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Twists and turns for Jets as roster deadline looms Tight defenceman race stretches into final days of training camp

By: Ken Wiebe

It was less than two weeks ago when Kevin Cheveldayoff stood around a group of reporters and was asked to grade his performance during the off-season.

The general manager of the Winnipeg Jets paused briefly before making a crack about how reporters would soon be asking him about the NHL trade deadline, which is still roughly six months away.

Cheveldayoff also dropped a line that is even more apt right now than it was at the time.

“You just move on to the next thing and there’s always a next thing in the National Hockey League,” said Cheveldayoff. “In this game, you never stop. There’s always something. It’s not a defined off-season, a defined beginning of the season.”

It’s not like Cheveldayoff was looking into the crystal ball and envisioning trouble on the horizon. But the Jets GM has been around the block enough times to realize that every season brings its own twists and turns.

Being without captain Adam Lowry for the first few weeks of the campaign meant the Jets had already worked hard to bolster their depth up front during the off-season.

The next bit of adversity arrived earlier this week when Jets head coach Scott Arniel announced that shutdown D-man Dylan Samberg had suffered a broken wrist after taking a hit from Calgary Flames forward Ryan Lomberg during the second period of Saturday’s exhibition game.

Jonathan Toews left Tuesday’s game against the Minnesota Wild after “tweaking something,” and Arniel told the CJOB post-game show that he was to be evaluated further after the team returned home to Winnipeg.

Then, during the third period, Vlad Namestnikov was rocked from behind and into the boards by Wild forward Yakov Trenin. Arniel also told CJOB that Namestnikov had been pulled from the game by the concussion spotter but that he was fine.

The status of Toews should be updated on Thursday when the Jets return to the ice, but it would not be surprising if he was simply removed for precautionary reasons.

Although the Jets have been relatively healthy so far, groin issues or soft tissue injuries are commonplace at this time of the year — and not just for someone coming back from missing two NHL seasons for health-related reasons.

As the Jets await the injury news on Toews, it's the time of training camp when the cuts get more difficult and watching the waiver wire becomes a bigger part of the roster-building process.

Finalizing the 23-man roster is top of mind for the management team and the coaching staff and will occupy a lot of time leading into Monday's deadline.

For the sake of clarity, any player who requires waivers and won't be on the opening-day roster must be exposed by Sunday afternoon.

The Jets made the latest round of cuts on Wednesday, placing defenceman Kale Clague and forwards Jaret Anderson-Dolan and Samuel Fagemo on waivers and reassigning goalie Thomas Milic, defenceman Elias Salomonsson and forwards Brayden Yager and Colby Barlow to the Manitoba Moose of the American Hockey League.

Aside from the personnel decisions, the Jets remain focused on negotiating a contract extension with top-line winger Kyle Connor, who figures to become the first member of the organization to ink a deal that includes an average annual value (AAV) above US\$8.5 million.

That number could end up being north of \$US12 million, especially after news that Kirill Kaprizov agreed to a deal that includes an AAV of US\$17 million for eight years on Tuesday.

"In this game, you never stop. There's always something. It's not a defined off-season, a defined beginning of the season."

While Cheveldayoff and cap connoisseur Larry Simmons work on the number crunching, Arniel spent some time this week test-driving some different line combinations and D pairings in practices and game action.

The exhibition season comes to a close on Friday when the Jets travel to Calgary to face the Flames.

From there, you can expect the Jets to do some team bonding on the weekend and then start ratcheting up things for next Thursday's season opener against the Dallas Stars.

The Jets are getting down to the short strokes when it comes to the final cuts.

It's safe to say that the players brought in to supply depth up front — coupled with the strong play of the prospects — have helped to make the decisions as difficult as possible.

Provided Toews isn't going to miss significant time, Arniel and his coaching staff have a pretty good idea what the line combinations are going to be, but the biggest decision will come on defence where the loss of Samberg has complicated matters.

