

## **Winnipeg Free Press**

<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/local/2026/02/25/hellebuyck-faces-tough-save-with-winnipeggers-after-fools-gold-plated-day-with-trump>

### ***Hellebuyck faces tough save with Winnipeggers after fool's gold-plated day with Trump***

By: Dan Lett

Connor Hellebuyck has given the people of Winnipeg all the reasons in the world to love him, both as an athlete and a human being.

The star goaltender for the Winnipeg Jets has been a stoic presence in Winnipeg, leading the Jets to the very precipice of glory while also establishing himself as arguably the best netminder in the league. At the same time, he's been a constant presence in Jets charitable activities, including campaigns to promote mental health and female sports.

And in 2023, at the age of 30, Hellebuyck signed a seven-year extension with the Jets, which may well take him to the end of his National Hockey League career.

At a time when a lot of hockey players shun smaller markets and change teams as often as they change their socks, Hellebuyck is a true role model.

And that's what makes the events of this week so utterly disheartening.

On Tuesday, the American-born Hellebuyck — the consensus MVP from Sunday's gold-medal-winning Olympic final against Canada — appeared with team members first in the Oval Office, and then at the U.S. Capitol for the State of the Union address as a guest of President Donald Trump.

During his address, Trump announced he was awarding Hellebuyck the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honour that a president can bestow.

In most Olympic years, and with most presidents delivering most State of the Union addresses, none of this would be particularly controversial.

However, this is not just any Olympic year, this is not just any president and the speech Trump delivered Tuesday night was legions away from being a normal State of the Union address.

The annual event gives the president an opportunity to speak directly to both houses of Congress to update them on the economy and major initiatives. Although not expressly non-partisan, most pre-Trump State of the Union addresses stopped short of overt attacks on political opponents.

#### ***Hyper-partisanship***

That was not the case Tuesday evening; Trump delivered an orgy of hyper-partisanship and falsehoods about the economy, immigration, elections and his destructive tariff war with the rest of the world.

Trump celebrated his divisive campaign to round up illegal immigrants in which multiple major U.S. cities have been swarmed by masked, heavily armed federal agents who have indiscriminately arrested legal citizens and triggered four fatal shootings.

The president also unleashed a new torrent of completely disproven claims of voter fraud that Republicans are using to introduce new voter ID laws that could prevent millions of people from casting ballots in the upcoming November mid-term elections.

By accepting the president's invitation, Hellebuyck and most of his American teammates cemented themselves as characters in the narrative of a political leader with tyrannical aspirations who has spent the last year dismantling one of the world's oldest democracies.

There are some who will argue the players were not endorsing Trump simply by appearing in Washington. Those apologists, and the Team U.S.A. players themselves, should take some time to study the history of authoritarian leaders and the important role that the stars of sports, arts and culture have played in legitimizing illegitimate regimes.

#### *De facto endorsement*

We can be confident that some, maybe even most, of the players did not stop to think about Trump's war on democracy when they accepted his invitation. However, at some point, even the most apolitical athletes have to consider whether the company they keep with politicians is a de facto endorsement of their politics.

It should be noted that five American players chose not to accept the president's invitation to visit the White House and attend the State of the Union address, including fellow Winnipeg Jet Kyle Connor. And the U.S. women's hockey team, also gold-medal winners, declined an invitation to join the men's team at the Capitol.

Others who made the trip to Washington made predictable rationalizations for their decision.

Team U.S.A. captain Auston Matthews, also captain of the Toronto Maple Leafs, was asked in a news conference if he thought the visit to Washington was ill-advised based on Trump's policies. He mumbled something about not wanting to "get political," which is, of course, the standard deflection when athletes are accused of sport-washing.

The more pointed question, which none of the sports reporters chose to ask, was whether he feared for the safety of his mother, Ema, a Mexican immigrant.

There are few details about whether Ema Matthews is a permanent resident or a full citizen, but hundreds of legal American residents have been caught up in raids by Immigration and Customs and Enforcement officers. Some have been sent to detention camps, and a number have actually been illegally deported.

Nobody dared ask Matthews about Trump's indiscriminate war on immigrants, but he'd be a fool not to be concerned for his mother and her extended family.

As of Wednesday afternoon, Hellebuyck has yet to make a statement on the backlash from his trip to Washington. For now, Winnipeggers and Jets fans will have to live with the fact that our relationship with Hellebuyck has become paradoxical.

Most of us will continue loving him for the player and human being he is. At the same time, many of us will be profoundly disappointed about what he has done.

<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2026/02/25/jets-proud-of-legendary-goaltender>

***Jets proud of legendary goaltender  
Hellebuyck to be first hockey player to receive Presidential Medal of Freedom***

By: Ken Wiebe

VANCOUVER – Connor Hellebuyck put his hand on his heart and from the emotional look on his face, you could tell how much it meant for the Winnipeg Jets goalie to hear he was going to be the next recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Given the current political climate that exists, the news was met with a wide variety of reactions.

After a one-on-one conversation with Jets captain Adam Lowry on Wednesday morning, it was apparent he was focusing on what the award stands for.

