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Vincent Massey's Owen Weekes is No. 1 in the high school varsity boys top 10 coaches' poll.

Massey star considered Manitoba's top varsity boys volleyball player

## WEEKES AS STRONG AS THEY COME

MIKE SAWATZKY

THREE years ago, Owen Weekes had a reputation as a pretty good baseball and basketball player, with a sideline interest on the volleyball court.

Fast-forward to 2023 and the entire trajectory of his athletic career has changed.

Baseball and hoops are fun pursuits but volleyball rules his world now — and it's not difficult to understand why.

The 6-6 right side from Vincent Massey Collegiate is at the top of his class in 2023, honoured as the province's No. 1 varsity boys player in the *Free Press* top-10 coaches' poll while leading the 46-0 Trojans to the top of the provincial AAAA polls.

Massey, chasing its first provincial AAAA varsity boys volleyball title in school history, has the top-three players in the FP poll and four of the top 10. The Trojans have a provincial quarter-final matchup Saturday afternoon and it will be the 17-year-old Weekes, currently being courted by multiple U Sports programs, setting the tone.

It's the kind of dominance unforeseen when he was in Grade 10.

"If we would've ranked the top-20 (junior varsity) kids, I don't even think he would have been (on the list)," says Massey head coach Marshall Jones, who estimates Weekes averaged 15 kills per best-of-five match while hitting at a 60 per cent efficiency rate. "He played middle when he was in junior varsity and he was going through a growth spurt.

"He's probably pushing 6-7 now and he was probably only 6-1 or 6-2 in Grade 10... The two things that come to mind for me is just his length — his arms and his legs are really long — and then when you combine that with his ability to move, for a big kid he's pretty agile, that just allows him to be so dynamic.

"On top of that, he's just got something in him that wants to be good."

Weekes, who hopes to play for the national team one day, sees the benefits of being a multi-sport athlete.

"I think one thing that's helped me from baseball to volleyball is the mental piece, because baseball is a really mental sport," says Weekes, who pitched and played first base for Winnipeg South AAA. "The best players succeed three out of 10 times... I can make an error in the field playing first base and then have to sit with that for the next hour and a half, or strike out and have to go to sleep that night. In volleyball, making one, two, even three or four mistakes in a row, it's like, 'I've been here before.'"

While Weekes may have the body type and

temperament suited for volleyball, basketball remains a sport deeply embedded in his family. His dad, Mike Weekes, was an accomplished player for the University of Manitoba Bisons in the 1990s, while his older sister, Olivia Weekes, is a Massey alum in her third season playing hoops for the UBC Thunderbirds.

Owen is concentrating on volleyball at the moment but he's contemplating whether to finish Grade 12 playing basketball for Massey.

Winning a provincial volleyball title is what matters most and performing at the highest level is paramount.

"We're flowing better, things are clicking more," says Owen. "Now that we've worked on things we just know that if we play our game, we're going to be good. So, kind of keeping that mindset has been a big push these last couple of weeks."

The Trojans are an accomplished group with Weekes and fellow Grade 12s Keon Torz, a setter, middles Morgan Eby and Shay McKim, libero Mitchell Strilchuk and left side Everett Smith. Jones has pushed Weekes and the other veterans to be better.

"When you get to the level he's at, you see the improvements at a slower trajectory than where he went last year, from pretty raw to pretty solid by the end of the year," says Jones. "But he's benefited for sure by being in a super competitive training environment all the time, because of this group. They've grown up together,

playing JV together, then high school, then club (volleyball) together and then most of them making the provincial team...

"Owen's got goals for U Sport but then he's smart enough to know he's got goals for after that, too. He'd like to play at the highest level he can possibly play at."

Trojans assistant coach Ken Krahn, a former national team member himself, sees an international future for Weekes.

"He jumps well, hits well, he's really smart and usually doesn't make many errors," says Krahn. "He needs a more consistent serve and maybe change his arm swing a little to contact the ball at a higher point... but Owen's got that potential, I think, where he's gonna be a special player."

Since the beginning of the season, Weekes figures he's added some nuance to his game — becoming a better passer, refining his booming jump spin serve and not going for power shots on every attack.

"I've definitely learned," he says. "Once guys get better and older, I can't just swing down and try to be an ego hitter, trying to bounce every ball. I definitely get blocked (sometimes) but I'm trying to just become smarter."

