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Jets mailbag: Injuries, prospects and salary cap on fans' minds

By: Mike McIntyre and Ken Wiebe

The Winnipeg Jets are off and running on a new NHL season — and local hockey fans are already in mid-season form when it comes to questions about the club.

Free Press hockey writers Mike McIntyre and Ken Wiebe are here with all the answers in the latest edition of their monthly mailbag.

If a player is injured early in the season and can't play for the rest of the year, what happens to his salary? What happens if it's a career-ending injury and he's still under contract for many more years?

GARY

MCINTYRE: NHL contracts are guaranteed, so the player would continue to get paid for the duration.

There's no way, for example, for a team to simply cut someone and be absolved of any further financial responsibility, like you might see in the NFL. There is, however, salary-cap relief that can be sought. A player placed on injured reserve continues to count against the cap, but a long-term injured reserve (LTIR) designation removes that hit.

Jets centre Bryan Little was still under contract for several more seasons when he took a slapshot to the head, which unfortunately led to career-ending injuries in November 2019. He was placed on LTIR by the Jets — meaning they didn't have to account for his annual salary to be cap compliant — but that also prevented the team from banking any cap space during the course of the season and weaponizing it at the deadline.

That's the prime reason they ultimately traded Little's remaining contract to the Arizona Coyotes in 2022 (adding a prospect in the process as a sweetener), which paved the way for some valuable deadline adds such as Nino Niederreiter and Vlad Namestnikov, among others. Little ended up getting all the money owed to him until his deal ran out at the end of the 2023-24 season.

At the risk of contradicting myself, there are a couple of ways to get out of a deal — but the player must be on board. One involves a "mutual termination," which you'll see in some cases where a player decides to go to Europe. The Jets did that just last season with prospects Henri Nikkanen and Daniel Torgersson.

A player could also decide to retire, but that would be a silly decision — unless, of course, your name is Dustin Byfuglien. He did just that, which meant leaving about \$14 million on the table that the Jets no longer had to pay.

I've seen it written in a few stories now that, because of the collective agreement, a Jets prospect like Kevin He can't play in the AHL this season, so it's either junior hockey or the Jets.

Can you explain this? It seems weird to me that a young player is allowed to jump to the highest level of hockey before they're allowed to play in the developmental level of professional hockey.
PERRY

MCINTYRE: That is indeed the current rule — but it's about to change. Currently, North American skaters must be 20 years old to be eligible to play in the AHL. However, tweaks negotiated this summer to the NHL's collective bargaining agreement will allow NHL clubs to assign one 19-year-old junior player to their top farm team starting next season.

The rationale is basic common sense, as you've identified. It's obviously good for development in the case of some high-end players who aren't going to benefit much from continuing to play against mostly teenagers.

However, it's not so good for Canadian Hockey League clubs, who are not only seeing an exodus of top talent to the college ranks but now face losing a big-ticket player to the AHL, too.

He, by the way, is off to a strong start with the Niagara IceDogs of the Ontario Hockey League after impressing so much during training camp with the Jets. The Beijing-born forward has 10 points (3G, 7A) in his first six games, which has him on pace to shatter his career high of 75 points (36G, 39A) from last year in 62 contests.

The salary cap is rising. Will this be detrimental to the Jets and their small market/arena?
RYAN

MCINTYRE: It's not ideal, that's for sure, especially with the rapid rate many are projecting it to rise in the coming years.

Although the Jets have spent to at or near the salary-cap ceiling in recent seasons, it's hard to envision how that could continue under current conditions. The fact is, the team still only has a season-ticket base of about 10,500 — up from 9,500 two years ago, sure, but still a far cry from the 13,000 prior to the pandemic.

This is why True North has become far more aggressive in marketing and ticket packaging, trying to shore up that foundation so the Jets can continue to be among the biggest spenders — something they believe is crucial to achieving their ultimate goal of winning a Stanley Cup.

This year's cap is \$95.5 million, which is a huge jump from \$88 million a year ago. Some believe that number could reach the range of about \$120 million within a few more years, especially if the NHL adds a couple more teams via expansion.

It's worth remembering that the salary cap is ultimately tied to overall league revenues, and the NHL is only as strong as its weakest link. All of which is to say, the Jets are still in pretty good shape — and I don't envision that changing anytime soon.

I'd suggest the fact they just inked top sniper Kyle Connor to an eight-year, \$96-million extension this past week tells you they remain committed to doing what it takes.