“As his teammate, I’m super proud for him to receive that honour,” Lowry said after the morning skate and before his team returned to action in a game against the Vancouver Canucks that was ongoing at press time.

“Looking at what it means and the implications of him representing his country, him playing one of the best games of his career and helping the U.S. men’s team win a gold medal after 46 years, to be recognized for his achievements and to be recognized for what he did and to show how meaningful that gold medal seemed to be taken by the entire U.S., it’s an incredible honour.

“To be the first hockey player recognized, he’s in incredible company, with incredible people that have done so much for their country. In talking to Helly, he’s a true patriot and he loves the U.S. He loved getting the opportunity to represent them. I’m sure he was extremely honoured.”

Hellebuyck is expected to rejoin his NHL teammates today, ahead of Friday night’s game against the Anaheim Ducks as they continue a three-game road trip.

He will become the 44th sports figure to receive the award and joins a list of remarkable athletes that includes Jackie Robinson, Billie Jean King, Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods, Yogi Berra, Simone Biles, Hank Aaron and Jack Nicklaus.

“For me, I didn’t know the history of it until I looked it up, with (40)-something athletes that have won it and those names that are on that, from Babe Ruth to Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Muhammad Ali, it’s amazing,” said Jets head coach Scott Arniel. “To be the first hockey player to receive that is an amazing honour. It’s something he’s awfully proud of. When he won the Hart Trophy, that was an amazing thing. Now this is just another great accomplishment. That list of names is pretty impressive.”

Hellebuyck was singled out during the State of the Union address at the U.S. Capitol on Tuesday night as part of the celebrations for the men’s Olympic hockey team after they defeated Canada 2-1 in overtime.

Hellebuyck made 41 saves in the game in a performance for the ages, lifting Team USA to its first gold medal in men's hockey since the Miracle on Ice in 1980.

"I mean, it's the highest honour a civilian can get," said Jets left-winger Cole Koepke. "So it's cool to see him get that kind of recognition after the game he had.

"He played a great game and he deserved to go and receive that award. We're all supportive of him and he'll be back when he's back."

"He played a great game and he deserved to go and receive that award."

Not all observers — some of them Jets fans — have been as supportive about what has transpired since Team USA won the gold medal in Italy, whether it was the reaction to some of the viral videos that were posted or the belief from some corners that the invitation to the White House should have been turned down.

"Sometimes, it's tough waters to navigate because generally, when you talk politics, unless you're able to have a conversation and find some common ground, in these short snippet interviews and these small TV clips, everything can get skewed and almost picked apart to fit the narrative that the person is trying to have," said Lowry. "Whereas, if you're sitting across from somebody, you can have a 30- or 40-minute conversation and you're able to articulate how you feel and really able to see the sides each party is coming from. Then you have context, you have nuance and you're able to reach some common ground.

"It is, and rightfully so, a very divisive subject. People that disagree on both sides and certain things that both sides would agree are unacceptable things we can't stand for."

Jets left-winger Kyle Connor was one of five American players who chose to skip the festivities so they could return to their respective NHL teams.

Arniel reiterated earlier this week that the plan was always for Eric Comrie to start the first game coming out of the break, so Hellebuyck didn't need to rush back to Vancouver to serve as the backup.

Comrie also started the first game after the 4 Nations Face-Off last February.

"This is exactly like last year," said Arniel. "We had talked about this. We didn't know the White House part of it was coming, coming into it. But at the end of the day, he wasn't playing (on Wednesday). (Comrie) was playing all along. (Hellebuyck) is going to meet us in Anaheim and then we'll go from there."

It can be difficult for players to go from rivals during the Olympics to resuming life as teammates, especially right before the most important stretch of the season.

"All of a sudden, you're butting heads and then you're turning around and sticking up for each other, making passes to each other," said Arniel. "That shines a light on how big the Olympics are and how much it means to everybody in their country. To represent your country and to put that jersey on. You're going to do anything it takes to win those games. When you come back here, it's a different mindset. Now, it's 'OK, these are my brothers here and they're going to help me win a Stanley Cup.' It's pretty cool."

Arniel doesn't believe he faces any additional challenges as a coach, given the politically-charged atmosphere of the present day.

"I know we have Americans, Canadians, Europeans. At the end of the day, that's a different business. It's (a road) we don't even go down," he said. "We're in the entertainment business and we're also in the results-driven business and winning hockey games. So that's our focus. Our team has always been that way. We've got good leadership.

"That (other stuff) doesn't come into our room. What's on the line right now for us is a playoff spot and that's our focus."

<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2026/02/24/connor-in-the-house>

***Connor in the house  
Jets winger declines Trump visit, returns to team***

By: Ken Wiebe

Kyle Connor made it clear from the outset that he wasn't going to insert himself into a hot-button topic with political undertones attached.

What matters most to the Winnipeg Jets left-winger was that he made a personal choice to skip the celebratory festivities that most of his United States Olympic teammates took part in at the U.S. Capitol and White House to rejoin his NHL teammates.

"Just getting ready to play on Wednesday," said Connor, who skated on a line with Mark Scheifele and Gabe Vilardi. "It's a big second half, so I wanted to make sure I was ready."

