

Winnipeg Free Press

<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2025/04/02/we-know-where-we-stand>

'We know where we stand'

Jets rebuff 'measuring stick' comment after Kings' season series sweep

By: Ken Wiebe

LAS VEGAS — Scott Arniel was eight questions into his post-game assessment when a Los Angeles-based reporter struck a nerve.

After being asked what had made the Los Angeles Kings such a tough team to go up against this season, the follow-up query was about whether the Jets head coach viewed this as a measuring-stick type of game?

"Us, a measuring stick?" Arniel asked rhetorically.

The reporter stood his ground, citing the Jets 0-3 record against the Kings in head-to-head play this season — which included a pair of 4-1 defeats and a tightly-contested overtime loss.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. We're sitting on top right now," said Arniel. "So, I don't know if there's a measuring stick. We don't measure that way. We go about how we play hockey. How we go against each and every opponent. We lost three games.

"At the end of the day, those things happen."

Arniel clearly didn't like the insinuation his team could be in trouble if the teams met again down the road and he wasn't about to toss any gasoline onto a barely noticeable flame to create an unnecessary narrative.

With his team in the heart of the stretch drive and battling for first place in the Central Division, the Western Conference and the entire NHL, Arniel wasn't going to make it seem like this loss was any more damaging than any other the Jets have suffered over the course of the campaign.

When a team only has 20 outright losses through 75 games, they've earned the benefit of the doubt.

But that doesn't mean the Jets won't be sifting through the video for clues as to why they were only able to secure one of a possible six points against a Kings team currently sitting second in the Pacific Division.

In listening to Arniel and several players on Tuesday after the morning skate, it's evident the Kings didn't catch the Jets by surprise.

They play a stifling brand of hockey, contesting each and every available loose puck while making it difficult for their opponent to find shooting lanes or create dangerous scoring chances from the home-plate area or around the crease either.

Sound familiar?

It's been a major part of the recipe that's made the Jets so successful this season.

"They move it fast in the D-zone. We couldn't get a forecheck," said Jets forward Alex Iafallo, who spent the first six seasons of his career with the Kings and knows all about the identity they've created over the years.

"They were playing faster offensively and getting more shots through. We've got to block more shots and just push the pressure more. Minimize the turnovers and stuff like that."

In some ways, the Kings beat the Jets at their own game, being diligent in the details and feeding off the mistakes of their opponent.

"We turned the puck over three times and it ended up in the back of our net. I liked a lot of what we did, our game plan against them," said Arniel.

"We did a good job of getting through the neutral zone. There were a few times we let them get out of the zone on some of the forecheck situations. We didn't spend a lot of time in our end of the rink. But again, we made three mistakes and it ended up in the back of our net."

Whether that was an errant breakout pass by Colin Miller or neutral-zone turnovers by David Gustafsson or Logan Stanley, the mistakes proved to be costly even if they weren't plentiful.

"A couple self-inflicted wounds and they capitalized on some of those chances," said Jets forward Cole Perfetti, who scored the lone goal for his team. "We know the style they play, they want to kind of bore you and wait for you to make a mistake. They're quick off the rush, they're good in transition. And they showed that."

There's no doubt the Jets missed defenceman Luke Schenn, who was scratched with an undisclosed ailment after leaving the morning skate early after stiffening up.

He's officially listed as day-to-day and his status for Thursday's game against the Vegas Golden Knights is up in the air.

The Jets didn't make the evening difficult enough on Kings goalie Darcy Kuemper, who could easily find himself as a finalist for the Vezina Trophy, along with clear front-runner Connor Hellebuyck.

Perfetti's goal came on a rare odd-man rush, created when Morgan Barron blocked a shot by Quinton Byfield.

Perfetti had just come out of the box after serving a tripping minor for Hellebuyck before burying his shot.

By not deferring to sniper Kyle Connor on the play and taking his shot when that was the right play, this was another example of the steps Perfetti is taking with his on-ice progression.

However, that was just the third goal in three games the Jets managed against the Kings — and the only one that came at even strength.

The other two were scored with the man-advantage and, with Nikolaj Ehlers using his craftiness to draw a pairing of tripping penalties in the third period, the door was open for the Jets to once again make it a one-goal game and put the heat on.

