

**WinnipegJets.com**

<https://www.nhl.com/jets/news/lambert-records-first-multi-point-game-jets-lose>

***Lambert records first multi-point game, Jets lose  
Lambert has goal and assist, has four points in last four games***

By Jamie Thomas

Sidney Crosby scored the shootout winner to give the Pittsburgh Penguins a 5-4 win over the Winnipeg Jets. Brad Lambert had a goal and an assist, Morgan Barron, Neal Pionk and Cole Koepke scored for Winnipeg whose record fell to 28-29-12. Connor Hellebuyck made 26 saves including five brilliant saves in overtime to get the Jets to the shootout. Winnipeg will finish off their road trip Sunday morning in New York against the Rangers.

***OVERCOMING A TOUGH START***

Pittsburgh got their home building going in the first period as Egor Chinakov and Rickard Rakell scored 56 seconds apart to give the Pens a 2-0 lead 2:02 into the hockey game. To the Jets credit, they started to climb back into the game immediately at 3:50, on an odd-man rush, Brad Lambert fired a low shot that Arturs Silovs stopped but Morgan Barron pounced on the rebound and got a friendly bounce to make it 2-1.

In the second period, Winnipeg elevated their game and while shorthanded evened the score. On another odd-man rush, Adam Lowry sent a perfect pass through Erik Karlsson and onto the stick of a flying Cole Koepke who slid the puck under Silovs for the shorthanded goal at 6:10.

***WELCOME BACK PIONK***

After a long absence having not played since January 13, Neal Pionk got back into the Jets lineup. Pionk's physicality, puck moving and defending have been missed as the Jets look to push their way into a playoff spot. Pionk started alongside Haydn Fleury on the third defence pairing and played 22:30 and on top of that in the third period, he helped pull the Jets even again down 3-2 with his third of the season.

"Yeah, it's nice to make contribution, but still the same feeling we lost," said Pionk.

"And look forward to tomorrow. So, yeah, it's good to be back out there, but hopefully different results tomorrow."

Lambert has started to look more comfortable with the Jets since being recalled earlier this month, he had the assist on Barron's goal that got them on the board in the first. The Jets thought they had the lead after Mark Scheifele scored to make it 4-3 Winnipeg; the goal was called back. But Lambert made sure they got the lead after taking the puck before the Pens blueline, the Finnish forward ripped a shot past a screened Silovs for his first multi-point game of his NHL career.

Lambert played with Morgan Barron and Isak Rosén for just under nine minutes and they showed a lot of speed and impressed head coach Scott Arniel.

"Most of their shifts were in the offensive zone or were coming off the rush. It was good to see them all getting up to speed, using their speed," said Arniel.

"I thought Barron did a really good job working with those two guys. All three, we'll keep them together for tomorrow."

## **NHL.com**

<https://www.nhl.com/news/winnipeg-jets-pittsburgh-penguins-game-recap-march-21-2026>

### ***Karlsson scores twice, Penguins defeat Jets in shootout Defenseman ties game in 3rd period; Lambert has goal, assist for Winnipeg***

By Wes Crosby

PITTSBURGH -- Erik Karlsson's second goal of the game tied it with 7:15 left in the third period, and the Pittsburgh Penguins won 5-4 in a shootout against the Winnipeg Jets at PPG Paints Arena on Saturday.

Karlsson made it 4-4 with his fifth goal in three games, a wrist shot off a drop pass from Bryan Rust, who had two assists in his 700th NHL game. Karlsson has 18 points (seven goals, 11 assists) in 11 games this month.

"I think our entire game this time of the year, you need a lot of experience," Karlsson said. "I think we have a lot of that in this room. Even today when, at times, we didn't play our best hockey, we gave up a lot of chances. But again, I felt like there wasn't any panic.

"We stuck with it, trusted the process. ... I think today was an experienced win for us, not necessarily our best game."

Egor Chinakhov had a goal and an assist, and Parker Wotherspoon had two assists for the Penguins (35-18-16), who are 3-0-1 in their past four games after winning for the second time in 12 games that have required a shootout. Arturs Silovs made 21 saves.

Sidney Crosby and Rickard Rakell scored in the shootout for Pittsburgh. Silovs made saves against Jonathan Toews and Gustav Nyquist. The Penguins are second in the Metropolitan Division, eight points behind Carolina Hurricanes and one ahead of the Columbus Blue Jackets in third.

"Going into a shootout, it's been on top of everyone's head that it hasn't gone great," Rakell said. "We kind of worked on some shootouts yesterday in practice and just said we were going to turn the page and try to go out there with confidence. I think that's what we did."

Brad Lambert had a goal and an assist, Neal Pionk scored in his return from missing 23 games with an undisclosed injury and Connor Hellebuyck made 26 saves for the Jets (28-29-12), who have lost three straight (0-1-2).

Winnipeg is five points behind the Nashville Predators for the second wild card into the Stanley Cup Playoffs from the Western Conference.

"I like our resilience," Jets coach Scott Arniel said. "I like the way that we battled back. ... I just thought we had a lot of opportunities. Their goaltender made some stops. We had some really good looks. Obviously, (we) got the lead. Those are the types of games you need to finish off."

Pittsburgh scored on two of its first three shots.

Chinakhov put it ahead 1-0 at 1:06, cutting above Winnipeg defenseman Dylan DeMelo to the slot for a wrist shot and his 100th NHL point.

Rakell made it 2-0 at 2:02, tapping in a backhand pass from Rust just above the crease.

Morgan Barron cut it to 2-1 at 3:50, when his shot off a rebound from Lambert was blocked by Karlsson and fluttered in as both he and Karlsson slid into Silovs. It was upheld after the Penguins challenged for goalie interference.

“(Karlsson) is part of my equation, in my head,” Barron said. “But I’m not really thinking about him. Watching it over, I kind of felt like he wedged himself in between, and I think if he’s not there, I stop and I’m nowhere near the goalie.”

Cole Koepke tied it 2-2 with a short-handed goal at 6:10 of the second period, going forehand to backhand off a pass from Adam Lowry on a 2-on-1.

Karlsson put Pittsburgh back in front 3-2 at 15:22 with a shot through traffic from the right face-off circle.

“(Karlsson) has taken it to another level, he really has,” Penguins coach Dan Muse said. “It’s been incredible to watch. ... You get to this time of the year, everything’s elevated. He’s been great all year. When it’s getting harder and it’s getting tighter, he just keeps finding a way to elevate his game.”

Pionk tied it 3-3 at 4:04 of the third when his shot from the point went in off the post.

“It’s nice to make a contribution,” Pionk said. “But, you know, still the same feeling. We lost.”

Mark Scheifele seemed to give the Jets a lead at 4:39 with another shot in off the post, but the Penguins challenged and it was determined Alex Lafallo used a high stick to move the puck.

Lambert then gave Winnipeg a 4-3 lead at 8:36 with his second NHL goal, collecting a loose puck in the neutral zone and driving to the high slot for a wrist shot.

*NOTES:* It was Crosby’s 327th career comeback win, moving him past Tampa Bay Lightning forward Corey Perry for ninth in NHL history. Washington Capitals forward Alex Ovechkin is the only active player with more (341). ... Rust has played all of his 700 games with Pittsburgh, joining Crosby (1,410), Evgeni Malkin (1,262), Kris Letang (1,224) and Mario Lemieux (915) as the only players to play at least that many only for the Penguins. ... Pittsburgh defenseman Ryan Shea left with an upper-body injury sustained on a hit from Lowry in the second. No update was provided. ... Penguins defenseman Connor Clifton had seven hits in 16:30 of ice time. ... Jets defenseman Dylan Samberg exited at 2:57 of overtime after taking a puck to the face, but Arniel said he’s expected to be fine.

## **Winnipeg Free Press**

<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2026/03/21/jets-find-another-unique-way-to-lose>

### ***Jets find another unique way to lose Likely to be plenty of second-guessing over Winnipeg's shootout choices***

By: Mike McIntyre

PITTSBURGH — The Winnipeg Jets have found plenty of unique and frustrating ways to lose hockey games this season. But Saturday afternoon may have topped them all.

Try this one on for size: With their game against the Pittsburgh Penguins tied 4-4 and heading to a shootout, head coach Scott Arniel curiously tapped 37-year-old Jonathan Toews and 36-year-old Gustav Nyquist on the shoulders to take the first two breakaway bids.

Not the team's brightest offensive stars in Mark Scheifele, Kyle Connor, Gabe Vilardi or Josh Morrissey. Not young guns like Cole Perfetti, Brad Lambert, Isak Rosen or the red-hot Morgan Barron.

No, it was the two oldest players on the team, who may both be in the final weeks of their NHL careers, tasked with trying to keep Winnipeg's fading playoff hopes alive. Toews, who has nine goals this season, hit the post. Nyquist, who has one goal all year, was stopped.

At the other end of the rink, Sidney Crosby and Rickard Rakell beat Connor Hellebuyck clean. And that was all she wrote.

A 5-4 shootout loss is the latest blow to the Jets, who are now winless in their last three games (0-1-2) and sit at 28-29-12 overall, which includes a 1-4 record in games decided by a shootout.

"JT is almost a 50 per cent shooter and Gus is in the 40s, right around 41 (per cent). It was about trying to change it up and get a different look," Arniel told the Free Press outside the team's dressing room at PPG Paints Arena.

