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BLOG: Jets start special teams work

Payne: "It's sort of a real good foundation-laying day."

By Jamie Thomas

WINNIPEG – A clear reason why the Jets rose to the top of the NHL standings last season was the efforts of their power play. Winnipeg pretty much led the league in efficiency from the start of the year until the end where they finished at 29.8%.

Wednesday afternoon, special teams became the focus at training camp.

"It has some excitement to it because you're getting back to an area of the game that we've got to players that love doing it and have some familiarity with each other," said Jets assistant coach Davis Payne.

"To be able to get that time to focus on it and have those type of practice days now, it's difficult to do that during the regular season. It's sort of a real good foundation-laying day."

One piece of last year's puzzle is missing with the departure of Nikolaj Ehlers to the Carolina Hurricanes. Cole Perfetti has moved up with Mark Scheifele, Kyle Connor, Gabe Vilardi and Josh Morrissey but the Jets power play guru reminded everyone there were two units that powered the team's man advantage.

"We sort of look at like we have really good pieces and it's the mindset of each unit going out there that really makes the difference," said Payne.

"Cole, in the time that Nik was hurt (last season), did a good job during that stretch in that role. So that's where we started today. There's lots of pieces and decisions to figure out here in the next little while."

Vilardi set career highs in many stat categories in 2024-25, including 12 goals on the power play. The 26-year-old is a big believer in Payne's ability to make adjustments that will allow the Jets to be one of the league's best units again this season.

"Yeah. A really smart power play mind, offensive mind. He's helped me a lot in my game," said Vilardi.

"But yeah, in terms of the power play adjustments, you kind of see different systems than two years ago. A lot of in-game adjustments. He's a really smart offensive mind."

The second unit has some new faces on it as well joining Nino Niederreiter, Neal Pionk and Vladislav Namestnikov are Gustav Nyquist (48 career power play goals) and Jonathan Toews (93 career PPG).

"It's definitely fun, obviously," said Niederreiter about the chance to play with Toews.

"I mean, was the first day basically being on the ice with him, having the same jersey on. So, it's definitely get some used to it. But we had some good talks on the ice, and I think we can only run from there."

Toews has a career faceoff winning percentage of 57.3% and should help boost puck possession time on the power play for the Jets.

"It's a luxury to have a guy what that kind of experience in the faceoff dot," said Payne.

"We're going to make full use of it."

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<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2025/09/24/youre-always-looking-to-adjust>

'You're always looking to adjust' Jets working on 'recession proof' power play at training camp

By: Mike McIntyre

Nobody made opponents pay for their on-ice sins quite like the Winnipeg Jets last season. An NHL-best power play was a major reason the club finished atop the regular-season standings.

In that sense, Wednesday's training camp skate at Hockey For All Centre felt a little like Christmas morning, as players and coaches got their first real crack at special-teams work.

"It has some excitement to it, because you're getting back to an area of the game with players that love doing it," said assistant coach Davis Payne — the architect of Winnipeg's man-advantage success.

"To be able to get that time to focus on it and have those types of practice days now, it's difficult to do that during the regular season. It's sort of a real good foundation-laying day."

So what's the key to replicating last year's 28.9 per cent success rate? Simply rolling out the same plan won't cut it, Payne said.

"You're always looking to adjust," he explained.

"There's base things that we want to do, but there's another group that is being paid a lot of money to try and stop us. They're coming up with different ways, they're taking different approaches, and we've got to understand that if they're throwing something at us, we've got to be able to move to a different direction and move quickly."

At one point last season, Payne compared the power play to the economy and said the key is to make it "recession-proof." On Wednesday, he suggested players will need to "re-invest" if they want it to keep paying dividends.

"We can't allow anyone to get ahead of us."

"There are a few things that we've addressed that we felt are areas we can improve," he said. "We've got to make sure that we know that people know we're good at that part of the game. And we can't allow anyone to get ahead of us."

A race to the top, if you will.

Change is also in the air in terms of personnel. Winger Nikolaj Ehlers moved on to the Carolina Hurricanes in free agency, creating a void on the top unit. Enter Cole Perfetti, who gets the first crack at replacing the guy known as "Fly" alongside Mark Scheifele, Kyle Connor, Gabe Vilardi and Josh Morrissey.

"He's done it before. He's filled in before and obviously he's a really smart player so I think we should be good," Vilardi said of adding Perfetti to the mix.

The second unit also has a fresh look, with free-agent additions Jonathan Toews and Gustav Nyquist joining Vlad Namestnikov, Nino Niederreiter and Neal Pionk.

"We know we've got to be very sharp right from the get-go to put up numbers like we had last year, but at the same time, it's a new season," said Niederreiter.

"We did a lot of good things last year, but obviously teams watched us, what we did last year, so we got to make sure we are even sharper. We're going to be even better. And that's the emphasis of (Wednesday)."

Puck possession is often the name of the game on the power play, and adding a face-off specialist to the mix like Toews should only help the cause. If there was one obvious flaw with the Jets last year, it was how often they'd lose the draw in the offensive zone.

"It's a luxury to have a guy with that kind of experience in the faceoff dot. We're going to make full use of it," said Payne.

One of the quirks from last year was that Connor scored 41 goals but only nine on the power play — and none in the final 46 regular-season games. That drought stretches to 59 games, including playoffs, where all five of his goals came at even strength.

Getting Connor going again would be a significant boost, though Payne stressed success comes from depth.

"There were two units and probably 10, 11 forwards and three or four defencemen who were involved in the success of it all last year," he said. "We sort of look at it like we have really good pieces and it's the mindset of each unit going out there that really makes the difference."

To that end, the Jets ran a third power-play group on Wednesday with forwards Alex Iafallo, Tanner Pearson, Nikita Chibrikov and Brayden Yager and defencemen Colin Miller and Ville Heinola all rotating in. The rest of the training camp roster was utilized as penalty killers.

Payne deflects credit, but the results are hard to ignore. Winnipeg ranked just 22nd on the power play the year before he arrived (18.8 per cent), before leaping to the top of the league under his watch.

"I think he has a very high expectation, and obviously he takes a lot of pride in what he wants to do," Niederreiter said of Payne. "His emphasis of being great and don't miss a beat is definitely huge and I think that's where his level of hockey sense comes through."

Added Vilardi, who scored a team-leading 12 power-play goals last year: "A really smart power-play mind, offensive mind. He's helped me a lot in my game. In terms of the power-play adjustments, you kind of see different systems than two years ago. A lot of in-game adjustments. He's a really smart offensive mind."

The Jets have played two of six pre-season games so far with Scheifele, Connor, Vilardi, Morrissey, Pionk, Niederreiter and Namestnikov all sitting out as healthy scratches. That should change this weekend with Winnipeg playing in Edmonton on Friday night, then hosting Calgary on Saturday.

"We need to get more reps. Obviously it's going to come with time when we get a couple of games," Vilardi said of finding some chemistry when it comes to life without Ehlers.

As for Ehlers, Niederreiter admitted he offered his longtime teammate some insight into Carolina — where Niederreiter once played — before the Danish winger made his decision.

"He definitely picked my brain a little bit. Obviously, there was a gut feeling for him, and he makes a decision for whatever is best for him," said Niederreiter.

"So it's nothing but best for Nikky. He's a guy who is definitely hard to replace. I mean, his speed was terrific in the lineup, and he was always good for something. But at the same time, it's opened chances for a lot of players to step in and do a great job, and I think that's what we have to do."