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Obviously, you want to win that one'

Toews looking forward to early-season matchup against former club

By: Ken Wiebe

Jonathan Toews knows this won't just be another game.

Given all that has transpired over the course of nearly two decades with the Chicago Blackhawks, there's no chance the first meeting against the team that chose him third overall in the 2006 NHL draft could just be one of 82 on the schedule.

The four-second pregnant pause Toews took before answering a question about the significance of the meeting early this week told a story in itself.

"I don't know. It is what it is. I'm so past that point now," Toews told the Free Press in a one-on-one interview this week. "It's been a couple of years. I've kind of wrapped my head around (the fact) things are over in Chicago. But yeah, the first time, it will be interesting."

When a player spends his entire career in one place and enjoys the highest of the highs — including three Stanley Cup victories — there's an attachment that accompanies the long affiliation with the franchise.

But the franchise that Toews helped resuscitate over the course of 15-plus seasons also told him they were moving on from him late in the 2023 season and that's not easy for any athlete to hear — especially for one as decorated as Toews, who is likely to have a statue of him built outside the United Center after he retires.

But this early-season matchup isn't about Toews' departure or any lingering bitterness he may have felt at one point and time.

He's spent so much time since signing with his hometown team talking about gratitude and he once again leaned into that when asked about his experience with the Blackhawks.

"Yeah, it's crazy to think how fast the time goes by, when you think of it," said Toews, who made the Blackhawks in the fall of 2007 after spending two seasons with the University of North Dakota Fighting Sioux. "Watching some of the games from my rookie season, it almost looks like HD didn't exist back then. Holy smokes, was it really that long ago? Obviously, the league changes so much every handful of years, let alone the better part of two decades.

"I've had a lot of time to reflect. I really appreciate (the time there). You don't really know what lies ahead when you get drafted, but in hindsight, it's like, 'Wow, how much more fortunate can you be?' To be thrown into that organization and to be able to contribute the way I was given the opportunity to. To have the stars align the way they did for six or seven years there, where we had a crack at a championship most of the time, that was a lot of fun."

Not only did the Blackhawks have a crack at winning during that extended period of time, they raised three championship banners between 2010 and 2015.

Helping the Original Six franchise get back to the glory days after some dark days was part of Toews' legacy, though he is reluctant to take the credit he deserves for the part he played.

Seeing how far things needed to go was part of what made the journey so enjoyable.

Early in that process, Toews remembers being out with an injury and sitting in the stands with some friends from Winnipeg that made the trip to the Windy City for the home opener.

"I was sitting in the stands and no one knows who I am," said Toews. "I remember (Brent) Seabrook and (Duncan) Keith telling stories about going to train stations all over the city with their jerseys on, handing out business cards with links where you could redeem free tickets. It was like people didn't know the Hawks existed. There was really no pressure on us when we came in. When Rocky (Wirtz) took over, we had the outdoor game, the team was going on the up and up and the rest is history. It was fun to see the contrast of where it came to what it obviously could be."

That anonymity would not last and the Blackhawks soon became the toast of the town.

Poor crowds were replaced by a remarkable string of sellouts and the United Center became the "Madhouse on Madison," with Chelsea Dagger blasting through the speakers after every Blackhawks goal.

Toews became the third youngest captain in NHL history in 2008 at 20 years and 79 days old, trailing only Sidney Crosby of the Pittsburgh Penguins and Vincent Lecavalier of the Tampa Bay Lightning.

By the time he appeared in his final game with the Blackhawks in April of 2023, he had suited up in 1,067 contests in the regular season to go along with 137 more during the Stanley Cup playoffs, piling up points while making helping make those around him better.

During a recent interview with the Free Press, Seabrook shed some light on what made Toews so impactful during his time with the Blackhawks.

"It doesn't matter if it's in the offensive part of the game or the defensive part, he plays a 200-foot game. He's taking the big draws, he's blocking shots," said Seabrook, who was Toews' roommate during his first season in the NHL. "Having a guy like that in Chicago who wore the C for us and being one of the top guys in the NHL that was willing to do all of that little stuff that made our team so successful, he was always willing to do it, he was always first in the pile and he was always ready to go. That's the kind of guy you want leading your team."

