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<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2025/09/28/tough-decisions-to-come-as-jets-roster-taking-shape>

Tough decisions to come as Jets roster taking shape 'We can't keep everybody,' head coach says as roster deadline approaches

By: Mike McIntyre

Slowly but surely, the opening-night roster for the 2025-26 Winnipeg Jets is taking shape.

Forty-five players remain in training camp with one week to go, including two final pre-season games: Tuesday night in St. Paul against the Minnesota Wild and Friday night in Calgary against the Flames.

The Jets trimmed four players from the roster Sunday, reassigning goaltender Isaac Poulter, forwards Fabian Wagner and Jacob Julien, and defenceman Dylan Anhorn to the Manitoba Moose. That followed an earlier round of cuts in which four players were returned to junior and two others joined the AHL club, which opens its camp today.

A much bigger cull is around the corner, as NHL teams must reduce to a maximum of 23 healthy players before the regular season begins Oct. 7. (The Jets open Oct. 9 at home against the Dallas Stars.)

"There's some tough decisions, We've got battles at forward position, battles at defence position. We can't keep everybody," Jets head coach Scott Arniel said following Saturday's 4-1 victory over Calgary which improved Winnipeg's exhibition record to 1-2-1.

Here's where the battles stand:

Defence

The locks (4): Josh Morrissey, Dylan DeMelo, Neal Pionk, Dylan Samberg
Also still in camp (11): Haydn Fleury, Luke Schenn, Colin Miller, Logan Stanley, Ville Heinola, Elias Salomonsson, Kale Clague, Isaak Phillips, Tyrel Bauer, Ashton Sautner, Dawson Barteaux
Remaining job up for grabs: 3-5

The skinny: Two major questions remain: Will the Jets start the year with seven or eight healthy defencemen? And will Samberg be one of them, after leaving Saturday's game with an apparent left arm/shoulder injury?

If Samberg misses time, a spot that was essentially spoken for suddenly opens up.

It's safe to assume Phillips, Bauer, Sautner and Barteaux will land with the Moose — the latter two are on AHL-only deals — leaving seven blue-liners fighting for three to five jobs. That's where things get complicated.

Fleury, Schenn, Miller, Stanley, Heinola and Clague would all require waivers to be assigned to the Moose, while Salomonsson would not. Fleury, Stanley and Clague are primarily left-side defenders; Schenn, Miller and Salomonsson typically play the right. Heinola is versatile on both sides.

Salomonsson's strong pre-season has given the coaching staff plenty to think about, but would the Jets risk losing a waiver-eligible veteran to keep the promising young Swede?

Clague, signed as a free agent this summer, has also had an impressive camp and could push his way into the mix, especially if Samberg isn't ready for opening night.

Schenn and Stanley bring size and grit. Fleury is a smooth-skating puck-mover who filled in capably last year when Samberg broke his foot. Miller owns a heavy shot and steady presence, while Heinola — despite battling injuries the past two seasons — remains a young first-round pick with upside.

This is, without question, the toughest decision facing the coaching staff — especially given that Winnipeg has lost two blue-liners on the waiver wire in recent years (Jonathan Kovacevic, Declan Chisholm).

Adding one or two more to that list would not be great asset management, but the club may ultimately not have much choice but to roll the dice in that department.

"The big thing for us is depth. It's important. We needed that last year during the season, we certainly needed it during the playoffs. These players, you hope they're part of that depth. They're hard to replace," said Arniel.

"Hopefully it works out for us."

A reminder, any NHL team claiming a player on waivers must keep him on the roster for a full month — they can't just stash him in the minors.

Forwards

The locks (11): Mark Scheifele, Kyle Connor, Gabe Vilardi, Jonathan Toews, Cole Perfetti, Gustav Nyquist, Vlad Namestnikov, Nino Niederreiter, Alex Iafallo, Morgan Barron, Cole Koepke

Starting the year on the IR (1): Adam Lowry

Also still in camp (14): Tanner Pearson, David Gustafsson, Samuel Fagemo, Mason Shaw, Parker Ford, Jaret Anderson-Dolan, Brayden Yager, Colby Barlow, Danny Zhilkin, Walker Duehr, Phil Di Giuseppe, Brad Lambert, Nikita Chibrikov, Kieron Walton

Jobs up for grabs: 2-3

The skinny: Expect Winnipeg to begin the year with 13 healthy forwards, though keeping 14 isn't out of the question.

Walton will return to junior once cleared from concussion protocol, trimming the competition slightly. Pearson, signed this summer, has been skating on the fourth line with Barron and Koepke and looks close to a lock. Gustafsson, a drafted-and-developed Jet, should also have the inside track on a job.

Players such as Lambert, Chibrikov, Ford, Yager, Barlow and Zhilkin can be sent down without waivers. Pearson, Gustafsson, Fagemo, Shaw, Anderson-Dolan, Duehr and Di Giuseppe cannot — another layer of complexity.

Several have made strong cases. Chibrikov, Duehr and Ford scored in Saturday's win, while Yager and Anderson-Dolan set up goals. Lambert and Fagemo each have two-assist games, and Barlow and Zhilkin have both found the net.