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● COMPLETE TOP-10 LIST ON D2

## DeMelo flies under the radar

KEN WIEBE

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. — Given the Movember moustache that makes him resemble late Queen lead singer Freddie Mercury, it's hard for Dylan DeMelo to fly under the radar these days.

When it comes to his Winnipeg Jets, DeMelo doesn't play the role of the frontman basking in the spotlight, though that doesn't mean his contributions aren't valued by those around him.

"I think he's a really underrated player in the league," Jets defenceman Josh Morrissey said in a recent interview. Morrissey has frequently been paired with DeMelo on the blue line

Solid blue-liner happy to ply his trade in supporting role

since his arrival in a 2020 trade with the Ottawa Senators.

"(With) skill, everyone likes to think of it as toe drags and flashy moves and stuff like that, but for me there are so many different elements. His ability to make a 10-foot pass under pressure on a breakout play, to have a good stick, to have a good gap, those are skills as well.

"I know he's really worked hard on his game over the last two years with the puck. You see some of the little passes he's made off the (blue) line, wrist shots at the right time, getting it

through."

One of those shots got through just over five minutes into Wednesday's 3-2 overtime win over Tampa Bay and as the rebound was kicked out by Lightning goalie Jonas Johansson, Morrissey was quick to pounce on it and bury it for his third goal of the season.

This was another example of the two players being in sync and reading off one another.

● DeMELO, CONTINUED ON D2  
● MORE HOCKEY ON D2



JOHN WOODS / THE CANADIAN PRESS FILES

Jets defenceman Dylan DeMelo makes sure Buffalo Sabres forward JJ Peterka doesn't get too comfortable in front of goalie Connor Hellebuyck.

Ste. Anne goalie undefeated between pipes for top-ranked Buckeyes

# Kirk perfect at OSU

MIKE SAWATZKY  
STICKWORK



RAYGAN Kirk and the Ohio State Buckeyes are in a familiar spot. The Buckeyes, who have played in the last two national championship games (winning once), are back on top of the NCAA Division I women's hockey polls after Kirk's 19-save shutout victory over the previously unbeaten Wisconsin Badgers last weekend.

The 3-0 win, which earned her Western Collegiate Hockey Association goaltender of the week honours, came against a Wisconsin team that entered the weekend No. 1 in the polls while averaging more than six goals per game.

The 22-year-old, a fifth-year senior from Ste. Anne, Man., is enjoying the best statistical season of her NCAA career. So far, she's 6-0-0 with a .936 save percentage with a 1.39 goals-against average while sharing the crease with fourth-year senior Amanda Thiele.

The Buckeyes host the sixth-ranked St. Lawrence Saints today and Saturday. Kirk and Thiele are expected to alternate starts as they have previously this season.

"The mindset is always to get that win, especially with teams out east, just to prove that in the WCHA we've got the upper hand but also when you're ranked No. 1 now, like we are, (head coach Nadine Muzerall) says there's not a lot of room at the top of the mountain and everybody's trying to try to push you off. So, we just have to perform every weekend," said Kirk, by phone from Columbus, Ohio, earlier this week.

Thiele, who was the club's No. 1 goaltender for the second half of the 2022-23 season and lost 1-0 to Wisconsin in last spring's championship game, is currently 5-1-0 with a .899 save percentage and 1.99 average.

"You want to get the No. 1 spot and be playing every weekend but I think as a team having two goalies that win both games... that's huge and it



JAY LAPRETE / OHIO STATE ATHLETICS PHOTO

Goaltender Raygan Kirk has a 6-0-0 record and a 1.39 goals-against average heading into this weekend's action.

keeps you fresh as well," said Kirk. "That's just kind of how we've been rolling for the past three years. If that's what works, that's what works. And then once it goes closer to play-offs and after Christmas, that's kind of where you have your No. 1 and you roll with them, whoever's kind of hot in the moment and has earned their spot. But it's been working great and we're both really supportive of each other."

Playing time at OSU has been at a premium for Kirk, who was the undisputed No. 1 netminder at Robert Morris University to begin her NCAA career.

She transferred to the talent-laden Buckeyes when RMU cut its women's hockey program following the 2020-21 season.

"At RMU it was a different environment and it's a different goalie squad and team," said Kirk. "So, you just have to adapt. It doesn't change my preparation and plan throughout the week. Your mindset is always hoping to earn that first game on Friday and if not, Saturday. I just try and work my hardest to take care of the things I can control like attitude and work ethic in practice. And we've been having a really great start so far."

