

Winnipeg Free Press

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'You've got to score goals in this league'

Lack of secondary scoring Jets' biggest problem, says legendary coach

By: Mike McIntyre

Bruce Boudreau has seen a lot of things over his professional hockey career. The stunning collapse of the Winnipeg Jets — from first to worst in the NHL standings in the blink of an eye — has the longtime player turned coach turned puck pundit completely perplexed.

"All options should be on the table," he told the Free Press. "Keep trying everything until you find something that works."

For now, status quo continues to be the play. The reigning Presidents' Trophy winners, who are currently dead last in the league with 34 points (15-18-4), boarded their charter Tuesday with the same 23 players in tow. Nobody was placed on waivers. Nobody was called up from the Manitoba Moose. Nobody was traded.

This, despite dropping six consecutive games (0-3-3) and 19 of their last 25 overall (6-15-4) as they begin a three-game road trip on Wednesday night in Detroit. They'll also play Thursday in Toronto and then wrap up Saturday in Ottawa.

"I'm surprised a little bit," admitted Boudreau. "Kevin (Cheveldayoff) is one of the most patient GMs ever, right? He doesn't make any rash moves. But they're at the stage where they've got to start winning. I think something needs to jump-start this team."

Jets coach Scott Arniel has seemingly tried every trick in the coaching playbook — individual meetings with players, extended video sessions, ripping them publicly, pointing the finger of blame at himself publicly and killing them with kindness in the form of unexpected days off.

If Cheveldayoff isn't going to give him any other options to consider, Boudreau suggested Arniel may need to send more pointed messages with the existing roster.

"Whether that means sitting out a guy that has been a regular forever, just to say 'We're not going to take it anymore, we've got to get going, I've given you guys all the rope you want and we're getting the same results,'" said Boudreau.

"You know, I think something has to be done, a move where guys are like 'I better get my ass in gear, I'm next.'"

Boudreau, who played for 17 years and then went on to coach for more than 30 — most recently with the Vancouver Canucks in 2022-23 — is one of the most respected names in the game who still works as a broadcast analyst around the league. He's been watching the Jets closely this year and has identified several problems.

"If they had any other line scoring goals, they wouldn't be in this mess they're in," he said.

Indeed, the Jets are essentially a one-trick offensive pony, with Mark Scheifele, Kyle Connor and Gabe Vilardi doing the majority of the heavy lifting. The trio has combined for 52 goals in 37 games, with the 22 other skaters who have appeared in the lineup combining for 54 goals.

Arniel has been reluctant to split them up, so far only moving Vilardi to another line for short spurts but always keeping Scheifele and Connor intact. Boudreau said it may be time to reconsider.

"It's easy to check one line," he said. "Last year, they had two and three lines going. This year, they're not. When you've only got one line going, and the other team is focusing on them and checking them, they know if they don't score they're not going to win. It's really problematic.

The Jets' recent run tells the story: strong defensive structure, solid goaltending and six consecutive one-goal defeats (excluding empty-netters).

"They've got that goalie, they've got that defence," Boudreau said. "They should be able to hold their own defensively. But you've got to score goals in this league."

"If they had any other line scoring goals, they wouldn't be in this mess they're in."
Winnipeg is averaging 2.86 per game this season, which ranks 22nd. Since Nov. 4, however, when a 9-3-0 start began to swirl down the drain, they are 30th in the league at 2.44.

Unfortunately for the Jets, their issues don't just end there.

"They don't look fast to me," said Boudreau. "(Nikolaj) Ehlers wasn't an elite goal scorer, but he added so much speed to the lineup. It made the team look faster."

Now, with Ehlers gone to Carolina, free agent signings such as Jonathan Toews, Gustav Nyquist and Tanner Pearson have failed to deliver. Core players such as Cole Perfetti (slowed by a high-ankle sprain), captain Adam Lowry (slowed by off-season hip surgery) and veteran, aging wingers such as Nino Niederreiter and Vlad Namestnikov have all struggled, too.

"Scoring down the line has dried up," said Boudreau.

"Jonathan Toews, as much as we all love him, has not become the player after the layoff that we thought he hopefully could be. Great on faceoffs, but production-wise, it's just not been there. They've got to find a way to score."

One thing Boudreau does not see is a team that has quit on Arniel.

"No, no. They're trying every night. Winnipeg tries their ass off," he said. "But, you know, the coach is the easiest one to question. I won eight division titles and I still got fired three times."

He's also experienced the aftermath of Presidents' Trophy seasons — including his own in Washington in 2009-10 which ended in a first round playoff exit — and knows how hard it is to follow-up on that kind of success.

"They call them career years for a reason," he said. "You don't have them every year. The goals that went in off the post last year? Now they're going wide."

As difficult as it may be right now, Boudreau said the key is trying to keep things as positive as possible.

"If the coach is acting like Eeyore from Winnie-the-Pooh, you're probably not going to get a lot out of these guys," he said.

