



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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THE NEWS & OBSERVER

Turning point for Canes? 'We were so bad I almost dressed and got out there'

By Chip Alexander

It came after the Carolina Hurricanes had been beaten 4-1 by the Ottawa Senators at PNC Arena, not long after Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour had apologized in the locker room to newcomer Nino Niederreiter.

Brind'Amour strode quickly in for his postgame press conference, saying, "We were so bad I almost dressed and got out there."

Brind'Amour is 48. That night, on Jan. 18, he might have been an upgrade on a team that was outquicked and outplayed, falling to 22-20-5 for the season and nine points out of playoff position in the Eastern Conference.

"I didn't know what I was watching," Brind'Amour said that night, later adding the need to "pick up the pieces" and get back to work.

Looking back now, with the Canes set to appear in the Stanley Cup playoffs, it can be said that was a turning point in the season, perhaps the turning point -- that night, that game, a badly disappointed Brind'Amour saying what he did.

Brind'Amour didn't mention any names. He even said the effort was there from his team, but countered it by saying, "We didn't play the way we're supposed to."

The Canes had three games left before the All-Star Game and bye-week break, all on the road. After the break would be two home games, then five more on the road -- in all, eight of 10 away in arguably the make-or-break stretch of the season.

The response? The Canes beat Edmonton 7-4 and Vancouver 5-2 on the road, sandwiched around an overtime loss to Calgary. Once back from the break, they beat the Vegas Golden Knights 5-2 at PNC Arena, had another close loss to the Flames, then went 4-1-0 on the road trip. It began with a 4-0 win over the Pittsburgh Penguins and included a 3-0 shutout of the New York Rangers that ended a 16-game losing streak at Madison Square Garden and a 4-1 win at Ottawa.

The 10-game record: 7-2-1. That's picking up the pieces and putting everything in place.

After the loss to the Senators, the Canes were 24-9-2 in their final 35 games, in keeping with Brind'Amour's directive to forget about the "big picture" -- we're how many points behind? -- for a couple of months, get back to playing their game and claw their way back into the playoff mix.

"I can't tell you the change," Brind'Amour said Monday. "I think confidence was a big deal with it. The puck started

going in and our guys, you could just see they had a little more swagger. That had a lot to do with it."

Claw back they did and much went into it. The Niederreiter trade on Jan. 17 was huge, bringing in a scoring winger from the Minnesota Wild who immediately produced. The goalies, Petr Mrazek and Curtis McElhinney, gave the Canes quality starts and Mrazek was at his fiery best down the stretch, winning 11 of his last 13 games.

"To me they're 1A and 1B, whatever you want to call it," Brind'Amour said. "They've been huge parts in what we're trying to accomplish."

Brind'Amour, asked about the season turnaround, will always say the Canes played their best hockey in the first 25 games, but it wasn't reflected in their record. That began to change in early January, with a five-game win streak. But after winning seven of eight, seemingly headed in the right direction, the Canes were hammered 6-2 by the Rangers in the Jan. 15 game at the Garden.

Then, the Ottawa debacle at home. Brind'Amour walked into that press conference, "It was so bad ..."

Brind'Amour made his point, delivered the message. Everyone did their part. Big picture: the Canes are in the playoffs.

Five factors that triggered the Canes' turnaround

Being lucky, being good

Canes general manager Don Waddell was said to have his "lucky" coin in his pocket when the NHL Draft Lottery was held April 28 in Toronto. Lucky or not, the Canes were the big winners, moving from the 11th slot in the first round to No. 2. With the Buffalo Sabres set to pick Swedish defenseman Rasmus Dahlin with the No. 1 pick, the Canes in effect had their top choice: Russian power forward Andrei Svechnikov.

In the lineup at 18, Svechnikov had his ups and downs but scored 20 goals, all at even strength, in his rookie season. Some lottery luck helped set the tone for a special season.

Getting his chance

Rod Brind'Amour was a great player and Stanley Cup winner for the Canes, then served seven years as an assistant coach, but that doesn't always translate into being a good head coach. But when Bill Peters left for Calgary, Brind'Amour publicly stated he wanted the job, saying, "Now's the time."

Owner Tom Dundon made the move, naming Brind'Amour head coach on May 8, saying, "I think Roddy can get more out of people than they may have known they had." The



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Canes, 36-35-11 last season, are 46-29-7 heading into the playoffs. Now was the time.

Only one choice for the one "C"

With preseason training camp about to begin, Brind'Amour named Justin Williams the team captain on Sept. 13. "Big surprise, right?" he said of his friend and teammate on the 2006 Cup champions.

Williams has embraced the new role, being a go-to guy in the locker room but also a leader on the ice, scoring some of the biggest goals of the season. To wit: his late goal against Pittsburgh on March 19 led to a shootout win and two critical points for the Canes.

Wired for success

Goalie Scott Darling didn't initially believe his hamstring injury was serious, saying he would quickly be back in the lineup. But with the regular season about to begin and down a goalie, the Canes turned to the waiver wire on Oct. 2 and

claimed goalie Curtis McElhinney from the Toronto Maple Leafs.

McElhinney started three of the first five games, all wins. He played a career-high 33 games and won 20, another career best. And the Leafs' Kyle Dubas wasn't the only general manager who helped the Canes.

The steal of the season

It's still hard making sense of the Jan. 17 trade, player for player, that brought Niederreiter to the Canes for center Victor Rask. Minnesota general manager Paul Fenton had his reasons. Waddell wasn't charged with larceny but could have been, certainly in hockey terms.

The Canes needed more scoring. Nino gave them five goals in his first five games and has been that guy. A fixture on the top line and power play, Niederreiter has 14 goals and 16 assists in 36 games with Carolina.

THE ATHLETIC

LeBrun: Breaking down and predicting the Eastern Conference matchups, with the help of two head coaches

By Pierre LeBrun

Thanks to two NHL head coaches (of non-playoff teams) for playing along with me and sharing their thoughts of the first-round matchups in the East.

They spoke on the condition of anonymity, which is key in getting a more honest assessment.

Here are their thoughts, followed by my picks for each series. The Western Conference predictions come Tuesday.

Lightning vs. Blue Jackets

The Blue Jackets should have contended for the Metropolitan Division title this season. This is no wild-card team. Not on paper, anyway. But the No. 8 seed they are.

Nice prize for a Lightning team that won 62 games this season.

"One of the first things that struck me was that you're Tampa, you just tied the record with the Detroit Red Wings, and now you got to play Columbus," head coach No. 1 said. "The difference between Columbus or Washington is nothing. I mean, it's miniscule. And I think Tampa is the deepest team in the league without a shadow of a doubt. They're the only team in the league — and to me the (Ryan) McDonagh trade did this — they've got great D, great forwards and a great goalie. They're the only team that can say they've got strength everywhere. That's why they won that many games."

But, the head coach continued, Columbus is mighty tough.

"Columbus is really good. They're not as good (as Tampa) by any stretch but they're really good. The interesting thing for me will be whether (Sergei) Bobrovsky can be a star. And if he can be a star, they have a chance. They can give them a real scare."

Head coach No. 2 also predicted a tougher than expected series despite Tampa's historical season.

"I think it's going to be a tight battle," he said. "I think Columbus has really meshed as of late. The fact that they had to win their way in, you look at that group, they went all-in at the deadline but it wasn't smooth sailing. I just think the fact they had to win their way in and played really well down he stretch, I think that's really good for them and their confidence. Now that they're in, I think the players are going to be all-in, whether that's Duchene, Panarin, Bobrovsky — guys who may not be coming back. I see them having that all-in mentality. They're a little bit of a juggernaut that way, maybe peaking and gelling at the right time. That's important."

Head coach No. 1 says the key for Columbus is to play a slightly different game than the Blue Jackets would naturally desire.

"To me, the thing that hurts Columbus little bit is that they play a North game where they want to really transition fast," he said. "Now, they're good down low in the O-zone, especially that (Josh) Anderson line. But if you want to play a North game now you're going up and down the sheet with Tampa and you'll get crushed. Any team doing that will just



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get crushed by Tampa. You can't do that. The only way you're beating them is you have to make them defend. They do give you chances for sure if you make them defend. If Columbus can grind them, that will help them a lot."

Head coach No. 2 said Columbus' physicality will be key.

"Tampa can play any way you want. But Columbus has big, physical guys who can grind you," he said. "They're excellent in the offensive zone hanging onto the puck. That could give Tampa some problems. ... If Columbus is going to have an opportunity to win it, their bigger, heavier, stronger guys have to play that style; relentless forecheck, heavy on pucks below the goal line. I think they're one of the better teams in terms of getting to the net front, being hard to play against."

He added: "There has to be physicality on guys like Kucherov, Johnson and Point."

Neither coach would go all the way and pick the upset. But they both clearly believed Tampa will have its hands full in Columbus.

"Columbus has the potential to make a deep run. That's why I think this could be a tough series," said coach No. 2.

"Now that they're in, it changes so much. Had they not got in, it would have been a disaster. Now I feel like they're playing with house money."

My pick: Any other team in the East and I might have picked Columbus. The Jackets are deep, yes, but what really matters here is that this is a group — at least the guys that have been there a while — that have taken a few kicks at the can. They're not a first-year playoff team. They've had a few chances. That experience matters. But Tampa? This Lightning team is as deep as any club we've seen in the salary cap era.

They'll have to sweat a bit. But they will prevail.

Bolts in 6.

Capitals vs. Hurricanes

A Jackets-Caps rematch would have been so much more enticing in my mind.

The Caps would never admit this publicly nor even off the record, hockey teams are superstitious that way, but I guarantee you deep down they're relieved to get Carolina instead.

Hey, the Canes were dominant in the second half of the season and fully deserved to make their first playoff entry in a decade.

But this smells of a team happy to get there. As opposed to a team that truly believes it can go deep.

"I think in the end, Washington just have too much talent for Carolina," said head coach No. 1. "I know Carolina has been great the whole second half but I can easily see them hit a little valley here. (Petr) Mrazek has been great, but if you look at his history, he's a guy that has 2-3 months of greatness but I don't think he's proven he can keep it going for a long period of time. Now, if he has to be great every night, it'll be really hard."

Head coach No. 2 also sees Washington prevailing.

"I think the heaviness and the size of Washington is going to give Carolina some problems," he said. "I think Carolina plays with a lot of energy, a great work ethic. But I think you're stepping into the playoffs for the first time in a long time with a young team going against the team that I think is the heaviest team in the Eastern Conference. I think they play an honest game. They play the right way. They're big, they're heavy, they're strong, they're physical. I think it's going to be a learning experience for a lot of those guys in Carolina in their first playoff series."

While both of these coaches would see a scenario where Columbus potential surprised Tampa, even though they both didn't go that far, neither here mustered up any feeling that the Canes would upset Washington.

My pick: The Michal Kempny season-ending injury and its impact on how the Caps' D lines up worries me for Washington. But not in the first round. Caps in 5.

Bruins vs. Maple Leafs

I love the reaction of head coach No. 2 when I started to bring up Leafs and Bruins.

"Oh boy," he said with great enthusiasm.

You get the sense he'll be pulling out the bag of popcorn for this one.

"I think Toronto has a heck of a team, I think there's going to be a tonne of pressure on them," said head coach No. 2. "I don't want to say dysfunctional but they're not as organized as they need to be ... I think when you look at Boston, I think to me Boston and Washington are your two teams in the East that have size, depth, heavy and hard, they have star power than can score. That's a Toronto team with a lot of pieces but ... I just think that the honest game that Boston plays and the depth that they have and how they're structured, I think it will be a very competitive series but I think at the end, very similar to Washington's qualities, Boston has guys that have been there and won. The Bruins can play any way. They can score, they can check very well, they're well-structured, I just think they play playoff-winning hockey."

Head coach No. 1 didn't pull punches when asked about Toronto's defensive play.

"It's amazing how many goals they give up right now," he said. "I think they've been bad defensively for a while and the goalie was masking it. But when the goalie isn't playing as well, they give up way too many goals."

The question he asked out loud is whether Toronto's depth and talent up front can control the puck enough to make Boston defend most of the series.

"If their forwards have the puck, they're great. If they got to defend, they're no good," he said. "Can they get Boston on their heels? I honestly don't think so. I think there's too much of Boston's game that is sound defensively, they won't get themselves on their heels, and if Toronto can't get Boston on their heels, they're going to have to defend them and I think they're just not good enough defensively."



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There is one way, the coach said, the Leafs can beat the Bruins and it's about the most old-fashioned way that exists.

"Unless Anderson is that much better than Rask — which could happen — I don't think Toronto can beat Boston," he said.

My pick: I'm surprised neither coach brought up the fact the Leafs now have John Tavares which is a significant difference from a year ago in terms of matchup scenarios. Patrice Bergeron can't match up against both Auston Matthews and Tavares/Mitch Marner. Bruins head coach Bruce Cassidy, I would imagine, will put Bergeron on one of those lines and veteran defenceman Zdeno Chara on the other. But it's a new edge the Leafs didn't have a year ago no matter how you shake it. For that reason alone I believe the Leafs have a better chance than most people think. But the defensive issues are worrisome from a Toronto perspective. The Leafs haven't been a tight team in terms of their defensive game in two months at least. The Bruins should not only scare the Leafs but every team in the league. They had massive injuries this season at different points and never slowed down. They missed their top offensive talent for a month in David Pastrnak and decided to win almost every game he missed. They have tremendous depth and can win games in different ways.

I think Tavares and Matthews each have big performances but the Bruins might just have the best team in the NHL not named Tampa.

Bruins in 7. Again.

Islanders vs. Penguins

No question there was clear hesitance from both coaches in figuring out who they liked in this series.

I'm similarly torn on this one.

"The Isles don't have an elite group, (Barry Trotz) has done a hell of a job to get them where they're at," said head coach No. 1. "Their goalies have played elite but they're not elite. But something's not right with Pittsburgh.

"Their secondary guys aren't as good as they used to be. I'll pick the Islanders because I love their mojo right now, that

barn will be going. It's a real home-ice advantage. But it's really a toss-up of a series."

Head coach No. 2 went the other way, but not with any real conviction.

"I'm going to go with Pitt," he said. "I think that playoff experience, I think the star power they have, I think when Pitt is dialed in, Mike (Sullivan) will have them going.

"My concern with the Islanders is that they overachieved this year, they bought in to the defensive part of the game, their goalies have been excellent. I think if the other team checks them just as well, I don't know if they'll be able to score enough. This is a tough one for me because I think they actually could check Pittsburgh out of the series but I just don't have that feeling. I think Pittsburgh has been better down the stretch."

But again, it's close for him.

"I do think Matt Murray will have to be the difference in the series," said coach No. 2. "I don't think Pittsburgh is that strong defensively. But I just don't know if the Islanders have enough high-end talent to pull it off."

My pick: One could actually make the argument Sidney Crosby is having one of his most impressive seasons if you consider how he's carried this squad at times. Overall, the Penguins have lacked consistency but No. 87 has been there every night to pull them into the fight. Kris Letang, too, has been all-world. But I, too, see a fading Penguins team overall. The Isles' work ethic and defensive commitment is second to none this season. They just suffocate the opposition. Imagine being the league's 31st team in goals against a year ago and then winning the Jennings 12 months later. Barry Trotz magic. But can they score enough to win a playoff series? I struggle with that. They're the lowest-scoring team among the eight Eastern playoff teams.

I have very little feel for this series. I can easily be talked into why each side would prevail. When in doubt, the tiebreaker goes to the team with the guy who has done a lot of winning in his life.

Penguins in 7. Game 7 goes to double OT.

Bag of Jerks: The Hurricanes are in the playoffs, what now?

By Sara Civian

The Hurricanes travel to meet the defending Stanley Cup champion Washington Capitals on Thursday (7:30 p.m. ET, USA) for their first playoff appearance since losing in the conference finals in 2009.

We knew you'd have questions — a lot of good ones (there are a lot of storylines to watch) — so it's time for a little pre-playoff Hurricanes Mailbag.

Let's be realistic here. What do you expect is going to change significantly enough during the first playoff series to give the Canes a real shot, that they couldn't muster against the Caps during the regular season? —Mandi C.

Good question. As the thrill of the playoff berth gives way to the actual thing, it's time to get real: The Capitals swept the

Hurricanes 4-0-0 in the regular season. It's not like the games were blowouts, but the Capitals always prevailed in a way defending Cup champions with no signs of slowing down do. While the Canes don't have to (and can't) change their whole approach at the last second, execution and focus need to kick into a new gear if they want a shot at the second round. This is the potential matchup I liked least for the Canes — they can outwork just about anything except, it has seemed, the best goal scorer potentially ever and his pesky shot from the circle.

"Obviously we're underdogs, we're playing against the defending Stanley Cup champions," Justin Williams said Monday. "But do we feel like we are? No. They're a veteran team. The games that we lost this year (against them) were tight-checking games that they found a way to win, which is



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what good teams do. We can learn from that, look at those and say we were right there — which we were. Playoff time is a whole new animal.”

The Canes' best chance to beat the Caps this season (Dec. 14, 6-5 shootout loss) featured a two-goal, two-assist effort from Sebastian Aho. Aho scored their lone goal in the next matchup, a 3-1 loss Dec. 27. He was goalless in the final two outings, but I don't think those performances are representative of what the Hurricanes will look like come Thursday. They'd been playing desperation hockey for three consecutive months.

If we don't count those, the Hurricanes' impact player Aho gave them their best chance to beat the Caps throughout the regular season. It's obviously concerning that he ended the regular season on a 14-game goal drought.

“Obviously you want to put up some points,” he said Monday. “But it's all about wins this time of the year. That's what matters. If we can get those wins I'm happy.”

This is what he's said all season, even when the script is reversed and he puts up four-point efforts in team losses.

A few days off and at least some of the pressure of being the 21-year-old star of a team that needed to make the playoffs lifted, I don't doubt for a second Aho will return to his scoring ways in the postseason. He's never been to the NHL playoffs, but he's come up with game-winners while representing Finland and is known to enjoy the thrill of overtime.

Even when he did try to will the Canes to wins over Washington this season, it wasn't enough. Interestingly enough, they blew two early leads in the four-game regular season series. They were a solid 32-7-3 overall when scoring first. If they happen to get an early lead throughout this series, they've gotta defend it like it's the difference between a first-round exit and Round 2, because the margin of error is really that small.

Could you play the role of the sorting hat and put the Canes lines and d-pairings into their different Hogwarts houses? — Will L.

I couldn't not attempt a few of these. Justin Williams and Petr Mrazek have to be Gryffindor, right? The fearless leaders who aren't afraid to break the rules (or, in Mrazek's case, the laws of physics). I would put Jaccob Slavin, Jordan Martinook, Curtis McElhinney, Calvin de Haan and Nino Niederreiter in Hufflepuff. Dougie Hamilton, Sebastian Aho, Jordan Staal and Justin Faulk would go to Ravenclaw.

I don't want to put anyone in Slytherin.

Wow, I feel absolutely ridiculous for actually doing that. But oddly satisfied with my choices.

Is Calvin de Haan officially out for the season, or are they hoping if we make a run he may be back in later rounds? And who is a better replacement, Jake Bean or Haydn Fleury? — Kelly T.

From head coach Rod Brind'Amour on Monday: “I'm not sure yet. I'm hopeful he'll (de Haan) get good enough to get into a game here or there, but I'm not sure yet.”

Welcome to the playoffs, where this is just about what we're going to get for injury updates. So yes, Brind'Amour is hopeful, but it's not sounding great for the upcoming trip to Washington. Really unfortunate for de Haan, who was having a great season before high sticks to both (!) eyes and now this upper body injury. It's a low-key significant loss for the Canes. Luckily for them, they have Haydn Fleury, who would be a mainstay on almost any other team's third pairing by now, and recent call-up Jake Bean.

If we're talking who is better suited for de Haan's role, it'd be Fleury. He's been doing fine in the lineup since de Haan was sidelined March 31. My understanding is Bean was called up as a seventh, insurance defenseman. I'd love to see him get a crack at the lineup in almost any other situation — he's been crushing it in Charlotte, and what's arguably more important is that he's shown clear improvement from the beginning of the season. He can run a power play, his 13 goals tie a Checkers franchise record for defensemen, and he leads all AHL rookie defensemen with 44 points in 70 games. Eventually, we'll see how that skill set translates at the NHL level.

But this is the Stanley Cup playoffs against the defending champion Capitals. The goal right now is to fill de Haan's role, and Fleury has been best suited for that.

Whose playoff beard (or attempt at one) are you most excited to see? — David Z.

