

Practice report - April 23

Scheifele: "It's going to be a big test going into St. Louis and playing in front of their fans."

By Jamie Thomas

WINNIPEG – This regular season Canada Life Centre was a tough place to get a win for most teams except the Winnipeg Jets.

That carried over into the first two games of the playoff series with the St. Louis Blues with the Jets winning both contests to take a 2-0 lead with them south of the border today. Jets forward Mark Scheifele was asked about what he thought was the one thing that stood out to him as to why the team has played as well as they have.

"I don't think you can pinpoint just one thing. A good team game. No matter what the game brings we kind of stick to our game plan, stick to what we do best and go from there. They've both been super hard-fought games right to the end," said Mark Scheifele who is tied for the playoff lead in points.

"Obviously we're happy with getting two wins at home, but it's going to be a big test going to St. Louis and playing in front of their fans. We're excited for the challenge."

The Jets held a full practice this morning before boarding the plane. Dylan DeMelo did not take part, but Scott Arniel said that was for maintenance reasons. Gabriel Vilardi practiced with the team but remained in the gold non-contact jersey, Arniel would not elaborate on Vilardi's availability but did say he will make the trip to St. Louis. Nikolaj Ehlers did not skate and will not travel.

The third period was one of the Jets best periods during the regular season and that has carried over to the playoffs as they have outscored the Blues 4-0 and out shot them 16-7.

In total, at 5-on-5, Winnipeg has only surrendered one goal. The best defensive team in the NHL has showed that though two games.

"Well, we've had some great saves at big moments, obviously, we pride ourselves on being a good defensive team, not giving up a lot of volume of opportunities and big scoring chances against," said Josh Morrissey.

"So, there's always going to be every night, and you're trying to clean that up, trying to not give up anything, but we've done a good job of limiting too many high danger

chances, and, obviously committing to doing the tough things, blocking shots and tracking back and not giving up those type of situations.”

The Jets are hoping that another regular season trend carries over into the next two games in St. Louis, that trend is how well they played away from home.

“I would like to think that how we play at home is how we play on the road,” said Scott Arniel.

“There isn’t two different ways to play as we are pretty consistent on how we go out and attack the opposition and how we defend. So, I think it is just as simple as that. We don’t try to change because we are on the road or because we are at home and that has made a difference.”

Winnipeg Free Press

<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2025/04/22/a-coaching-connection>

Road-ice advantage

Tough regular-season travel schedule has Jets prepped for post-season away games

By: Mike McIntyre

Road, sweet road?

They may not enjoy the same creature comforts of home, but the Winnipeg Jets have proven they can pack up their winning formula along with their toothbrush and other travel accessories and continue to enjoy success when skating in enemy territory this season.

A league-leading, franchise-record 26 wins occurred outside of Canada Life Centre. They’ll be looking to add to that total Thursday night as they visit the St. Louis Blues for Game 3 of the best-of-seven playoff series.

“We try not to change how we play. I would like to think that how we play at home is how we play on the road,” Jets head coach Scott Arniel said Wednesday following a full team practice in downtown Winnipeg, where the Jets took Games 1 and 2 by scores of 5-3 and 2-1.

“There isn’t two different ways to play as we are pretty consistent on how we go out and attack the opposition and how we defend. So, I think it is just as simple as that.”

It’s no secret that the Jets have one of the toughest travel schedules every year in the NHL given their location, which requires plenty of extra air miles compared to the

majority of their rivals. Staying true to their systems and structure under less-than-ideal circumstances is a huge reason they finished on top of the league standings.

"I think it's the depth of our lineup," Jets defenceman Josh Morrissey said of seemingly having road-ice advantage.

"When you go on the road, sometimes it's easier to just simplify your game, and I think that's something we've done a good job of. Playoffs, we're gonna have to continue to try to do the same things that made us successful on the road this year."

Beating the Blues in their own backyard won't be easy, although the Jets did it twice during the regular season. Does that give them a bit of a psychological edge?

"I think it goes out the window. It's a new animal," said Jets forward Mark Scheifele, who leads all Jets players with five points (two goals, three assists) through five games.

"Especially come playoffs, we know their fans are going to be rowdy and loud and excited as well as their players. It really doesn't come into effect, the previous stuff. We're just ready to get playing again and hopefully get some wins down there."

St. Louis reeled off 12 straight victories inside Enterprise Center to close out the campaign. Their last loss occurred on Feb. 22 — against Winnipeg in the form of a 4-3 shootout decision.

"It's playoffs now. We have to start a win streak in the playoffs," Blues coach Jim Montgomery told reporters Wednesday.

St. Louis was actually a pretty lousy home team when the Jets paid that last visit right after the 4 Nations Face-Off, falling to 12-14-3 that night. But the incredible run they'd go on propelled them into the final Western Conference wild card spot and a first-round date with the Presidents' Trophy-winning Jets.

"They did their job at their home. Now it's our turn to do our job here in front of our fans," said St. Louis forward Zack Bolduc.

