

***THREE THINGS: Jets give up 4 goals in first, lose to Oilers 6-2  
Vilardi and Koepke scored for the Jets who return home to begin a four-game homestand on Tuesday***

By Jamie Thomas

EDMONTON - The Edmonton Oilers scored three goals in a 7:24 span in the first period on route to a 6-2 win over the Winnipeg Jets at Rogers Place. Gabe Vilardi and Cole Koepke scored for the Jets who are now 14-13-1 on the season. Winnipeg will have two days between games before kicking off an important four-game homestand on Tuesday against the Dallas Stars.

***ROUGH FIRST PERIOD***

The Jets have had an up and down week when it comes to their play in the first period. Following a disappointing performance in the opening frame in Buffalo in which they were outscored 3-0, Winnipeg played much better in the first 20 minutes in Montreal and again Friday night at home against the Sabres. However, the Oilers jumped out to a 3-0 lead in the first 7:24 with goals from Ryan Nugent-Hopkins, Leon Draisaitl and Matt Savoie. Jets coach Scott Arniel called a timeout hoping to let his group get their legs back but after Kyle Connor took a tripping penalty at 12:18, Evan Bouchard would score on the power play for a 4-0 lead after the first period. Eric Comrie was pulled after the opening period as Thomas Milic played the final two periods.

“Yeah, it's hard. You're trying to take steps forward. You're trying to gain points no matter how you do it and, you know, that's another big step backwards,” said Scott Arniel.

“And we've been kind of repetitive on doing this and we've got to find a way to get that consistency in our game.”

***LIFE IN THE THIRD***

The Jets seemed to find their legs in the third period and got some great scoring chances and finally beat Stuart Skinner at 4:12 on some nice passing from the top line.

Edmonton made it 6-1 just over nine minutes later before Cole Koepke got his second goal in as many games.

“I think the third was probably our best. We made some plays, we had some chances, had some O-zone time. You know, Skinner made some big saves. That was better in the third,” said Mark Scheifele.

“We finally have two days in between games for the first time in a long time. It's been a long stretch, especially with being on the road a lot. We gotta get our rest and be ready for a good homestand.”

***NO EXCUSES***

The Jets were playing their second game in as many nights and have been on the road for six of their last seven games. The schedule hasn't allowed for them to have much practice time

during the last month and a half. But Josh Morrissey says that the condensed schedule should be any reason for the team's struggles.

"It is part of the NHL but I think, like I said, it is part of being a great team, is handling that schedule," said Morrissey.

"You might not feel your best, you might not be snapping it around like you do when you are on your 'A' game but you have to find ways to stay in hockey games and push games to OT and obviously get those greasy wins and I don't think that was something we have done a great job of lately."

## **NHL.com**

<https://www.nhl.com/news/winnipeg-jets-edmonton-oilers-game-recap-december-6-2025>

### ***Oilers score 4 in 1st, cruise to win against Jets Draisaitl, Bouchard, McDavid each has 2 points in victory***

By Gerry Moddejonge

EDMONTON -- The Edmonton Oilers scored four goals in the first period on the way to a 6-2 win against the Winnipeg Jets at Rogers Place on Saturday.

Leon Draisaitl and Evan Bouchard each had a goal and an assist, and Connor McDavid had two assists for the Oilers (13-11-5), who have won three of four.

"I think the first 40 (minutes) was probably the best we've played all year," Draisaitl said. "Sometimes when you go up like that, the third period can be challenging, but all in all it was a deserving win."

"We look a lot more connected, we look a lot faster. Obviously, we're looking to take steps and continue to get better. Sometimes you lose confidence in your own ability and the ability of the group a little, and sometimes you're in a little lull before you get out of it. Hopefully we can string a couple together now."

Stuart Skinner made 19 saves for Edmonton and has allowed three goals on 71 shots in his past three starts (.958 save percentage).

"It comes down to defending so much better," Oilers coach Kris Knoblauch said. "We were giving up so many grade-A opportunities. When you're not doing that, it's so much easier for the goaltender."

"The goalies know what kind of shots are coming and they can make the big save."

