

# ‘This feels like home to me’

## Pionk inks six-year extension

MIKE MCINTYRE

IT’S been a rough week for the “Nobody wants to play in Winnipeg” crowd.

First to debunk that widespread belief across the NHL was American forward Alex Iafallo, who signed a three-year contract extension with the Jets on Wednesday. That was quickly followed by American defenceman Neal Pionk inking a new six-year deal on Thursday.

“We love it here, and probably most importantly, my family loves it here, too,” said Pionk, who hails from Hermantown, Minn. “This feels like home to me. Didn’t want to leave.”

Pionk, 29, will be paid US\$7 million per year starting in 2025-26, which makes him the highest-paid blue-liner on the team. All-star Josh Morrissey is making US\$6.25 million on an eight-year pact he signed in 2019. It’s a bit of an apples and oranges comparison considering the salary cap is projected to soar after years of being stagnant.

A better comparable would be current market value. For an example, the Washington Capitals recently signed 27-year-old defenceman Jakob Chychnon to an eight-year extension that will pay him US\$9 million per year. He has a career-high 47 points this year, which is eight more than Pionk in four extra games played.

Pionk had been earning US\$5.875 million and tied his career high in goals (10) after scoring in Thursday’s regular-season finale against the Anaheim Ducks. The undrafted right-shooting rearguard also had 29 assists over his 69 games played and was a plus-21 on the NHL’s No. 1 team, forming an effective second pairing with Dylan Samberg.

“Obviously, very exciting. I know he loves it here and he’s starting a family, so it’s important for him to be in one spot,” said Samberg, who is a pending restricted free agent this summer.

“(We) complement each other well. He’s got more of that offensive side, I’d say I am more on the defensive side. We’re good with communication, we know where we’re going to be on the ice and we’re always looking to support each other. That’s why we’ve been having so much success.”

Pionk was thrilled to get the business done prior to the start of the Stanley Cup playoffs, saying it was a relatively painless negotiation between his agent and Jets general manager Kevin Cheveldayoff.

He would have been in demand had he hit the open market on July 1.

“He’s extremely popular in our dressing room. He’s one of our leaders, I know he doesn’t have an ‘A’ on his jersey but he is one of those guys that has a strong voice in there. Real excited that he’s decided that he wants to be a Winnipeg Jet for six more years,” said head coach Scott Arniel.



In six seasons with the Jets, Neal Pionk has produced 37 goals and 216 points to go along with 14 assists in 22 playoff games.

“He’s got an all-around game. When you have top-four defenceman, you’re playing against other teams’ top players. He’s on the penalty kill, he’s on the power play. It gives us an offensive edge, he’s got some bite to him and he also likes to get under the skin of the opposition. He’s one of those guys who is well-rounded and brings a lot to the table in every game.”

Pionk was traded to the Jets in the summer of 2019 as part of the Jacob Trouba package. He put up a career-high 45 points in his first season in Winnipeg and likely would have eclipsed that this year if not for missing 13 games with a lower-body injury.

“To think when I got traded here at 101 (career) games coming off my entry-level deal and to see that we’re here is pretty crazy to believe,” said Pionk. “You know, I was just breaking into the NHL. Really, I had one full season under my belt, and now we’re here and making a Cup run. So it’s really fun.”

Pionk said the fact so many core players are locked up long-term speaks to how the reality is different than the perception of Winnipeg.

Iafallo, who is from Buffalo, N.Y., said essentially the same thing a day earlier. Like Pionk, he came over in a trade but has come to appreciate the organization and the city.

Other trade additions such as Nino Niederreiter

and Vlad Namestnikov have previously re-upped with the Jets, as have numerous drafted and developed players.

“I mean, all these guys that I played with now for six years, like these are lifelong friends that we’re creating. Not only that, my wife’s created a lot of friends. So that was a big deal,” said Pionk.

“Chance to win here every year. Family loves it here. Those are the two biggest things.”

From a Jets perspective, why not try to keep as many pieces of the band together consider the sweet music they’re making? Winnipeg just had its best regular season with a 56-22-4 record.

“Any time you see those in-season signings, I personally feel really good about them with the direction of this team and knowing the future of this team is starting to get locked up for longer,” said goaltender Connor Hellebuyck, who along with top centre Mark Scheifele are in the first year of seven-year extensions they signed in 2023.

“He is just a phenomenal player and he has earned every second of it. I am so proud of him and proud to play behind him, and having him there for another six years, it feels pretty good being the guy behind him.”

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The Hockey Guys launching T-shirts into the stands at a New York Islanders game.

## Whiteout meets The Hockey Guys

BEN LITTLE

WHEN Lawson McDonald started a YouTube channel several years ago, it was a hobby.

McDonald grew up in Winkler playing junior hockey with his hometown Flyers. After junior, he spent two years playing college hockey at the University of Nebraska Omaha in the NCAA.

In his third year, McDonald was cut and decided to try out for the University of Wisconsin-Superior.