"I hope it will be like usual lately, like (the) last two months," added veteran winger Pavel Buchnevich. It will be an amazing crowd, going hard when you make the hits. It brings energy to the building and everybody pumped up, goose bumps and stuff."

One of the things to watch for is how Montgomery might handle matchups now that he has the last change. The Jets have been playing Scheifele's line against the trio of Buchnevich, Robert Thomas and Jimmy Snuggerud. Adam Lowry's shutdown trio was then deployed at home against Brayden Schenn, Jake Neighbours and Jordan Kyrrou.

It's safe to say that, so far, Winnipeg has the edge. St. Louis has scored just one five-on-five goal so far, which came off the stick of fourth-line centre Oskar Sundqvist.

Regardless of whether the Blues try to switch things up, Scheifele said he welcomes the challenge on both an individual and team level.

“You don’t have last change, so you just go out and play against whoever you’re playing against and do what you can. I think our whole squad, top to bottom, has done a great job at that,” he said.

“This is what we play for. You play 82 games to get to the post-season. It’s definitely not hard to get excited for these games. It’s been a good start. I just want to keep it going. It’s going to be a tough test going to their building, we know they’re going to be ready. It’s going to be another tough test. We’re just excited to get there and put our best foot forward.”

This is the second-ever playoff meeting between these Central Division rivals. Back in 2019, St. Louis opened the series by grabbing the first two games in Winnipeg, while the Jets responded by taking Games 3 and 4 on the road. The Blues grabbed a third win at Canada Life Centre in Game 5, then won the series at home in Game 6.

“That 2019 series is a long time ago. And obviously this season, as everyone always says, what happens in the regular season ends when the regular season ends,” said Morrissey.

“So we’re just focused on going into St Louis to bring our best road game and continue to build on some things we’ve done well and some things we can do better.”

Game 4 will be held Sunday afternoon in St. Louis.

“Maybe down two, but they got their two in their barn and now it’s our turn to do our job at home,” said Neighbours.

“We’re excited for that opportunity to play in front of our fans, first playoff game in over three years. Fans are going to be excited, we’re excited to play in front of them. We believe this series is long from over.”

Canadian Press

<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2025/04/22/confidence-in-our-style-of-play>

‘Versatile Jets forward Alex Iafallo ready to lend a hand on and off the ice

By Judy Owen The Canadian Press

Alex Iafallo is always willing to lend a helping hand — on and off the ice.

The Winnipeg Jets forward has moved up and down the lineup this season without a complaint.

He also signed a three-year contract extension before the NHL playoffs for less money than his previous deal.

And during the COVID-19 pandemic, lafallo bought and delivered dinners for his mom and dozens of her nurse co-workers at the Buffalo General Medical Center.

“I think everybody has it in them, just got to do it,” lafallo said of his helpful nature in a recent interview.

The 31-year-old from Eden, N.Y., might soon have to be unselfish again as the Jets head to St. Louis for Game 3 Thursday in the Western Conference opening-round series they lead 2-0.

lafallo was moved to Winnipeg’s top line from the fourth after Gabriel Vilardi was injured March 23. He’s complemented left-winger Kyle Connor and centre Mark Schiefele, but Vilardi is getting close to returning.

Vilardi practised with the team again Wednesday in a yellow non-contact jersey. He has to practise in a regular jersey before he’ll be available for real action. Game 4 is Sunday.

lafallo is ready to adapt to any change in his role.

“I’ll take it like it comes, just like I always have,” he said. “Playoffs, it’s do or die. It’s the best time of the year, so be ready to go on whatever line you’re playing with.”

Often described as a “Swiss Army knife” for his versatility, it’s a reputation lafallo has taken pride in since the Los Angeles Kings took a chance on the undrafted winger and signed him in 2017-18.

His hockey career was put on pause in the spring of 2020 when the league shut down because of the pandemic.

lafallo packed up and drove across the United States to stay with his parents, Barb and Tom, and sister Julianna, a former women’s professional hockey player.

Watching his mom work long hours on a unit for patients with COVID-19 made him want to help out.

lafallo got the go-ahead to bring dinner for the staff one evening. After buying chicken parmesan from a local restaurant, he set off with his truck’s heaters cranked up.

“It was a 30-minute drive so I just kept (the order) on the floor where the heaters all come out,” he said.

By the time he arrived, he was hot and had to have his temperature taken before he could enter the building. It barely registered under the required threshold, he recalled with a smile.

His mom met him and he helped load the dinners on a cart she took upstairs to her unit.

“They were working hard at a tough time. I wanted to give back,” lafallo said, adding his mother still works at the hospital. “I appreciate everything that they do, nurses and everybody in that whole field.”

He’s also been helping out in the Winnipeg community since being traded to the Jets from the Kings in June 2023. He was part of the Pierre-Luc Dubois deal that also brought Vilardi and Rasmus Kapari to Manitoba.

Through the team’s True North Youth Foundation, lafallo and teammate Nino Niederreiter have coached young hockey players.

His all-round positive experience is why he chose to re-sign with the Jets instead of becoming an unrestricted free agent this summer.