Toews, now 37, won the Conn Smythe Trophy as playoff MVP during the first Stanley Cup victory and he won the Selke Trophy as the top defensive forward in the NHL during the 2012-13 season.

"Chicago is an amazing sports city and when we were at the top, it was a lot of fun," said Toews. "Obviously some great memories and friendships. It was like a brotherhood with a lot of guys that were there for a lot of those years. It was pretty special."

Toews' return to the NHL, though still in the early stages, has been special in its own way.

With a goal and five points in 10 games with the Jets, Toews has done a great job of shaking off the rust accumulated during his long road back to the NHL as he dealt with a number of health issues on the road to recovery.

Toews is settling in nicely and while you can expect some additional emotions to creep in when the Jets travel to the United Center on Jan. 19, that won't be a factor on Thursday.

As much as Toews is looking forward to catching up with some of the trainers and equipment staff, there aren't many former teammates still on the Blackhawks roster either, so it won't be too awkward once the puck is dropped.

"There's nothing really recognizable about the team. It's such a young team," said Toews, noting that the only players left from his final season are Connor Murphy, Jason Dickinson, Arvid Soderblom and Wyatt Kaiser. "It will be good to see the trainers. I'm good buddies with them and they become like family. It's the same guys from the 15 or 16 years I was there. It will be fun. I'm excited. Obviously, you want to win that one."

<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2025/10/29/we-still-havent-come-close-to-playing-our-complete-game-yet-arniel>

***'We still haven't come close to playing our complete game yet': Arniel
Jets flying high at 10-game mark as they look to improve to a full 60-minute hustle***

By: Ken Wiebe

Scott Arniel chose his words carefully.

Asked for a bigger-picture assessment of the 10-game block to open the season, the head coach of the Winnipeg Jets made it clear that as happy as he is about the 14 points that have been put in the bank, but further improvements will be required to sustain a pace that includes a .700 winning percentage.

"I'm happy with 7-3. I don't ever want to talk down on being 7-3, but we still haven't come close to playing our complete game yet," Arniel said after the Jets defeated the Minnesota Wild 4-3 in overtime and before using Wednesday to recharge the batteries. "There's signs of things that we're doing better, but sometimes it's two steps forward, one step back.

"But it's early in the year and if we're going to do it, do it now. Get it out of the way. But I like the fact that, even though we haven't played our best hockey, we're still sitting at 7-3."

There's the rub.

Arniel knows there are going to be ups-and-downs to navigate over the 82-game marathon that is the regular season. There will be injuries to battle through and adversity to attack.

Even with some important things that have been ingrained into the DNA of the Jets since the arrival of Arniel four seasons ago, there's a reinvestment in some of the core beliefs and values that is required — no matter how sound the foundation appears to be.

The Jets play a style where commitment to being on the right side of the puck is essential and paying particular attention to the minute details can pay huge dividends.

This group has turned its ability to defend from a weakness to a strength, but it doesn't happen automatically and the uncharacteristic lapses in areas of puck management and defensive-zone coverage have proven costly at various points in each of the three losses and several of the wins as well.

No, this isn't a major cause for concern, but it's been noted by both players and coaches alike.

And that's a good thing, since an important step in solving a problem is actually acknowledging one exists.

That's another area of massive growth of the Arniel era, where the ability to provide a critical self-assessment is another trait that's been woven into the fabric of this group.

Accountability is nothing more than a buzzword if a team doesn't actually put in the work needed to improve the deficiencies that pop up.

"We're still growing as a team. We've got to work on our consistency a bit," said Jets left-winger Kyle Connor. "That being said, we've shown spurts of the identity of the team, but it's definitely a work in progress.

"Everybody's motivated in here to get better and push each other. And I would just say, yeah, we're kind of building our identity, still working on it."