“If I was a better hockey player, none of this would have happened,” McDonald joked.

That’s where he met Austin Friesen, Martan Yelle, Levi Cudmore and former Flyers teammate Will Blake — and they became The Hockey Guys.

The crew shot their first video during the COVID-19 pandemic. When it generated over a million views, The Hockey Guys saw an opportunity.

“People had never really seen hockey players doing social media stuff,” said Friesen, The Hockey Guys’ social media co-ordinator, who was born in Winnipeg. “But we’re kind of changing that up a little bit and I think it caught fire pretty fast.”

Fast forward to now, and The Hockey Guys are a TikTok sensation with more than 1.5 million followers and countless experiences including a trip to the White House, mini sticks at the Daytona 500 and their own Stanley Cup parade.

They landed in Winnipeg Friday, where the Jets have invited them to attend Games 1 and 2 of their series against the St. Louis Blues.

“That’s always been on my bucket list,” said McDonald about the group’s trip to Winnipeg. “It’s going to be really fun, I’m excited to be a part of it.”

Winnipeg is not the first NHL team to invite the group to attend. In fact, The Hockey Guys have worked with half of the NHL’s teams to date.

Before their final season at UW Superior, new opportunities emerged for The Hockey Guys brand when NCAA student athletes could finally profit off their name, image and likeness. This allowed The Hockey Guys to turn their exposure into cash.

That year, the group was invited by the NHL and Discover Card to the Winter Classic in Minneapolis. Once their season ended, The Hockey Guys went on a “Spring Break Tour,” visiting four hockey towns in seven days.

That spring break tour launched interest around the NHL, and The Hockey Guys were invited to rinks across the country. They worked with team mascots, highlighted unique features about a team’s arena, or go-to spots before the game.

“That’s what the teams kind of recognized that we could do to provide value,” said Friesen. “Showing the fun experience at a game.”

The Hockey Guys success also attracted political attention, earning them an invitation to the White House to celebrate the Vegas Golden Knights Stanley Cup win in 2023.

Friesen said the crew received individual emails from the White House. At first, it seemed too good to be true.

“It said ‘dot gov,’ and we saw the White House stamp at the bottom of the email and were like, ‘OK, what the heck?’” said Friesen, noting the group were some of the first creators to be invited to the White House.

They were even congratulated by NHL commissioner Gary Bettman — perhaps, for the wrong reason, as Cudmore had been mistaken for a Vegas Golden Knight. “(Bettman) went up to (Cudmore) and said like ‘good job,’ or ‘good to see you again,’ something like that,” said Friesen.

The Hockey Guys TikTok page is full of adventures like these. They skated in the Washington Capitals alumni game, played mini sticks against a pit crew minutes before the Daytona 500, attended Game 7 of last year’s Stanley Cup Final and watched Team Canada win gold at the 4 Nations Face-Off.

Now, they get to bring that adventure to Winnipeg.

“I’m excited to show these guys the Whiteout... and how electric the city gets,” Friesen said.

As for a prediction, McDonald said he took the Jets to win the Stanley Cup in his playoff bracket.

Friesen took a more subtle approach.

“I’m a big, big Jets fan, so I’m going to be rooting for them all the way through, until June,” Friesen said.

### JETS ● FROM E1

That includes a 15-1 start that was the best in NHL history, a franchise record for points, and winning streaks of eight, seven and 11 games.

It also included staving off a late push from the Dallas Stars (who ended up 10 points back in the Central) and leaving the Washington Capitals in the dust in the Presidents’ Trophy battle.

In short, this group has tackled whatever challenge was in front of them.

“We really are just staying in the moment and having a singular focus,” said DeMelo. “I’m not saying it wasn’t there in years past, but it feels like this year, we clinched the Central after the Chicago game and you wouldn’t have really known. It was like ‘sweet, we got it.’ We got the Presidents’ Trophy and it was kind of like ‘cool, we got it.’ We’re really focused on the task at hand and you’ve got guys that are really hungry this year.”

The hunger can only be quenched by a deep playoff run and, with that in mind, let’s dig into some of the juiciest storylines for this series

### Centres of attention

Scheifele is someone the Jets will be leaning on, not to carry them, but as someone to lead the charge — much like he did in 2018, when he produced 14 goals and 20 points in 17 games.

Scheifele’s personal scar tissue includes several injuries to go along with his suspension that contributed to early exits.

Scheifele has 38 points in 42 career post-season games and he’ll need to connect often with Kyle Connor, who had 40 goals and set a career-high with 97 points during the regular season.

The chatter surrounding the Jets’ second-line centre job hasn’t really subsided all season long, but that’s of little concern to Vladislav Namestnikov.

Namestnikov has done a solid job, picking up 38 points in 78 games, but knows he’ll need to supply some complementary offence to go with his feisty play and defensive awareness.

When it comes to the men in the middle, Morgan Barron is playing with renewed confidence and could end up being an X-factor in this series.