Despite a large turnover due to graduation and the addition of four freshmen and six transfers, including forward Hannah Bilka and blue-liner Cayla Barnes, the Buckeyes haven't skipped a beat.

Kirk can't help but speculate about her future in the game with Professional Women's Hockey League train-

ing camps currently underway and the league's inaugural season slated to begin in January.

"I'm definitely trying to focus on this year and the mindset is always on (playing) Friday and even the national championship, that's so far away, but sure it's been back my head with the (new) pro league," said Kirk.

"I'm so excited for the girls that I know that graduated here and are going there and just seeing how that all develops. It's so new for them and I'm hoping after this year things will be a little more settled. It's very different season because they're starting in January... it's definitely my goal to get drafted and then if not, just work it out from there."

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DeMELO • FROM D1

"He just gets rewarded for making good hockey plays and there are a lot of unnoticed skills that go into that," said Morrissey. "I've always really admired a partner who is consistent and it makes my job so much easier, because I know where he's going to be. I know what he's thinking with the puck. He's very good defensively, he has a great stick, he communicates a lot. Our styles mesh well."

"I absolutely love playing with him and hopefully we can play together for a long time."

DeMelo would like nothing more, though there is the important matter of needing a new contract before he can become an unrestricted free agent on July 1.

"I had some past experience in Ottawa, which was good to go through and (learn) how to deal with it," said DeMelo, who was a pending UFA when the trade with the Senators was completed with the Jets. "I feel like I'm better equipped (this time). In Ottawa, it did eat at me a little bit because you want to know where you stand. You're waiting for the shoe to fall or the domino to fall. "Here and now, obviously, it's in the back of your mind. I have a family, my

wife and my son to worry about. We love it in Winnipeg and really enjoy our neighbourhood. The team, the fit, everything has been off the charts for me."

That's why DeMelo was so encouraged to see the Jets lock up centre Mark Scheifele and goalie Connor Hellebuyck on long-term extensions prior to this season.

With the Jets off to a solid start, battling for top spot in the Central Division with the Dallas Stars and Colorado Avalanche, the appeal to stick around has only grown.

"The best thing I can do is take care of what I need to do to help us win every night and that's really my singular focus," said DeMelo. "I'm not naive, I know the pecking order and I knew (Hellebuyck and Scheifele) were obviously first on the list. To see them re-sign here was an awesome thing to see. Two guys that were drafted and developed, to stay here and be lifers, that's an amazing thing."

The Jets (11-5-2), winners of four consecutive games and seven of their last eight, took Thursday off and continue this three-game road trip tonight against Paul Maurice and the Florida Panthers (12-6-1).

Morrissey's ascent to a Norris Trophy candidate last season and continuing into this one means the opposition is often keying in on him, which also opens up some space for DeMelo. Known more for his ability to defend, DeMelo made a concerted effort to increase his production — and the numbers back that up.

He managed to chip in a career-high six goals, 21 assists for 27 points in 75 games last season, and currently has a goal and seven helpers this year, second among Jets blue-liners behind only Morrissey (18 points in 18 games).

"I've always been a guy that has kind of flown under the radar, a guy that makes subtle plays that helps the team win," said DeMelo. "I feel I've always had offence in my game, maybe it was a little untapped. I came into the league and I was playing 13 minutes a night in San Jose and trying not to make a mistake to stay in the lineup. I grew some of that game in Ottawa and then here, I just kind of took it to another level."

Part of that relates to experience, the other lending to opportunity, as he's grown into a guy who plays on the top pairing and plays a vital role on

the penalty kill, averaging 21:30 of ice time per night.

"As you get older, you understand the league a little bit more, (knowing) when to jump (up on the rush)," said DeMelo. "I've also grown into my body a bit more. My workouts are better and I'm stronger at 30 than I was at 24. Faster and all of that stuff."

"I also watch a ton of video of my own shifts and (other) guys on our team. When I'm at the rink or away from the rink, I'm thinking about how to improve."

Fellow Jets D-man Brenden Dillon watched DeMelo break into the NHL when they were teammates with the San Jose Sharks and has seen the growth in his game.

"You root for guys like (DeMelo) that I have seen work on his game from Day 1," said Dillon. "He's really blossomed into a player here where he understands his role. He's kind of like Robin to Batman. He doesn't mind maybe not getting as much notoriety. "He's someone who has earned everything that he's got."

