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Puck drops on training camp

Storylines to follow as Jets take first step on long road to Stanley Cup

By: Mike McIntyre and Ken Wiebe

Stanley Cups aren't won in September. But this is the time of year when championship dreams take shape and good habits are built — the kind teams hope will lead to the ultimate celebration nine months down the road.

The Winnipeg Jets believe they have as good a shot as anyone. And why not?

Now entering their 15th season of the 2.0 era, the Jets are coming off a magical campaign in which they set franchise records for wins (56) and points (116), finishing atop the Central Division, the Western Conference, and the entire NHL after the 82-game marathon.

They've (mostly) kept the band together and hope to keep making sweet music — ideally building to a crescendo next spring.

Of course, it's far too early to start planning the parade. There's a long road ahead, which begins Wednesday with medicals and testing, followed by the first on-ice sessions Thursday at the Hockey For All Centre.

Along with the excitement and optimism, there's no shortage of compelling storylines as camp opens. Let's dig in.

HAPPY HOMECOMING — Before he even played a single game or put on the jersey of his hometown team, Jonathan Toews was the highest-profile unrestricted free agent the Jets have signed in the 2.0 era.

He's one of the most decorated athletes the province of Manitoba has ever produced and his resumé speaks for itself. For a team trying to build on a Presidents' Trophy, there's little-to-no downside in signing a three-time Stanley Cup champion and two-time Olympic gold medallist to the roster.

Toews is a natural-born leader and has the personality that should fit in seamlessly with this Jets' group and his comeback after a two-year absence from the NHL is a story that many folks around the league are taking great interest in.

It's fair to say there are a few unknowns for Toews, who is hopeful that he's left his health issues in the rearview mirror. During the informal skates, it's clear that the Winnipegger is finding great joy in being back on the ice and getting back in the routine of being an NHL player. He's put in the work during the recovery process and is in great shape.

Now it's time to see how his body is going to hold up over the long haul.

In the short term, Toews will work at getting himself back up to speed — both literally and figuratively. Asked last week if he has a number in mind for how many exhibition games he

wants to participate in, the former Chicago Blackhawks captain didn't sound like someone who planned to just dip a toe into the water.

"I won't say a number, but probably the more the better at this point," said Toews, noting there's a week between the final exhibition game and the first game of the regular season.

Provided Toews shows he can do that — and there's no indication so far that he won't be able to — handling middle-six minutes is a more than reasonable expectation. Toews has always been someone whose performance improves when the stakes get higher, so that's something to take into consideration as well when trying to come up with any early evaluations. However, given his will to win, it probably won't take all that long for Toews to show that he's still got plenty of gas left in the tank.

CONTRACT TALKS — Trouble in paradise? Top sniper Kyle Connor enters this season without a contract beyond it, and so far, extension talks haven't produced any results.

There's no need to smash the panic button just yet, but the chatter will only grow louder with each passing day. That's life in a hockey-crazed market still feeling a touch of PTSD from how the Nikolaj Ehlers situation unfolded.

If opening night on Oct. 9 arrives with no progress, the whispers could quickly escalate into a full-blown roar.

Connor declined media requests for comment at Monday's team golf tournament, which is his right. Players aren't obligated to talk. But come Thursday, when training camp officially opens, he won't be able to dodge the questions.

What he says will be closely watched.

GOODBYE, FLY — There's no denying that the departure of Ehlers to the Carolina Hurricanes as an unrestricted free agent leaves the biggest hole to fill on this roster.

Often referred to as a one-man zone entry for his ability to gain the offensive zone with his speed and shiftiness, Ehlers was a highly-productive winger during his decade in the organization. The eight-time 20-goal scorer was a play driver and played a critical role on the top-ranked power play in the NHL last season, handling his move to the pop position in the high slot with aplomb.