Gabriel Vilardi and Cole Koepke scored for the Jets (14-13-1), who have lost three of four (1-2-1). Eric Comrie allowed four goals on 16 shots before being pulled after the first period, and Thomas Milic made nine saves in relief.

"It obviously wasn't what we wanted," Winnipeg center Mark Scheifele said. "They're a good team. With us playing last night, they got on us early. That's usually what you try to do when a team is coming off of back-to-backs, especially with travel."

“So, we’ve got to be better. We hung ‘Coms’ out to dry in that first period and it’s tough to rebound from being down 4-rip.”

The Jets were coming off a 4-1 victory against the Buffalo Sabres on Friday.

“The whole League’s going through this right now because of the Olympics,” Winnipeg coach Scott Arniel said. “Everybody’s having their tough grind of the schedule. For me, we had talked about the first 10 minutes, how we had to be smart about how we did things. They get three goals in the first 7 1/2 minutes to start.

“Both mentally and physically, we weren’t ready to go. At the end of the day, I’ll take responsibility for that.”

Ryan Nugent-Hopkins put the Oilers ahead 1-0 at 3:00 of the first period when he scored from the low slot on the rebound of McDavid’s shot.

Draisaitl made it 2-0 on a breakaway at 4:37, taking a stretch pass from Bouchard and finishing with a backhand.

Matt Savoie pushed it to 3-0 at 7:24, putting a rebound into an open net after a high shot by Mattias Ekholm bounced off Comrie’s left shoulder.

Bouchard then extended the margin to 4-0 on the power play at 13:31. He scored into an open net with a one-timer from the point off a Draisaitl feed with Comrie having lost his footing.

Edmonton outshot Winnipeg 16-5 in the first.

“Obviously, it was a tough first period. I think it was a tough back-to-back for us,” Jets defenseman Josh Morrissey said. “They came out hot and we weren’t ready to match that.”

Curtis Lazar made it 5-0 at 2:42 of the second period. He beat Milic with a wrist shot from above the left hash marks off Mattias Janmark’s pass up the slot.

Scheifele had a goal overturned at 13:09 after the Oilers challenged for offside, but Vilardi brought Winnipeg within 5-1 at 4:12 of the third period when he scored at the right post off a backdoor pass from Scheifele.

David Tomasek then increased the lead to 6-1 at 13:29, scoring from the low slot to the stick side off a pass out of the left corner by Trent Frederic.

Koepke scored on a wraparound at the right post at 15:25 for the 6-2 final.

The Oilers have scored 15 goals in their past two games, including a 9-4 win against the Seattle Kraken on Thursday, after losing 1-0 to the Minnesota Wild on Tuesday.

“Obviously, it’s what you want to see, how you want to respond. It just comes down to sticking to it and not getting frustrated,” Nugent-Hopkins said. “We had some good looks in that [Minnesota] game that didn’t go in, and then we kind of exploded the other night and followed up on it. A lot of things to like tonight.”

*NOTES:* Jets forward Kyle Connor's goal streak ended at four games (four goals), but he had an assist to extend his point streak to five games (seven points; four goals, three assists). ... Scheifele's assist ran his point streak to seven games (eight points; three goals, five assists). ... Winnipeg had a 36-9 edge in hits. ... The Oilers scored six or more goals for the fifth time this season, which trails only the Colorado Avalanche (six) for the most in the NHL.

## **Winnipeg Free Press**

<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2025/12/07/jets-struggles-continue-with-beating-in-edmonton>

### ***Jets struggles continue with beating in Edmonton Comrie pulled again as offence continues to sputter***

By: Ken Wiebe

Embarrassing had already been used earlier this week by Winnipeg Jets head coach Scott Arniel, so feel free to insert an adjective — or an expletive — at your leisure.

As the Winnipeg Jets wrapped up a busy stretch of seven games in 11 days with a highly uninspiring effort against the Edmonton Oilers, Arniel was left to chew on what had transpired.

By the time the final buzzer sounded, the Jets were on the business end of a 6-2 beatdown to the Oilers on Saturday night at Rogers Place.

