeremy Rutherford

The St. Louis Blues were 22 seconds away from playing the Vegas Golden Knights in the first round of the playoffs.

But a goal by the Minnesota Wild's Joel Eriksson Ek earned the Wild a point against the Anaheim Ducks, and with that, the Blues' opponent switched to the Winnipeg Jets. The series starts Saturday at 5 p.m. CT at Canada Life Centre.

It will be a hard series for the Blues. Winnipeg won the Presidents' Trophy this season, and the Blues were 1-2-1 against the Jets this season.

But the pressure will weigh heavily on Winnipeg beginning with Game 1. The Jets will be reminded they were the favorite against the Blues in 2019 and became the first team to fall on St. Louis' way to the Stanley Cup.

Winnipeg, not Vegas, may just be the opponent the Blues want. Do they look nervous? We'll find out.

For a closer look at what to expect, I'm bringing in colleague Murat Ates, our man on the ground in Winnipeg. Ates provides fantastic coverage of the Jets, and I really

recommend following him on X and Bluesky and reading him here at The Athletic throughout this series.

Rutherford: I don't think many people predicted Winnipeg to win the Central Division, much less the Presidents' Trophy. What's made the Jets so good this season?

Ates: The Jets were better than I expected them to be for two main reasons: First, the Jets' power play was dynamic for most of the season, with multiple ways to create Grade-A scoring chances. Second, Connor Hellebuyck was spectacular, somehow improving upon last year's Vezina Trophy-winning performance by leading all starters in wins, shutouts, save percentage, goals-against average and goals saved above expected. He could win the Hart Trophy this season, has already won his second straight William Jennings Trophy and is a near lock to win his second straight Vezina.

But you asked why the Jets were good. The real answer is that, somewhere along the line, the Jets' star forwards bought in to team defense, and the role players developed such a complete game that they created offense, too. Mark Scheifele and Kyle Connor used to put up point-per-game seasons but give up even more goals than they created. They've worked hard under coach Scott Arniel (and Rick Bowness before him) and turned from a matchup that other teams could exploit into a star tandem that takes care of winning the puck before rushing off on the attack. They have the puck more often, score more often and get beat less often than they did in years past.

The Jets' depth forwards are also wildly underrated. There's a hard-forechecking, annoying-but-effective player type Winnipeg used to lack but has since added multiple times over in the form of Alex Iafallo, Nino Niederreiter, Vladislav Namestnikov and Brandon Tanev. Adam Lowry's shutdown line, usually with Niederreiter and Mason Appleton, has played some of the toughest minutes in the NHL this season and won by fighting for the toughest parts of the ice at both ends of the rink. I'd argue Winnipeg's overall advantage over most teams is more about its depth than its top-end forward talent.

Josh Morrissey leads a defense corps that has learned how to contribute to offense with or without his skating ability. The Jets forecheck and backcheck way better than they ever have, so the defense can gap up on their blue line early and aggressively. Winnipeg does a good job of forcing turnovers (or dump-ins) at the line, turning and making great passes to send its forwards up the ice. I thought that was the biggest part of what went well for the Jets against St. Louis earlier this month. Yes, the Blues defended their zone brilliantly, but Winnipeg spent a ton of time on offense. Why? Because the Jets worked their tails off to stuff St. Louis' entry attempts at Winnipeg's line. That's not a star power thing; it's a team buy-in thing.

And Winnipeg is better bought-in this season than at any point in my memory of covering them.

What comes next?

Rutherford: Last season, the Jets picked up 110 points but got picked apart by Colorado in the playoffs. Plus, there was that whole “Spittin’ Chiclets” storyline about Winnipeg being frauds. Is this version of the Jets an actual playoff threat?

Ates: Short answer: Yes, yes, they are.

Longer answer: This season’s Jets were always going to be judged by their playoffs. That’s the cost of Winnipeg’s disappointing playoff history. Winnipeg had already made substantial year-over-year improvements to go from missing the 2022 playoffs to getting beaten by Vegas in 2023. They got even better with Lowry as captain last season (and malcontent Pierre-Luc Dubois shipped to Los Angeles for Gabriel Vilardi, Lafallo and Rasmus Kupari). But the improvement Winnipeg managed, as real as it was, brought it only far enough to realize how far it still needed to go.

