

Winnipeg Free Press

<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2025/06/02/home-town-a-perfect-landing-spot-for-toews-next-chapter>

Home town a perfect landing spot for Toews' next chapter Winnipeg product would be a depth upgrade for Jets' centre-ice position

By: Ken Wiebe

The Winnipeg Jets remain in the market to upgrade the centre-ice position and one of the most intriguing players that is available will be Jonathan Toews.

The pride of St. Vital recently made it clear through agent Pat Brisson that his healing journey has brought him to a place where an NHL comeback is something he plans to pursue this fall.

There's no doubt whatsoever that the Jets will be among the teams interested in Toews' services and given where they are in their competitive window, they absolutely should be.

Provided Toews can remain healthy after his excruciating battle with long COVID, he checks a lot of boxes for what the organization would be looking for.

Wherever Toews lands as an unrestricted free agent, his resumé speaks for itself.

For those who need a refresher, Toews is a three-time Stanley Cup champion and has appeared in more than 1,200 games when you include the regular season and the playoffs.

He's been a highly-productive player since entering the NHL during the 2007-08 season with the Chicago Blackhawks and his leadership skills are legendary.

Toews is a winner who hates to lose and he's someone who isn't afraid of the bright lights or the big stage.

These are all qualities that would come in handy for an organization looking to take the next steps in pursuit of the first Stanley Cup in franchise history.

With Luke Schenn the only player on the current roster who has been part of a Stanley Cup champion team, adding someone with three rings to go with an abundance of gold medals looks like a natural fit.

Back in January, Jets general manager Kevin Cheveldayoff held court with several reporters on a road trip, including colleague Mike McIntyre, and mentioned he had been in touch with Toews' representatives.

“He’s going to want to play to win. These guys don’t want to just say they want to play. He knows the standard he would have to be at, and we would certainly hope to be in that mix,” said Cheveldayoff. “Knowing Jonathan and knowing what standard he holds himself to as an athlete, and what impact he wants to have in games when he plays, I think it will be an interesting journey to watch how things unfold with him.

“Certainly if he’s progressing to that point in time, it would be a real welcome conversation to see if there’s a fit both ways. I think it would be a great story for his career, too. Not that he needs another story to his career. But I think he’s proud of his roots and would be an interesting fit.”

One of the most important factors for Toews in making his decision will be having the ability to play for a winner and the Jets would appear to fit that criteria.

Clearly, steps forward were taken by the Jets this past year, when they put together the best regular season since returning to the NHL in 2011 and captured the Presidents’ Trophy.

That the Jets were among the last eight teams standing reinforced that they were a legitimate contender, but by losing in six games to the Dallas Stars, it was clear the Jets still needed to upgrade the roster slightly to get over the hump.

Winning six playoff games was something the Jets hadn’t done since 2018 when they advanced to the Western Conference final and racked up nine of the 16 wins required to get your name etched on Lord Stanley’s silver chalice.

That progress is to be acknowledged and it will also serve as motivation moving forward.

Motivation is something Toews is never lacking and by having the game he loves taken away from him, there’s no way he would put himself through the physical and mental toll required if he didn’t think he could be an effective player.

Now, there’s no playbook when it comes to what Toews has battled through medically since taking his last shift during the 2022-23 season, when he was limited to 53 games.

The last time Toews appeared in the post-season was 2020, when he orchestrated an unlikely upset and the Blackhawks bounced the Edmonton Oilers in four games during the qualifying round.

Toews was the most effective player in all three zones in that series — which included two of the best players in the world in Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl.

Not only has Toews proven to be a clutch performer, both in the NHL and while suiting up for Canada on the international stage, he's got a level of defensive awareness and competitive spirit that all teams are looking for.

Toews won the Conn Smythe Trophy as playoff MVP in 2010 when the Blackhawks captured the first of three Cups in five years (2013, 2015) and he also won a Selke Trophy as the top defensive forward in the NHL in 2013.

It's true that Father Time remains undefeated and that Toews turned 37 on April 29.

It's also true that Brad Marchand of the Florida Panthers is 37 and has been a driver on a highly-effective third line as he prepares to suit up in the Stanley Cup this week, while Corey Perry of the Edmonton Oilers turned 40 last month and has seven goals and 10 points in 16 playoff games this spring while flourishing in the role of a complementary scorer and shift disturber.

So, while the examples of players making an impact in their late 30s and early 40s remains rare, bet against Toews at your own peril.

Toews doesn't need to suit up for his hometown team to enhance his legacy, but for someone who helped the Blackhawks win a championship for the first time since 1961, it's easy to see the appeal of joining a Jets' team that could be knocking on the door.

It might just be the perfect landing spot for Toews to write the next chapter in his storied career and to eventually go out on his own terms.

For the Jets, bringing in someone with the pedigree of Toews makes a ton of sense, especially when you consider that captain Adam Lowry is expected to miss the start of the season after undergoing successful hip surgery last week.

Lowry's absence means the Jets will have plenty of important minutes to distribute in the early stages of 2025-26, which should provide ample runway for Toews to show what type of role he'll be able to handle.

Once Lowry is back to full speed, having him on a depth chart that features Mark Scheifele, Toews and/or Vladislav Namestnikov, Morgan Barron, Rasmus Kupari or David Gustafsson would provide an upgrade — with prospects Brayden Yager and Brad Lambert knocking on the door and looking for inclusion, provided they're not playing on the wing instead.

The Jets already have a number of versatile guys that can either be used down the middle or on the wing, including Namestnikov, who has handled the bulk of the second-line centre responsibilities during the past two seasons when Sean Monahan wasn't on the roster.

Signing Toews isn't the only option the Jets are going to consider and it's not a make-or-break situation if Captain Serious chooses to go in another direction, but signing him to a one or two year deal is something that could help provide a boost for what will be one of the most important off-seasons in franchise history for Cheveldayoff and his staff.

<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/featured/2025/05/28/lowry-undergoes-hip-surgery>

***Lowry undergoes hip surgery
Jets captain likely to miss start of next season***

By: Mike McIntyre

The Winnipeg Jets will likely be starting next season with a significant hole in their lineup.

Captain Adam Lowry underwent hip surgery on Tuesday and is not expected to be ready in time for the start of the 2025-26 campaign. His recovery and rehabilitation time is estimated at five to six months, which would mean a potential return between the end of October and end of November.

The NHL schedule won't be released until late June but teams are expected to begin their 82-game season in early October. Training camp will begin in mid-September.

Lowry, 32, is coming off a terrific year in which he scored a career-high 16 goals in 73 regular-season games and then chipped in with four playoff tallies in 13 contests. He was the shutdown centre for the No. 1 defensive team in the league, which also finished on top of the standings with a 56-22-4 record.

The Jets won their first-round playoff series in dramatic fashion, with Lowry scoring the overtime winner in Game 7 against the St. Louis Blues, then fell in six games to the Dallas Stars during the second round.

It would appear the need for medical intervention is something that just recently came up, perhaps in the post-season medicals that all players go through. Lowry made no mention of it last week when meeting with the media for year-end interviews, nor did head coach Scott Arniel or general manager Kevin Cheveldayoff.

Lowry, the second-ever draft pick of the 2.0 Jets, has been remarkably durable during his career despite his hard-nosed playing style but did miss eight games this past season with an upper-body injury he suffered in January against Utah after crashing into the boards. The Jets responded to his absence by reeling off eight straight victories.

A statement from the Jets, released Wednesday, says Lowry is expected to "make a full recovery." It's not clear if this is related to the issue that came up earlier in the year or something else entirely.

Lowry's situation should up the urgency for Cheveldayoff to address the off-season need for another proven centre in Winnipeg's roster, either through a free agent signing or trade. The Jets attempted to deal for one at the deadline in early March — Brock Nelson was their prime target — but could not get it done, with Nelson ultimately joining Colorado.

Vlad Namestnikov, who finished the regular-season on a 16-game scoring drought (and had just one goal in his final 29 games and two over his final 43 contests) was the de facto No. 2 centre on the club, although Lowry's heavy minutes against the other team's top players often meant he was in that position.

Other centre options on the current roster include Morgan Barron, who was moved over from the wing late in the year, along with David Gustafsson and Rasmus Kupari, who were perpetual healthy scratches down the stretch. Moose captain Dominic Toninato appeared in seven games with the Jets but is a pending unrestricted free agent.

In terms of prospects, 21-year-old Brad Lambert just finished up his second pro season with the Manitoba Moose, but had just seven goals in 61 AHL games after scoring 21 times in 64 games as a rookie. He's played six games with the Jets so far, registering no goals and two assists.

Brayden Yager, 20, just wrapped up his final season in the Western Hockey League and will make the jump to pro this fall. He had 82 points (25G, 57A) in 54 games with the Moose Jaw Warriors and Lethbridge Hurricanes, then added 14 points (8G, 6A) in 16 playoff games this spring.

Depending on how this summer shakes out, Lowry's absence could mean extended looks for both of Lambert and Yager in training camp and beyond as the depth chart behind No. 1 centre Mark Scheifele looks rather thin at the moment.

As for Lowry, he will be entering the final year of his current contract which pays him US\$3.25 million annually. He is eligible to sign an extension as of July 1 and has made it clear that's something on his radar.

"That's kind of how I picture myself. As a Winnipeg Jet for life," he said last week.

"I love the city, love playing in front of these fans and I think that's something that hopefully we can take steps towards getting that out of the way this summer. There's obviously a few more important pieces that will probably get done before. But I don't see that being an issue. As long as they want to bring me back, I'm more than happy to come back."

Cheveldayoff made it clear getting his captain's signature on a new contract is a top priority.

"I think the world of Lows. He is Winnipeg. He is what it embodies," said Cheveldayoff.

Lowry showed that in spades during Winnipeg's final game of the year, a heartbreaking 2-1 overtime loss in Dallas. Scheifele, whose father had passed away earlier that day, was in the penalty box when the Stars scored the series winner. Lowry immediately skated over to Scheifele to console his teammate in what became a viral moment on social media.

"We're a family. Just to let him know that we're there for him. It's just an awful day for him. You want to give him the strength, you want to get that kill so bad. We just couldn't do it," an emotional Lowry said following the game.

Lowry, who now has 775 career NHL games under his belt, was named captain prior to the 2023-24 season by now retired head coach Rick Bowness. He said last week he believes the best is still to come for the organization which selected him 67th-overall in 2011.

"There's a lot of optimism that with another good summer, guys really pushing to get better to work on their game and to find ways to improve, that we can come back next year and put ourselves in a spot to be successful again," he said.

"Put ourselves in a spot to go on another playoff run and hopefully this one ends in late June instead of late May."

<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/opinion/analysis/2025/05/22/a-look-at-our-passion-for-the-jets-now-and-then>

A look at our passion for the Jets, now and then

By: Paul Moist

This has been an unprecedented year for hockey passions at both international and local levels.

In February, in the wake of U.S. President Donald Trump's assault on Canada's sovereignty through his tariff war, the 4 Nations Face-Off, a midseason kind-of-international tourney (absent Russia), saw Canada win over the Americans in the championship match, igniting a wave of national euphoria.

Closer to home, the Winnipeg Jets, who raced out of the gate in October to a 15-1 start, were en route to a first-ever President's Trophy, as the points leader in the NHL regular season. Expectations were high entering the playoffs that the Jets could exceed their 2017/2018 run, and make it all the way to the Stanley Cup final.