Well, I asked Williams whose will be the worst and he said Brock McGinn's is “terrible,” so now I'm intrigued. Obviously, Martinook was born with a playoff beard, but I'm wondering if he'll go for a playoff mustache as well.

How should I feel about the Canes' veteran leadership? It's easy for teams with playoff droughts to have a sense of accomplishment after just making the playoffs when reality that means the work is just getting started. Is the leadership there for this team to keep them focused? — David C.

Before opening night I asked Williams something about “obviously the goal is to make the playoffs ...” and he corrected me mid-sentence to say that isn't the goal, that isn't great and that's not how great teams think. I bring this up because that's been the motto of the season for them since the first day. It's not just something they're saying now that they've made it into the playoffs. You take one look at his resume, listen to what past teammates have to say about him and hear the words out of his mouth and you know he's not one for a first-round exit. As far as veteran leaders you have him, Brind'Amour and Staal who have won Cups, been there before and know what works. But there's also Martinook, who has emerged as a leader of this team in his own right and has never been to the playoffs. I think that's an underrated part of the answer to this question because there's a mix of experience and fresh eyes even in the leadership group. Then, of course, there's Faulk who has stayed the course for eight years and knows exactly what not only a playoff berth but a playoff run would mean around here.

Do you see the Hurricanes continuing to alternate starts between Mrazek and McElhinney during the series? Or has Mrazek's recent play earned him the opportunity to start every game? — Spencer C.



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I went in on this in detail here.

I don't think there's going to be (nor should there have to be) some grand declaration of who is the "No. 1" starter. That said, I would guess that Mrazek would get the first start and they will go from there.

"We haven't discussed that (yet) to be honest," Brind'Amour said Monday. "I let Balesy (goalie coach Mike Bales) handle that goalie thing until I disagree with him, and that hasn't happened yet. We've got a good problem here. I love both these guys. I have a feeling they both will take part in our success moving forward."

What are your initial reactions/thoughts/feelings when seeing videos of the crowd from Thursday night knowing what it meant to them? — Dan M.

Honestly, as you could probably tell from my story selection throughout the playoff push, this has been far more important to me than any sort of stat-driven storyline. Now that the Canes are in it's back to a little bit of everything and certainly back to business, but I found it insanely difficult to focus on anything except the emotions of the crowd, all of the wonderful Caniacs I have met here already and their stories.

It's not like I've been around here and I obviously didn't grow up a fan of the Canes or anything like that, so I don't know your pain. But hearing the stories, seeing pictures of crying kids who have never experienced playoffs, seeing the team you guys love, love you back again is why I am here.

It also has me thinking of all the moments of my childhood I took for granted. I'm not talking about the bragging rights or even watching a team win, just the simple act of gathering with my loved ones to watch a meaningful sporting event in the first place. The years spent screaming about the Celtics with my dad, even the bonding outlet the Patriots and Bruins had given my older brothers and me, you know? Like so many other families, we aren't the best at emotions or apologies, but I can't count how many times a text like:

"Hey, did you see that play?" or "Come over, the game's on" has really meant "Sorry" or "I love you."

I have no idea what I would do without some of the playoff-run memories from my childhood, so I can't help but be happy for Canes fans, their friends, families and children.

To be honest, I've been internally struggling with what my idea of what "professionalism" or unbiased journalism really is because of how happy I am to be here right now and how much I care about this for all of you. But I'm not happy because the Canes are winning, nor am I rooting for them to win. I just think everyone deserves to tell their brother they love him without really having to say it.

Regardless of how the Playoffs end, do you see Justin Williams signing a short-term deal to stay for the next year or two? — William W.

You have to think whatever he decides the Hurricanes will be on board with it. I don't know anything at all about what his intentions are after this season, but if you want me to speculate I could totally see him signing a short-term deal. He's easily one of the best forwards on the ice most nights. That's all there is to it.

Obviously, Rod has been hesitant all year to mix things up when it's not going well, but could it benefit him to split up the top line? It could also cause some confusion for the Caps game prep, no? —Kevin K.

My opinion (which you are, as always, 1,000 percent entitled to disagree with) is the second you do something for the sole purpose of messing with the other team, you've already lost. I have seen too much Mike Babcock vs. Boston to believe doing this is coming from a place of confidence in your team, and I think this Hurricanes team needs to feel confident to have a chance. That said, if Aho's #scoringwoes persist I wouldn't hate the return of Teuvo Teravainen on his wing for a little Finnish reunion. Teravainen obviously has won a Cup and didn't just coast by with the Blackhawks — he contributed four goals and six assists for 10 points in 18 games to win the Cup in 2014-15. Toss him back on the first line and see what happens, move whomever wherever, just make sure it's not all about the other team.

Ignoring the obvious answer (because lol duh) Who do you think is going to be most clutch/have the biggest impact for the Canes in the playoffs that we might not expect? — Leah M.

By obvious I don't know if you mean Williams or Aho and I kind of love that. For my answer to this question, though, see the answer directly above.

I remember back in the '06 run, the team adopted "The Rising" by Bruce Springsteen as their 'song of the moment'. If you had to pick a song (Kanye or otherwise) ahead of the playoffs as the 'song of the moment' for this team, what would it be? — Nick L.

First of all I love that song, saw it live with my dad. We love The Boss almost as much as we love Neil Young. I don't know what song I would pick for this team, but I know it wouldn't be Fall Out Boy or Imagine Dragons so I'm already doing better than the NHL.

Victory Playlist? — Lizz F.

The season ain't over, Lizz!



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Canes seek reversal of regular season fortunes against Caps

By Jared Fialko

Raleigh, N.C. — On PNC Arena ice, there's a new paint job: "Stanley Cup Playoffs 2019." On paper, it's a mismatch: the "Bunch of Jerks" who hadn't made the postseason in a decade versus the squad who rightfully still can claim ownership of Lord Stanley's Cup.

"Obviously, we're underdogs. We're playing against the defending Stanley Cup Champions, but do we feel like we are?" asks Hurricanes Captain Justin Williams. "No, we're going to work our tails off, and, like I said all along, we'll see how good we can be."

In the regular season, again on paper, the Canes were not all that good against their rivals. Four meetings, four Ls. The equivalent of a playoff series sweep.

"They play a really smart 5-on-5 game," says Sebastian Aho, Hurricanes forward.

"They're comfortable being uncomfortable," explains Hurricanes head coach Rod Brind'Amour. "They're comfortable in the games that are 1-0, 1-1. They're comfortable in playing their game because they know it wins."

But details also can get lost solely on paper. As Canes Captain Justin Williams recalls, all four contests were there for Carolina's taking. In fact, they only trailed entering the third period in one of them. O-for the regular season maybe, but playoff hockey's a whole new animal, Williams says.

"At some point, somebody's going to give and say 'It's too hard,'" Williams smiles. "We gotta make sure that's not us."

"The one thing I love about this game is that the best team wins," Brind'Amour nods. "In a best-of-seven series, I haven't been in too many where the better team didn't win."

The better team will be determined not on paper, but on the Washington, D.C., ice, starting Thursday at 7:30 p.m.



Hurricanes, Islanders, Stars intrigue NBC analysts heading into playoffs

McGuire, Olczyk, Emrick, Milbury discuss teams returning to postseason

by Tracey Myers

For Pierre McGuire, it's about the teams returning to the Stanley Cup Playoffs after absences.

It's about the Carolina Hurricanes, who return to the playoffs for the first time since 2009. It's about the atmosphere at Nassau Coliseum for the New York Islanders, who missed the playoffs the past two seasons. And it's about the Dallas Stars, who are in the playoffs for the third time in the past 11 seasons.

"The new teams that are in and the different storylines that have the potential to be created," the NBC analyst said.

"Different teams getting opportunities to get exposed to the

national spotlight. It's going to be a magnificent playoff for everyone that's involved."

"The NHL on NBC" commentators Mike "Doc" Emrick, Eddie Olczyk, Pierre McGuire and Mike Milbury are preparing for the Stanley Cup Playoffs, which begin with five games on Wednesday. Through June, the NBC Sports Group will televise as many as 105 playoff games and possibly more than 260 hours of programming.

The Hurricanes play the Washington Capitals in Game 1 of the best-of-7 Eastern Conference First Round at Capital One Arena on Thursday (7:30 p.m. ET; USA, SN360, TVAS2, FS-CR). The Hurricanes have garnered attention for their postgame celebrations but Olczyk said their talent looms larger.



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"Did that get precedent over [forwards] Sebastian Aho, Teuvo Teravainen, Justin Williams, or their goaltending? Maybe a bit," Olczyk said. "But if you're not winning hockey games, you're not celebrating like they are. But it doesn't matter what they do after the game or between periods: it's a pretty [darn] good hockey team. People know how they play on the ice more than post-game celebrations."

The Islanders host the Pittsburgh Penguins in Game 1 of the best-of-7 Eastern Conference First Round at Nassau Coliseum on Wednesday (7:30 p.m. ET; NBCSN, CBC, TVAS2, MSG+, ATTSN-PT). Emrick said the atmosphere should be incredible.

"You have a boisterous crowd ready to raise the roof, and they can do it," Emrick said. "This is a different Islanders team now in how they approach the game, and they've had

wonderful success with it. So, it'll be intriguing to see the contrasting styles and how it plays out."

The Stars play the Nashville Predators in Game 1 of the best-of-7 Western Conference First Round at Bridgestone Arena on Wednesday (8:30 p.m. ET; USA, TVAS, SN1, FS-SW). The Stars need big performances from their top players, including forward Tyler Seguin, who has 21 points (seven goals, 14 assists) in 49 NHL playoff games. Seguin won the Stanley Cup with the Boston Bruins in 2011.

"He needs to have a dominant postseason, and [forward] Jamie Benn has to be there alongside him. It's time for them to step up," Milbury said. "It's been a great turnaround by another first-year coach [Jim Montgomery], who's done an outstanding job. They've found a way to put it together."

Behind the Numbers: Eastern Conference playoff teams

Key statistics for Lightning-Blue Jackets, Capitals-Hurricanes, Bruins-Maple Leafs, Islanders-Penguins series

by Scott Cullen

Here are some key statistics to consider for the Eastern Conference First Round:

Special teams could determine Blue Jackets' chances

One reason the Tampa Bay Lightning were the best team in the NHL this season was their power play, which was ranked No. 1 (28.2 percent). Brayden Point, with 20, and Steven Stamkos, with 19, ranked first and second in the NHL in power-play goals, and Nikita Kucherov had an NHL-best 48 power-play points, including 15 goals (tied for eighth).

The Columbus Blue Jackets might be able to slow down that power play in the Eastern Conference First Round. Columbus had the best penalty kill in the League after the 2019 NHL Trade Deadline on Feb. 25 (89.7 percent). For the season, it was tied for first with the Lightning and Arizona Coyotes for (85.0 percent).

The Blue Jackets allowed an NHL-low 30 power-play goals, making for a compelling matchup against the Lightning, who were first with 74 man-advantage goals. Tampa Bay is so good, winning the special-teams battle won't assure Columbus of victory, but if it can't limit the Lightning power play, it will be a more difficult uphill climb.

Playing with lead critical for Blue Jackets

Columbus is not a good come-from-behind team, especially if it's trailing entering the third period.

Yes, Columbus clinched a playoff berth when it rallied for a 3-2 shootout win against the New York Rangers in its penultimate game, but it was the second time it won this season when trailing entering the third. Their .077 winning percentage (2-23-1) in that situation was the fourth worst in the NHL.

The Lightning were the best when trailing entering the third. No other team was close to their .429 winning percentage (9-

12-0). The Calgary Flames, the No. 1 seed in the Western Conference, were second at .242 (8-22-3).

Face-off battle between Bergeron, Tavares will be intriguing part of Bruins-Maple Leafs series

No team in the playoffs won more face-offs this season than the Toronto Maple Leafs, who won 2,629 of 4,959 (53.0 percent). Against the Boston Bruins (50.7 percent), the ability to win more draws will be a huge advantage because it will deny the Bruins possession, which is one of their strengths.

The battle between John Tavares of the Maple Leafs and Patrice Bergeron of the Bruins will be especially intriguing. Tavares took 1,528 faceoffs, 11th most in the NHL and 617 more than any other Toronto player. He won 54.4 percent. Bergeron won 56.6 percent of his 1,389 face-offs. It is likely Tavares and Bergeron will be matched up for most big draws in this series, and with Tavares a left shot and Bergeron a right shot, each will be on his strong side at the same time.

Hurricanes must make most of shots against Capitals

The Carolina Hurricanes had a shot attempts percentage (SAT%) of 54.81 percent during 5-on-5 play, which ranked second in the NHL to the San Jose Sharks (54.87 percent). That has been Carolina's underlying strength in the recent past. Since the start of 2016-17, the Hurricanes have an SAT% of 53.55 percent, second behind the Bruins (53.82 percent). But in those three seasons, the Hurricanes' combined shooting and save percentage at 5-on-5 was 986, which ranked last in the NHL.

Their first-round opponent, the Washington Capitals, lead the NHL in shooting percentage (9.5 percent) and combined shooting and save percentage (1022) over the past three seasons.

The Hurricanes improved in those areas in the latter part of this season, with a combined shooting and save percentage of 1013 after Jan. 1, seventh best in the NHL in that span, and they needed that surge to reach the postseason as the second wild card from the East. The question is whether Carolina can continue its relatively newfound improvement in



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shooting and save percentages into the series against Washington.

Islanders need to dictate pace of play against Penguins

The Pittsburgh Penguins averaged 33.3 shots on goal per game this season, fifth most in the NHL. The New York Islanders averaged 28.8 shots on goal, lowest among playoff teams and tied for 29th in the NHL.

The Islanders, who ranked second among NHL playoff teams in blocked shots (1,295), behind the Colorado

Avalanche (1,324), prefer low-event hockey. It makes sense as a strategy against the Penguins because it's difficult to trade chances with a team that had four players with at least 70 points this season: Sidney Crosby (100), Phil Kessel (82), Jake Guentzel (76) and Evgeni Malkin (72).

The Islanders also had the lowest SAT% (47.85 percent) among playoff teams, so if that trend continues, they may need to get bailed out by their goalies, Robin Lehner and Thomas Greiss, who combined to allow an NHL-low 180 goals and had 11 shutouts.

Hurricanes brace for test against Capitals in Game 1 of Eastern series

Three-time Cup winner Williams says Carolina prepared to face defending champions

by Kurt Dusterberg

RALEIGH, N.C. -- The Carolina Hurricanes know the challenge they face in the Eastern Conference First Round against the Washington Capitals, but that won't change their approach.

"Obviously, we're underdogs, we're playing against the defending Stanley Cup champions," Hurricanes captain Justin Williams, who played with the Capitals from 2015-17, said on Monday. "Do we feel like we are (underdogs)? No, we're going to work our tails off and see how good we can be."

Game 1 of the best-of-7 Stanley Cup Playoffs series is at Washington on Thursday (7:30 p.m. ET; USA, SN360, TVAS, FS-CR).

None of the 10 players drafted by Carolina has appeared in an NHL playoff game. The Hurricanes are making their first postseason appearance since 2009 (swept by the Pittsburgh Penguins in Eastern Conference Final).

"For our guys who haven't been in that situation, that's where it gets tough," said coach Rod Brind'Amour, the captain of the Hurricanes when they won the Stanley Cup in 2006. "It's the mental toughness part of the game. You've got to be able to grind. We've done that all year, and you've got to be able to stick with it. They're not going to give you much. That's why they're the champs. They know how to win. We're going to have to fight that."

Sebastian Aho, who led the Hurricanes with 83 points (30 goals, 53 assists) will be counted on to find his scoring touch.

The 21-year-old forward had six assists in the final 14 games of the regular season.

"You want to prove some points, but it's all about wins this time of year," Aho said. "If we can get those wins, I'm happy."

Aho is not alone. Micheal Ferland, who had 40 points during the regular season (17 goals, 23 assists) finished the season with five assists in the final 17 games.

"If we don't have everyone playing at their top, we're not going to win," Brind'Amour said. "The best players obviously have to be right up there. You talk to all your guys, whether they're playing good or bad. I don't think (Aho and Ferland) are playing poorly. I just think they haven't been scoring."

Williams, who signed with the Hurricanes before the 2017-18 season, was on the team when they won the Cup in 2006 and won the Cup twice with the Los Angeles Kings (2012, 2014). He was encouraged with the way Carolina played in the second half of the season. After a 15-17-5 start, the Hurricanes went 31-12-2 to reach the playoffs.

"Guys expect more out of themselves, and more out of each other," Williams said. "When you challenge each other to be better players, that's the only way you improve as a team."

The Hurricanes won't dwell on their 0-3-1 record against the Capitals in the regular season.

"The games we lost this year were tight-checking games that (the Capitals) found ways to win, which is what good teams do," Williams said. "At the end of the series, you either want to make them really, really earn it, or you want to be able to push them out of it. At some point, somebody is going to give and say it's too hard. We've got to make sure it's not us."



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'Jerk' Hurricanes surge into 1st playoff series since 2009

By JOEDY McCREARY

RALEIGH, N.C. (AP) — They traded punches with Evander Holyfield. They dunked a basketball on ice. They flopped around like beached whales.

The Carolina Hurricanes have done plenty of unusual things this season, and here is one more: They are preparing for their first playoff series in a decade.

That team dubbed a “bunch of jerks” over their wild, choreographed post-victory celebrations hopes to surge — or, perhaps more fittingly, Storm Surge — all the way to the Stanley Cup.

The Hurricanes, who open their first best-of-seven playoff series since 2009 on Thursday night at defending Cup champion Washington, are walking the fine line between savoring their rare-for-them accomplishment while not being completely satisfied with just making the field of 16.

“You never know when you’re going to be back in this situation,” 37-year-old captain Justin Williams said, “because making the playoffs is hard — as people in this area know.”

Oh, do they know.

It has been nine seasons since the Hurricanes last skated in a springtime game that mattered. Only two franchises have gone longer between postseason appearances — the Florida Panthers from 2001-11 and the Edmonton Oilers from 2007-16, with each missing the playoffs for 10 straight seasons.

Yet first-year coach Rod Brind’Amour isn’t just happy to be here.

“We’re certainly expecting more — this isn’t what we signed up for,” he said. “We all understand it’s a huge task, but we’re not going into this series not expecting to win, that’s for sure.”

The only current Carolina player who was on the ice for the Hurricanes’ last postseason series was center Jordan Staal — who at the time played for Pittsburgh, which swept those Hurricanes in the Eastern Conference finals.

To finally end that drought, Carolina changed just about everything, from the players on the ice all the way up to the team owner. Tom Dundon bought a majority stake in the team from longtime owner Peter Karmanos Jr. last January, then promoted Don Waddell to general manager and hired Brind’Amour — who, as captain of the title-winning team in 2006, was the first player to hoist the Stanley Cup — as head coach.

Along the way, the team’s culture changed. Williams was selected as team captain after a failed experiment last year

in which Staal and Justin Faulk shared the captaincy, and the players became more accountable to each other.

“Guys expect more out of themselves and expect more out of each other,” Williams said. “And when we challenge each other to be better players, that’s the only way to improve as a team.”

They’re also having more fun after games, thanks to those Storm Surges.

Each one started with a slow, exaggerated overhead clap and ended with a different skit or activity. They celebrated March Madness by bringing a portable basketball hoop onto the ice and Trevor van Riemsdyk threw down a one-handed dunk. When Holyfield visited as a guest, they brought him onto the ice and the former boxing champ pretended to spar with Jordan Martinook. They marked Hartford Whalers night by flopping around on the ice like whales.

And when veteran hockey broadcaster Don Cherry ripped the celebrations and called the Hurricanes a “bunch of jerks,” they turned the insult into a rallying cry — even selling T-shirts with the slogan at the team shop.

Even as Williams announced the team’s decision to halt the Surges late in the season, he left the door open for their return by calling them “unpredictable.”

So was this playoff appearance. Just a few months ago, the Hurricanes were 15-17-5 on Dec. 30 and one point out of last place in the East.

Since then, they have gone 31-12-2.

“A lot of people that didn’t watch our team all year, they were, ‘What happened?’ and I don’t know that anything happened,” Brind’Amour said. “The puck just started to go in. I still think the first 25 games were the best segment of our season, and yet our record didn’t show it, so what do I know? ... I can’t tell you the change. When pucks started going in, I think you could see they had a little bit more swagger.”

So now, on a day usually reserved for melting the ice at PNC Arena, they were doing something different to it — placing the playoff logos inside the blue lines.

