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# IN SPOKEN WORDS

## The awakening of the Jets through interviews, statements, and musings

by Michael Remis

**T**he new Winning Jets—compared to their NHL brethren—own a very brief history. However, that doesn't mean there hasn't been a shortage of things said about the team. The following are some memorable quotes from key moments for the franchise since its inception.

NHL deputy commissioner Bill Daly appeared on the *Illegal Curve Hockey Show* on November 27, 2010. When asked about the state of the then-struggling Atlanta franchise, he gave this answer:

*"I would acknowledge that Atlanta historically has been a difficult sports market, and I can't exactly put my finger on it as to why that's been the case. You make good points when you point to the fact that the Atlanta Braves made the playoffs 13 consecutive years in baseball, where it is a little more difficult to make the playoffs. And they are having difficulty selling out their home playoff games, which, you would think in most markets is unheard of. So, Atlanta has proven to be a very difficult market."*

*"Again, it might be a situation where the building location isn't ideal in that market, and if it was built in a different location within the Atlanta metropolitan location, it might be drawing better. But those are all issues that are important issues, obviously the building is not moving. We're going to have to look at the long-term prospects of that franchise, and if the determination is made that it can't make it there, and can't be successful there, then something will have to be done."*

At the time the answer was intriguing, but no one could have predicted that just six months later, the NHL would be on the verge of returning to Winnipeg. Then, Stephen Brunt of the *Globe & Mail* published an article on the evening of May 19 that shocked the hockey world. Brunt appeared on the *Illegal Hockey Show* that night to reiterate what he reported.

*"I learned late today, that an agreement had been reached between True North and the Atlanta Spirit group to purchase*





**NHL deputy commissioner Bill Daly: "Atlanta has proven to be a very difficult market."**

*the franchise with the understanding that it would be moved to Winnipeg; I was told the NHL had signed off on that months ago. They told the Winnipeg group that if they could get a deal done with Atlanta Sprit, that they would be free to move the team. I was also told that preparations are being made for an announcement next Tuesday, and had that confirmed by a second source. I'm feeling very secure about the sources in both cases. Whether there is an "I" to be dotted somewhere or a "T" to be crossed, as far as I'm concerned and as far as the Globe & Mail's concerned the deal is done and there is a hockey team coming back to Winnipeg. I would be celebrating if I was in Winnipeg tonight."*

While Brunt was confident in his reporting, TSN's Darren Dreger was quick to refute Brunt's claims, and stated that the deal was in fact not completed yet.

*"Well I can tell you that the deal isn't done, that's not to say it won't get done, but as we have this conversation tonight, all three parties involved in this process—Winnipeg, Atlanta, and the National Hockey League—confirmed to TSN there is no deal."*

After a gruelling two weeks of waiting, True North Sports & Entertainment held its historical press conference on May 31 at the MTS Centre announcing the return of the franchise. Mark Chipman, chairman of TNSE, and owner of the then-unnamed Winnipeg NHL franchise:

*"Today, on behalf of my family, our partner David Thomson, and our entire organization, I am excited beyond words to announce*

*our purchase of the Atlanta Thrashers. In a sense, I guess you can say that True North, our city, and our province have received the call we have long since been waiting for."*

Greater Winnipeg residents watched on their televisions, computers, and at public locations such as the historical intersection of Portage & Main and The Forks. When NHL commissioner Gary Bettman appeared on screen, he drew light boos from the Winnipeg crowd.

*"It's nice to be back in Winnipeg after all these years. We get to be back in a place we wish we hadn't left in 1996. The best way for our fans here to celebrate the opportunity is to buy season tickets; selling 13,000 season tickets is the best message to send the NHL board of governors before they meet on June 21. This isn't going to work very well unless this building is sold out every night."*

TNSE president and CEO Jim Ludlow followed up by introducing the "Drive to 13,000." The season-ticket drive was comprehensive and well-planned—making it clear that this plan had been in the works for quite some time.

*"The 'Drive to 13,000' is this necessary season-ticket sales campaign advanced in the Manitoba marketplace by True North for the successful sale of 13,000 season tickets, prior to this board meeting. The success of the 'Drive to 13,000' will ensure the long-term viability of an NHL team in Winnipeg and will allow our fans to showcase their support by participating in a season-ticket drive that will secure NHL hockey in Manitoba for years to come."*



As the story goes, the goal of “Drive to 13,000” was accomplished in record time (17 minutes). Ludlow spoke to the media on June 4 after the completion, showing his amazement at the Winnipeg fans.