Jets leadership took last year’s loss much harder than the losses before it. “I hope it stings,” Morrissey said, and then player after player talked about getting 5 percent to 10 percent better in the offseason. From the outside, these will seem like platitudes, but the players’ willingness to speak the truth — that they weren’t good enough — kickstarted a long offseason that’s led to real growth. I’ve written that I believe in these Jets’ resilience more than previous models — that what we got wrong about this season’s Jets was not the truth in their call to action but the size of their response to it — and I stand by that now. The Jets just get after it this season. They don’t let bad shifts or bounces derail them. And they’re finally playing with the doggedness from top to bottom that characterizes true contending teams.

There are points of concern, of course. Vilardi will likely miss Game 1, and Nikolaj Ehlers will likely miss the series. If you’re unfamiliar with his game, I think of Vilardi as the Jets’ power-play quarterback despite Winnipeg running a top unit of Connor, Scheifele, Morrissey, Vilardi and Ehlers (when healthy). The Jets’ power play is ranked No. 1 but is less dynamic without Vilardi and Ehlers.

The Jets also have a hardworking, physical third pair of Luke Schenn and Logan Stanley that gives up quite a bit in terms of footspeed. Schenn appears to have the veteran wiles not to get burned by it; Stanley has mixed solid games with moments of chaos leading directly to goals against.

Rutherford: The last time Hellebuyck and Jordan Binnington faced off in a high-stakes environment, Hellebuyck gave up the deciding goal to Connor McDavid in the 4 Nations Face-Off. Binnington won the Cup in 2019, too, while Hellebuyck came under fire last year. Can the two-time Vezina winner beat Binnington when it matters most?

Ates: There’s a narrative out there that Hellebuyck gave up 24 goals in five games to Colorado and must have been the reason Winnipeg lost. If you didn’t get the chance to watch that series, you’ll have missed the Avalanche’s utter dominance in the moments leading up to their goals. The Jets didn’t have an answer for Nathan MacKinnon or Cale

Makar's speed or Valeri Nichushkin and Arturri Lehkonen's net-front presence, so what you often saw was zone entry, cutback, pass to a trailer with tons of open ice, seam pass, shot, recovery, seam pass, shot, rebound, goal. It was that dominant.

While the 4 Nations gold-medal game wasn't nearly that one-sided, Team Canada did create a ton of slot shots, and Hellebuyck was equal to them until McDavid was left all alone in front. I'm not worried about Hellebuyck's big-game ability.

Binnington can absolutely dazzle, though. There were many moments in that tournament when I thought he'd been beaten, and no matter what position he was in, he found a way to make an incredible save. It felt like 2019 all over again, but somehow all the more spectacular on the international stage. I'm not worried about Binnington's big-game ability, either.

Rutherford: The Jets made smaller trades at the deadline, picking up Brandon Tanev and Schenn. (Not sure if you've heard, but Luke has a brother who plays in St. Louis.) How will Tanev and Schenn impact this series?

Ates: Winnipeg tried to trade for Brock Nelson, but that trade didn't come to fruition; it seems Colorado was Nelson's preferred place to play. The players the Jets did add addressed specific needs. Tanev is tenacious, fast, and a pain to play against. I wouldn't expect much offense, but you'll know him well for his speed and his involvement in after-the-whistle scrums. Schenn is Winnipeg's only player who has won a Stanley Cup and provides an on-ice element that the Jets have lacked; Schenn wins net-front battles and ends plays on the boards with authority and strength. He's not fast — and that could become a problem — but the Jets got sick of getting beat for loose pucks and rebounds, whether at five-on-five or on the penalty kill, and Schenn helps on both of those fronts.

Rutherford: Is there somebody less famous than Hellebuyck, Connor, Scheifele or even Morrissey who could be dangerous for Winnipeg against St. Louis?

Ates: I'm sure Blues fans will feel the same way when Connor and Scheifele get cycling as Jets fans will feel on shifts when Thomas and Kyrrou are controlling play. I've also praised Winnipeg's depth players; I'm fully expecting Lowry, Lafallo or Niederreiter to score a big goal from within an inch of the crease.