Round 1 saw hockey fever rise and a Game 7 overtime win that defied the odds. Both the game-tying goal by Cole Perfetti, with less than two seconds left in regulation time,

and the winning goal by Captain Adam Lowry, in double-overtime, are sporting moments for the ages when it comes to our city's rich sporting history.

Round 2 against the Dallas Stars, saw the emotional rollercoaster continue. The Jets were strong at home and unable to win on the road. Passions were high throughout the city. I watched most games with my daughter and twin grandsons, and yes, we wore whiteout T-shirts.

Game 6, a must-win for the Jets, in Dallas, began with the heartbreaking news that star centre Mark Scheifele's father Brad had passed away just hours before the game began. Scheifele played, and was the team's best forward, scoring the team's only goal. Ironically, he started the overtime period in the penalty box, having likely saved a goal late in the third period on a Dallas breakaway.

The Stars scored, and the Jets' "season to remember" ended on a poignant note, with Scheifele the recipient of an outpouring of emotion from players on both teams.

The Jets' season ended, but it would be hard to argue that the team did not ignite the passions of the community writ large

It was a very different, but equally passionate scene, 30 years ago when the public campaign to save the Jets 1.0 franchise failed and the team left after the Spring 1996 playoffs for Phoenix, Ariz.

The economics of professional hockey, in the pre-salary cap era, in a small city like Winnipeg with an aging arena, did not work. A months-long public campaign spurred emotions, saw kids empty their piggy banks in support of a fundraising campaign, saw city council flounder, and ultimately, corporate Winnipeg refuse to put forward the necessary financial support, leading to a boisterous, messy and at times, divisive debate.

This murkier chapter in the Jets history is well-documented in the book *Thin Ice – Money, Politics, and the Demise of an NHL Franchise*, by professor Jim Silver. Silver, and his University of Winnipeg colleague, Dr. Carl Ridd, were the face of the Thin Ice Coalition that openly questioned the propriety of a public bailout of the Jets at the behest of corporate Winnipeg interests.

Silver, a hockey player in his youth and fan of the game, stated that the campaign to save the Jets was worthy; he wrote that the team was a "valuable community asset ... culturally and emotionally."

He also argued that the campaign to save the team went too far. Costs escalated so high he argued that it forced "a consideration of fundamental questions that are not only political and economic, but also ethical." Silver asked, "Is it appropriate to spend tens and even hundreds of millions of dollars on professional sports when ... children are lining up at food banks?"

A wide array of noted writers spoke out on the conservative nature of the Winnipeg business community wanting to force public financing for a private venture they themselves would not support, including columnist John Robertson, writer Roy McGregor and Olympian and professor of physical and health education Bruce Kidd.

Professor David Whitson, co-author (with Richard Gruneau) of the widely acclaimed book, *Hockey Night in Canada: Sport, Identities and Cultural Politics*, offered sage advice in the foreword he wrote to Silver's book where he said: "...we have to stop and think about what we mean when we say that professional sports teams benefit the whole community, for they do so very unequally. We also have to recognize that our interests as fans, however powerfully felt, may not coincide with our interests as citizens."

Three decades on, I celebrate the passion and power of the 2025 Jets run. As well, I remember the important lessons from Spring 1995.

Winnipeg Sun

<https://winnipegsun.com/sports/hockey/nhl/winnipeg-jets/first-place-votes-but-no-selke-trophy-for-jets-lowry>

First-place votes, but no Selke Trophy, for Jets' Lowry

By Paul Friesen

For the second straight year, Winnipeg Jets centre Adam Lowry has cracked the top-10 in voting for the award as the NHL's best defensive forward.

Lowry finished 10th in voting for the Selke Trophy, collecting 115 points, well behind Aleksander Barkov of Florida, who won the award for a second straight season and third time overall.

The Jets captain picked up 115 points on the strength of three first-place votes, four second- and third-place votes, with another nine voters choosing him fourth and 10 slotting him in at No. 5 on their ballots.

It's the first time in his career Lowry has picked up first-place votes for the Selke. Last year he finished seventh in voting, but nobody had him at No. 1.

Barkov received 96 first-place votes and finished with 1,363 points in voting by members of the Professional Hockey Writers Association.

First-place votes are worth 10 points, second-place are worth seven, third-place, five, fourth-place, three and fifth-place, one.

Lowry finished a career-high plus-18 this season, despite anchoring a checking line that often lined up against opposing team's top scorers. He also scored a career-high 16 goals and added 18 assists in his 11th NHL season, all with the Jets.

In 13 playoff games the 32-year-old scored four goals, no assists, with a plus-2 rating.

Following the playoffs, Lowry underwent hip surgery that will cause him to miss the start of next season.

<https://winnipegsun.com/sports/hockey/nhl/winnipeg-jets/lowry-out-for-months-may-29-2025>

Jets captain Adam Lowry out for 5 to 6 months after having hip surgery on Tuesday

By Gordon Anderson

The off-season for the Winnipeg Jets began with some unpleasant news.

On Wednesday, the team announced that Adam Lowry will miss five to six months after he underwent hip surgery on Tuesday.

The timeline suggests the captain will be on the sidelines until the end of October, meaning he will miss the start of the 2025-26 NHL regular season. The regular season will start on Oct. 7.

The Jets said in a release that the centre, born in St. Louis, is "expected to make a full recovery."

The Jets named Lowry the captain on Sept. 12, 2023.

The surgery came less than two weeks after the Jets were eliminated in six games by the Dallas Stars in the second round of the Stanley Cup playoffs. The club did not reveal why Lowry required surgery.

The 32-year-old scored the biggest goal of the playoffs for the Jets, notching the series-clinching goal in double overtime of Game 7 as the Jets beat the St. Louis Blues in the first round of the Western Conference playoffs.

Winnipeg selected Lowry in the third round, 67th overall, of the 2011 June amateur draft. This past season he scored 16 goals and chipped in with 18 assists in 73 regular-season games. The 6-foot-5 forward has reached the 30-point mark in each of the last three seasons. In the playoffs, Lowry scored four goals in 13 playoff games.

Over 775 career games with Winnipeg, Lowry has 121 goals and 152 assists. The captain is entering the final year of his five-year deal with the Jets. The contract is worth US \$3.25 million per season.

The Jets (56-22-4) finished the regular season with the best record in the National Hockey League, winning the Presidents' Trophy for the first time in franchise history. The team also had the best road record in the league at 26-15-0.

Canadian Press

<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2025/05/28/jets-captain-lowry-likely-to-miss-start-of-next-season-after-undergoing-hip-surgery>

Jets captain Lowry likely to miss start of next season after undergoing hip surgery

By: The Canadian Press

WINNIPEG – Winnipeg Jets captain Adam Lowry is expected to miss the start of the next NHL season as he recovers from hip surgery.

The Jets updated Lowry's status in a statement Wednesday, a day after Lowry underwent the procedure.

The statement, which did not specify when Lowry sustained a hip injury, said the surgery was a success. The team expects him to make a full recovery after five to six months of rehabilitation.

Lowry had four goals in 13 post-season games for the Jets, including the double-overtime goal that gave Winnipeg a 4-3 win over the St. Louis Blues in Game 7 of the first round.

The Jets, who won the Presidents' Trophy as the team with the best regular-season record, were eliminated in six games by Dallas in the second round.

The 32-year-old Lowry, who has played his entire career with the Jets, is set to enter the final season of a five-year, US\$16.25-million contract.

Sportsnet.ca

<https://www.sportsnet.ca/nhl/article/jets-mailbag-could-jj-peterka-be-a-viable-replacement-for-nikolaj-ehlers/>

Jets mailbag: Could JJ Peterka be a viable replacement for Nikolaj Ehlers?

By Jacob Stoller

Let's end off the season with a mailbag, shall we?

We asked you to submit your Winnipeg Jets-related questions to us on X, and now we're here to answer them.

Without further ado, let's get right into it.

Is Toews serious about returning, and would he even be a viable 3C or 4C in the league still? Obviously his leadership and vet presence is valuable but still need to be able to compete. — @NittanyGooner

Forget a serviceable third or fourth-line centre, several people online have been pencilling Jonathan Toews in as a potential second-line centre. But let's pump the brakes on the 2C discourse. Frankly, even the notion that he'll be an upgrade in the bottom-six isn't guaranteed.

Let's keep some things in perspective: Toews – a sure-to-be first ballot Hall of Famer with three Stanley Cups on his resume – hasn't played in an NHL game since April 13, 2023. It's also been five years since he cracked the 60-point benchmark. And he's turning 38 in April. The odds are stacked against him being an impact player on the ice, although that doesn't mean he can't provide value.

Before adding Luke Schenn at last year's deadline, the Jets didn't have a single player that had their name engraved on the Cup. Schenn's impact off the ice was palpable, with several Jets players applauding the veteran defenceman's experience and pedigree.

If Toews can tread water as a fourth-line centre that wins the majority of his draws – he has a career face-off win percentage of 57.3 per cent – all while providing some experience to the locker room, signing him to a one-year deal would be well worth it.

Just don't get your hopes up that he'll be the Jonathan Toews you remember from the Chicago Blackhawks' golden era.

With the entire d core signed through next season... do the Jets make any changes on the back? — @jordansburner16

It's unlikely we'll see any changes on the blue line.

Sure, in an ideal world, the Jets would find a right-handed top-four defenceman — preferably with size — that could serve as an upgrade from Dylan DeMelo alongside Josh Morrissey. Players like that aren't readily available in free agency and even if they were, Winnipeg's not likely to sign them. Those archetypes aren't on trade blocks either. And again, if they were, odds are Winnipeg is likely on that player's no-trade list.

However, this question could also be interpreted another way. Will the team move one of their defencemen? It's easy to look at things on paper and think that there are "too many" defencemen.

But here's the reality: you can never have too much depth. The Jets defence is one top-four injury away from dissolving, which makes the utility of having a Colin Miller, as an example, valuable. Even if he's not a lineup regular.

That said, if Elias Salomonsson, who is knocking on the door for a roster spot, wins a spot in camp, the Jets will have to move somebody. Odds are, that's Miller.

Are the Jets tying themselves to too many long-term contracts for non-impact players (Demelo, Iafallo, Nino, Vlad)? These players did not get them over the hump this year. How likely are they to improve playoff chances in the next few years? — @gmkevin17

This answer is going to be a two-parter.

I don't count Vladislav Namestnikov's two-year deal or Alex Iafallo's three-year extension as "long-term" deals. And I don't think there's anything wrong with either of them.

Namestnikov may be an inadequate 2C, but as a utility piece, a \$2 million AAV is very reasonable. Iafallo may play on the fourth line when Winnipeg has a healthy roster, but he's capable of jumping into the top-six in a pinch and is an excellent penalty killer. So a \$3.67 million AAV is perfectly reasonable for that, especially with the cap rising.

Now, Nino Niederreiter and Dylan DeMelo's deals? Your point has merit. But sometimes, adding an extra year (or two) is the cost of doing business when you're running an NHL team in Winnipeg.

Niederreiter, approaching the second season of a three-year deal (\$4 million AAV), is a streaky scorer who has become relatively inconsistent, even when he's with Adam Lowry and Mason Appleton. That said, he's flirted with the 20-goal mark in each of the last two seasons.

The DeMelo deal could age badly. We saw signs of regression from the 32-year-old — signed for another three years (\$4.9 million) — through the first year of his deal. A four-year pact was rich to begin with, and I think, similar to the way the Jets valued Niederreiter on that "identity line," they overvalued DeMelo due to how he fared alongside Morrissey.