He's referring to their career numbers, of course. But the majority of that damage was done years ago.

It's fair to wonder if Arniel was possibly sending a message to the likes of Scheifele and Connor and Morrissey, who were caught on the ice for an extended shift to begin a wild, wide-open three-on-three overtime which ultimately led to a Pittsburgh power play that was unsuccessful.

"It was just trying to do something a little bit different," Arniel insisted.

Let the second-guessing begin.

Pittsburgh had been an NHL-worst 1-10 in shootouts this year. They are now 35-18-16 overall to sit in second place in the Metropolitan Division.

### *Definitely a message*

The Jets were coming off a 6-1 beatdown on Thursday night in Boston and should have come racing out of the starting gate in this one.

Instead, they trailed 2-0 just 122 seconds into the game.

Veteran defenceman Dylan DeMelo, who is having some major on-ice struggles lately, was burned badly on both goals by Egor Chinakhov and Rakell. And so Arniel told him to take a seat for the rest of the opening frame, with an ugly stat line that read: 2 shifts, 37 seconds of ice time, minus-two.

“With these afternoon games, sometimes it’s whoever wakes up first that gets the advantage. Pittsburgh certainly came out coming at us like we expected them to come at us, especially with their attack game,” said Arniel.

DeMelo and his teammates, meanwhile, appeared to be mentally back in their warm, cozy beds at the Four Seasons.

The benching ended after the first period, more out of necessity than anything. Winnipeg plays again on Sunday afternoon, and the Jets couldn’t afford to burn out their other five blue-liners — especially since one of them was Neal Pionk, returning from a two-month injury absence.

However, DeMelo was taken off the top pair with Morrissey and moved down to the third-pairing with Haydn Fleury. Rookie Elias Salomonsson moved up to play with Morrissey, while Pionk reunited with his usual partner, Dylan Samberg.

### *Bowling ball Barron*

Goalie interference has become a hot-button topic in the league, and Winnipeg’s first goal of the game will surely pour fuel on the fire.

Barron rushed towards the front of the Pittsburgh net to get a stick on a rebound off a Lambert shot that was stopped by Penguins goalie Arturs Silovs. In doing so, he nudged Penguins defenceman Erik Karlsson straight into Silovs, who went sprawling to the ice as the puck eventually trickled into the net.

Officials called it a good goal, and the Penguins immediately challenged. The call was upheld.

“Eighty per cent,” Barron said when asked how confident he was his 11th of the year would stand, which came at 3:50 of the first period and cut the deficit to 2-1.

“Lambo made a great block and I’m trying to charge up the ice. From my perspective, I’m trying to stop. Obviously, (Karlsson) is a part of my equation in my head but I’m not thinking about him. Watching it over, I felt like he kind of wedged himself in between and if he’s not there, I’m nowhere near the goalie. So, that’s the way I saw it.”

The Penguins, who are now 0-for-8 on goalie interference challenges, couldn’t believe it. They were so irate, their public relations staff handed out printed copies of the NHL rulebook to media members in the press box, believing it supported their case the goal should have been waved off.

### *Don’t call it a comeback*

The Jets managed to erase the early deficit when Cole Koepke finished off a beautiful two-on-one shorthanded rush with Adam Lowry early in the second period to make it 2-2.

Karlsson would restore the lead for the home team with just under five minutes left in the middle frame, but third-period tallies from Pionk (4:04) and Lambert (8:36) gave the Jets the advantage for the first time.

"I liked our resilience and I like the way that we battled back. The last 10 minutes of the first, we were the better team and we took over the game after that," said Arniel.

Winnipeg's 4-3 lead could have been bigger. Scheifele had a goal called back on a missed stoppage challenge, with replays confirming Alex Lafallo had grazed the puck with a high stick that initially went undetected. Scheifele then just missed on an open net a few minutes later.

These close calls proved costly when Karlsson struck for a second time with just more than seven minutes left in regulation to tie it 4-4.

"That one was more about how we managed it coming up the ice. We gave them the numbers coming back and so they had their numbers against us," said Arniel.

"We had done a really good job of not allowing them to get those odd-man looks against us. We did there, unfortunately."

Hellebuyck couldn't get over to seal the net in time as Karlsson scored from a tough angle. It also didn't help that there may have been goalie interference on the play — from his teammate, Fleury.

"We didn't want to get in a track meet but we put ourselves in a position where we had to," said Barron.

"I still think there were some moments throughout that game where we can manage it better. We did a good job of getting back in it and sticking with it, but it was not as clean a game as we would have liked to have played."

#### *Key play*

Karlsson's second goal of the game, late in the third period, took away a valuable point from the visitors.

#### *Three stars*

1. PGH D Erik Karlsson: 2 goals
2. WPG RW Brad Lambert: 1 goal, 1 assist
3. PGH Rickard Rakell: 1 goal

#### *Extra, extra*

Pionk's last game was on Jan. 13. Since then, he suffered an injury, was close to returning to the lineup, then suffered a new ailment while ramping up his original recovery.

"It's been a wild year in that sense. Could it have been related? Maybe, (it would) be hard to prove. Frustrating, for sure, but glad I'm back now," he said.

His return knocked Jacob Bryson out of the lineup, as he joined fellow defenceman Ville Heinola as a healthy scratch.

Samberg took a puck to the face during the overtime session and looked to be in distress, writhing on the ice for a second but then quickly skating off on his own and going straight down the tunnel to the room.

"He's OK. He's all right. Obviously, it looked more like a cut than anything. He seems to be OK with everything else. He should be good," said Arniel.

Hellebuyck stopped 26 of 30 shots, while Silovs blocked 21 of 25.

Winnipeg went 0-for-1 on the power play, while Pittsburgh went 0-for-2.

The Jets flew to the Big Apple following the game and will now close out this quick road trip by facing the New York Rangers inside Madison Square Garden on Sunday (11 a.m. CT).

"We need all the points right now," said Barron.

"We have kind of put ourselves in this position, so the good news is we have another chance to go for two (on Sunday) so we will try to regroup and go back at them."

### **Sportsnet.ca**

<https://www.sportsnet.ca/nhl/article/penguins-frustrated-with-goalie-interference-call/>

### ***Penguins frustrated with goalie interference call***

By Sportsnet Staff

The Pittsburgh Penguins are the latest team to be frustrated with a failed coach's challenge for goaltender interference.

The play in question occurred in the first period of Saturday's game against the Winnipeg Jets. Jets forward Brad Lambert skated in on a partial breakaway and fired a shot at Penguins goalie Arturs Silovs. Silovs steered the puck away but it bounced into the slot. Jets forward Morgan Barron and Penguins defenceman Erik Karlsson both reached for the puck and Barron bumped Karlsson into Silovs. At the same time, the puck ricocheted off Barron and into the net.

The Penguins challenged the call for goaltender interference but the call was upheld after review. In a statement about the play, the NHL only said that "Video review confirmed no goaltender interference infractions occurred prior to Morgan Barron's goal."

Sportsnet's Elliotte Friedman reported during Saturday Headlines on Hockey Night in Canada that he spoke to an official about this play and that official agreed with the call, saying the play "was a puck battle."

However, Friedman added, the Penguins handed out a paper to the media in the Pittsburgh press box with a section of the rulebook highlighted in yellow. The section highlighted was from Rule 69.1 Interference on the Goalkeeper, which states in part: "If a defending player has been pushed, shoved, or fouled by an attacking player so as to cause the defending player to come

into contact with his own goalkeeper, such contact shall be deemed contact initiated by the attacking player for purposes of this rule, and if necessary a penalty assessed to the attacking player and if a goal is scored it would be disallowed."

As Friedman pointed out on the broadcast, the rule does not mention puck battles as a reason to allow the goal to count.

Speaking after the game, Penguins coach Dan Muse backed his staff for initiating the challenge and said general manager Kyle Dubas told him after the annual general manager meetings earlier this week to challenge plays "by the the book."

"We felt that one was by the book, in the sense that their player pushes (Karlsson) into (Silovs)," Muse continued. "That's why I challenged."

The Penguins won the game 5-4 in a shootout.

### **Associated Press**

<https://www.sportsnet.ca/nhl/article/crosby-rakell-lead-penguins-past-jets-in-shootout/>

### ***Crosby, Rakell lead Penguins past Jets in shootout***

By Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — Sidney Crosby and Rickard Rakell scored in a shootout and the Pittsburgh Penguins beat the Winnipeg Jets 5-4 on Saturday.

Pittsburgh, which is jockeying for playoff positioning, earned an extra point in the shootout for the second time this season. The Penguins have points in seven of their last eight games and 21 of their last 25.

Arturs Silovs, who made 21 saves, stopped Jonathan Toews and Gustav Nyquist in the shootout.

Erik Karlsson scored two goals and has five in his last three games. Karlsson, who has four straight multi-point games, now has seven goals and 19 points in his last 12 games.

Egor Chinakhov earned his 100th NHL point with a goal and Rakell scored to continue a career-best eight-game point streak.

Parker Wotherspoon had two assists, while Bryan Rust, playing in his 700th NHL game, continued a six-game point streak with an assist.

Cole Koepke scored a short-handed goal, while Morgan Barron also scored for the Jets.