Connor stickhandled around several follow-up questions, making it clear the decision revolved around wanting to get back onto the ice as quickly as possible to help his team — which finds itself in a rather precarious position as they open a three-game road trip Wednesday at Rogers Arena against the last-place Vancouver Canucks.

Connor had family and friends with him in Italy, but his young daughter was back home and he hadn't seen her in nearly two weeks, which was certainly a factor in his choice to rejoin the Jets.

So were the circumstances surrounding his personal experience at the Olympics in Milan, even if Connor said all the right things about being a good teammate when he was a healthy scratch for the final four games of the best-on-best event.

"It was surreal. To be able to share that with those teammates in that moment, waiting in line and getting that put around your neck, it's a pretty cool feeling."

"It was awesome. Some of the things were out of my control, the way it was," said Connor, who was in full uniform and sprinted onto the ice to celebrate after Jack Hughes scored the overtime winner. "I don't know if it's really set in at this point. It's been a whirlwind. It was surreal. To be able to share that with those teammates in that moment, waiting in line and getting that put around your neck, it's a pretty cool feeling."

Connor was also asked about the videos from the locker room that went viral of the exchange between the American team and Donald Trump, where the U.S. president spoke in a derogatory tone about needing to invite the women's team to the celebration as well.

"Honestly, no, I don't really have any thoughts on it," he said. "There's so many things happening, where you just won the gold medal and things are going on. So I don't really remember what he said. It was such a whirlwind and (I was) just celebrating with teammates."

Connor was one of five American players — Dallas Stars goalie Jake Oettinger, Colorado Avalanche centre Brock Nelson, Tampa Bay Lightning forward Jake Guentzel and Anaheim Ducks defenceman Jackson LaCombe were the others — to skip the visit to Washington, D.C.

Jets goalie Connor Hellebuyck will attend the state of the union address and is expected to rejoin his teammates in Anaheim on Thursday. Backup Eric Comrie had been scheduled to start against the Canucks prior to the Olympics.

Jets head coach Scott Arniel was thrilled when he got word of Connor's travel plans on Monday afternoon.

"He's an all-star. He's an elite player in this league and with those guys, sometimes there are different things that motivate them and this might be one of them."

Not only would the Jets be getting their second leading point-getter and goal scorer back in the lineup earlier than expected, they could be getting a highly-motivated player.

Arniel saw something similar from Connor last season after he was a healthy scratch for Team USA in the gold medal game at the 4 Nations Face-Off last February.

By the time the regular season had ended, Connor had accumulated a career-best 97 points and delivered his second 40-plus goal campaign.

"He wanted to be a part of that, (to be) in that last game and at the end of the day, he wasn't," said Arniel. "He's an all-star. He's an elite player in this league and with those guys, sometimes there are different things that motivate them and this might be one of them."

Connor is a proud individual and he's going to do his best to be at his best during the final 26 games.

The Jets are going to need him to be, since most of the injury news delivered by Arniel on Tuesday afternoon wasn't positive.

Defenceman Josh Morrissey made it back from Italy, but has been ruled out of the entire road trip with the upper-body issue that kept him out of all but one period and change of the Olympics.

Joining Morrissey on the sidelines are fellow blue-liner Neal Pionk and forward Nino Niederreiter, both of whom are considered to be week-to-week.

Pionk sustained a new injury, not related to the lower-body issue that has kept him out of the lineup since Jan. 13.

Niederreiter is dealing with an undisclosed ailment and will be replaced by Tanner Pearson on the line with Jonathan Toews and Vladislav Namestnikov.

Defenceman Haydn Fleury, who hasn't played since crashing violently into the end boards on Jan. 6, shed his non-contact jersey but won't be an option to return to game action until later in this road trip.

Colin Miller skated with his teammates for the first time since a knee injury on Jan. 11, but is still going to need more time before he's a consideration to return to the lineup.

With all of the injuries, defenceman Kale Clague was recalled from the Manitoba Moose of the American Hockey League and forward Walker Duehr could jump into the lineup before the week is over.

"All hands on deck," said Arniel. "At the end of the day, it's our group. Whoever is dressed for those (26) games, find a way to start with against Vancouver and find a way of gaining two points. We've got lots of great players here. We've got a lot of veteran guys that have helped us in the past and we need them to step up now."

Speaking of opportunities, blue-liner Ville Heinola is set to make his season debut with the Jets on the third pairing with Luke Schenn on Wednesday and will be running the second power play.

Heinola, who hasn't played with the Jets since Apr. 13, 2025, is having a strong season with the Moose, chipping in three goals and 21 points in 44 games.

"You never, ever want to see guys go down. But obviously for me, I'm super excited to get to play," said Heinola. "It's been mentally tough, for sure, but I think my game has been improving all year, and I feel like my game is in a good spot right now. So yeah, right now, I feel confident."

"(Being on the power play) is huge for me. You get more touches when you go out there, and obviously you feel better when you touch the puck. And, yeah, obviously it's a big part of my game too. So I think it really helps me."

Heinola was chosen 20th overall in the 2019 NHL Draft, selected with the pick the Jets got back in the deal for Jacob Trouba.