"It's hard. You're trying to take steps forward and you're trying to gain points, no matter how you do it. That's another big step backwards," Arniel told reporters in Edmonton. "We've been kind of repetitive on doing this and we've got to find a way to get that consistency in our game."

In a week where the Jets held a players-only meeting after a 5-1 loss to the Buffalo Sabres, they were left to once again lick their collective wounds after a mind-boggling showing to an Oilers team that hadn't won consecutive games in regulation since mid-October.

One night after defeating the Sabres 4-1 in the rematch, the Jets showed very few signs of life and were down four goals by the time the first period ended.

"You can't let mistakes compound and end up in the back of your net," said Jets defenceman Josh Morrissey. "Part of being a great team is handling that schedule. You might not feel your best and you might not be snapping around like you do when you're on your A-game, but you've got to find ways to stay in hockey games, push games to OT and obviously get those greasy ones. I don't think that was something we've done a good job here of late."

By slipping to 14-13-1 for the season, the Jets fell two points behind the Oilers while holding a game in hand.

But unless the Jets can clean up some of the things that have been ailing them, rallying to secure a playoff spot looks like an uphill battle.

The Jets open a four-game homestand on Tuesday against the Dallas Stars.

Let's take a closer look at this one:

### *Back-to-back*

It had been an eventful and busy week for Jets goalie Eric Comrie.

After being pulled after one period in the aforementioned 5-1 loss to the Sabres, Comrie had two outstanding outings, turning aside 63 of 66 shots on goal in the shootout loss to the Montreal Canadiens on Wednesday and the victory over the Sabres on Friday.

Given the heavier workload for the career backup, the expectation was that third-stringer Thomas Milic would make his second NHL start on Saturday night.

But looking to ride the wave of Comrie's strong play, he led the Jets out for the pre-game warmup and made his ninth start in the past 10 outings.

Comrie was under siege immediately and he was bombarded for 16 shots on goal in the first period.

"We've got to be better. We hung (Comrie) out to dry in that first period," said Jets centre Mark Scheifele. "It's tough to rebound from being down four-rip."

Compounding matters, Comrie was bowled over by Oilers captain Connor McDavid as he tried to tip-toe behind him in the crease.

McDavid received a minor penalty for goalie interference on the play.

Comrie received his second mercy pull of the week, as Milic was between the pipes to start the second period.

Milic made 10 saves on 12 shots on goal in relief.

### *The blender*

Arniel had been reluctant to break up the Jets top line, given how well they've been playing.

But after a brutal first period for the Jets entire group — one that included more than 13 minutes without a shot on goal and getting outshot 16-5 — Arniel moved Gabe Vilardi onto a line with Adam Lowry and Jonathan Toews.

That moved Alex Iafallo up with Scheifele and Kyle Connor.

Scheifele thought he had got the Jets on the board with 6:50 to go in the second period, but his 15th goal of the campaign was erased by a coach's challenge when it was determined that Iafallo had entered the offensive zone early and was offside.

Naturally, the Jets first goal came when Vilardi was on the ice on a shift with Connor and Scheifele.

Vilardi's goal gave him 13 on the season.

The goal also gave Arniel a reason to reunite the top line for several shifts during the third period.

It made perfect sense for Arniel to search for an offensive spark after the poor start, but it will be interesting to see what the combos look like when the Jets get back on the ice to prepare for the game against the Stars.

The biggest issue that Arniel is facing right now is that he's getting almost no offence from his middle-six forward group for an extended period of time.

So while there's been plenty of shuffling the deck, chemistry has been nearly impossible to come by and the list of players in the midst of lengthy scoring droughts is incredibly long.

That makes it hard to find a lineup that can win consistently.

#### *The swap*

In what looks like a sign of things to come, Arniel made one lineup change, inserting veteran defenceman Luke Schenn on the third pairing for rookie Elias Salomonsson.

Salomonsson has appeared in four NHL games and shown some promise, while also experiencing some of the growing pains that come with being air dropped into your first action just past the quarter point of the new season.

Salomonsson has shown his mobility and provided some quality zone exits, but he's been on the ice for an abundance of scoring chances against so far.