But the Jets failed to record a single shot on goal during the four minutes of power-play time — meaning the dry spell continues.

Since returning from the 4 Nations Face-Off break, the Jets are eight-for-49 (16.3 per cent) on the man-advantage, and that's moved them behind the Golden Knights for top spot in the NHL.

It was going to be nearly impossible for the Jets to maintain their efficiency rating above 30 per cent over the course of 82 games, but they haven't been as diligent when it comes to executing the mentality that was at the root of their incredible run.

"You have to attack the net. We've stressed on that all year long," said Arniel.

"You can get possession, we did a good job getting in there. But you've got to attack. They're an aggressive group and we knew they were going to come. But in that split-second where you've got them, you've got to get the puck to the net and try to take the chaos down there."

Arniel didn't think the Jets did a good enough job of turning offensive zone time into quality looks at even strength either — and that facet of the game will be under the microscope during the coming weeks as it's a necessity to enjoying playoff success.

Perfetti was asked the same question as Arniel about the measuring stick aspect and he answered it in a similar fashion.

“We know where we stand. I think we’re pretty confident in our group,” said Perfetti. “I don’t know about a measuring stick. But they’re a playoff team, they’re a high-quality team, and we wanted to play good against them.

“You’re not going to win every game. That’s the reality. We know where we’re at. And, I mean, we’re top of the top of the league, we’re there for a reason.”

With the Dallas Stars still within four points of the Jets and now holding a game in hand, the measuring stick component will be moot soon enough.

But that doesn’t change the fact the Jets want to finish the regular season clicking on all cylinders.

Four of the final seven outings come against teams in the thick of the race, two are against teams that are out of it and one is against Utah HC, who are hanging by a thread in the wild card race.

Arniel is correct in saying that the most important thing the Jets must continue to focus on revolves around where their game is at — and how close they are to the gold standard they’ve established.

Winnipeg Sun

<https://winnipegsun.com/sports/hockey/nhl/winnipeg-jets/jets-bristle-at-suggestion-they-need-to-measure-up>

Jets bristle at suggestion they need to measure up

By Paul Friesen

The best Scott Arniel, to me, is the one who gets his back up. Diss his team or his adopted home town and he’ll bristle like a cornered porcupine.

The latest example came late Tuesday night in LA, well after midnight in Winnipeg, following the Jets’ 4-1 loss to the Kings.

An LA reporter asked the head coach if the game had felt like a measuring stick for his team.

“Us, a measuring stick?” Arniel asked, surprised at the very suggestion he may have been measuring his team against the Kings.

The reporter acknowledged the Jets are on top of the NHL’s Western Conference, but he also pointed out they went 0-3 against the Kings this season.

Arniel wanted none of it.

“Hey, whoa whoa whoa whoa,” he said, shaking his head. “We’re sitting on top right now. So I don’t know if there’s a measuring stick.”

If there had been one handy, he may have used it to swat at the guy asking the question.

“We don’t measure that way,” the coach, composing himself, continued. “We go about how we play hockey. How we go against each and every opponent. We lost three games. At the end of the day, those happen. They’re all tight games, empty netters at the end type of thing. They’re a really good team. They’re in a tight division themselves. It is what it is.”

Here’s what it is: Another example of the Jets not getting the respect Arniel feels they deserve.

Here was the No. 1 team in the league with 106 points going against one that had been 15 points back, and someone suggests he was the one doing the measuring.

It’s a theme that’s popped up throughout the season. Even as the Jets have stayed at or near the top, they’re never the pundits’ pick.

Arniel in January: “Yeah, bugs me,” he said. “It’s been since the start of the year. Gotten used to it. It’s something that’s happened for years. We’re the underdogs – if that’s the case, let’s run with it. You’ve just got to go out and prove people wrong.”

Don’t think that feeling hasn’t trickled down to his players.

“Stick it to everybody that thinks we can’t do it,” is how Dylan DeMelo put it back then.

Josh Morrissey: “I’m like most Winnipeggers, where you’re defensive of where you live and play. Because we take a lot of flak from friends in other places and people that you meet around Canada, around the world.”