What, if anything, surprised you about the Jets' training camp and pre-season?
ED

MCINTYRE: First and foremost, the injuries. Obviously, we knew captain Adam Lowry wasn't going to be ready to start the year, but losing both Dylan Samberg (broken wrist) and Cole Perfetti (high ankle sprain) was quite the gut punch. There's risk any time players step on the ice — Aleksander Barkov suffered a season-ending injury during a training camp practice — but the degree of bad luck this fall really stood out.

Secondly, how good Colby Barlow looked. I know he didn't make the team off the hop, but there's a ton to like about the first-round pick who is coming off a strong end to his junior career. If he can keep that up with the Manitoba Moose over the coming weeks, I have no doubt we'll see him with the Jets sooner rather than later.

Third, just how open returning Jets players were in discussing the Stanley Cup as their ultimate goal. Of course every team wants to win, but the fact it was such a focal point in camp — their mantra, basically — tells you how much the internal bar has been raised and how high expectations are, at least within the room.

ESPN listed players that are most likely to regress this year in the NHL. Mark Scheifele was listed as No. 2 on the list, noting "A regression in power play success, combined with some expected shooting percentage regression should see Scheifele score around 30 goals and 77 points." Agree or disagree?

RODGER

WIEBE: Strongly disagree, not with the rationale necessarily, but with the projected outcome. I'm on record as saying that given his Olympic motivations and the work Scheifele has put into continually improving his game, I see a progression being more likely than a regression.

Although it's true that 11 of his 39 goals and 14 of his 48 assists came with the man-advantage, Scheifele is a consistent point producer on the power play. He's produced seven or more power-play markers eight times and hit double digits four times. Given the power-play improvement since the arrival of assistant coach Davis Payne, marking Scheifele down for double digits once again seems like a safe call.

As for a projected regression in shooting percentage, it's true Scheifele posted a career-best 21.7, which is up 4.5 per cent from his career average of 17.2. The thing about Scheifele is that he's always had a quick release and a wicked shot, so it's more surprising to me that he's only hit 38 goals or more three times (including his career-best 42 in 2022-23).

The other thing about Scheifele is that he often waits for a dangerous chance before unloading that shot — he isn't the type of guy to shoot from anywhere to pad his shots on goal stats. A lot of his scoring chances come from dangerous areas, so he's not necessarily a candidate for a shooting percentage regression.

My pre-season prediction was that I won't be surprised for Scheifele to eclipse 90 points for the first time in his career and he might challenge triple digits. As for goals, I expect him to be closer to 40 than to 30. It's an extremely small sample size, but with two markers and five points through two games, Scheifele is off to a strong start when it comes to producing offence and avoiding any sort of dropoff.

Why Nikita Chibrikov over Brad Lambert?

MARK

WIEBE: It's important to remember that it's Chibrikov getting the first crack at the minutes available because of the ankle injury to Cole Perfetti. Make no mistake, this competition is very much ongoing and Chibrikov realizes he's not guaranteed an extended spin on the second line.

However, Chibrikov showed a little better than Lambert during the exhibition games and the workouts since training camp began. The physical element and willingness to get his nose dirty is also something that's helped give Chibrikov a leg up.

On Sunday morning, Lambert was actually reassigned to the Moose in order to make room for defenceman Kale Clague, who begins the two-game road trip as the seventh D-man as Haydn Fleury deals with a lower-body injury.x

It was a relatively quiet season opener for the Russian winger, but that's not surprising, considering it was his first NHL opener. Chibrikov was much more noticeable in Saturday's win over the Los Angeles Kings, especially during the first period. His ice time finished at just under 10 minutes, but if Chibrikov (who recently signed a two-year, one-way contract extension that kicks in next season) plays with the same level of confidence and vigour, he will continue to get the opportunity to show he can handle a heavier workload.

It's not that Lambert played poorly, as evidenced by the fact he was kept ahead of longtime Jets forward David Gustafsson, but he didn't display as many of his offensive gifts as we've seen from him in the past. The ability to be used at both centre and wing should serve Lambert well here, but it's more likely he's going to see more time on the wall this season than down the middle. Lambert saw a big dip in production last season with the Manitoba Moose in the American Hockey League as he was limited to seven goals and 35 points in 61 games – after notching 21 goals and 55 points in 64 games the season prior.