Ehlers also dealt with a variety of injuries during his tenure, so the Jets have had ample experience learning what life will be like without him. But replacing his point totals isn't a one-man job — this task will be tackled by committee as the Jets look for the combination of internal growth from several returnees, coupled with the addition of free agent signings like Gustav Nyquist, Tanner Pearson, Cole Koepke and some of the depth pieces that were brought in to strengthen the organization.

Nyquist figures to get the first crack at filling in for Ehlers on the Jets' second line and, while he's not expected to challenge the career-best 75 points he had in 2023-24 with the Nashville Predators, he's been north of 40 points nine times in his 13 NHL seasons — which is probably why the Jets feel the 28 points he had last season was an outlier.

CAPTAIN'S RECOVERY — Like Connor, captain Adam Lowry is also set to become an unrestricted free agent on July 1. But in his case, an extension is expected to be little more than a formality, which is why there isn't nearly as much buzz. The numbers on his next deal will also be considerably smaller than Connor's.

Still, Lowry will be a focus at camp for another reason — he'll begin on a separate sheet of ice, apart from his teammates. The 32-year-old is recovering from off-season hip surgery, and his progress will be closely monitored. Will he join the main group at some point?

Lowry has been moving well during informal skates the past two weeks and is targeting a late October or early November return. And, if history is any indication, he'll do everything in his power to get back into the mix sooner rather than later.

PERFETTI'S PROGRESSION — Cole Perfetti sits at the top of the list when it comes to internal candidates to level up considerably.

He clearly established himself as a top-six player last season and enjoyed a nice step forward, moving from 38 to 50 points while suiting up in all 82 games for the first time in his career. Not only did Perfetti increase his production, he was a consistent contributor and found a way to make an impact even when he didn't hit the score sheet.

Winnipeg Jets forward Cole Perfetti clearly established himself as a top-six player last season.

The 10th-overall pick in the 2020 NHL draft also scored the most memorable goal of his young career, bulging the twine with 1.6 seconds to go in regulation time in Game 7 against the St. Louis Blues. Coming through in the clutch was another example of Perfetti's development last season and he looks primed for the first 20-goal campaign of his career.

Perfetti has an underrated shot and it probably won't be long before he's regularly in the 25-goal range and pushing for 30. One of the intriguing storylines in training camp will be watching to see how the chemistry develops between him and Toews.

CENTRES OF ATTENTION — With Lowry sidelined, there's a temporary vacancy down the middle for the Jets. Mark Scheifele is locked in as the No. 1 centre, while Toews will be given every chance to prove he can handle the No. 2 role. That leaves the question: who fills Lowry's skates on the third line, traditionally used as a shutdown unit?

The most likely answer is Vlad Namestnikov, who spent much of last season holding down the fort on the second line and brings a steady, two-way presence. Morgan Barron is another option, although he's currently projected to anchor the fourth line after moving off the wing last year and thriving at centre.

A long-shot candidate could be David Gustafsson, once dubbed by scouts on draft day as "a Swedish Adam Lowry." Other players with centre experience include Gabe Vilardi and Perfetti, though the coaching staff prefers to keep them on the wing in top-six roles, plus depth skaters such as Jaret Anderson-Dolan and Mason Shaw.

Expect plenty of pre-season experimentation as head coach Scott Arniel works to find the right mix.

BLUE-LINE LOGJAM — It's important to remember that the Jets aren't that far removed from a time when organization depth on the blue line was severely tested. And when you're trying to make a serious playoff run, most teams want to be comfortable going nine or 10 D-men deep.

With that in mind, it makes sense the Jets enter training camp with nine blue-liners on one-way contracts but, as Jets general manager Kevin Cheveldayoff pointed out in July, they aren't going to be carrying nine D-men on the active roster when the season begins.

Last fall, the Jets found out within the first two days of training camp that both Logan Stanley and Ville Heinola were injured, so having some extra guys around on the back end was important. However, all signs point to the nine returnees being healthy and they're now joined by Kale Clague and top prospect Elias Salomonsson in the battle for NHL minutes.