In this case, though, I'll pick 23-year-old Cole Perfetti. The cerebral playmaking forward scored 50 points while staying healthy for his first 82-game season. Perfetti is equally adept as a shooter or a passer, but his biggest strength is his hockey sense: He has the intelligence and hands to make a first-option play and the hockey IQ to hold on to the puck for a quarter second until a seam opens up that other players may not have seen. Perfetti has only played one playoff game, though, and his next playoff point will be his first.

Rutherford: Ehlers is hurt. Vilardi is hurt. That's an enormous part of Winnipeg's top unit for the league's No. 1-ranked power play. What's the latest on those players, and do the Jets have any other lineup concerns?

Ates: Vilardi has been skating on his own before recent Jets practices. Arniel is calling him "day to day," but Vilardi has yet to take contact or participate in a full practice since his upper-body injury on March 23. I'd be surprised if he played in Game 1. Ehlers is out "week to week," and I don't think he'll play at all in this series.

This is where the Jets may be vulnerable. Lafallo has given the Jets a hard-forechecking, hard-backchecking forward to play with Connor and Scheifele while Vilardi has been hurt. The Jets have promoted Niederreiter to play with Namestnikov and Perfetti with Ehlers out of the lineup. In both cases, the Jets' depth provides a quality 200-foot player who gets the details right, but neither Lafallo nor Niederreiter can match the production of Vilardi or Ehlers. I don't worry about the Jets' commitment to team defense, but they're going to need to work harder for goals against St. Louis than they've needed to for most of the season.

Daily Faceoff

<https://www.dailyfaceoff.com/news/2025-stanley-cup-playoffs-winnipeg-jets-vs-st-louis-blues-series-preview-scheule-predictions>

2025 Stanley Cup Playoffs: Jets vs. Blues series preview

By Scott Maxwell

Winnipeg Jets: 1st in Central Division, 116 points

St. Louis Blues: 2nd Western Conference Wild Card, 96 points

Schedule (ET)

Date Game Time ET

Saturday, April 19	1. St. Louis at Winnipeg	6:00 p.m.
Monday, April 21	2. St. Louis at Winnipeg	7:30 p.m.
Thursday, April 24	3. Winnipeg at St. Louis	9:30 p.m.
Sunday, April 27	4. Winnipeg at St. Louis	1 p.m.
*Wednesday, April 30	5. St. Louis at Winnipeg	TBD
*Friday, May 2	6. Winnipeg at St. Louis	TBD
*Sunday, May 4	7. St. Louis at Winnipeg	TBD

The Skinny

The only other time these two met in the playoffs, the Jets were in the midst of one of their better stretches of play in their franchise history, while the Blues managed to get into the playoffs after a slow start and a midseason coaching change. The Jets didn't make too much noise and started to hit a decline, while the Blues went on to win the Stanley Cup.

I wouldn't exactly hold my breath on that happening this time around. When you give a very barebones comparison of the situations, they sound similar, but that's not quite the case when you break it down more.

The Jets exploded with one of the hottest starts in NHL history, winning 15 of their first 16 game. They slowed down a bit after that, maintaining a 41-21-4 record the rest of the way, but they were always in the race for the Presidents' Trophy, which they wound up winning. They got career years from Kyle Connor, Mark Scheifele, Nikolaj Ehlers and Gabriel Vilardi, and another Vezina-worthy season from Connor Hellebuyck. It was just about as perfect of a season as you could get.

In almost perfect antithesis, the Blues probably had one of the hottest finishes to the season. Their start was middling at best, and a 9-12-1 start got Drew Bannister fired shortly after St. Louis had removed his interim tag. Well, that and the fact that Jim Montgomery had become available. That was the right choice, as the Blues went 34-18-7, including a league-best 19-4-3 since the 4 Nations Face-Off break, to get the final playoff spot.

The Jets are very much the favourites in the series, but they also bear the most weight. They've disappointed in the playoffs time and time again, and there's only so many times they can get away with it. The Blues are playing with house money and have nothing to prove quite yet, outside of whether or not they belong here.

Will the Jets finally live up to the hype and perform in the playoffs? Or will the Blues' late-season run live on for a couple more weeks?