The Moose didn't score much last season, but Lambert is still searching for his offensive groove, to a certain degree. He's got NHL speed and when his opportunity arises, Lambert needs to show he can provide some secondary scoring. Perfetti is officially week-to-week, so there could be some twists and turns in this battle before a winner is declared – or whether one or both of the players will remain on the active roster once Perfetti returns to game action.

What assurance do the Jets have in case Connor Hellebuyck suffers a serious injury? Could Eric Comrie carry the load?

BRUCE

WIEBE: Most NHL teams that lose a bona fide No. 1 goalie would find themselves in a great deal of difficulty, especially one that is as much of a workhorse as Hellebuyck is. Although Jets head coach Scott Arniel made it clear he'd like to keep Hellebuyck below 60 starts this season because it's an Olympic year, there's no clear contingency plan to combat a serious injury. Hellebuyck is a three-time Vezina Trophy winner and is the reigning Hart Trophy winner, so it's hard to imagine there wouldn't be a dropoff in the level of play.

Comrie has played his best hockey in the Jets' organization and posted his lowest goals-against average (2.39) and second-lowest save percentage (.914) in 20 starts last season. Since Comrie has never made more than 20 NHL starts in a single season, it's impossible to say with any level of certainty that he could carry the load. It could depend on how serious the injury was and how long he would need to carry that load.

The Jets are excited about the development of Dom DiVincentiis, but he's only in his second professional season. So having him in the backup role for an extended period of time seems unlikely. Winnipegger Isaac Poulter was signed to add experience to the organizational depth chart, but while he's suited as a backup goalie with the New Jersey Devils on multiple occasions, he's yet to make his NHL debut between the pipes.

With all of that in mind, it's likely a trade for a goalie would be required if Hellebuyck is on the shelf. Hellebuyck has been extremely durable over the course of his career though, which is one of the reasons the Jets are comfortable with him carrying such a heavy workload.

I'm wondering if you have sensed any animosity towards Kyle Connor yet, for signing that lucrative contract, especially from some of the other stars who are already locked into long-term contracts at a much reduced payout?

KEN

WIEBE: I don't get the sense at all that anyone on the Jets roster is anything but thrilled for Connor for his ability to cash in before becoming an unrestricted free agent. He was greeted by a round of stick taps on the morning the deal was signed. Connor might be on the hook for a team meal (or several) at some point, but all players – not just the stars – recognize that timing is everything in the world of professional sports.

Paying homegrown stars is applauded, not something that causes animosity. Losing Connor to free agency wasn't something that any member of the Jets wanted and most – if not all – players are happy to see the ceiling move from \$8.5 million to eight figures because it shows a willingness to spend what it takes to give the organization the best chance to compete for a championship.

It's simply a sign of the times as it pertains to the rapidly rising salary cap. That the Jets were always willing to eventually bend on the issue of a substantial signing bonus for Connor was probably met with a nod of approval from the players.

The Jets were one of a small group of teams that don't have a single player with a signing bonus on the roster (at least until next season), but it's a sign of the times and making an exception for Connor helped keep him on the fold.

In that sense, it was what it was going to take, then it was something that needed to be done. The same goes for handing out the \$12 million AAV for a guy who was seventh in the NHL in points last season with 97.

<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2025/10/12/jets-defenceman-miller-expected-to-be-called-in-fleury-day-to-day>

Jets defenceman Miller expected to be called in, Fleury day-to-day

By: Ken Wiebe

NEW YORK – Colin Miller, the stage is yours.

Thanks to a lower-body injury to Haydn Fleury, the veteran defenceman is expected to be called into duty and make his season debut for the Winnipeg Jets on Monday afternoon against the New York Islanders.

Miller has experience dealing with the in-and-out nature of being a sixth or seventh defenceman over the course of his career, so you can expect him to be ready to try and seize the opportunity.

"You want to get your first game under the belt for your season. We have a lot of good D-men on this team, so we help out where we can." said Miller, who had four goals and 15 points in 60 games with the Jets last season but was a healthy scratch in the first two games of the current campaign. "When you are on the off-side, there are some things that are better and some things that are different, taking routes. Some positives, as well as some things to adjust to."

Jets head coach Scott Arniel officially called Fleury day-to-day and left the door open for him to potentially play on Monday, though that seems unlikely since the afternoon game means there won't be a morning skate to test things out.

Miller is shifting over to the left side (his off side) on the third pairing with Luke Schenn, though the pairings could be fluid since the Jets won't have the last change during the next two games.