Salomonsson had an excellent first season playing in North America, while Clague, a former Brandon Wheat Kings blue-liner, brings 94 games of NHL experience to the organization. While he's a prime candidate to partner with Salomonsson on the top pairing with the Manitoba Moose of the AHL, he's also a valuable insurance policy who could force his way into NHL action like Dylan Coghlan and Kyle Capobianco did with the Jets during the past several seasons.

It's a bit surprising that someone like Heinola wasn't moved during the summer, but now that his ankle injury has been taken care of, this could be a final opportunity to show the Jets — or another team — that he's ready for full-time duty.

The Jets' top-two pairings are firmly established with Josh Morrissey-Dylan DeMelo and Dylan Samberg-Neal Pionk ready to log major minutes. Going into camp, Haydn Fleury-Luke Schenn appear to have the inside track, though they'll face competition for playing time from Stanley, Heinola, Colin Miller and company.

If the Jets can avoid the injury bug, making a trade or subjecting a player or two to waivers looks like the most likely outcome here.

KIDS IN PLAY — Lowry's absence also opens a spot on the 23-man roster that might not otherwise exist — one that could be filled by a young skater from within the system.

Could Brad Lambert, Nikita Chibrikov, Parker Ford, or even one of the first-year pros such as Brayden Yager (a natural centre), Colby Barlow, or Jacob Julien grab it? It's possible, though all six are expected to spend much of this season with the Manitoba Moose unless injuries or performance issues create an opportunity.

Don't overlook free-agent signing Samuel Fagemo, either. The 25-year-old has an excellent AHL resumé and could push for NHL minutes. And the organization was surely encouraged by what it saw from third-year pro Danny Zhilkin at this past weekend's prospects tournament in Montreal.

There's far less intrigue on the blue line, where Salomonsson is likely destined for more time with the Moose thanks to a serious numbers crunch at his position. That's not necessarily a bad thing, though.

SPECIAL TEAMS — Improving on special teams was one of the top priorities for Arniel and his staff after he took over from Rick Bowness prior to last season. Mission accomplished on both

fronts, especially on the power play as the Jets went from the bottom third of the NHL to leading the league for almost the entire season with the man advantage.

Losing Ehlers will be a blow, but the Jets have two guys capable of handling the pop position in Perfetti (who was promoted when Ehlers was out for 13 games last season) and Toews, who has seen top power-play minutes throughout a career that has spanned nearly two decades.

Davis Payne did an outstanding job creating wrinkles for the power play last season and he'll be tasked with doing so again.

Vilardi is an outstanding distributor and finisher and he will be looking to build on the 12 power-play goals he scored last season.

Nyquist is also guy who should be a threat on the second unit, as he has 48 markers on the man advantage during his career — including 14 with the Detroit Red Wings during the 2014-15 season.

As for the penalty kill, it moved from the bottom third of the NHL to 13th overall under Dean Chynoweth during his first season running the unit and they'll be trying to improve further. Being without Lowry for the first month or so will make that challenge a bit stiffer — as will the departures of Mason Appleton and Brandon Tanev in free agency — but the Jets believe they have the personnel to be better while shorthanded.

Finding pairs that work well together up front will be one of the under-the-radar things on display during the six exhibition contests.

FORWARD BATTLES — Morrissey said Monday he believes the Jets are as deep as they've ever been — and it's hard to argue with him.

Just look at the forward group: Scheifele, Vilardi, Connor, Toews, Perfetti, Nyquist, Namestnikov, Barron, Nino Niederreiter and Alex Iafallo are all locked in. Add Lowry once he's off IR, and that's 11 spots spoken for.

That leaves just two to three openings for as many as 15 candidates: Gustafsson, Anderson-Dolan, Shaw, Lambert, Chibrikov, Ford, Yager, Barlow, Julien, Fagemo, Zhilkin, plus free-agent additions Koepke, Pearson, Phil Di Giuseppe and Walker Duehr.