For Williams, who scored the winning goal in Game 7 of Carolina’s Cup run 13 years ago and came back before last season to try to bring the franchise back to those heights, it’s particularly satisfying.

“I think the atmosphere’s going to be electric,” Williams said. “Still to this day, (Game 7 was) one of the loudest buildings I’ve ever been a part of. And playoff hockey coming back to the area, people are going to be ready. I know that.”



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NHL playoffs: Atlantic bracket a brutal path to East final

By STEPHEN WHYNO

Three of the top seven teams in the NHL are packed into a four-team murderers' row playoff bracket and only one can reach the Eastern Conference final.

The Tampa Bay Lightning's reward for finishing 21 points ahead of the rest of the league during the regular season is a first-round matchup against Artemi Panarin, Sergei Bobrovsky and the all-in Columbus Blue Jackets, while the Boston Bruins and Toronto Maple Leafs meet for the second consecutive year in the other Atlantic Division series.

"If you do win a round or two going through those two big guys, there's still a couple rounds to go after that," veteran Maple Leafs winger Patrick Marleau said. "It's a hard path to win it, whichever way you look at it. It's one of those things where you can't get ahead of yourself."

It's not much easier in the Metropolitan Division half of the East bracket where the defending Stanley Cup champion Washington Capitals face the Carolina Hurricanes, who just ended the league's longest playoff drought, and Barry Trotz's New York Islanders meet the 2016 and 2017 champion Pittsburgh Penguins.

"Every game's going to be tough," said Islanders center Valteri Filppula, who faced Pittsburgh in the playoffs last year with Philadelphia. "It'd be pretty much the same (no matter) who we'd play, it would be tough games. Hopefully we can play well and get a good start at home and get the playoffs started the right way."

For all the championships won by the Bruins, Penguins and Capitals over the past eight years, the East has plenty of fresh blood. The Islanders have home-ice advantage in the first round for the first time since 1988, the Hurricanes are in the playoffs for the first time since 2009 and the Blue Jackets are looking to win their first series in franchise history.

The first-round matchups in the Eastern Conference:

BLUE JACKETS-LIGHTNING (Game 1 at Tampa Bay on Wednesday)

All the pressure is on Tampa Bay after lapping the field this season, tying the NHL wins record and boasting the league's leading scorer in Nikita Kucherov. The Lightning haven't played meaningful games for a couple of weeks and are now expected to flip a switch and raise their level in the playoffs.

"We've been ready for a while," captain Steven Stamkos said. "We're ready for playoff hockey."

Columbus has plenty of urgency, too, given that Panarin and Bobrovsky and deadline additions Matt Duchene, Ryan Dzingel and Adam McQuaid are pending free agents. Things

could blow up there if the Blue Jackets bow out in the first round.

MAPLE LEAFS-BRUINS (Game 1 at Boston on Thursday)

These teams went to seven games a year ago but are trending in very different directions now.

The Maple Leafs don't know which version of goaltender Frederik Andersen will show up and have to hope their defense can withstand the big, bad Bruins. Boston tied Calgary for the second-most points in the league, has gotten strong goaltending from Tuukka Rask and Jaroslav Halak, and is deep at forward and on defense.

"I like our team," Bruins coach Bruce Cassidy said. "We play hard. We're one of the better teams from start to finish I think in the National Hockey League, specifically the second half of the year. We've played well at the right times. We've earned our way."

HURRICANES-CAPITALS (Game 1 at Washington on Thursday)

There's no bigger contrast in the first round than Washington, in the playoffs for the 11th time in 12 years, going up against Carolina, which has 12 players who have not played before in the NHL postseason.

The Hurricanes do have three-time Cup-winner Justin Williams as their captain and one-time champion Jordan Staal as their second-line center, but the Capitals' big guns of Alex Ovechkin, Nicklas Backstrom, Evgeny Kuznetsov and Braden Holtby are seasoned for this time of year. Winning last year also gives the Capitals extra confidence.

"It's a fun time," Ovechkin said. "You have to believe in each other and work hard. You can see we was down almost every series and we bounced back and win the series, so that's the most important thing."

PENGUINS-ISLANDERS (Game 1 at New York on Wednesday)

Nassau Coliseum will be rocking after the Islanders went from allowing the most goals in the league last season to the fewest this season and finished second in the Metropolitan Division. Trotz brought the structure that helped the Capitals win the Cup to Long Island, and goaltenders Robin Lehner and Thomas Greiss have been much improved.

Pittsburgh is still dangerous because of the high-end talent of Sidney Crosby, Evgeni Malkin and Phil Kessel.

"It starts with Sid," Trotz said. "Sid's still the standard and Malkin raises his game in the playoffs all the time. They've got Kessel, they've got a number of people. They've got championship pedigree."



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2019 Stanley Cup playoffs: Capitals vs. Hurricanes series preview, pick

Emily Kaplan

The defending Stanley Cup champion Washington Capitals look as strong as ever heading into the 2019 Stanley Cup playoffs. But the Carolina Hurricanes have been proving doubters wrong all season -- and having lots of fun while they're at it. Who wins this series? Let's break it down.

How they got here: Yes, the Capitals spent the summer splashing in fountains and celebrating the franchise's first Stanley Cup, but the hangover wasn't as severe as many feared. Washington won its fourth straight division title.

The Capitals did slump at times -- including a seven-game losing streak in mid-January -- but had some dominant stretches too. The captain set the tone. Alex Ovechkin cruised to his second-consecutive Rocket Trophy, and eighth overall. Ovechkin's 51 goals were 26 more than his closest teammate. The Caps began the season with nearly the same roster they ended with in June. They would add along the way -- including depth defenseman Nick Jensen and veteran winger Carl Hagelin, a force on the penalty kill -- but also lost some. They sent playoff hero Devante Smith-Pelly to the minors, and lost top pairing defenseman Michal Kempny to injury late in the season.

Carolina, meanwhile, has been injected by new energy. In his first full season as the majority owner, Tom Dundon has been intimately involved in day-to-day operations while Rod Brind'Amour shined as a rookie NHL head coach. With elaborate postgame celebrations -- which drew the ire of many traditionalists in hockey media -- and a fast-paced game, the Canes improved attendance and clinched their first playoff berth in a decade, snapping the NHL's longest postseason drought. The "Bunch of Jerks" had a bunch of fun. They also boasted a strong defensive structure. Young Finns Teuvo Teravainen and Sebastian Aho, plus captain Justin Williams, set the bar offensively.

When projected starting goalie Scott Darling faltered, Carolina benefited from surprise performances from both Petr Mrazek and Curtis McElhinney.

First line: Aho led the Hurricanes in scoring with a career-high 30 goals and 53 assists. He's due for a star turn, and there's no better place to make your mark than the playoffs -- especially if he gets the chance to go up against

Washington's top center, Evgeny Kuznetsov. That said, it's hard to imagine Ovechkin, or his line, slowing down anytime soon. The Capitals are also strong on their second line, and the finding an answer to Tom Wilson (most teams do). Advantage: Caps

Depth: The Canes flex some talent (and scoring production) on their second line, but after that, there's a significant drop off. The Capitals are also strong on their second line, and the third line has been especially impressive this season, thanks to a career-high 22 goals from Brett Connolly. Advantage: Caps

Defense: The Canes boast a surplus of capable defensemen, especially ones who can contribute offensively. The blue line is Carolina's biggest area of strength. The Caps are without top-pairing defenseman Kempny, a huge blow considering how effective the young Czech was in last season's Cup run. The Jensen acquisition was a prescient one. Advantage: Canes

Goaltending: Unlike last spring, Washington enters the playoffs with no uncertainty in net: Braden Holtby is the guy. Holtby ended the season with five straight wins and a .947 save percentage across those games. Mrazek has been a delight for the Canes this season; but this isn't the first time we've seen flashes of brilliance from the 26-year-old. His challenge now is sustaining it. Advantage: Caps

Health: Losing Kempny is significant, as the Caps are still juggling defensive pairs. Advantage: Canes

Special teams: The Caps' penalty killing unit has seen improvements, especially since adding Hagelin via trade, while the Canes have a top-10 unit. Washington's power play is slightly above league average; the Canes' power play is slightly below. Advantage: tie

Coaching: Rod Brind'Amour and Todd Reirden are in their first seasons as NHL head coaches. Brind'Amour has experiences of long playoff runs as a player, including winning the Cup with Carolina in 2006; Reirden has experience of a long playoff run from last spring, as a lead assistant for the Cup-winning Caps. Advantage: tie

Prediction: Caps in five



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Stanley Cup Playoff Hype Rankings: Which series are must-see?

Greg Wyshynski

The National Hockey League's playoff format has once again yielded a postseason bounty of rivalry series, potential thrillers and odd matchups that would otherwise seem like the product of a dartboard and a blindfold.

Which ones are worth your time? Trust the ESPN Hype Rankings.

We rate each series based on several facets: star power, secondary plot lines, the hate factor, the controversy quotient (for potential violent acts or heinous actions), the arena atmosphere, the probability of a Game 7 and, last but not least, the "Beardosity" of a series, in which the face shrubbery of players is weighed as heavily as the fame of that series' players.

Each category is given a score of 1 to 10. Now, without further explanation of a completely subjective and arbitrary process, here are the 2019 Stanley Cup Playoff Hype Rankings:

8. Calgary Flames vs. Colorado Avalanche

Star power: 7
Secondary plot lines: 2
Hate factor: 4
Controversy quotient: 3
Arena atmosphere: 8
Game 7 probability: 1
Beardosity: 6
Overall hype ranking: 31

The Flames have Johnny Gaudreau (a potential Hart Trophy nominee) and Mark Giordano (the favorite for the Norris Trophy) going against Nathan MacKinnon and one of the best lines in the NHL. What this series lacks, at first glance, is compelling plot lines, although there have been some contentious moments between the two teams over the past two seasons.

The biggest question looming over our ratings for this one: Does the existence of Ian Cole offset the lack of beard potential on the baby-faced Avs?

7. Tampa Bay Lightning vs. Columbus Blue Jackets

Star power: 8
Secondary plot lines: 9
Hate factor: 1
Controversy quotient: 2
Arena atmosphere: 8
Game 7 probability: 1
Beardosity: 5
Overall hype ranking: 34

The greatest juggernaut the NHL has seen in nearly 25 years takes on an interesting, if seemingly overmatched, opponent in Round 1: the Blue Jackets, who went all-in with trade deadline acquisitions of Matt Duchene and Ryan Dzingel, and are poised to lose stars Artemi Panarin and Sergei Bobrovsky to free agency.

The previous four series the Lightning have played outside of the conference final ended in five games. Columbus has

never made it out of the first round in franchise history. This could go from "interesting setup" to "wait, it's over already?" pretty quickly.

6. Winnipeg Jets vs. St. Louis Blues

Star power: 6
Secondary plot lines: 3
Hate factor: 4
Controversy quotient: 6
Arena atmosphere: 8
Game 7 probability: 7
Beardosity: 6
Overall hype ranking: 40

Although these teams boast a good number of compelling players -- including Vladimir Tarasenko, Blake Wheeler, Patrik Laine and rookie goaltending sensation Jordan Binnington -- this series has been shuffled off on American television to a network where it will preempt "Shark Tank" reruns.

The arenas will be hopping and the games could get nastier as the series goes on, but this is a series between a team that was in last place in January and a team that people had in the Stanley Cup Final before the season started (and before they tumbled into the No. 2 seed in the Central). Still, a Binnington-led upset bid could make this one interesting in a hurry.

5. Nashville Predators vs. Dallas Stars

Star power: 8
Secondary plot lines: 2
Hate factor: 6
Controversy quotient: 4
Arena atmosphere: 8
Game 7 probability: 6
Beardosity: 7
Overall hype ranking: 41

The Central Division's wacky final days produced this Winter Classic 2020 preview, as the Predators and Stars have a hoedown, er, showdown in the first round. Obviously, there are big names to watch on both teams, especially in goal, as Pekka Rinne and Ben Bishop could determine who advances (for better or worse). Ryan Ellis alone elevates the Beardosity here.

On the downside, there aren't a ton of compelling narratives heading into this series, outside of revisiting the fecal-based criticisms of Stars players by their team president. Given some antagonistic games between these two in recent years, this one could get a little rough, however.

4. Washington Capitals vs. Carolina Hurricanes

Star power: 7
Secondary plot lines: 8
Hate factor: 3
Controversy quotient: 9
Arena atmosphere: 7
Game 7 probability: 2
Beardosity: 6
Overall hype ranking: 42



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With due respect to all the other lower-seeded teams, this is your Cinderella series. The "bunch of jerks" from Raleigh take on the reigning Stanley Cup champions, who dominated them 4-0-0 in the regular season. While there isn't much hate between these two yet, the existence of Tom Wilson in any series nearly maxes out the controversy quotient (as does the presence of outspoken Carolina owner Tom Dundon in a playoff series).

It's been a minute since we had a postseason game at the Hurricanes' home rink, so we might have underestimated the arena atmosphere. This could be a fun one. Or a short one. In either case, viva la Southeast Division, and let's watch Alex Ovechkin score more goals.

3. New York Islanders vs. Pittsburgh Penguins

Star power: 7
Secondary plot lines: 9
Hate factor: 5
Controversy quotient: 6
Arena atmosphere: 8
Game 7 probability: 7
Beardosity: 6
Overall hype ranking: 48

Do the Penguins have another Stanley Cup run in them? Their bid for a three-peat was thwarted by the Capitals in the conference semifinals last season, and the coach behind the elimination is now behind the Islanders' bench to step up a classic confrontation: Sidney Crosby, Evgeni Malkin and Phil Kessel against the NHL's best defensive team in the regular season.

Two franchises that have some distinct playoff history, with some players who can bring a little nastiness. Playoff hockey returning to Nassau Coliseum ... if the fans there care one-tenth as much about the Penguins as they did about John Tavares' return to Long Island, it'll be intense.

2. San Jose Sharks vs. Vegas Golden Knights

Star power: 8
Secondary plot lines: 8
Hate factor: 8
Controversy quotient: 7
Arena atmosphere: 9

Game 7 probability: 8
Beardosity: 9
Overall hype ranking: 57

The Golden Knights eliminated the Sharks in six delightfully physical and contentious games last season, and there's no reason to expect anything less in this rematch. There are stars on both sides, two deafening arenas and (of course) some choice playoff beards.

But the underlying plot lines here are just terrific: the Sharks having gone all-in over the past two seasons vs. a Knights team that's significantly upgraded since last season's expansion shocker. Plus, San Jose's league-worst goaltending -- it had the lowest team save percentage in the NHL -- and second-best offense against Golden Knights star Marc-Andre Fleury.

This could be the best series of the first round and perhaps the entire playoffs.

1. Boston Bruins vs. Toronto Maple Leafs

Star power: 9
Secondary plot lines: 8
Hate factor: 9
Controversy quotient: 9
Arena atmosphere: 9
Game 7 probability: 10
Beardosity: 8
Overall hype ranking: 62

There's no logical reason that the second- and fifth-best teams in the NHL should face each other in the first round (and even less logic to have either of them advance to face the No. 1-seeded Lightning in Round 2).

With that established ... how fun is this going to be?

Last year's first-round battle gave us a three-game suspension to Leafs forward Nazem Kadri for boarding in Game 1. It gave us Bruins pest Brad Marchand licking the face of a Toronto player. It gave us a seven-game series of wild momentum swings between the oldest of old-school rivals. This year, we get John Tavares added to this feud that's produced two straight seven-game series. Let's go!

YAHOO! SPORTS

NHL Eastern Conference Round 1 Preview

Corey Abbott - Rotoworld

TAMPA BAY LIGHTNING VERSUS COLUMBUS BLUE JACKETS

Tampa Bay tied the 1995-96 Detroit Red Wings for most wins in a season (62) en route to earning the Presidents' Trophy for the first time in franchise history with 128 points. Tampa Bay lost in the Eastern Conference Final to Washington last year in a seven-game series.

Nikita Kucherov led the team and ranked first overall in league scoring with 128 points in 82 games. Remarkably, his

offensive production never slowed down while he compiled 41 goals and 87 assists. Steven Stamkos and Brayden Point supplied plenty of support on the scoresheet with 98 and 92 points, respectively. Stamkos led the team with 45 goals and Point found the back of the net 41 times. In doing so, Tampa Bay became the first team since the 1995-96 Pittsburgh Penguins to have at least three 40-goal scorers. Tyler Johnson and Yanni Gourde chipped in with 29 goals and 22 goals, respectively.

Victor Hedman, who finished the year on the sidelines with an upper-body injury, led the team's defense corps with 54



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points in 70 appearances. Ryan McDonagh earned a personal best 46 points in 82 contests, while Mikhail Sergachev picked up 32 points over 75 outings.

Andrei Vasilevskiy led the league with 39 wins. He lost just 10 games in regulation through his 53 starts, while posting six shutouts, a .925 save percentage and 2.40 goals-against average.

Tampa Bay was sitting pretty in the playoff picture for most of the year, while the Columbus Blue Jackets battled to the end of the season to clinch a spot in the postseason. Columbus defeated the New York Rangers in a shootout on the second last day of the regular season to punch their ticket to the playoffs. It was nearly a complete disaster for a team that went all-in at the trade deadline by acquiring Matt Duchene and Ryan Dzingel in separate deals with Ottawa to bolster their top-six forward group.

Artemi Panarin topped the team with a career-high 87 points. He contributed a personal best 59 assists in 79 games. Cam Atkinson led the Blue Jackets with 41 goals. He had a career year in 2018-19 with 69 points in 80 appearances. Pierre-Luc Dubois had a strong sophomore campaign with 27 goals and 61 points.

Seth Jones and Zach Werenski contributed from the back end with 46 and 44 points, respectively.

Sergei Bobrovsky had an up and down year, but he was great after the All-Star break to help backstop Columbus to the playoffs. He posted 18 wins, including seven shutouts, to go with a 2.20 goals-against average and .924 save percentage in his last 28 appearances. Bobrovsky topped the league with nine shutouts this year.

Tampa Bay was a popular Stanley Cup favorite going into the 2018-19 campaign and the club strengthened that belief over the course of the year thanks to a prolific offense, strong defense and superb goaltending. This is a complete roster with the tools to go all the way and Columbus shouldn't be too much trouble. Bobrovsky will have to stand on his head for the Blue Jackets to have a chance, but his playoff statistics have been lackluster at best during his career and his 5-12 record doesn't inspire much confidence. Lightning in five games.

Tampa Bay

Please note these are projected line combinations that could change on a game-by-game or even shift-by-shift basis once the matches begin.

Ondrej Palat - Steven Stamkos - Tyler Johnson

Yanni Gourde - Brayden Point - Nikita Kucherov

Alex Killorn - Anthony Cirelli - J.T. Miller

Adam Erne - Cedric Paquette - Mathieu Joseph

Ryan Callahan

Victor Hedman - Anton Stralman

Ryan McDonagh - Erik Cernak

Jan Rutta - Mikhail Sergachev

Dan Girardi, Braydon Coburn

Andrei Vasilevskiy

Louis Domingue

WHO'S HOT

Kucherov has 10 goals and 20 points in his last 14 outings. He finished the year with three goals and four helpers in his last five games. Stamkos accumulated 11 goals and 19 points in 12 matches to finish the year. He picked up four goals and one assist during a four-game point streak going into the playoffs. Sergachev wrapped up the regular season with one goal and six helpers in five games.

WHO'S NOT

Johnson has earned three goals and no assists in his last 10 contests. Point was held off the scoresheet in four of his last five games.

NOTES

Hedman missed the last four games with an upper-body injury and is considered day-to-day. The team hopes he will be ready for Game 1 and it looks like he will be good to go.

Anton Stralman appears to be banged up as well and if he can't play then Dan Girardi will step into the lineup instead. Tampa Bay had a rotation on defense throughout the season, so Braydon Coburn and Jan Rutta could see game action as well.

Louis Domingue is expected to be back as Vasilevskiy's understudy after he missed the last four games of the year due to a lower-body injury.

Tampa Bay owned the best power play (28.2%). They led the league with 74 power-play markers. Kucherov topped the team with 48 points on the man advantage, while Point led the way with 20 goals.

The Lightning tied Columbus for the best penalty kill percentage (85.0%) in the league. They surrendered 40 goals, while being shorthanded 267 times. They also finished in a tie for third overall with 12 shorthanded goals.

Tampa Bay led the league with 3.89 goals for per game, while leading the NHL with 319 markers and tying San Jose for the most first-period goals (102). The team's plus-103 goal differential was 41 points higher than second-place Calgary.