Instead of knowing for certain what the top two pairings were going to be and then figuring out how the rest of the players slot in for the top-8 (the most likely outcome right now), some mixing and matching might be required.

Wednesday's moves make it likely that the Jets go with the path of least resistance and start the season with Haydn Fleury, Logan Stanley and Ville Heinola on the left side of the defence depth chart behind Josh Morrissey.

In the short term, all of Dylan DeMelo, Neal Pionk, Luke Schenn and Colin Miller could be under consideration for left-side duty as well.

It's apparent that the idea of exposing an experienced D man to waivers in the coming days became far less appealing to the Jets after Samberg was sidelined.

There will surely be some angst among the fan base with the Salomonsson news, but there's a chance this might just be temporary.

While it's unfortunate that Salomonsson fell ill and missed out on playing a third exhibition game last week, the odds were stacked against him to make the club right out of the gate.

That doesn't mean his NHL debut will be delayed for an extended period of time.

The decision to send Salomonsson back to the AHL will allow the Jets' top prospect to go down to the Moose and play 20-plus minutes per game and build some confidence on his natural side.

After getting some games under his belt, recalling Salomonsson could definitely occur at some point before Samberg is set to return to game action — depending on how things go in the interim.

Up front, none of the top prospects boosted their stock more than Barlow has during the past several weeks.

He's skating much better than he was at this point of training camp last fall and he was much more impactful in exhibition game action.

Barlow has a nose for the net and a propensity to go to the hard areas and find open space to get his heavy shot off.

For both Barlow and Yager, it's merely a matter of time and working through the adjustment to the professional game before they're working their way into the conversation for recall duty.

The biggest battle for a roster spot remaining up front revolves around Tanner Pearson, David Gustafsson, Parker Ford, Nikita Chibrikov, Brad Lambert and Walker Duehr competing for two or, at maximum, three forward jobs.

Injuries are a part of the game, which is why Cheveldayoff spent a good chunk of the off-season bringing in additional depth — both to help insulate and lead those players in the AHL and to fill in on the big club when opportunities like this present themselves.

The Athletic

<https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/6666722/2025/10/02/jets-mailbag-connor-contract-draft-defence/>

How much did Kyle Connor's next contract just jump? Jets mailbag, Part 2

By Murat Ates

There's no way around it. Kyle Connor's life will be affected by Kirill Kaprizov's eight-year, bonus-heavy \$17 million AAV contract.

The NHL hasn't always priced its superstars fairly, even as it's made them rich. Top-end talents such as Connor McDavid and Sidney Crosby have long been more likely to take "discounts" than mid-tier stars, bearing the brunt of contending teams' needs to build depth, too — even while generating a disproportionate share of wins in a team game.

Now Kaprizov is a superstar and getting paid like one, taking reasonable expectations for star-caliber players and stretching them toward the upper limit of what's allowable under the salary cap. It's going to be a lot easier for very good — but not Kaprizov good — players to ask for most of what Kaprizov will make, and Connor is a great example.

Is Connor worth what Kaprizov earned? No. (Phew, that was easy.) But Connor has scored at an 85-point pace per 82 games over his last three seasons. Kaprizov has scored at an 102-point pace per 82 games in that same time period. If Connor were to get paid a portion of Kaprizov's cap hit, based on the proportion of Kaprizov's offence Connor has produced, that makes Connor a \$14 million player. He doesn't have to be the record-setting superstar to benefit from the new salary cap landscape.

There are other key considerations, too: Connor is his own man, Winnipeg is its own team and points aren't the only thing that get players paid. The Jets aren't automatically

beholden to what happens in other markets; they may not believe that Kaprizov is worth two Connor Hellebuycks per season. Winnipeg likely has an internal walk-away price for Connor's contract, whereas Minnesota established early on that no NHL team would outbid it for Kaprizov.

This leads us to the first item in this week's mailbag.

Note: Submitted questions have been lightly edited for clarity and length.

What's the latest on Kyle Connor? — Ashley C., Liam D., John B.