For the Blues, Robert Thomas is a force to be reckoned with and is the clear guy who drives the engine, even with Jordan Kyrou playing a rejuvenated game and leading the team with 36 goals.

Thomas, who is one of five Blues who were on the roster in 2019 when the team won it all, is a strong two-way player and finished with 81 points in 70 games.

Had Thomas not fractured his foot in a game with the Jets in October, he might have eclipsed 90 points.

He’s got great vision and a great shot, so you can expect Lowry and his line will be tasked with trying to contain him.

Former Brandon Wheat Kings captain Brayden Schenn also figures to be someone to keep an eye on, given his propensity to go to the hard areas and deliver in big moments.

### Walking wounded

There’s no shortage of top-end talent in this series, but both teams are missing significant pieces up front, at least as the series starts.

The Jets will likely be without speedy winger



Winnipeg Jets’ Logan Stanley (64) levels St. Louis Blues’ Mathieu Joseph during their December contest.

Nikolaj Ehlers (week-to-week, lower body) for the entire series, while right-winger Gabe Vilardi (day-to-day, upper body) continues to skate on his own and figures to join the main group in the near future.

Given the number of two-day breaks on the horizon, the best guess is Vilardi could become an option to return to action around Game 5 or 6, which means the Jets will be without their third and fifth-leading point producers for the foreseeable future.

The Jets have leaned on their depth all season and that won’t change when the post-season begins.

“They’re both fantastic players, obviously guys that are missing in your lineup,” said defenceman Josh Morrissey. “At the same time, one of the reasons we had such a good season is our depth and our ability to have players step up in injury cases, illness, all those things, and that’s something we’ve really taken a lot of pride in as a group is our ability to have guys step up when someone’s out.”

The Blues are without talented winger Dylan Holloway, who was third in team scoring with 26 goals and 63 points in 77 games.

He has game-breaking speed and quickly established himself as a top producer in his first season with the Blues after being signed to an offer sheet by general manager Doug Armstrong — who got defenceman Philip Broberg from the Edmonton Oilers in identical fashion.

The exact nature and severity of Holloway’s injury hasn’t been revealed either, though it would be surprising if he forces his way into this series.

The addition of 2023 first-rounder Jimmy Snuggs has helped mitigate the loss of Holloway, but the Blues would be more dangerous if both were in the lineup.

### Jets vs. Blues

<b>Game 1</b>
April 19, 5 p.m., St. Louis at Winnipeg, Canada Life Centre
<b>Game 2</b>
April 21, 6:30 p.m., St. Louis at Winnipeg, Canada Life Centre
<b>Game 3</b>
April 24, 8:30 p.m., Winnipeg at St. Louis, Enterprise Center
<b>Game 4</b>
April 27, noon, Winnipeg at St. Louis, Enterprise Center
<b>Game 5</b> (if necessary)
April 30, TBD, St. Louis at Winnipeg, Canada Life Centre
<b>Game 6</b> (if necessary)
May 2, TBD, Winnipeg at St. Louis, Enterprise Center
<b>Game 7</b> (if necessary)
May 4, TBD., St. Louis at Winnipeg, Canada Life Centre

### The coaches

Arniel has ample playoff experience from his time as a player, an assistant coach and a head coach in the minors, but today will be his first Stanley Cup playoff game as an NHL bench boss.

As a player, Arniel won a gold medal with Team Canada at the World Junior Hockey Championship, a pair of Memorial Cup championships with the Cornwall Royals (1980 and 1981) and a Turner Cup with the Utah Grizzlies in 1996.

Behind the bench, he was an associate coach when the New York Rangers made it to the Stanley Cup final before losing to the Los Angeles Kings in 2014, and was the head coach of the Manitoba Moose of the American Hockey League when they advanced to the Calder Cup final in 2009 before losing in six games to the Hershey Bears.

“It’s an unbelievable opportunity that I’ve been handed,” said Arniel, noting he received a bunch of well-wishes in recent days but no advice from friends and former colleagues. “The players helped me get here this year, just (with) the way they’ve played throughout the season.

“For me, really I’m going to try to stay out of the way as much as possible and let those guys go out and do what they do best.”

As much as he downplayed it, there’s no doubt Arniel will be feeling plenty of juice when he walks down the tunnel and the game begins.

For a guy who waited more than a decade for a second chance as an NHL head coach, Arniel has pushed most of the right buttons so far this season, but wants to follow that with a lengthy playoff run.

Standing in his way is a team led by former Manitoba Moose centre Jim Montgomery, who has the Blues wondering if it might be 2019 all over again.

Since taking over from Drew Bannister, the Blues have gone 35-18-5 under Montgomery and they were the hottest team in the NHL coming out of the break for the 4 Nations Face-Off.

Montgomery has helped the Blues restore their structure and identity, but he’s looking to exorcise a few playoff demons of his own, including the loss in Game 7 of the 2023 playoffs to the Florida Panthers when he was the head coach of a Boston Bruins team that posted the best regular season in NHL history.

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