The Lightning had the best home record (32-7-2) and the best road record (30-9-2).

Tampa Bay had the most wins (nine) when trailing after two periods.

Columbus

Artemi Panarin - Pierre-Luc Dubois - Cam Atkinson

Ryan Dzingel - Matt Duchene - Josh Anderson

Alexandre Texier - Nick Foligno - Oliver Bjorkstrand

Brandon Dubinsky - Boone Jenner - Riley Nash

Alexander Wennberg

Zach Werenski - Seth Jones



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Markus Nutivaara - David Savard

Dean Kukan - Scott Harrington

Sergei Bobrovsky

Joonas Korpisalo

WHO'S HOT

Panarin produced 11 assists and 14 points in 13 games to end the year, including one goal and seven helpers in his last five matches. Oliver Bjorkstrand found the back of the net nine times and added two assists in 11 games to finish the regular season.

WHO'S NOT

Atkinson has three goals and three assists in his last 14 outings, while being held off the scoresheet in four of his past six games. Josh Anderson had one goal and one assist in seven games down the final stretch of the 2018-19 campaign.

NOTES

Adam McQuaid, who was also a trade-deadline acquisition, has missed five games with an upper-body injury and his return doesn't seem imminent as he hasn't been showing signs of progress.

Ryan Murray is still out indefinitely with an upper-body injury. He was out of action for 24 straight contests to end the year.

Columbus ranked 28th on the power play (15.4%), while finishing 28th with 34 power-play goals. Panarin led the team with 18 power-play points, while Atkinson topped the Jackets with eight goals on the man advantage.

The Blue Jackets tied Tampa Bay for the best penalty kill percentage (85.0%) in the league. They surrendered 30 power-play goals against with being shorthanded 200 times.

Columbus ranked 12th overall with 3.12 goals for per game.

NEW YORK ISLANDERS VERSUS PITTSBURGH PENGUINS

The Islanders were one of the surprises of the season. After losing John Tavares to Toronto via free agency it was widely believed the team would take a major step back in 2018-19. Instead of finishing near the bottom of the standings, New York nearly won the Metropolitan Division title. The Islanders finished second, just one point behind Washington, and will have home-ice advantage against Pittsburgh. Former Capitals bench boss Barry Trotz deserves a great deal of credit for helping to turn the Islanders around defensively and getting the franchise into the playoffs for the second time in the last four years.

Mathew Barzal led the team with 44 assists and 62 points in 82 games. The Islanders got some balanced scoring thanks to 20-goal seasons from new captain Anders Lee, Brock Nelson and Casey Cizikas. Josh Bailey generated 56 points on what was more of a score by committee group.

On the back end, the most dangerous member of the Islanders was Ryan Pulock, who registered a career-high 37 points in 82 contests.

The strength of the team was the goaltending duo of Robin Lehner and Thomas Greiss. They combined to win William M. Jennings Trophy, while allowing a league-low 196 goals, including shootout winners. The Islanders permitted a league-high 296 goals in 2017-18. Greiss was on the team that season, but he bounce bounced back in a big way in 2018-19. Lehner was cast aside by the Buffalo Sabres, but he rebounded to post the best season of his career. He went 25-13-5 with a 2.13 goals-against average, a .930 save percentage and six shutouts.

The Islanders will depend on their defensive game, but Pittsburgh will be a handful to contain. The Penguins will be making their 13th straight playoff appearance and the team has won two of the last three Stanley Cups.

Sidney Crosby is coming off his sixth 100-point season. Phil Kessel finished behind him with 82 points, while Jake Guentzel and Evgeni Malkin also topped the 70-point plateau. Malkin had 72 points despite being limited to 68 appearances due to injuries. Guentzel led the team in goals with his first 40-goal effort.

Kris Letang racked up 56 points, including 16 goals, in 65 games. Justin Schultz, who is capable of contributing offensively as well had 15 points in 29 outings. They need to stay healthy for the Penguins to have a long playoff run.

Matt Murray got off a sluggish start in 2018-19, but he was much better in the second half. He posted a 15-8-5 record with a .924 save percentage and 2.56 goals-against average in 28 appearances after the All-Star break. He has also two Stanley Cups and has played very well in the playoffs before.

Pittsburgh will have to weather the storm at what is sure to be a raucous crowd at Nassau Coliseum, but their playoff experience and high-powered offense should get them to the second round. It wouldn't be a surprise if the Penguins took this series in five games.

New York

Anders Lee - Mathew Barzal - Jordan Eberle

Josh Bailey - Brock Nelson - Tom Kuhnhackl

Anthony Beauvillier - Valtteri Filppula - Leo Komarov

Matt Martin - Casey Cizikas - Cal Clutterbuck

Michael Dal Colle

Nick Leddy - Johnny Boychuk

Adam Pelech - Ryan Pulock

Devon Toews - Scott Mayfield

Robin Lehner

Thomas Greiss

WHO'S HOT

Nelson and Bailey have produced six points in the last eight games. Nelson has three goals and three assists during that span, while Bailey has two goals and four helpers during that span.

WHO'S NOT



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Barzal has one goal and three assists in the past 10 contests. He has one goal in 24 matches going into the playoffs.

NOTES

Andrew Ladd won't be available for the playoffs after he sustained a torn ACL, which required season-ending surgery.

Tanner Fritz had surgery at the end of March to remove a blood clot from his hand. He was given a six-to-eight week timetable.

The Islanders ranked 29th in the league on the power play (15.4%). They had the second-fewest power-play goals (33) in 2018-19 over 227 opportunities. Barzal led the team with 18 power-play points, while Lee topped the club with 10 goals on the man advantage.

New York placed 17th on the penalty kill (79.9%), while surrendering 44 power-play goals against on 219 chances for the opposition.

The Islanders finished with the best goals against per game (2.33) in the league.

New York ranked fourth in the league with 1,295 credited blocks by their players.

Pittsburgh

Jake Guentzel - Sidney Crosby - Bryan Rust

Jared McCann - Evgeni Malkin - Patric Hornqvist

Dominik Simon - Nick Bjugstad - Phil Kessel

Teddy Blueger - Matt Cullen - Garrett Wilson

Brian Dumoulin - Kris Letang

Olli Maatta - Justin Schultz

Jack Johnson - Erik Gudbranson

Matt Murray

Casey DeSmith

WHO'S HOT

Crosby collected two goals and four helpers in a three-game point streak to finish the year, while Guentzel had two goals and two assists during that span. Guentzel has eight points in his last nine contests. Kessel has three goals and six assists in his last seven outings.

WHO'S NOT

Malkin hasn't scored a goal in his last nine games. He played in two contests to finish the regular season after returning from an eight-game absence due to an upper-body injury. He had one assist in those two matches. Bryan Rust didn't pick up a point in his last five games.

NOTES

Brian Dumoulin sat out three games at the end of the year with a lower-body injury. Pittsburgh hopes to have him back for Game 1. If he isn't ready then Marcus Pettersson is next in line to take his place.

Zach Aston-Reese (lower body) and Chad Ruhwedel (upper body) have been skating, but it's unclear when they will be available to play. They are both listed as day-to-day. Aston-Reese has been out since Mar. 10, while Ruhwedel hasn't played since Feb. 26.

Pittsburgh ranked fifth in the league in power-play efficiency (24.6%). They placed seventh overall with 56 power-play goals. Kessel led the team with 36 points on the man advantage, while tying Crosby for the team lead with 12 power-play goals.

The Penguins placed 19th on the penalty kill (79.7 percent). They allowed 45 goals when they were shorthanded 222 times. Pittsburgh tied for third in the NHL with 12 shorthanded goals.

Pittsburgh was sixth in the league with 3.30 goals for per game.

The Penguins led the league with 2,363 hits.

WASHINGTON CAPITALS VERSUS CAROLINA HURRICANES

Washington claimed the Stanley Cup last year for the first time in franchise history and didn't let success go to their heads in 2018-19. The Capitals won the Metropolitan Division for a fourth consecutive season.

There was no Stanley Cup hangover for Alex Ovechkin, who led the NHL with 51 goals and registered a team-high 89 points. Top-two centers Nicklas Backstrom and Evgeny Kuznetsov both surpassed 70 points. The Capitals had seven players on the roster record at least 20 goals, with T.J. Oshie, Jakub Vrana, Brett Connolly and Tom Wilson joining Ovechkin, Backstrom and Kuznetsov.

John Carlson had a career-high 70 points during the 2018-19 campaign. He racked up 20 points in 24 playoff games last year.

Braden Holtby will enter this playoff run as the team's undisputed one goaltender after he entered last year's postseason as the backup to Philipp Grubauer, who plays for Colorado now. His numbers weren't much better this year, but he performed well in the second half with a 15-7-2 record, a 2.42 goals-against average and .920 save percentage in 24 games after the All-Star break. He was also superb in the 2018 Stanley Cup Playoffs.

Washington won't have it easy against the upstart Hurricanes, though. Carolina ended what was the longest playoff drought in the league and will be back in the postseason for the first time since 2008-09.

Sebastian Aho led the team with 30 goals and 83 points during the 2018-19 season. He set personal bests in goals, assists (53) and points to help get Carolina back into the postseason, but he didn't have to do it alone. Teuvo Teravainen also had a career year with 55 helpers, which led the club, and 76 points. Justin Williams was second on team with 23 goals, while rookie Andrei Svechnikov, who was the second overall pick in the 2018 NHL Entry Draft, tallied 20 markers. Nino Niederreiter produced 14 goals and 30 points in 36 games with the Hurricanes after he was acquired from Minnesota.



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The Hurricanes also got plenty of offensive support from the back end with Dougie Hamilton posting 39 points in his first season with the team. Justin Faulk produced 35 points and Jaccob Slavin accounted for 31 points. Brett Pesce finished one point shy of giving Carolina four 30-point blueliners.

Carolina received great goaltending from Petr Mrazek and Curtis McElhinney this season. Mrazek had 23 wins compared to McElhinney's 20. Mrazek had a 2.39 goals-against average and .914 save percentage, while McElhinney had a 2.58 goals-against average and .912 save percentage. Mrazek could end up as the starter for Game 1, but it wouldn't be a surprise if McElhinney saw playing time as well during the series.

Washington's battle-tested roster and hunger to do it all again should get them past the Hurricanes. The Capitals won all four regular-season games, but this series should be closer than that so look for it to go six games before the Hurricanes are eliminated and they celebrate their strong season with one last Storm Surge for their fans.

Washington

Alex Ovechkin - Evgeny Kuznetsov - Tom Wilson

Carl Hagelin - Nicklas Backstrom - T.J. Oshie

Jakub Vrana - Lars Eller - Brett Connolly

Andre Burakovsky - Nic Dowd - Chandler Stephenson

Travis Boyd

John Carlson - Nick Jensen

Dmitry Orlov - Matt Niskanen

Brooks Orpik - Christian Djoos

Braden Holtby

Pheonix Copley

WHO'S HOT

Kuznetsov registered four goals and 12 points in his last 12 games. Ovechkin has notched five goals and seven assists in his past 13 games. Oshie has collected 12 points, including eight helpers, in his last 11 outings.

WHO'S NOT

Wilson had one goal and two assists in nine matches to finish the 2018-19 season. Vrana has contributed three goals and one assist in his last 12 appearances.

NOTES

Michal Kempny won't be available for the playoffs because of a torn hamstring. He has been out since Mar. 20.

Lars Eller is dealing with an upper-body injury, but he is expected to be ready for Game 1.

Washington ranked 12th overall on the power play (20.8%), while scoring the 11th-most power-play goals with 49 over 236 chances. Carlson led the team with 33 points on the man advantage, while Ovechkin topped the club with 18 power-play goals.

The Capitals finished 24th in the league on the penalty kill (78.9%). The 55 goals they allowed while shorthanded was the sixth-highest in the league.

Carolina

Nino Niederreiter - Sebastian Aho - Justin Williams

Micheal Ferland -- Jordan Staal --Teuvo Teravainen

Andrei Svechnikov - Lucas Wallmark - Jordan Martinook

Warren Foegele - Greg McKegg - Brock McGinn

Jaccob Slavin - Dougie Hamilton

Brett Pesce - Justin Faulk

Haydn Fleury - Trevor van Riemsdyk

Petr Mrazek

Curtis McElhinney

WHO'S HOT

Niederreiter produced two goals and four assists in seven games down the stretch. Hamilton has four goals and two helpers in his last seven outings. Teravainen collected two goals and four assists in five matches at the end of the regular season.

WHO'S NOT

Aho hasn't scored a goal in 14 games and he has six assists during that span. Micheal Ferland hasn't scored a goal in 17 contests, while recording five assists over that stretch. He has picked up two helpers in his last four outings, though. Svechnikov had just one assist in the final seven contests of the regular season.

NOTES

Calvin de Haan has been out since Mar. 31 due to an upper-body injury and is uncertain when he will be available to play. It's hoped he will be able to play at some point in the playoffs.

The Hurricanes ranked 20th on the power play (17.8%) in the regular season. They were 19th in power-play goals with 44 over 247 opportunities. Aho and Teravainen had 24 power-play points apiece to co-lead the team. Williams topped the team with nine goals on the man advantage.

Carolina finished eighth on the penalty kill (81.6%). They surrendered goals while being shorthanded 239 times.

Carolina led the league with 2,822 shots for in 2018-19.

BOSTON BRUINS VERSUS TORONTO MAPLE LEAFS

Boston finished second in the Atlantic Division again and will face Toronto again in the opening round of the playoffs. The Bruins tied Calgary for the second-most points in the league, while finishing with the third-most wins (49) in the NHL. The Bruins have one of the best top lines in the league and predictably they led the way in 2018-19.

Brad Marchand reached 100 points for the first time in his career. He scored 36 goals and earned a career-high 64 assists. David Pastrnak topped the team with 38 goals despite being limited to 66 contests. Patrice Bergeron played



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in 65 games, but he compiled 79 points. David Krejci tied a personal best with 73 points in 81 games to provide some secondary scoring.

Torey Krug had 53 points over 64 games to lead Boston's defense corps in scoring. Charlie McAvoy is capable of contributing offensively as well. He had 28 points in 54 appearances.

Tuukka Rask had to claw back the number one role from Jaroslav Halak after a tough start to the year. He still battled his share of consistency issues over the course of the season, but ended up with solid overall numbers. Halak offers some solid insurance, though.

The Bruins will need whoever plays to be at the top of their game because the Maple Leafs possess an explosive offense. Toronto finished fourth in the league with 286 goals, while posting a 46-28-8 record.

Mitch Marner had a career year with 26 goals and 68 assists for 94 points. John Tavares shined in his first season with his hometown team. He led the Leafs with a career-high 47 goals and he posted a personal best 88 points. Auston Matthews generated 73 points in 68 appearances. The Leafs had seven 20-goal scorers with Zach Hyman, Andreas Johnsson, Kasper Kapanen and Morgan Rielly joining Marner, Tavares and Matthews.

Rielly picked up a career-high 72 points this season, which ranked him third among all blueliners. He also led all defensemen with 20 goals. Jake Gardiner and Jake Muzzin have offensive ability as well. Gardiner had 30 points in 62 outings, while Muzzin produced 16 points in 30 games after he was acquired from Los Angeles.

Between the pipes, Frederik Andersen had a rough second half after a superb start to the 2018-19 campaign. He showed some glimpses of rediscovering his form in his final few outings, but he will need to be much better if the Leafs are going to defeat the Bruins. Michael Hutchinson will serve as Toronto's backup netminder after Garret Sparks struggled mightily in his first year as a No. 2 goalie in the NHL.

The top line of Marchand, Pastrnak and Bergeron combined for nine goals and 30 points against Toronto in Round 1 a year ago. Most teams have trouble containing the talented trio, but the Leafs don't seem to have answer for them. Toronto has had defensive issues this year, while allowing 3.04 goals against per game and 33.1 shots per game. That will put a great deal of pressure on Andersen. Adding Tavares and Muzzin to a group that took Boston to seven games last postseason gives the Leafs more of a chance than some are giving them credit for, but the team's play late in 2018-19 doesn't inspire much confidence. Boston wins in six games.

Boston

Brad Marchand - Patrice Bergeron - David Pastrnak

Jake DeBrusk - David Krejci - Karson Kuhlman

Marcus Johansson - Charlie Coyle - Danton Heinen

Joakim Nordstrom - Noel Acciari - Chris Wagner

Zdeno Chara - Charlie McAvoy

Torey Krug - Brandon Carlo

Matthew Grzelcyk - Steven Kampfer

Tuukka Rask

Jaroslav Halak

WHO'S HOT

Pastrnak has seven goals and 15 points in his last nine outings. Krejci has one goal and nine points in his past six games. He has one goal in 12 games, but he does have 13 points over that stretch. Marchand has five goals and eight helpers in his last seven appearances. Bergeron has six goals and 14 points in his past 10 contests.

WHO'S NOT

Krug has seven assists in his last 11 games, but he hasn't hit the scoresheet seven times during that span.

NOTES

Kevan Miller is not expected to be ready for the start of the playoffs because of a lower-body injury.

John Moore (upper body) and Sean Kuraly (hand) will probably be available to play at some point during Round 1. Moore hasn't been in the lineup since Mar. 25. while Kuraly has been sidelined since Mar. 21.

Boston finished third overall on the power play (25.9%), while scoring 65 goals (third-most in the league) on 251 opportunities. Marchand led the team with 34 power-play points, while Pastrnak paced the club with 17 goals on the man advantage.

The Bruins placed 16th in the league on the penalty kill (79.9), while surrendering 49 goals on 244 chances for the opposition.

Boston tied for the league lead with nine overtime goals, which included three from Marchand.

Toronto

Zach Hyman - John Tavares - Mitch Marner

Andreas Johnsson - Auston Matthews - Kasper Kapanen

Patrick Marleau - Nazem Kadri - William Nylander

Trevor Moore - Frederik Gauthier - Connor Brown

Tyler Ennis

Morgan Rielly - Ron Hainsey

Jake Muzzin - Nikita Zaitsev

Jake Gardiner - Travis Dermott

Frederik Andersen

Michael Hutchinson

WHO'S HOT

Marner has two goals and nine points in his last nine appearances, while Tavares has seven markers and two helpers during that span. Nazem Kadri picked up one goal and four helpers in his final six matches of the regular



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season. That includes a three-game assist streak to close out the year.

WHO'S NOT

Kapanen has one goal and two assists in his past 15 contests. He ended a 14-game goalless drought in Toronto's regular-season finale. Johnsson has three assists in nine games going into the playoffs. He has one goal in his last 17 outings.

NOTES

Muzzin was dealing with an illness at the end of the year, but he is expected to be ready for Game 1.

Toronto placed eighth in the league on the power play (21.8%), while scoring 46 goals on a league-low 211 chances. Marner and Rielly tied for the team lead with 21 power-play points. Matthews topped the club with 12 goals on the man advantage.

The Leafs ranked 17th on the penalty kill (79.9), while permitting 41 goals on 204 chances for the opposition.

Toronto finished second in the league with 2,629 faceoff wins and second with a 53.0% faceoff win percentage.

The Hockey News

2019 NHL First Round Playoff Preview: Washington Capitals vs. Carolina Hurricanes

The defending champion Capitals soundly won the season series against the Hurricanes, but Carolina has momentum behind it as it prepares for its first post-season in a decade. Washington's experience advantage could come to roost, however.

By The Hockey News

Perfection. That is what the Capitals achieved against the Hurricanes through the four-game season series against the Hurricanes., and that includes two potential message-sending contests to close out March in which Washington downed Carolina twice in three days. That said, the Hurricanes are no pushovers. Since the beginning of January, only the St. Louis Blues and Tampa Bay Lightning have accumulated more points than Carolina, who Storm Surged their way into the post-season and enter their first playoff this decade with momentum behind them. One wonders how the battle of experience versus inexperience impacts the matchup, however, as the defending Stanley Cup champions square off against a team that has its share of playoff newbies.

WASHINGTON CAPITALS

Somehow, the defending champs look even more impressive this year. Maybe it's because there is no longer a question of if the Capitals can win it all, or if they can beat Pittsburgh in a seven-game series – because both happened in the 2018 playoffs. So what is left is a well-balanced team with money players at every position, led by future Hall of Famer Alex Ovechkin.

Though he partied hard in the summer, Ovechkin won an eighth Rocket Richard Trophy, while a number of other forwards managed 20-goal campaigns. The power play ranked top-10 in the NHL.