Arniel stressed the importance of communication with those who don't make the final cut.

"If it comes to a situation where they're going to be put on waivers or if they're being sent down to the Moose, we have the conversations. Chevy and I are in there and (Moose coach) Mark Morrison is in there," he said.

"We talk to them and we explain what it is, why, the reasoning, and maybe some areas they need to work on. Hopefully, that's part of helping them to get better."

One thing is certain: If waiver-eligible players clear, the Moose will be loaded — giving Winnipeg valuable depth and fuelling internal competition.

Goal

The locks (2): Connor Hellebuyck, Eric Comrie

Also still in camp (2): Thomas Milic, Domenic DiVincentiis

Jobs up for grabs: None

The skinny: No drama here. Hellebuyck, the reigning Hart and Vezina Trophy winner, anchors the crease with Comrie backing him up.

Hellebuyck has yet to appear this pre-season but is expected to play the full games against Minnesota and Calgary this week.

Milic and DiVincentiis, both waiver-exempt, will eventually be assigned to the Moose, where they'll share the net with Poulter. One of them will likely be re-assigned to the ECHL's Norfolk Admirals to secure steady playing time.

The Athletic

<https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/6670470/2025/09/29/jets-samberg-injury-roster-projection/>

Projecting Jets' opening-night roster: Dylan Samberg's injury creates new questions

By Murat Ates

Dylan Samberg was injured in a play coach Scott Arniel called a "freak accident." The Winnipeg Jets now might be forced to start the season without their best defensive defenceman.

Samberg left Saturday's preseason game against Calgary after taking a hit near the Flames' bench. He left the ice quickly under his own power and did not return. It wasn't a dirty hit, nor was Calgary's Ryan Lomberg penalized on the play, but Samberg seemed to crash into a stanchion with his left arm.

There's a chance Samberg's "freak accident" takes him out of Winnipeg's opening-night lineup.

On Saturday, Arniel spoke to the importance of Winnipeg's depth. He said Samberg would receive further medical evaluation on Sunday, but the implication was that the depth was about

to be tested. Though the Jets were initially scheduled to have a smaller roster at Monday's practice, Arniel cut only four players on Sunday: goalie Isaac Poulter, forwards Jacob Julien and Fabian Wagner, and defenceman Dylan Anhorn (who was released from his PTO).

If Samberg is out long-term, there's an enormous hole in the Jets' roster. Samberg plays against other teams' best forwards at even strength and is a top penalty killer; his breakout last season while paired with Neal Pionk helped Winnipeg give up the fewest goals against for the second straight year. For a sense of Samberg's importance, consider that Winnipeg outscored teams 36-21 last season when he and Pionk played together at five-on-five. With Samberg out of the lineup, Pionk and Haydn Fleury were outscored 9-5 and outshot 104-81 in almost 200 minutes of five-on-five action.

That's the size of the lift. It's also the size of the opportunity for other defencemen — whether it's Fleury, Logan Stanley, Ville Heinola, Colin Miller or even top prospect Elias Salomonsson — if Samberg is out long-term. So, which depth defenceman will step up into a feature role? And which defencemen just went from long shots to make the NHL roster to realistic possibilities for opening night?

With Samberg's start to the season in jeopardy, we try to project Winnipeg's opening-night roster.

Forwards (26)

Kyle Connor

Mark Scheifele

Gabriel Vilardi

Cole Perfetti

Jonathan Toews

Gustav Nyquist

Nino Niederreiter

Vladislav Namestnikov

Alex Iafallo

Tanner Pearson

Morgan Barron

Cole Koepke

David Gustafsson

Depth options

Injured

Top Prospects

Walker Duehr

Adam Lowry

Colby Barlow

Jaret Anderson-Dolan

Kieron Walton

Nikita Chibrikov

Samuel Fagemo

Brad Lambert

Parker Ford

Brayden Yager

Also in the picture: Phil Di Giuseppe, Mason Shaw, Danny Zhilkin

Winnipeg's decision with respect to Samberg affects Winnipeg's forward group, too.

If Samberg were healthy, the Jets' most straightforward route to a 23-player roster would include keeping 13 forwards, eight defencemen and two goaltenders. Heinola would be the most likely odd man out, while veterans Luke Schenn, Fleury, Stanley and Miller fill out the D-corps. If the Jets still keep all of those same defencemen — and if Samberg starts the season on injured reserve, as I expect — there's room for Winnipeg to keep one more forward.

That could be the opening for Walker Duehr (or a top prospect) winning a job in time for opening night.

Duehr, 27, is a 6-foot-2 forward with a bit of puckhound in him and more speed than 33-year-old Tanner Pearson. Still, Pearson has scored over 20 goals in his career (twice) and can still win battles and make plays in the offensive zone. He's also expected to kill penalties — something Duehr hasn't historically done — and I think that's what earns Pearson the job.

If David Gustafsson had made more progress, the Jets' 25-year-old, homegrown draft pick could complement Morgan Barron and Cole Koepke on a quality fourth line. Gustafsson has been limited by injuries, though — his career high for NHL games played in a season is 46 — and he hasn't had as dynamic a camp or found his way to the scoresheet. It may be safer to pencil him in as a 13th forward.