Now, Arniel wasn't expecting the Jets to be a finished product by Game 10.

That's just not realistic, whether you have team filled with returnees or are working to integrate a number of newcomers up front like the Jets are in the midst of.

That aforementioned motivation to push one area to reach higher heights is something the Jets can count on as they push toward the quarter point in this next block of games that includes visits from the Chicago Blackhawks on Thursday and the Pittsburgh Penguins on Saturday afternoon.

"The good thing is we've won more games than we've lost. But at the same time you can't be super pleased with how we've been playing," said Jets winger Nino Niederreiter. "We have to find a way to pull a full 60 minutes together. I think that's going to make us feel a lot better than we do right now."

The pending return of captain Adam Lowry during the next week or so and the ahead-of-schedule recovery for forward Cole Perfetti will surely provide a boost to a middle-six forward group that is still in search of its optimal deployment.

And when defenceman Dylan Samberg returns at some point in the month of November, some additional stability should be provided to the defence corps.

While the Jets are still in the business of providing solutions and not leaning into excuses, it would be foolish not to suggest some of the slips in the structure might not be happening as

often if several of the Jets most reliable defensive players had yet to appear in a game this season.

On the opportunity came knocking side of things, Logan Stanley has provided some important minutes, often playing on the second pairing while chipping in offensively with two goals and six points in 10 games, getting into a couple of scraps and providing the physical element the coaching staff has been asking of him for quite some time.

Further consistency is needed, but Stanley has shown the type of progress that will have him under consideration for full-time duty once Samberg is back to full health.

Josh Morrissey has been outstanding to open the campaign, both offensively (eight assists in 10 games) and defensively, as he's been on the ice for seven more even-strength goals than the Jets have allowed.

Dylan DeMelo is also off to an excellent start after making the declaration during training camp that he wanted to get back to the level he'd established for himself before taking a step back last season.

Although Neal Pionk chipped in a pair of assists on Tuesday to move him to three helpers in 10 games, he's looked a bit unsettled without his regular defence partner (Samberg).

Pionk has been known to be extremely hard on himself and while he continues to work on that, you can be sure he's motivated to raise his level of play as things move forward.

As for the forwards, a tremendous start for Mark Scheifele has been an important development.

With eight goals, 15 points and a diligent two-way effort, Scheifele's push to be an Olympian has surely caught the attention of Team Canada's decision makers.

Connor has been outstanding, including a hat trick in the season opener and the 61st game-winning goal of his career on Tuesday.

It was a slow start on the goal-scoring front for Gabe Vilardi, but he's now found the back of the net twice in the past three games and he's operating at nearly a point per game piece (with eight points in 10 games).

While the first line has carried a big portion of the offensive load, the secondary scoring is on the rise, with Morgan Barron taking another step forward and Jonathan Toews showing positive signs that he can handle the responsibilities thrust upon him after a layoff that lasted two-and-a-half years.

Special teams are another aspect of the game that has allowed the Jets to overcome some of their missteps.

The power play has been solid once again and the penalty kill has moved from 13th overall last season and comfortably into the Top-10, while spending some time in the top spot.

"Our power play has continued to be strong, to help us win hockey games, stay in hockey games," said Arniel. "Our PK has been really good and it's helped us a ton. It's given us a chance to stay in hockey games and that's what you need."

No mention of the Jets start would be complete without a nod to the goaltending.

Backup Eric Comrie has won both of his starts, while posting strong numbers (2.50 goals-against average, .926 save percentage) and getting exceptional run support (10 goals for, compared to five allowed).

As for Connor Hellebuyck, the reigning Hart Trophy winner has simply been exceptional, with a goals-against average at 2.26 and a save percentage that once again has him among the league leaders (.926).

Having goalies that can mitigate the damage is always welcome, but the Jets will be looking to lower the volume and quality of opportunities Hellebuyck and Comrie face during this next block of games.

“It’s a resilient group here,” said Connor. “Showing parts of it every game this season, of what this team could be. We’ve stuck with it and we’ve just found a way to win.”