Brad Lambert had a goal and an assist, while Neal Pionk scored in his return after missing the last 23 games because of injury.

Connor Hellebuyck, making his 11th start in 12 games, had 26 saves for the Jets, who have lost three straight and five of their last seven games.

Chinakhov and Rakell scored in the first 2:02 of the game for Pittsburgh, but the Jets tied the game at 6:10 of the second period thanks to Koepke's goal.

Pittsburgh has given up 11 short-handed goals, second-most in the league. The Penguins have allowed short-handed goals in back-to-back games and four this month.

The Jets trailed 3-2 entering the third period, but Pionk tied the game at 4:04 with a shot from the point. Lambert beat Silovs at 8:36 from a distance off the rush. Karlsson forced overtime when he beat Hellebuyck with a wrist shot from the top of the right circle.

*Up next*

Jets: Visit the New York Rangers on Sunday.

Penguins: Host Carolina on Sunday.

## **The Athletic**

<https://www.sportsnet.ca/nhl/article/toews-scores-lone-goal-for-jets-in-loss-to-bruins/>

### ***Winnipeg Jets are No. 20 in Scott Wheeler's 2026 NHL prospect pool rankings***

By Scott Wheeler

*Welcome to Scott Wheeler's 2026 rankings of every NHL organization's prospects. You can find the complete ranking and more information on the project and its criteria here, as we count down daily from No. 32 to No. 1. The series, which includes evaluations on nearly 500 prospects, runs from March 9 to April 8.*

The Jets' pool has a little more than a half-dozen name prospects, but a few of them have struggled to take that final step to the NHL, softening the outlook on the whole. The emergence of a couple of prospects has helped to soften the blow of some of the first-rounders who haven't fully realized their potential, as has the addition of Isak Rosén, but the Jets' group is a tricky one to project.

Still, their list is the full 15 players deep, and there are multiple future NHLers in there.

*2025 prospect pool rank: No. 15 (change: -5)*

*Tier 1*

*1. Elias Salomonsson, RHD, 21, Manitoba/Winnipeg (No. 55, 2022)*

Salomonsson has become a nice development story for the Jets and is already playing real minutes to positive results without needing to be sheltered.

He was off to a really positive start to his post-draft season in the SHL three seasons ago and was bound to make Team Sweden for the World Juniors before a late-November ankle injury halted his year. It was particularly noteworthy after he was just OK in his draft year and didn't take the steps many hoped he would, sliding out of first-round consideration and into the second round, where the Jets took him. You don't often see teenage defensemen play 16-20 minutes per game in the SHL, but that's how much Salomonsson was playing before he got hurt and how much he continued to play two seasons ago. He was just two weeks away from eligibility for the 2023 draft with his Aug. 31 birthday, too, so had his pre-injury play in the SHL been in his draft year, he would have been viewed differently.

He then became an important defender for the 2024 SHL champs and the Swedish World Junior team. Despite missing time with an upper-body injury he suffered in mid-December last year, he had a really strong first season in the AHL as a 20-year-old as well, driving impacts at both ends on a bad Moose team. This season, he has averaged 21-22 minutes per game for another Moose team that has struggled to score and has also emerged in the back half with the Jets.

He's a tremendous north-south skater who can join the rush with ease off the puck, skate it down ice when he has it and close gaps quickly to play a physical and tight-defending brand of hockey while funneling opposing carriers wide into rub-outs along the wall. If he does get caught down ice trying to involve himself, he tracks back easily.

His decision-making physically does need some tightening up at times and has gotten him into suspension trouble at different levels, but his reads in other areas of the game have improved. I like his comfort level under pressure and confidence for a player as young as he is. He moves really well in all four directions, involves himself in a lot of plays offensively, has a pro frame and build, and most of his finer skills (including his shot and his handling) get good grades. He closes and snuffs out a lot of plays and projects as a two-way top-six defenseman at five-on-five who may be able to help out on either special team. It doesn't hurt that he's a 6-foot-2 righty, either.

His problem at times in the past has been that his actual tools were better than the way he used them. That was something I was comfortable betting on when I ranked him 39th on my final draft board for 2022, though, and I think he has figured out what he needs to be at the next level. He looks like how most teams want their D to look nowadays: big, strong, highly mobile. He already looks like a full-time top-six D but could be a two-way second-pairing piece.

## *2. Brayden Yager, C, 21, Manitoba (No. 14, 2023)*

Yager has been on the radar in western Canada for a long time, and he has some pedigree to his profile, though his numbers never found that true upper echelon in junior. He was the No. 3 pick in the 2020 WHL Bantam Draft and the CHL Rookie of the Year (with 34 goals), then an alternate captain and second-leading scorer at the Hlinka Gretzky Cup. He was Canada's second-leading scorer at the World Juniors as an 18-year-old and their captain and most-used center as a 19-year-old. As an alternate captain and one of Moose Jaw's leading scorers for two consecutive seasons, he centered the first line to a WHL title with 49 goals and 128 points in 81 games split between the regular season, playoffs and Memorial Cup in 2023-24. And then last year in the final chapter of his junior career, he registered 33 goals and 96 points in 70 games split between Moose Jaw and Lethbridge.

This season, he has had a fine though unspectacular rookie season in the AHL with the Moose. He has been a solid center for them, winning 54 percent of his draws, and has contributed around half a point per game on a low-scoring team while playing 15 minutes per game in the middle of their lineup — including regularly on the power play and spot usage on the penalty kill, where he was dangerous in junior. His actual statistical profile has always been good without being great, but he has been a consistent offensive player in his age group while playing a detail-oriented off-puck game as a center.

Yager plays a threatening, attacking game with skill in straight lines and in cutting sequences in transition. He has smooth-skating mechanics. He's dangerous inside the offensive zone from the top of the circles in with a quick-release wrister that comes off his blade hard and with a slight, goalie-fooling adjustment pre-shot. He has good puck skill in congested areas, an ability

to attack in bursts and make something happen out of dead plays, and an equal ability to play off coverage and make himself available as a shooter for his linemates.

He's a natural scorer who plays a direct style, but he also has vision and good touch, though I wouldn't say his creativity is necessarily a strength. I like the way he supports the puck defensively as a center. He's very intentional with his routes, offensively and defensively, which should help him stick at the center position long-term. He's a decent, though not standout, skater; his skating hasn't taken a step to add a separation gear in the last couple of years. He's a smart player who finds ways to get open and supports his linemates well. I like his work rate. He doesn't have a star quality, but he's going to play in the league and projects as a potential 3C/PP2/PK2 type.

### *3. Isak Rosén, LW, 23, Buffalo/Rochester/Winnipeg (No. 14, 2021)*

Rosén is a slippery goal-scoring winger who just looks talented in possession. On the attack, he's a crafty handler who sneaks through traffic to navigate in and out of space in control, drawing attention as he goes. A lot of the tools he has are also the ones required of average- or slightly below-average-sized players in today's game; he's now listed at 6 feet and 185 pounds, which is up an inch and 15-plus pounds over the last couple of years.

He's inventive. He's a light, fluid skater who changes directions in an instant and beats defenders off cuts, and his ability as a marksman really can't be overstated. Both his one-timer and his wrister are pinpoint accurate, and he makes a ton of quick adjustments before he releases the puck to catch goalies and defenders off guard. Though his first instinct is to look to attack the slot to score, he's also got great touch with the puck when play breaks down and he has to improvise or make a play to a linemate.

He was a top scorer in Rochester the last two seasons, playing to around a point per game and learning to find ways to get to the heart of the offensive zone to create more for his shot. I think he's got what it takes to inject skill into an NHL top nine and threaten on the power play. There was a risk that he would just become a AAAA scorer blocked by the wing depth in Buffalo, but he should have more of an opportunity to fulfill his potential in Winnipeg. He's got the threatening transition game, nifty release, shot shaping and perimeter speed and control to become a 20-goal complementary middle-six finisher and PP2 scorer. I considered ranking him first or second here.

### *4. Sascha Boumedienne, LHD, 19, Boston University (No. 28, 2025)*

I've been hearing about Boumedienne for some time, and he'd lived up to the billing before a disappointing showing at Hlinka. He impressed as a rookie in the USHL to play his way onto its All-Rookie Team and internationally with the Swedish national under-17 team. He's a plus skater with a long and fluid stride complemented by good footwork and balanced four-way mobility. He has natural glide but can also stay on top of the ice and flow through his skating patterns in straight lines. His puck management/decision-making in control needs work, though, as he doesn't think the game particularly well and relies too much on his instincts both with and without the puck — he can take an extra second to make his read at times and is prone to turning the puck over. He has a good stick defensively and can take away time and space with his length, skating and timing in neutral ice, though. He can also try to do too much for his skill level with the puck and put himself in bad spots at times. He's also going to get stronger and fill out his frame further to add some more power to his game (which he has started to do, but remains lean relatively speaking).

After an up-and-down start at BU in his draft year, he took major steps as his freshman year went on, playing his best hockey down the stretch and logging significant minutes alongside Canucks first-rounder Tom Willander. After playing in the teens through much of the year, he was logging 21-26 minutes into the national tournament for the Terriers. And after wanting to see him play a more assertive, sure-of-himself game on both sides of the puck in the first half of last year, he also began taking action more proactively in games and jumping into the play more confidently and at better times. By year's end, he was playing to positive results and even helping out on the penalty kill after making what some believed (myself included for a time) was a too-early move to college.