*“Suspended animation; suspended disbelief; surreal; exciting beyond words; not just for me but for our entire organization. I think when we were upstairs at 12:17 p.m. acknowledging that we hit our target, the folks downstairs were celebrating and letting out a lot of emotion at 12:17 p.m. at the same time. It took 17 minutes today to push through the balance of our inventory. This is a very powerful message that goes out throughout North America to 29 other NHL cities right now.”*

The next step for the team was to name a general manager. On June 8, Kevin Cheveldayoff was announced as the decision maker of the new franchise. During the press conference, he reiterated that True North’s goal was to make the new Winnipeg NHL franchise the class of the NHL.

*“What are the goals I have for this franchise? What are my visions? One of them that comes to mind is that I’m going to work as hard as I can with my staff. [Senior vice president and director of hockey operations Craig Heisinger] and I are going to do everything we possibly can to make sure that this is the best franchise in the National Hockey League for the players to play in. Second is that the fans of this organization, they’re going to be proud to be a fan. They’re going to be proud of the players both on and off the ice. They’re going to be proud that the players are in the community. They’re going to be proud that the players are going to give back to the community, and they’re going to be proud when we ultimately*



**Kevin Cheveldayoff:** *“The fans of this organization are going to be proud.”*

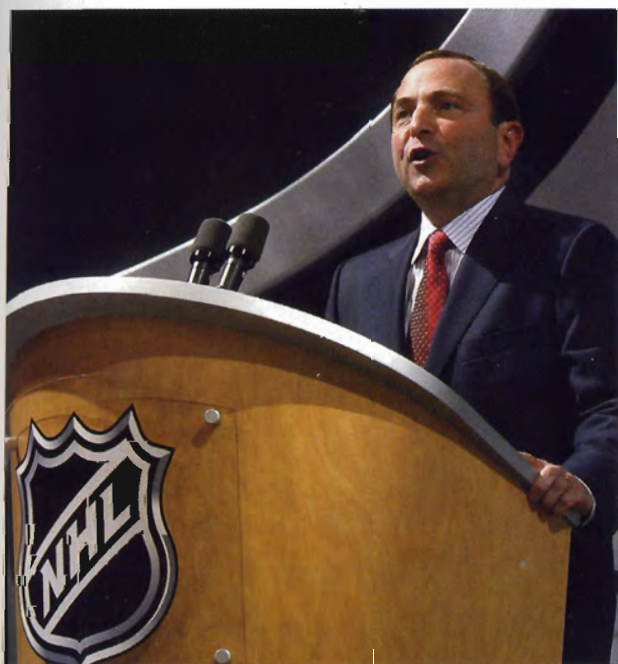
*achieve our goals. And finally, the on-ice goal is to help mold this team into one that can be a contender for many years to come. This organization has shown that it has the foundation, ownership, perseverance, and what it takes to put that effort forward to make sure we do well.”*

Cheveldayoff is joined on the management team by good friend Heisinger. The former Manitoba Moose general manager established from day one that he has nothing but support for the general manager he calls “Chevy.”

*“I just feel 100% at the end of the day that I’ve always been a Kevin Cheveldayoff fan. For a long period of time, I think this structure, the way it is laid out now, gives us the opportunity for success. I’m so behind Chevy, and I’m sure if you ask Mark the same question, I think this gives us the strongest management team and the best chance for success.”*

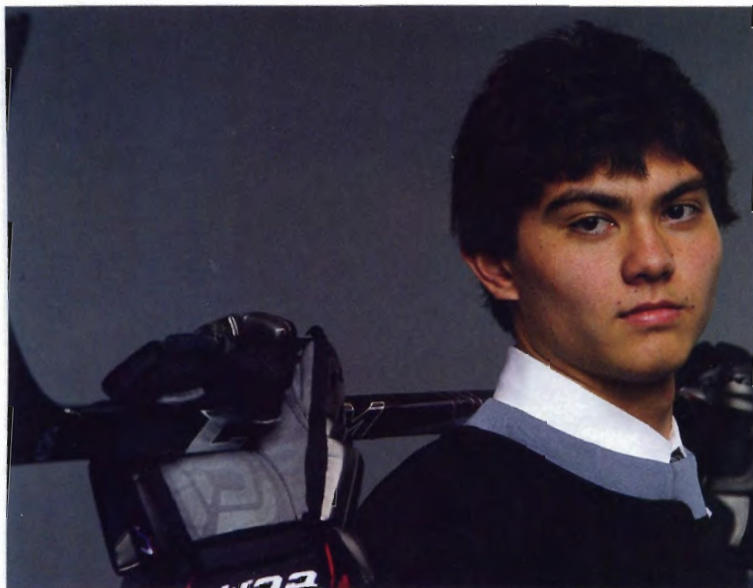
The next major step for the team was at the NHL Draft in St. Paul, MN. On the morning of June 24, the still-unnamed Winnipeg franchise held a press conference to announce the hiring of former Manitoba Moose coach Claude Noel as Winnipeg’s new head coach. Cheveldayoff, on his decision:

*“We wanted to find a guy that was going to be the right fit for our organization moving forward. It’s very exciting for me to be standing here knowing how strongly we feel that we have found that guy. That the group of young players we have moving forward, the young players that we are going to be drafting here today, are going to be coached by a guy that’s a tremendous leader, a person who spends a lot of time getting to know each individual player. Over the*



**Gary Bettman:** *“It’s nice to be back in Winnipeg after all these years... We get to be back in a place we wish we hadn’t left in 1996.”*





**Brennan Serville:** "It's awesome, I couldn't be happier."

course of our due diligence, we talked to many players who played for him and were coached by him that said the dressing room was a fun place to be, a place where they enjoyed coming to the rink. [And that] on the bench they enjoyed playing for him and that he was fair and kept everybody accountable."

In the weeks following the announcement leading up to the NHL Draft, Winnipeg had yet to announce a name, and faced tremendous pressure from the public to name them the Jets. On a June 1, 2011 episode of *Coaches Corner* on *Hockey Night in Canada*, Don Cherry, a long-time supporter of the return of an NHL franchise to Winnipeg, almost threatened Chipman:

"Are you going to name them the Jets, or what?"

The official announcement of the team's name came before the franchise was to make their first draft pick. Chipman went up to the podium and nonchalantly announced the name of the team.

"It's now my pleasure to introduce our executive vice president and general manager, who will make our first pick on behalf of the Winnipeg Jets."

Chipman later said that he was nervous standing at the podium in front of the sold-out Xcel Energy Centre and the thousands of fans watching on TV.

"Knowing how important the name is to so many people, it's humbling to have been able to utter those words."

Following the announcement of the name, the crowd at Xcel erupted, as did the fans back home in Winnipeg watching the draft live at the MTS Centre. Speaking to the media after the draft, Chipman was impressed with the fan reaction to the name.

"[Winnipeg Jets director of corporate communications and hockey operations Scott Brown]s been telling me people are pretty

amped up at the MTS Centre; it's really cool that fans drove down here to be a part of this thing."

While it was rumoured that the franchise wanted to go in a new direction, in the end, Chipman stated that naming the team the Winnipeg Jets was the right choice to make.

"We considered a lot of names; we felt strongly about Manitoba to be honest with you, [but] in the end, 'Winnipeg Jets' has so much equity in it; it just seemed right to take it forward in its original form. I talked to family, I talked to close friends, and guys who I grew up playing hockey with, trying to get an authentic feel about what the right thing to do would be. In the end, it kept coming back to that name."

Not quite lost in the excitement of the new name was Jets first-round draft pick Mark Scheifele, of the Barrie Colts. He had heard a few stories about Winnipeg from his head coach in Barrie, former Jet and Hall of Famer Dale Hawerchuk.

"He always told me about the big Queen Elizabeth they used to have, and how it's really cold. So he was actually kidding around. He said if you get drafted by Winnipeg, they're going to bring a parka instead of a jersey."

All jokes aside, Scheifele knew what the rest of Winnipeg already knew, that he was headed to a world-class organization.

"But I hear it's a great organization. [Hawerchuk] loved it there. He had a great time. He said it was an unbelievable organization to play for, so I'm very excited."



**Mark Scheifele:** "One guy told me back at the arena in Winnipeg they were going bonkers."



Everyone involved in the draft couldn't help but notice the exuberant Winnipeg fans who made the trip down to support the team. Scheifele and fellow draft pick Brennan Serville were proud to be selected by an organization with such great fans.

Scheifele:

*"It was definitely cool to have that many fans here and hear them screaming. The one guy told me back at the arena in Winnipeg they were going bonkers. So it's great to have a great fan base, especially here [in] Minnesota."*

Serville, drafted in the third round:

*"It's awesome, I couldn't be happier. It seems like there were more Jets fans than Minnesota fans."*

Jet defenceman and Minnesota product Dustin Byfuglien spoke to the media, sharing his excitement about the move.

