

Winnipeg Free Press

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Trade rumblings abound for potential playoff push Clubs beginning to choose lanes as three-quarter mark of season nears

By: Ken Wiebe and Mike McIntyre

DUMP & CHASE

A weekly lap around the NHL by Free Press hockey writers Ken Wiebe and Mike McIntyre

A few notable pre-emptive strikes have already been made, sending shockwaves throughout the NHL.

Whether it was Bill Guerin taking a big swing to acquire Quinn Hughes for the Minnesota Wild or Kelly McCrimmon putting together a package to bring in Rasmus Andersson to bolster the blue line for the Vegas Golden Knights, some of the big-name players have already been taken off the trade boards that are prevalent at this time of year.

With teams in a full-out sprint to the Olympic break, the other buyers and sellers are starting to emerge ahead of the March 6 deadline.

Lanes are being chosen — or at least coming into much clearer focus, despite very few teams understanding that they're not likely going to remain in the mix for a playoff spot in either conference.

A recent 5-1-2 stretch has the Winnipeg Jets going into Friday's action only six points out of a playoff spot with 32 games to go, but they still have five teams to pass to squeeze into the second wild-card berth in the Western Conference.

As we've been discussing for several weeks, it remains a steep and uphill climb for the Jets and, while the organization would fully understand that, they're probably going to take a bit more time to mull over the options before they plant their flag in either aisle.

It's also possible the Jets will focus on moving the majority of their pending unrestricted free agents, while also looking to retool the roster on the fly.

About the only thing that won't be on the table will be shipping out the 2026 first-rounder, which still has the potential to be a Top-5 pick, considering the Jets are still hovering near the basement of the league's overall standings.

In the Western Conference, the Vancouver Canucks have already traded their captain (Hughes), their leading goal scorer (Kiefer Sherwood) and are considering other prominent moves, while the St. Louis Blues have been taking calls on a number of players as they consider a significant change to their mix.

Jordan Kyrou's name has been floated during the past several seasons, but the fact that top centre Robert Thomas has been out there on the rumour mill is a huge surprise. The price tag

would certainly be high, but once Thomas gets healthy, if he's really an option to be traded, there will be a long list of suitors for his services.

Thomas is enduring a drop off in production (11 goals, 33 points in 42 games), but he's 26 years old and is under contract with an average annual value of US\$8.125 million for four more seasons after this one, expiring in 2031 when he's 31. He's also reached between 77 and 86 points three times in eight NHL seasons and he's a strong two-way player with championship pedigree.

If you're a Stanley Cup contender, Thomas is the type of player that checks an awful lot of boxes and is worth exploring.

Speaking of centremen, another interesting name to consider is Seattle Kraken pivot Shane Wright, whose name was first floated in a report from The Fourth Period.

Wright, the fourth overall pick in the 2022 NHL draft, has regressed in his second season with the Kraken, producing seven goals and 17 points in 49 games while averaging just under 14 minutes of ice time (which leaves him 10th among Seattle forwards). This after generating 19 goals and 44 points in 79 games during his rookie season.

Since Wright recently turned 22, he still has plenty of upside as a Top-6 player. He also has one more season left on his entry-level contract and, given his production to date, Wright's next contract is most likely to be a bridge deal and the earliest he can become an unrestricted free agent right now is 2031.

For a Jets team that is still looking for a long-term solution at second-line centre, Wright is someone Winnipeg should consider putting together a package for, depending on the asking price.

Sticking with the theme of coveted pivots, there are some rumblings around Vincent Trocheck of the New York Rangers, especially after the Original Six franchise sent out a message to the fan base talking about retooling on the fly in an effort to be competitive again next season.

Trocheck is 32 and has three more seasons on his contract that includes an AAV of US\$5.625 million, though it's important to note that he has a modified no-trade clause that includes 12 teams. So while the Jets would most likely have interest in a feisty and productive secondary scorer like Trocheck, other contenders might be in the driver's seat when it comes to acquiring the soon to be U.S. Olympian.

Let's take a quick look at the five teams the Jets are trying to leapfrog in the Western Conference and predict how they might handle the deadline.

Chicago Blackhawks: This team is on the rise in the first season under head coach Jeff Blashill, but there is still plenty of work to be done when it comes to bolstering the roster and integrating a few more prospects.

With Connor Bedard back healthy and contributing, GM Kyle Davidson will be tempted to add forward help, provided they have term or team control.

Pending UFAs: F Ilya Mikheyev, F Nick Foligno, F Jason Dickinson, F Sam Lafferty, D Connor Murphy, D Matt Grzelcyk

Nashville Predators: By putting a slow start in the rearview mirror, the Predators are suddenly back in the thick of the playoff chase and in position for Dauphin product Barry Trotz to consider adding talent rather than trying to ship out a few veterans in an effort to change the mix.