He also led all D in scoring at U18 worlds after his college season was over, putting up big points and playing a lot while still struggling at times with giveaways and defensive-zone reads. There were positives in his play defensively in some areas at U18s as well: he got first touch on a lot of pucks with his skating on the penalty kill and cleared the zone, skated a lot of pucks out, made some effort plays and blocked some shots. This season, he has played 22-23 minutes per game as a sophomore for Jay Pandolfo at BU, and while it has been a learning experience on an up-and-down team, he has handled it pretty well and his production should tick up as a junior now that Cole Hutson has turned pro. He also had a positive World Juniors in Minneapolis, where he got better as the tournament went on and was big in the big games en route to gold, showing some vision, PKing well, getting open for his one-timer and making some mistakes but still making an impact all over the ice.

He just needs to move it a little quicker and cleaner at times. When he looks to create and plays decisively, you can see it. He also wants to make a difference and can be very involved in offense when he's activating, walking the line and swinging off the point. Once his game matures and the execution/decision-making/getting caught up ice trying to do too much starts to improve, he has NHL upside with his skating. There's definitely a better player/prospect in there than the one we saw at that Hlinka a year and a half ago. His skating should carry him, and there's some untapped potential there still.

##### *5. Brad Lambert, C/RW, 22, Manitoba (No. 30, 2022)*

The story of Lambert's career has repeated across half a dozen teams, five levels and three World Juniors, and through the pandemic, injuries and illnesses. There have been times in junior, internationally and in pro in Finland and the AHL, where he has shown some really nice flashes of the skill and skating that made him one of the biggest names in his age group growing up. But there have also been extended and recurring stretches where he looks like he doesn't know who he is or how to affect a game. Just as he looked like he was ready to take the step to the NHL over the last couple of years, that inconsistency in his play has seemed to crop back up, too.

Lambert's gifts are undeniable. He's a beautiful skater whose hands flow in sync with his feet. When he's feeling good, he's fearless with the puck, makes a ton of plays in control and looks to dictate in possession. He has excellent control of his outside edges, which allows him to carve up coverage on cutbacks and carries. He's slippery because of his ability to spin away from his man and make a play. He's a good passer off his backhand. He's capable of playing pucks into space, getting to the interior, splitting lanes and cutting off the wall aggressively, and has a low base to his stride that allows him to extend plays (though he does have a bit of a hunch to his posture, which can put him off-balance). He's capable of playing the point and half-wall on the power play because of his puck skill, dangerous wrister off the flank and playmaking instincts.

But there's a difference between ability and know-how or execution. Some scouts have worried about Lambert's game without the puck in terms of both his intensity off it and ability to make things happen offensively when he's not getting a ton of touches. I actually think playing him at center full-time both in the WHL and then with the Moose, instead of bouncing him between the wing and the middle, helped to keep him more involved, but they're now back to playing him on the wing. Others have worried about how often he has skated the puck into trouble and made his decisions too late at times during his career. I've wondered at times whether he goes to the net enough to score up levels.

With the puck, though, Lambert is a multifaceted threat who blends impressive puck skill with standout all-around skating mechanics and an attack mentality that can complement a dangerous curl-and-drag shot (which also complements the short stick he uses).

There has been a boom-or-bust prognostication for him because of some of the inconsistencies and the requirement that he's going to have to play in an offensive role in the NHL. It can feel like he'll follow a shift where he has the puck four or five times with one where he's not processing things quickly enough or making bad decisions, but those brain cramps and bad habits have begun to show up less. He's a fascinating ongoing case study.

#### *Tier 2*

##### *6. Nikita Chibrikov, RW/LW, 23, Manitoba/Winnipeg (No. 50, 2021)*

Chibrikov, like Chaz Lucius, Lambert and Salomonsson before him here, was ranked higher on my board than where the Jets grabbed him at the draft. His stock would have likely been higher post-draft and pre-AHL had Russia been able to participate in the two World Juniors he would have been a part of as well. He impressed in his brief showings at the first iteration of the 2022 World Juniors, where he looked like Russia's second-best forward for my money through two games after Matvei Michkov, before it was shut down mid-tournament due to the spread of COVID-19. Though he never quite broke into the KHL before coming over, Chibrikov was a top player in his age group at the MHL and VHL levels and was immediately productive as an AHLer — though he, like Lambert, has struggled to replicate that this season coming off a season-ending knee injury last year just as he'd started to push for an NHL job.

He's a talented offensive player who, when he's involved in the game and playing confidently, looks to take and has the tools to do so. Chibrikov plays a direct, intentional game that looks to attack at and through pressure, create his own chances and drive play to the inside when he has the puck. When he's engaged in the fight and keeping his feet moving, there's a lot to like about his ability to affect a shift, both by ramping up the pace with his skating or slowing the game down to play a little more calculating as an equal part finisher and playmaker. His play off the puck as a 5-foot-10 winger needs some work, but he has shown more of a willingness to engage in battles and compete against pros in the AHL, even if he's not winning the majority of his engagements or providing defensive value. He projects as a complementary winger with some skill, but there might also be some risk that he becomes a tweener who doesn't quite have the chops to stick in a role in the NHL.

##### *7. Kieron Walton, C, 19, Sudbury/Peterborough (No. 187, 2024)*

One of the stories of the 2024 draft since being selected in the sixth round, Walton found a new level (or two, or three) last season, finishing ninth in OHL scoring with 92 points in 66 games as a 6-foot-6 center. He has shown that it wasn't a fluke this year with the Wolves and now the Petes as well.

Walton is a massive forward with impressive handling and feel on the puck for a player his size. And while he's not a natural mover, his skating has come along enough to give him a real chance at becoming an NHL player. Teams wanted to see him impose himself more last season on and off the puck, given his skill level, and he has really taken charge this year. He doesn't have the big, mean streak that you might expect out of a player his size, but he has some other qualities that pop, including some sneaky power-play utility around the net and good playmaking feel/puck skill. He's not the big man prototype, but I think he's even more interesting because of the offensive acumen he has. He has been impossible to contain in many games over the last two seasons, generating a ton of offense and looks not just for him but for his linemates as well.

He was one of the final cuts for my top 100 in 2024, and I'm kicking myself for not including him. He certainly doesn't look like a No. 187 pick, and it's notable that I've slotted him in front of a couple top-two-round picks here.

#### *8. Colby Barlow, LW, 21, Manitoba (No. 18, 2023)*

Barlow was one of the more impressive 2005s in the OHL for a couple of seasons, but questions about his pace and playmaking have followed him. He scored 35 goals in 66 combined regular-season and playoff games as a rookie in the OHL, was named captain of the Attack for his draft year before scoring 49 goals in 63 combined games that season (rare scoring and a rare honor for a player his age) and then played to a 51-goal, 68-game pace in the OHL two seasons ago after starting slow and missing time with a back injury. He also looked good from what I saw of him in his first three AHL games with the Moose in spring 2024. He got off to a very slow start for a 19-year-old first-rounder last year after a trade from Owen Sound to the contending Generals, taking him out of the running for the World Junior team, but his play picked up after a coaching change and he had a really strong playoffs, registering 33 points in 21 games for the Gens on a line that looked dominant when I went to see them play. This season has predictably been a bit of an adjustment for him at pro pace as a rookie in the AHL, where he has played just 11-12 minutes per game for the Moose.

Barlow plays a direct, intentional game built around good hands, a physically mature pro frame and an NHL shot that can cleanly beat goalies from mid-range. He's also an able penalty killer. Whether he becomes a third-line secondary scorer at the NHL level will be determined by his skating because, outside of his lack of pace, he has a high floor and tools. It's also fair to ask if his advanced growth gives him less runway for improvement, because he really does look like a man already. He does, at times, look powerful in straight lines once he builds speed — he moves just fine through his crossovers and can build momentum that way — but he's slow out of the blocks from a standstill. I would like to see him open up his plane of sight a little more as well. Even though he can score on them, he takes low-percentage shots a little too much for my liking off the rush (maybe because he feels he can't take the D one-on-one, so he shoots through them instead?). The pro build, mentality, competitiveness and scoring are appealing, though, and he brings it shift to shift. There's some bust risk given where he was drafted, but we'll see.

#### *9. Alfons Freij, LHD, 20, Timrå (No. 37, 2024)*

Freij is a smooth-skating, strong-on-his-feet-and-edges defenseman who can play in transition both ways, handles the puck comfortably and confidently on exits and past pressure, walks the line well and will roam and maneuver when opportunities present themselves inside the offensive zone (sometimes to his detriment defensively). There's some give and take with how actively his game tilts (he's highly involved off the line and in transition), but his confidence is admirable, and he has learned to make his game more applicable. He has also learned to defend better.

After bouncing between the second-tier HockeyAllsvenskan and junior level J20 last year, he has played exclusively in the SHL this year and has held his own in a depth role. He also played on Sweden's third pairing at the World Juniors and ran their PP, registering seven points in seven games and hitting a couple of posts along the way. He still needs to buckle down a little more defensively and make better decisions with the puck at times. I think he reads play well, he's just a little overzealous on both sides, and it comes with some mistakes. But his ability to be highly involved in offense, his skill level and his confidence in when to jump in and out of space and play in and out of give-and-gos are appealing — his on- and off-puck movement offensively is a real strength. When he's feeling himself, he wants the puck and plays aggressively.