Notably, prospects Colby Barlow, Brad Lambert, Nikita Chibrikov and Brayden Yager are all still with the big club. Barlow has impressed the most, Lambert has gotten better with each game, Chibrikov has won plenty of battles and Yager wins pucks in the defensive zone. I don't think any of them have done enough to threaten a veteran's job. It's likely they bolster what should be a more productive Moose lineup this season.

If the Jets do keep 14 forwards, I think they hold on to Pearson and Duehr. If it's 13, I expect Pearson is the one they keep. Note that Pearson is skating with the veterans in Group 1 on Monday, leaving Gustafsson, Duehr and perhaps Jaret Anderson-Dolan battling for the 13th forward job in Group 2.

A thought on each new player:

Gustav Nyquist has been sneaky, shifty, slow and small. It's a treat to watch Nyquist try to solve problems in the offensive zone because he creates chances in surprising ways. His backhanded spin-o-rama in which he fooled his defender against Minnesota was one example, but Nyquist also puts pucks through players' feet and has found creative ways to try to be dangerous. I think he'll score (and set up) highlight-reel goals if he gets sheltered minutes with plenty of time in the offensive zone. Otherwise, he's not much of a checker, and I'm skeptical about his ability to drive play against top opponents.

Jonathan Toews looks smart, capable and tired. He's almost always in the right spot and his vision is still high-end. He's made multiple passes that have carved seams through the offensive zone, even if they haven't turned into goals. It's only been two preseason games since he missed over two years of hockey, but it's worth acknowledging he sometimes looks gassed at the end of shifts. I think the measure of Toews' impact this season will be his timing and conditioning; if they return to him in time for the playoffs, he has the hockey sense, work ethic and hands to make a difference in both ends of the rink. If not, he's a smart veteran with good defensive positioning and not much else.

Defencemen (15)

Josh Morrissey

Dylan DeMelo

Dylan Samberg

Neal Pionk

Haydn Fleury

Luke Schenn

Logan Stanley

Colin Miller

Depth options

Top prospects

Ville Heinola

Elias Salomonsson

Kale Clague

Also in the picture: Isaak Phillips, Ashton Sautner, Tyrel Bauer, Dawson Barteaux

Do not underestimate how much harder it is for players to handle top-four minutes compared to playing on the bottom pair. Winnipeg's third pair doesn't have to deal with top forward lines nearly as often as the others do.

A long-term absence from Samberg would be a problem. Jets history includes countless examples of defencemen who posted great numbers on the third pair but proved incapable of handling top-four competition. Recent examples include Fleury last season, Stanley in his rookie year or Tucker Poolman before the Jets decided to play him with Josh Morrissey, and the duo got dominated.

The difficulty and rarity of the transition is part of what made Samberg's work in top-four minutes with Pionk so impressive last season. More players fail that leap than land it. It's possible Fleury is Winnipeg's option to take Samberg's spot, but Fleury and Pionk got dominated in possession numbers (and goals against). That wasn't because Fleury forgot how to play once he was promoted — it's a reflection of the difficulty of the job.

Other options include Stanley, Heinola or making a right-hander like Miller or Schenn switch sides.

Let's consider a world in which Samberg is healthy, though, whether right away or a couple of months into the season. In that world, Winnipeg's top two pairings — Morrissey-DeMelo, Samberg-Pionk — should be capable of playing against top forwards and beating them. The Jets' third pair could get more of its minutes against bottom-six opponents, as has often happened in the past.

If that becomes the case, why not try Salomonsson in the NHL? Miller (32), Stanley (27) and Schenn (35) are all set to become unrestricted free agents next summer. Schenn is a Stanley Cup winner and a veteran whose intangibles the Jets clearly value. Still, if the goal is for a third pair to hold the fort against lesser opponents until the impact players take over, why not make the job an investment in Winnipeg's future?

That's not the same thing as saying I expect Salomonsson to have won a job if the Jets defence is at full health. He may need another year of AHL work to make the leap for good. The idea is simply that if he's capable of handling the minutes, then he's a better player — and a better Winnipeg Jet — next season. That's not automatically true about pending UFAs.

Heinola had great luck in terms of making the NHL early, poor luck with injuries and a long story with ups and downs in between. He may have been headed for waivers — and still could be, if the Jets keep 13 forwards. It's also possible Samberg's injury leads to Heinola getting an NHL job.

Goaltenders (4)

Connor Hellebuyck

Eric Comrie

Top prospects

Dom DiVincentiis

Thomas Milic

Only two goalies are making this team and their names are Connor Hellebuyck and Eric Comrie. That said, preseason gave us some clues about each goaltender's current place on the depth chart. Domenic DiVincentiis played a full preseason game after excelling at the prospect tournament in Montreal, Thomas Milic played two periods and Isaac Poulter got just one period. Poulter became the first goaltender assigned to Manitoba.

The age differences are small — Poulter is 24, Milic 22 and DiVincentiis 21 — but it seems possible the more veteran Poulter splits the Moose crease with one of the prospects while the other starts for Norfolk.