If/when Nik Ehlers walks, how viable is JJ Peterka as a replacement for the Jets to acquire? — @NikLynam

This one is spicy.

JJ Peterka would be such an awesome fit for this team. The speedy 23-year-old is a threat to score every time he touches the puck — he came within spitting distance of 30 goals in consecutive years — and he's got a good motor. He'd provide some 'pop' to a second line that'll look grim if Ehlers leaves.

Assuming Buffalo moves on from him before July 1 — when the pending RFA can sign an offer sheet — there's going to be several suitors offering high draft picks and or blue-chip prospects for his services. Winnipeg doesn't have a lot of ammo to pull off a deal.

Even if they were willing to deal, say, Brayden Yager or Brad Lambert, who are centres and not a winger like Peterka, you can bet there'll be plenty of interested teams with better prospects to offer.

<https://www.sportsnet.ca/nhl/article/assessing-the-off-season-centre-market-for-maple-leafs-canadiens-jets/>

Assessing the off-season centre market for Maple Leafs, Canadiens, Jets

By Ryan Dixon

On one hand, John Tavares holds a little less leverage than your typical pending-UFA star who can hit open market imminently. Usually a player in that position possesses all the cards. Tavares, however, has made no attempt to hide his hand, making it known his preferred outcome is to be a Toronto Maple Leaf for the remainder of his career.

Suffice it to say, the 34-year-old is not — or certainly not yet — adopting a hardline posture with his current employer.

On the Leafs' side of things, GM Brad Treliving called himself a “huge John Tavares fan” at his year-end presser on Thursday, though did say the team was not far enough along with its internal plan-making to absolutely guarantee Tavares — or Mitch Marner, for that matter — would be offered a new contract before July 1.

While Marner may be a goner, it's difficult to imagine — for a few reasons — that Toronto and Tavares won't hold serious talks at some point. And if during those negotiations the player's representation feels a desire to needle the team just a little a bit, their biggest bullet may be that if Tavares isn't the Leafs' second-line pivot next fall, the drop to whoever is could be sharp and scary.

The open market is not completely devoid of 2C options, but it's difficult to argue any of them would be an upgrade on Tavares. And when you look at the trade market, it's not as though a bevy of viable options come spilling in. Really, it's easier to find players who — in a different universe — should be available via trade, but don't appear to be in our current reality.

That's worth remembering, not only if you're a Leafs fan sick of the status quo, but also if you're a backer of a couple other Canadian clubs examining the centre scene.

The Winnipeg Jets seem perpetually in search of a true second-line centre to skate behind Mark Scheifele and the need for help down the middle is more pronounced now that Adam Lowry will be out for around six months due to hip surgery.

Meanwhile, in Montreal, all the talk is about how the team can't move forward without finding a 2C to help relieve Nick Suzuki's burden at the top of the lineup.

Of course, for Toronto, it goes back to what Treliving referenced on Thursday when he said the DNA of the club must change. On the extreme end, some could see that as a willingness to bid farewell to both Marner and Tavares, opening up all kinds of cap space to play with.

To be sure, there are players you could pursue at other positions that would help. On the back end, Florida's Aaron Ekblad could be a UFA come July 1, while we've already mentioned the possibility of Toronto chasing another longtime Flames defenceman — last year Treliving signed Chris Tanev — in Rasmus Andersson via the trade market.

But down the middle? That's a different story.

Yes, we hear the Sam Bennett screams and, no doubt, the Panthers' second-line centre seems — along with the rest of his team — constructed in a lab to succeed at this time of year.

But, at the end of the day, you've got to be skeptical about players actually leaving that team and no-tax state as free agents. It happens — Brandon Montour departed for Seattle last summer — but when Florida wants to move heaven and earth to keep a guy, it can usually do it. If the Cats prioritize Bennett over fellow pending-UFA Ekblad, the former could be a Floridian for eight more agitating years.

There's also the reality that Bennett just posted a new career high with 51 points. While it's easy to think Toronto should be single-mindedly focussed on the playoffs, it can't completely lose sight of the regular season. And if you watch Marner's 100 points and Tavares' 38 goals saunter out the door and replace it with a 50-point guy, things might get more interesting during the 82-game dress rehearsal than Leafs fans care to consider.

Aside from Bennett, we could see a couple guys who just had their season end in Dallas hit free agency. Matt Duchene, who is only a year younger than Tavares, scored his one and only goal of the playoffs Thursday night in the 6-3 loss to Edmonton that ended the Stars' spring, while the 33-year-old Mikael Granlund — though a gamer — is nowhere near the level of player Tavares is.

Either of those options sound like desirable moves? Even if you paired their signing with a splashy acquisition on the blueline, you're still taking a pretty big hit up front.

You could try to change the mix with six-foot-four, 33-year-old Brock Nelson, but it's still tough to say that former Islander is better than the former Islander Toronto already has in-house. Beyond that, it feels like Nelson is a natural fit for another team that can use help down the middle, that being the Wild club that plays in his home state of Minnesota.

As far as trades go, there's a guy with championship pedigree and Leafs history who plays a distinct playoff-brand of hockey and is coming off a 35-goal season with a club that hasn't made the post-season in three years. But 34-year-old Nazem Kadri is an important player on a Flames squad in transition, and it sure seems like Calgary, understandably, wants to keep him as a north star for the young guys coming up in that organization.

Dream even bigger and you could wonder about an all-time great who, at 37, might be thinking about one last run at the Cup with a new team. Makes sense on paper, but in the world we live in, Sidney Crosby — until we definitively hear different — has to be viewed as a Penguin for life, even if Pittsburgh is a bottom-feeder right now.

The Wild — for whatever reason — seem destined for a divorce from talented 23-year-old Marco Rossi, but the pending-RFA is a five-foot-nine guy who doesn't suit Toronto's needs. Bo Horvat from the Islanders? The Ontario kid could be a wonderful fit in Toronto, Winnipeg or Montreal, but there's just no indication from the new management that a firesale is coming on Long Island. On the contrary, the Isles may go the other way, draft first overall in June, then turn around and try to land a big offensive fish on July 1.

Scour the league and you'll see, finding a 2C — a tough chore at the best of times, given their importance — seems like an even taller task than usual at this particular moment in time.

And quite frankly, if a plug-and-play option did become available, how would the Leafs outbid other teams for that player's services? Toronto isn't exactly flush with prospects and doesn't have a first-rounder for the next three years.

If Treliving is, indeed, a Tavares fan as he stated on Thursday, he might want to cement that notion by extending the hometown boy in the next few weeks. Because, in this centre market, getting Tavares at a bargain rate sure feels preferable to going out and paying full boat for anybody else.

<https://www.sportsnet.ca/nhl/article/is-elias-salomonsson-ready-to-make-jump-to-jets/>

Is Elias Salomonsson ready to make jump to Jets?

By Jacob Stoller

WINNIPEG — Talk to anyone who watched Elias Salomonsson in the AHL this season and a common sentiment emerges.

He didn't look like a 20-year-old.

"The way he does a lot of things, you'd think he's a veteran player in our league," Manitoba Moose coach Mark Morrison told Sportsnet.ca back in April.

For those within the Winnipeg Jets organization, the maturity seen in the six-foot-two, right-handed defenceman's game is nothing new.

"I remember, two years ago, when he was at (Jets) training camp and we had to send him back to Sweden contractually still, I remember (Scott Arniel) asking me - 'so, there's no way we can keep him? There's no way he can stay? Are you sure?'" Jets GM Kevin Cheveldayoff said at his end-of-season availability. "He was running the D at that time, so obviously he was pretty D-centric at that point. But, we're excited. If he has a really good summer, he's someone that could force us to make some big decisions."

The Jets' 2022 second-round pick (55th overall) is coming off an eye-opening AHL rookie season. He recorded 27 points in 53 games – ranking sixth in points per game among under-21 AHL defencemen (0.51) – while logging north of 20 minutes per game, matching up against opponents' top scoring threats and playing a vital role on both the power play and penalty kill. He was named to the AHL All-Star Game, too.

Salomonsson isn't the flashiest prospect. But he's a sturdy two-way defenceman that oozes top-four potential.

"We have a role model in front of him, for me: that's Dylan Samberg," Arniel said at his end-of-season availability.

While Salomonsson may not be a carbon copy of Samberg – he's arguably a better puck-handler and skater and not as good of a defender – his trajectory parallels with what Samberg has become.

Whether it's defending a player one-on-one, joining the rush to make a play, or making an outlet pass, there's no panic in Salomonsson's game.

"He's an intelligent hockey player," Morrison said. "He sees the ice real well. He plays an easy game, so he's always in the right position. He's never scrambling around trying

to get to loose pucks, so he's always in the right position. It saves him a lot of energy — he can play 22 to 25 minutes and still look fresh."

For someone of his age, that type of composure is rare.

"He's got the ability to slow the play down and let the game come to him," Moose defenceman Ashton Sautner said. "For a lot of younger defenceman — in the NHL or AHL — that's hard to do. But he's got this quiet confidence to him."

Over the last few months of the regular season, his game took a huge step forward.

The turning point came after Salomonsson sustained an upper-body injury on Dec. 6, which sidelined him for nearly two months. Watching games from above turned into a valuable learning experience.

"When you're playing, you don't really see the whole picture," Salomonsson said. "Watching from above, you see some situations that you could be (handling) better."

Upon his return, Salomonsson showed few signs of rust. He became more consistent in two key areas: making plays quicker under pressure and being a more aggressive defender.

The former is a common obstacle for young European defenders who are adjusting to a smaller ice surface.

"The corners are a little bit tighter here. It's easier for the forechecker to close on you," Salomonsson explained. "In the Swedish league, you have more time and space (along) the wall."

And overseas, with a wider ice surface, there are fewer one-one-battles. Winning those 50-50s is imperative to regaining and sustaining possession.

As the year went on, Salomonsson's confidence grew.

"He's really poised with the puck and he's come a long way in a lot of different areas," Morrison said. "For instance, he wasn't a power-play guy. But he's been here working on the power play and running a power-play unit. He's picked it up tremendously well and turned into a great power-play quarterback in the American Hockey League. It's something that he picked up quick and he seems to do that in a lot of areas in his game."

So, when will we see Salomonsson in a Jets uniform?

Winnipeg's been known to be overly patient with its prospects. And heading into the 2025-26 season, the Jets have four right-handed defencemen — Dylan DeMelo, Neal Pionk, Luke Schenn and Colin Miller — under contract.

“The biggest thing is that we want to make sure that when he's ready to go, he's ready to go. We're not force-feeding this,” Arniel said. “I think he's a good enough hockey player that he'll find his way in.”

<https://www.sportsnet.ca/nhl/article/jets-off-season-checklist-whats-the-plan-if-ehlers-bolts/>

Jets off-season checklist: What's the plan if Ehlers bolts?

By Jacob Stoller

WINNIPEG — Was this the last we've seen of Nikolaj Ehlers in a Winnipeg Jets uniform?

The organization certainly hopes not.

“We will put our best foot forward to try to make our case (for him) to be one of those guys who can be a unique Jet-for-life type of player and we'll see where it goes from there,” Jets GM Kevin Cheveldayoff said of the pending UFA during at his season-end availability last week.

But the Jets don't have a lot working in their favour right now.

The closer a pending UFA gets to free agency, the more difficult it is to sway them off the open market.