If you work with him and encourage him to play, his style may be able to develop into an interesting, involved, offensively inclined AHL defenseman with a chance at getting NHL looks. But he's not a sure thing, either.

### *Tier 3*

#### *10. Kevin He, LW, 19, Niagara/Flint (No. 109, 2024)*

He, drafted in the fourth round, is a 6-foot, 180-pound winger who I identified as a potential breakout candidate coming into last season. He then got off to one of the hottest starts in the OHL, and while he has cooled off in the second half, the IceDogs captain still finished his post-draft season with 39 goals and 80 points in 67 combined regular-season and playoff games. He also had a primary assist in his lone preseason game with the Jets in back-to-back camps. This year, though his production hasn't taken a step between Niagara and now Flint, He remains a top forward in the OHL.

Even more importantly, he has imposed his will on games, using his blend of skating and skill to really push and prod defenses. He's a great athlete, has legit speed, and when you talk to his peers in the OHL, his puck skills are commonly lauded. When he gets going, he can be a lot to handle for junior defensemen. I don't think he has high-end hockey sense, but he plays with pace, can make things happen and has good overall skill and a natural release that he can get off in motion. I expect him to have a good pro career. I'm not sure there's NHL upside, but I could see him eventually playing games with his skating and intuition on the ice.

#### *11. Thomas Milic, G, 22, Manitoba/Winnipeg (No. 151, 2023)*

After building a strong statistical track record as a 6-foot goalie, the Jets drafted Milic in the fifth round as an overager. In 2020, he was named the top goaltender in the CSHL's U18 loop. In 2021, he played well in a small sample due to the pandemic for both the Seattle Thunderbirds and Team Canada at U18 worlds (as the backup). In 2022, he was named to the WHL's U.S. Division second All-Star team. In 2023, he won the WHL's goaltender of the year award, was named to the CHL's First All-Star Team, backstopped Canada to gold at the World Juniors and backstopped the Thunderbirds to a WHL title as the league's playoff MVP. That's a pretty compelling case that he's a solid, worthwhile goalie prospect.

He's now in his third year of pro and has played his first few NHL games, and has a career ECHL save percentage of .922 and a career AHL save percentage just below .900 (much of which has been played behind some leaky Moose teams). I don't know if he'll ever be more than a fine No. 3/4 goalie, but that's what he is right now.

Milic is nimble on his feet. He really battles in the net. He tracks pucks well through traffic and finds pucks on scrambles. He holds his outside edges well one-on-one with shooters. Despite

his size, he covers the posts and corners well from bad angles. He controls his rebounds in front of him or into the corner really well. He's a good goalie. But he will occasionally get beaten by good shooters, and his lack of size has been exposed at times by pros. He compensates by being a fighter.

*12. Domenic DiVincentiis, G, 22, Manitoba (No. 207, 2022)*

Drafted with one of the final picks in the 2022 draft, DiVincentiis was a .907 goaltender across three seasons in the OHL, and a CHL Second All-Star Team member and OHL goaltender of the year in his second season. He has hovered around .900 in the ECHL and AHL over the last two seasons as well. I've never quite seen him as more than organizational depth, though, and he has really fought it in some of my viewings over the years, including live ones in the OHL and at Canada's selection camp for the World Juniors. He's fine, but I just don't see upside.

DiVincentiis is a fairly mobile 6-2 goaltender who moves to pucks to make his saves but doesn't have to scramble as much as young goalies who play that style typically do. He then battles to stay in plays when he has to, though I wouldn't call him an ultra-competitive type. His tracking and focus can get the better of him, and I've seen goals squeak through him, as well as moments where he doesn't look set and ready. I find he goes down early, too. He has good technical tools, though, and is a sound goalie in terms of habits: sealing posts, closing the five-hole, playing the puck, steering rebounds into the corner, etc. I could see him playing games at some point, but he looks more like an AHLer to me, and I'd be surprised if he became a full-time NHL goalie.

*13. Danny Zhilkin, C, 22, Manitoba/Winnipeg (No. 77, 2022)*

There's a lot to like about Zhilkin, whose game is led by his physical makeup/athleticism. His skating, speed and quick hands get high grades and can catch your eye. His defensive game has typically been a strength (including in the faceoff circle) and even resulted in him playing defense a couple of times in the OHL. But his production never found that next echelon in Guelph for a player with his tools and experience — he was a December birthday who got an extra year in the OHL pre-draft — and he hasn't been productive in the AHL, so you're looking at a player who has to vie for a fourth-line call-up type of role.

It was nice to see him get that first call earlier this year because he has continued to work. He doesn't make finishing plays as consistently as he should, though, whether that's by putting the puck in himself more consistently on the chances he gets, or making that final pass that sets up a goal more regularly. He is what he is: a guy who can skate at the NHL level and won't burn you, but also doesn't seem to provide much offensively despite some tools.

*14. Zachary Nehring, RW, 21, Western Michigan (No. 82, 2023)*

Nehring is a rangy, hardworking winger who got drafted out of Shattuck St. Mary's and then had a difficult time adjusting to the USHL level post-draft, but has had two respectable seasons at Western Michigan. He won a national title in his freshman year with the Broncos, playing on their second line and registering 30 points in 42 games (sixth on the team in scoring), and has produced at a similar rate as a sophomore this year.

His frame was underdeveloped and in the middle of a growth spurt when he got drafted, but he's now 6-5 and 200 pounds, which in and of itself makes him relevant when he has decent production. He also plays a fairly physical, engaged game off the puck and has some sneaky playmaking feel and vision on the puck. He can drive the net and fight to pounce on rebounds or get to tips and redirects, but he can also slow the game down, hold it on the perimeter and wait for lanes and linemates to open up. I expect him to be a four-year college player, but I could see

him getting an NHL/AHL deal when he decides to turn pro. He remains a bit of a project, but a development team will want to work with him, even if it's not the Jets in the end.

*15. Edison Engle, LHD, 19, Brantford (No. 188, 2025)*

Engle, an Ohio State commit, was drafted in the sixth round out of the USHL last year and made the move to the OHL when eligibility opened up for his post-draft season. He has had a great year for Brantford, too, stepping into one of the top teams in the CHL and playing 20-plus minutes per game on a loaded blue line. He has been productive at five-on-five and has often played on a two-D second power-play unit as well as killing penalties. I've been impressed in both live and on-tape viewings by his edges. Engle walks the line, shapes shots and passes through lanes, and falls back onto his heels to gap up or surf really well. He's not a super physical or physically advanced D, but he's 6-2, he has a good stick and he seems to have a good head on his shoulders in all three zones. He has played well enough to earn consideration for an entry-level deal if he were to decommit, in my opinion.

*Honorable mention*

*Viktor Klingsell, LW, 19, Skellefteå (No. 156, 2025)*

Klingsell is a skilled, at-times-dynamic winger with an NHL release, quick hands and an ability to slice up coverage both on the puck or through his touch and vision as a passer. He didn't pop at the J20 level as consistently last season as I expected he would, but he has lit it up this year and has now scored his first SHL goal. He has flashed a ton with the national team, but also played high in their lineup at the U18 level with very talented players. He's a ton of fun to watch manipulate, shoot and play-make against his peers with the puck, but he's also ultimately a 5-9/10 winger, and there are questions about whether he'll be able to be more than a top-six AHL/SHL type long-term.

He's certainly dangerous in open ice, though. And his slick handling and offensive acumen are also complemented by a fairly stocky build for his size. He tries things. He's opportunistic when he gets a chance in open ice and has a nasty snapper that can beat goalies from long-range. He's clearly a top offensive player in Sweden's 2007 age group, but being a top offensive player at the U18 level internationally/in J20 and in the NHL are two different things.

<https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/7134462/2026/03/22/winnipeg-jets-stanley-cup-contender-checklist/>

***Winnipeg Jets Stanley Cup contender checklist: So far to go, unclear how to get there***

By Murat Ates

This year's Winnipeg Jets team is more likely to draft inside the top five than to make the playoffs. To talk about it in terms of winning the Stanley Cup is absurd.

It's also highly instructive. The Jets' season was a disaster, but their future doesn't have to be.

Winnipeg has strengths in key areas of its roster, even when compared to recent Stanley Cup champions. Connor Hellebuyck is a luxury in goal, while Josh Morrissey is performing at a level beyond that of franchise defencemen on the overwhelming majority of Cup winners from 2010 through last season's Florida Panthers. Mark Scheifele and Kyle Connor, whose defensive warts can partially suck the impact out of their offence, are performing at an overall level in line with that of past Cup champions, too.

It's what comes after them that poses a problem — partly because it's not good enough and partly because Winnipeg's response to its top-heavy roster construction has been to lean so hard on shifts that feature all of Connor, Scheifele and Morrissey that some of their top players' success seems unsustainable.

Today we're digging into all of it. How do the Winnipeg Jets compare to the most recent 16 Stanley Cup champions? Where are they having success, where do they need the most help, and how are they supposed to fill their roster holes?