Injuries opened the door for Heinola to make the Jets right out of training camp and he appeared in eight NHL games before he was sent down to the minors and eventually loaned back to Finland.

A series of injuries and stalled development have limited Heinola to 53 NHL games and that's a trajectory few people would have envisioned — including the Finnish puck-mover.

"The first year gave me a little bit of too much hope, I would say, going straight in," said Heinola. "But yeah, obviously, I know it's never going to be easy anyway. If you make it there it's not going to be easy to stay there. It is what it is. But yeah, I really hoped I would have made it sooner."

Heinola, who turns 25 on Mar. 2, is focusing on making an impact, but since he doesn't have enough runway to appear in enough games with the Jets in order to avoid becoming a Group 6

unrestricted free agent this summer, it will be interesting if this latest audition could boost his stock with the trade deadline fast approaching on Mar. 6.

“I always say, I never want to give up on my dream,” said Heinola. “Play well enough to stay in the lineup. That’s obviously the first thing I want to do. Show what I can do out there.”

## **Global Winnipeg**

<https://globalnews.ca/news/11701068/analysis-winnipeg-jets-begin-post-olympic-push-without-some-key-players/>

### ***ANALYSIS: Winnipeg Jets begin post-Olympic push without some key players***

By Paul Edmonds CJOB

Negotiating from a pillar of strength is always the top priority in business.

In the hockey arena, it’s no different, as your best advantage comes from having a full and healthy roster.

But as the Winnipeg Jets enter the final portion of their regular season — that is, the post-Olympic break segment — they do so limping into Vancouver on Wednesday night slightly shorthanded.

With an objective over the coming weeks to erase an 11-point deficit in the playoff standings and with only 26 games to play in a compressed 51 days, the task was already made problematic.

But after Tuesday’s news that Josh Morrissey, Neal Pionk and Nino Niederreiter are listed as week-to-week at best, due to injuries, and Connor Hellebuyck won’t rejoin the team from his Olympic commitment until later this week in Anaheim, the adversity, like a simmering cream sauce, just got thicker.

As the Jets begin a truly important three-game road trip through the Pacific Division against the Canucks — the National Hockey League’s last-place team — the resolve and belief coming out of their room this past week has been admirable.

From players to coaches, you honestly feel there’s confidence within the group to stage the greatest late-season run in the franchise’s 15-year history, and one the city has never experienced at any level of hockey.

But as mentioned, doing so without two top defencemen (the two quarter-backs on your respective power play units, no less), along with a six-time, 20-goal scorer and your reigning Vezina and Hart Trophy-winning goaltender out, makes the climb out of the crater a little steeper and certainly more jagged.

It’s not exactly the leverage the Jets were hoping for coming out of the break in negotiating their way back into playoff contention. But perhaps the pillar of strength that appears to be slightly missing can still be used as a jumping-off point in getting down to the business of saving the best of the season, for last.

<https://globalnews.ca/news/11697376/kyle-connor-hellebuyck-donald-trump/>

## ***Jets' Connor skips White House, Hellebuyck to receive Presidential Medal of Freedom***

By Aaron D'Andrea Global News

Two Winnipeg Jets stars were at the opposite sides of the border Tuesday ahead of the team's first game back from the Olympic break.

Kyle Connor returned to the Jets instead of joining his U.S. men's hockey teammates at the White House, while goaltender Connor Hellebuyck stayed stateside and attended U.S. President Donald Trump's state of the union address that night.

Trump announced that Hellebuyck, who stopped 41 shots in the 2-1 gold-medal victory against Canada Sunday, will receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honour.

Hellebuyck, whose 41 saves included a crucial desperation paddle stop on defenceman Devon Toews, tapped his heart as those in the chamber applauded.

"Watching him have the game of his life was incredible," said Connor, who only played two games during the Winter Olympics.

"He was fantastic, and being a part of it was an experience I'll never forget."

The 29-year-old forward told reporters after practice that he "just wanted to get back," given that the team plays in Vancouver against the Canucks Wednesday night.

Head coach Scott Arniel told reporters Monday that Connor was expected to be with his U.S. teammates Tuesday.

"It's a big second half, so I wanted to make sure I was ready," Connor said.

"It's a quick turnaround. Obviously, I haven't been playing, so I wanted to get a practice under me and be ready for that game."

The U.S. men's team chartered into Miami on a flight from Italy on Monday and dined together in Miami Beach before visiting a nightclub where hundreds of fans clamoured to get inside.

They then made their way to Washington Tuesday. Videos and photos shared on social media by Trump administration aides showed the hockey players posing for a photograph in front of the South Portico. They walked along the West Wing colonnade where Trump has posted portraits of every U.S. president just steps away from the Oval Office, where they were welcomed by Trump.

As they approached the Oval Office, some of the players popped into the press office's open door to flash their medals. It was the Americans' first gold medal in men's hockey since the "Miracle on Ice" in Lake Placid, N.Y., in 1980.

U.S. Olympic women's hockey team declines Trump's invite to attend State of the Union

With the Olympics in the rearview mirror, the Jets must now pivot back to the reality of the NHL's stretch run.