When his new US\$11-million deal kicks in next season, he’ll earn an average annual salary of \$3.66 million. His current contract pays him \$4 million per season.

“It’s such a great team. I don’t want to go anywhere else,” lafallo told reporters when the deal was announced April 16. “I was going to accept under what I was worth, or whatever it was.

“It’s a great contract for me and I’m loving it, so it’s going to be a great three years.”

lafallo finished the regular season with 15 goals and 31 points in 82 games. In his final 11 games on the top line, he scored four goals and added three assists. He has one goal through two playoff games.

NHL.com

<https://www.nhl.com/news/topic/playoffs/2025/series-e-news/st-louis-blues-look-to-improve-at-even-strength-in-game-3-of-western-1st-round>

***Blues look to improve at even strength in Game 3 of Western 1st Round
Have scored once 5-on-5, return home trailing 2-0 in series against Jets***

By Tracey Myers

MARYLAND HEIGHTS, Mo. -- Oskar Sundqvist scored from the low slot, the St. Louis Blues forward proving opportunistic after Winnipeg Jets defenseman Luke Schenn's clearing attempt went awry.

It was a nice goal late in the first period of Game 1, and an even-strength one at that. But it's also been the only one the Blues have scored 5-on-5 through the first two games of the Western Conference First Round.

"I think obviously it starts with more possession in the [offensive] zone, hanging onto pucks longer," St. Louis forward Jake Neighbours said after practice Wednesday. Obviously, [it's about] directing more shots in that direction and getting more traffic there.

"They've got a really good goalie (Connor Hellebuyck), and you can't make it easy on him. You've got to get to the net and make it harder for him to see pucks and create chaos around him. I think if we can do a better job of that, I thought it got better from Game 1 to Game 2 and hopefully taking another step heading into Game 3."

The Blues trail 2-0 in the best-of-7 series but host Game 3 at Enterprise Center on Thursday (9:30 p.m. ET; FDSNMW, ESPN2, SN, TVAS, CBC).

The Jets have scored five 5-on-5 goals (three of those in the combined third periods) and one goal on the power play.

They've been pleased with how they've stifled the Blues 5-on-5 thus far.

"Well, we've had some great saves at big moments, obviously," Winnipeg defenseman Josh Morrissey said. "We pride ourselves on being a good defensive team, not giving up a lot of volume of opportunities and big scoring chances against. There are always going to be some (opportunities) every night and we're trying to clean that up, trying to not give up anything.

"But we've done a good job of limiting too many high-danger chances, and obviously (we're) committing to doing the tough things -- blocking shots, and tracking back and not giving up those type of situations. So, we're going to have to continue to improve. There are areas we can get better at from the first two games, but it's a commitment to playing hard (defense) that we've tried to make a staple of ours all season. And certainly, this time of year it's extremely important to keep all four lines, all six [defensemen], committed to playing hard [defensively]."

The Blues' need for 5-on-5 scoring became more obvious as Game 2 progressed. Their power play was 2-for-3 in Game 1 and scored again with two seconds remaining in the first period of Game 2 (Jimmy Snuggerud) to tie it 1-1. But their power play was denied on their next three opportunities.

"We've got to get to their blue paint better," St. Louis coach Jim Montgomery said. "We have to sustain more [offensive]-zone time. Those are two things that we definitely have to do better. Then, besides that, we need to play faster not only offensively, but defensively."

"You know, sometimes you have to credit the opposition and sometimes we need to reinforce it. I think we've talked a lot about defending our net, but I don't think we've talked enough, as a coaching staff myself in particular, about being heavy at their net front."

The Blues will have the home crowd on their side after losing the first two games in Winnipeg, and home has been very good to them; they were 24-14-3 here during the regular season, including finishing with 12 straight home wins.

St. Louis hasn't lost at home since a 4-3 shootout defeat against Winnipeg on Feb. 22, its first game after the 4 Nations Face-off break.

"Maybe (we're) down two, but they got their two in their barn and now it's our turn to do our job at home," Neighbours said. "We're excited for that opportunity to play in front of our fans, first playoff game in over three years. Fans are going to be excited. We're excited to play in front of them. We believe this series is long from over."

Winnipeg Sun

<https://winnipegsun.com/sports/more-funny-than-anything-mark-scheifele-on-blues-goalie-warmup-antics>

'More funny than anything': Mark Scheifele on Blues goalie's warmup antics

By Gordon Anderson

Winnipeg Jets forward Mark Scheifele prefers his last player on the ice status.

Jets vs. Blues 2025 NHL Playoff Preview - Blues Players to Watch

St. Louis Blues goalie, and Winnipeg product Joel Hofer, challenged Scheifele's final player on the ice tradition prior to Game 2 of the quarterfinal series downtown on Monday night.

Scheifele was asked for his thoughts on the pre-game antics as Hofer shot pucks into the Jets defensive end long after players on either side had vacated the frozen playing surface.

"It's something I've done my whole career so I just kind of want to get off the ice for the Zamboni guys to get out there and do their job properly," Scheifele said. "It was more funny than anything."