That, folks, is one heck of a battle. May the best men win.

The Athletic

<https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/6631201/2025/09/16/nhl-rookie-camp-ivan-demidov-vilmer-alriksson/>

NHL rookie camp roundup: The biggest standouts from tournaments across the league

By The Athletic NHL Staff

NHL rookie tournaments marked the start of the league's 2025-26 calendar over the weekend.

The Athletic's team of writers attended tournaments and games in Buffalo, Montreal, Edmonton, St. Paul, Minn., Wesley Chapel, Fla., Irvine, Calif. and more.

These tournaments are an important kickoff of training camps and an opportunity for prospects — from top draft picks to potential free agents — to make lasting impressions.

All told, we had eyes on 27 of the league's 32 teams. Here are our biggest standouts for each.

Prospect Showdown

Montreal Canadiens

Ivan Demidov, RW

The one game Demidov played against the Winnipeg Jets rookies was ridiculous and firmly demonstrated he did not belong in this event, which was only confirmed when Canadiens brass decided there was no point in Demidov playing a second game. He was involved in all three Canadiens goals, with his first assist leaving 2023 No. 14 pick Brayden Yager spinning, and that was not the only time Demidov hurt Yager's feelings in the game. His goal was borderline unfair and left his varsity Canadiens teammates laughing amongst themselves in the stands. "Every time you send him on the ice, you get the sense something's going to happen," Laval Rocket coach Pascal Vincent said. "And then, something happens." — Arpon Basu

Ottawa Senators

Carter Yakemchuk, RHD

The Sens' top prospect had a great performance in his team's first game of rookie camp, scoring two goals where he flashed his NHL-ready shot and smooth hands. His defense will be under the microscope when he attends main camp later this week — he used his reach and size during the rookie tourney, but can't afford to be too aggressive or out of position. But his offensive capabilities and build will also draw attention. — Julian McKenzie

Toronto Maple Leafs

Luke Haymes, C

The Leafs have been light on high draft picks, so it was promising to see touted NCAA free-agent signing Haymes pop. The quick and intelligent 6-foot-1 center battled for pucks and usually came out on the right side of things. Haymes took the puck to dangerous areas shift after shift. But in doing so, he never put his teammates in jeopardy. He added a goal in each game. Also, this is a guy who blocked a shot ... with his face. With a short opportunity to make a serious impression, Haymes did just that. After impressing in a late-season Toronto Marlies stint, a full AHL year could put him on his way toward a middle-six NHL center role. He certainly looks like a bona fide pro. — Joshua Kloeke

Winnipeg Jets

Domenic DiVincentiis, G

DiVincentiis was the only thing stopping Saturday's prospect showcase game against Montreal from turning into a rout, with Ivan Demidov creating scoring chances seemingly at will.

DiVincentiis was swarmed early and often but made spectacular saves on Demidov, Owen Beck and Joseph Dunlap at even strength. He also put on a penalty-killing clinic, stopping multiple one-timers — including a third-period slingshot play into the center slot that gave Winnipeg a chance to pull off the win. DiVincentiis' 38-save performance made him the Jets' weekend standout, leaving Manitoba Moose head coach Mark Morrison effusive in his postgame praise. — Murat Ates

<https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/6635620/2025/09/17/nhl-mcdavid-kaprizov-eichel-connor-negotiations/>

NHL rumblings: Latest on Connor McDavid, Kirill Kaprizov, Jack Eichel, Kyle Connor and more

By Pierre LeBrun

As training camps kick off this week, there's no shortage of intriguing storylines on the contract front, led of course, by the best player in the world.

I will say that everyone involved did a good job after the Stanley Cup Final of conditioning the media, the Edmonton market and frankly, the hockey world at large not to expect a quick extension for Connor McDavid when he was eligible July 1.

The message was that it would be a longer process — McDavid was expected to take his time this summer to ponder things.