Even American Kyle Connor draws from that well, occasionally.

“It’s something we can dig into as a team and use as motivation,” Connor said at the time.

The Jets and Vegas were on top of the league then, with 28 wins each.

Last week, locked in a weeks-long duel with Washington at the top of the heap, the theme came up again.

I was asking players what this team’s greatest asset is, and it wasn’t long before someone pointed to the chip on their shoulders.

Again, it was DeMelo who pulled out the big “stick.”

“Everybody doubts us,” he said. “It would be great to stick it to everybody else that we can be a winner here in a market that people don’t think we can do it in.”

Cole Perfetti was asked the measuring-stick question in LA, too, and wanted no part of it either.

“I don’t know about a measuring stick,” he said. “Because we know where we stand. We’re pretty confident in our group. They’re a playoff team. They’re a high-quality team... but I don’t know about a measuring stick.

“We’re top of the league. We’re there for a reason. And we just didn’t have it tonight.”

Maybe not.

But their prickliness, it seems, is here to stay. At least for their coach it is.

I don’t know what it’s worth come playoff time, but if it can translate onto the ice, it sure won’t hurt.

Up next, a Thursday date with the Golden Knights in Vegas, a team that’s been where the Jets want to go – and went through Winnipeg to get there.

A measuring stick, though?

Don’t even go there.

<https://winnipegssun.com/sports/hockey/nhl/winnipeg-jets/less-finesse-more-force-jets-have-seven-games-to-heat-up-power-play>

Less finesse, more force: Jets have seven games to heat up power play

By Paul Friesen

It is no longer the most lethal weapon in hockey. Sharpening it before the playoffs has to be one of the Winnipeg Jets’ top priorities these next seven games.

For most of the season the Jets power play was humming along at a record 33 percent success rate.

Since the 4 Nations tournament break, it’s been running on half the power, at 16.3 percent (eight goals on 49 chances), passed by Vegas as the NHL’s best.

There was a time when handing Winnipeg two third-period power plays was asking for a load of trouble.

The Los Angeles Kings did that on Tuesday and emerged unscathed on their way to a 4-1 victory.

“Both units have to be better,” Jets forward Cole Perfetti said. “They’re obviously a good kill team. They were coming and we didn’t move the puck fast enough. One of the units has to bear down, and then we’ve got to put one in the net. On a night like (Tuesday), we need to do that.”

Perfetti is on the Jets’ second unit. But it didn’t matter which unit was on the ice in LA. Neither got a single shot on goal through four minutes with the extra man.

That’s a lot of talent to be shut down, but it’s happened all too many times since mid-February.

At times it’s been streaky: an 0-for-14 drought after the break, followed by a 5-for-7 stretch, before another 1-for-16 hiccup.

Another three-game run at 33 percent (2-for-6) has given way to the current 0-for-6 stretch.

It’s hot and cold, with a distinct lean towards the latter.

Head coach Scott Arniel suggested more chaos at the net would have helped against a stalwart defensive team like the Kings. Less attempted finesse and more force, you might say.

They’ll likely face similar penalty killing in the playoffs, so now is the time to get into the habit.

On the bright side, the Jets’ penalty kill is a perfect 9-for-9 over the last four games.

Since the tournament break it’s at 80 percent (36-for-45), right around its success rate for the season to date: they’re ranked 14th at 79.8 percent.

Winnipeg plays in Vegas on Thursday.

The Athletic

<https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/6249004/2025/04/02/winnipeg-jets-kings-nhl-central-division/>

How Winnipeg Jets' unforced errors put their Central Division title hopes at risk

By Murat Ates

The Winnipeg Jets are still the favourite to win the Central Division, but Tuesday night in Los Angeles, they made their goal of finishing in first place more difficult.

That they lost 4-1 to the Kings on the same night St. Louis passed Minnesota, turning the Wild into the division winner's most likely first-round opponent — as opposed to Colorado, waiting to play the second seed — made their mistakes all the more costly.