Steven Stamkos recorded the 16th hat trick of his career on Thursday and is up to 24 goals and his improved play is one of the reasons for the turnaround.

Pending UFAs: F Erik Haula, F Michael Bunting, F Cole Smith, F Michael McCarron, F Tyson Jost, D Nick Blankenburg.

Los Angeles Kings: This is a win-now organization, so they're more likely to be adding than subtracting. They don't want captain Anze Kopitar to play his final NHL game during the regular season, since he is retiring at the conclusion of the campaign.

Pending UFAs: F Anze Kopitar, F Andrei Kuzmenko, F Corey Perry, F Jeff Malott, F Taylor Ward, D Jacob Moverare.

San Jose Sharks: GM Mike Grier made one of the pre-emptive strikes for Sherwood, who is a physical force and a candidate to eclipse 20 goals, while contributing in all facets of the game. Don't be surprised if he continues to be aggressive in an effort to get back into the post-season.

Pending UFAs: F Kiefer Sherwood, F Jeff Skinner, F Ryan Reaves, D Mario Ferraro, D Timothy Liljegren, D John Klingberg, D Vincent Desharnais, D Nick Leddy, G Alex Nedeljkovic, G Laurent Brossoit

Seattle Kraken: With a new head coach (Lane Lambert) and GM (Jason Botterill), there is ample motivation to be a playoff team. The longer-term view suggests the organization might be alternating between buying and selling, shipping out some pending UFAs but also looking to add secondary scoring from players under contract.

Pending UFAs: F Jaden Schwartz, F Jordan Eberle, F Eeli Tolvanen, F Ben Meyers, D Jamie Oleksiak, G Matt Murray

AROUND THE GLASS:

MASKED MAYHEM

Was is the most unlikely fight in NHL history? A Monday night scrap between Florida goaltender Sergei Bobrovsky and San Jose netminder Nedeljkovic had the hockey world buzzing this week.

Panthers head coach Paul Maurice, speaking prior to Thursday's game in Winnipeg, broke out in a big smile when asked about it.

"Two concurrent thoughts: The first is, you know, he kind of deserves to have a little bit of fun," Maurice said.

"And then there's the thought of hands or face. Like, if you're going to break something, for him personally I don't want it to be his face. I'd rather it be his hand. That's what blasts through your brain. Then really, really happy when it's over."

BUFF'S RETURN

Another big story making waves this week was the pending return of Dustin Byfuglien, who has agreed to suit up in October for the Jets alumni game prior to the Heritage Classic.

"He's training right now. He's training for that game. I know it," cracked Maurice.

It was also the talk of Winnipeg's locker room.

"I'm not going to give that away, but got some special skates done up for it," Jets defenceman Josh Morrissey said. "It's crazy how I guess time flies, and it'll be great to have him back. I know the fans will really love having him back."

"That's amazing," Jets forward Mark Scheifele added. "And to be headed by Wheels (Blake Wheeler) is great. It will be great to see a lot of those guys coming back into town for it — a lot of guys you haven't seen in a while. That'll be really fun."

"I think it's going to be great to see a lot of those guys throw the jersey on again and have some fun with it," said Jets captain Adam Lowry, "I think a few of them could probably still play, if they put their mind to it."

<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2026/01/23/should-he-stay-or-should-he-go>

Should he stay or should he go?

Jets' Stanley one of GM Cheveldayoff's most valuable chips to play

By: Mike McIntyre

Logan Stanley has finally arrived. Is he now about to leave?

That's the multimillion-dollar question facing the Winnipeg Jets and their polarizing six-foot-seven defenceman, who has a knack for timing as he enjoys a breakout season ahead of pending unrestricted free agency this summer.

Stanley, 27, weighed in publicly for the first time Friday after being asked about it by the Free Press.

"You definitely think about your future and what's going on. I think everybody would be lying if they said they didn't think about that," he said following his club's optional practice at Canada Life Centre.

"There's a lot of aspects you're thinking about — family, kids, everything like that. You try to block it out, come every day and try to work your hardest. Whatever happens, happens. Trying to help this team to push to get into that race and make the playoffs and that's what I'm most focused on. The rest will take care of itself."

The Jets are trending in the right direction, now with just one regulation loss over the past eight games (5-1-2). They'll try to keep the good times rolling when they host the high-flying Detroit Red Wings on Saturday night.