The idea that McDavid wouldn't sign an extension by training camp, which is now reality, was even on the table if you listened to some of the speculation back in June.

The idea that the puck would drop on the regular season and McDavid still would not have signed? I can't say I would have predicted that as a real possibility back then. But given what we're hearing now, it's obviously feasible.

It's also true McDavid may still extend before puck drop next month. That's what the Oilers are hoping. They remain confident they will get him signed to an extension at some point. I think everyone involved is comfortable with the idea that if and when an extension happens, it'll be of a shorter term — not eight years. Whether that's two, three or four years, we shall see. McDavid's agent, Judd Moldaver, negotiated a four-year extension for fellow superstar Auston Matthews with the Toronto Maple Leafs, so there's a track record there.

But I also think it's important to note an important aspect of these ongoing discussions, which again Tuesday were described to me by league sources as very cordial and ongoing: This isn't a financial back-and-forth. It remains very much a philosophical discussion between the parties.

It's a feel thing for McDavid. As colleague Chris Johnston wrote Tuesday, it's about his comfort level and understanding where the Oilers are headed as a franchise. Are they headed off a cliff in a few years, or can they remain contenders? I really think McDavid is trying to answer that for himself.

I do think the likeliest scenario remains that McDavid will extend at some point on a shorter-term or medium-term deal, but I can't tell you when exactly that will happen because the most important person in that decision hasn't decided yet.

Once McDavid green-lights Moldaver to enter the financial bargaining, that will take five minutes. The Oilers have no choice but to sign off on whatever McDavid and Moldaver bring to them. Until then, Oilers management, as general manager Stan Bowman told me earlier this month, remains patient in the process and is going out of its way not to put any pressure on McDavid. Which is smart.

If the puck drops next month and there's still no extension, though, the pressure builds from within to be sure.

Right now? It's status quo.

Wild aren't engaging in trade talks on Kaprizov

The Minnesota Wild are not engaging with teams on Kirill Kaprizov, according to league sources. There's zero appetite to do that at this juncture. They also haven't asked for a list of teams he'd want to be traded to. Their only objective remains to sign him to an extension despite the rejection of a massive offer last week.

That offer also remains on the table.

We've not yet heard from Kaprizov since he turned down \$16 million per year. He's expected to meet the media in Minnesota on Thursday as camp opens. GM Bill Guerin is also expected to meet the media that day. You can bet our all-world Wild coverage led by Michael Russo and Joe Smith will be all over it.

My sense of things is that the Wild don't want to negotiate against themselves, so I don't believe they've made another offer to this point. I also think the Wild still believe Kaprizov wants to stay in Minnesota. And that's a really, really important sentiment to underline at this very delicate stage of things. If the Wild thought the offer being rejected meant the player wouldn't sign no matter what, that'd be a different thing altogether.

For now, it's a tough negotiation with a veteran agent in Paul Theofanous, who has grinded many a team over the years — and made his clients a lot of money. The reality is, the Wild desperately want to sign the player, so the agent does have a lot of leverage. Can he get a few more dollars above \$16 million a year? Perhaps ...

Nothing yet on Eichel extension front

I have such a hard time believing the Vegas Golden Knights and Jack Eichel isn't a marriage that will continue past this season, given how he ended up there and the faith each side had in each other in that process. It's been a wonderful trade for everyone involved. A perfect fit all around.

But as training camp opens this week, Eichel is without an extension entering the final year of his deal. My understanding is that negotiations are still in early stages but no one is worried about it not getting done.

What is Eichel's comfort level going into the season without a deal, if that in fact is the case next month?

"You can only control so much, right?" he said at the Player Media Tour last week in Las Vegas. "And that's sort of been my mindset. ... I focus on preparing for the season, getting my mind and body in the best place to be successful and help our hockey team. That's more so my focus. I think anything else just takes care of itself when you do your job well."