Corey Perry of the Edmonton Oilers attempted the same mind scramble before Winnipeg's penultimate home game of the regular season earlier this month, wanting to disrupt Scheifele's routine. It didn't work that day, either.

"I like to be off (the ice) last," Scheifele said, noting Hofer's antics didn't bother him one iota. "It's not a thing that really comes into my brain."

The Jets leading playoff scorer doesn't know when the tradition, or superstition, began.

"It's just something I did," Scheifele said. "I did rock paper scissors with (Tyler Seguin) a couple years ago. Honestly, it is some weird quirk about me, but all in good fun."

The league hasn't made a public comment on the incident, though Jets head coach expects the NHL to wade into the pool here.

"I think the league is going to have something to say about this," Arniel said on Tuesday. "I'm sure we're going to hear about it. It affects when the Zamboni is coming out on the ice. That's the stuff the league does not want."

At the other end of the ice, Scheifele is certainly having more 'fun.'

The Kitchener, Ont., native has five points in two games, leading the league in playoff points heading into playoff action on Wednesday evening.

The #55 in Jets gear has two goals and three assists. Two of his assists have led directly to the most decisive goals in the series so far, Kyle Connor's winners in Games 1 and 2.

"It's not hard to get excited for these games," he said. "It's been a good start. I just want to keep it going. Like I said before, it's going to be a tough test going to their building, we know they're going to be ready. It's going to be another tough test. We're just excited to get there and put our best foot forward."

The Jets lead the quarterfinal series 2-0.

Game 3 is Thursday in St. Louis.

<https://winnipegssun.com/sports/hockey/nhl/winnipeg-jets/playoff-clash-a-full-circle-moment-for-jets-arniel-blues-montgomery>

'Hard game for them': Jets take their show on the road for Game 3 in St. Louis

By Gordon Anderson

Consistency is an extended runway to success for the Winnipeg Jets.

The Jets look to take a stranglehold on this Stanley Cup quarterfinal series against the Blues on Thursday night in St. Louis.

"We play at home is how we play on the road," head coach Scott Arniel said. "There aren't two different ways to play as we are consistent on how we go out and attack the opposition and how we defend."

Winnipeg leads the best-of-seven-series two games to zero.

"It is just as simple as that," Arniel continued. "We don't try to change because we are on the road or because we are at home, and that has made a difference."

Going into Game 3, Arniel wants his team to keep the clamps on the St. Louis offence threats in Robert Thomas, Jordan Kyrrou and Pavel Buchnevich.

Thomas led the Blues in scoring with 81 points during the regular season. Kyrrou was second with 70 and Buchnevich was fourth with 57 points. Dylan Holloway was third in scoring with 63 points, but the ex-Edmonton Oiler is week-to-week with a lower-body injury dating back to April 4.

Thomas and Kyrrou have a goal apiece through two games. Buchnevich has two assists. Buchnevich played 22:47 in Game 2; Thomas saw 23:13 of ice time and Kyrrou was somewhat limited to 18:59.

"We have to make sure that we continue to make it a hard game for them," Arniel said. "Make them defend, run into them when you can get the chance, if they're going to log that much ice."

Arniel doesn't seem concerned about losing the last change advantage on the road, seemingly confident his players measure up.

"I'm comfortable with whoever's out on the ice against those guys," the coach said. "They've done it all year, knowing that they have to do it again."

Puck drop is 8:30 p.m.

Winnipeg finished the regular season with a franchise best road record at 26-15-0. The previous mark of 25-15-3 was set last season.

"There's a lot of factors that go into that road record," Mark Scheifele said. "You don't have last change, so you just go out and play against whoever you're playing against and do what you can. I think our whole squad, top to bottom, has done a great job at that."

“When you go on the road, sometimes it’s easier to just simplify your game, and I think that’s something we’ve done a good job of,” Jets defenceman Josh Morrissey added. “We need to continue to try to do the same things that made us successful on the road this year.”

However, Scheifele discounted the team’s previous success, whether it is modern times or the very limited playoff history between the squads. In spring of 2019, the Jets lost 4-2 to the Blues in the opening round but won both road games.

“We know their fans are going to be rowdy and loud and excited as well as their players,” he said. “It really doesn’t come into effect, the previous stuff. We’re just ready to get playing again and hopefully get some wins down there.”

Winnipeg won both games in Missouri during the regular season. They won 3-2 on Oct. 22 and 4-3 on Feb. 22.

“Everyone always says, what happens in the regular season ends when the regular season ends,” Morrissey said. “We’re just focused on going into St Louis, to bring our best road game and continue to build on some things we’ve done well and some things we can do better.”

<https://winnipegsun.com/sports/hockey/nhl/winnipeg-jets/guts-of-the-ice-jets-dominating-even-strength-action-against-the-blues>

‘Guts of the ice’: Jets dominating even-strength action against the Blues

By Gordon Anderson

It’s going to take some ‘guts’ to get in there.

One area where the Jets have been the vastly superior team is in even-strength action, as this Stanley Cup quarterfinal series heads south to St. Louis for Games 3 and 4.