### *The Stanley Cup contender checklist*

Every NHL fan has an idea of what a team needs to win the Stanley Cup. Take a moment to consider yours: Maybe it starts with two franchise centremen, such as Joe Sakic and Peter Forsberg in Colorado or Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin in Pittsburgh. Maybe it starts with an all-around defenceman such as prime Drew Doughty or an offensive superstar such as Cale Makar — or maybe you start with an elite goaltender such as Andrei Vasilevskiy at the peak of his powers or Jordan Binnington that season he caught fire.

Either way, you're trying to build an overpowered roster, with so many good players that some of them would almost certainly play higher up the lineup on average on weaker teams. You know you don't need the best player at every single position, but you want to be better and deeper than the teams you're going to need to beat in the playoffs.

The Stanley Cup contender checklist is one way of approaching the question of what it takes to win the Cup. It uses Dom Luszczyszyn's offensive and defensive ratings model from 2023 (and the usage adjustments he made in 2024) to compare every Cup winner from Chicago in 2010 to Florida last year. It's not a hard-and-fast rule that dictates the only way Cups are won in the NHL.

The contender checklist has been updated since I evaluated last year's Jets team — and then found the post-deadline Stars and Avalanche were even better than the Jets.

Here's how it works, according to Luszczyszyn's write-up.

The new Cup Checklist focuses on role more than position and looks at the appropriate values that define that role. It also looks at each item on the checklist with a five-point scale, allowing for a bit more nuance if a team is stronger or weaker in one role compared to another.

Players get ranked as one of the following:

*Luxury (>90%)*: A player in the top 10 percent of his role relative to other Cup winners. Someone who brings an exceptional amount of value that allows a team some significant slack in other areas. Or, it's the kind of difference-maker who puts a team over the top.

*Ideal (70-90%)*: A player who is above average for his role relative to other Cup winners. This is where champions find sources of strength on their roster. They're players to lean on who add more to their role than expected, making up for some weaknesses elsewhere.

*Solid (30-70%)*: A player right in the middle of the range of other Cup winners. Nothing fancy here, just the average expectation with a fair bit of leeway above and below the mean.

*Passable (10-30%):* A player who is below average for his role relative to other Cup winners. It's not ideal, but teams have still won with a player at this level. It's a potential weakness that should be countered with a source of strength elsewhere.

*Exception (<10%):* A player in the bottom 10 percent of his role relative to other Cup winners. Essentially, they're the "exception to the rule." It's not that a team can't win with an exception to the rule (some already have!), it just means that a player has to play above his means when it matters, or the team has to make up ground elsewhere. It's a potential liability that could be the team's downfall. On the more hopeful side, it's where a team needs a playoff breakthrough. The postseason is where legends are born and a lot of great stories start here: with a player who went above and beyond expectations.

We're about to look at 13 Jets roster spots from franchise forwards and defencemen through shutdown players, support scoring and goaltenders.

Fifteen of the past 16 Stanley Cup champions graded out as "solid" or better for at least half of the players in those roster spots. Fifteen of the past 16 champions also had at least two players meeting the "ideal" criteria for their position on the roster.

How does Winnipeg do?

*Winnipeg's 'elite' core: Its biggest strengths are, in fact, big strengths*

One of the most important takeaways from this year's assessment is that Winnipeg's star players — Hellebuyck, Morrissey, Scheifele and Connor — meet the standards of Cup champions.

These players take plenty of criticism, including from me, when their defensive game goes awry (see Connor's backhand saucer pass to David Pastrnak in Boston). The truth is that Winnipeg needs more players who impact the game like their star players do — not for those star players to be tossed aside for their flaws.

Going by this rubric, Winnipeg is missing only one out of five pieces of its Cup-caliber elite core.

|                   |                      |           |
|-------------------|----------------------|-----------|
| Mark Scheifele    | Franchise forward    | Passable  |
| Kyle Connor       | Star forward         | Solid     |
| Josh Morrissey    | Franchise defenceman | Ideal     |
| Adam Lowry        | Shutdown forward     | Exception |
| Connor Hellebuyck | Star goaltender      | Luxury    |

Scheifele's offensive production — 31 goals, 52 assists, 83 points — puts him on pace for a career-high 100 points this season. He's been spectacular on that front, guiding the Jets to wins at times no one else could drive offence. When he hasn't produced, the Jets have generally lost. His defensive impact does hurt him, though. Scheifele's negative defensive rating drags him down from "solid" overall impact, such as Anže Kopitar in 2014 and Alex Ovechkin in 2018, to "passable," which is more in line with Ryan O'Reilly in 2019.

If you watch any Jets hockey, it should not be surprising that Connor grades out in a similar fashion — brilliant offence, below-average defence. The threshold for a team's second-best forward is lower than for its No. 1, though, so Connor scores as "solid" compared to recent Cup champions. He scores enough to grade out similarly to Patrick Kane in 2013, Evgeni Kuznetsov

in 2018 and Brayden Point in 2021, but Connor's defensive impact costs him the opportunity to be truly exceptional compared to No. 2 forwards on Cup champions.

The only Cup-winning franchise defencemen from 2010 through 2025 who graded out better than Morrissey does now are Cale Makar in 2022 and Kris Letang in 2016. He's among just a few all-around masters of his craft, producing enough offence to be among the league's best with the puck and defending against elite competition so effectively that he's one of the best there, too. Morrissey deserves the Norris Trophy consideration he gets every season; I've argued before his dancing at the blue line and power-play production obscure real quality in his defensive game, too.

You either believe in Hellebuyck or you don't; at this point, the reigning Hart Trophy-winning goaltender has three Vezinas and an Olympic gold. Whatever you think of his recent playoff performance, it's no wonder the gold medal thief grades out as "ideal."

Adam Lowry is not an ideal shutdown centre. That might not come as a surprise after the season Lowry has had. Hip surgery has clearly impacted his explosiveness; not only is Lowry not scoring at his customary 35-point pace, but he's also not the dominant defender we've watched for several consecutive seasons.

The surprising part is just how far even the best version of Lowry falls short of this category. Cup-winning teams tend to have shutdown forwards delivering Lowry's best defence and more than his best point production, too: Florida's comparable is Sam Reinhart, for example, while Colorado scored highly for having Gabriel Landeskog in this slot in 2022.

I have a lot of faith in Lowry's returning to form next season. I think being healthy enough to return to the lineup is not the same thing as having the maximum explosiveness that comes with a full offseason of training. But the Jets need more than Lowry in this position. Ideally, they'd have someone closer to the impact of Anthony Cirelli, and that's a problem, because those players are hard to find.

#### *Winnipeg's 'support' core: Three key hits, one big miss*

Winnipeg's next wave of players — a scoring forward, a support forward, a scoring defenceman and a shutdown defenceman — surprise one more time: The Jets do have quality players meeting most of these requirements.

|                 |                     |           |
|-----------------|---------------------|-----------|
| Gabriel Vilardi | Scoring forward     | Solid     |
| Neal Pionk      | Scoring defenceman  | Exception |
| Dylan Samberg   | Shutdown defenceman | Solid     |
| Cole Perfetti   | Support forward     | Solid     |

Gabriel Vilardi has been a positive story this year, putting himself on pace for his career highs in goals, assists and points for the second straight season. He scores the most when playing on the Jets' top line with Connor and Scheifele but is not limited to that role; Vilardi has produced secondary scoring playing with Lowry, Cole Perfetti and Jonathan Toews. Add it all up, and Vilardi is right up there with T.J. Oshie (2018), Jake Guentzel (2017) and Patrick Sharp (2010) in terms of overall impact.

Perfetti's positive offensive and defensive ratings help him meet the mark as the Jets' fifth-most-important forward. The bar is lower at Perfetti's spot in the depth chart than it is for people getting Connor's, Scheifele's or Vilardi's minutes, but he clears it, matching comparables such

as Chris Kunitz (2016), David Perron (2019) and Mike Richards (2012.) (And, if you're wondering how he grades out so well defensively, consider zone exits: Perfetti consistently makes plays that help get the Jets across their blue line, avoiding some of the defensive perils available to Winnipeg's other forwards.)

Dylan Samberg has recovered from a substandard first half of the season to his usual standard: shutting down top forwards while providing just enough puck movement to help the Jets get up the ice. This season had been difficult for him, what with his injury and then Neal Pionk's extended absence, but Samberg and Elias Salomonsson have mostly succeeded as Winnipeg's second pair.

The big hole in this section belongs to Pionk. His offence was way down this season — as perhaps expected, given that only one forward line scored for most of it and Morrissey's pair got more minutes with that line. But Pionk doesn't tilt the ice as much as his Cup-winning peers — Brent Seabrook (2013, 2015), Mikhail Sergachev (2020), or Shea Theodore (2023). He'd need much better results at both ends of the ice to grade out as a strength for Winnipeg in his spot.

*Winnipeg's 'depth' core: Three more hits, one more miss*

|                   |                      |           |
|-------------------|----------------------|-----------|
| Alex Lafallo      | Offensive forward    | Exception |
| Dylan DeMelo      | Defensive defenceman | Luxury    |
| Nino Niederreiter | Depth forward        | Solid     |
| Adam Lowry        | Defensive forward    | Ideal     |

Whether you view him as a product of Morrissey, appreciate his puck retrievals or find yourself aggrieved by the times he gets beaten, Dylan DeMelo grades out as a luxury as a team's defence-first, fourth-most-important defenceman. That he plays the second-biggest role on this year's team — and would ideally be bumped down the depth chart — is not an indication that he couldn't help a Cup-winning team, as Johnny Oduya did in 2015.