Arniel has seen some of the things he's liked from Salomonsson, but all signs point to a return to the Manitoba Moose of the American Hockey League during the coming days.

"It's kind of the test he was going to run into when it comes to the different teams that he's faced," Arniel said earlier this week. "But he's got good feet, he's got good instincts. There's lots of things that he needs to improve on but there's also a lot of good, positive things that are there as well. He's got good feet, he's got good vision, It's just a different game up here. It's faster, heavier game. That's why we wanted him to get these opportunities while he can."

Salomonsson would benefit from a longer look and he's bound to improve once the game slows down for him.

The flip side of the equation is that the Jets are going to need a roster spot once Haydn Fleury gets his conditioning back up after being cleared from concussion protocol.

#### *The key play*

Zach Hyman took a hit from Jets defenceman Logan Stanley at the blue line, starting a play that allowed Ryan Nugent-Hopkins to open the scoring.

#### *The three stars*

Leon Draisaitl, Oilers, One goal, one assist.

Connor McDavid, Oilers, Two assists, five shots on goal.

Evan Bouchard, Oilers, One goal, one assist.

#### *Extra, extra*

The NHL used the Hockey Night in Canada broadcast to make the official announcement about the 2026 Heritage Classic, with the Jets hosting the Montreal Canadiens at Princess Auto Stadium on Oct. 25. It will be the third time the Jets will host an outdoor game.

Former Winnipeg Ice forward Matt Savoie is up to six goals and 10 points in 29 games for the Oilers after scoring in the first period.

Former Jets forward Jack Roslovic will be sidelined for several weeks with a lower-body injury after getting off to an excellent start with the Oilers that includes 10 goals and 18 points in 23 games.

### **Winnipeg Sun**

<https://winnipeg.sun.com/sports/hockey/nhl/winnipeg-jets/jets-bowled-over-by-a-slick-oilers-team-losing-6-2-in-edmonton-on-saturday-night>

#### ***Jets bowled over by a slick Oilers team, losing 6-2 in Edmonton on Saturday night***

By Gordon Anderson

Before the Jets knew what hit them, they were knocked flat by the slick Oilers.

The Jets allowed four first-period goals in a 6-2 loss in Edmonton on Saturday evening.

Jets bowled over by a slick Oilers team, losing 6-2 in Edmonton on Saturday night

Ryan Nugent-Hopkins, Leon Draisaitl and Matt Savoie scored even-strength goals before the period was eight minutes old. Evan Bouchard then notched a power-play goal later on to finish the onslaught.

Edmonton improved to 7-1-3 when leading after one period of action. The Jets are 1-7-0 when trailing after one period of play.

Naturally, the analytics heavily favoured the home team.

Edmonton outshot the Jets 16-5 in the first period and, according to Natural Stat Trick, the Jets generated one high danger chance in the first period, while allowing eight high danger chances to home side.

Eric Comrie didn't last beyond the first period. Comrie stopped 12 of 16 shots in 20 minutes of action.

The four goals allowed were the most the team has surrendered in a period this season.

Gabe Vilardi and Cole Koepke scored for the Jets in the third period. Koepke scored his first goal of the season in a 4-1 win over the Buffalo Sabres on Friday night. Mark Scheifele has his second-period goal called back for offside. Scheifele also had a third-period goal against the Sabres nullified due to an offside call.

Comrie started his fourth game in six days. He earned the win over the Sabres on Friday night. Thomas Milic took over to start the second period. Milic allowed two goals on 11 shots.

Curtis Lazar and David Tomasek also scored for the Oilers. The last time the Oilers scored four goals in the first period was against the Carolina Hurricanes in December of 2023. With their

nine-goal outburst against the Kraken on Thursday night, the Oilers have now scored 15 goals in their last two games.

Stuart Skinner turned aside nine shots through 40 minutes and 19 of 21 overall.

The Jets host the Dallas Stars on Tuesday night.

#### *Ice Chips*

Colin Miller, Gustav Nyquist, and Elias Salomonsson were scratched.