"We've talked about it since we went to 7 D here, we said that might be one of the ways you're going to get in," said Arniel. "So he's been doing it not just today, but for other days he's been practicing on that side. He said he's played there other times. Whenever you get down to five defencemen, a lot of those guys will end up on the off-side. That's just something that I had told him right from the very beginning when we broke camp, to make sure to work both sides because you never know when we might need it."

Fleury's absence also moves Logan Stanley up onto the second pairing with Neal Pionk.

They were used together throughout a good chunk of the third period on Saturday afternoon with Fleury out of commission, along with various points during training camp and exhibition action.

Stanley made a series of important blocked shots during the final three minutes of the 3-2 victory over the Los Angeles Kings and finished with four in the contest.

"It was a long, long couple minutes," said Stanley. "I felt like I was doing burpees in the crease, getting up and down to take away the (shot) but it was fun to be out there at the end of the game."

"Yeah, I was exhausted. Legs were gassed, and I think they were too. I think LA's guys were kind of hunched over in front a little bit too. It was a good battle."

Stanley also delivered a massive body check on forward Alex Turcotte, which sparked a fight between Jeff Malott and Schenn.

"I looked around, and I think Schenner had a long summer and was looking for one. So he kind of big brothered me there and stepped in for me," said Stanley. "Actually, my dad was at the game last night, and I think he went up and said to Schenner after 'Thanks for looking after my son.' Yeah, it was good. It's nice of a guy like Schenner on the team who sticks up for teammates and is willing to do that job."

Fleury blocked a blistering one-timer from Kings forward Adrian Kempe near the end of the second period and while he tried to test it out before the third period got underway, the pain was too high and the mobile blue-liner made his way back down the tunnel for further evaluation.

With Fleury day-to-day, defenceman Kale Clague was recalled from the Manitoba Moose of the American Hockey League as an insurance policy that could jump into the lineup if needed as the road trip continues in Philadelphia against the Flyers on Thursday.

In order to make room for Clague's recall, the Jets reassigned forward Brad Lambert to the Moose and he was in the AHL lineup on Sunday against the Laval Rocket.

That leaves Parker Ford as the extra forward on the roster.

As for the Islanders, they're off to a 0-2 start and have been led offensively by winger Kyle Palmieri, who has a goal and three points in two games after signing a contract extension last spring.

Defenceman Matthew Schaefer, the first overall pick in the 2025 NHL Draft, is off to a strong start – scoring his first NHL goal and chipping in an assist through his first two games.

Monday's matinee will feature an excellent matchup with workhorse goalies with Connor Hellebuyck expected to be back between the pipes for the Jets and Ilya Sorokin preparing for his third start for the Islanders.

Sorokin has allowed eight goals through two games, so his numbers are inflated (4.21 goals-against average and .860 save percentage).

Hellebuyck has allowed seven goals, but none of them have been softies.

Despite giving up five goals in the season opener against the Dallas Stars, Hellebuyck made a number of critical saves that allowed the Jets to rally back from a four-goal deficit and he was outstanding on Saturday, finishing with 29 saves.

Hellebuyck skipped Sunday's workout for maintenance, but that's normal for the reigning Hart Trophy winner.

After the formal portion of Sunday's skate wrapped up, defenceman Dylan Samberg joined captain Adam Lowry on the ice for some conditioning work.

Samberg remains week-to-week with a wrist injury, but is the next step in his progression as it was his first time back on the ice since taking a hit from Calgary Flames forward Ryan Lomberg in an exhibition game on Sept. 27.

"There was just a concern about falling. Now we've got to keep his legs sharp," said Arniel. "So, he'll start to do stuff, just conditioning more than anything."

The timeline for Samberg's potential return is in the six-to-eight week window, so he's probably still about a month or so away from getting back into game action.

The Athletic

<https://www.chrisd.ca/2025/10/11/winnipeg-jets-los-angeles-kings-game-article/>

Mark Scheifele, offensive mastermind: How Jets' top centre makes goals happen

By Murat Ates

It is difficult to put the subtleties of Mark Scheifele's puck protection into words.

He has such a well-studied, well-practiced sense of timing, leverage and opponents' tendencies that defies simple explanation. I've seen the scenarios and the outcomes on a loop: Scheifele has his back to his defender — wait, look, he's found a pass to a teammate in space. Even after talking to Scheifele at length, it's clear there are layers to his board work. Scheifele scored Saturday's game-winning goal on a backhand deflection that Josh Morrissey called "crazy hand-eye."