*"It should be good; everybody should be excited about it. I know the fans up there are. We're going to be focused playing in front of a full crowd again. It's going to be fun; it's exciting anytime you have a full barn behind you, it's just like having another player on the ice."*

It was a relatively quiet start in the free-agency market for the new franchise. On July 4, Winnipeg made its first big

signing, inking restricted free agent and captain Andrew Ladd to a five-year contract. Ladd:

*"They made me feel welcomed, and they showed me how they were going to run things, and when [we] walked into the building, everyone who worked there was raring to go, everything was first class. For me, that's a big part of having a successful organization."*

Ladd spoke about the passion of the fans and compared Winnipeg to other small-market cities such as Buffalo.

*"I knew all along it would be exciting place to play. I played there for the World Juniors, and I knew the atmosphere and what fans were like—passionate people, you know, to have that in your head right away. I'm sure [NHL players] do [have a misconception about Winnipeg]. I think it falls along the same lines as Buffalo, in terms of it maybe gets a bad rap, but when guys play there and have the opportunity to play in Winnipeg, they're going to grow to love it and make it home. The people that are there are a big part of it, down to earth and real friendly, especially when you have guys with families coming along."*

Winnipeg signed players with whom they were familiar, such as former Manitoba Moose and Canuck, Tanner Glass. In a tragic off-season story, the newly signed Rick Rypien—who felt that he needed to respond to the loyalty showed to



Andrew Ladd: *"[The organization] made me feel welcomed."*



him by TSNE in joining Winnipeg's roster—passed away on August 15. His comments following his signing showed the kind of character that Winnipeg will miss.

*"It was a no-brainer that they wanted me there; it came down to the character that those guys have, how much they believe in me, the opportunity they've given me, and how much they've stuck by me. I wanted to be loyal back to them."*

On July 18, the Jets signed the second of their three restricted free agents, Blake Wheeler:

*"I think you want to play in front of fans, there's no question about that. There's really nothing better than knowing every night [that] you're going to have a good support system in front of you. That they're going to be cheering you on through the good times and the bad. Certainly that's one of the exciting things when we were moved to Winnipeg, you knew what you were going to get."*

*"We knew the fans up there were excited to have us; they showed that by selling out the season tickets in just a few minutes. That there solidifies it was probably the right move to go to Winnipeg. It's too bad it didn't work out in Atlanta, but we're really excited about the new opportunity for us."*

On July 22—after an image of a t-shirt was leaked onto the internet—Chipman held a press conference at the MTS Iceplex—the future practice facility of the Jets—presenting the logo for the new team.

*"Several weeks ago after we concluded the purchase of the Atlanta Thrashers, we began the process of developing the new brand, look, and feel of the Winnipeg Jets. Our desire was to authenticate the name and make it as meaningful as we possibly could."*



*Eric Fehr: "I've played a lot of years in Manitoba; it's going to be exciting coming home and playing in front of our fans."*



**RIP Rick Rypien, 1984–2011.**

*In my view, the best way to do that was to draw a connection to the rich history that our city has enjoyed with the Air Force, particularly through 17 Wing. The best way beyond that we felt was to link ourselves to the iconic roundel that it's referred to that you'd see on the fuselage on practically every Canadian Air Force airplane."*

That day, the Jets Gear store at the MTS Centre was lined up around the corner, as fans itched to get their hands on the new merchandise. The store sold \$200,000 of merchandise within 24 hours. Newly-acquired forward and Manitoban Eric Fehr signed autographs at the store the next day and expressed his enthusiasm about the logo and playing in front of the hometown crowd.

*"It's going to be great, I have a lot of friends and family here. I've played a lot of years in Manitoba; it's going to be exciting coming home and playing in front of our fans. It's definitely what we expected, the fans are very passionate, and I've seen it throughout the years, and it will get stronger with an NHL team in the city. A lot of guys have played here in the American League or different times; I think they know what to expect from this city. I know they will enjoy it once they get here, and hopefully we'll have a lot of fun this year. I've always wanted to be a Winnipeg Jet. Growing up, I followed the Winnipeg Jets. It's really hard to believe there's a team back here and I can be a part of it this year."*

In their short history, the Jets have had many memorable moments, but we can only expect more of these to come during the 2011–12 season. Perhaps further excitement will come with the team's first playoff appearance? **MSP**

Michael Remis is the radio and online media producer for *The Illegal Curve Hockey Show* and a part-time contributor for *IllegalCurve.com*. Remis was heavily involved in the creation of the website and brought *The Illegal Curve Radio Show* to *ustream.tv* in the spring of 2010.