

VILARDI BACK IN ACTION

Jets forward to make series debut tonight

MIKE MCINTYRE

IT’S a bird! It’s a plane! It’s... Gabe Vilardi!

“I’m hopeful to make a big impact,” the Winnipeg Jets forward said Tuesday as he prepared to swoop into the middle of an intense best-of-seven playoff series with the St. Louis Blues that is tied 2-2.

“I don’t know. I have to go out there. I’m not going to be Superman or anything like that.”

Maybe not, but Vilardi’s return from a five-week injury absence comes just in the nick of time for his team. The Jets are reeling after two straight blowout losses to the Blues and need all the help they can get in today’s pivotal Game 5 at Canada Life Centre, where they won the first two games of the first-round series.

Can the 25-year-old power forward save the day?

“I’m just going to go play and hopefully I can help (his linemates) out and help the team out,” said Vilardi, who slides right back to his familiar spot on the top line with Mark Scheifele and Kyle Connor.

“Hopefully we can get back and get a win. But I’m not thinking too much about stuff like that. Just going in there, playing my game and hopefully making some good plays out there.”

Vilardi last played on March 23 against the Buffalo Sabres, suffering an undisclosed upper-body ailment that was deemed week-to-week. It would mark the end of a career-best regular-season in which he had 61 points (27G, 34A) in 71 games. He began skating on his own a couple weeks ago and has been participating in full-contact practices for the past week.

“It’s going to be an adjustment and I’ve got to be prepared for that right away,” Vilardi said of the intense pace that comes with playoff hockey. “There’s no working back into it. Every play matters right now, as you guys are seeing.”

Jets head coach Scott Arniel won’t hesitate to lean heavily on Vilardi despite him missing 15 consecutive games. He was close to playing Sunday’s Game 4, even participating in the pre-game warmup, but ultimately the decision was made to give him a few extra days of recovery and conditioning.

“It’s green light now. There’s no holding back. This is playoff hockey.



MATT SLOCUM / THE ASSOCIATED PRESS FILES

Winnipeg Jets’ Gabriel Vilardi will return for Game 5 against the St. Louis Blues today at Canada Life Centre.

There’s no (wading) his way in,” said Arniel.

“First couple of shifts he’s going to have to get up to speed. It’s going to be a heck of a lot faster now than it was when he left us. But I’ve got all the confidence as I watched him the last few days in practice that he’ll be alright.”

Vilardi’s return impacts every line. He knocks Alex Iafallo down to the second unit with Vlad Namestnikov and Cole Perfetti, while Nino Niederreiter reunites on the shutdown trio with Adam Lowry and Mason Appleton. Brandon Tanev moves to the fourth line with Morgan Barron and Jaret Anderson-Dolan, while David Gustafson comes out.

“It pushes people back down to where they normally usually play. And it just helps us balance out some of our lines,” said Arniel. “It really changes things for us in the sense of the offence that we can produce, not just from our top guys but spreading it back out through our lineup.”

It will also allow Arniel to go back to using Lowry, Niederreiter and Appleton against the top two lines of the Blues, especially with the Jets enjoying last change as the home team.

“Obviously the last couple of years they’ve been together, their offensive zone time, because they do so well defensively, they don’t spend a lot of time in our end of the rink,” he said.

“The chemistry’s there. They kind of read off each other and do the things together. So yeah, I need those guys up and doing what they do best, and that’s really forcing lines to play in their end of the rink.”

Vilardi also goes right back to his usual net-front spot on Winnipeg’s top power-play unit, which has struggled mightily in his absence. The Jets are two-for-12 so far in the playoffs.

“He just becomes another threat, right. (Connor’s) shot’s a threat. (Josh Morrissey’s) shot is a threat. (Scheifele’s) playmaking ability, (Perfetti) in the pop area is a threat. Now there’s a fifth one there,” said Arniel.

“If you leave him alone he can do things down there, whether that’s take the puck to the net himself or (Perfetti) to him to make, he’s a really good passer as well. Now you’ve got your five threats that make it a little bit more difficult for the penalty killers to try to shut everybody off.”

Connor and Scheifele lead the Jets with five points each in the series, with nobody else having more than two. The dynamic offensive duo appreciate having their regular wingman providing another offensive weapon.

“It’s exciting. We know what he means to this team, means to our line,” said Connor.