#### *Inside track*

The Oilers opened the game with three consecutive goals, two of the markers occurring with Edmonton forwards skating for inside positioning prior to finding the back of the net with rebound goals. Nugent-Hopkins beat Alex Lafalo to the right post before cashing home the rebound from a Connor McDavid shot on goal. Savoie then fought through Adam Lowry's checking attempt before swatting home a rebound from a Mattias Ekholm shot.

Well, it is official now.

Prior to the puck drop, the NHL, the Jets and the Montreal Canadiens officially announced the 2026 NHL Heritage Classic.

The game will be played at Princess Auto Stadium on Oct. 25. No scheduled time has been announced.

This will be the third outdoor game for Winnipeg. The Jets are 1-1-0 in outdoor regular-season action. The Jets defeated the Calgary Flames 2-1 in overtime in 2019 at Mosaic Stadium in Regina and Jets lost 3-0 to the Oilers at Princess Auto Stadium in 2016.

#### **Canadian Press**

<https://globalnews.ca/news/11566642/four-goals-in-first-period-oilers-beat-jets-6-2/>

#### ***Four goals in first period, Oilers beat Jets 6-2***

By Shane Jones The Canadian Press

EDMONTON – Leon Draisaitl and Evan Bouchard each had a goal and an assist for the Edmonton Oilers in a 6-2 victory over the Winnipeg Jets on Saturday.

The Oilers exploded out of the gate to take a 4-0 lead after the first period.

Ryan Nugent-Hopkins, Matthew Savoie, Curtis Lazar, and David Tomasek also scored for the Oilers (13-11-5) who have won three of their last four. Oilers captain Connor McDavid had a pair of assists.

Gabriel Vilardi and Cole Koepke replied for the Jets (14-13-1) who have lost seven of their last nine.

Edmonton Oilers lace up for 1st game of regular season after McDavid extends contract



Edmonton's Stuart Skinner made 19 saves for the win. Winnipeg's Eric Comrie allowed four goals on 16 shots in the first period. Thomas Milic drew in to start the second and made 10 saves.

Story continues below advertisement

#### TAKEAWAYS

Jets: Mark Scheifele extended his points streak to seven games with an assist after having a goal called back on a flagrant off-side in the second period. Kyle Connor's goal scoring streak halted at four games, but he has points in five straight.

Oilers: The 21-year-old rookie Savoie scored his third goal in his last two games and has six this season. In Edmonton's 9-4 win over Seattle on Thursday, the forward from St. Alberta, Alta., became the third youngest player in Oilers history to score both a short-handed and a power-play goal in the same game behind Glenn Anderson and Paul Coffey.

#### KEY MOMENT

Edmonton led 3-0 by 7:24 of the first period when a huge rebound from a Mattias Ekholm shot came across to Savoie, who had an easy tap-in for his sixth of the season. The Oilers scored on three of their first four shots.

#### KEY STAT

McDavid and Draisaitl continued to pile up the points. Since the beginning of November, McDavid has 28 points (11G, 17A) in 17 games. Draisaitl has 19 points (7G, 12A) in his last 11 games.

#### UP NEXT

Jets: Host the Dallas Stars on Tuesday.

Oilers: Host the Buffalo Sabres on Tuesday.

#### **Sportsnet.ca**

<https://www.sportsnet.ca/nhl/article/jets-still-searching-for-scoring-depth-ahead-of-showdown-in-edmonton/>

#### ***Jets still searching for scoring depth ahead of showdown in Edmonton***

By Mark Spector

EDMONTON — When Winnipeg fourth-liners Tanner Pearson and Cole Koepke each scored in a 4-1 win over Buffalo Friday, the hockey world shrugged. Big deal, right?

Well, actually....

"It's huge for us," Koepke told Winnipeg reporters after the game. "We haven't had a game like that for us this year. It was great for us as a line, and the team was rolling as well, so it's even better when it comes in a win."

As the weary Winnipeg Jets arrive in Edmonton for a Hockey Night in Canada matchup at Rogers Place tonight — hanging on for dear life in the Central Division while cornerstone goalie Connor Hellebuyck recovers from knee surgery — they'll be hoping that a couple of fourth-line goals against the Sabres becomes contagious.