Cheveldayoff, a GM of the year nominee isn't about to throw a blank cheque at the talented Danish speedster. Right or wrong, as electrifying of a talent Ehlers is — coming off a career-high 0.91-point-per-game season — he's always been second fiddle to Mark Scheifele and Kyle Connor. In fact, eight players logged more five-on-five minutes per game than Ehlers did in the playoffs (12:01).

It's safe to say Cheveldayoff's pitch won't include a dollar figure that's market value. AFP Analytics projects Ehlers' next deal to be a six-year contract with an \$8.1-million AAV.

That number could get even higher, given the bidding war that'll be had for his services.

Ehlers — who has excellent statistics on a per-minute basis — has all the characteristics of a player that teams overpay for, under the assumption that he could thrive in a bigger role.

Are the Jets really going to outbid these suitors? Certainly not, especially if that number surpasses Connor Hellebuyck and Scheifele's \$8.5-million AAV.

Better yet, even if they were comfortable disrupting the apple cart and paying his market value — is Ehlers really going to re-sign with a team where he won't play nearly as much as he would elsewhere?

All signs point to Ehlers being good as gone. And while priority No. 1 may be re-signing him, realistically, Cheveldayoff's agenda will soon shift to how he can replace a four-time, 60-plus-point scorer in his top-six.

Here are the items atop Cheveldayoff's summer to-do list

An Ehlers contingency plan

Whether you're Winnipeg or a free-agent hotbed like Vegas or Florida, replacing someone like Ehlers, overnight, is tricky.

The difference for Winnipeg, of course, is that no-trade clauses eliminate several plausible options and they're not landing any hot-shot free agents.

Ideally, similar to when they let Brenden Dillon walk, the Jets find a way to fill that hole internally. The best-case scenario is that someone like Cole Perfetti takes a step forward, or a prospect — like Nikita Chibrikov or Brad Lambert — becomes a viable top-six forward.

But for a team with legitimate Stanley Cup aspirations? You can't solely bank on that.

Don't be surprised if Cheveldayoff goes out and trades a mid-round pick — or either of his upcoming firsts, if it's a real difference-maker — for a middle-six forward that can provide some scoring.

Extending Kyle Connor

His extension may not seem time pressing — with one year remaining on his contract — but re-signing Connor is Cheveldayoff's most important summer objective.

Connor is one of the best left wingers in the world. And the Jets are going to have to pay him accordingly.

Since breaking into the league during the 2016-17 season, only Alex Ovechkin has scored more goals than Connor (284) and nobody at his position has buried more game-winning goals than him (60).

Over the last three years, Connor ranks third in both five-on-five playoff points per 60 minutes (2.70) and five-on-five playoff goals per 60 minutes (1.43).

With the cap rising, there's no doubt Connor is going to be getting a double-digit payday. Here's a look at how he compares to others that landed extensions.

Connor's new deal would kick in at the start of the 2026-27 season, when the salary cap is projected to sit at \$104 million. Based off percentage of cap from the players above, Connor is in line for an AAV in the ballpark of \$11 million.

Re-signing Dylan Samberg and Gabriel Vilardi

Samberg, 26, is coming off a career year where he solidified himself as a high-end, top-four defenceman.

The pending RFA is one year away from free agency and there's no doubt the Jets are going to try to retain him for the long-term. AFP Analytics predicts a five-year, \$5.2-million contract for Samberg – although one ought to believe the Jets will try to lock him down to a seven- or eight-year deal. With the cap rising, we could see some players entertain shorter long-term deals – four or five years – in the hopes of landing one more big contract down the road. Whether or not Samberg is eyeing a mid-range or long-term deal remains to be seen but there's no doubt the Jets will be aggressive in retaining him for as long as possible. The Jets defence, and the team as a whole, is a whole other animal without Samberg in the fold.

2024-25 season Record
Jets with Sandberg
45-14-2

Jets without Sandberg
11-8-2

Vilardi's situation is quite a bit different.

The 25-year-old RFA is two years away from being a UFA and signing him long-term, should he be interested, may not even be feasible. Think about it: Connor is about to be paid handsomely, Josh Morrissey is eligible for an extension in a year from now, plus Scheifele and Hellebuyck are linked long-term — can they really afford to give Vilardi the bag, too?

A bridge seems the most plausible, for both parties.

Global Winnipeg

<https://globalnews.ca/news/11208267/jonathan-toews-winnipeg-jets-analysis/>

ANALYSIS: Could hometown hero Toews finish NHL career in Winnipeg?

By Kelly Moore Global News

ANALYSIS: Could hometown hero Toews finish NHL career in Winnipeg? - imageView
image in full screen

Five Manitoba-born players have suited up for the Winnipeg Jets in the 14-year history of the 2.0 version of the franchise. There is a genuine opportunity for that number to grow to six in season 15.

The last Manitoban to wear a Jets jersey in an NHL regular-season game was Winnipegger Adam Brooks in 2021-22.

Story continues below advertisement

Cody Eakin is the only homegrown product to appear in the post-season for Winnipeg — and that was the play-in series versus Calgary in the Edmonton Bubble in 2020.

Quinton Howden, Eric Fehr and Derek Meech are the only others with a Manitoba birth certificate of the group of 160 players who have played for the 2.0 Jets.

But there is every reason to believe that come July 1, or maybe even sooner, it won't be a reach that Jonathan Toews could become the next made-in-Manitoba product to join that list.

And without a doubt, there would be the expectation — both from himself and the hockey club — to make the biggest impact.

Toews, through his agent Pat Brisson, has made it clear he's ready to return to the National Hockey League. I'm not sure there would be a better fit than his hometown Jets.

There is no doubt the three-time Stanley Cup champ wouldn't be putting himself out there if he didn't believe he could still be an effective NHL player. Even after a more-than-two-year absence. And even at the age of 37.

Forget about the sentimental aspect of "Captain Serious" finishing a Hall of Fame career in front of his family and friends.

The Jets are a legitimate Cup contender. They are deep up front, so Toews doesn't need to be "the guy." But there is still a big enough role available at second-line centre to provide plenty of appeal to a very proud player.

Winnipeg will not be the only team interested. But the Jets just might offer the opportunity that turns out to be the most interesting for Toews.

<https://globalnews.ca/news/11204980/analysis-hockey-playoffs-compelling-winnipeg-jets/>

ANALYSIS: Hockey in June is compelling, even with Jets out of playoffs

By John Shannon CJOB

It's hard to imagine, but it took 1,312 regular-season games, and 78 more in the playoffs, to get to the same two teams playing for the Stanley Cup: the Florida Panthers and the Edmonton Oilers.

And for teams from opposite sides of the league, and completely different geographies, this series is set up to potentially be one of the best in decades. The contrasts and contradictions and storylines are fascinating.

The loquacious Panthers coach Paul Maurice versus the reserved Kris Knoblauch. Great players on both sides — Edmonton's Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl versus Florida's Aleksander Barkov and Matthew Tkachuk — teams that both found great success in these playoffs with the depth on their rosters.

Perhaps the biggest perceived advantage is in goal. For Florida, Sergei Bobrovsky (you would think) has an advantage over Stuart Skinner. But all Skinner has done is win game after game, with an exaggerated save percentage since regaining his form against Vegas in Round 2.

There's also the amazing play of two grizzled veterans, the Oilers' Corey Perry and Panthers' Brad Marchand, who have both been integral to their team's success without changing their style one little bit. Both will drag their teams into the fight.

And of course, the biggest storyline: can the Edmonton Oilers bring the Stanley Cup back to Canada for the first time since 1993?

While the city of Edmonton is already in a frenzy, it will take a few games, maybe three, for the rest of the country to catch up. Winnipeg Jets fans, Ottawa Senators fans, fans of all the Canadian teams, in fact, will look enviously at what the Oilers are doing before jumping on the bandwagon for Connor and company.

But it will happen. Last season's series proved that hockey in June, even if it's not your favourite Canadian team, can grip the nation. And by the time hockey's grandest prize is given out, our country will be glued to the television, hoping that 32 pounds of silver resides in pro sports' most northerly city.

<https://globalnews.ca/news/11200747/winnipeg-jets-ehlers-contract-analysis/>

ANALYSIS: Silence deafening on extension for Jets' Ehlers

By Paul Edmonds CJOB

Listening to general manager Kevin Cheveldayoff last week, it would appear the Winnipeg Jets are still very much interested in re-signing star forward Nikolaj Ehlers.

With essentially one month to go before the 29-year-old Dane hits the open market as an unrestricted free agent, you could say negotiations – if those are truly happening – are past Defcon 5 and rapidly nearing the eleventh hour.

During his season-ending availability a week ago Wednesday, the Jets GM said the team would put its best foot forward with Ehlers to try to make a case for him to be a unique Jet for life.

In the time between then and now, one would presume that overture has been extended and the Jets' willingness to consummate a new contract understood by the Ehlers camp.

From this seat, however, it may not be the Jets' decision any longer and the one major stumbling block to Ehlers' continued future in Winnipeg is, in fact, Ehlers himself.

After 10 seasons, nearly 700 games, 225 goals and more than 500 points with the organization, if Ehlers wanted to stay with the Jets, an extension would have been signed long ago.

But frankly, he was non-committal, refusing to discuss the subject when pressed earlier in the season, avoiding it totally as the campaign progressed and then seemingly just walking away by boarding a plane for the world championship within hours of the Jets' season concluding against Dallas.

Putting it together, the silence is unmistakably deafening.

As Cheveldayoff also said last week, players like Ehlers have earned the right to become free agents and that opportunity is respected, but without a doubt, the further this situation moved to this moment, the further it got from ever happening.

Sure, the Jets are interested in re-signing Ehlers – they said so last week. The problem is, in reading the tea leaves, it's become painfully clear to many that Ehlers has no interest in re-signing with the Jets.

<https://globalnews.ca/news/11196865/winnipeg-jets-defence-depth-analysis/>

ANALYSIS: Jets' blue line could be crowded heading into next season

By Kelly Moore Global News

ANALYSIS: Jets' blue line could be crowded heading into next season - imageView
image in full screen

Winnipeg Jets GM Kevin Cheveldayoff has a full plate to deal with in the off-season.

And some of the more interesting decisions will include what to do about the blue line depth chart.

Suppose all goes according to plan this summer and Dylan Samberg signs a long-term deal in the seven-to-eight-year range. In that case, we can be pretty certain the Hermantown Two of Samberg and Neal Pionk — along with the longtime two of Josh Morrissey and Dylan DeMelo — will form the Jets' top four on defence for the coming season and beyond.

After that, it gets interesting. Right-shot veterans Colin Miller and Luke Schenn still have one more year on their respective contracts. As do Logan Stanley and Ville Heinola on the left side.

And then interesting turns into crowded if pending unrestricted free agent Haydn Fleury parlays his impressive first season as a Jet into something beyond a one-year deal and if Elias Salomonsson arrives as an NHL defenceman ahead of schedule.

Winnipeg's cupboard of blueline prospects isn't exactly over-flowing, but there's also no immediate need for help. So with what Cheveldayoff, head coach Scott Arniel, and the rest of the organization know about Stanley and Heinola, is it time to give one or both players a chance to become full-time NHLers somewhere else?

Stanley is just one year away from unrestricted free agency. There is more time on the clock before Heinola will have his chance to test the open market.

Can Cheveldayoff make a deal — or deals — to turn a couple of young veterans into assets that better fit Winnipeg's timeline?

Lord knows both former first-round draft picks have been professional in handling difficult situations and, for the most part, they've been patient.

At some point, the Jets have to fish or cut bait.