Winnipeg is currently 11 points out of the final wild-card spot in the Western Conference. The Jets have 26 games remaining on their regular-season schedule, which will be played over a stretch of just 51 days.

Backup goalie Eric Comrie is expected to start Wednesday's road game against the Canucks, with Hellebuyck slated to return to the crease on Friday when the Jets visit the Anaheim Ducks.

The Jets will also be without defenceman Josh Morrissey Wednesday as he returns from Italy to be evaluated by team doctors after suffering an undisclosed injury in Canada's opening game.

When Hellebuyck does return, the Jets are hoping his Olympic high will provide a much-needed spark for a team trying to string together wins.

"The confidence that he has in himself doesn't waver," captain Adam Lowry said Monday.

"To know his game is at an elite level at the world stage, I'd expect he can carry that over coming back to us."

### **ESPN.com**

[https://www.espn.com/olympics/story/\\_/id/48028360/team-usa-goaltender-connor-hellebuyck-receive-presidential-medal-freedom-donald-trump-says](https://www.espn.com/olympics/story/_/id/48028360/team-usa-goaltender-connor-hellebuyck-receive-presidential-medal-freedom-donald-trump-says)

### ***Connor Hellebuyck to receive Presidential Medal of Freedom***

By Ryan S. Clark

Connor Hellebuyck, the goaltender for the gold-medal-winning U.S. men's Olympic hockey team, will be awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, President Donald Trump announced during Tuesday night's State of the Union.

Athletes such as Simone Biles, Joe DiMaggio, Michael Jordan, Megan Rapinoe and Babe Ruth are among the 671 individuals who have received the award, the nation's highest civilian honor. It is believed that Hellebuyck, who plays for the NHL's Winnipeg Jets, will be the first hockey player.

"Great athletes have gotten that, very great, the best," Trump said during the State of the Union, with players from the U.S. men's hockey team in attendance. "I thought he deserved it. I did take a vote -- every single one of them. I said, 'I'm not giving it if anybody goes "no,'" and every single one of them rapidly put up their hand. So, I want to thank you all. What a special job you did. What special champions you are."

A smiling Hellebuyck tapped his heart and waved his hand as those in the chamber applauded when Trump made the announcement.

Players from the U.S. men's team -- wearing blue "USA" sweaters, khakis and their gold medals -- entered the House chamber through two sets of doors and walked down the rows of the press

gallery. Lawmakers on both sides of the aisle not only stood and cheered but chanted "USA!" several times, many even pumping their fists.

Hellebuyck made 41 saves in the gold medal game against Canada and also assisted on the overtime goal scored by Jack Hughes in the Americans' 2-1 victory.

It was the first time the U.S. men had won gold since the famed 1980 "Miracle on Ice" team that stunned the Soviet Union.

Hellebuyck was one of the most consistent players in Team USA's journey to the gold medal game but took a leading role in the win over Canada. His signature moment came when he made a sprawling save and used his stick to stop Devon Toews.

Winning a gold medal has only added to Hellebuyck's reputation as one of the best goalies in the NHL. He was awarded the Hart Memorial Trophy for the 2024-25 season as the league's most valuable player, becoming the eighth goalie to win the award and the first since Carey Price in 2014-15.

He also won his third Vezina Trophy that season, given to the NHL's top goalie.

### **Winnipeg Sun**

[https://www.winnipegsun.com/sports/winnipeg\\_jets/president-promises-medal-of-freedom-to-jets-hellebuyck/article\\_e8d22721-1d0c-42da-89f0-ba8e5802c0dd.html](https://www.winnipegsun.com/sports/winnipeg_jets/president-promises-medal-of-freedom-to-jets-hellebuyck/article_e8d22721-1d0c-42da-89f0-ba8e5802c0dd.html)

### ***Making hockey history: Trump shines spotlight on Jets' Hellebuyck***

By Paul Friesen

What does Winnipeg Jets goalie Connor Hellebuyck have in common with Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bob Dylan?

They are all recipients of the U.S. Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honour in America.

Donald Trump promised Hellebuyck the award during Tuesday night's State of the Union address at the U.S. Capitol.

While Hellebuyck hasn't dedicated his life to serving the poor, hasn't sparked a social justice movement or won a Nobel Peace Prize, he did stop 41 of 42 shots in the Americans' 2-1, overtime win over Canada in the Olympic men's hockey final.

The 32-year-old and most of his U.S. teammates attended Tuesday's address after meeting Trump at the Oval Office earlier in the day.

At the State of the Union, they walked into the upper level of the Capitol building, Hellebuyck next to Matthew Tkachuk, to a standing ovation and chants of "U.S.A, U.S.A" as players held their medals in the air.

The President used his speech to give a shout-out to the Jets' goalie, providing an unprecedented platform to the game and its smallest-market team.

“I’ve never seen a goaltender play as well as goalie Connor Hellebuyck,” Trump said, sparking applause as cameras showed Hellebuyck giving two thumbs up and waving to the audience.

To no surprise, Trump mixed up his numbers, saying Hellebuyck got 46 shots on goal. He zoomed in on one that had everybody talking: Hellebuyck reaching back with his stick to rob Canada’s Devon Toews and keep the game tied, 1-1, early in the third period.