Head-to-Head

Winnipeg: 3-1-0

St. Louis: 1-2-1

The head-to-head records between the Jets and Blues is slightly misleading. While Winnipeg took three of the four games, two of them were close one-goal games, and the other was a 3-1 win with an empty net goal (read: a one-goal game). Meanwhile, the Blues lone win was a 4-1 win where they were up 3-0 early in the third. So, the Jets have barely snuck by the Blues in their wins, while the Blues had a much more decisive victory.

The Jets' first win and the Blues' lone victory came early on in the season, while win number two for Winnipeg was a couple of weeks before the trade deadline, and the third win was last week – the one that actually ended the Blues' 12-game win streak.

Top Five Scorers

Winnipeg

Kyle Connor, 97 points

Mark Scheifele, 87 points

Nikolaj Ehlers, 63 points
Josh Morrissey, 62 points
Gabriel Vilardi, 61 points

St. Louis
Robert Thomas, 81 points
Jordan Kyrou, 70 points
Dylan Holloway, 63 points
Pavel Buchnevich, 57 points
Brayden Schenn, 50 points

X-Factor

The last time we got any sort of meaningful hockey was the championship game between Canada and the United States. After winning the round-robin match, the US looked daunting, especially with Hellebuyck in net. But despite the doubts of running with Jordan Binnington, Canada pulled off the overtime victory, largely in part due to Binnington pulling one hell of a performance out of his hat, particularly in that overtime frame, reminding the hockey world why he has a Stanley Cup ring.

So once again, it'll be Hellebuyck and Binnington standing across the ice from each other, and once again, Hellebuyck's team will be the favourite. If the Blues have any chance of winning this series, it's going to be because Binnington steps up again and matches the performance of Hellebuyck.

Offense

If there's an aspect of the Jets' game that felt slightly unsustainable, it was that their offense outperformed their chance generation for a good portion of the season. But that actually improved in the final couple of months in the season, and as a result, they have the eighth-best 5v5 expected goals for per 60 (2.66) and 12th-best power play xGF/60 (9.23) to go along with their goals for per game that's tied for third (3.35) and their league-leading power play (28.9%). There's still a slight difference, but it's much better than where it was at the start of the season, and they have the talent to justify the overperformance.

That talent starts with the five players that make up the Jets' top power play unit and drive their offense. Connor led the way with 97 points, Scheifele wasn't far behind with 87, and Vilardi's really come out of his shell on that top line with 61 points (in 71 games too). Ehlers also had a great season with 63 points in just 69 games, while Josh Morrissey continues to be one of the league's most productive defensemen with 62 points. Morrissey was the only one of the five to not to set a career-high total this season.

A driving force of the Jets' early season success was their depth scoring, as it felt like everyone was scoring for them. That has since teetered off, although they still finished with great totals. Cole Perfetti continues to blossom with 50 points, while Vladislav Namestnikov, Nino Niederreiter, Adam Lowry and Alex Iafallo all hit the 30 point mark.

Neal Pionk was the only other defenseman to get more than 20 points with his 39, although Dylan Samberg, Dylan DeMelo, Colin Miller and Logan Stanley all at least got 10 points.

That offense for the Jets will be a huge advantage for them, because offense certainly hasn't been the Blues' game. The Blues had the 14th-best goals per game (3.05) and the 16th-best PP% (22.1%), and it wasn't any better under the hood with the 28th-best 5v5 xGF/60 (2.3) and the 19th-best PP xGF/60 (8.38). Their goals for per game does sit fifth in the league (3.3) since they hired Montgomery, but everything else has stayed relatively the same, with that number mostly being inflated by the second-highest 5v5 shooting percentage in the league in that span (10.54%).

The Blues don't have the high-end talent like the Jets do with Connor and Scheifele, but that doesn't mean they don't have any talent either. Robert Thomas continues to be one of the more underrated centers in the league, and he was great again this season with 81 points in 70 games. Jordan Kyrou has also been a productive player for St. Louis with 70 points, while the addition of Dylan Holloway has been a game-changer for their depth, as he finished the year with 63 points before his injury. Pavel Buchnevich and Brayden Schenn also had solid seasons with 57 and 50 points each.