The latter option might be the best course of action, especially with a pair of players who could potentially slide even further down the pecking order in 2025-26.

TSN.ca

<https://www.tsn.ca/nhl/video/could-ehlers-end-up-sticking-around-in-winnipeg%7E3136527>

Could Ehlers end up sticking around in Winnipeg? (VIDEO)

TSN Hockey Insider Darren Dreger joins SC with Jay Onrait to discuss if pending unrestricted free agent Nikolaj Ehlers could re-sign with the Winnipeg Jets.

The Athletic

<https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/6392173/2025/05/31/winnipeg-jets-stanley-cup-final-nhl/>

Five lessons the Winnipeg Jets can learn from the Stanley Cup finalists

By Murat Ates

The NHL likes to overreact to teams that have success.

But the Edmonton Oilers and Florida Panthers' Stanley Cup Final rematch gives us a chance to dig deeper into what's worked for the two teams. It goes much deeper than drafting Connor McDavid or having an advantageous state tax — and those advantages, while real, often obscure what's led to Edmonton's and Florida's success.

Let's get right into it, then. What can Winnipeg learn from the two best teams in the Stanley Cup playoffs?

1. Spend every dollar

The first part of this two-part lesson is obvious: Teams that want to win must spend to the cap. Using PuckPedia as a guide, the Oilers and Panthers each exceeded the cap maximum with bonus overages factored in, while the Jets left money on the table.

Winnipeg tried — hard — to avoid that. When the Jets signed Cole Perfetti to a bridge deal last summer, part of the reasoning was to create room under the cap. This helped Winnipeg build space day by day, creating the potential to add over \$12 million in contracts at the trade deadline. They succeeded in adding \$6.25 million in the form of Brandon Tanev and Luke Schenn, but ultimately left a Brock Nelson-sized portion of cap space unused.

Remember that Winnipeg thought it had acquired Nelson prior to Colorado's emergence as the winner in that sweepstakes. It is my belief that Nelson, who had a no-trade clause, was initially open to going to Canada, but that the Avalanche were higher on his

priority list. So the Jets don't need to be told that it's important to spend every dollar. It is not a matter of opinion to say it was Winnipeg's plan to do so.

It's also true that Dallas' playing roster cost between \$4 million and \$6 million more than Winnipeg's did during their playoff series, depending on who was dressed. Meanwhile, the Panthers open the Cup final with a roster that costs roughly \$8 million more than the Jets team that lost to Dallas in Game 6. Edmonton will open the final spending \$4 million less than Winnipeg's Game 6 roster — but only because Zach Hyman, \$5.5 million, is injured.

Spending money just to spend money is not the goal, while it's worth noting that this year's trade deadline was a seller's market, based on the prices teams paid for lesser players — including Tanev and Schenn. The Jets' lack of pivot after Nelson fell through may reflect good sensibility regarding asset prices as opposed to a lack of judgment on their part.

But the Oilers and Panthers were a little more desperate than Winnipeg was — even at the cost of that sensibility.

2. Remember that quality trumps efficiency

In the salary-cap era, winning is an efficiency contest. If everybody has the same payroll, then the team that spends its money the most efficiently will have the best collection of players.

Those are the obvious basics, but there are wrinkles that develop throughout a season. Teams don't do all of their spending at once, and opportunities to spend efficiently don't all present themselves at once. The Jets' cap efficiency gave them an advantage over other teams when the season began. They're cap efficient again as the offseason begins, particularly with Blake Wheeler's buyout coming off the books. But Winnipeg didn't need to be cap efficient at the deadline — it needed more threats against a Dallas team that had been aggressive in its own right.

Winnipeg didn't need to bring in a \$5 million player performing at a \$5 million level for its cap space to have been useful; anybody performing at a higher level than Winnipeg's 12th forward or sixth defenceman would have been an upgrade to the talent pool.

Edmonton built various forms of salary-cap prison from drafting McDavid in 2015 through its back-to-back Cup finals. As it's escaped from inefficient money spent on Milan Lucic, Jack Campbell, Mikko Koskinen and company, it's thrown more and more darts — not all of them sensible — in the name of building a roster that can win when McDavid and Leon Draisaitl are on the bench, too.

3. Throw more darts

The misconception about Edmonton is that the Oilers didn't attain their level of success because McDavid and Draisaitl cost too much money. The reality is that the Oilers

wasted years with a brutally cap-inefficient middle class. Now that Edmonton's non-superstars are finally winning their minutes, the Oilers are a contender.

These numbers track with Florida's performance without its top two centres, Aleksander Barkov and Sam Bennett, on the way to the Panthers' 2024 Cup win. Yes, one takeaway on everybody's minds when it comes to Edmonton and Florida is "acquire superstars." But Winnipeg got outscored 17-5 at five-on-five without Mark Scheifele or Adam Lowry on the ice during these playoffs.

Meanwhile, superstars are hard to come by, while depth players can be approached with trial, error and creativity. The Oilers pulled off three-team trades in consecutive seasons to find the cap room for Adam Henrique and Trent Frederic. The Panthers signed Carter Verhaeghe for \$1 million in 2020 after Tampa Bay didn't give him a qualifying offer, and picked Gustav Forsling off waivers for free in 2021.

If they hadn't worked, they'd be gone.

The Oilers have also taken swings at Viktor Arvidsson, Henrique, Connor Brown, Jeff Skinner, Corey Perry and John Klingberg in recent seasons. Not all of them have hit at a high level, nor did they come without cost; Dylan Holloway and Philip Broberg signed offer sheets in St. Louis that the Oilers couldn't match. But it's another case of a desperate team acquiring players by any means available — and being fully prepared to move on if they didn't work out.

4. When the player you need is available, step up and win the trade

Only four Panthers who have played in these playoffs were Florida draft picks. Winnipeg had 10, from Scheifele and Connor Hellebuyck at the top of the roster through backup goaltender Eric Comrie.

Does this mean the Jets draft well and the Panthers are free-agent poachers, basking in Floridian sunshine?

Not at all. Just ask Jonathan Huberdeau, MacKenzie Weegar, Cole Schwindt, Devon Levi, Spencer Knight and Emil Heineman. All of these were Panthers picks, with NHL careers ranging from dominant to nonexistent, who Florida moved to acquire Matthew Tkachuk, Sam Reinhart, Seth Jones and Bennett. The goalies stand out — two budding stars, each traded before establishing themselves as a starter — as does Florida's willingness to move on from a 115-point scorer like Huberdeau. In Jets terms, the Tkachuk acquisition was akin to sending Kyle Connor and Dylan Samberg away and ending up with the most important player in the trade. Winnipeg would never dream of it — nor would the Jets have been an option for Tkachuk, whose list of preferred teams included Florida, Tampa Bay, Carolina and St. Louis.

It must burn Panthers management that the team drafted as well as it did and stepped up like it did, making the final in back-to-back-to-back years after such a bold move — only for people to scream "state tax."

5. Every weakness is a strength

The NHL's recent obsession with state tax rates is shortsighted. By virtue of no state income tax, Florida, Tampa Bay, Vegas, Dallas and Nashville do enjoy a slight competitive advantage, but the first 14 Cup champions of the cap era didn't share that same edge. This includes the Kings and Ducks, who are meant to be at the biggest disadvantage, given California's income tax rates, but they won three Cups in eight years, all the same.

This is not the same thing as saying taxes have no influence on players' decision-making, but the Panthers have 11 UFA signees on their roster. Of those, the biggest impacts come from Sergei Bobrovsky — a clear win — and then Verhaeghe, who they picked up for \$1 million, and Evan Rodrigues, who they got for \$3 million. This is not a case of a team running rampant through the free-agency market, nor are we meant to believe that the Panthers' 11 UFA signees are the only good players available in the NHL.

The Jets do not have Floridian sunshine, surf or tax advantages, nor do players disappear into anonymity in Winnipeg the way they do in bigger American markets. On the opposite side of the same coin, the Jets do boast Winnipeg's tight-knit community. They do benefit from stable ownership that gets the emotional moments right. It builds community when True North makes the decisions to charter Jets players and staff to Kitchener to attend Brad Scheifele's funeral — and to do the same for Minnesotan players for Adam Johnson — or gets less tragic, personal details right, like making time for Schenn to see his family during road trips. It builds community when a guy like Alex Iafallo arrives from Los Angeles to find a group of Jets stars like Hellebuyck and Connor, who spend almost as much time outdoors as he does.

If Winnipeg is small, then it can be tight-knit. If its top players decompress in an icefishing shack, then it can be a top destination for players who love the outdoors. If it is loyal to a fault, then it is a place where career Jets like Hellebuyck, Scheifele and Lowry can establish unique legacies. There is no salary cap for efforts made to make players' families feel at home.

The Jets do appear to have their room in order, with team culture as a strength. Does this give them the opportunity to sign Samberg, Perfetti and Vilardi to long-term deals that age well as the cap rises, continuing team culture while giving Winnipeg tangible advantages? It's worked for Scheifele, Connor, Nikolaj Ehlers, Hellebuyck, Lowry and Josh Morrissey when they were restricted free agents. It also seems to be an advantage now that Jonathan Toews is a UFA — if the 37-year-old Toews can achieve a level of performance that helps in a middle-six role.

<https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/6386138/2025/05/29/winnipeg-jets-nhl-playoffs-future/>

What would it take to put the Winnipeg Jets over the top? 5 potential paths

By Murat Ates

The Winnipeg Jets' season was spectacular but it ended in Round 2.

The Jets won the Presidents' Trophy and have finalists for the top goaltender, most valuable player, coach of the year and GM of the year awards. They are a good hockey team and should remain one, with or without Nikolaj Ehlers, but there is also an enormous question facing them in the years ahead.

How do the Winnipeg Jets get over the top? What can they realistically do to augment the group that beat the St. Louis Blues in seven games and then lost to the Dallas Stars in six?

There's no Connor McDavid, Connor Bedard or Macklin Celebrini on the way. The Jets are too good to pick No. 1 and are on track to avoid the top 10 for years to come. Top UFA targets like Mitch Marner, Sam Bennett, John Tavares and Aaron Ekblad are unlikely acquisitions, too; even with stable ownership, cap space to burn and a Stanley Cup-contending roster, the Jets have never been a top UFA destination.

It's remarkable, then, that the Jets finished No. 1 in the regular season standings at all. They're Cup contenders, pending Ehlers' future (or their attempt at his replacement) and they've done it through a combination of savvy trades and by developing their own players — despite trading away a ton of draft capital in the name of winning. In this way, the Jets' poor UFA track record hurts them twice — by keeping top end talent out of Winnipeg on July 1 and by incentivizing trading first-round picks in search of No. 2 centres. That said, it also helps them by keeping Winnipeg away from albatross UFA contracts.

But this isn't a case of a team running roughshod over the NHL, making it to the Stanley Cup Final and getting beaten by a fluke in Game 7 OT. The Jets are doing their best to maximize every avenue of talent acquisition and haven't made it as far as the third round since the Vegas Golden Knights beat them in 2018.

That team believed it had the cavalry coming in the form of top young players maturing into bigger roles. This one is led by Connor Hellebuyck, Mark Scheifele and Josh Morrissey — all on the wrong side of 30. The window to win depends on that trio maintaining elite performance before inevitable age-related decline. Elias Salomonsson, Brayden Yager and Brad Lambert are good prospects but don't match the superstar potential of 2011-2016 first-round picks Patrik Laine, Kyle Connor, Ehlers, Morrissey, Jacob Trouba and Scheifele.