“It’s a huge advantage for us to have him back. He’s a big part of what we’ve talked about all year, not being a one trick pony on the power play. Being able to score and being pretty dynamic from all over the place, he just adds another element for them to be aware of.”

St. Louis has taken a clear in-your-face approach with Connor and especially Scheifele over the past two

games, hitting them legally — and at times illegally — at every chance they can get. Does Vilardi immediately join the hit list?

“It’s a different game. It’s intense,” admitted Connor.

“Every play is magnified that much more. You’ve got to be on your game, you’ve got to pay attention to detail. We stress that every shift. He’s aware of that. He’s played in big games throughout his career, throughout his life. I just think he’s the type of guy, and this is the type of game, too, where he can just step in and focus on himself, focus on his game, and he’s going to be ready.”

Vilardi declined to reveal any specifics about his injury, likely not wanting to provide the physical Blues team any additional intelligence. But he admitted it’s been tough both physically and mentally to be sidelined for such a stretch.

- VILARDI, CONTINUED ON D2
- MORE JETS COVERAGE ON D2

‘Hidden gem of a sport’

Affordability, time driving factors in growth of disc golf

BEN LITTLE

WINDS gusted Saturday as Anton Sawka pulled a driver from his bag. He set his feet and launched his disc through a narrow tree gap on the second hole, landing on the fairway.

Sawka has been disc golfing since 2021. He and a couple friends run the Manitoba Disc Golf Tour, which began last weekend in the fourth annual Spring Fling at Kilcona Lakes — one of Winnipeg’s 11 disc golf courses.

“(People) wanted to get outside,” said Sawka. “It’s an easier barrier to entry than golf, because you can buy a disc and just throw it.”

Graham Sereda, vice-principal at Niverville High School, said disc golf has all the benefits of golf, without the financial commitment. He added disc golf is also more welcoming for beginners.

“There’s a very high minimum skill for traditional golf, where anybody can throw a disc,” said Sereda. “Anybody can throw yards down the field and feel like you’re making progress.

“It’s a nice free way to get outside, get some exercise,” he said.

The sport became increasingly popular during the COVID-19 pandemic, allowing people to get outside while maintaining social distance guidelines.

“I was looking for something to do through COVID to be active,” said Jeff Burns, father of two. “I turned 50 that year, and I was kind of heavy, so I lost 60 pounds and started playing disc golf.”

Before he was a dad, Burns would golf 50 rounds a year. In fatherhood, Burns couldn’t commit to the time that golf demanded, eventually selling his clubs.

“The time commitment, the financial commitment, you know, when you have a young family, it’s just tough to do,” said Burns.

Sawka has been golfing for 20 years and still finds time to go regularly. Still, both Sawka and Burns agree that a free round of 18 holes that takes less than two hours to complete is an attractive sell.

Sawka said roughly 50 disc golfers are signed up for the tour. He expects a few more will sign up now that the season is underway. The tour helps run five to seven events during the year.

“The main point is to bring people to the course,” said Sawka. “If you’ve joined the tour, you’ll be more committed to playing more tournaments. And that just benefits everyone. Bigger tournaments, bigger community.”

Sawka said the tour partners with sponsors to provide prizes for tournament winners, culminating in a year-end cash prize for the best performers on the tour.

Each disc golfer has a minimum of 10 discs in their bag. Jason The (pronounced Tay), owner of Disc Republic on Archibald St., said much like golf, each disc performs differently.

“You can select ones that fly differently,” said The. “That will fly to the right and finish to the left, or vice versa, some of them are better in a headwind, some of them are better in a tailwind.”

While more experienced players employ a variety of discs in their arsenal, The said starting out is quite simple. A starter kit provides you a driver, a mid-range and a putter — selling for as little as \$25.

He said worldwide accessibility is a reason for the sport’s increased popu-



BEN LITTLE / FREE PRESS

Disc golfer Anton Hawka putts from a few feet out on the fourth hole at Kilcona Park.

larity, where players can still experience the scenery and challenge that golf offers for a fraction of the price.

“It’s fantastic that there’s all these free courses across the world,” said The. “It’s got a lot of the same appeal

as regular golf.”

The said he sees a wide variety of customers in his store from families, to kids, to seniors.

- DISC GOLF, CONTINUED ON D3