On the back end, John Carlson played some of his best hockey ever and the defense did a good job at limiting shots. Adding Nick Jensen from Detroit at the deadline gave the unit some much-needed depth, and his steady hand will serve the team well as they run for back-to-back titles.

Though all the jokes about a "literal Stanley Cup hangover" didn't end up coming true (the Caps started the season 5-3-2, including a 7-0 opening-night waxing of the Bruins), there is still a concern about just how physically taxing it can be to go through the NHL playoffs twice in a row. Does Washington have the horses to do it, especially with physical teams such as Columbus and the Islanders lurking in the division?

In net, Braden Holtby battled through his second straight subpar regular season, though he turned it on in the playoffs last year and guided his team to glory. Does that switch get flicked once again? If it doesn't, can backup Pheonix Copley save the day?

Elsewhere, Washington has a pedestrian penalty-killing unit and does not do well on faceoffs. In fact, the Caps are the worst team in the league when it comes to draws, and every loss is magnified in the playoffs. Jay Beagle's departure stings in that department.

X-Factor: No doubt Tom Wilson will play a big part of Washington's post-season again, but which side of the line will he fall on? If the intimidating power forward spends his nights bashing opponents in the corners and scoring goals in front of the net, then the Caps will be tough to beat. If he's suspended for yet another violent transgression, as he was in last year's playoffs, then Washington is down a crucial player at the most inopportune of times. Given his reputation, Wilson will not get the benefit of the doubt in any sketchy interactions, so the right winger will have to be on his (relatively) best behavior.

CAROLINA HURRICANES

You'd be hard-pressed to find a more modern team than the Hurricanes right now. Carolina is the best possession squad in the league; a burgeoning youngster, Sebastian Aho, paces the attack; and the defense is great at moving the puck and keeping it away from its own net.

Had it not been for questions in net and concussion woes for center Jordan Staal, the Hurricanes would've been even higher in the standings. As it is, the Canes trended in the



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right direction in the second half, and the combination of leadership from coach Rod Brind'Amour and captain Justin Williams – the latter of whom spearheaded the fan-favorite 'Storm Surge' post-game celebration craze – has this franchise in the best place since the Stanley Cup championship team from 2006.

Keeping in-demand power forward Micheal Ferland at the trade deadline sent a very positive message to the team, too, while Nino Niederreiter has been a revelation since coming over from Minnesota.

The Hurricanes have played four different netminders, and none has really seized the reins. The main options are Petr Mrazek and Curtis McElhinney, neither of whom has been able to establish himself as the No. 1. McElhinney has the best save percentage, but the 35-year-old backup is streaky, while Mrazek has made a career out of coming close but never quite putting it all together. A .934 save percentage after the all-star break suggested he was figuring things out. That was big news, as anything less than average goaltending in the playoffs spells doom for non-elite teams.

Offensively, the Hurricanes are just OK, and the power play is not intimidating. The squad also ranks in the bottom third of the NHL in faceoff percentage, which tends to mean more in the high-stakes post-season than it does in the first 82 games. Is this a good team, or does it just play in a mixed-up division?

X-Factor: With a breakout offensive campaign, converted winger Sebastian Aho has shown he can hang with some of the top offensive centers in the league. As a member of

Finland's gold-medal WJC team in 2016, he has proven himself to be great in pressure situations. But how will the understated pivot react to the NHL's biggest stage? The last time he was in the playoffs was with Karpas Oulu of the Finnish Liiga. Will the smallish center thrive when the checking gets tighter? So far, Aho has made a living off proving the doubters wrong, and the NHL playoffs simply represent his next challenge to overcome.

SEASON SERIES:

Dec. 14, 2018 – WSH 6, CAR 5 (SO)

Dec. 27, 2018 – WSH 3, CAR 1

March 26, 2019 – WSH 4, CAR 1

March 28, 2019 – WSH 3, CAR 2

SCHEDULE:

Thursday, April 11, 7:30 p.m.: Hurricanes at Capitals

Saturday, April 13, 3 p.m.: Hurricanes at Capitals

Monday, April 15, 7 p.m.: Capitals at Hurricanes

Thursday, April 18, 7 p.m.: Capitals at Hurricanes

*Saturday, April 20, TBD: Hurricanes at Capitals

*Monday, April 22, TBD: Capitals at Hurricanes

*Wednesday, April 24, TBD: Hurricanes at Capitals

(All games listed in Eastern Time)

DEPTH CHARTS

Fan Favorite: Washington Capitals

THN Series Pick: Washington Capitals in six



SB NATION
CANES COUNTRY

Charlotte Checkers Corner: The Best of the Best

The Checkers clinch the best record in the AHL's regular season and home-ice advantage throughout the playoffs.

By Justin Lape

It's official. The Charlotte Checkers are the best of the best. Charlotte won the MacGregor Kilpatrick trophy this week, given to the team that finishes the AHL's regular season with the most points. The Syracuse Crunch have made a push in the second half of the season, but some slips over the last ten games put them out of the picture for the best regular season team.

Weekly Recap

The Checkers dominated in their first game of the week by disposing of the Lehigh Valley Phantoms 5-1. Charlotte opened the game with a pair of goals in the first period from Tomas Jurco and Aleksis Saarela. Saarela struck again in the second period for another multi-goal game this season. Stelio Mattheos scored his second professional goal in the

second period and Julien Gauthier added insurance with his 23rd goal of the season in the third period. Alex Nedeljkovic had to do the bare minimum to get the win, facing just 17 shots.

The Checkers topped the Phantoms again the next day 6-2. Charlotte's power play was buzzing and went 2-for-4 on the day. Tomas Jurco opened the scoring just 20 seconds into the game and Charlotte didn't look back, rambling off three unanswered goals. Martin Necas, Jake Bean, Jurco and Patrick Brown each finished with multi-point games in a comfortable Checkers win.

The Checkers slipped later in the week in their first game against the Springfield Thunderbirds and came out on the wrong side of a 5-3 score. The Checkers pestered opposing goalie Chris Driedger with 36 shots but it wasn't enough. Alex Nedeljkovic stopped 19 on 23 shots. Jean-Sebastian Dea found the back of the net twice for the Thunderbirds and Dryden Hunt scored his 22nd of the season.



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Charlotte wrapped up their week with a Dustin Tokarski 20-save shutout and a 5-0 win in a testy game. Aleksi Saarela stayed hot, potting his 29th goal of the season and giving him an opportunity to hit 30 later this week. Charlotte received help on the back end, receiving some offensive help from Roland McKeown and Trevor Carrick. The Checkers penalty kill stopped all four Thunderbird man-advantages and Necas added a pair of assists in the win.

Player of the Week

This week's player of the week goes to Tomas Jurco. The late-season addition had a productive week with two goals and four assists in four games to keep the Checkers rolling late in the season. He has 15 points in 17 games this season for Charlotte since being acquired.

Thought of the Week

It's a great time to be a fan of the Carolina Hurricanes organization. With the Canes playoff clinching win over New Jersey, both teams will be going to the playoffs in the same season for the first time since the Checkers relocated. The organizational depth truly shows when two of your top prospects have only played a handful of games for the Hurricanes this season and can be ready to go for the 2019-20 campaign.

It would be surprising for Martin Necas to not be in a full-time role with the Hurricanes next season. Whether Rod Brind'Amour initially thrusts him into a center position right away remains to be seen. Necas has found his scoring touch after initially struggling and has hovered around the 0.75 points per game mark. He could be one of the reasons the Hurricanes could repeat their success next season.

I'm especially curious to see what the Hurricanes choose to do with Haydn Fleury, especially with how the Adam Fox situation is playing out. Fleury is an RFA at the end of the season. Will Jake Bean fill Fleury's role or are the Hurricanes patient enough to stick with Fleury as the 7th defenseman?

Speaking of Bean, the Hurricanes called him up on Sunday to give him some experience as the Canes get set for the start of their first round playoff series. Bean, who made his NHL debut earlier in the season, is unlikely to play, but with the Checkers playing out the string there was really no harm in bringing Bean up for a few games. It seems likely that Bean will return to the Checkers before their opening round playoff series begins in two weeks.

Looking Ahead

Look, you don't care about the rest of the remaining games in the regular season. The Checkers will take on the Cleveland Monsters on the road Thursday and Friday to wrap up the regular season.

Here's the real schedule you want to see. The first round playoff series for the Checkers:

Game 1 - Away

Game 2 - Away

Game 3 - Bojangles Coliseum - Wednesday, April 24th - 7 p.m.

Game 4 [if necessary] - Bojangles Coliseum - Friday, April 26th - 7 p.m.

Game 5 [if necessary] - Bojangles Coliseum - Saturday, April 27th - 6 p.m.

TriangleSportsNetwork

2019 NHL Playoffs: Carolina Hurricanes

Peter Koutroumpis

RALEIGH, N.C. – The Carolina Hurricanes announced on Sunday the team's schedule for the First Round of the 2019 Stanley Cup Playoffs against the Washington Capitals.

Marking the first time the franchises have ever met in the postseason, the Metropolitan Division-champion Capitals will host the Hurricanes in Game 1 on Thursday.

Washington is looking to become only the fourth repeat Stanley Cup champion in the last 30 years, while Carolina is aiming to win its first playoff series in a decade.

The Hurricanes clinched their 14th all-time playoff appearance with a 3-1 victory against the New Jersey Devils, and eventually earned the first Wildcard spot in the Eastern Conference standings to match up with the Capitals.

Following Games 1 and 2 played on the road at Capital One Arena on April 11th and 13th, Carolina will return home to PNC Arena for Games 3 and 4 on Mon., April 15 and Thurs. Apr. 18.

Should a Game 6 be necessary, a third home game will take place in Raleigh on Mon. Apr. 22.

The Hurricanes boast a 22-17 record all-time at PNC Arena in the NHL playoffs.

NHL Playoff Snapshot

(Information via NHL.com includes totals of Hartford Whalers, 1979-97)

Carolina Hurricanes

2018-2019 – Regular Season Record: 46-29-7, 99 points

Playoff History

All-Time Playoff Appearance: 14th

Consecutive Playoff Appearances: 1

Most Recent Playoff Appearance: 2009 (CQF: 4-3 W vs. NJD; SCF: 4-3 W vs. BOS; CF: 4-0 L vs. PIT)



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All-Time Playoff Record: 59-68 in 127 GP (10-22 in 22 series)

Playoff Records

Game 7s: 4-3 (2-0 at home, 2-3 on road)

Overtime: 21-13 (12-8 at home, 9-5 on road)

Facing Elimination: 12-12 (8-6 at home, 4-6 on road)

With Chance to Clinch Series: 10-10 (4-3 at home, 6-7 on road)

Stanley Cup Final

Stanley Cup Final Appearances: 2

Stanley Cups: 1 (2006)



Weekly Report: Apr. 8, 2019

Written by Nicholas Niedzielski

The Checkers took three out of four games during a busy week to wrap up the home portion of their regular season.

Week in Review

Team Statistics

Overall record

49-17-8

Home record

26-7-5

Road record

23-10-3

Last week's record

1-1-0

Last 10 games

8-2-0

Division Standings

1st

Conference Standings

1st

League Standings

1st

Checkers 5, Lehigh Valley 1

The Checkers made quick work of the Phantoms in the first leg of their final visit to the Queen City. An early power-play goal from Tomas Jurco set the tone and it would be all Charlotte from there. Aleksi Saarela would find the net in both the first and second periods, while rookie Stelio Mattheos knocked home his second career goal to give

Charlotte a substantial 4-0 lead through 40 minutes of play. The Phantoms would finally breakthrough in the third to put the only blemish on Alex Nedeljkovic's otherwise stellar stat line, but a Julien Gauthier tally would slide things back the Checkers' way for good. Full recap

Checkers 6, Lehigh Valley 2

It was more of the same the next night, as Charlotte's offense made noise early and often. The Checkers struck three times in the opening frame before the Phantoms could find the back of the net, then tacked on another two unanswered to build a 5-1 advantage early on in the third. Lehigh would muster one more tally but it was too little, too late, and an empty netter from Steven Lorentz sealed the lopsided win for the home side. Full recap

Checkers 3, Springfield 5

The Checkers' good fortune on home ice came to a halt in their first meeting with Springfield. Despite opening the scoring, the Checkers found themselves in a 3-2 hole early on in the third period. Julien Gauthier came through on the power play to even the score midway through the frame, but the Thunderbirds had one more push in them, going back ahead with five to play. The Checkers had no answer for that, despite a strong rally effort, and the Thunderbirds would escape with a win. Full recap

Checkers 5, Springfield 0

Charlotte didn't have to wait long to get revenge, throttling the Thunderbirds the next day to wrap up the home portion of the team's regular season home schedule. Roland McKeown ripped one home just 38 seconds into regulation and that would kickstart the Charlotte offense. Five different Checkers found the back of the net, while Dustin Tokarski stopped all 20 shots he saw to pick up his first shutout in a Charlotte sweater. Full recap

Three Stars Of The Week

3rd Star



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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Trevor Carrick

1g, 5a

2nd Star

Tomas Jurco

2g, 4a

1st Star

Martin Necas

2g, 4a

Notables

RACKING UP THE ACCOLADES

The Checkers became the first team this season to punch their ticket to the postseason, then became the first team to clinch a division title, and now they've clinched themselves the best record in the AHL.

By virtue of the Syracuse Crunch losing on Saturday night, the Checkers have captured the Macgregor Kilpatrick Trophy, given annually to the AHL's regular season champions. It marks the first time that the Checkers – who are currently the only team in the league to surpass 100 points – have earned the honor in franchise history.

HOME SWEET HOME

The Checkers wrapped up the home portion of their regular season schedule with a 26-7-5 record, coming just one shy of the franchise record for home wins in a season. Still, the 26 victories on home ice currently stand as the most in the AHL.

The good news for the Checkers, who finished off their home slate on a 12-1-1 run, is that they've locked up home ice advantage for the entirety of the Calder Cup playoffs.

CARRICK CONTRIBUTES

After going through a 10-game stretch that saw him record just one point, Trevor Carrick has regained his scoring touch as of late. The All Star – who has assists in each of Charlotte's last four games – has racked up eight point (1g, 7a) over the last eight contests, pulling himself into a tie with Jake Bean for the team's defensemen scoring lead.

With 15 games to play, Carrick is nine shy of matching his single-season career high in points – set last year – and six shy of his career high in assists – a mark he hit in 2017-18 and 2015-16.

DEADLINE UPGRADES

The Checkers added a pair of big pieces around the trade deadline and both have paid huge dividends thus far. Tomas Jurco, acquired from Springfield in exchange for rookie Cliff Pu, has racked up 15 points in 17 games for the Checkers, including six (2g, 4a) in his last four. The forward is in the midst of a four-game point streak, matching his longest since joining Charlotte.

Between the pipes, the addition of Dustin Tokarski has been

a solid boost for Charlotte. The veteran netminder has appeared in six games for his new club and picked up the win each time while never allowing more than two goals in any game, giving him a 1.17 goals-against average and a .950 save percentage while in a Checkers sweater.

CARRICK'S BIG YEAR

Currently in the midst of a five-game point streak, Trevor Carrick continues to tack on points to his career year. The blue liner has now set career highs in assists (38) and points (47), both categories in which he ranks among the league's best blue liners.

With two games remaining, Carrick needs just three points to become the second defenseman in franchise history to hit the 50-point mark. Bobby Sanguinetti set the current record of 50 points during the 2011-12 campaign.

SAARELA STAYS SCORING

Aleksi Saarela's already lethal scoring touch has been ratcheted up as of late. The forward has lit the lamp 13 times over the last 16 contests – including four goals in the last four games – and now leads the team with 29 tallies this season.

With one more goal Saarela could become the fourth player in franchise history to reach 30 goals in a season, following Valentin Zykov's 33-goal effort a season ago.

GAUTHIER'S GOALS

The only Checker rivaling Saarela's red-hot goal output is Julien Gauthier. The forward has goals in five of the last six games to bring his season total to 25, far eclipsing his rookie total from last season of 16.

Gauthier also appears to have found a home as the net-front presence on the power play, knocking home goals in each of Charlotte's last two games in a nearly identical fashion.

Ranks

Andrew Poturalski is tied for fourth in the AHL in scoring (70) and ranks fifth in assists (47)

Aleksi Saarela is tied for ninth in the AHL in goals (29) and is tied for third in game-winning goals (8)

Alex Nedeljkovic leads the AHL in wins (33) and minutes played (2854), is tied for the league lead in goals-against average (2.25), ranks fifth in saves (1171) and is tied for eighth in save percentage (.916)

Martin Necas ranks fifth among AHL rookies in scoring (48) and is tied for fourth in assists (32)

Morgan Geekie ranks sixth among AHL rookies in scoring (46), is tied for fifth in goals (19), is tied for third in shooting percentage (21.1) and ranks fourth in plus-minus (+24)

Trevor Carrick ranks fifth among league defensemen in scoring (47), ranks fourth in assists (38) and is tied for third in game-winning goals (4)

Jake Bean is tied for eighth among league defensemen in scoring (44) and is tied for fifth in goals (13)



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Roland McKeown ranks fourth among AHL defensemen and sixth overall in plus-minus (+30)

Dan Renouf ranks fourth among league defensemen and is tied for ninth overall in penalty minutes (121)

INJURIES

Andrew Poturalski - Missed two games starting 4/6

Josiah Didier - Missed four games starting 4/2

Clark Bishop - Missed seven games starting 3/27

Janne Kuokkanen - Missed 15 games starting 3/8

Spencer Smallman - Missed 61 games starting 11/11

Transactions

Incoming

Apr. 5: (D) Derek Sheppard - Recalled from Florida (ECHL)

Outgoing

Apr. 7: (D) Jake Bean - Recalled by Carolina (NHL)

Coming Up

Thursday, April 11 at 7 pm - Checkers at Cleveland

Broadcast Info: AHLTV | Checkers App

Friday, April 12 at 7 pm - Checkers at Cleveland

Broadcast Info: AHLTV | Checkers App

By the Numbers

CATEGORY	RECORD	AHL RANK	LAST WEEK
Power play	19.6%	t-9th	13th
Penalty kill	86.6%	1st	1st
Goals per game	3.36	t-5th	9th
Shots per game	30.14	14th	16th
Goals allowed per game	2.50	2nd	2nd

Shots allowed per game 26.84 3rd 3rd

Penalty minutes per game 12.86 13th 13th

LEADERS

CATEGORY LEADER(S)

Points Andrew Poturalski (70), Aleksii Saarela (53), Martin Necas (48)

Goals Aleksii Saarela (29), Julien Gauthier (25), Andrew Poturalski (23)

Assists Andrew Poturalski (47), Trevor Carrick (38), Martin Necas (32)

Power play goals Julien Gauthier (8), Aleksii Saarela (7), Janne Kuokkanen (6)

Shorthanded goals Saku Maenalanen (3), Patrick Brown, Nicolas Roy, Michal Cajkovsky (1)

Game-winning goals Aleksii Saarela (8), Andrew Poturalski (6), Nicolas Roy (5)

Shots on goal Aleksii Saarela (190), Jake Bean (165), Andrew Poturalski, Julien Gauthier (158)

Penalty minutes Dan Renouf (121), Trevor Carrick (84), Julien Gauthier (57)

Plus/minus Roland McKeown (+30), Morgan Geekie (+24), Nick Schilkey (+21)

Wins Alex Nedeljkovic (33)

Goals-against average Alex Nedeljkovic (2.25)

Save percentage Alex Nedeljkovic (.916)



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TODAY'S LINKS

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SportScan

Articles from outlets covering the Hurricanes' upcoming opponents and league-wide news

1139651 Carolina Hurricanes

Turning point for Canes? 'We were so bad I almost dressed and got out there'

BY CHIP ALEXANDER

APRIL 08, 2019 01:43 PM

It came after the Carolina Hurricanes had been beaten 4-1 by the Ottawa Senators at PNC Arena, not long after Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour had apologized in the locker room to newcomer Nino Niederreiter.

Brind'Amour strode quickly in for his postgame press conference, saying, "We were so bad I almost dressed and got out there."

Brind'Amour is 48. That night, on Jan. 18, he might have been an upgrade on a team that was outquicked and outplayed, falling to 22-20-5 for the season and nine points out of playoff position in the Eastern Conference.

"I didn't know what I was watching," Brind'Amour said that night, later adding the need to "pick up the pieces" and get back to work.

Looking back now, with the Canes set to appear in the Stanley Cup playoffs, it can be said that was a turning point in the season, perhaps the turning point -- that night, that game, a badly disappointed Brind'Amour saying what he did.