“When your fourth line can do that and score you two goals, that’s a big game changer,” said head coach Scott Arniel. “It just takes a little bit of heat off everyone.”

So far this season, only the Colorado Avalanche’s top line of Nathan MacKinnon, Martin Necas and Artturi Lehkonen has been more productive than Winnipeg’s No. 1 unit of Mark Scheifele between Kyle Connor and Gabe Vilardi.

But the rest of the Jets? The major reason Winnipeg has lost six of its past eight games is that nobody else has been chipping in any offence.

Arniel lies awake at night, wondering if he should split up one of the best lines in the NHL in order to spark some offence from the rest of his lines.

“Believe me, I’ve debated this for a long time,” he said on Friday morning. “We’ve been talking about it. I’ve got some ideas. But at the end of the day, we are getting zero goals and it’s hard when that line can score like that. You hope they can go out and do what they do and outscore the opposition.

“Do we spread the wealth? That’s something we’ve honestly been talking about here in the last couple of days. We want to get through this stretch here.”

The Jets picked up three points on a five-game roadie, came home for last night’s win over Buffalo, and then flew to Edmonton to complete the back-to-back. Lots of games, lots of losses — it has Arniel coaching as fast as he can.

Arniel healthy-scratched Gustav Nyquist for the first time in Nyquist’s career — not once, but twice this week. Those things happen when a team drops 10 of its past 15.

Meanwhile, ‘The Big Experiment’ this season — the return of Jonathan Toews — has thus far been inconsequential.

Toews has one assist in his last 11 games, and drags pedestrian totals of 3-6-9 and a team-worst minus-12 in 27 games into tonight’s match against Edmonton.

“The big thing to JT is it’s all new to him right now. It’s been a couple years, and he’s the first to admit the league is even faster than when he left it,” Arniel said this week. “I know offensively the numbers aren’t there. For him, this isn’t a 10-game, 20-game, 30-game thing. This is about building towards the 82nd game and the playoffs.”

Slotted as a 2C, it is fair to wonder if this former Team Canada centreman is even that anymore.

“You get to a certain point and you’re waiting for a bounce, waiting for things to go your way, to give you the energy to get over the hump, and that’s not really how it works,” Toews told Mike McIntyre of the Winnipeg Free Press. “I try my best to improve my game. I think it’s getting better. Each game I’m getting chances.”

Toews had no points or shots against Buffalo, and tonight he’ll go nose-to-nose with Oilers 2C Leon Draisaitl — a superstar right in his prime who is coming off a four-point night in a 9-4 win over Seattle on Thursday.

It's likely difficult for Toews to try and lead his new team through the hardest part of their season when his own game is barely getting him by.

"We have a lot of leaders in this locker room, a lot of experience, been on winning teams. We have the energy to be one of the top teams in the league," Toews said in the Free Press. "For me, it's taking time to find my place but I try to have the mentality like when I was a captain — be a leader.

"It takes time but I'm starting to find my place here."

He'd better hurry.

Colorado leads the Central, a full 15 points ahead of the Jets — and it's only Dec. 6.

['It still gives me chills': Lowry reflects on his Game 7 OT winner | After Hours](#)

***'It still gives me chills': Lowry reflects on his Game 7 OT winner | After Hours (VIDEO)***

Winnipeg Jets' Adam Lowry joins Scott Oake and Louie DeBrusk to reflect on moments throughout his hockey career, such as his time with the Swift Current Broncos, his double-overtime goal in Game 7, being coached by his father, and more.

## **The Athletic**

<https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/6863826/2025/12/06/winnipeg-jets-gabriel-vilardi-mental-health/>

***Jets' Gabriel Vilardi opens up about mental health struggles: 'You just see the negatives'***

By Murat Ates

Winnipeg Jets star forward Gabriel Vilardi makes his point abundantly clear, repeating himself over the course of multiple interviews. He's going to talk about mental health and, as such, he is going to talk about his personal struggles with panic attacks, negative self-talk and the ways he's tried to cope with those challenges since he was a child.

