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Milestone game for Namestnikov against Sharks Jets' chameleon journeyman to record 800th career start Friday night

By: Ken Wiebe

Never mind the Swiss Army knife term that is so often thrown around for Vladislav Namestnikov.

While it's true the term most definitely applies to the Winnipeg Jets forward, he's actually more of a chameleon.

No matter what label you prefer, Namestnikov's ability to not only navigate whatever situation that has been thrown in front of him over the course of his 13 NHL seasons but thrive in it is about to be celebrated as he prepares to suit up in his 800th regular-season game on Friday against the San Jose Sharks.

This is a player that was chosen 27th overall by the Tampa Bay Lightning in the 2011 NHL draft — mostly for his offensive talent and creativity — and has blossomed into a tenacious, two-way threat that is dependable defensively and capable of handling all three forward positions.

"Yeah, I think I came in as a centreman. I didn't really know the defensive side of the game well over the years," Namestnikov told reporters in California on Thursday. "Kind of got put in those positions to defend first, and I think that helped me along the way. And now, I can play any role in any position."

As for the milestone itself, Namestnikov isn't much of a numbers guy — though he recognizes the significance of this one as he continues to work his way towards 1,000.

"It kind of crept up on me that it's gonna be No. 800 (on Friday), so I've just got to go out there and enjoy it like any other game."

"I don't know. You track everything a little bit, but at the same time, you don't really think about it," said Namestnikov. "It kind of crept up on me that it's gonna be No. 800 (on Friday), so I've just got to go out there and enjoy it like any other game."

Oddly enough, it was a trade with the Sharks that brought Namestnikov on Mar. 3 of 2023 to the Jets for a fourth round draft pick in 2025.

Namestnikov had been dealt to the Sharks a day earlier by the Lightning, and while he never suited up in a game with the Sharks, they represent the eighth NHL organization to have held his rights.

Make no mistake, Namestnikov isn't the type of player who moves around because he wears out his welcome. On the contrary, he's been involved in multiple NHL trade deadline deals because teams see the value in his versatility and want him to join them for a Stanley Cup playoff run.

Namestnikov has an additional 70 playoff games on his resumé, including a run to the Eastern Conference final with the Lightning that ended in Game 7 heartbreak with a 2-1 loss to the Penguins.

Namestnikov's addition — along with the deal that brought Nino Niederreiter from the Nashville Predators — was part of a concerted effort from Jets general manager Kevin Cheveldayoff to help make his team deeper and harder to play against.

Both players have signed contract extensions and have become part of the fabric of this team — a pair of valuable journeymen who were happy to put down some roots with the Jets in their early 30s.

Since joining the Jets, Namestnikov has proven his value over and over again.

Need someone to centre the second line after Pierre-Luc Dubois is traded?

Namestnikov is your guy.

Need someone on the second power-play unit? How about the penalty kill? Need someone to provide an important shot block or to get involved in a fracas in front of the net?

Namestnikov doesn't need to be asked twice.

Whether he's asked to deliver secondary scoring or play in more of a checking role, Namestnikov is up for the challenge.

"Longevity happens because you adjust to the league, you adjust to what's needed," Jets head coach Scott Arniel told reporters in California. "Maybe the coach may have you in a penalty killing role, maybe you're a power-play guy. Things change. You may play in the top-6, you may play in the bottom-six. It depends how your team is and the makeup of your group.

"The guys that play a long time are the ones that are able to adapt and are able to do that. Obviously, the superstars, they go about their business and do what they do every night. But it's those other guys, guys like Vladdy, who recognize what they need to do to stay in the lineup."

Namestnikov is off to a strong start to the season and has been thriving offensively since he was moved from centre to the wing.

He's found chemistry with Jonathan Toews and Alex Lafallo and has already produced six goals and seven points in 13 games this season.

Namestnikov, who had 11 goals and 38 points in 78 games last season while playing mostly with Cole Perfetti and Nikolaj Ehlers, could threaten his career-highs of 20 goals and 44 points he posted with the Lightning back in 2017-18 if he keeps up his current pace.

Shifting to the wing has allowed Namestnikov to be a bit more disruptive on the forecheck and to unlock his goal-scoring potential.

"It takes a couple games to kind of learn all the routes that wingers do instead of centres," said Namestnikov. "But the way our system is built, we interchange so much. With JT and Al, they're such smart players, so we read off each other."

SCOUTING THE SHARKS: The Sharks have grown into an exciting team to watch, even if they got off to a bit of a slow start, with five wins and 13 points in 14 games. But they're coming off a 6-1 victory over the Seattle Kraken and have won four of the past six games overall, so it looks like they're trending in the right direction.

Second-year centre and 2024 first overall pick Macklin Celebrini has been tremendous out of the gate, leading the Sharks with eight goals and 21 points. Former Jets winger Tyler Toffoli has five goals and nine points in 14 games to sit in a tie for fifth in team scoring. Between the pipes, Yaroslav Askarov has turned aside 65 of the past 68 shots he's faced in winning consecutive starts.

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<https://www.nhl.com/jets/news/blog-lowry-looks-back-on-first-game-back>

BLOG: Lowry looks back on first game

By Jamie Thomas

One done, a lot more to go.

Following the Winnipeg Jets skate in El Segundo, California, Adam Lowry looked back at his first game of the season which was in a 3-0 loss to the Los Angeles Kings.

Yeah, I mean, I didn't love my game. I was happy that I got through the game, and the hip felt good, obviously, I talked about the reads and things like that. First shift, I try and

jump and get a hit on (Adrian) Kempe and leave (Anze) Kopitar all alone in front of our net and assist on (Drew) Doughty goal to end the game,” said Lowry.

“So, I mean, it was one of those ones where going into the game, obviously I didn't expect to feel my best or be as sharp as I'd like to be. But I felt like as the game progressed, I started to handle the puck a little more. My reads started to get better. And, felt like I was starting to get my legs under me. So a good practice today, reviewing some clips and some things I didn't like in my game that I think are easy fixes.”

Following the practice, the Jets continued their journey through the west coast by travelling to San Jose. The Jets had yesterday off and with no back-to-backs scheduled during the six-game trip there will be plenty of practice and bonding time for the team.

“The time we are able to spend away from the rink together, going out for dinners, guys going to the beach, kind of getting away and decompress a little, sometimes it's a nice mental reset. You're looking at the trip and the way that it is structured, we're able to get some practice time that we wouldn't necessarily get,” said Lowry.

“That plays a huge role too. Being able to watch back the previous game and take things we need to work on and try to implement them in practice; we're not a finished product yet.”

Another positive sign for the Jets is that Vladislav Namestnikov has looked very comfortable on the wing with Jonathan Toews and Alex Lafallo.

“It takes a couple games to kind of learn all the routes that wingers do instead of centers. But the way our system is built, like we interchange so much, it's kind of same thing. So just go out there and think,” said Namestnikov.

“And I think with JT and Al, they're such smart players, we kind of read off each other and as you said, we're interchangeable in all the positions, so I think we've gotten better.”