Eight and a half minutes into the first period, Colin Miller bounced a puck past Mark Scheifele to Joel Edmundson, setting up Trevor Moore's deflection goal. A little over a minute later, David Gustafsson tried to bolt up the boards but gave the puck to Andrei Kuzmenko as Josh Morrissey and Dylan DeMelo tried to change, leading directly to Anze Kopitar's goal.

Then, after Cole Perfetti looked off Kyle Connor and handcuffed Darcy Kuemper with a shot to bring the Jets within a goal, Kuzmenko stole a puck from Logan Stanley in the neutral zone. This was the most egregious of the three errors, as Stanley tried to beat the quicker Kuzmenko with a neutral zone deke but fell as he attempted to retreat toward Winnipeg's net. The dual error sent Kuzmenko and Adrian Kempe on a fast two-on-one break against Haydn Fleury that ultimately led to Kuzmenko's unassisted goal.

In all three cases, the play started with the puck on a Jets player's stick. Give the Kings credit for their stifling neutral zone play. Give the Jets credit for getting through that neutral zone for the better part of the game, even if the middle of the ice in the offensive zone was tough to come by.

But Winnipeg fed the Kings in transition, playing right into L.A.'s style of play.

"We turned the puck over three times and it ended up in the back of our net," Jets coach Scott Arniel told reporters after the game.

The Jets' unforced errors leave them just four points up on Dallas for first place in the division. The Jets and Stars are tied with 40 regulation wins each, but Dallas has a game in hand on Winnipeg. If the Stars win that extra game — and then beat Winnipeg when the teams meet on April 10 — Dallas will take top spot from the Jets. The playoffs are tough no matter who you play, but there appears to be a world of difference between the Avalanche (94 points, +40 goal differential, 6-2-2 in their last 10) and Wild (88

points, -10 goal differential, 4-4-2 in their last 10). The playoffs can be a war of attrition; short, early series combined with good health can go a long way toward a deep run.

This brings us to Winnipeg's next unforced error. Luke Schenn left Tuesday's morning skate with what Arniel called "stiffness" and is now day to day. Neal Pionk is still working his way back from his lower-body injury. The Jets ran Miller on the second pair with Dylan Samberg, leaving Miller exposed in a top-four role, while Stanley and Fleury played together on the third pair. In an ideal world, Pionk and Schenn would be healthy, leaving the Jets to pick between Miller, Stanley and Fleury — not to mention Ville Heinola, who, while healthy, has gone over a month between games twice now — as the sixth defenceman.

In an even more ideal world, the Jets would have found a better way to insulate themselves from this type of issue at the trade deadline. Any deep playoff run is going to test Winnipeg's depth. Florida won the Stanley Cup in 2024 with the same six defencemen playing in every game, but the Panthers are the exception to the rule; the previous 11 Cup winners all used at least seven defencemen, while Schenn's 2020 Cup champion Tampa Bay Lightning used nine. When everyone is healthy, Miller, Fleury, Stanley and Heinola are Winnipeg's Nos. 6-9 defencemen.

Let's be clear: We're still talking about a Cup-contending team. But the Jets got badly burned by three specific mistakes in a hockey game, which gives us the pretense to discuss some of the playoff challenges they face.

If the Jets' defence corps returns to full health, we could once again see the pairs used in Schenn's first game after the Jets acquired him: Morrissey-DeMelo, Samberg-Pionk and Fleury-Schenn. Does that give you confidence?

A reporter from Los Angeles asked Arniel if he felt that the Kings were a measuring stick game for Winnipeg. Not only did Tuesday's Jets loss give Winnipeg an 0-2-1 record against L.A. this season, but the Kings held Winnipeg to an average of 17 shots in those three games.

"For us? A measuring stick? Whoa," Arniel said. "We're sitting on top right now."

The coach has a point there.

As much as I believe the Kings are a bad stylistic fit for the Jets, we've only recently seen how little a season series can mean.

Winnipeg scorched its way into last year's playoffs with an eight-game winning streak. In four of those games, the Jets beat division rivals Minnesota, Nashville, Dallas and Colorado by a combined score of 18-5, shutting out the Stars and Avalanche in back-to-back games on the road. It made sense for Jets fans to expect first-round success against Colorado after that torrid run, combined with a 3-0-0 record against the Avalanche during the season.