The Blues have one even-strength goal in 120 minutes of game action. In contrast, the Jets have six goals at five-on-five.

“We have always talked about when we defend, we take away the guts of the ice, and it is no different in the playoffs,” Jets head coach Scott Arniel said. “It is hard to get to the inside of the ice and that is something that we have worked on all year long and that is something we have to do for the whole series and throughout the playoffs.”

The Florida Panthers and the Washington Capitals have allowed one even-strength goal, having played one less game than the home team. The Jets are the only squad to allow one goal against at five-on-five through two games.

St Louis and its shooters forced Jets keeper Connor Hellebuyck into 15 even-strength saves in Game 1 and 14 in Game 2.

“We pride ourselves on being a good defensive team, not giving up a high volume of opportunities and big scoring chances against,” defenceman Josh Morrissey said, while adding Hellebuyck has made several quality stops to keep the number of goals limited. “We’ve done a good job of limiting high-danger chances. And committing to doing the tough things, blocking shots, tracking back and not giving up those type of situations.”

If anything, the trend has continued as the Jets allowed the fewest five-on-five goals during the regular season with 119. The Los Angeles Kings were second best with 125.

“There are areas we can get better at from the first two games, but it’s a commitment to playing hard defence that we’ve tried to make a staple all season,” Morrissey said. “At this time of year, it’s extremely important to keep all four lines, all six defencemen committed to playing hard D.”

St. Louis has three power-play goals in seven chances but find themselves on the wrong end of the scoreboard heading into a pivotal Game 3 on Thursday night. Normally, special teams success is a golden ticket for an extended playoff run.

Blues forward Jake Neighbours says his team must thwart the very thing the Jets are good at.

“You’ve got to have the will, and the compete to work around your check and to get around the dirty areas,” Neighbours told reporters in St. Louis. “They’ve got some good D-men that are strong and try to hold you to the outside. It’s no excuse. You’ve got to find a way to get there, bang in some greasy ones and help your team.”

St. Louis winger Zack Bolduc says his team needs more desperation if they hope to make this a longer series.

“We haven’t done a good job of being at the net and trying to be a screen to those shots, so I think that’s one thing we’ve got to get better at,” he said.

TSN.ca

<https://www.tsn.ca/nhl/video/how-can-jets-maintain-dominance-on-the-road~3120830>

How can Jets maintain dominance on the road? (VIDEO)

The Jets had a league-best 26 road wins in the regular season and will look to maintain that momentum as the series shifts to St. Louis with Winnipeg up 2-0. How can the Jets continue their dominance away from home? TSN Hockey analyst Cheryl Pounder joins Domino's That's Hockey host Gino Reda to discuss ahead of Game 3.

<https://www.nhl.com/news/scott-arniel-proving-he-was-the-right-guy-to-lead-winnipeg-jets-as-coach>

Can Jets reach another level with Vilardi's return looming? (VIDEO)

TSN's John Lu joins Domino's That's Hockey to update Gabriel Vilardi's status, and give his thoughts on if the forward can help the Jets reach another level when he does return to the lineup.

The Athletic

<https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/6303464/2025/04/24/jets-adjustments-blues-nhl-playoffs/>

Jets take 2-0 series lead into St. Louis: Storylines and adjustments to watch

By Murat Ates

As the Winnipeg Jets' first round series against the St. Louis Blues shifts to Enterprise Arena, Jim Montgomery's adjustments will take centre stage. Winnipeg leads 2-0 and has the opportunity to put St. Louis on the brink of elimination with a win in Game 3 or Game 4.

Now that the Blues have home ice, who will Montgomery match up against Mark Scheifele and Kyle Connor? What can he do to get Robert Thomas or Jordan Kyrou more open ice? After tweaking his breakout in Game 2, what else does Montgomery have in store?

First, take a moment to consider the alternate Jets universe wherein Montgomery and not Scott Arniel is head coach of the Jets.

When the Jets hired Arniel in 2022, it was as for the role of "associate" coach — a title more elevated than assistant, but not the head coaching return Arniel had coveted. Arniel was made Winnipeg's presumed head-coach-in-waiting and, as The Athletic was first to report, the Jets committed to Arniel over a month before hiring Rick Bowness.

Jets ownership and management cast a wide net in those intervening days, with the up-and-coming Montgomery near the top of their list. Part of the appeal? His pre-existing relationship with Arniel — not only had Arniel coached Montgomery for the IHL edition of the Manitoba Moose, they'd stayed in touch as Montgomery rose through the coaching ranks at the University of Denver. They exchanged penalty killing tips when Arniel coached in Washington and Montgomery was hired by Dallas.

Montgomery and Arniel even traded tips at a dinner for the Bruce Oake Recovery Centre in September.

“He was in Boston, so we were trading back secrets,” Arniel told reporters in Winnipeg this week. “I guess I should have held onto a couple of those, because I wasn’t expecting him to be in St. Louis.”