Look at Lowry's "ideal" grade here for a similar argument. Whereas the Jets' captain did not deliver enough all-around results to meet the bar for "shutdown" forward higher up the lineup, he's more than good enough to play a third-line, defence-first role on a Cup-caliber team. His comparables here are Jarret Stoll (2012, 2014), John Madden (2010) and Eetu Luostarinen (2024, 2025). The same logic applies to Nino Niederreiter, showing adequately as a depth forward.

Winnipeg's biggest need in this section is one more forward who can be counted on to score, whether we're talking about Vladimir Tarasenko in 2024, Phil Kessel in 2017 or André Burakovsky in 2022. Great teams have players as productive as these players were in excess; Winnipeg needs more.

*The Jets' final tally: Big strengths, big needs*

Winnipeg's star power comes off looking good in this study. There simply isn't enough of it — and I'm not sure Jets fans will find that encouraging or disappointing.

On one hand, Winnipeg needs "only" a second-line centre, another top-six forward and an upgrade on defence. On the other hand, Winnipeg needs a better second-line centre, another top-six forward and an upgrade on defence.

Not every Cup champion is blue boxes across the board. With nine of 13 players scoring as "solid" or better, the Jets are better off than the 2018 Capitals and 2011 Bruins were when they

won it all. Remember that sufficient strength in one area — say, Hellebuyck at his best — should be enough to make up for deficiencies in another. Connor McDavid made it to Game 7 of the 2024 Cup Final on a team with as many holes in it as the 2025-26 Jets.

Winnipeg's holes are substantial, and the path to acquiring much-needed help has not always been easy. The Jets have sent out multiple first-round picks in search of a 2C by trade; they've never managed to retain the player they acquire. They've picked up good depth forwards such as Niederreiter and Vladislav Namestnikov for cheap, but they've lost more players with another offensive gear to their game (Nikolaj Ehlers) than they've gained in the last calendar year. If they'd gotten the 2014 edition of Toews, this study might land entirely differently.

### **Pittsburgh Tribune**

<https://triblive.com/sports/penguins-get-rare-shootout-win-to-beat-jets/>

#### ***Penguins get rare shootout win to beat Jets Penguins earn just 2nd shootout victory in 12 tries this season***

By Seth Rorabaugh

In a game full of challenges — two literal ones, to be precise — the Pittsburgh Penguins conquered their most vexing challenge this season – the shootout – and defeated the Winnipeg Jets, 5-4, Saturday at PPG Paints Arena.

Shootout goals by forwards Sidney Crosby and Rickard Rakell were the difference.

It was only the second shootout win for the Penguins this season (2-10).

“Oh, it feels awesome,” Rakell said. “Going into a shootout, it’s been on top of everyone’s head that it hasn’t gone great. But we kind of worked on some shootouts yesterday in practice. And just said that we were just going to try to turn the page and try to go out there with confidence.

“That’s what we did.”

A pair of coach’s challenges — one successful, one unsuccessful — issued by the Penguins dictated the flow of the contest. Their unsuccessful challenge for goaltender interference was the latest entry into a season-long debate over the NHL’s seemingly unspecified definition of the rule.

“I don’t know what they’re looking for,” Penguins rookie goaltender Arturs Silovs said. “What is goalie interference? What’s not goalie interference? ... It’s frustrating. Give (the Jets) an easy goal for no reason.

“But we battled through and we managed to win the game.”

Silovs stopped 21 of 25 shots in regulation and overtime, then did not allow a goal on two shootout attempts as his record improved to 16-9-8.

The victory extracted a bit of a toll, however, as Penguins defenseman Ryan Shea did not finish the game because of an apparent facial injury. He left the contest late in the second period, then

emerged from the dressing room to open the third period with a full shield to protect his face but did not record a shift in the final frame.

Following the contest, there was no substantive update on Shea, one of five players who have appeared in all 69 of the team's games this season.

Another defenseman, Erik Karlsson, maintained his prolific pace as of late as he scored two goals, including one that tied the contest relatively late in regulation.

Since Feb. 28, Karlsson has 19 points (seven goals, 12 assists) in his past 12 games.

"There's not too many guys in the league who can do what he does, especially when he's at the top of his game," said Penguins forward Bryan Rust, who appeared in his 700th career game. "He's been a catalyst for us, obviously, offensively. He's making really good plays defensively, too. And he's helping, being a calming presence, both on the ice (and) on the bench, too."

The Penguins wasted little time in taking a lead. To be precise, they wasted 66 seconds before forward Egor Chinakhov recorded his 100th career point with his 15th goal of the season.

Off a short-area backhand pass from near the penalty boxes by linemate Evgeni Malkin, Chinakhov raced into the offensive zone on the right wing, made a dashing deke past Jets defenseman Dylan DeMelo in the near circle, then fired a lightning bolt of a wrist from the slot through goaltender Connor Hellebuyck's five hole. Malkin and defenseman Parker Wotherspoon, who made a challenging pass out of the defensive zone to initiate the sequence, had assists.

Only 56 seconds later, Rakell registered his 14th goal.

DeMelo had trouble again, this time trying to settle a bouncing puck between his skates at Winnipeg's blue line. Rust took advantage of DeMelo's mishap and swiped the puck before driving it up ice. From just below the left circle, Rust slipped a backhand pass past the stick of Jets defenseman Josh Morrissey to the front of the crease, where an onrushing Rakell directed a forehand shot past Hellebuyck's glove. Rust and defenseman Sam Girard had assists. For Girard, it was his first point since the Penguins acquired him via trade Feb. 24.

The Jets got on the scoreboard under disputed circumstances when forward Morgan Barron scored his 11th goal at 3:50.

After blocking a slapper by Wotherspoon at the left point of Winnipeg's zone, Jets rookie forward Brad Lambert chased down the ensuing rebound in the neutral zone, gained the Penguins' zone on the right wing and fired a wrist from the near circle to the far side. Silovs punched the rebound to the slot, where Barron chipped the puck forward, only to have it partially blocked by Karlsson's stick. As the puck became airborne, the ample Barron (6-foot-5, 220 pounds) crashed into Karlsson, who then collided with Silovs as the puck fluttered into the cage. Lambert logged the lone assist.

The Penguins issued a coach's challenge on the basis of goaltender interference. Following a lengthy review, officials found no evidence of malfeasance, and the Penguins were issued a delay of game penalty as they fell to 0 for 8 on challenges related to goaltender interference.

The NHL issued a brief statement on the decision, simply noting “video review confirmed no goaltender interference infractions occurred prior to Morgan Barron’s goal.” No substantive details were provided on the decision.

Penguins officials were so agitated by the outcome that a staffer distributed printed copies of page 101 of the NHL’s rule book to media in the press box. The final paragraph of rule 69.1 was highlighted. It states:

“If a defending player has been pushed, shoved, or fouled by an attacking player so as to cause the defending player to come into contact with his own goalkeeper, such contact shall be deemed contact initiated by the attacking player for purposes of this rule, and if necessary a penalty assessed to the attacking player and if a goal is scored it would be disallowed.”

The contest was tied at 6:10 of the second period via forward Cole Koepke’s sixth goal, which came while short-handed.

After a puck caromed fortuitously in Winnipeg’s zone, Jets forward Adam Lowry claimed it near the left point and generated a two-on-one rush with Koepke against Karlsson. Gaining the Penguins’ zone on the right wing, Lowry slipped a pass past Karlsson’s skates to the lower right hashmark. Koepke took the pass on his forehand, deked to his backhand, undressed Silovs and deposited a backhander into a mostly vacant cage. Assists went to Lowry and DeMelo.

It was the 11th short-handed goal the Penguins have surrendered this season. Entering the day, only the Colorado Avalanche (12) have allowed more.

Karlsson reclaimed a lead for the hosts at 15:22 of the second frame with his 10th goal.

Off a feed from Chinakhov, Wotherspoon advanced from the left point to the near circle, then fed a seam pass across the ice to Karlsson. Surveying his options, Karlsson zipped a far-side wrister to the past Hellebucyk’s blocker. Wotherspoon and Chinakhov claimed assists.

Jets defenseman Neal Pionk struck with his third goal 4:04 into the third period.

Accepting a pass at the left point of the offensive zone, Pionk gripped and ripped a wrister through a phalanx of bodies near the crease and beat Silovs’ glove on the near side. Linemates Jonathan Toews and Gustav Nyquist negotiated assists.

The Jets appeared to take their first lead of the contest only 31 seconds later when forward Mark Scheifele fired a wrister from the Penguins’ left circle. But after the Penguins took a timeout, they issued another coach’s challenge, claiming the play should have been halted because Jets forward Alex Iafallo played the puck with a high stick earlier on the sequence. A review confirmed those suspicions and euthanized the goal.

Oddly, the Penguins are now 4 for 4 in coach’s challenges for scenarios not involving goaltender interference.

A valid goal was scored by Lambert at 8:36 of the third frame, his second of the season.

After Penguins defenseman Connor Clifton was unable to cleanly play a puck in the neutral zone and was thumped away by Barron, Lambert took possession, gained the offensive blue

line, utilized Girard as a screen in the high slot and fired a wrist shot that glanced off Girard's right leg and sailed past Silovs' glove. There were no assists.