Brind'Amour didn't mention any names. He even said the effort was there from his team, but countered it by saying, "We didn't play the way we're supposed to."

The Canes had three games left before the All-Star Game and bye-week break, all on the road. After the break would be two home games, then five more on the road -- in all, eight of 10 away in arguably the make-or-break stretch of the season.

The response? The Canes beat Edmonton 7-4 and Vancouver 5-2 on the road, sandwiched around an overtime loss to Calgary. Once back from the break, they beat the Vegas Golden Knights 5-2 at PNC Arena, had another close loss to the Flames, then went 4-1-0 on the road trip. It began with a 4-0 win over the Pittsburgh Penguins and included a 3-0 shutout of the New York Rangers that ended a 16-game losing streak at Madison Square Garden and a 4-1 win at Ottawa.

The 10-game record: 7-2-1. That's picking up the pieces and putting everything in place.

After the loss to the Senators, the Canes were 24-9-2 in their final 35 games, in keeping with Brind'Amour's directive to forget about the "big picture" -- we're how many points behind? -- for a couple of months, get back to playing their game and claw their way back into the playoff mix.

"I can't tell you the change," Brind'Amour said Monday. "I think confidence was a big deal with it. The puck started going in and our guys, you could just see they had a little more swagger. That had a lot to do with it."

Claw back they did and much went into it. The Niederreiter trade on Jan. 17 was huge, bringing in a scoring winger from the Minnesota Wild who immediately produced. The goalies, Petr Mrazek and Curtis McElhinney, gave the Canes quality starts and Mrazek was at his fiery best down the stretch, winning 11 of his last 13 games.

"To me they're 1A and 1B, whatever you want to call it," Brind'Amour said. "They've been huge parts in what we're trying to accomplish."



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Brind'Amour, asked about the season turnaround, will always say the Canes played their best hockey in the first 25 games, but it wasn't reflected in their record. That began to change in early January, with a five-game win streak. But after winning seven of eight, seemingly headed in the right direction, the Canes were hammered 6-2 by the Rangers in the Jan. 15 game at the Garden.

Then, the Ottawa debacle at home. Brind'Amour walked into that press conference, "It was so bad ..."

Brind'Amour made his point, delivered the message. Everyone did their part. Big picture: the Canes are in the playoffs.

FIVE FACTORS THAT TRIGGERED THE CANES' TURNAROUND

Being lucky, being good

Canes general manager Don Waddell was said to have his "lucky" coin in his pocket when the NHL Draft Lottery was held April 28 in Toronto. Lucky or not, the Canes were the big winners, moving from the 11th slot in the first round to No. 2. With the Buffalo Sabres set to pick Swedish defenseman Rasmus Dahlin with the No. 1 pick, the Canes in effect had their top choice: Russian power forward Andrei Svechnikov.

In the lineup at 18, Svechnikov had his ups and downs but scored 20 goals, all at even strength, in his rookie season. Some lottery luck helped set the tone for a special season.

Getting his chance

Rod Brind'Amour was a great player and Stanley Cup winner for the Canes, then served seven years as an assistant coach, but that doesn't always translate into being a good head coach. But when Bill Peters left for Calgary, Brind'Amour publicly stated he wanted the job, saying, "Now's the time."

Owner Tom Dundon made the move, naming Brind'Amour head coach on May 8, saying, "I think Roddy can get more out of people than they may have known they had." The Canes, 36-35-11 last season, are 46-29-7 heading into the playoffs. Now was the time.

Only one choice for the one "C"

With preseason training camp about to begin, Brind'Amour named Justin Williams the team captain on Sept. 13. "Big surprise, right?" he said of his friend and teammate on the 2006 Cup champions.

Williams has embraced the new role, being a go-to guy in the locker room but also a leader on the ice, scoring some of the biggest goals of the season. To wit: his late goal against Pittsburgh on March 19 led to a shootout win and two critical points for the Canes.

Wired for success

Goalie Scott Darling didn't initially believe his hamstring injury was serious, saying he would quickly be back in the lineup. But with the regular season about to begin and down a goalie, the Canes turned to the waiver wire on Oct. 2 and claimed goalie Curtis McElhinney from the Toronto Maple Leafs.

McElhinney started three of the first five games, all wins. He played a career-high 33 games and won 20, another career best. And the Leafs' Kyle Dubas wasn't the only general manager who helped the Canes.

The steal of the season

It's still hard making sense of the Jan. 17 trade, player for player, that brought Niederreiter to the Canes for center Victor Rask. Minnesota general manager Paul Fenton had his reasons. Waddell wasn't charged with larceny but could have been, certainly in hockey terms.

The Canes needed more scoring. Nino gave them five goals in his first five games and has been that guy. A fixture on the top line

and power play, Niederreiter has 14 goals and 16 assists in 36 games with Carolina.

News Observer LOADED: 04.09.2019

1139652 Carolina Hurricanes

Storylines and predictions for the Hurricanes vs. Capitals Round 1 matchup

By Sara Civian Apr 8, 2019

You've heard it 1,000 times already since Thursday, but 1,001 can't hurt: The Carolina Hurricanes have secured a playoff berth for the first time in a decade. Though that's huge in itself, head coach Rod Brind'Amour and the rest of the Canes keep making it clear that it's just the beginning.

"It's a special time," Brind'Amour said before Game 82 on Saturday. "I think when you have a drought as long as we've had, it obviously elevates this feeling. If it'd been every year it wouldn't mean as much. But it's special because the people who haven't seen it are excited to see something different. We all know that it's a different game, and it's exciting. Making the playoffs was not the goal. It was a huge step, but we're not done. We're trying to be the best."

And to be the best, you have to beat the best ...

(minus 10 points for Gryffindor for the cliché)

The Canes beat the Flyers 4-3 for a shot at facing the Islanders instead of the Capitals in Round 1, but the Penguins tied up their game on Sidney Crosby's 100th point and Jake Guentzel's 40th goal with 2:35 left in regulation, because of course they did. The loser point was enough to secure their matchup with the Islanders and set up Carolina on a date with the defending Stanley Cup champion Capitals.

This isn't a blind date — they've seen each other four times this season, but the Canes just weren't that into it. The Caps swept the season series with a 6-5 shootout win Dec. 14, a 3-1 decision Dec. 27, and home-and-home wins less than two weeks ago.

It's tough to say what the regular-season series means for the games ahead. On one hand, even capturing one point in the most recent losses would've made things infinitely less stressful for the Canes and they couldn't get it done. On the other, they weren't must-wins in a brutal stretch full of games that were. The first came after an emotional, overtime win against the Canadiens, who would've knocked them out of the playoffs. They followed the latter up with a decisive, 5-2 must-win.

That was an exhausted group playing with a decade of pressure on its shoulders. The brunt of that pressure has been lifted, so much was clear in the loose style of play that appeared in the regular-season finale.

Playoff hockey is a whole different beast, we're not sure which Canes and which Caps will show up on any given night to fight for the hardest title to win in professional sports — that's part of the fun.

Here are some storylines to keep in mind throughout the series that could mean everything as much as they could mean absolutely nothing.

How will Carolina's duo in net stack up against Washington's proven Cup-caliber goaltending?



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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Before we can even take a look at the goaltending matchup for this series, we approach the question of the hour: How will the Hurricanes approach their situation in net?

All season it's been a unique tandem between Petr Mrazek on a prove-yourself contract and journeyman Curtis McElhinney making his case for an extended stay.

The method was generally "ride the hot hand," which fluctuated throughout the season. McElhinney was the guy through late November to early December, with three consecutive starts and wins in a row, six of eight starts from Nov. 18 to Dec. 5, and two or fewer goals allowed in five of those six starts.

It truly became a college hockey-esque tandem when the Canes started heating up in January. The two alternated starts from Dec. 31 to Jan. 18 (10 games), Mrazek started three in a row due to a McElhinney injury, "goalie of the future" Alex Nedeljkovic had a strong appearance in Vancouver, then Mrazek and McElhinney shared the net equally until March, when Mrazek's play was leaving even opposing broadcasters speechless.

Mrazek has started 10 games since March 1 and won eight with a 1.79 GAA and .942 save percentage. His dramatic style of play just seems conducive to playoff hockey, and there's a .927 save percentage and 1.98 GAA in 11 postseason appearances to at least somewhat back up that notion.

Overall, Mrazek's made 40 starts to McElhinney's 33. Neither was pulled all season. (It's the first time in franchise history that's happened, by the way, and Tampa was the only other team to do it this season.)

Mrazek: 23-14-3, 2.39 GAA, .914 save percentage, 2,387 minutes logged in Carolina's crease

McElhinney: 20-11-2, 2.58 GAA, .912 save percentage, 1,978 minutes logged in Carolina's crease

With the way Mrazek has performed while the Canes were playing for their lives, keeping McElhinney's nagging knee issue in mind and knowing goalie coach Mike Bales isn't afraid to switch it up if things go south, my guess is Mrazek will get the nod as the "No. 1" goalie at first and they'll see what happens.

While the Canes have the luxury of two viable options in net, the Caps have the ultimate luxury of a proven Stanley Cup champion in Braden Holtby.

Holtby has played 59 games this season with 58 starts. He's 32-19-5 with a 2.82 GAA and a .911 save percentage. If we want to talk about coming in strong, he's undefeated in his past five, with a .944 save percentage in that span. He has been on fire since the All-Star break, really, with a 15-7-2 record and a .920 save percentage.

Bold prediction: Mrazek either gets another assist or gets involved in another net-front scrum. Maybe he does both and racks up a shutout, and that becomes the Petr Mrazek hat trick.

How will Sebastian Aho and other postseason newcomers perform for the Canes?

I asked Brind'Amour in Pittsburgh on March 31 why he thinks the Hurricanes are so good in the second game of back-to-backs (12-4-1), and aside from his opinion that their difficulty is a "myth," I thought he'd say goaltending.

"You definitely need solid goaltending," he said. "But I think youth helps, we're a fairly young team and I think they don't know that they're tired."

Brind'Amour will have to hope that ignorance yields the same type of bliss in terms of playoff experience with the younger (and some of the older) guys, considering none of Sebastian Aho, Justin Faulk, Jaccob Slavin, Brett Pesce, Jordan Martinook, Brock McGinn, Lucas

Wallmark, Andrei Svechnikov, Warren Foegele, Saku Maenalanen, Haydn Fleury or Jake Bean has played in an NHL playoff game.

There's also the elephant (or seabass, if you will) in the room, that Aho has struggled to find his scoring touch since (and a little before) friendly fire when Nino Niederreiter banged him up. He's goal-less in his past 14 games — he last scored in Nashville on March 9. Others have obviously stepped up in that aspect in the playoff push, and the emergence of Svechnikov's offensive flair seemed to coincide with Aho's drought, but you bank on your best players to come through in the playoffs. The Canes' rising star and first-line center is going to need to find his way back on the scoresheet for his team to make a dent in the Caps. He still leads the Canes in points with his career-high 30 goals, 53 assists and 83 points.

Playoff hockey is obviously different than regular-season hockey, but it's still the same game they know and love. This is what some of them (like Faulk) have been missing for eight years — it's no surprise he scored the game-winner that clinched the playoffs and has stepped up on the scoresheet to make it happen recently. The desperation of getting where some of them have wanted to be for so long should make for a fascinating series with the uber-experienced, defending champions.

"It's going to be a great challenge — we're playing the Stanley Cup champs," Brind'Amour said. "It'll be tough, we know that. No matter who we're playing it'll be an uphill battle, we know that. But I like all year the way this group responds to challenges."

Bold prediction: #PlayoffSvech is going to become a thing.

Justin Williams' connection with the Capitals

One of the most interesting yet ultimately inconsequential storylines to follow here is Williams' connection with Washington. Obviously, Williams spent two seasons with the Caps prior to reuniting with the Canes in 2017-18, but it goes deeper than that as things with Williams tend to.

When he was asked if it would be extra personal for him, he thought about it for a second.

"The only thing that makes it extra personal is that I know a lot of the players ... I guess that is the definition of personal," he conceded. "It'll be a fun series to be part of. Stanley Cup champs, the best team. Someone's gotta knock them out so we're gonna try. It'll be tough, but we'll give it everything we've got."

The Capitals actually FaceTimed with Williams the night they won the Cup, as the always excellent Amalie Benjamin reported last month for NHL.com.

If you ever want to understand how much Williams is respected as a teammate, just ask Nicklas Backstrom.

"He's probably one of my favorite people ever," Backstrom said ahead of their last tilt in Raleigh. "He's just a great person. He cares. He cares about everybody on the team. He's funny, but he can get everyone on board too, so it's no surprise where he's taking this team. It's not surprising, it's like him, the way they are, the way they're playing. ... A player like him can mean so much."

Lukewarm prediction: There's no chance someone as sharp as Williams accidentally walks into the home locker room in Washington.

How will Brind'Amour and Capitals coach Todd Reirden navigate their first postseasons at the helm?

The fun in this storyline is that we really don't know.

Can't imagine Brind'Amour deviating too far from anything that has yielded so much success for the Canes since New Year's Eve, right? He's been adamantly against changing things for the sake of changing them since Day 1. Even when things were at their worst in December, he stayed the course and the team bought into that. His



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game plan in Carolina has never been easy, but it has always been simple: Earn it, buy-in, work hard, take a bunch of shots (franchise record) and don't allow much.

That's really it, and it's been working as long as the ones implementing it give it their all.

Things change when you need to prepare for the same team in a series, of course. The Canes will definitely watch some extra film and draw up some extra plays to attempt to stop Alex Ovechkin on the power play. But how do you stop that man from setting up shop in his own oval office, standing there like he's waiting for the bus, and still scoring more often than not?

"The losing really blows, that's the part I've had a hard time with," Brind'Amour described what it's like for him as head coach Saturday. "But watching the guys have success has given me a lot of enjoyment. The other night, clinching at home and just seeing that pure joy. I don't know that when I played I had that much joy, I was always chasing something, thinking about the next one. Now I get to see these guys and I'm enjoying how they've responded and how they're enjoying it ... any coach would love this group, that's the thing. I can't even think of a negative, that's really hard to find in this league. This buy-in, for a first-year coach, that makes it pretty easy."

The Canes have generally just focused on what they can control all season and kept it simple. It's hard to imagine them getting any more or less caught up in matchups and the opponents' quirks than they already have. Besides, it'll be Jordan Staal doing much of the matching up. He has a Stanley Cup and six seasons of playoff experience under his belt.

Bold prediction: This won't become the matchup war that many a playoff series become.

Clash of the jerks

Even though the Caps just clinched the Metropolitan Division for the fourth consecutive year and the Hurricanes are making their first postseason appearance in, well, you get it ...

Even though Alex Ovechkin just won a record-breaking eighth Rocket Richard Trophy for leading the NHL in goals (51) and the Hurricanes' star forwards are still emerging ...

... these teams have more in common than it seems on the surface of the actual ice.

The Capitals finally conquered the Penguins last season, went on to win the Cup and had one of the most cathartic, public Cup celebration benders in recent memory. It was awesome to see such childlike joy out of Ovechkin when so many years of greatness paid off. They were criticized for it, of course, and for some equally stupid reason Evgeny Kuznetsov has been periodically criticized for his awesome bird celebration.

Can you think of another team criticized for enjoying some cathartic celebration of its own?

This series is stacked with personality and intensity. It'll be entertaining no matter the outcome.

Bold prediction: Bird surge, anyone?

The Athletic LOADED: 04.09.2019

1139749 NHL

New book brings the Seattle Metropolitan back to life more than a century after their greatest triumph

By Geoff Baker

There's a touch of sadness that comes with reading a newly released book on the Seattle Metropolitan's 1917 Stanley Cup championship.

First-time author Kevin Ticen, a former University of Washington baseball player and longtime Seattle Sports Commission director, does a fine job in "When it Mattered Most: The Forgotten Story of America's First Stanley Cup Champions, and the War to End All Wars" (Clyde Hill Publishing) of bringing to life many of the team's forgotten figures. It's easy to grow attached to the personal stories of men like Pete Muldoon, Frank Foyston and Bernie Morris, all working to build a hockey legacy in Seattle amid the backdrop of the United States preparing its late entry into World War I.

And that's the sad part: Knowing the championship hockey foundation laid by the Metropolitan of the Pacific Coast Hockey Association (PCHA) ultimately went the way of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires Ticen's book mentions in its war references. Sure, we'll have a pending launch more than a century later of a National Hockey League franchise in Seattle for the 2021-22 season.

But none of the men who brought the first Stanley Cup to U.S. soil right here in Seattle, beating the vaunted Montreal Canadiens of the pre-NHL National Hockey Association that have since become the sport's legacy franchise, wound up within even a few decades of living to see the moment. And perhaps that's a tribute to Ticen's book: It makes us empathize with hockey figures who've been dead longer than most of the city's sports fans have been alive.

"For me, when I started, the priority was to try to bring these guys back to life," Queen Anne resident Ticen said. "I wanted it to be more like you knew them as people and knew how they experienced the games. And how fans experienced the games."

And he wasn't going to get many firsthand anecdotes; the oldest living relatives he talked to of men like Foyston and Metropolitan founder Lester Patrick having been just wee toddlers long after the Metropolitan's demise in 1924. Instead, Ticen relied heavily on public records, library documents, newspaper archives and plain old common sense in recreating behind-the-scenes dialogue as best he could.

For much of the locker room and on-ice banter, he used material from a series of Royal Brougham stories in the Seattle Post-Intelligencer in the 1930s. Brougham would attend periodical meetups between the ex-players over lunch and relay the old on-ice stories to his readers.

One of the book's funnier moments talks about a frustrated coach Muldoon tapping Hall of Famer Jack Walker on the shoulder during a game the Metropolitan were losing and telling him to substitute on for a struggling player. Muldoon had pulled Walker from the game moments earlier to give him a rest, but forgot about that and thought he was still on the ice.

Without taking his eyes off the action, he advised Walker to "get in there for Walker, he's awful."

After the game, a loss, Walker — in a bid to defuse player tension — stormed in to the dressing room and advised teammates that if they didn't start playing better, Muldoon wouldn't hesitate to substitute "Walker for Walker" to get them going. Much laughter ensued and the "Walker for Walker" line became a running gag throughout the championship season.

Ticen said it was through Brougham's recaps that he discovered the anecdote.

"The 'Walker for Walker' story gets told three times in the 1930s from Royal (Brougham) having lunch with them and they all laugh about it," Ticen said. "It was obviously important if 20 years later they're all telling the same story multiple times. I can't tell you that it exactly happened the moment that I said it did, but I could tell when certain



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things in the season were happening so I'd insert it where it would work the best."

But for other things, like how Hall of Famer Foyston often used his eyes to calm down friend and teammate Morris, he relied on information gleaned from an interview with Foyston's granddaughter.

"She went on about the look in his eyes," Ticen said. "She said 'He could absolutely defuse your tension in a heartbeat by the look in his eye. He had the warmest look in his eye. It was incredible how he could change your emotional state by his eyes.' "

Ticen was able to nail the exact dates for several war happenings and correlate them to what was going on with the team. The collapse of the Romanov dynasty in Russia, for instance, took place two days before the 1917 Stanley Cup final opened.

This isn't mere trivia: Folks often overlook the horrific nature of the First World War — especially its first-time use of tanks, planes and mustard gas on a broad scale — and how U.S. isolationist policies back then were vastly different from the world policeman role this country later adopted. Americans were preoccupied with happenings overseas and whether they should get involved, while talk of a pending military draft by 1917 was a daily reality for Canadian-citizen Metropolitan players, whose birth country had joined the fighting with a volunteer army years before the U.S.

Ticen is a history buff and married an Austrian while playing baseball overseas. His wife's family farm in Vienna was just a five-minute drive from one of the homes where Archduke Franz Ferdinand — whose 1914 assassination in Sarajevo was a catalyst that triggered the war — used to reside.

"In so many ways, this book was just a pitch right down the middle for me," Ticen said.

The war also serves as debate fodder for what could become a revived push to posthumously land Morris in the Hockey Hall of Fame. Morris missed the entire 1919-20 season after being erroneously convicted and imprisoned in the U.S. for draft dodging and finished his career just shy of the 200-goal-mark typically considered automatic for Hall enshrinement for players from that era.

The bittersweet Morris life story could serve as a metaphor for the Metropolitan as a whole. Their 1917 triumph was but a flickering moment in the city's vast sports history, one followed by the collapse of both the franchise and PCHA less than a decade later.