So how do the Jets maximize this window? What can they do to take the next step in the playoffs before it's too late?

These are bigger questions than typically get asked of first-place teams, but the urgency is real. The Jets' best players are still great but on the downswing of their aging curves. The next wave — Dylan Samberg, Gabriel Vilardi and Cole Perfetti — is entering its prime. What could come next that would lead Winnipeg to the Stanley Cup?

The mythical Tkachuk acquisition

This section is up there with "draft Connor McDavid" as far as helpfulness goes, but there is a common thread that connects most of Winnipeg's recent trade targets. Whether it's Brandon Tanev, Luke Schenn, Alex Iafallo, Vladislav Namestnikov or Nino Niederreiter, the Jets have clearly tried to supplement their stars with players who are a pain to play against.

Ideally, Winnipeg's star players would be a pain to play against in their own right. It's just not realistic to expect Connor, Scheifele and Vilardi to play on the edge like Matthew Tkachuk, Sam Bennett or Brad Marchand do. The Panthers didn't draft any of those players, nor did they draft Sam Reinhart, but they've been aggressive on the trade front, putting themselves first in line whenever a highly talented, playoff-ready curmudgeon becomes available. It's not Niederreiter or Namestnikov's fault they're not Tkachuk, but there's clearly a difference in outcomes when the truculence comes attached to a point-per-game star player.

Winnipeg's solution may be to identify targets who are closer to the middle class — more impactful than Tanev or Namestnikov, more likely to be available than Tkachuk. Andrew Mangiapane is a pending UFA, for example. Tanner Jeannot was once thought to have offence in his game. As rare as it may be for a Tkachuk, Marchand or Tom Wilson-type player to become available, they could certainly add a valuable dynamic to the Jets.

The somehow yet more mythical Byfuglien acquisition

Dustin Byfuglien was perhaps even more rare as a defenceman than Matthew Tkachuk is as a forward (and didn't have a heavy-hitting little brother in the league). He's not fair to invoke as a trade target or UFA signing, but useful to us as a symbol. Wouldn't Josh Morrissey have done better than getting outscored 6-2 if he had a massive, mobile, puck-moving force to help him clear the crease and get pucks up ice against St. Louis and Dallas?

That's the score Winnipeg picked up in the playoffs with the Morrissey/Dylan DeMelo pairing on the ice at five-on-five — a huge disappointment after they'd won their regular season minutes 51-36 while controlling 55 percent of expected goals (via *Evolving Hockey*).

Watching them get pounded on each puck retrieval vs. St. Louis — and then watching Morrissey get hurt, twice — should have been a call to arms for the Jets. They've

heavily invested in Morrissey, DeMelo and Neal Pionk and are about to heavily invest in Dylan Samberg. This makes for a smart, talented top four defence corps, but one that's more likely to take punishment than to dole it out. Add that disadvantage to Hellebuyck's woes fighting through traffic (and acknowledge that bigger D-men like Luke Schenn and Logan Stanley didn't help on this front) and the symbol of Byfuglien lives on.

Aaron Ekblad isn't quite it, nor is Ekblad a realistic UFA target. Vladislav Gavrikov plays an effective, physical style, but is well-liked in Los Angeles. It's easy to understand why past versions of the Jets were so interested in Jamie Oleksiak, although he's not a top-four solution anymore.

The uncertain path to a second-line centre

Adam Lowry had hip surgery on Tuesday. His recovery is expected to take five to six months, taking until the end of October or November. The Jets needed help at centre before Lowry's surgery and tried to acquire Brock Nelson at the trade deadline. As I wrote in March, the Jets believed they had a deal done for Nelson at that time.

There are some wonderful UFAs available, Nelson included, but free agency isn't typically kind to the Jets. They're not going to sign Sam Bennett or John Tavares this offseason, although players of that caliber would clearly go a long way toward putting Winnipeg over the top.

Could the Jets trade for a centre instead of signing one? Andrew "Hustler" Paterson put the idea to me on this week's Winnipeg Sports Talk and it's an easy idea to run with. Winnipeg sent three first-round picks away from 2018 to 2024 for pending UFA centres (Paul Stastny, Kevin Hayes, and Sean Monahan) who signed elsewhere on July 1. It seems as though Nelson may have signed elsewhere even if the Jets had acquired him at this deadline, too. Would it not make sense to trade for a younger centre with years of team control instead of waiting until the trade deadline to go after pending free agents?

Let's say the Minnesota Wild put 60-point RFA centre Marco Rossi on the market — a distinct possibility, given the 23-year-old's unhappiness with his usage. It's unlikely that a 5-foot-9, 182-pound centre is the solution to Winnipeg's playoff dreams but Rossi's skill is undeniable and he's not UFA eligible until 2029.

The example may not be ideal but the concept is strong. The Jets are going to keep throwing assets at their second-line centre hole until the position is filled. A younger option with team control would give Winnipeg long-term stability, while freeing up deadline day assets in the pursuit of other upgrades.

A young player going supernova while the core is still great

Cole Perfetti is alone among current Jets with NHL experience, draft pedigree and enough youth to project a continued upswing. Dylan Samberg and Gabriel Vilardi have established themselves, but they'll each be 26 years old by the start of next season. Logan Stanley just turned 27; the Zdeno Chara dreams are history now.

In 2018, the Jets' great hope was that Laine, Ehlers, Connor, Morrissey and Trouba would develop into great players while Blake Wheeler, Scheifele and Byfuglien were still at their peak. It seemed realistic, based on the sheer volume of high draft picks and their early returns: the 2017-18 Jets got more than 100 goals from players who were 21 years old or younger when the season began.

Perfetti may strike closer to a point per game — especially if he replaces Nikolaj Ehlers on the first-unit power play — but there's only one of him. Lambert scored seven goals and 35 points in the AHL this year. Yager has yet to play at the AHL or NHL level, while Colby Barlow's playoffs offer long-term hope after a pedestrian 20-year-old season in the OHL.

This leaves Winnipeg with two shots at stunning star turns: Perfetti, 23, and Elias Salomonsson, who turns 21 in August. Salomonsson is Samberg-esque in his defensive intelligence, while skating better and achieving elite AHL results at a younger age than Samberg did. That doesn't mean he's a surefire NHL player this season — there isn't a lot of room at right defence — but it bodes well long-term. The Jets' defence corps is all right if Salomonsson peaks early enough and at a high enough level while Morrissey and Samberg are still excelling in their roles.

Perfetti took an exciting step forward this season. The Jets would do well to look at a long-term extension this summer before power-play opportunity raises his price for a second time. Ideally Winnipeg would have two or three players in his position — or a lottery pick, which isn't in the cards — or even more promising signs from Lambert, Barlow and Yager relative to their age.

Connor Hellebuyck goes full Hellebuyck

This is the easy way out of the thought exercise. One way for Winnipeg to make it to the third and fourth rounds of the playoffs is for Hellebuyck to shake off his recent playoff misery. Hellebuyck could carry the Jets that far himself with a string of performances like Game 2 or Game 5 against Dallas — or, more spectacularly, like Round 1 against the Edmonton Oilers in 2021.

To watch Hellebuyck get shelled against St. Louis and then start to question himself — just as he did against Colorado last season — is to think Winnipeg needs to do a better job of insulating him from crease-crashing playoff brutality. Hellebuyck has been the best regular-season goalie of the past several years because of his reads and his positioning — but through processing power, not acrobatics. We've seen multiple teams bully the Jets in the slot now, taking Hellebuyck's sightlines away from him such that he's left to scrap for positioning. He's gotten off his game, confessing last year that he tried to put too much on his own shoulders and this year that he started to doubt his own process as the goals piled up.

It's a tempting, easy out as far as projecting Winnipeg's success goes. Snap your fingers, give Hellebuyck league-average results, and Winnipeg is dealing with Edmonton in Round 3 right now instead of sorting out its offseason. And it's entirely

possible that he gets hot at the right time, or finds a better way to manage net-front chaos against his Central Division rivals.

I think the Jets' best play at helping him do that comes in the form of that mythical Byfuglien figure discussed above. In a playoffs where Winnipeg lapped the field in terms of giving up goals on screens, part of the solution must come from Hellebuyck and part of it must come from what happens in front of him.

<https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/6381504/2025/05/26/winnipeg-jets-offseason-priorities-2/>

Winnipeg Jets offseason priorities: Get clarity on Nikolaj Ehlers, seek term with RFAs

By Murat Ates

The Winnipeg Jets begin the 2025 offseason with a high-profile, homegrown UFA to sign — or an abundance of cap room to go shopping with.

Once it has Nikolaj Ehlers' future sorted out, it has Dylan Samberg and Gabriel Vilardi's long-term futures to prioritize. But what next? In what order? How much cap space do the Presidents' Trophy-winning Jets have to work with — and how do Kyle Connor, Adam Lowry, and Winnipeg's other 2026-27 free agents impact what the Jets do this summer?

This offseason has the power to cement the Jets as perennial contenders, solidifying their roster and addressing their playoff shortcomings — or leave them behind as they take their next steps toward the Stanley Cup.

We'll dig deeper into each of these in the coming weeks but for now, here are the Jets' eight biggest offseason priorities:

Winnipeg's 2025-26 salary cap

This incomplete version of the 2025-26 Winnipeg Jets would have \$26.4 million to work with, highlighting the team's flexibility as the offseason begins.

Winnipeg gets out of Blake Wheeler's buyout, leaving only \$1.6 million from Nate Schmidt's buyout as dead money on the cap. While there is the potential for upheaval via Nikolaj Ehlers' departure — and Winnipeg's efforts to replace him, if he does sign elsewhere — there's a lot of roster stability on defence and in goal.

RFA forwards: Gabriel Vilardi, Morgan Barron, Rasmus Kupari

RFA defence: Dylan Samberg

How much does \$26.4 million get you in 2025?

There are still two forward jobs available once Vilardi, Barron, and Kupari have signed. Ehlers could take one, if the Jets do manage to sign him. Perhaps more likely, there is the possibility of signing a centreman — I can't shake Winnipeg's interest in Jonathan Toews, if he's ready — and then promoting whichever of Brad Lambert, Nikita Chibrikov, Jaret Anderson-Dolan, or Parker Ford is most NHL-ready.

Samberg's contract would give Winnipeg eight NHL defencemen under contract, necessitating movement. This could be as simple as waiving Ville Heinola at training camp, given how little they used him, or it could involve an offseason transaction that preemptively clears that room.

The Jets can afford to sign all three of Ehlers, Vilardi, and Samberg if they make \$23 million or less collectively.

1. Get clarity on Ehlers — and plan for life without him

Winnipeg is not blindsided by Ehlers' UFA uncertainty. Cheveldayoff's two-hour meeting with Ehlers' agent should leave the Jets with clarity on Ehlers' contract hopes — including how likely he is to be a free agent on July 1. It's not that the Jets can't afford to sign Ehlers, mind you: Cheveldayoff said last week that he's prepared to offer Ehlers a "Jet for life" type of contract.

How might that look?

I believe the Jets could sign Ehlers to big ticket money without upsetting their existing contractual hierarchy.

Mark Scheifele is Winnipeg's highest-paid forward, earning \$8.5 million per season — 9.66 percent of the 2024-25 cap — but that contract was signed toward the end of the flat cap era. The new \$95.5 million cap maximum changes things: the same percentage Scheifele signed for would earn him \$9.2 million contract in today's dollars. Put another way: Winnipeg could sign Ehlers to Scheifele's same \$8.5 million — or any \$8.x million number — without it being a statement that Ehlers is worth more than Scheifele is to the team.