If Boston hadn’t been so appealing to Montgomery back in 2022 — and if Bowness hadn’t emerged as ideal for the Jets — there’s a chance Montgomery and Arniel would be teammates instead of rivals in Round 1. Instead, the Jets are happy with the way history unfolded, St. Louis has been great to Montgomery and we get to enjoy the cat-and-mouse interplay between them as the series shifts to St. Louis.

Here’s what we know about Montgomery’s approach to home ice against the Jets.

Blues don’t fear the Thomas vs. Scheifele matchup

Despite Winnipeg’s decided advantage on the top line in Game 1 and Game 2, don’t expect Montgomery to hide Robert Thomas from Winnipeg’s top line.

Montgomery showed absolutely no issue with the match-up when he last had home ice in St. Louis earlier this season. Not only did Scheifele and Thomas go toe-to-toe for over nine of the 13 minutes Thomas played at five-on-five, Thomas scored a two-on-one rush goal against Scheifele’s line to tie the game in the first period. It took an ill-timed change, combining with a breakdown at the Jets’ offensive blue line, but Thomas made Winnipeg pay for its mistakes. Thomas scored again at four-on-four against Scheifele and Connor later in that same game.

In their head-to-head matchups this season, St. Louis outscored Winnipeg 5-1 with Thomas and Scheifele on the ice at even strength. Scheifele and Connor have run an offensive masterclass these playoffs, outscoring the Thomas line 3-0, but shots and chances are far closer to even. Add it all up and I expect Montgomery’s bet will be that Thomas can play those minutes and win.

If Scheifele, Connor and Alex Iafallo win that matchup in St. Louis, it’s hard to see the Blues coming back in this series.

Blues’ 11F, 7D approach gives Arniel more to worry about

“I’m not a hard-match guy,” Montgomery told reporters in St. Louis on Wednesday. “It all depends on how well our team’s playing. If we’re playing (well), I kind of roll the lines. If not, then I match.”

There will be wrinkles to this. If the Blues run 11 forwards and seven defencemen again, it will give Montgomery more options to get Thomas, Pavel Buchnevich, Jimmy Snuggerud, Jordan Kyrou and his other big guns on the ice in various combinations. Expect St. Louis to use its last change to pick on Winnipeg’s third defence pair whenever possible: the Blues’ top line played between 11 and 15 minutes against everyone in Winnipeg’s top four in Games 1 and 2, but three minutes against Logan Stanley and not much more against partner Luke Schenn.

Arniel said the matchup considerations change when the Blues run 11 forwards.

“It gives them a different look when Thomas is getting that much ice and Buchnevich is playing that much and Kyrrou, those guys,” Arniel said. “It means the other side as well, that we have to make sure that we continue to make it a hard game for them. Make them defend, run into them when you can get the chance, if they’re going to log that much ice.”

One option Arniel has to mitigate this concern is to run Schenn with Dylan Samberg; he turned to this option for two minutes in Game 1 and three minutes in Game 2.

Arniel wants to eliminate Binnington from the Blues’ breakout

Despite the Jets’ 2-0 series lead, St. Louis has had the better start in both games of the series so far. This is not just a “vibes” thing — and it’s more than a matter of the Blues managing their energy better in front of a Whiteout crowd.

The Blues got sick of Winnipeg’s defencemen jumping their breakouts in Game 1, so they changed the process in Game 2.

“We kept giving the puck to (Jordan) Binnington so that eliminates one of our forwards. Then they’ve got numbers above us with a quick play,” Arniel said. “We did a better job as the game went on of keeping the puck away from him, not allowing him to make that first pass.”

When Binnington gets to a puck first, the Blues get to play six-on-five with possession of the puck. Thomas got the first Grade A chance of Game 2 when Binnington beat Winnipeg’s F1, Alex Iafallo, with a quick pass 44 seconds into the first period. The speed with which Binnington picked up Winnipeg’s dump-in and found Cam Fowler gave Fowler time to beat Scheifele, the Jets’ F2 on the strong side.

Two passes beat two forecheckers, giving the Blues a numbers advantage pushing the puck up ice, and that’s where the adjustment comes in. The Jets’ defencemen like to jump the next pass in St. Louis’ sequence — up the boards to Buchnevich, in this case. It’s a great way to kill a breakout early, keeping the Jets on the attack in the offensive zone. The Blues were ready for it right out of the gate in Game 2, though: check out the bump-back pass Buchnevich makes to Thomas to negate Dylan DeMelo’s pinch attempt. Without DeMelo behind him, Buchnevich can take this pass and go; with DeMelo there, he has a different idea:

If Connor wasn’t on his horse to get back, the Blues would have had a three-on-one for free. Even with Connor backtracking like that, Thomas gets to walk straight down Main Street — and all of this less than a minute into the game.

Arniel said he’s ready for breakout tweaks. Winnipeg needs to do a better job of taking Binnington out of the play, though — and not necessarily by bowling through him, as the Jets did a couple of times on Monday. It’s about keeping the puck out of his hands.

“The bump–back, those different things come when they have time and space,” Arniel said. “That, for us, when we can keep it away from the goalie or they’ve got to go back with pressure on top of them, they’re not going to be able to make those clean one-touch plays and get it out of the zone.”