It's a harsh reminder that nothing lasts forever in sports, as NBA Sonics fans can well attest and something those bringing the NHL here had best keep in mind. History does repeat itself to various degrees depending on how much — or how little — is learned from previous experiences.

"I thought that sports were going to be a completely different enterprise 100 years ago," Ticen said. "And as I really got in to the research and the game recaps and a lot of those things, it was like 'Oh yeah, sports are exactly the same.' It was a little bit slower back then, the equipment wasn't as good and all that, but it was very much the same."

And that's not necessarily bad news for a city where the highest level of pro hockey has gone missing for 95 years. The fact the Metropolitan were once ingrained in the city's sports psyche provides evidence for the incoming NHL team that Seattle just may have been a hockey town all along.

A hockey town perhaps merely needing a reminder of its storied past.

Author Kevin Ticen will perform a reading of his book at the University Book Store, 4326 University Way NE on Tuesday at 6 p.m. He will also appear at Third Place Books in Shoreline on April 25 at 7 p.m.

Seattle Times LOADED: 04.09.2019

1139750 NHL

Plenty of Washington state stories to watch as 'real season' begins with NHL playoffs

By Geoff Baker

Six months after the National Hockey League regular season launched, what puck aficionados routinely refer to as "the real season" begins this week.

The playoffs are a grueling two months for a league with arguably no peer in North America when it comes to parity once the postseason begins. The NHL long ago shed itself of the Stanley Cup dynasties that permeated its landscape from the 1940s onset of the Original Six era right on through the early 1990s.

While we can debate whether Major League Baseball enjoys better regular-season parity, the playoff ledger has tilted hockey's way the past two decades.

No NHL team has gone to three consecutive finals since the Edmonton Oilers did it 34 years ago, in stark contrast to NFL's New England Patriots and NBA's Golden State Warriors and Cleveland Cavaliers being in the midst of such runs while MLB's Los Angeles Dodgers are vying for a third World Series appearance in a row.

Only one NHL franchise — the 2016 and 2017 Pittsburgh Penguins — has repeated as Stanley Cup champion since 1998. The Penguins also were the only NHL team to reach consecutive finals over that 21-year span, while the NBA has had eight such finalists, MLB five and NFL four.

Finally, only four NHL teams since 2000 that finished first overall in the regular season have gone on to claim a Cup title. The NBA had nine regular-season champs claim a league title in that span, the NFL had seven and MLB five.

So, while teams like the Penguins, Chicago Blackhawks and Los Angeles Kings have enjoyed multiple championships the past decade or so, the days of a lone NHL franchise ruling everyone for consecutive years on end are long gone.

We've heard ample attempts at explaining it, from the NHL adopting a salary cap after the 2004-05 lockout to the sheer length of a more-physical postseason exposing weaknesses previously hidden.

There will be locally-tinged playoff story lines to follow, starting with Stanwood and Everett product T.J. Oshie and his defending Cup champion Washington Capitals, who open against the Carolina Hurricanes. They'll be challenged in the Eastern Conference by the Tampa Bay Lightning, who play Columbus after becoming the second team in NHL history to reach 62 victories in a season. The Lightning feature forward Tyler Johnson from the Spokane suburb of Liberty Lake.

Johnson tied his career high with 29 goals this season as the Lightning ran away with the Presidents' Trophy for the top overall regular-season record. Oshie scored 25 goals for the Caps, who started slow but won 16 of their final 23 games to claim the Metropolitan Division crown.

The Western Conference's top team was the Calgary Flames, who now face Colorado and feature another Spokane-area graduate in Derek Ryan. The plugging centerman, who spent much of his pro career in Austria and with the Hurricanes before joining the Flames this season, scored 13 goals and had a second consecutive 38-point campaign.



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Finally, a Bonney Lake product with zero goals might see playoff action with the San Jose Sharks, who open against the 2018 Cup finalist Vegas Golden Knights. After three NHL appearances last year, Dylan Gambrell played eight games for the Sharks this season but has yet to log an NHL point.

The Sharks last week sent Gambrell back down to the American Hockey League's San Jose Barracuda, who just made the AHL playoffs. But there's a decent chance Gambrell could rejoin the Sharks this postseason, especially given his strong game last week in a defeat against Calgary.

Some non-Washington natives with Seattle Thunderbirds connections to watch include reigning NHL Rookie of the Year Mathew Barzal, whose Islanders led the Metropolitan Division much of the year before the Capitals took over. Barzal's teammate, defenseman Thomas Hickey, also played for the Thunderbirds.

Former T-Birds forward Shea Theodore notched a career-high 12 goals and 25 assists for the Golden Knights and played three games in the finals defeat against Washington, scoring once.

Brenden Dillon had a solid season on defense for the Sharks, appearing in 80 games.

Finally, future Hall of Fame candidate Patrick Marleau — the most decorated ex-Thunderbird of all-time — tries yet again for his first Cup victory, this time with the Toronto Maple Leafs. Toronto is in tough against first-round opponent Boston and hasn't made the Cup final since 1967, while Marleau made it once with the Sharks in 2016.

Onetime Everett Silvertips defenseman Ryan Murray remains out indefinitely for the playoffs with Columbus after sustaining an upper body injury.

At first glance, Johnson and Oshie appear to have the edge at hoisting the Cup. But as mentioned, recent history has not been kind to teams trying to repeat as champions or parlay regular-season titles into something more meaningful.

Sure, the salary cap had something to do with it, making it difficult to hoard talented players for years. The cap came on the heels of the NHL becoming the last major pro sports league to embrace true free agency, which began the dispersal of players away from championship cores.

Throw in the vanishing of the "territorial exemption" rule from decades prior, which gave Original Six squads any amateur player within 50 miles of their home rink, and it becomes clear why NHL champions no longer repeat as automatically.

The last true NHL dynasty — by definition of three or four consecutive years at the top — was the New York Islanders, who won four consecutive championships from 1980-83 and made a fifth consecutive final in 1984 before being dethroned by the Edmonton Oilers. Those Oilers, who'd lost the 1983 final to New York, went on to win four titles in five years and a fifth in seven seasons.

Finally, the Detroit Red Wings of the 1990s passed for a new generation's definition of a dynasty with three finals appearances in four seasons and victories in 1997 and 1998. But seriously, the true championship dynasty thing is done.

With four best-of-seven rounds and up to 28 playoff games for the Cup winner, this becomes a war of attrition the deeper a team goes, and luck can factor in. Tampa Bay, which went 24-3-4 in one-goal games this season — including 7-3 in five-minute overtimes and 6-1 in shootouts — risks being exposed by pucks suddenly bouncing the other way or by depleting playoff overtimes that can drag on for hours until somebody finally scores.

So, this really is a new season. And while there will likely be some local connection hoisting the Cup, history tells us regular-season results won't be of much help in figuring out who that will be.

Seattle Times LOADED: 04.09.2019

1139831 Washington Capitals

Amid Capitals' playoff-proven roster, Nic Dowd and Nick Jensen are the key postseason rookies

By Samantha Pell April 8 at 10:10 AM

Washington Capitals center Nic Dowd and defenseman Nick Jensen have long been stuck watching the Stanley Cup playoffs through a television screen. For years, neither had the chance to break into the coveted race for a championship and experience what Washington now considers an organizational norm.

That will finally change this season. The close friends are set to play in their first postseason when the Capitals begin their first-round series against the Carolina Hurricanes on Thursday at Capital One Arena.

With the Capitals making it to the postseason 11 times in the past 12 years, Washington is used to this feeling — and the expectation of success for a team looking to repeat as Stanley Cup champion.

"Until you think about it, people don't understand how impressive it is what they do here and how much they won," Dowd said of the Capitals' success. "And to be a part of it, I think it just becomes the norm, and it is what guys expect, which is how it should be. But for a guy like myself who hasn't been in the playoffs, I'm excited."

The trick now is for Dowd and Jensen to mentally prepare for something they've never experienced.

While Dowd and Jensen are true playoff rookies, as is backup goaltender Pheonix Copley, center Travis Boyd is the next closest thing. The 25-year-old only played in one postseason game last season — the clinching Game 6 in the second round against the Pittsburgh Penguins that sent the Capitals to their first Eastern Conference finals in 20 years.

"I remember I was pretty darn nervous before that game," Boyd said. "It was pretty much exactly how you would expect it. Every single time you touched the puck, you were going to get hit. Every time you have a chance, you have to hit someone. And it's just, the game, it seems like it gets a little bit faster, and on top of that it gets a little more physical."

If there was one thing Boyd took away from his first postseason appearance and overall playoff experience, it was an undeniable urge to want to do it all over again.

"Once you finally win a Stanley Cup and get to actually see what it is and what it is all about and what comes with it, I mean it's got to be one of the most addictive things in the world, right?" he said.

In recent days the Capitals have attempted to rekindle the energy that surrounded last season's Stanley Cup run, with Dowd and Jensen trying to absorb what they can.

"We've been kind of getting together as a team, kind of trying to re-create some of the feelings that this team had last year," Jensen said. "I think that is kind of important for guys like me and the other guys that haven't won a Cup, to kind of understand a little bit of that feeling of what it is like, because that is a dream for anyone to win it."

For Dowd and Jensen, the postseason will be yet another challenge experienced together. They have shared a lot of memories since they were roommates and teammates at St. Cloud State University. They worked their way up through different teams in the American



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Hockey League, were groomsmen in each other's weddings and now have carved out roles with the Capitals.

After spending time with Vancouver and Los Angeles last season, Dowd signed with the Capitals in July as a replacement for fourth-line center Jay Beagle, who departed for the Canucks in free agency. While Dowd ended up on a fluctuating fourth line and was a healthy scratch 18 times during the regular season, he managed to have a career year, scoring eight goals.

Before joining the Capitals for his fourth NHL season, he had nine career goals. This year, he not only scored the goal that clinched a playoff spot for the Capitals, but he also scored the goal that helped them lock up the Metropolitan Division title.

Jensen's acquisition at the trade deadline in February added blue-line depth to a team gearing up for the postseason. Jensen, who played top-four minutes with Detroit, has proved even more important after the loss of defenseman Michal Kempny for the season; he had surgery for a torn hamstring last week.

Dowd and Jensen barely missed playoff runs with their previous organizations.

Dowd, who was picked by the Kings in the 2009 entry draft, could only watch as the organization found postseason success while he was coming up through the AHL. He made his NHL debut in March 2016.

Jensen, chosen by Detroit in the 2009 draft, made his NHL debut in December 2016 — during the first season in 26 that the Red Wings didn't make the playoffs. Detroit missed the playoffs the following year as well.

"When you miss it for the first time, it feels a little bit like the end of an era," Jensen said. "It was a little tough, but I mean all teams go through that. But being able to be here and kind of go from a developing team that was really trying to grow and get back to the playoffs to a team that was sitting on top of the division and eventually clinch the division title just was pretty exciting."

While Dowd and Jensen had their share of playoff experience at the AHL level, have watched playoff hockey and have been around players who have experienced the postseason, it's hard to replicate those pressure-packed contests. But Jensen thinks he and Dowd can bring a different type of edge to a team kept mostly intact after last season's championship run.

"I think it's a different kind of hunger," Jensen said. "Yeah, it's, 'I've never won, and I want to win it.'"

Washington Post LOADED: 04.09.2019

1139832 Washington Capitals

Frenemies: Former Capital Williams leads Hurricanes against old team

By Adam Zielonka - The Washington Times - Monday, April 8, 2019

Carolina Hurricanes forward Justin Williams likely didn't mind getting a call on FaceTime in the middle of the night last June. Once he saw who was calling, he probably understood how they were feeling.

Members of the Washington Capitals called Williams, an old teammate, the night they won the Stanley Cup last year as they partied with the trophy around Las Vegas, Williams told NHL.com earlier this year.

Williams' name was etched on the Cup three times, for winning in 2006 with Carolina and in 2012 and 2014 with the Los Angeles Kings. Nicklas Backstrom found those spots and texted pictures of them to Williams, as if to gush, "We're going to join you on here next."

"When I got it, I just wanted to send it to him because he's obviously on there a couple times," Backstrom said.

Backstrom once called Williams one of his "favorite people ever," as well. But the two friends will be incommunicado for a while as the Capitals and Hurricanes gear up for their first-round Stanley Cup Playoffs series that kicks off Thursday.

"Obviously when he was here, we loved him as a guy," Backstrom said. "But right now we're not gonna talk to him for a couple weeks here."

On a young Hurricanes team that many didn't expect to qualify for the postseason, the 37-year-old Williams has been an important veteran presence. First-year coach Rod Brind'Amour elevated Williams to captain this year due to how respected he is in the locker room.

He was respected in Washington, too, for the two seasons he played for the Capitals from 2015 to 2017.

"If there's one guy that you wanna take some advice from on how to play in the playoffs, (Williams) is it," T.J. Oshie said. "I'm sure he's going to have them ready to roll and it's going to be a pretty intense and fun series."

Backstrom recalled one Williams-ism that stuck with him long after his friend left Washington.

"He always said in the playoffs, momentum is dead after you win," Backstrom said. "There's a new game coming up, instead of, oh you got the win. He always reset the room ... which I think is a good thing to do in the playoffs. Leave that other game and then move on, even if you win or lose."

Williams was a mentor for younger wingers like Andre Burakovsky, who was 20 and 21 years old at the time. Burakovsky said he helped him on and off the ice.

"He's a leader. He's been around, he's been winning before," Burakovsky said. "He knows what it takes. I think him coming in to help our team, I think he did a lot for us and tried to guide us to the way to how we need to act in the playoffs to be successful."

Even general manager Brian MacLellan was happy to praise Williams Monday, saying he "really senses the tone of an organization, of a team, where they are at in the games and playoffs."

In Carolina, that meant creating a new tradition of "Storm Surge" team celebrations after home victories to rally the team and fan base — though Williams has said they won't continue the practice in the postseason. That type of activity might not have flown in a locker room like Washington's.

Now Williams, who holds the NHL record for career points in Game 7s and who won the 2014 Conn Smythe Trophy for postseason MVP, will be the galvanizing force for Washington's first-round opponent, a Hurricanes team that is otherwise very green to the whole postseason thing.

"You either want to really, really make them earn it or you want to be able to push them out of it," Williams told reporters in North Carolina. "By saying that I mean, at some point, somebody's gonna give and say it's too hard, and we gotta make sure it's not us."

Washington Times LOADED: 04.09.2019

1139833 Washington Capitals



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Capitals may not call up former playoff hero Devante Smith-Pelly

By Adam Zielonka - The Washington Times - Monday, April 8, 2019

The Washington Capitals are able to recall Devante Smith-Pelly from the AHL Hershey Bears at any time now. As of Monday afternoon, it has yet to happen.

Smith-Pelly, who scored three goals in the last three games of the Stanley Cup Final in June, cleared waivers and was assigned to Hershey in February to make room for a trade for Carl Hagelin. He's played in the AHL since then, and the Capitals are not in a rush to call him back up.

"We have guys here that have played well. We've played really well down the stretch. We're not anxious to make changes but we're open to whatever it takes," general manager Brian MacLellan said Monday. "If we need Devante — he's played well down there — we'll use him."

NHL teams are allowed to disregard the salary cap limit and roster as many players as they wish during the Stanley Cup Playoffs.

Last year during playoff time, the Capitals recalled minor-league players Pheonix Copley and Nathan Walker, the latter of whom actually saw ice time due to injuries and suspensions in the lineup. These extra players are often called "black aces."

The Bears qualified for the AHL's playoffs and will continue to play meaningful games in April and perhaps beyond. But MacLellan does not view that as a complicating factor when deciding who to call up to the NHL roster.

"I think it's more advantageous because these guys get to keep playing, versus having a guy come up and do the extra player skate," MacLellan said. "You're gonna lose your game a little bit, you lose the timing of it. So we have guys down there that we're considering bringing up, and they're playing, they're playing power play, they're playing penalty kill. I think their game stays sharper and if we need them we can call them up."

Washington Times LOADED: 04.09.2019

1139834 Washington Capitals

Meet the three playoff rookies on a quest to help experienced Capitals go back-to-back

By Brian McNally April 08, 2019 10:47 PM

ARLINGTON — A year ago at this time, Nic Dowd was watching the Stanley Cup playoffs from home while most of his current Capitals teammates were on the run of a lifetime.

Nick Jensen, Dowd's friend and college teammate at St. Cloud State, was in the same position back in Michigan. Neither player had ever reached the NHL postseason. Dowd's Vancouver Canucks finished 14th in the Western Conference. Jensen's Detroit Red Wings were 20 points out of a playoff spot in the Eastern Conference.

Neither could have foreseen the position they find themselves in now. Dowd and Jensen joined the Capitals this season — one via free agency in July, the other near the trade deadline in February —

and are about to participate in the Stanley Cup playoffs for the first time. Washington plays the Carolina Hurricanes in a best-of-seven first-round series beginning Thursday.

"I'm excited. I've never even come close to making it to clinching playoffs or even playing [big games]," Dowd said after a 3-2 win against the Hurricanes in Raleigh on March 28 secured a playoff spot.

Unlike last year's team, which relied on six rookies or playoff neophytes who had never been in the postseason before, including Jakub Vrana, Chandler Stephenson and Christian Djoos, this year's Capitals returned almost intact and loaded with experience. Only center Jay Beagle, backup goalie Philipp Grubauer, forward Alex Chiasson and defenseman Jakub Jerabek did not return to the organization among the 26 players who were on the playoff roster.

Forward Devante Smith-Pelly is in the minors with AHL Hershey, but began the year with the Capitals. So did defenseman Madison Bowey, who was traded to Detroit in the Jensen deal.

Jensen and Dowd are joined by rookie defenseman Jonas Siegenthaler and goalie Pheonix Copley as the only Capitals who have never been in a playoff game. And even Copley was around the team all last spring as a third goalie, though he was never active. He did get to lift the Cup on the ice at T-Mobile Arena in Las Vegas and take part in the victory parade. He is the clear backup to starting goalie Braden Holtby, however, and it would be a shock if Copley plays.

Siegenthaler, for now, is the seventh defenseman, but could quickly be called upon if an injury hits the blueline. The Capitals have already lost Michal Kempny (torn hamstring) for the season. Siegenthaler appeared in 26 games this season as a rookie.

"The players that were not involved in it I have dealt with individually and talked to them about getting them ready in some of their cases for their first playoff action," Capitals coach Todd Reirden said. "That's been something I've been talking to those players about for the last 10 games to get them ready. Talked to them about decisions they make with the puck and how important that is in their role and their responsibility. 'We can't have that type of mistake in a playoff game.' And when they have a great shift that starts to give us momentum then I let them know those are the type of shifts that we need from our fourth line in playoff hockey."

So this will be new — at the NHL level at least. Jensen left St. Cloud State in 2013 after he, Dowd and their teammates reached the NCAA Frozen Four. He immediately joined Grand Rapids, the Red Wings' AHL affiliate, and was a black ace — a practice player who was scratched for games — on a team that won the Calder Cup. It wasn't as sweet because he didn't actually play, but there were lessons learned.

"One of the biggest things I saw with that Grand Rapids team was perseverance. Get knocked down, getting scored on, but getting right back up and scoring again and staying with it," Jensen said. "I think that's a big characteristic of a winning team. Can you get back up? You're not just going to drift through playoffs winning every game. There's going to be tough spots and you've got to find a way to get out of them."

That describes exactly what the Capitals did last year en route to the Cup. They were down 2-0 in the first-round series against Columbus and playing in overtime of Game 3, but found a way to win. They lost the first game in the second round against Pittsburgh by blowing a two-goal lead in the third period and lost Game 1 in the Cup Final against Vegas. Washington bounced back every time. It clinched all four series on the road.

Dowd began his career with the Los Angeles Kings, who won the Cup in 2012 and again in 2014 while he was still at St. Cloud State. But Dowd did get his own taste of a long postseason run in 2015. He was a key part of a Calder Cup title by the Manchester Monarchs,



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the Kings' AHL affiliate. Dowd had seven goals and six assists that spring in 19 games. But his first full NHL season in 2016-17, the Kings missed the playoffs by eight points. Dowd was traded to Vancouver early last season.

"They did win two Stanley Cups [in Los Angeles] before me so I know the atmosphere and the level play that is expected," Dowd said. "It's hard not to dream a little bit. But people keep talking about a long run. We've got to win the first series, we've got to win the first game and then the second game. I played in the American League playoffs and that took us two-and-a-half months and that was a grind. That's as close as I can compare it to, but I'm sure the Stanley Cup playoffs will be an eye opener. I'm excited to get into it."