“The one shot, the one where you put your stick in the back, and it hit the neck of your stick and bounced off – do you practice that or was that a little lucky?” Trump asked, turning to look up at Hellebuyck in the upper level.

Marking his return to the Jets, Connor participated in practice and headed on a flight to Vancouver for the Wednesday game against the Canucks. He highlighted the necessity of the practice to ensure that he was ready for the game, given his recent lack of play.

A smiling Hellebuyck held out his hands and shrugged.

“He refused to answer that question,” Trump said.

The President went on to say he’d asked Hellebuyck’s teammates during their White House visit about presenting their goalie with the Medal of Freedom, and everyone “rapidly put up their hands.”

“I just want to tell you the members of this great hockey squad will be very happy to hear, based on their vote, and my vote – and in this case my vote was more important – that I will soon be presenting Connor with our highest civilian honour, which has been given to many athletes over the years... the Presidential Medal of Freedom,” Trump said.

The Michigan native waved as the audience cheered, held his hands together in a gesture of thanks and finally put his hand over his heart.

“Great athletes have gotten that. The very best,” Trump said. “And I thought he deserved it.”

The President turned his attention to the entire team in closing.

“What a special job you did,” he said. “What special champions you are. Thank you very much.”

The Medal of Freedom can be given upon recommendations to the President or at the President’s own choosing.

While Trump said there were only 12 athletes who’ve received it, the list is actually more like two dozen. They include Muhammad Ali, Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods. Some, like Babe Ruth and Jackie Robinson, received it posthumously.

Hellebuyck, though, will become the first hockey player to collect the honour.

That he plays for a team in a country Trump has engaged in a trade war – and has said should be part of the U.S. – just adds another out-of-proportion chapter to a presidency that often resembles reality-show television.

Hellebuyck's February to remember comes in the middle of a Jets season that could soon be one to forget.

Coming off last year's first-place finish, overall, Winnipeg was tied for 13th place in the Western Conference going into Wednesday's games, 11 points out of a playoff spot.

They were opening a three-game road trip in Vancouver on Wednesday, but Hellebuyck wasn't expected to join the team until it hits Anaheim for a game on Friday night.

Trump also used his speech to say the U.S. women's team would soon be visiting the White House. That brought a hearty round of applause, in contrast to the criticism he took for his cavalier mention of them in his post-game phone call with the men's team.

The women, who also beat Canada to win Olympic gold, had declined Trump's State of the Union invitation, citing scheduling.

Not every men's player attended on Tuesday.

A handful of them, including Jets forward Kyle Connor, returned directly to their NHL teams, Connor citing the need to get ready for Wednesday's game after sitting out much of the Olympic tournament as an extra forward.

How will history treat this and other White House visits, given the still mostly-hidden pile of evidence of Trump's dark past, not to mention his reckless use of power in America and abroad?

A Presidential Medal of Freedom should shine almost as brightly as any Olympic gold.

As long as it's free of shadows.

[https://www.winnipeg.sun.com/sports/winnipeg\\_jets/winnipeg-jets-deal-with-lost-veterans-on-road-trip/article\\_ba712bb0-750c-4fd1-8fd2-fd4799a88e96.html](https://www.winnipeg.sun.com/sports/winnipeg_jets/winnipeg-jets-deal-with-lost-veterans-on-road-trip/article_ba712bb0-750c-4fd1-8fd2-fd4799a88e96.html)

### ***Two more down, Jets hit road wobbled by injuries***

By Paul Friesen

The climb facing the Winnipeg Jets was arduous enough, but it just got rockier.

Not only will the Jets be without top defenceman Josh Morrissey for their road trip through Vancouver, Anaheim and San Jose, they've also lost two more veterans in defenceman Neal Pionk and forward Nino Niederreiter.

Pionk, on the brink of returning from one injury, suffered another in practice this week, while Niederreiter has aggravated something he was already dealing with before he went to the Olympics.

Both are out at least a couple of weeks.

"All hands on deck," head coach Scott Arniel said, putting on a brave face. "Opportunity. I've said it before, guys are getting opportunities and a chance to gain more ice time and gain an

opportunity to get in the lineup. Take advantage of it. That's what we're hoping here. We need guys to step up.

"We've got lots of great players here. We've got a lot of veteran guys that have helped us in the past and we need them to step up now."

Three of those veterans have been reunited on the top line: Mark Scheifele, Kyle Connor and Gabe Vilardi.

Connor's return a day earlier than expected was the only good news Arniel had.

The star winger passed on an invitation to meet President Donald Trump in order to get back on the ice, after being a healthy scratch from the Team USA lineup for the better part of the Olympic tournament.

"We're going to have to lean on them even more," Arniel said of his top unit. "We've been leaning on them all year long, and it's part of the reason why I threw those big three back together, throwing Gabe back up there. They were dynamic for us early on in the year.

"They do things that other guys can't."

The Jets are 11 points out of a playoff spot with 26 games left and just 10 days before the NHL trade deadline.

Scheifele looks at the mountain in front of them and doesn't mince words.

"Very steep," he said. "We knew that going into the break. We didn't leave ourselves a lot of comfort."