The Penguins did not relent as Karlsson tied the score again at 12:45 of the third period.

Racing into the offensive zone on the right wing, Rust left a drop pass near top of the circle for Karlsson. Lining up Jets defenseman Haydn Fleury as a screen, Karlsson ripped a wrist shot past Hellebuyck's blocker on the far side. Rust and Crosby claimed assists.

With that score, Karlsson became the first defenseman in the 58-year history of the franchise to score multiple goals in consecutive games.

During a 6-5 road overtime loss to the Carolina Hurricanes on Thursday, Karlsson scored twice.

"He's doing so much for us," Rakell said. "And it's not just scoring goals. It's the way he breaks out pucks and keeping a close cap on their entries and just dictating the game. Then, obviously, everybody knows his game. When he's confident, he's one of the best defensemen in our league still. He shows that he can do it all."

After failing to score in overtime despite a four-on-three power-play opportunity, the Penguins secured victory in the shootout.

After Chinakhov was denied on the opening attempt, Crosby and Rakell beat Hellebuyck. For the Jets, Toews hit a post while Nyquist was rejected by Silovs.

"Everyone felt pretty confident in shootouts," said Silovs, who is now 2-6 in shootouts this season. "And I think we executed on both ends.

"It was a confident win in the shootout."

#### *Notes:*

- Rakell has an eight-game scoring streak, totaling 10 points (three goals, seven assists).
- Penguins forwards Kevin Hayes and Blake Lizotte were scratched because of undisclosed injuries.
- Penguins defensemen Ryan Graves, Ilya Solovoyov and Jack St. Ivany, as well as forward Ville Koivunen, were healthy scratches.
- Graves was formally activated from injured reserve prior to the game.

#### **Winnipeg Sun**

[https://www.winnipegsun.com/sports/neal-pionk-pots-a-goal-but-jets-lose-to-the-penguins/article\\_196be3ad-cef2-4114-943a-81c911f1a213.html](https://www.winnipegsun.com/sports/neal-pionk-pots-a-goal-but-jets-lose-to-the-penguins/article_196be3ad-cef2-4114-943a-81c911f1a213.html)

#### ***Neal Pionk pots a goal but Jets lose to the Penguins***

By Gordon Anderson

Neal Pionk scored in his return to the lineup, but the Jets still lost 5-4 in shootout to the Pittsburgh Penguins on Saturday afternoon.

"It's nice to make a contribution, but still the same feeling as we lost," Pionk told reporters in Pittsburgh. "It's good to be back out there, but hopefully (we get) different results tomorrow."

The Jets (28-29-12) play the New York Rangers (28-33-8) on Sunday morning at 11 a.m. The Jets lost 6-1 to the Boston Bruins on Thursday night prior to the one-goal loss to the Pens.

The Omaha, Neb., native missed 23 games with a non-specified lower-body injury. His last game was Jan. 13 against the New York Islanders. He was later placed on injured reserve retroactive to Jan. 13. The 30-year-old was listed week-to-week at the time.

Pionk returned to action in a non-contact jersey when the Jets began practicing on Feb. 17. He was on track to make his return for the three-game road trip out of the Olympic break but reinjured himself in a practice before the team departed for the Vancouver game on Feb. 24.

It seems Pionk isn't sure if the initial injury he picked up during the Islanders game was the same one he suffered prior to the Vancouver game. And, even if he does know, he certainly has the right to keep the information to himself.

"I lost count which injury it was," Pionk said. "It's been a wild year in that sense. But, yeah, it was a completely different injury. Could it have been related? Maybe, (would) be hard to prove. (I just) got injured in practice before the Vancouver game. Frustrating, for sure, but glad I'm back now."

#### *Not ready to go*

In the 13 games since the resumption of the season following the Olympic break, the Jets have allowed a goal in the opening 2:02 of a period in seven of those games. They have surrendered four first-period goals, and six third-period goals. The club has a 4-1-2 record in those games.

Egor Chinakhov gave the Penguins a 1-0 lead at 1:06 of the first period when he cut to middle on Dylan DeMelo and shot the puck against the grain, beating Connor Hellebuyck to the glove side on Pittsburgh's second shot on goal. Rickard Rakell doubled the lead at 2:02 when DeMelo lost control of the puck to Bryan Rust inside the Jets' defensive zone. Rust took the puck to the net, his centering pass tucked into the net by Rakell on Pittsburgh's third shot on goal.

"With these afternoon games, sometimes it's whoever wakes up first that gets the advantage," Jets head coach Scott Arniel said. "Pittsburgh certainly came out coming at us like we expected them to come at us, especially with their attack game."

Prior to the two goals allowed in the first period against the Penguins, the Jets allowed multiple early goals on two separate occasions.

In the 6-3 loss to the Rangers on March 12, the visitors scored at 1:08 of the first and 1:15 of the third and in the 3-2 win over the Canucks on Feb. 25, the locals allowed a goal 1:58 into the first and 38 seconds into the third.

"We didn't want to get in a track meet with the Penguins, but we put ourselves in a position where we had to," Morgan Barron said. "We did a good job of getting back in it and sticking with it, but it was not as clean a game as we would have liked to have played."

[https://www.winnipeg.sun.com/sports/penguins-jettison-the-jets-in-a-saturday-afternoon-shootout/article\\_5d5ee89a-3d8e-4d27-b680-4cc8da0edfeb.html](https://www.winnipeg.sun.com/sports/penguins-jettison-the-jets-in-a-saturday-afternoon-shootout/article_5d5ee89a-3d8e-4d27-b680-4cc8da0edfeb.html)

## ***Penguins jettison the Jets in a Saturday afternoon shootout***

By Gordon Anderson

With Winnipeg's sharpshooters on the bench, Jets head coach Scott Arniel went with career numbers.

The nod to career numbers failed to materialize into something positive as the Jets lost 5-4 to the Penguins in a shootout on Saturday afternoon.

"Jonathan Toews is almost a 50 per cent shooter, and Gustav Nyquist is right around 41 (per cent)," Arniel told reporters after the game. "It was about trying to change it up and get a different look."

Toews proceeded to hit the post, and Nyquist proceeded to hit Arturs Silovs. Sidney Crosby scored the winner. Rickard Rakell also scored for the Penguins.

According to NHL records, Toews has the second most shootout goals with 52. His shooting percentage is 46.4. Nyquist has 22 shootout goals. His shooting percentage is 37.3. Crosby has 48 shootout goals. His shooting percentage is 37.5.

Coming into the game, the Jets were 2-21-2 when trailing after 40 minutes, but Neal Pionk and Brad Lambert scored to give the Jets a 4-3 lead by 8:36 of the final stanza.

Erik Karlsson tied the game four each at 12:45 with his second of the afternoon, sending the game to the extra session.

"We had done a really good job of not allowing them to get those odd-man looks against us," Arniel said. "We did it there, unfortunately. I haven't looked at the exact angle on it. He's the hottest guy in the league right now and he buried that one."

Karlsson has five goals and five assists in his last five games.

Morgan Barron and Cole Koepke also scored for the Jets (28-29-12). Koepke's short-handed goal was the team's first since a Jan. 3 game against the Ottawa Senators. The Jets have six short-handed goals. Pionk returned to the lineup on Saturday after missing 23 games with a lower-body injury. His last game was Jan. 13 against the New York Islanders.

Hellebuyck (17-19-11) stopped 26 of 40 shots. He is 1-4 in shootouts this season.

Barron's goal was his 11th of the campaign, equaling a career high. The Nova Scotia native had 11 goals in 80 games during the 2023-24 season. However, Barron has bested his career high in points through 60 games played. Barron has 23 points this season. During the '22-23 campaign he netted 21 points.

"Even if you talk to Scheifele or Connor, they want to score more, and it is not different at the bottom of the lineup," Barron said. "You try to do it in a way where you are not giving up goals against, and you're not on the ice for opportunities for the other team. I am continuing to build

my game, and we need everyone in here, and that includes myself, so I am just trying to push forward.”

Egor Chinakhov and Rakell also scored in regulation for Pittsburgh (35-18-16). The Penguins have allowed the second most short-handed goals in the league at 11. Silovs (16-9-8) turned aside 21 of 25 shots to pick up the win.

The Nashville Predators beat the Vegas Golden Knights 4-1 on Saturday, vaulting the Predators into the second wildcard spot in the West prior to league action on Saturday evening. The Preds have 73 points. The Jets have 68 points.

“We need all (the points we can get) right now,” Barron said. “We have kind of put ourselves in this position, so the good news is we have another chance to go for two (on Sunday) so we will try to regroup and go back at them.”

The Jets are in New York to play the Rangers on Sunday morning.

#### *Ice Chips*

Ville Heinola, Jacob Bryson and Vlad Namestnikov were scratched.

#### *Face first*

Dylan Samberg left the game with 2:03 remaining in the overtime when a Bryan Rust shot deflected off the stick of Dylan DeMelo and hit him in the face. Samberg went down hard and lay on the ice for a short time before getting up and skating over to the bench holding his face. From there, he made his way down the tunnel and did not return.

“He is okay,” Arniel said. “Obviously, it looked more like a cut than anything. He seems to be okay with everything else. He should be good for now.”

He played 25:35 before leaving the game. He was a plus-two.