But this story is not about Gabriel Vilardi. The three-time 20-goal scorer is sharing the details from his life in case he can help somebody else.

"Everyone deals with anxiety, right? Just because I was diagnosed, it doesn't mean that I have it different than other people do ... I hope this can help give people ideas for how to deal with it."

Those are the ground rules. We're having this conversation for the greater good, through the lens of Vilardi's lived experiences, because the first lesson he ever learned about managing anxiety was that it is important to seek help.

"My family is from Italy. A very old school area of Italy. For my dad to say he had anxiety growing up, it would have been ... 'F off,' right? I think we've grown so much as a society, and especially in hockey, with mental health. It's not like that anymore. For me, seeing the mistakes my family made — where maybe they didn't see help — I look at that and say, 'I have all of these things available to me. I have to do them because they didn't do them and it's going to help me.'"

As a professional hockey player, Vilardi has access to mental health professionals and stress-reducing strategies that his parents' generation didn't think about. He's grateful for that. There have been times he's wondered what his career would look like without them.

But this is a story that goes back to his earliest days as a child, long before he celebrated professional success and coped with failure in front of thousands of people, 82 games a year.

Vilardi's journey with mental health started when he was a boy growing up in Kingston, Ont. Vilardi had seen anxiety manifest itself in his father, Natale, as well as his grandmother. Even as a child, he'd reflected on the importance of mental health supports. He understood that people could struggle with mental health without a formal diagnosis. Then, when he was 11 or 12 years old, Vilardi started to experience panic attacks at home.

"There was a period I didn't go to school for six months," Vilardi says. "I was scared ... I had this idea I was going to throw up for whatever reason and I'd have panic attacks."

Vilardi thought about his dad's and his grandma's experiences. He considered the differences between his upbringing as a first-generation child in Canada and the "old school" Reggio Calabria Italian culture that had raised his parents. The idea to seek help came naturally to Vilardi. He'd seen how much harder it is when people choose to battle alone.

He found a psychologist at Kingston General Hospital and made sure to talk to them at least once per week. When he was drafted by Windsor in the Ontario Hockey League at 15 years old, Vilardi sought out resources through his junior team, then did the same in the NHL, first in Los Angeles and again when traded to Winnipeg in 2023. The habit of speaking to somebody at least once per week is a foundational part of his personal and professional life.

So what is a panic attack?

The Mayo Clinic defines a panic attack as a sudden episode of intense fear that triggers severe physical reactions, when there is no real danger or apparent cause. It describes panic attacks as frightening: "When panic attacks occur, you might think you're losing control, having a heart attack or even dying." Some people experience negative self-talk during a panic attack, wherein their internal monologue bombards them with unhealthy or hurtful thoughts."

That's what Vilardi experienced for the first time as a child and continues to relate to today.

"For me, negative self-talk is not just panic attacks; it's something that I deal with a lot. And it drags on. It starts with one play. Then it's like, 'Oh s—, I've got to make up for that play.' Then it drags on to three shifts because you're still thinking in your head that you've got to make up for it. Next thing you know, it's a period and it's like, 'F—, I've only got two periods left.' I was in my head the whole first period."

There are times when Vilardi's self-talk becomes so critical that he changes how he prepares for an NHL game. As a first-line forward who plays a key role on the team's top power-play unit, Vilardi knows he's counted upon to score goals and produce points. This season, when it took him eight games to score his first goal, he found that he had to battle through negative self-talk.

"I went through a period where I stopped watching my shifts for three or four games because I just got to a point where I was overanalyzing myself," Vilardi says. "To the point that no matter

what I did, I was fearful to watch my shifts because it felt like there were no positives coming out of it.”

Publicly, Vilardi said all of the right things while he was slumping. He talked about helping his team win games in ways that didn’t necessarily involve scoring. He says he understood, rationally, that he was creating a large volume of scoring chances and that those usually lead to goals.

But anxiety is an enemy of the word “rationally.” Self-talk can lie.

“I was in the right spots. I was doing the right things ... (But) when you’re so in your head, you don’t see those things. You just see the negatives. ‘Why did I get rid of the puck there? If I was playing with confidence, I wouldn’t get rid of that. I’d carry it a little bit more.’”

