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RULE: Wild Need Their Puzzle Pieces to Fit If They're Going to Beat the Jets



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By [Heather Rule](#) - April 11, 2018

The fun thing about the NHL playoffs is they can be so unpredictable. Top teams lose in the first round, others don't even win a game and upsets are a regular occurrence. Oh, and there are also no shootouts.

The Minnesota Wild (45-26-11) are hoping to play spoiler to the favored Winnipeg Jets (52-20-10) as the two division-and-location rivals face off Wednesday in Winnipeg in the first round of the Stanley Cup Playoffs.

The Wild have as good of a shot as any team to try and win four games and advance to round two. They just need to make sure the key ingredients that got them to the playoffs are still in the mix this spring.

I'm calling it spring, even if Mother Nature is confused.

Here's the upside for the Wild: The Jets have never won a playoff game. They were swept 4-0 in 2014-15 at the hands of the Anaheim Ducks in their fourth season after moving to Winnipeg. For the Wild, they've got the upper hand in postseason experience, it's just that the victories have been spread out over a few seasons. Plus, reaching the second round has been a struggle at times.

Last season, the Wild had their best regular season in franchise history. They won a franchise-best 49 games and recorded a franchise-best 106 points. The feeling was Stanley Cup or bust. Instead, they were ousted in the first round by former head coach Mike Yeo and his pesky St. Louis Blues. As had been the case in the past, the Wild had trouble finishing and therefore scoring goals.

It was a deflating finish for the Wild.

Five years in the playoffs and a bunch of exits to Chicago, and then a quick series loss to St. Louis when the Wild had home-ice advantage – for what that's worth.



Sarah McLellan

@sarah_mclellan

Asked if [#mnwild](#) is aware of underdog status, Boudreau said, "You'd have to be blind not to see it, especially on Canadian TV everywhere. ... But we're here. We're going to play this game. I'm glad we're invited to play, so we'll give it our best shot."

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I've maintained for a few seasons that the Wild need to win two playoff rounds for the postseason to be considered a success. That hasn't changed. The surprising run in 2003 is still the Wild's most successful playoff appearance in their history.

This spring, the pressure is off for Minnesota. Sure, they're one of three teams in the NHL that's made the playoffs for six consecutive seasons. But they're definitely the underdogs against the Jets.

The Jets won three of the four regular-season meetings between the clubs in 2017-18. That's a very take-it-with-a-grain-of-salt fact, however. The last time they met was Jan. 13 when the Wild finally got a victory, 4-1 in St. Paul, in the head-to-head series. A lot can change in a team's play, and with personnel, since then.

Also, keep in mind that one of the Wild's most lopsided losses this season came against Winnipeg — 7-2 on Nov. 27.

At the very basic level, the Wild need to score goals and rely on more than just a couple top scorers to get the job done. This sounds obvious because teams need goals to win games. I'm just reminded of playoffs from the past when the Wild made goaltenders like [Jake Allen](#), [Jose Theodore](#) and [Semyon Varlamov](#) look like Vezina Trophy winners who never let in anything.

It's a movie Wild fans have seen too many times.

The Wild will need [Eric Staal](#) to contribute to the scoresheet. As the team's leading scorer with 42 goals and 76 points this season, that shouldn't be a problem. Although, he has cooled off a bit the past few games. Of course, that's being a little harsh. Going a couple games without a goal would be considered a slump for Staal after such a successful season when he tied [Marian Gaborik's](#) franchise record for 42 goals in a single season.

[Jason Zucker](#) had another career year with 33 goals and 31 assists, constantly keeping pace at the top of the Wild leaderboard. His speed is always a factor, and he's played well when paired with Staal and [Mikael Granlund](#).

Speaking of Granlund, he has thrived in the playoffs in the past. From making great passes to set up his teammates to scoring the overtime-winner while sliding on the ice, he's been known really come through in the clutch. The Wild will definitely need that Granlund to show up against the Jets.



Minnesota Wild

@mnwild

Boudreau: "Playoffs are amped up in every way. So I think it's going to be more physical — controlled emotion is what it's going to come down to." [#mnwild](#)



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Nino Niederreiter and [Charlie Coyle](#) could be wild cards, too. Coyle is a streaky goal scorer, who can be more off than on and scores in bunches. Niederreiter has dealt with injury issues this season but has also been known for some key playoff moments in the past.

Among the veteran advantages for the Wild, the biggest asset is the oldest player in the NHL, [Matt Cullen](#). He has three Stanley Cups, including back-to-back wins with Pittsburgh.

In goal, [Devan Dubnyk](#) (35-16-7) has been solid for the Wild. He'll need to keep the soft goals out of the picture to give the Wild their best shot at victory. On the other end, there's [Connor Hellebuyck](#) (44-11-9) with a .924 save percentage and 2.36 GAA.

The liability and big question mark for the Wild are their defensemen. Even with [Jared Spurgeon](#) back, they're a very young squad including [Ryan Murphy](#), [Nick Seeler](#) and Louie Belpedio. Take a look at a few of the opposing goals the Wild have allowed lately, and it's been poor decisions and turnovers that have been the culprit. Make no mistake though, having Spurgeon back from injury will be a huge boost for the Wild in confidence and on the ice.

As much as I don't enjoy predictions sometimes, I'm going with the oddsmakers on this one and taking the Jets in six games.

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