It may be that Ehlers is simply prepared to move on. Perhaps he's ready for a new opportunity. His promotion to the Jets' top power play unit helped him play the fourth-most all-situations minutes among Jets forwards this season — closer to his value — but there may be teams that can afford to play him in an even bigger role. New Jersey, Carolina, and Washington come to mind as markets with cap space, ambition, and room for another top winger. (Montreal, a frequent fan-suggested landing spot, won't have the cap room and is already well-stocked in skilled forwards.)

If the Jets find themselves without Ehlers, they'll have his \$8.x million projected cap hit available to spend on other players. The UFA market hasn't traditionally been kind to Winnipeg but does include players the Jets have been interested in before. There's

Brock Nelson, who the Jets worked to acquire at the 2025 deadline, and Brock Boeser, who they were keen to draft in 2015, for starters. There are also players who balance truculence and skill — a combination Winnipeg could use more of — including Sam Bennett, who seems at home in Florida, and Andrew Mangiapane, whose ice time and output dipped in Washington.

It's hard to know what to project from Toews, if he's healthy enough to play, while equally famous options like John Tavares, Mitch Marner, and Brad Marchand seem like unrealistic points of discussion. The only UFA signings on Winnipeg's everyday roster last season were Eric Comrie and Colin Miller, each of whom had prior experience with the Jets.

It's Winnipeg's job to know their options — with Ehlers and without him — and one expects they've been assembling contingency plans for months, if not longer. The sheer size of his potential cap hit makes clarity on Ehlers No. 1 in the order.

2. Seek term with Vilardi and Samberg

Samberg is 26 years old; Vilardi turns 26 in August. Winnipeg would do well to sign both players for as many years as they're able to budget, but arbitration rights and the desire to see how the new cap affects UFA prices — plus the outcome of Ehlers' future — could push the timeline deeper into summer.

Samberg's case seems like the more straightforward of the two. The Jets defence corps is rock solid with him and Josh Morrissey playing on the left side and problematic without him. Samberg shares his hometown, his agent, and his offseason lake with his defence partner, Neal Pionk, while his wife — Dr. Destiny Samberg — has started her dental practice in Winnipeg. It helps the Jets' case that Samberg has delivered top flight top-four minutes for one season, instead of several, or that the best-in-class shutdown defenceman, Jaccob Slavin, starts his eight year, \$6.4 million AAV contract next season.

It helps Samberg's case that he's UFA-eligible as soon as 2026 — in fact, all he'd have to do to fast track a Winnipeg departure is file for arbitration, take the one-year award it creates, and then walk next summer. (I don't expect that kind of hardball. If Samberg files for arbitration this summer, I don't expect it will be done with the intention of cutting off long-term contract discussions.)

Vilardi's situation is similar to Samberg's: He has arbitration rights and he hit a new plateau last season. Vilardi's earliest UFA eligibility is 2027, though, giving him a few options: While he can't fast-track UFA status by filing for arbitration, he could decide to bet on himself by signing a one year pact. The cap maximum will increase from \$95.5 million in 2025-26 to \$104 million next season; Vilardi could earn himself a bigger payday just by repeating his 71 game, 61-point season — and more power to him if he continues to improve.

Both parties will need to weigh their feelings about Vilardi's injury history. There may be incentive for the player to lock down guaranteed long-term money, despite the

opportunity to pursue an 82-game 2025-26 season and improve upon his point totals. There may not be as much incentive for a max term deal on the Jets' part as is typical of a 26-year-old with such a dynamic offensive toolkit. They haven't seen him drive five-on-five play away from Connor and Scheifele and may want to see that happen before committing to a more expensive, long-term contract.

Given the rising cap and a belief in Samberg and Vilardi as quality players, I expect the Jets' best outcome includes long-term contracts for both players.

3. Lay the groundwork for Connor, Lowry, and Perfetti extensions

We'll keep this section short but rest assured: Winnipeg is going to put in long hours this summer to prepare for Kyle Connor, Adam Lowry, and Cole Perfetti's contract extensions. Connor is at the front of that line, given the dollars in play, and his projected contract — which would start in 2026-27 — will impact this summer's long-term thinking. Lowry won't command the same kind of money and may wait until September or beyond to finalize a deal but, like Connor, he's also in line for an extension as soon as July 1. Perfetti's bridge deal is half over and the Jets may do well to sign him long term before he's played a full year on the top power play unit (assuming Ehlers signs elsewhere).

It helps that the cap is increasing to \$104 million in 2026-27 and that the Jets will be free of Schmidt's buyout by then, too. Rest assured that these future contracts — Connor's in particular — are already part of Winnipeg's thought process.

4. Make a new plan to find a second-line centre

Vladislav Namestnikov is versatile, tenacious, a pain to play against, and a good stylistic complement to Winnipeg's finesse-first forwards. He's not an ideal second-line centre, nor have the Jets treated him as one: Winnipeg traded for Sean Monahan in 2024 and then tried to extend him last summer. It made Nelson their top target at this year's trade deadline, then watched as Nelson arrived at his preferred destination in Colorado.

Winnipeg has traded three first-round picks for second line centres that didn't stay in Winnipeg: Paul Stastny (2018), Kevin Hayes (2019), and Monahan (2024). It also traded Patrik Laine and Jack Roslovic for Pierre-Luc Dubois, although Dubois' departure worked out in the form of Vilardi, Alex Iafallo, Rasmus Kupari, and a second-round draft pick (Alfons Freij).

The asset drain is continuous — and would have continued this year had Winnipeg landed Nelson — and it will continue until the hole is plugged. Vilardi, Perfetti, and Brad Lambert are internal options (although Vilardi and Perfetti lack footspeed, while Lambert seems to have taken a step back in the AHL this season). The Jets need to know that one of their own players can fill the role, sign someone this summer, or run the risk of trading more assets away for a centre at the 2026 deadline. It's hard to be a draft and develop organization that sends draft capital out the door to fill the same hole every season.

5. Assess roster balance: Do the Jets need more shift disturbers?

This priority may be difficult to pin down but it must be part of Winnipeg's assessment all the same. Florida and Edmonton seem to be on a crash course to repeat as Cup finalists; watching the Oilers drives home the importance of generational talent, while watching the Panthers shows the power available when elite skill and brutal toughness meet on the same roster. Winnipeg is too good to draft No. 1 overall several times, as the Oilers did, but some amount of emulating Florida seems possible. We've already seen it in the form of the Niederreiter, Namestnikov, and Lafallo acquisitions: There's nothing Matthew Tkachuk adjacent or even Brad Marchand-esque in this group but it's made Winnipeg tougher to play against all the same.

I'd caution against overcorrecting — the Presidents' Trophy is a difficult trophy to win, even if the road to the Cup is more brutal. But the Jets are built around the Connor/Scheifele duo up front and on Morrissey (and ideally Samberg) on defence. There's not a lot of sandpaper among the Jets' elite; Winnipeg doesn't need to pivot to pure grit but it would do well to stay on top of opportunities to add more talented truculence. What if the Jets' next first-round opponent hits like the Blues but has the top end talent of the Stars?

6. Another must-win NHL draft

Winnipeg's scouts must be under more pressure than most of their rivals; the Jets' win-now mode, combined with Winnipeg's tough draw as a UFA market, has meant trading picks for veteran players. Perfetti (2020) and Samberg (2017) are the Jets' last two draft picks to establish themselves as either a top-six forward or a top-four defenceman. Part of what seems like a dip in draft efficacy is actually a shortage of picks. The Jets have traded away a ton of draft capital since 2018, including two of its picks at this year's draft in June.

Winnipeg has its own picks in the first, third, fifth, sixth, and seventh rounds. It traded its second-round pick to New Jersey for Tyler Toffoli last season and its fourth-round pick to San Jose for Namestnikov in 2023. The Jets got Freij, Kevin He, Markus Loponen, and Kieron Walton out of four picks last year — with particularly good early returns from He and Walton in the OHL — and a little bit more of that magic would be more than welcome.

7. Appleton, Tanev, and Winnipeg's other non-Ehlers UFAs

Mason Appleton and Brandon Tanev complicate the cap picture presented above. It's hard to imagine Winnipeg paying Appleton market value (\$3.2 million, according to AFP Analytics) and having the room to take a swing at Ehlers while retaining Samberg and Vilardi. Tanev may not cost as much but is coming off a \$3.5 million AAV deal. It's not as easy to assume team-friendly contracts for either player as for RFAs like Barron and Kupari.

The Jets have more room if Ehlers walks but may also find that Lafallo, Namestnikov, and Niederreiter have Winnipeg's depth jobs covered, while earmarking room on the roster for Lambert or Chibrikov with an eye to the future. I'm not expecting Winnipeg to

make early, aggressive swings on Appleton and Tanev. The Jets like both players, but I don't expect they enjoy their projected UFA prices.

Dominic Toninato, Haydn Fleury, and Chris Driedger may have a role on next year's club but don't represent urgent priorities at this stage of the offseason.

8. Fleury? Heinola? The inevitable logjam on defence

It's easy to assume there's no room for Haydn Fleury. The Jets will have eight defencemen on their NHL roster once Samberg signs — nine if they retain Fleury as a UFA — while they prefer to carry seven on the roster during the regular season. That's not a pressing offseason concern, if we're being honest; it would be easy to bring extra defencemen to camp and then waive them if everybody stays healthy.

The Jets could proactively try to clear room. If they're done with Ville Heinola, for example, they could try to move him before he becomes a Group VI UFA next summer. It would be easier and more cautious to wait until training camp and make sure everyone is healthy to start the season before risking waivers on Heinola, Fleury, or even one of the established veterans. The Jets signed Fleury on July 5 last summer; whether it's Winnipeg or a different team, it seems less likely that Fleury lasts that long after a strong showing this season.

<https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/6371613/2025/05/23/winnipeg-jets-who-stays-who-goes/>

Winnipeg Jets 2025-26 roster decisions: Who stays and who goes this offseason?

By Murat Ates

Nikolaj Ehlers' Jets future is in jeopardy, but GM Kevin Cheveldayoff says he met with Ehlers' agent, Andre Rufener, for two hours on Monday.

That such a meeting took place is a positive sign toward an Ehlers extension — they did not do the same with Brenden Dillon or Nate Schmidt's representation at this time last year — although it's clear the Jets are also preparing themselves for the possibility of an Ehlers departure.

"We will put our best foot forward to try to make our case (for Ehlers) to be one of those guys who can be a unique 'Jet for Life' type of player," Cheveldayoff said at Jets exit interviews on Wednesday. "We'll see where it goes from there, but the relationship is great. He did contribute to the success of this organization on many fronts and we hope that that's something that can continue."

Jets fans hoping for an Ehlers contract can take optimism from that kind of dialogue. Ehlers and his camp have done an excellent job of keeping their business private, giving themselves the opportunity to come to an agreement with Winnipeg or explore the open market on July 1. Just don't mistake optimism for certainty.

The Jets will have an internal budget for Ehlers, knowing that they have Dylan Samberg and Gabriel Vilardi to extend this summer and that Kyle Connor's contract ends next season. Ehlers' power play promotion helped him score 63 points in 69 games, the highest per-game rate of his career, but he was still a secondary player at even strength. He received the ninth-most five-on-five minutes per game during the regular season — and again in the playoffs — and, whatever the contract terms are, there's a chance Ehlers is more interested in playing a bigger role than Winnipeg can promise him.