That’s just one wrinkle on one breakout. Winnipeg’s players will be ready for more. The point is that Thomas got a Grade A opportunity from a single moment of better execution by St. Louis; if Winnipeg is to push the Blues to the brink, it needs to be sharper from the opening whistle.

Montgomery wants more traffic in front of Hellebuyck

There is a roadmap to beating the Jets and the Blues aren’t implementing it.

St. Louis doesn’t have the speed of a Nathan MacKinnon or the net-front talent of Valeri Nichushkin or Arturri Lehkonen, but one only needs to look back at the Jets’ first-round loss to the Colorado Avalanche last season for a blueprint. And it’s not as though Montgomery isn’t well aware of it.

“It’s about Grade A chances, trying to get as close to the net as possible, or having two inside and double layered screens, deflections, rebounds,” Montgomery said.

Take a look at where each team has gotten its shots at five-on-five, though. The colour by the Blues’ logo represents St. Louis’ shots against Winnipeg. The colour by the Jets’ logo represents Winnipeg’s shots against St. Louis.

One team is getting to the middle of the ice with consistency and the other one is not.

The G’s make an obvious point: Winnipeg is outscoring St. Louis 5-1 at five-on-five so far in Round 1. That’s been Winnipeg’s biggest advantage, given the Blues’ three power-play goals, and it takes a combination of things going right for the Jets.

First and foremost, they’re spending more time in the Blues’ end of the rink. Second, they’re finding space away from the Blues’ zone defence, getting the puck to the net, and getting there with numbers. Third, despite the Blues’ transition success in key moments like the one shown above, Winnipeg’s transition defence has been excellent — they’ve often been able to stifle St. Louis’ entry attempts.

Some of the difference is about size, strength and determination of will.

Montgomery took responsibility for his role in that, saying he’s emphasized net-front battles in the Blues’ zone more often than he talks about its role in offence. Despite the Blues’ power-play success, the majority of the game is still played at even strength. If the Blues can’t get rush offence because the Jets are adapting to their breakouts, then they need to get offence from inside the zone. (Ideally, teams get both — strength in one area creates opportunity in another — but the Jets have had the answers so far.)

The Jets might simply have too big of a talent advantage for the Blues to overcome. They need only to manage a split to put St. Louis on the brink of elimination.

But home ice advantage can change the complexion of a series — and Arniel has been talking about this moment since before the series began.

“Adjustments start to happen as you get into the series,” he said last week. “Hopefully they’re the ones that have to adjust to us. You just don’t know how each and every game goes. It might be matchups that you’re looking at. It might be D partners that are head-to-head against certain players ... That’s kind of what playoff series are all about.”

<https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/6302191/2025/04/24/blues-offense-home-ice-nhl-playoffs-jets/>

Blues need more offense, not just home ice advantage, in Game 3 against the Jets

By Jeremy Rutherford

ST. LOUIS — After two days off, the St. Louis Blues are looking forward to being at Enterprise Center for Game 3 of their Western Conference series against the Winnipeg Jets on Thursday night.

It will be their first home playoff game since May 27, 2022, when the Colorado Avalanche’s Darren Helm scored with 5.6 seconds remaining in regulation for a 3-2 win in Game 6, sending the Avs into the conference finals and the Blues into the offseason.

St. Louis missed the playoffs the past two years and has played the first two games against the Jets at Canada Life Centre, where there may be no better home-ice advantage in the NHL than the team’s “Whiteout.” The Blues lost both and trail the best-of-seven series 2-0.

But now it’s their turn, and they’ve been lights-out at Enterprise Center, winning their last 12 regular-season games.

“I hope it will be like the last two months,” Blues forward Pavel Buchnevich said. “It brings energy to the building and everybody is pumped up, goose bumps and stuff.”

If there’s one team in the league, however, that doesn’t seem bothered not being at home, it’s the Jets, who won an NHL-best 26 road games this season. That includes two wins in St. Louis: 3-2 on Oct. 22 and 4-3 in a Feb. 22 shootout.

There’s an old saying in the NHL playoffs that the series hasn’t started until the home team loses, and the Blues hope that’s the case. But there’s another adage that if you

can't win the five-on-five scoring battle, you can't win in the playoffs, and if they don't change that soon, this series will be over anyway.

In the first two games, at five-on-five, the Jets have outshot the Blues (39-26), had more high-danger chances (20-7) and outscored them (5-1). The Blues' only five-on-five goal came from Oskar Sundqvist (assisted by Justin Faulk and Zack Bolduc) in Game 1. Their other three goals in the series have come on the power play.

"We've got to get to their blue paint better," Blues coach Jim Montgomery said. "We've got to sustain more O-zone time. Those are two things that we definitely have to do better."

Let's take a look at the Blues' offensive heat map, courtesy of Hockey Viz. The chart illustrates where the shots (red) are coming five-on-five, and as you can see, there's a lot on the perimeter and not much inside.

In Game 1, a 5-3 loss to Winnipeg, the Blues were credited with just 17 shots on goal.