So Vilardi reached out to his social support network. For him, that means his brother, Francesco, his mom, Giovanna, and a select group of close friends. He spoke to Dr. Morgan Marcoux, one of three psychiatrists (and five mental health professionals) listed on Winnipeg’s hockey operations staff. He also continued to engage with the day-to-day stress-reducing habits he’s formed over the years.

When he scored his first goal of the season on Oct. 24, Vilardi’s first response was not joy but relief. He looked skyward, grateful to have finally broken his slump, then raised two fists into the air and jumped into the glass.

“You should be happy. You should be joyful. You should be whatever emotion you want to call it. Yeah, that one felt more like relief — which isn’t always a good thing, but sometimes it is a good thing. It’s part of the process.”

Vilardi has scored 11 more goals in 17 games since that game.

There are several tools Vilardi uses to look after himself during the rigors of an NHL season.

One rule he has for himself is that he always tries to do something fun when he gets out of the rink. His teammates tease him (lovingly) for going to the Rec Room as often as he does to indulge in arcade games.

“Guys always mess with me for that but it’s a mental thing,” Vilardi says. “I go there and I have an hour or an hour and a half where nothing else exists. I just go there, I play, I have fun, and I’m like a kid.”

At home, Vilardi gets into that same state of mind by building Lego. It’s methodical and slow, demanding just enough of Vilardi’s focus to make everything else in his day irrelevant for an hour while connecting to a joyful piece of his childhood. Building 7,500-piece showstoppers such as the Millennium Falcon from “Star Wars” or smaller projects such as the DeLorean from “Back to the Future” is a healthy distraction. And for Vilardi, who’s hoping to get the Lego Death Star for Christmas, it’s just plain fun.

The cold plunges aren’t quite so joyful, but he believes in their value.

"I really enjoy cold therapy because that's legit — it's like fight or flight. Your body is telling you to 'Get the F out, get the F out,' but you're like, 'No, I can do this,'" Vilardi says. "That correlates directly to situations where you could have high anxiety."

He's also reached out to people in his support network for tools to manage anxiety as it's building up in the heat of the moment. He knows people who use deep breathing exercises. He meditates. His mom counts backwards from 10, which sounds simple but has been useful in moments that feel overwhelming. His days aren't perfect, even when he's scoring goals, but — to borrow a hockey phrase — Vilardi stays in the fight.

One thing he's particularly grateful for in hockey is that, as long as there's time on the clock, there's always another opportunity to turn things around.

"I get put in situations where I feel like I can succeed ... You make a nice move and it's like, 'What did you just do?' almost. But it just happened naturally. Then you build confidence off of that."

There is one more positive offshoot to Vilardi's experience with anxiety. He's using what he's learned as often as he can while speaking to students through his role in the Jets organization's mental health-focused initiative, Project 11.

Project 11 was created in honor of the late Rick Rypien, a former player on the Winnipeg Jets and Manitoba Moose who died by suicide. It works with schools in Manitoba to deliver mental health curricula to students of all ages in English and in French at no cost to teachers. Project 11 is delivered in classrooms and is meant to connect thousands of kids in Manitoba and beyond with a positive mental health curriculum.

Vilardi has volunteered at Project 11 events in schools and at Canada Life Centre in Winnipeg, speaking alongside mental health professionals about managing emotions and anxiety. He also volunteers with the Winnipeg Jets Hockey Academy as a part-time coach.

"One thing I tell the kids when we talk to our hockey team with the WJHA is, 'Talk to yourself like you're talking to your friend,'" Vilardi says. "If your friend was struggling or thought he sucked, you would never say, 'Yeah, you suck.' You'd say, 'You're great. You had a bad practice or you had a bad game but you're good, don't worry.'"

He's trying to pay it forward, sharing lessons that have not always been easy to come by in his own life. In speaking to him multiple times for a story about mental health, the degree to which Vilardi cares about others comes through.

"Everyone deals with anxiety," he says. "Fortunately or unfortunately, I started to deal with it at an earlier age than maybe most people would."