At least three of you wanted to know more about Connor's contract situation, and you spoke for so many more Jets fans. Rest assured, Connor is still tracking to become Winnipeg's highest paid player. He's earned a lot of money. The Jets are prepared to pay him a lot of money. The relationships are good and both sides want to see a deal get done.

There's work to be done, though.

As we wrote in our State of the Franchise in September, the major work to be done is more about the structure of Connor's contract than the desire for one.

The goal is to make him as wealthy as possible while keeping his cap hit low, but Winnipeg is at a disadvantage here. Take a look at Kaprizov's salary structure on PuckPedia: he will receive signing bonuses — instant, lump-sum money — of \$18.1 million in each of the first three years of his contract. In Vegas, Mitch Marner is getting \$11 million of his \$12 million AAV this year in the form of a signing bonus. Winnipeg has historically avoided doing business this way, but that's probably going to need to change in Connor's case.

There are also agents who believe the income tax difference between Winnipeg in Canada and many U.S. markets will cost the Jets between \$1 and \$2 million in AAV on Connor's deal. Again, from a player representative's perspective, the primary goal is to put as much money in a client's hands as possible. Keeping a team's cap hit low is a nice bonus, in some cases, but that's mostly something for the Jets to worry about — not Connor.

Years ago, I used to wonder if Connor would get more than \$10 million. I thought he would. More recently, I wondered if he'd get more than Marner's \$12 million. I wasn't as sure. At this point, a \$14 million AAV on an eight-year deal wouldn't faze me at all.

At that price, there are teams that would walk away — teams who value Connor less than Winnipeg does (and teams that tend to win UFA sweepstakes each summer). I don't think Winnipeg walks, but the Jets do have to be cautious here. They don't automatically have to sign him just because he's a star forward who likes Winnipeg. Their finances and cap situation have to make sense, too.

If Connor appears reluctant to sign, how will the Jets deal with it? — John B.

My best guess is that Winnipeg signs Connor and it leads to many questions about whether Connor can live up to the AAV. But John asks a good question.

The preamble gave us three options to work with:

- Hang on until the end and lose him for nothing, like Ehlers
- Trade him early to see how the team develops
- Wait until the deadline if that maximizes the return

You can take “trade him early” out of the running. From Mark Chipman on down to the players, the Jets value Connor too highly to trade him if they think there’s a chance he’ll stay.

I think the Jets would prefer to go down to the wire, offering Connor everything in their power, so that they can say — to themselves, to the media and to other players — that they did everything they could. That it was simply Connor’s choice in the end. That Winnipeg is still committed to winning.

But they can’t afford to lose Connor to the UFA market after losing Ehlers last year. If the Jets get to the trade deadline without the belief Connor will sign, then they need their own version of the Mikko Rantanen for Martin Necas deal. Necas isn’t Rantanen, but he’s worlds better than Rantanen walking for nothing.

(Of course, there are those who believe Colorado may have signed Rantanen had the club stuck it out for longer.)

Based on what the Jets released prior to the Rookie Tournament it appears that Nikita Chibrikov is around 20 pounds heavier this year. They listed him at 5-11, 193 pounds. They listed him 5-10, 172 pounds last training camp (Elite Prospects also uses these measurements). Is that real or is some sort of typo involved? — Aavcocup A.

That’s real. Nikita Chibrikov is bigger/thicker/heavier than he used to be. He’s been winning his battles at camp (which he’s always done) and is working on getting his timing back after last year’s injury.

What is your opinion on the Jets’ drafting in the past eight years? They have not been finding gems in the first round nearly as constantly as they did from 2011 to 2016. — Evan T.

This is a great question, Evan. I might tweak your depiction of Winnipeg’s glory years to run from 2011 through 2015, but it’s clear there was an era when the Jets were rich with draft-day steals ... and then an era of comparative darkness that followed.