But that wasn't the whole story.

Scheifele kick-started the cycle by putting on a masterclass in puck protection against Cody Ceci. As Morrissey's rimmed pass came around the boards, Scheifele turned his back and got his hip out to box Ceci out along the boards. He drew Ceci behind the net, keeping his head up to see Brian Dumoulin trying to provide help, then won his one-on-two battle to get the puck to Gabriel Vilardi in space.

If it were a simple script — Scheifele running through steps A, B and C on his way to creating space along the boards — more people would be able to stop it. The reality is Scheifele has plans and he knows how to read and react to his surroundings, making decisions in real time based on subtle information only he seems to understand.

Once, when trying to explain the basics of body positioning to me, Scheifele walked me into the middle of the Jets' room after most of the other media members had left. He established an imaginary puck on one side of his body, then walked me through a sequence of steps. What if he turned this way? Where would I naturally step? Now what if he crossed over in that direction?

I followed along, keeping my brain in "writer" mode, trying to remember what was happening. As I listened, I couldn't shake the fear: "What if I step on Scheifele's foot? What a dumb journalist I'd be if I ..."

That's when I tripped over myself, nearly falling, like I'd been eliminated from a game of Twister I didn't know I was playing.

"See?" Scheifele said.

Scheifele turns 33 in March. There will be a time when he loses explosiveness, slowing down enough that he's less of an open-ice threat and relies on his puck-protection mastery even more than he does now. It's a sobering thought, but Scheifele might have only one or two elite seasons beyond this one (if he declines at the rate of an average NHL forward).

There is no sign of a slowdown here.

Instead, there are way-too-early signs Scheifele is going to have a stronger Team Canada case this year.

Scheifele's had a brilliant start to the season. There is no slowdown, no diminished version of Winnipeg's star centre — not yet, possibly not for a long time. In addition to his game-winning deflection, he tied the score on a rush goal. He drew the holding penalty that led to Alex Iafallo's power-play goal. He made the play to Connor for Winnipeg's first goal against the Dallas Stars and helped set up Connor's second and third goals, too.

In fact, the only Jets goal this season Scheifele didn't help facilitate was Morgan Barron's short-handed breakaway in the season opener — and even then, Scheifele was racing down the ice, looking for a rebound if Barron left one behind.

There are other ways this season could have started. Scheifele's playoffs ended in heartbreaking fashion, playing in Game 6 against Dallas after the sudden passing of his father, Brad. Scheifele's decision to play was made based on a family conversation and started brilliantly, with Scheifele scoring the game-opening goal, which put Winnipeg on track to force Game 7. But sport can be cruel. Dallas went on to tie the score. Then Scheifele took a penalty late in the third period and Dallas eliminated the Jets in overtime while he watched from the penalty box.

It was a moment that revealed character, starting with Adam Lowry rushing to the penalty box to try to console Scheifele in the moment. Teammates gathered around Scheifele to hug him, and the series-ending handshake line revealed the class of Winnipeg's opponents, too.

Grief could have derailed Scheifele's offseason. So could any rehab or complications from the injury that cost him two games against the Blues. (Scheifele has said only that he was hurt, missed two games and feels great.) But Scheifele's teammates showed class here, too — a golf trip with Eric Comrie, Morrissey and other friends was a big part of Scheifele's summer. He began his first media address of the season by thanking his teammates, family, friends, the Jets organization and people throughout the hockey world: "It just shows how great this hockey world can be."

Scheifele spent the rest of that interview talking about how excited he was to be playing hockey again. He also shared support for Kyle Connor, who at that point was still negotiating his eight-year, \$96 million extension. Then he set Connor up for all three of his goals in Game 1 of the regular season, scored two goals of his own in Game 2, and continues to centre Winnipeg's most dangerous line.

There's extra importance in Scheifele's efforts so far, with injuries to Lowry and Cole Perfetti diminishing the abilities of the Jets' second and third lines. It's more crucial than usual that he's capable of leading the attack. The Jets' middle six isn't as good of a bet as usual to win its minutes, so Winnipeg is going to have to depend on Scheifele's focus to start the year.

"He is a machine off the ice and on the ice," Morrissey said after setting Scheifele up for the game-winner Saturday. "He looks great — always — to start the year. ... That's from his hard work and commitment all summer."