However, Jets fans know how that story ended. The job isn't done until a team wins four games in a playoff round — and then repeats itself in three more rounds.

Despite Tuesday's loss to the Kings, I still believe Winnipeg is playing at a higher level right now than it did last season, even when compared only to the Jets' season-ending eight-game winning streak. The Jets have a higher share of shot attempts and shots on target over their last 10 games, including Tuesday's loss, than they did during that streak. They're also first in the league in five-on-five expected goals percentage during that time frame by multiple public models.

Winnipeg has been controlling the flow of play to such a degree that I recently asked Arniel if he thought this year's team was better than the one that won all of those games to end last season. Arniel paused, stopped short of saying he agreed with me, and then gave me an answer that gave me confidence in my premise. It's an answer rooted in intangibles and, based on my view of this season's Jets, it's exactly right.

"We've been playing at a high level for 74 games, in my opinion," Arniel said. "We've done a really good job of staying away from the low lows. The way we've been able to focus and put a game behind us and move forward to the next one ... last year, there were some tough games and tough stretches."

Don't underestimate the importance of the resilience Arniel is invoking here.

It's been six years since Winnipeg won a single playoff game after losing one: The Jets dropped four straight to Colorado in 2024, four straight to Vegas in 2023 and four straight to Montreal (after sweeping Edmonton) in 2021. Winnipeg did win Game 2 of its 2020 qualification round series after losing Game 1, but we're not counting that because it wasn't a playoff series. The last time the Jets won even one playoff game after losing one was in 2019 when they won two — Games 3 and 4 — after going down 2-0 against St. Louis.

So, yeah. It's important that the Jets have demonstrated a higher level of day-to-day consistency and resilience.

Are they better than last year's team, though? Including the version that outscored its opponents 35-15 on the way to an 8-0-0 finish to last season?

"I just think this is a good hockey team that knows how to play night in and night out," Arniel said. "They know when we're successful ... When we play the way we have to play. I don't know if it's any different. You may have those analytics or those stats. I just think that we're a confident group. From game one of the season to where we are today, when we play at our best, we're a tough team to play against."

That doesn't automatically mean Winnipeg will fend off the Stars for first place in the Central Division. The Jets have a tougher end-of-season schedule than Dallas does,

with games against Vegas, Utah, St. Louis, Dallas, Chicago, Edmonton and Anaheim. The Stars play Nashville, Pittsburgh, Minnesota, Vancouver, Winnipeg, Utah, Detroit and Nashville again.

I think the bitter nature of the loss to L.A. will go further in memory than the many things the Jets did right. In a sample this small, unforced errors like the ones Winnipeg made on Tuesday can undercut excellence in other facets of the game. I haven't come to expect those unforced errors from this year's Jets; cut them out now and fend off the Stars' late-season surge.

<https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/6248407/2025/04/03/nhl-underrated-defenseemen-top-10/>

The NHL's top 10 most underrated defensemen and why they're so valuable

By Harman Dayal

Who are the most underrated defensemen in the NHL?

It's a topic bound to create ferocious debate because of its subjective nature. We have to inherently assume how highly the hockey world/public sphere rates every defenseman and then determine which players deserve more recognition.

In an exercise like this, we have to be aware of the Aleksander Barkov effect, where if a player has been unanimously dubbed as underrated for many years, they're probably not underrated anymore. With that in mind, we're going to avoid names like Jaccob Slavin, Devon Toews, Miro Heiskanen and Shea Theodore.

I'd also argue that Chris Tanev has finally gotten his flowers as an elite shutdown defenseman after last year's tremendous playoff run with the Dallas Stars. Thomas Harley would have been perfect for a list like this, but I believe he turned heads and landed on the casual fan's radar with his impressive play subbing in for Team Canada at the 4 Nations Face-Off.

I debated whether MacKenzie Weegar has flown under the radar enough to be on this list, but fans voted him one of the game's most underrated players just a few years ago, and I saw lots of people clamoring for him to be brought in as an injury replacement for Team Canada at 4 Nations, so I leaned toward him being closer to being fairly rated now and left him off.

I haven't included Josh Morrissey or Rasmus Dahlin, either. You could argue both deserve more attention, but they're still generally recognized as bona fide stars.