Cheveldayoff says Winnipeg will be prepared for a future with or without Ehlers, who they drafted ninth in 2014 and developed into a dominant, if chaotic, five-on-five player.

"If he does choose to go in a different direction, then obviously as an organization we will have to evolve as we have in the past with other things," Cheveldayoff said. "It will be another opportunity for us to grow in a different area."

Will Ehlers stay? Will he go? What about the rest of the Jets — whether they need new contracts or not — as Winnipeg's offseason begins?

The three untouchable core players

Connor Hellebuyck isn't going anywhere. He's just completed the first year in his seven year, \$8.5 million contract extension, is a finalist for the Hart Trophy, and will win the Vezina Trophy. Cheveldayoff called him "the best goaltender in the world" twice on Wednesday. This is a franchise player.

Mark Scheifele isn't going anywhere, either, nor is anybody clamoring for it after the 87-point season he just had and the family tragedy he played through in Game 6. His contract matches Hellebuyck's — they're the two pillars upon which this contention window is built — and the Jets are fortunate that both were signed before the salary cap started to skyrocket.

Josh Morrissey will receive Norris Trophy votes for the third straight season while earning a \$6.25 million AAV. His decision to frame his struggle with his dad's death as a lesson to help him be there for Scheifele is one of the most striking bits of humanity of the Jets' season. He's the heart of the Jets defensive group.

Core adjacent players, not going anywhere

Cole Perfetti is tracking to move from this group into the core; he hit 50 points as a 22-year-old and should see his minutes increase next season. He should be first in line for top power play minutes if Ehlers signs elsewhere, while continuing to grow at even strength. His \$3.25 million bridge deal has been great short-term value for the Jets; his next contract will ideally be long-term and will cost more now that he's proven himself than it would have last summer.

Neal Pionk just signed a six-year contract extension and it's clear the Jets are invested in him as a person and part of their leadership group. He deserves credit for an epic, 46-minute performance in Game 7 against St. Louis after Morrissey was hurt. There's a chance that his \$7.0 million cap hit ages poorly; this depends on his performance, health, and the degree to which the cap increases to mitigate age-related decline. He'll be 30 this summer, though, and he's a big part of this team.

Dylan DeMelo has three years left on the \$4.9 million AAV contract he signed last summer. He showed his first real signs of wobbling in a top four role alongside Morrissey this season, but the chemistry continues to produce positive regular-season results. It's starting to look more and more like Winnipeg needs a more Byfuglien-esque version of a No. 1 RD to partner with Morrissey; even if it found such a player, DeMelo would be valuable further down the depth chart.

Recent signees, staying put

Alex Iafallo has bought in to Winnipeg as a team and as a place to play, signing a three year, \$3.67 million contract that could see him elevated from the fourth line — particularly if the Jets are willing to let Mason Appleton, Brandon Tanev, or both hit free agency.

Nino Niederreiter was the first non-core player to extend in Winnipeg following the matching Hellebuyck and Scheifele extensions. His \$4.0 million AAV contract has two years left on it. If that seems expensive, consider that Lowry's shutdown line has excelled since Niederreiter's 2023 arrival bumped inferior competition like Saku Maenalanen, Karson Kuhlman, Axel Jonsson-Fjallby, and Jansen Harkins from the role.

Vladislav Namestnikov's \$3.0 million AAV contract was the first of three end-of-season extensions, followed by Iafallo and Pionk. That's an excellent price point for a versatile player who is often listed as Winnipeg's No. 2 centreman. Will the Jets try to upgrade down the middle again? Yes. If they succeed, Namestnikov will have no trouble finding a different useful role.

Core players who are UFA in 2026

Adam Lowry told us that he sees himself as a lifelong Jet and Cheveldayoff said the organization is on board. Cheveldayoff also shared that, when he called Lowry to talk about his last extension, it was about a week before the 2021 trade deadline and he accidentally spooked Lowry with the timing: "He thought he was getting traded." Cheveldayoff said he and Lowry were laughing about it on Wednesday, with the GM promising not to put Lowry through a similar scare this time around.

Kyle Connor's \$7.1 million contract comes to an end next summer. His next contract is a massive priority for the Jets. Assuming Connor signs an extension before next year at this time, he'll automatically become the highest-paid Jets player. There's risk here, given that Connor turns 29 this December, but 90-plus point players who love Manitoba's outdoors are a rarity in the NHL. The Jets value Connor and will do everything in their power to sign him.

Nikolaj Ehlers: Jet for life? Or soon to be set free?

"I know how this world works," Ehlers told *The Athletic* earlier this season. "Everyone wants answers and I get that."

What he didn't do was tip his hand as to his future plans. Questions about his contract were met with uncertainty, while questions about the bonds he's formed in Winnipeg were met with love.

"Ask the retired guys, you know what I mean? They may not miss the hockey part so much when they retire — it's the guys," Ehlers said. "It's going to the rink, hanging out with the guys, and shooting the s—. You grind for so long to get to the same thing. There's guys here that we've been trying to win the Stanley Cup for the Winnipeg Jets for nine years. So yes. You do create a special bond with the guys that sit in here and go through the same things on and off the ice and that's something that lasts for a long time."

What does it all mean? Some of the conversations that determine whether he's a Jet "for life" as Cheveldayoff said — or a free agent — will happen after he's done at the World Championships. If I'm guessing, I think that a team that can offer Ehlers a bigger role on the ice — perhaps a bigger, Eastern Conference metropolis — will have the best shot at signing him when all is said and done. He played low-end second-line minutes (or high-end third-line minutes, depending on where you set the boundaries) and I wonder if he'll want more than that while his production is still worthy of it.

It's too soon to be sure, though — and it was clearly a special year in Winnipeg.

Core players: In need of RFA contracts

Dylan Samberg has turned himself into a cornerstone of Winnipeg's defence corps. He'll be back. The only questions are about dollars and term — and whether Samberg's goal is multiple cracks at UFA status or a longer-term deal that maximizes stability. He wasn't interested in detailing his hopes when speaking to reporters on Wednesday but I fully anticipate a multi-year contract extension. Note that Samberg could theoretically become a UFA as soon as July 1 of next summer — he has more leverage than might be expected for a player with one year of top four experience.

Gabriel Vilardi isn't eligible for unrestricted free agency until 2027. This opens the door for a one-year contract as well as long term options. He's due for a sizable raise regardless of term but Vilardi is a big part of Winnipeg's future.

In both cases, Cheveldayoff was more excited about the players' development than worried about their contract.

"That's going to take care of itself," he said of negotiations. "We'll find a way to find common ground."

Restricted free agents hoping to grow

Morgan Barron played his way into the fourth-line centre job in the wake of Rasmus Kupari's concussion. I think the Jets are hoping Barron can grow beyond that role, perhaps inspired by the power forward type goals he started to score at the end of the season.

Kupari told The Athletic on Wednesday that his concussion recovery was a slower process than he'd anticipated. It sounded as though he's done a good job of listening to his body, managing symptoms, and making the right choices to make a full recovery. He will be keen to consolidate the step forward he took this season.

Barron and Kupari are each eligible for arbitration this summer. That said, their limited offensive numbers make it hard to imagine a case for a substantial raise.

UFAs: A heavy helping of 'If the price is right'

Mason Appleton scored 22 points in 71 games. He's been a dogged part of Winnipeg's shutdown line, helping it achieve dominant flow of play numbers since Niederreiter's arrival. He sounded hopeful that a contract would get done, although conversations between his agent and the Jets haven't started in earnest the way they have for other players. I wonder if he's a player the Jets would like to bring back, but not at the \$3.25 million or \$4.0 million prices of his linemates.

Brandon Tanev was fun to watch but didn't score or control the flow of play in concert with his \$3.5 million contract. Like Appleton, I could see the Jets being interested but not at a price that brings him close to Lowry or Niederreiter's AAV. Having said that, there's also a chance that Winnipeg is so entrenched in its win-now mode that veterans like Appleton and Tanev are more appealing to them than opportunities for Brad Lambert, Nikita Chibrikov, and the next generation.

Dominic Toninato won't be in line for a substantial raise from the \$775,000 contract he's just finished; he's been a great fit in his role playing in the AHL and NHL as needed, though, and I could see him signing in Winnipeg once again.

Haydn Fleury signed with Winnipeg in part because the Jets and Moose share a city. He then took his opportunity and ran with it out of training camp, earning third pairing minutes, getting promoted beyond his reach when Samberg was hurt, and then showing well when added to Winnipeg's playoff lineup. That's a good addition to Fleury's resume and should see him earn an everyday job somewhere in the NHL. He said he'd love to say in Winnipeg; if the Jets are interested in that, they might have to work to create room or run the risk of losing multiple defencemen to waivers.

Chris Driedger could be a good option to insulate Thomas Milic and Dom DiVincentiis in the AHL if the Jets still expect they need one. He enjoyed his hometown return. Axel Jonsson-Fjallby didn't get into an NHL game this season. I wonder about a return to Sweden; I'm not sure what his future holds.

Jets depth under contract

Luke Schenn has one more year left on his contract. Schenn spoke openly about how hard it was to be away from his wife and three kids, who stayed behind in Nashville when the Jets acquired him. Winnipeg did its part, allowing him to leave the team to be with his family during off days. Assuming he's back next season, one hopes for a more sustainable arrangement; Schenn's family is clearly his No. 1 priority.

Colin Miller is the player whose minutes Schenn largely took. Miller's underlying numbers were superior to Schenn's, while the Jets performed better on the scoreboard in Miller's minutes than they did with Schenn on the ice. He'll be back to compete for the third pairing job one more time.

Logan Stanley has one more year left on his \$1.25 million AAV contract before UFA eligibility next summer. Based on this season's usage, Stanley is first in line for the job at third pairing left defence. Ville Heinola could theoretically offer competition for that job, depending on his health and Winnipeg's roster construction, but Heinola only played in two games after the 4 Nations break and seven in 2025.

Eric Comrie is an ideal fit as Hellebuyck's backup. Their friendship is strong, their working relationship is strong, and the Jets were pleased with Comrie's .914 save percentage in 20 regular-season games.

David Gustafsson and Jaret Anderson-Dolan combined for what was very briefly an important goal against St. Louis in Game 3 of the first round. They'll be in the mix for fourth line jobs next season, depending on what happens further up the depth chart.

Salomonsson, Lambert, and beyond: Is there room?

Winnipeg's prospects are in tough to make next year's team, barring dramatic steps forward or spectacular training camp performances.

Elias Salomonsson is Winnipeg's top prospect. He is in tough to win an NHL job, with DeMelo, Pionk, Schenn, and Miller slotted ahead of him on the right side; he'll turn 21 this August and has two years left on his ELC.

Brad Lambert struggled to produce AHL offence last season — a fact true for every Moose but worrisome for an offence-first speedster with Lambert's skills. It seems worth tempering expectations about the nature of NHL impact he could make if he earns a Jets job this fall. Brayden Yager is likely Moose-bound and may have surpassed Lambert as Winnipeg's top forward prospect; it would be exciting to see them play on the same line at any level.

Nikita Chibrikov has the most NHL-ready game of Winnipeg's forward prospects but his season ended early due to a lower-body injury. Colby Barlow redeemed an underwhelming OHL season with a dominant playoff performance, scoring 33 points in 21 games. He'll likely head to Manitoba to start his pro career.