Imagine averaging not one but two high-quality NHL players per draft for five straight years:

2011: Mark Scheifele, Adam Lowry

2012: Connor Hellebuyck, Jacob Trouba

2013: Josh Morrissey, Andrew Copp, Eric Comrie Tucker Poolman

2014: Nikolaj Ehlers

2015: Kyle Connor, Jack Roslovic, Mason Appleton, Jansen Harkins

The Jets followed this run by getting Patrik Laine and Logan Stanley in 2016, then Dylan Samberg and Johnathan Kovacevic in 2017, but their reign of excellence has largely faded since. For example, Cole Perfetti is the only first-round pick to become a full-time NHL player from 2017 to now.

Kristian Vesalainen didn't work out. Ville Heinola is still trying to prove he belongs. Chaz Lucius retired due to Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome. Rutger McGroarty wanted out, while Brad Lambert is looking to re-establish himself as a top prospect. Colby Barlow is turning pro, on schedule, while Sascha Boumedienne returns to college.

But how much of this is on the Jets?

I think success at the draft depends on several factors. In order:

- Volume of high first-round picks
- Volume of picks, total
- Luck
- Scouting ability
- Development quality

It might seem crazy to list scouting ability so far down the list. I just know that if I had to project whether a team of elite scouts would out-draft a team with a bunch of top-five picks, I'd take the team with draft capital without losing sleep.

Look at Winnipeg's first-round picks, 2017 through 2025:

2017: 24th

2018: None

2019: 20th

2020: 10th

2021: 18th

2022: 14th, 30th

2023: 18th

2024: None

2025: 28th

The lone top-10 pick is on the cusp of a breakout season. The others are various shades of work in progress.

It's clear the total number of picks has declined, too. In the nine drafts from 2017 to 2025, the Jets made a combined 48 selections. In the six drafts from 2011 to 2016, they made 44.

This isn't meant to fully exonerate Winnipeg's scouting staff or development team. There was a time when it routinely pulled quality NHL players out of the later rounds. Luck may have been in Winnipeg's favour when it drafted Hellebuyck so late — although the story of how the Jets found him is a doozy — and it's been against them with Chaz Lucius' health, but it probably doesn't explain the entirety of the difference in performance.

It's noteworthy, then, that Winnipeg did make a structural change to its scouting staff heading into 2016. Marcel Comeau had been the team's director of amateur scouting from 2011-2015. He took a step back heading into the 2015-16 season, continuing to scout for Winnipeg while Mark Hillier took over the reins. It may be that Comeau was a particularly gifted head of amateur scouting, or that something about his leadership style gave Winnipeg a unique advantage Hillier was unable to maintain.

It's also difficult to project 18-year-old hockey players as a general rule. It is an inexact science at the best of times.

Which depth defencemen — or even depth forwards — could get an unexpected roster spot to start the season?

Will the Jets give one of the other defencemen other than the top four a true chance over Logan Stanley? Last season, they always went back to Stanley. — Christine C W.

Winnipeg assigned Elias Salomonsson to the Manitoba Moose on Wednesday, likely drawing the ire of Christine and other subscribers with similar viewpoints. (This was a popular question!) With Samberg expected to start the season on the injured reserve, I'm expecting the Jets to run 13 forwards, eight defencemen and two goalies.

That means Josh Morrissey, Dylan DeMelo, Neal Pionk, Hayden Fleury, Luke Schenn, Colin Miller, Stanley and Heinola on defence.

If I'm right — and if Winnipeg promotes Fleury to the second pair, like when Samberg broke his foot last season — the third pair will include two of Schenn, Stanley, Miller and Heinola. My best guess is that the Jets run Stanley and Schenn on the third pair, based on games played and time on ice per game last season. It seems hard to believe Heinola has leapfrogged the veterans in front of him, but it's possible a Heinola/Schenn partnership would have enough brawns via Schenn for Heinola to freewheel a bit.

Miller might be the best defenceman of the bunch, to be honest, but he's never quite been able to prove he should be an everyday Jet.

To be honest, Winnipeg isn't in a great situation here regardless of who it picks. Samberg played a huge role and it's hard to see any of the remaining options excelling with Pionk like Samberg did last year.