Beyond them, though, the Blues don't have a lot left to offer in terms of depth. Jake Neighbours certainly has the upside to be a difference maker with his 46 points, and Zack Bolduc had a solid rookie campaign with 19 goals and 36 points, but those are the only other forwards with more than 20 points. They did get a lot of production on their back end though, as Cam Fowler had 40 points (36 after he was dealt to St. Louis), Colton Parayko and Justin Faulk hit the 30-point mark, and the Blues' other offer sheet addition in Philip Broberg was just shy with 29 points (in 68 games).

Overall, it's a bit of a mismatch for the Blues here. While their forward group is solid, their big horses aren't of the same caliber as the Jets' and the Jets also boast the better depth. That said, while the Blues don't have a Morrissey, they do have better offensive depth from their blueline.

Defense

As good as the Jets' offense is, their defensive game has really driven their success, and it's not just because of Connor Hellebuyck. Sure, Hellebuyck was a big reason why the team finished first in the league in goals against per game (2.32) for the second-straight season, but the team in front of him was also excellent, with the sixth-best 5v5 expected goals against per 60 (2.34). If Winnipeg did have one minor blemish, it was on the penalty kill, as it only ranked 13th (79.4%) and their shorthanded 5v5 xGA/60 was only tied for 17th (8.47).

It helps that, for the most part, the Jets' top players aren't defensive enigmas like they have been in past seasons. Scheifele was the only player on their top line that had a negative defensive goals above replacement (-0.4), while Vilardi (1.9), Connor (1), and

Ehlers (0.6) had positive impacts. In fact, they only had two players who had a significant negative defensive impact in Haydn Fleury (-1.9) and Mason Appleton (-2.4).

The Jets' blueline is defensively strong, almost entirely across the board. They finished the season with five defensemen with defensive GARs above two, and all of them regulars in Samberg (6.7), Miller (6.2), Demelo (4.8), Morrissey (2.2), and Pionk (2.2). They also had a few forwards in that range in David Gustafsson (3.1), Lafallo (2.9) and Perfetti (2), but the fact that most of their blueline is that good defensively is scary for other teams.

That's a shame for the Blues, because if there's one part of their game that is really good and would have been the driving force of an upset, it's their elite defensive game. And yet, the Jets are just as good there. At the very least, it's still what St. Louis can use to keep games close. Their numbers on the season as a whole are good, as they were tied for 12th in goals against per game (2.82) and seventh in 5v5 xGA/60 (2.35). But, they saw significant improvement under Montgomery, jumping to seventh (2.62) and fourth (2.26), respectively. Their penalty kill, however, has struggled with or without Montgomery. They finished the season tied for 27th in PK% (74.2%) and 24th in SH xGA/60 (8.99).

The Blues' strong defensive game was also helped mainly by the Holloway and Broberg additions over the summer, as the two were second (4.5) and tied for third (4) in defensive GAR this season. Rookie Bolduc was also a huge addition, ranking sixth (2.2). On top of that, Oskar Sundqvist (6.2), Mathieu Joseph (4) and Alexei Toropchenko (2.8) all had great years defensively up front, while Fowler (3.8) and Parayko (2.2) were excellent on the back end.

St. Louis isn't entirely in the clear, though, as they do have a few players who struggle defensively, worse than anyone on the Jets. What makes it worse is that two come from their top six in Thomas (-4.4 defensive GAR) and Buchnevich (-6.4). That should be easy to shelter, but it could be one way the Jets take advantage here. Ryan Suter also struggled with a -3.3 defensive GAR on St. Louis' blueline.

Overall, expect tight, defensive hockey from both teams in this series. The Jets' best case scenario is that their opponent's biggest strength is also theirs, especially when they have a clear advantage in every other aspect.

Goaltending

There may not be a more impactful player this season than what Hellebuyck brings to the table in net for the Jets. If anyone had any doubts that he was the best goalie in the league, he silenced them this season with another Vezina trophy-caliber performance. Only Anthony Stolarz had a higher save percentage among regular starters than Hellebuyck's .925, and Hellebuyck played twice as many games. He pulls himself from the rest of the field in goals saved above expected, as he finished the season at 49.48, almost 20 more than the second-placed Stolarz at 31.2.