As for Connor, he sounded ready for a fresh start.

"It's almost a new season here," he said. "There's a lot of fight in this group and a lot of belief in here. So hopefully we can get off to a good start. We need to start rolling these wins and piling them up... these are huge games for us."

Blue-line mishmashWith two of their top-four defencemen out, the Jets will insert Ville Heinola into the lineup for the first time this season, creating a mishmash of pairings on the blue line for Wednesday's game in Vancouver.

"You never, ever want to see guys go down," Heinola said. "But obviously I'm super excited to get to play."

Once a highly-regarded first-round draft pick, the 24-year-old Heinola failed to crack the Jets lineup out of training camp and hasn't played an NHL game since last April.

"It's been mentally tough, for sure," the Finn said. "But my game has been improving all year, and is in a good spot right now."

An ankle injury and surgery have hampered Heinola in the past.

He has to be careful not to hurt himself in this latest opportunity.

“That’s going to be the hardest part, just not to do too much.”

Just a few days ago, Arniel’s plan for Heinola was for him to simply be around to gain some experience with the NHL team.

That changed quickly.

“We just met with him the other day,” the coach said. “It’s amazing how things quickly change... I didn’t think it was going to happen within two days of that conversation.”

Tuesday’s practice saw Logan Stanley take Morrissey’s spot alongside Dylan DeMelo, while Dylan Samberg and Elias Salomonsson made up the second unit, Heinola and Luke Schenn the third.

Arniel also has Heinola on the second power-play unit, which the 6-foot-0, 181-pounder hopes fuels his confidence with the puck.

His long, bumpy road to a place where he’s still not an NHL regular probably fuels some doubt, too.

“The first year gave me a little bit of too much hope, I would say, going straight in,” Heinola said. “But yeah, obviously it’s never going to be easy anyway. If you make it there it’s not going to be easy to stay there. But yeah, I really hoped I would have made it sooner.”

Drafted in 2019, Heinola played eight games as a rookie, but just five the next season. The most he’s played was 18, last year.

In 53 career NHL games, he has one goal and 11 assists.

Forwards deep, at least Arniel says the improved play of centres Adam Lowry and Jonathan Toews on secondary lines made bumping Vilardi back to the top line more doable.

“It’s not trying to find a second line now,” the coach said. “Now I’ve got 2-A and 2-B. So it’s have our top line doing what they do best, and then having those next six guys go out and be threats... but also do the job against some of the lines they’re facing. That’ll be the test on the road here for three games.”

[https://www.winnipeg.sun.com/sports/winnipeg\\_jets/hockey-not-trump-inspired-decision-for-jets-kyle-connor/article\\_e2fd16ae-2c0e-4f25-b19c-a749e955d91a.html](https://www.winnipeg.sun.com/sports/winnipeg_jets/hockey-not-trump-inspired-decision-for-jets-kyle-connor/article_e2fd16ae-2c0e-4f25-b19c-a749e955d91a.html)

### ***Hockey, not Trump, inspired decision for Jets’ Kyle Connor***

By Paul Friesen

Right around the time Kyle Connor was boarding a Winnipeg Jets flight to Vancouver, his gold-medal-winning American teammates, including goalie Connor Hellebuyck, were meeting President Donald Trump.

Connor passed on that opportunity to return to Manitoba instead, joining his Jets teammates for a Tuesday practice and the ensuing flight to the west coast.

His reason had nothing to do with the increasingly dark cloud surrounding the leader of the U.S. and everything to do with hockey.

After sitting out much of the Olympic tournament as a healthy scratch, including the medal round, Connor was simply itching to get back on the ice.

"It's a big second half, so wanted to make sure I was ready," he said between practice and the flight. "It's a quick turnaround. Obviously I haven't been playing so I wanted to get a practice under me and be ready for that game."

That next game: Wednesday against the Canucks.

Hellebuyck will rejoin his NHL team in Anaheim, where the Jets play on Friday.

Nobody was happier to see No. 81 back on the ice on Tuesday than his centre.

"It feels like it's been forever since I skated with him," Mark Scheifele said. "I didn't know he was back, so that was a very pleasant surprise."

Head coach Scott Arniel, who got the heads up a day earlier, might have been the second-happiest man in the room.

"He wanted to get home. He hadn't seen his daughter in about 12 days," Arniel said. "He wants to play. That's the biggest thing. He wants to get back on the ice, get going and help us. When I got that phone call, it was great to hear. To see him here today and get a chance to congratulate him on a historic moment that he was a part of."

That historic moment drew some online backlash when videos showed Team USA getting a call from Trump while celebrating.

The President reluctantly acknowledged he'd have to invite the U.S. women's team, too, otherwise he might get impeached.

The players laughed and played along, like hockey players generally do.

"I don't really have any thoughts on it," Connor said. "There's so many things happening, where you just won the gold medal and things are going on. So I don't really remember, to be honest, what he said. It was such a whirlwind and just celebrating with teammates."

If Connor's celebration was muted just a touch, it would have been understandable. While making the Olympic team was a dream come true, getting scratched from the lineup wasn't part of that dream.