Finally, I made a similar list a couple of years ago. I won't be repeating names from that story, which means no Mikey Anderson, Gustav Forsling, Jonas Brodin, Nick Jensen, Vince Dunn or Jake Walman, among others.

Here's my personal take on the 10 most underrated defensemen in the NHL, presented in no particular order.

Dylan Samberg, Winnipeg Jets

Samberg is enjoying a monster breakout season in which he's emerged as the Jets' clear-cut second-best defenseman.

The 26-year-old left shot is averaging 21:25 per game and has been trusted by the coaching staff to eat the toughest matchups against top forwards of all Winnipeg blueliners. The Jets have controlled nearly 55 percent of expected goals and outscored opponents by a whopping 20 goals during his five-on-five shifts.

Samberg is driving stellar short-handed results while averaging the most PK minutes per game on the team. He checks many boxes for a modern-day elite shutdown player: he's 6-foot-4 which gives him a massive reach/wingspan, he skates well which enables him to quickly gap up to eliminate time and space, his anticipation is impeccable and his active defensive stick is constantly breaking plays up.

Here's an example of him making a defensive stop on Aliaksei Protas, the Caps' monster 6-foot-6 power forward:

The amazing thing about Samberg is his passing and decision-making with the puck are very sharp and advanced for a player who's primarily focused on the defensive side of the game. You can always count on him to make poised, efficient decisions with the puck to connect plays in all three zones.

In fact, according to Sznajder's tracking, Samberg has created more zone exits with possession per hour this season compared to his usual defense partner Neal Pionk, despite the latter having the reputation for being more dynamic and offensively involved.

And as his confidence has grown, Samberg has become more ambitious with his playmaking. How many shutdown defensemen can join the rush and make a play like the one below, leading to a scoring chance?

Samberg is the indispensable two-way linchpin of the Jets' second pairing.

TSN.ca

<https://www.tsn.ca/nhl/video/the-talking-point-who-needs-a-division-win-more-jets-or-leafs%7E3108924>

The Talking Point: Who needs a division win more - Jets or Leafs? (VIDEO)

With Winnipeg currently leading the Central Division and Toronto currently leading the Atlantic, TSN Hockey analyst Frankie Corrado examines which team needs a division win more in this edition of The Talking Point.

Daily Faceoff

<https://www.dailyfaceoff.com/news/breaking-down-5-playoff-locks-paper-tigers-maple-leafs-jets-lightning-capitals-stars>

Breaking down the five playoff locks that might be paper tigers

By Scott Maxwell

The NHL is no stranger to paper tigers.

Every season features its fair share of overperforming teams. Whether it's a team that should have been in lottery contention finding itself in the playoff race, or a fringe playoff team playing its way into a division, conference or league title, some teams just capture a bit of magic and luck and can ride the wave for most of the season. Some can even see that translate to a lengthy playoff run, but it's more likely the storybook season ends with a flameout in the first round.

With the season just about wrapped up, we generally know what every team brings to the table, at least during the regular season. The race for the Stanley Cup feels wide open, with so many teams capable of making a run, and the same goes for some exciting battles for the final playoff spots.

Tocchet very specific with what Canucks were missing in bad loss to Kraken

So, which teams among those groups are not what they seem? I'm going to look at five teams whose play hasn't been nearly as good as their results would lead you to believe, tiering them into three different categories: overperforming a bit (teams that are just maybe a step or two below their results), good, but not great (teams at the top of the league that are still playoff-caliber, but not that good), and way over their heads (the ones who are much worse than where they currently stand). I'll mostly be looking at the statistical paper tigers, so some teams like the Carolina Hurricanes or the Los Angeles Kings who are elite but still don't have a lot of belief from the general public won't be included on this list.

Overperforming a bit
Tampa Bay Lightning

What's their flaw?: Outperforming their play-driving ability

What's covering it up?: Elite scorers and Andrei Vasilevskiy

Once the model for being consistently elite, the Tampa Bay Lightning had fallen from grace after back-to-back first round exits in 2023 and 2024, and many thought that their contention window was closed. But, after making several drastic changes over the summer, particularly moving on from Steven Stamkos and Mikhail Sergachev in order to bring back Ryan McDonagh and sign Jake Guentzel, the Lightning appear to have reawakened and look like a Stanley Cup contender again.