But the one stain on Hellebuyck's resume has been his postseason performance as of late. Since 2023, his .878 SV% in the playoffs is the worst among goalies with 10 starts, while his -7.97 GSAX is the second-worst only to Vitek Vanecek's -8.08. There are some concerns that it's due to the fatigue of playing 60+ games a season, and the Jets didn't do anything to alleviate those concerns by starting him in 63 games this year. Should he really struggle again, the Jets have Eric Comrie, who's played well with a .914 SV% and +4.78 GSAX, but he hasn't done that with a starter's workload. This is Hellebuyck's cross to bear, and the Jets' fate all depends on how he does this time around.

For the Blues, they'll have Jordan Binnington in net, who's had a solid season with a .900 SV% and 7.36 GSAX. However, since backstopping Canada to a win in 4 Nations, he's been much better for St. Louis as well with a .910 SV% and 7.85 GSAX. Not Hellebuyck good, but good enough to get them to the playoffs. If anything, Binnington is almost the antichrist to Hellebuyck, as he's had an inconsistent career, but he seems to have that extra gear to lock in in the big moments, as seen by his Stanley Cup and 4 Nations win. Backing him up is Joel Hofer, who's been a bit more inconsistent with a .904 SV% and -1.54 GSAX.

Injuries

At this point in time, the only two Jets' players that might be in doubt for the start of the series due to injuries is Ehlers and Vilardi. Ehlers is week-to-week after colliding with an official last Saturday and will for sure be missing the start of the playoffs, and may possibly not even see the entire first round at all. Vilardi is a bit more of a mystery, as he has missed more than three weeks with an upper-body injury but is currently day-to-day. He could start in Game 1, or he could miss the series, who knows. But Winnipeg will definitely be hurting if they're without two of their top four forwards for most of this series.

There's really only one Blues player whose status is up in the air for this series, and that's Holloway. After getting hit into the boards almost two weeks ago, he hasn't played for St. Louis and is considered week-to-week. Whether that means only a couple weeks and he's back for Game 1 or it's 3-4 weeks and he may not even play in this series remains to be seen. Thomas left Tuesday's game with an injury, but that was later confirmed to be precautionary. And then there's Torey Krug, who's missed the entire season after undergoing ankle surgery, and isn't expected to play at any point in the playoffs, or maybe even his career.

Intangibles

While the Toronto Maple Leafs and their current core get the most flak for their lack of performance in the playoffs, the Jets aren't too far behind. Since their 2018 run, they have just one playoff series win, a sweep of the Edmonton Oilers in the shortened 2020-21 season only to be swept by the Montreal Canadiens right after. The past two seasons have particularly seen them get off to a hot start, cool down in the second half, and then go out with a whimper in the first round. They improved on the first step, avoided the second step, and now they need to close it out and avoid the third as well.

Along with that, both Ehlers and Pionk's contracts are up at the end of the season. While Pionk could return well, it's starting to feel like Ehlers is playing last games as a Jet. Even if they both return, it won't be at a combined \$11.875 million price tag. The time for the Jets to win is now before they see their depth shift around one way or another.

For the Blues, the stakes are quite low. The 2019 championship is still close enough that there isn't this city-wide panic to win again. They're very clearly in the start of a new window of contention built around a core of Thomas, Kyrrou, Buchnevich, Neighbors, Holloway and Broberg. And they probably didn't even expect to be here for most of the season. This playoff run is found money for them, and that mindset means there's no pressure for them, which allows them to catch a Jets team with all the pressure by surprise.

If there are any stakes at all, it might be that the Blues want to get 40-year-old Ryan Suter a ring. Who knows how many more seasons he has left in him, and considering he's already been bought out twice, it's quite clear that the game is already passing him by. There are a few other veterans without a Stanley Cup like Cam Fowler, Nick Leddy, Justin Faulk, and Radek Faksa, but they still have quite a few years left in them.

Series Pick

Anyone who followed the Daily Faceoff power rankings all season knows that I had the Jets pegged as frauds. The underlying numbers had them pegged as a middling, not great team, and if you had told me then that they were going to face a team with a strong defensive game like the Blues, I would have maybe considered an upset here.

But the Jets managed to improve on their metrics and are now a Stanley Cup contender on merit. We'll see how they fare against other teams of their caliber, but even if there's an avenue for the Blues to upset them, I expect Winnipeg to not have too many problems. If they do, then this core deserves any criticism tossed their way.

Jets in five games.