Connor called it a "really cool" experience, regardless.

"Some of the things were out of my control," he said. "And all you can do in that situation is try to be a great teammate. And if your time is ever called, go out there and play your game. That's how I approached it, trying to contribute in any way possible."

He's satisfied he did that, and over the moon to have a front-row seat for what may well be the career-defining game for his good friend and teammate between the pipes.

"Watching him have the game of his life was incredible," Connor said of Hellebuyck. "He was fantastic. And being a part of it was an experience I'll never forget."

Connor was watching from the tunnel, in full gear, when Jack Hughes gave the Americans their first Olympic gold since the Miracle on Ice, 46 years earlier – to the day.

It wasn't long before he was accepting the keepsake of a lifetime.

"We just sprinted on the ice," he said. "I don't know if it's really set in at this point. It's been a whirlwind. It was surreal. And to be able to share that with those teammates in that moment, waiting in line and getting that put around your neck, it's a pretty cool feeling."

While he didn't score any goals in his two games or even suit up when the games mattered most, Connor will look back at his first Winter Games with the warmth of just being part of it, from staying in the athletes village to watching some of the other sports.

"It was very cool to be able to talk to the other athletes," he said. "You don't get to watch too much speed skating or figure skating, at least I don't, throughout the regular season, so it was cool to take in that stuff. Their dedication to the craft – that's the pinnacle for them, too. And we went to a couple of short-track events and that was very exciting.

"It was cool, the whole experience of the Olympics and staying at the village... a great experience."

At 29, who knows if the Michigan native will get another chance in four years.

Asked what, if anything, can top an Olympic gold medal, he didn't have to think more than a second.

"I'm sure you can answer that one," he said. "A Stanley Cup."

### **The Athletic**

<https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/7070418/2026/02/25/connor-hellebuyck-presidential-medal-of-freedom/>

### ***Connor Hellebuyck to join list of Olympic legends awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom***

By Devon Henderson

President Donald Trump announced Tuesday in his State of the Union address that Team USA men's hockey goalie Connor Hellebuyck would be awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor, in light of Hellebuyck's heroics in Sunday's gold medal game against Canada.

"I've never seen a goaltender play as well as goalie Connor Hellebuyck," Trump said, with 17 of the 25 members of the team in attendance.

The medal is traditionally awarded to individuals to recognize a lifetime of significant achievements in the arts, public service, science or other fields. Hellebuyck anchored Team USA's 2-1 overtime win over Canada, saving a record 41 of the 42 shots he faced and spearheading the United States' first men's hockey gold in 46 years.

"We're going to be talking about this performance for generations," U.S. winger Brady Tkachuk said after the win. "It was an all-time performance from a superstar at his position. It's going to go down as one of the best performances of all time."

The performance earned Hellebuyck inclusion on an exclusive list of U.S. Olympians to be awarded the honor. While 19 athletes, coaches and sports figures who have competed in the Olympics have been awarded a Medal of Freedom, only a few have received it primarily for their Olympic performances. Other gold medal winners like Muhammad Ali, Dan Gable, Michael Jordan, Jim Thorpe and Babe Didrikson Zaharias were awarded the medal at least in part because of the broader successes of their athletic careers.

Here are the individuals who earned the nation's most prestigious award for their Olympic and international sporting significance.

#### *Jesse Owens*

The Black sprinter defied Nazi Germany and Aryan supremacy ideologies at the 1936 Berlin Games by winning gold in the 100m, 200m, long jump and 4x100m relay. Owens was the most successful of five Black athletes on the U.S. men's track and field team that year, who combined to earn eight gold medals. He was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1976 by President Gerald Ford, four years before Owens died.

#### *Simone Biles*

Biles is the most decorated American gymnast ever, with 32 Olympic and World Championship medals. Her seven Olympic golds are the most by an American gymnast.

In 2021, she testified in Congress about failures in the investigation of widespread sexual abuse by former USA Gymnastics doctor Larry Nassar. Biles has also advocated for children in the foster care system, as she was a former foster child. President Joe Biden awarded her the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2022, making Biles the youngest person to receive the award.

#### *Megan Rapinoe*

Rapinoe was a key star of the U.S. women's national soccer team during a dominant period in the squad's history. She won two FIFA Women's World Cups (2015, 2019), a gold medal at the 2012 London Games and a bronze medal at the 2021 Tokyo Games. Rapinoe's 73 goals with the USWNT are tied for the third most in program history.

Biden awarded her the Medal of Freedom in 2022, partly for her successful fight for equal pay for women's athletes and for helping to make U.S. Soccer the first federation to equalize pay for men's and women's teams.

#### *Katie Ledecky*

Ledecky is the only female swimmer to win an individual event at four consecutive Olympics. In total, she is a nine-time Olympic gold medalist and has won 14 medals across four Olympics from 2012 to 2024, and has broken 17 world records in her career.

Biden awarded her the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2024 for being “a humble leader, Olympian and champion of unparalleled determination.”

Correction: A previous version of this article misstated the number of players from the U.S. men’s Olympic hockey team present for the State of the Union address. Although 20 made the trip to Washington, D.C., 17 were seen at the speech.