With a 51.79% 5v5 expected goal share (xGF%) this season, their play-driving ability still falls closer to the past couple seasons than it does to the seasons that saw them in the hunt for Stanley Cups, which usually sat above 52.5%. That said, it's not that far off, and it's still the best iteration of the team that we've seen in the past three years.

Two things have really rejuvenated the Lightning this season. First, the changes they made in the summer have improved both their ability to score and defend, and while they're not the best in the league at either, having elite talents like Nikita Kucherov, Brayden Point and Victor Hedman can alter a game at any point. And then on top of that, they've seen a return to form from Andrei Vasilevskiy, whose 26.04 goals saved above expected (GSAx) ranks fifth in the league.

It's not that the Lightning aren't a playoff team. They deserved to be sitting comfortably in the top three of the Atlantic Division. But at the end of the day, I wouldn't exactly say I'm confident they've truly regained their championship-contending form. Their experience is certainly an x-factor over most teams, but they'll be in tough against the truly elite teams, including their state rivals in the Florida Panthers.

Winnipeg Jets

What's their flaw?: Peaking too early

What's covering it up?: Connor Hellebuyck

The Winnipeg Jets have been a weird team to project this season. Anyone who follows my work knows that I've been banging the "Jets are frauds" drum for a while, and that rang true when they were playing like a fringe playoff team but playing at a Presidents' Trophy pace.

But recently the tide has shifted, as the Jets are playing closer to the level of their first-place record, and you might even say that they could be a Cup contender. Their 53.23% xGF% is currently sixth in the league, which is certainly high enough in the league to say they're elite. However, they're still overperforming in terms of 5v5 goal share (GF%), which is first in the league with 59.28%.

Their success is not necessarily a bad thing when the Jets have the high-end underlying numbers to back it up, but if there's one concern, it's that they might be peaking too early. I wrote about this two years ago, but the reason why Presidents' Trophy winning teams haven't won the Stanley Cup too much during the salary cap era is because they're rarely the best team in the league, and instead one of the 5-10 top teams that just used up their luck in the regular season. Come playoff time, that luck usually runs out, and they get bounced by a team that is at their level but on their run of good luck at the right time.

So with how well the Jets have played this season, you have to wonder if that might be the case for them come playoff time. When you look at how tough the Central Division is, and how good some of the wild card teams have the potential to be, Winnipeg could certainly be in for a scare if they cool down at the wrong time.

Even with another Vezina-caliber season from Connor Hellebuyck, who's first in GSAX with 44.92, he's going to hit 60 starts again and may be at risk of being fatigued by the playoffs. This Jets team is good, even better than I anticipated, but it's easy to see how they could become the 12th straight Presidents' Trophy-winning team to fail to win the Stanley Cup.

Good, but not great

Dallas Stars

What's their flaw?: Defense

What's covering it up?: Elite offense and Jake Oettinger

The Dallas Stars made the biggest splash at the trade deadline, jumping on a soured relationship between Mikko Rantanen and the Hurricanes to bring in the star winger and lock him up long-term. After that addition, the Stars were the popular pick to win the Stanley Cup with a loaded forward group, the talented Miro Heiskanen and Thomas Harley on the back end, and Jake Oettinger in net.

However, the Rantanen addition didn't do a lot to address the true problem with the Stars this season: their defensive play. So far this season, the Stars ranked 22nd in the league in expected goals against per 60 minutes (xGA/60) with 2.6, a rate that you would maybe expect from a team that is hovering around a Wildcard spot, not one that is gunning for a Stanley Cup.

The problem specifically lies on the right side of Dallas' blueline, which boasted Ilya Lyubushkin, Matt Dumba and Brendan Smith to start the season. The recent addition of Cody Ceci hasn't improved things either, as since he was acquired, the Stars have allowed the second-most xGA/60 with 2.92. That said, Heiskanen has been out of the lineup the entire time as well, which certainly won't help.