I asked Eichel how he felt about negotiating once the puck dropped next month. Some big-name pending unrestricted free agents tell their agents to suspend talks during the season. They don't want to be distracted. Others have zero issue with talks continuing. It sounds like Eichel is fine with talks continuing.

"I'm definitely not in the 'no communication' (camp)," Eichel said. "I just try to focus on things that are in my control. If the contract happens organically, then it happens. Right now you're just focused on getting yourself in as good a place as you can be to start the season and help the hockey team."

Again, let me stress: No one involved seems concerned it's not done yet.

"That's a priority," Golden Knights GM Kelly McCrimmon told me Sept. 3 at the GM meetings in Detroit when asked about an Eichel extension. "He's been a great player for our organization. I think our organization has been great for him. So lots of interest obviously, I think from both sides, to make something work."

Devils and Luke Hughes' camp grinding away

I checked into the Luke Hughes contract situation Tuesday and was told by league sources that the New Jersey Devils and Hughes' camp are continuing to "grind" away at a resolution, with the pressure of training camp opening and everyone involved wanting the player there.

A longer-term deal remains the preferred option for both sides, but all options are on the table to get the restricted free agent signed.

Hughes, who turned 22 last week, had seven goals and 44 points in 71 games last season after putting up nine and 47 in 82 games as a rookie. Overall, he's got 41 power-play points over two seasons, especially taking advantage of running the top PP unit when Dougie Hamilton has been injured.

What's the next step in Hughes' evolution?

"Hopefully Luke can come in and be on power play 1 from Day 1," brother Jack Hughes said at the Player Media Tour. "That's super important for him because he's got so much upside. And when we do give him these things that all the other No. 1 Ds around the league get, we get a great return. But then sometimes he gets taken away (from the power play). So my hope for him is that he comes in, he's on power play 1 to start, and the rest of the game, he'll take care of himself. He's a great skater. He's a really good defender, too. I think he can be a true No. 1 for us. He's going into his third full year. I think as a group we should expect him to be a true No. 1."

And listen, it's natural for Jack to feel that way about his brother. As we saw with Jack's comments on Quinn Hughes last week, it's a tight-knit family as well and the brothers all have each other's backs.

But I can't help but wonder where Hamilton fits into this whole picture. When an extension gets done, the Devils will have two talented offensive blueliners but just one QB job on the top power play.

Hamilton, 32, has three years left on his contract, which pays him \$9 million annually. He really likes it in New Jersey and doesn't want to go anywhere. His full no-movement clause this summer switched to a modified no-trade, under which he can list 10 teams he would go to.

I'm not suggesting there's anything imminent on that front, but it's more something to file away closer to the March 6 trade deadline, depending on how things play out.

A quick note on another top RFA

The Anaheim Ducks' negotiations with Mason McTavish have been difficult by all accounts.

Ducks GM Pat Verbeek has had his own approach when it comes to his young RFAs coming off entry-level deals — former Ducks forward Trevor Zegras being one example a few years ago.

So we'll see where this one goes, but as of Tuesday, communication was ongoing but it was still in a tough place.

Mutual interest in getting a Jets-Connor deal done

Colleague Darren Dreger reported during our Insider Trading segment Tuesday on TSN (Insider Trading is back!) that there's progress in negotiations and mutual interest to get something done between Kyle Connor and the Winnipeg Jets. That's no guarantee it gets done before the regular season. There's no firm timeline to get a deal done, Dreger noted, but both sides are hoping to keep at it.

It might surprise some people outside of Winnipeg that an American pending UFA star player would want to stay on with the Jets, but I'll point out Connor loves the outdoor life the market affords. He's an avid hunter, like many players on the team. That's not reason alone, of course, for him to stay. There are other markets where you can find that outdoor life. But it's not nothing. (Fellow American star and avid outdoorsman Connor Hellebuyck also extended two years ago.)

Again, nothing is done until it's done, but the mere fact there's mutual interest in getting an extension done answers an important question about Connor's mindset.