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**TONIGHT:**  
**JETS @ PANTHERS**  
AMERANT BANK ARENA, 7 p.m.  
TV: TSN3  
Radio: CJOB 680



WINNIPEG JETS

- 37 Connor Hellebuyck G
- 39 Laurent Brossoit G
- 2 Dylan DeMelo D
- 4 Neal Pionk D
- 5 Brenden Dillon D
- 7 Vladislav Namestnikov C
- 9 Alex Lafallo C
- 17 Adam Lowry C
- 19 David Gustafsson C
- 21 Dominic Toninato C
- 22 Mason Appleton LW
- 27 Nikolaj Ehlers LW
- 36 Morgan Barron LW
- 44 Josh Morrissey D
- 54 Dylan Samberg D
- 55 Mark Scheifele C
- 62 Nino Niederreiter RW
- 64 Logan Stanley D
- 71 Axel Jonsson-Fjallby LW
- 81 Kyle Connor LW
- 88 Nate Schmidt D
- 91 Cole Perfetti C

**Interim head coach:** Scott Arniel  
**Assistant coaches:** Brad Lauer, Marty Johnston  
**Goalie coach:** Wade Flaherty

FLORIDA PANTHERS

- 41 Anthony Stolarz G
- 72 Sergei Bobrovsky G
- 5 Aaron Ekblad D
- 7 Dmitry Kulikov D
- 9 Sam Bennett C
- 12 Jonah Gadjovich LW
- 13 Sam Reinhart C
- 15 Anton Lundell C
- 16 Aleksander Barkov C
- 17 Evan Rodrigues C
- 18 Steven Lorentz C
- 19 Matthew Tkachuk LW
- 21 Nick Cousins C
- 23 Carter Verhaeghe C
- 27 Eetu Luostarinen C
- 28 Josh Mahura D
- 42 Gustav Forsling D
- 62 Brandon Montour D
- 77 Niko Mikkola D
- 82 Kevin Stenlund C
- 91 Oliver Ekman-Larsson D
- 94 Ryan Lomberg LW

**Head coach:** Paul Maurice  
**Assistant coaches:** Jamie Kompon, Sylvain Lefebvre, Tuomo Ruutu, Myles Fee  
**Goalie coach:** Robb Tallas

(Lineups subject to change)



Dmitry Kulikov

**Up next:**  
**JETS @ PREDATORS**

Sunday, 7 p.m.  
TV: TSN3  
Radio: CJOB 680

VARSITY BOYS VOLLEYBALL • FROM D1

## The Free Press's Varsity Boys Volleyball Top 10

This list was compiled with voting from a panel of high school coaches



- 1. Owen Weekes, Vincent Massey (Winnipeg), Grade 12, 6-6, right side:** Excels in the front and back row. Great blocker and vocal leader. Has the ability to attack from anywhere.
- 2. Keon Torz, Vincent Massey (Winnipeg), Grade 12, 6-1, setter:** runs a dynamic offence and makes the game look easy.
- 3. Everett Smith, Vincent Massey (Winnipeg), Grade 12, 6-4, left side:** Dynamic attacker with a wide range of shots. Terrific defender and receiver.
- 4. Maxime Vermette, Collège régional Gabrielle-Roy, Grade 12, 6-2, setter:** Super server with pace and location. Great athlete who runs a smart offence.
- 5. Augustine Okose, Glenlawn, Grade 11, 6-3, left side:** Dynamic attacker with a great vertical and loads of potential.
- 6. Wizdom Smith, Dakota, Grade 12, 6-7, right side:** A dynamic attacker from DCI. Also a strong blocker and great server.
- 7. Levi Unger, Kelvin, Grade 12, 6-2, left side:** Terrific leader who's a consistent and creative offensive player.
- 8. Jack Kisil, River East, Grade 12, 6-3, left side:** clutch hitter who leads by example.
- 9. Matthew Brown, River East, Grade 11, 6-3, setter:** Runs a great offence and a very hard worker.
- 10. Mitchell Strilchuk, Vincent Massey (Winnipeg), Grade 12, Grade 12, 5-9, libero:** A strong leader with an incredible ability to control the defensive side of the game.

**Honourable mentions:** Max Anderson (Dakota Collegiate); Levi Johnston (Transcona Collegiate); Nico Nadeau (Glenlawn Collegiate); Jhet Bowen (Dakota Collegiate)