Here's a breakdown of who took the team's even-strength shots, according to Hockey Viz, and from where on the ice.

In Game 2, a 2-1 loss, the Blues were credited with 22 shots on goal. Here's a similar breakdown of who took the team's even-strength shots and from where.

Montgomery gave the Jets credit and took some blame for the Blues' lack of work on the inside.

"We've talked a lot about defending our net, but I don't think we've talked enough, as a coaching staff, myself in particular, about being heavy at their net-front," he said.

But this shouldn't be something where the Blues need a reminder.

In the team's late-season turnaround, Montgomery often complimented the forecheck and the frequency with which players were driving to the net to create offense. Yet against the Jets, that's been non-existent.

"It's not about (being) physical," Buchnevich said. "We have to get out from the corners. We have to spread them and get some good shots with the bodies in front. Sometimes (the Blues defense) gets the puck, and the forwards are still in the corner. Basically, (the Jets) box out before the shot is coming and (Connor) Hellebuyck sees most of the shots. It's hard to score like that."

In Game 2, with the score tied 1-1 in the second period, the Blues had possession in the offensive zone and spent most of the time on the left side of the ice.

There's a point where forwards Jordan Kyrour and Brayden Schenn are attempting to control the puck in tight quarters along the wall, drawing the attention of multiple Jets. Eventually, defenseman Cam Fowler has the puck at the point, but he's forced to put it deep and hope for the best. Buchnevich loses the battle on the end boards, and after a turnover by Kyrour, the Jets exit the zone.

"That's what I mean, we have to spread the zone and get more possession time," Buchnevich said. "We chip the puck, and we have two against four, two against five. It's hard to win the puck. We have to make one against one, or two against two, and it will make offense easy for us."

Also in Game 2, with the Jets leading 2-1 in the third period, the Blues had the potential of creating some offense when Buchnevich got in on the forecheck and Robert Thomas knocked down the clearing attempt. Kyrour provided support for Thomas on the wall, so his positioning helped them maintain possession. But with all three forwards on the same side of the ice, the Jets were easily able to defend the situation and exit the zone after Buchnevich turned the puck over.

As a result, all the Blues' top-six forwards — Buchnevich, Thomas, Kyrour, Schenn, Jimmy Snuggerud and Jake Neighbours — are still without a point at five-one-five in the series.

"Obviously, it starts with more possession in the O-zone, hanging onto pucks longer," Neighbours said. "They've got a really good goalie, and you can't make it easy on him. You've got to get to the net and make it harder for him to see pucks and create chaos around him."

"They've got some good D-men that are strong and try to hold you to the outside. It's no excuse. You've got to find a way to get there, bang in some greasy ones and help your team. I thought it got better from Game 1 to Game 2, and hopefully, taking another step heading into Game 3."

Thomas didn't practice Wednesday, but Montgomery said he "will be a player" in Game 3. Even if he's in the lineup, it's evident he's limited by the lower-body injury that caused him to leave the team's last regular-season game.

Winnipeg coach Scott Arniel has sought to keep the Jets' top line of Kyle Connor, Mark Scheifele and Alex Iafallo on the ice against Thomas' line, perhaps because the Blues center is ailing. But since Game 3 will be at Enterprise Center, Montgomery will have the last line change and may elect to put Schenn's line out against Scheifele's line. Whoever it is, the line must be more physical on the Jets. In the series, the team has five goals at five-on-five, and Connor (2), Scheifele (1) and Iafallo (1) have four of them.

"We have to be harder on Connor and Scheifele," Montgomery said. "They've scored the winning goal both nights. They're making plays on us down low. So yes, we have to be harder."

The Jets have certainly been tough on the Blues' top six, highlighted by defenseman Logan Stanley leveling Kyrrou in Game 2.

But it wasn't just that blast.

In Game 2, the Blues' top line of Snuggerud, Thomas and Buchnevich were on the receiving end of four hits, with an additional five hits laid on the second line. Meanwhile, the Blues hit Connor, Scheifele and Lafallo a combined once.

"If the play was there, we try to be physical," Buchnevich said. "We have to still play hockey."

"You've just got to be harder on them," Neighbours said. "(Connor and Scheifele) are two guys that not only have a ton of talent, but they compete really hard and they care a lot. You've got to be strong in there, take away their time and space and try and frustrate them."

There could be one lineup change, however. After the Blues went with 11 forwards and seven defensemen in Game 2, they had Alexandre Texier on the third line with Sundqvist and Bolduc on Wednesday, so they could go back to 12 forwards and six defensemen to insert Texier. He hasn't played since March 27, sitting out the past 10 games, but Montgomery believes he could come in and help the offense.

"He has incredible self-belief and confidence," Montgomery said. "He is very, very high-end with the puck. He does things in practice that not a lot of players that I've seen, that I've had the fortune of coaching, be able to do what he does."

The Blues are returning home where, again, they've won 12 games in a row. But that will matter little if they don't improve in several areas against the Jets, who are looking more and more like a Stanley Cup contender.

"It's playoffs now," Montgomery said. "We have to start a win streak in the playoffs."