This Stars team is still really good. Their offense is one of the best in the league, especially since Jason Robertson and Roope Hintz returned to being lights out, and Oettinger has been playing well enough to cover up their defensive mistakes with the

eighth-best GSAX at 23.46. Even the left side of Dallas' blueline is strong with Heiskanen, Harley, Esa Lindell and Lian Bichsel, but unless they can make that their top four, they have a noticeable flaw on their roster that another team of their caliber could easily exploit.

Washington Capitals

What's their flaw?: Outperforming their play-driving ability

What's covering it up?: League-best shooting percentage

The Washington Capitals have been one of the best stories in the league this season. A lot of that has to do with the ever-enticing narrative of Alex Ovechkin chasing down Wayne Gretzky's all-time goal-record. But the fact that the Capitals have managed to retool on the fly in the past five years to build a competitive team around Ovi as he approaches the record has made that story all the better.

This might be the one team on this list whose parade I truly hate to rain on, but the Capitals are far from a team that should be competing for a Presidents' Trophy based on their play. Much like the Stars, this is a good team deserving of a playoff spot, but the Caps have certainly overperformed for most of the year.

Despite the third-best 5v5 GF% at 58.2%, the Capitals sit just 11th in 5v5 xGF% with 51.72%, certainly the play-driving level of a good, but not great team. A lot of that is inflated by a league-best 3.05 5v5 goals for per 60 and 11.3 5v5 shooting percentage, compared to a 5v5 expected goals for per 60 of 2.74, which is still tied for fourth. Even their poor defensive play has been masked a bit, as despite a 2.56 expected goals against per 60 minutes that ranks 21st, they're ninth in 5v5 goals against per 60 with 2.19 thanks to a breakout season from Logan Thompson, who is fourth in GSAX with 26.24.

That said, if there's one team that shouldn't care too much about overperforming, it's the Capitals. Unlike the other four teams on this list, they entered with very low expectations, so playing this well is found money amidst a magical and likely historic season. Obviously they'll want to take advantage of their high seeding to win a round or two in the playoffs, but you also get the sense they won't be all that disappointed if they lose in the first round.

Way over their heads

Toronto Maple Leafs

What's their flaw?: Poor play-driving, likely driven by coaching

What's covering it up?: Elite goaltending, one-goal game success

On the surface, the Toronto Maple Leafs are having one of their more successful regular seasons during the core four of Auston Matthews, Mitch Marner, William Nylander and John Tavares' time in Toronto. While their .635% win percentage isn't quite at the level of the 2020 to 2023 teams, they're still in the running for a division title and actually have the lead for the time being.

But not only has this season not been as good as it may seem for the Leafs, it may actually be their worst season with their core. This season, they sit in 20th in the league in xGF% at 49.31%, 20th in xGF/60 with 2.47, and 18th in xGA/60 with 2.54, certainly not the level you'd expect from a team contending for a division title and, they hope, a Cup. It's not a mark that should be too alarming, but for the standard that Toronto holds, it is, as it's the worst xGF% of the Matthews/Marner/Nylander era.

Their offense struggling to generate shouldn't come as a significant surprise considering how much their scoring depth drops off after the core four and Matthew Knies, whether in their bottom six or on the blueline. But their defensive struggles are a bit more shocking, as the depth of their D-corps and the defensive quality of some of their forwards on paper would suggest better results.

While it's hard to truly quantify coaching impact, when a talented roster is underperforming unlike anything we've seen with this group, and it's Craig Berube's first season behind the bench, you have to wonder how much of that is on him and a system that might not be fit for this group. But, that's been masked by the play of Anthony Stolarz and Joseph Woll, who've combined for a .922 5v5 save percentage that's tied for fifth, along with getting the bounces in one-goal games with a record of 18-4-4.

The Jim Rome Show

<https://podcasts.apple.com/ca/podcast/joker-jets-hockey-atps/id1435335050?i=1000701963465>

Joker, Jets Hockey, ATP's (AUDIO)

The Jets were off today but Jets head coach Scott Arniel took some time to join Jim Rome on The Jim Rome Show. The interview starts at the 18 minute mark and runs until the 28 minute mark. Then Rome talks about the Jets for about a minute after it concludes.