"And the veteran leadership has to come through, too. There's enough veterans on this team that they should be able to do that. But just find a way to turn it around. Score that extra goal. Bear down. Shoot the puck where you might normally be trying to make the perfect play. I'm starting to sound like a coach, again."

As for the trade market, Boudreau surveys the current NHL landscape and sees 32 teams — the Jets included — that still feel they have a shot at the playoffs. Parity reigns supreme, save for the three-headed monster of Colorado, Dallas and Minnesota threatening to lap the field.

Which brings a sliver of hope for a group that is currently seven points below the playoff line with 45 regular-season games remaining.

"A wild-card is the only thing (the Jets) could possibly get at this point. One thing about Winnipeg, though. If they get in, there will be no pressure on them," he said.

"They've had pressure the last three, four years because they were the higher seed. Now, there would be no pressure. I think that could work to their advantage. But somehow, they've got to flip the switch and some of these one-goal losses have to turn into wins.

"A rut and a groove — they're exactly the same thing with two totally opposite meanings. Right now they're in a rut, but they could turn it into a groove by winning those one goal games, then they would be hard pressed to lose, because then they would have the confidence and the belief that they can do it all the time."

Winnipeg Sun

https://www.winnipegssun.com/sports/winnipeg_jets/prolonged-losing-streak-casts-doubt-on-winnipeg-jets-process/article_40376573-935e-41f3-a444-232f15d8c0f7.html

FRIESEN: Jets need help, and need it now

By Paul Friesen

Keep working and stick to the process: those words echo like a constant and by now monotonous drumbeat in the background of a Winnipeg Jets season running out of time.

After a while, when the process doesn't produce results, it's only natural to question it.

After yet another frustrating loss, Monday's 3-1, home-ice setback to Edmonton, Jets captain Adam Lowry acknowledged walking that line isn't always easy.

"I don't know if you ever fully learn," Lowry said. "Obviously, doubt creeps in when you haven't been able to put a streak together and you've lost several in a row. It's tough to have that faith. But we believe in what the coaching staff is saying and we believe in this group, that when we're all playing the right way, when everyone in this room is going, we're a good team."

Good teams don't often go through a 25-game period with only six wins.

The standings suggest the Jets are a bad team, their record better only than Chicago's in the entire NHL.

They're not actually that bad, though. It's not like they're getting blown out.

They've only allowed seven more goals than they've scored. Seven teams in the Western Conference alone have a worse spread, including the San Jose Sharks at minus-16 – and holding the final wildcard playoff spot as of Tuesday morning.

If the Jets start getting embarrassed, we'll know they've tuned out the process and the man trying so hard to keep them to it.

"We just played a team that went to the Stanley Cup finals two years in a row," head coach Scott Arniel said Monday night. "And we spent an awful lot of time in their end of the rink. I think the process worked. Again, it's us finishing.

"When everything seems to be working, we're scoring three, four, five goals a game and you're not talking about this stuff."

Only once in their last 10 games have the Jets scored as many as four goals in a game. Their record over that span: 1-6-3.

As frustrated as anyone, Arniel points to the last two games as the way this team has to play to turn this stubborn beast around.

Those sleepy first periods and lengthy defensive lapses of the recent past, gone. The intensity through all 200 feet of ice, up.

Yet the stone hands remain. The Jets have fallen to 22nd in league scoring.

And talk about fragile: When they score first, they're 13-4-2. If they don't, they're 2-14-2.

Leading after the first period, they're 10-1-1. Trailing after 20, they're 1-10-1.

Arniel didn't like a lot of things he saw early this season, even when they got off to a good start.

So he hammered away. When the lapses caught up with them, he kept hammering.

Putting his hammer down for Christmas, he's preached a more positive message and his team has come out of the break rejuvenated.

One point of a potential four, though, isn't exactly a ringing endorsement going into the New Year.

"This is the best we've played in these last six periods," the coach said. "It's more like we have to play. Sooner or later, this has to fall. These goals have to come."

Do they, though? In dribs and drabs, sure.

Lowry, for instance, scored his first in 18 games against Edmonton.

Vlad Namestnikov hasn't scored in 25 games, Jonathan Toews in 21, Nino Niederreiter and Cole Perfetti in 13, Gus Nyquist in all 28 he's played this season.

If Mark Scheifele, Kyle Connor and Gabe Vilardi don't light up the scoreboard, it's lights-out for this team.

But they stick to the process. So far, anyway.

"I can't see us all of a sudden... just go and play, throw it to the wind," Arniel said. "Say we're going to try to trade chances with the Edmonton Oilers – how's that going to end up? We already tried that earlier. We're keeping these top teams under 10 scoring chances, five-on-five. Just keep doing what we're doing."

He really has no other choice.

One person does, though: GM Kevin Cheveldayoff.

This team needs help, offensively, and it's the GM's job to go out and get it. Some might argue it's already too late, but it's not.

St. Louis did it last year and the Jets have to try and repeat it, a second-half charge from near-worst to a playoff spot.

What's the point, you say, when they'll stand almost no chance against someone like Colorado in the first round?

Because quitting is for losers.