There's no denying Stanley has become a big piece of Winnipeg's roster this year. Only 16 defencemen in the entire NHL have scored more than his eight goals, which is seven more than

his previous career high. He's recently added power-play work to his resumé and even played two games earlier this week on his off-side, firing 16 combined shot attempts.

"He is feeling it and he has been feeling it for the last little while," said assistant coach Dean Chynoweth, who oversees the blue line.

"We are encouraging mainly because we are not getting enough shots. When you get the opportunity take the shot — bombs away. Forwards, let's get to the net and whether it is traffic or a rebound and that is how he creates most of his stuff."

Some will argue Stanley's value will never be higher and the Jets should try to salvage what they can from the 18th-overall pick from the 2016 draft, who might have gone unclaimed through waivers not long ago. He is making US\$1.25 million this year and is in line for a major raise, with some speculation the open market could lead to US\$5 million per year.

Trade talk will get even louder if the Jets can't gain any more ground in the playoff chase over the 11 games left until the March 6 deadline. Winnipeg may have no choice but to enter "sell" mode, and Stanley could be the most valuable chip general manager Kevin Cheveldayoff has to play.

Others will counter that the Jets have nobody quite like "The Stanimal" and would regret letting him walk — particularly given the decade-long investment that now appears to be paying off. Stanley has become a genuine fan favourite and, by all accounts, loves Winnipeg, as do his wife and two young children.

For his part, Stanley doesn't subscribe to the notion that he's already peaked.

"I think I'm definitely improving. But I'm still trying to work on my game and I see holes in it," he said.

"Trying to work on my defensive game more than anything. I think the offensive side of it's great, but I still know what I have to do to stay in this league for a long time. Yeah, I think this is a great start to hopefully continued success."

Stanley's development path has been anything but typical, hampered both by injuries and inconsistent play. He missed two months early in the 2022-23 season with a broken ankle, then suffered a high-ankle sprain one game after his return. The next year, he was routinely a healthy scratch as Winnipeg's deep top six went unscathed through the season.

The result: just 44 combined games over two years.

"Obviously those couple years were tough. Those (injuries) linger for a long time. Coming into the next year we had a really solid D-core. The only games I think somebody missed was when Brenden Dillon took a three-game suspension. Everybody was healthy all year, and that's kind of unheard of," he said.

"It's hard to get in a groove and play, and you're not really developing."

There was a point when Stanley's agent even approached the Jets to explore the possibility of a trade, believing a fresh start might be best for all parties.

“The mental part was really hard, actually. I struggled with it quite a bit,” said Stanley.

“You’re kind of second guessing yourself and you don’t have any confidence and you’re wondering what the future holds. I’m lucky that I have great family members and a lot of great friends on this hockey team that have helped me through a time that wasn’t very easy. They’ve been great throughout my career and very happy to have some great people.”

Opportunity came knocking last year as Stanley set career highs in games played (63) and points (14) for the No. 1 team during the regular season. But an entirely new level has now been unlocked, with Stanley already up to 16 points and looking like an offensive threat every time he’s on the ice.

“I thought last year I took strides in my game to get my confidence back and then this year has been solid. A lot of hard work in the summer and preparation. It’s nice to see that it’s paying off,” he said.

Chynoweth, who spent a decade playing pro at both the NHL and AHL levels and now has more than 25 years of coaching experience on his resumé, believes Stanley is just starting to scratch the surface of his potential and could be a proverbial late bloomer.

“He has been given more opportunity because he has earned it. Where he can take it to? We will see,” he said.

“A six-foot-seven defenceman that is a specimen both offensively and defensively. I think the defensive side is something him and I talk about quite a bit. Less time in our end, being a strong defenceman is going to lend to the other end everybody wants to play in to. He has done a really good job of staying focused and in the moment from game to game.”

Stanley and the Jets now turn their attention to a Detroit team that leads the Atlantic Division, beat Winnipeg 2-1 on New Year’s Eve and arrives in town riding a 7-1-1 stretch.

Jets goaltender Connor Hellebuyck is expected to play in his 600th game — fittingly against his hometown team — while defenceman Josh Morrissey needs one point to tie Dustin Byfuglien for top spot in franchise scoring among all blue liners.

“They’ve got some young skilled players with a good core and good veterans,” said Stanley. “Obviously they’re rolling right now, so it’s going to be a good test for us. They’re playing well. I think limiting their rush game will be huge. They can make plays and score off the rush.”

Back to the Moose

The Jets also made a pair of roster moves on Friday morning, sending forward Danny Zhilkin and defenceman Isaak Phillips back to the Manitoba Moose. Zhilkin appeared in four games with the big club, while Phillips made two appearances. They were in the lineup a few hours later as the Moose hosted the Grand Rapids Griffins at Canada Life Centre.