Comcast SportsNet.com LOADED: 04.09.2019

1139835 Washington Capitals

Lars Eller: Capitals have 'very deep confidence' they can handle the Hurricanes

By Lisa Redmond April 08, 2019 11:25 AM

The Washington Capitals had the Carolina Hurricanes' number during the 2018-19 season, coming out victorious in all four of their matchups.

The Caps will see them once again during the First Round of the Stanley Cup Playoffs, and as Caps fans know too well, regular season success goes out the door come mid-April.

For center Lars Eller, the man behind the team's Stanley Cup-clinching goal, there's confidence within the team that they can get the job done.

"If you don't think you can win, then you're not going to win," Eller said Monday on 106.7 The Fan's Sports Junkies. "I think you've gotta have a certain confidence. We have a very deep confidence within our team that we can handle it and that we can go a long way."

On paper, the Caps look to be the better team. The Hurricanes scored the second-lowest goals per game (2.96) among playoff teams in the Eastern Conference during the 2018-19 season and lack offensive depth, despite having weapons like Justin Williams -- who has a ton of playoff experience with the Caps -- on his resume.

Nonetheless, it won't stop the Caps from being ready for whatever.

"But at the same time, you gotta respect what they bring to the table as well," Eller said. "So, you've gotta show some respect but not too much either."

When asked if this Caps team is confident heading into Thursday's game at Capital One Arena, Eller, without hesitation, said, "Yes."

Comcast SportsNet.com LOADED: 04.09.2019

1139836 Washington Capitals

Stanley Cup Playoffs Power Rankings: Let the real games begin

By J.J. Regan April 08, 2019 9:41 AM

It doesn't matter how much of a hockey fan you are, by the end of the regular season you can start to feel the grind. Eighty-two games are a lot, but what it gives us is the best postseason in sports. Hockey is at its absolute best in the playoffs and finally, the wait is over. Playoff hockey is here.

For a team like the Capitals, there is always that feeling of wanting to fast forward to April. No team knows better than Washington that what happens in the regular season does not amount to much in the spring. You punch your ticket, but then the season starts anew and this year, for the first time, the defense of the Stanley Cup begins in earnest.

SEE THIS WEEK'S STANLEY CUP PLAYOFF POWER RANKINGS HERE

Despite being the defending champs, however, they are not the team everyone is looking at as the team to beat.

The Tampa Bay Lightning tied the record for most regular season wins with 62, but the Stanley Cup is not awarded for a strong regular season. Washington managed to beat the Lightning on their run last year. Can they do it again?

Before Washington and Tampa Bay meet for the rematch, however, there is a lot of hockey left to play.

Thirty-one teams have been whittled down to 16. As the postseason begins, let's look at which of those 16 teams are the real contenders and who should just be happy to be there.

Comcast SportsNet.com LOADED: 04.09.2019

1139853 Websites

The Athletic / DGB weekend power rankings: Why every playoff team will (and won't) win the Cup in a season-ending top 16

By Sean McIndoe Apr 8, 2019

Well, that turned out to be an interesting weekend.

It wasn't an especially important one, at least in terms of the playoffs. Despite a loaded Saturday night schedule that had seemed like it would make for can't-miss viewing a few weeks ago, we came into the weekend with only one spot up for grabs, and that one was wrapped up by the Blue Jackets on Friday.

Still, there were seedings and home ice to figure out, so let's start with a quick roundup. The Predators held off the Jets and Blues to win the Central, the Islanders held onto home ice in the Metro, and we narrowly missed a first-round dream matchup of Caps/Pens. Instead, Pittsburgh will face the Islanders while the Caps get a tricky wildcard matchup with the Hurricanes. The Flames get the Avs, the Stars head to Nashville, and the Blue Jackets gets the fun task of trying to knock off the Lightning. The full matchups and schedule can be found here.

The highlight of the weekend came on Saturday, with the final game of Bob Cole's legendary career. The Leafs and Habs gave him plenty of action to call, abandoning defence to near-historic levels and serving up an all-timer debut by Ryan Poehling that had the Bell Centre rocking. It all ended in a shootout -- yes, the streak is over -- and an outpouring of tributes for Cole from around the hockey world.

"THE TRUTH IS YOU HAVE TO SELL THE SONG WITH YOUR SINCERITY. THAT'S BOB'S MAGIC. HE SINGS THE GAME." -- @RONMACLEANHTH



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TONIGHT THE VOICE OF SATURDAY NIGHT, BOB COLE, CALLS HIS LAST #HOCKEY NIGHT IN CANADA. PIC.TWITTER.COM/F6TCTTW2QN

— SPORTSNET (@SPORTSNET) APRIL 6, 2019

That game was followed by the Oilers and Flames, and what briefly seemed like it would be by far the biggest story of the weekend. Connor McDavid's high-speed collision with the goal post left him writhing on the ice with what we all assumed was a broken leg.

And then, just as we were still figuring out timelines for his return and how they'd impact next season, word came that X-rays were negative. That's huge for the Oilers, an organization that clearly can't afford any more bad news as they head into a crucial offseason.

In individual news, Nikita Kucherov finished with the highest point total since 1995-96 while breaking the scoring record for Russian players. Leon Draisaitl hit the 50-goal mark, Alexander Ovechkin won his eighth Rocket Richard, and Robin Lehner and Thomas Griess held off the Stars to win the Jennings.

On Sunday, we didn't waste any time getting to the coaching casualties, as the Panthers parted ways with Bob Boughner while releasing a hilarious press release that basically said "We're hiring Joel Quenneville" without mentioning his name. They've schedule a news conference for noon today, where they will introduce Quenneville as coach. We've also got a new opening in Buffalo, where Phil Housley was relieved of his duties yesterday after two years on the job, and Los Angeles, where interim coach Willie Desjardins will not return.

So now it's on to the playoffs. But first, one last set of power rankings. All year long, we've been presenting a top five and bottom five every Monday morning. But in this final edition, it seems like a top five just isn't enough. After all, we've got 16 teams still standing. Shouldn't we close out the season by ranking each and every one of them?

No, we should not. This is a terrible idea that will make everyone hate me. But we're doing it anyway, complete with reasons why each playoff team will (and won't) win the Cup.

But since we're already playing with the format this week, let's switch it up a bit more and lead things off with one last look at the bottom five before we move on to the main event.

The bottom five

The five teams that look like they're headed towards hoping the ping-pong balls deliver Jack Hughes.

There isn't going to be much suspense this week. The goal of his section all season long has been to predict the bottom of the standings, and now we know what they look like. In other words, this will be my first 100 percent correct ranking of the season. Yay me.

For these five teams and the ten others who didn't make the playoffs, the big moment comes tomorrow night with the draft lottery. (And yes, I'll have my annual draft lottery power rankings for you tomorrow morning. Let's hope it goes better than it did the first time around.)

5. Buffalo Sabres (33-39-10, -47 true goals differential*) – Housley's dismissal was hardly a surprise after yet another disastrous season. Now the question is who replaces him; Joe Yerdon took a look at some potential candidates.

4. Detroit Red Wings (32-40-10, -48) – Congratulations to the Red Wings for playing hard down the stretch and earning the first overall pick in an alternate universe in which the NHL wants its fans to be happy when their team wins.

3. New Jersey Devils (31-41-10, -52) – They've hired Tyler "Why I'm Leaving The Athletic" Dellow, which is kind of fascinating given his history with the Oilers and the fact that the Devils' biggest offseason

question is what to do with Taylor Hall. Would you go eight years at north of \$10 million for a 27-year-old former MVP coming off a major injury? And if not, how soon do you get serious about moving him?

2. Los Angeles Kings (31-42-9, -60) – There's been talk for weeks that Todd McLellan will be the next coach in L.A., and it certainly sounds like that's the direction we're headed in. Lisa Dillman makes the case for the hire.

1. Ottawa Senators (29-47-6, -59) – Senator fans will no doubt be watching tomorrow's draft lottery with their hands over their eyes, and if they turn out to have traded away the first overall pick then it will put the perfect bow on an miserable season. But remember that there's still a 50.6 percent chance that they won't come up in the lottery at all, and the Avs will end up with the same fourth overall pick that Ottawa chose to keep last year. And if they do, will that player end up being any better than 22-goal rookie Brady Tkachuk? It's still possible that we look back on that call and say the Senators got it right.

*Goals differential without counting shootout decisions like the NHL does for some reason.

Road to the Cup

The five teams that look like they're headed towards a summer of keg stands and fountain pool parties.

OK, let's do this.

As has been the case all season, what we're aiming here for a ranking of the teams that are most likely to win the Stanley Cup. That's not quite the same as a ranking of the best teams, since things like health, recent play, and (maybe most importantly) playoff path will factor in. If you think your favorite team is better than one ranked above it, you might be right, but that doesn't mean they're as likely to win it all.

This my best attempt based on everything we know heading into the playoffs. I'm putting aside factors like hunches, fandom, and picking upsets for the sake of upsets, while reserving the right to bring all that stuff back when I fill out my bracket. For today, let's just focus on who has the best odds to take home the Cup based on everything we know right now.

Prepare your hate mail. Here we go.

16. Colorado Avalanche (38-30-14, +14)

Why they'll win: They went from 48-point laughingstock to back-to-back playoff appearances. Compared to that, winning a Cup should be easy. They're healthy-ish with Gabriel Landeskog back and Mikko Rantanen reportedly on the way, and they finished hot, winning eight of eleven.

Why they won't: They're the only playoff team that lost more than they won, and they're facing a Flames team that has more talent just about everywhere in the lineup. There are no sure things in today's NHL, but the Avs will be hard-pressed to win a round, let alone four.

15. Columbus Blue Jackets (47-31-4, +25)

Why they'll win: Even though they barely snuck into the last wildcard, they're better than you think – they won more games than the Sharks, Leafs or Penguins. And they eventually finished strong after loading up at the deadline, so there's a good case that they're even better than their overall record would indicate. If they can get rolling, they're going to be a great story in what we all know is their last shot at winning with this core.

Why they won't: They're playing the Lightning in round one. Good luck with that.

14. Dallas Stars (43-32-7, +9)

Why they'll win: They very quietly led the Western Conference in fewest goals allowed, and by a decent margin. They'll need to pull



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off some serious upsets to make any kind of a Cup push, but goaltending is almost always what's behind those sorts of unlikely runs, and we know that the Stars have it. And hey, it's not like the Central is all that imposing.

Why they won't: They can't score. Despite having guys like Tyler Seguin and Jamie Benn, they finished 29th in the NHL in goals scored. I mean, they scored 32 fewer goals than the Senators, a team that couldn't afford sticks. It's one thing to go into the playoffs planning to win every game 2-1, it's another to do it when you're not sure you can actually score two goals.

13. Vegas Golden Knights (43-32-7, +18)

Why they'll win: They came close last year, they've added several weapons since then, and they'll have a big edge in goal over both of the other Pacific contenders.

Why they won't: I just don't know with this team. When they got hot after the Mark Stone trade, I briefly flirted with having them in the top five. But they've gone ice cold since then, losing seven of eight to finish the season. Maybe I'm over-correcting on a team that didn't have much to play for. But it's not like that was a minor stain on an otherwise stellar season – they finished with 93 points, three behind a Canadiens team that didn't even make the playoffs.

On paper, they're better than last year's team. But the magic just doesn't seem to be there this year. Maybe the postseason atmosphere brings it back. Or maybe we remember that this is a second-year expansion team, and just winning a round should still feel like a hill to climb.

12. Carolina Hurricanes (46-29-7, +22)

Why they'll win: They're the season's feel-good story, their underlying numbers are (as always) among the best in the league, and they've already been in playoff mode for weeks thanks to a tight wildcard race.

Why they won't: They've got a tough opening round draw in the defending champs. Maybe more importantly, it's rare for teams to go from playoff outsiders to Cup champs in one season. We've seen it happen – heck, we've seen it happen in Carolina – so we can't rule it out. But this year feels like the start of something in Carolina, not the big finale.

11. Toronto Maple Leafs (46-28-8, +37)

Why they'll win: Their faults have been well documented over the last few weeks. Maybe too well documented. You might start to think this was a team in turmoil, and not one that scores a ton and just finished with 100 points and the fourth-best goals differential in the league.

Could they get smoked by the Bruins? Sure. It happened early in last year's series. But it's also not that hard to picture a series where the Leafs' three scoring lines all click, their power play looks deadly, their finally healthy blue line does enough, Frederik Andersen looks like the Vezina candidate he was for most of the season, and they roll past the Bruins while we all wonder what we were so worried about.

Why they won't: All that stuff could happen. Here's what did happen: The Leafs were an utterly uninspiring team over the season's second half, one with plenty of flaws that mostly haven't been addressed. And their path to winning the Cup is brutal, featuring arguably the two best teams in the league in the first two rounds.

The level of panic in some quarters of the Leafs fan base feels overwrought right now, and this is still a team that can win a Cup someday. But it sure doesn't seem like someday is this year.

10. New York Islanders (48-27-7, +32)

Why they'll win: We're constantly being told that offence makes the regular season highlight reels while defence and goaltending wins

championships. Well, here's the team that allowed the fewest goals in the league. And they did it while splitting time between two goaltenders, so it's not like you even worry too much about an injury or poorly timed cold streak. And of course, Barry Trotz and Lou Lamoriello know a thing or two about winning Cups.

Why they won't: At the risk of re-litigating a debate we've been having around these parts all season long, there's still some question over just how good this team really is, even 103 points later. Top to bottom, there's just not as much talent here as the big contenders.

You can win a series and maybe even a Stanley Cup by being more than the sum of your parts. The Islanders will have to.

9. St. Louis Blues (45-28-9, +24)

Why they'll win: They were dead last in the league in January, but the arrival of Craig Berube and Jordan Binnington turned them into a powerhouse that nearly won the division. They went 28-8-5 in the second half, so we're not just talking about a two-week hot streak here. They're really good.

Why they won't: They came this close to winning the Central, and their path to the Cup would look a lot smoother if they had. Instead, they have to go through the Jets and (probably) Predators without having home ice. They could still absolutely beat both of those teams and come out of the division, but I'd like their odds a lot better if they'd banked just two more points.

8. Nashville Predators (47-29-6, +24)

Why they'll win: Because nobody thinks they will. That seems to be what works for this team, who went to the final as a No. 16 seed in 2017, then lost in the second round as the Presidents' Trophy winner last year. Now they're back to being counted out, even though they won the Central with pretty much the same lineup we all loved last year.

Why they won't: Nobody thinks they're going to win for a reason. They've been barely mediocre in the second half, winning 25 and losing 24 since mid-December. And while Pekka Rinne may be the reigning Vezina winner, nobody's going to fully trust him after how last year ended. The Predators seem like a reasonable pick to win a round or two in a weak Central. But to be the last team standing? Maybe not so much.

7. Pittsburgh Penguins (44-26-12, +32)

Why they'll win: They've won two of the last three Cups, and should be hungry after getting knocked off by the Capitals last year. And their first-round matchup with the surprising Islanders feels very winnable, even if they'll start on the road. At the risk of kicking off yet another round of Isle fan table-flipping in the comment section, I think the Penguins win that series.

Why they won't: We've been debating whether the Penguins are a great team or merely a very good one, and I still lean towards the latter camp. Still, very good might be enough in the Metro, and while they'd be underdogs against whoever comes out of the Atlantic, it will be hard to bet against Sidney Crosby and company once they get close to another Cup.

6. Winnipeg Jets (47-30-5, +27)

Why they'll win: Yes, I've got them as my Central favorite, even as they'll match up against a Blues team that lots of people will pick to win the series. I know I said we weren't doing hunches, but there's just too much talent here, even as it's underachieved for most of the second half. Like we've seen over the last few years, the Stanley Cup is often won by a talented team that hasn't necessarily been great start-to-finish but gets hot at the right time. I still like the Jets to be that team.

Why they won't: They really were bad down the stretch, including winning just 13 of their last 30 games. And they're facing a Blues



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team that was on fire down the stretch and has an anthropomorphic voodoo spell in goal. I'm rapidly talking myself out of this pick. Quick, let's skip ahead to one I like even less...

5. San Jose Sharks (46-27-9, +31)

Why they'll win: On paper, they're right there with the Lightning in terms of overall talent. And there should be a palpable sense of urgency as the window for the Joe Thornton era closes. Assuming Erik Karlsson is healthy and can stay that way, they should measure up well against anyone they run into out West.

Why they won't: Their path out of the Pacific goes through Vegas and Calgary, their goalie has been awful pretty much all year long, and Karlsson probably won't stay healthy. Also, they are the San Jose Sharks. Other than that, this feels like a great pick.

4. Washington Capitals (48-26-8, +26)

Why they'll win: They know how to win, and man does it feel weird to write that about the Washington Capitals. They've got the top seed and home ice in a winnable division, and they're not going to be underdogs in any series until at least the conference final. And while everyone else in the East worries about how to shut down the Lightning when it counts, the Caps have actually done it.

Why they won't: Are they better than last year's team? Maybe not, and remember that last year's team was on the brink a couple of times. Fatigue could also play a role here, as the Caps have played a lot of hockey in the last 18 months. Spoiler alert: You're going to see lots of experts picking the Hurricanes as the trendy upset special of round one, so proceed with caution.

3. Boston Bruins (49-24-9, +44)

Why they'll win: They might be the second-best team in the league. And while they've drawn a tougher first-round matchup than their record says they deserve, it's also against a team that they know they can beat.

Why they won't: They have to get past Tampa, and they'll have to do it in round two, which means that the most likely outcome is that the Bruins don't even make it to the final four. In one sense, that makes them a bad pick to rank this high.

But there are fifteen teams on this list who'll have to get past the Lightning to win the Cup. Sure, you'd rather hold off as long as possible and hope some other team pull off the upset for you. That option isn't available to Boston. But they'll have as good a shot as anyone against Tampa, and if they can pull off the win then they'll emerge from round two as heavy favorites to go the rest of the way.

2. Calgary Flames (50-25-7, +66)

Why they'll win: They're a very good team and, more importantly, they might have the best path to the Cup of anyone in the league. It's one that starts with a wildcard matchup, moves on to the winner of what should be a grueling series between two good but flawed teams in the Sharks and Knights, and goes through the winner of a suddenly not-all-that-scary Central. That's a long road with plenty of opportunity for things to go bad, but it's about the best you could hope for.

Why they won't: It's a myth that you need to have an elite goaltender to win the Cup. But can you do it with Dave Rittich and Mike Smith? I guess we'll find out.

1. Tampa Bay Lightning (62-16-4, +98)

Why they'll win: They're the best team in the league by a huge margin, and maybe one of the best ever. They're strong at every position, they're deep, they're experienced, and if Victor Hedman is OK then they're as healthy as you can reasonably expect to be at this time of year. There's no such thing as an easy path through the playoffs, but they'll have a first-round matchup that they should be

able to finish off easily, and then get a Leafs or Bruins team that could be beaten up after a tough series.

We don't need to overthink this. The Lightning will win because they're the best team.

Why they won't: As we've covered before, the best team usually doesn't win. Not in today's NHL, where parity rules the day and the gap between the best and the worst of the playoff teams is smaller than any of us want to think. A bad bounce here and a hot goalie there, and even the best team is out and wondering what happened.

Odds are, that will happen to the Lightning at some point. It won't change the fact that they're the best team in the league. It's just how the NHL works these days.

That's bad news if you're rooting for a Lightning championship. But if you're a fan of one of the other fifteen teams on the list, it's a reminder that anything can happen and everyone has a shot. As these rankings have shown over and over again all season long, none of us know anything.

Not ranked: Your favorite team – They were sixth seventeenth, I promise.

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1139854 Websites

The Athletic / Breaking down and predicting the Eastern Conference matchups, with the help of two head coaches

By Pierre LeBrun Apr 8, 2019

Thanks to two NHL head coaches (of non-playoff teams) for playing along with me and sharing their thoughts of the first-round matchups in the East.

They spoke on the condition of anonymity, which is key in getting a more honest assessment.

Here are their thoughts, followed by my picks for each series. The Western Conference predictions come Tuesday.

Lightning vs. Blue Jackets

The Blue Jackets should have contended for the Metropolitan Division title this season. This is no wild-card team. Not on paper, anyway. But the No. 8 seed they are.

Nice prize for a Lightning team that won 62 games this season.

"One of the first things that struck me was that you're Tampa, you just tied the record with the Detroit Red Wings, and now you got to play Columbus," head coach No. 1 said. "The difference between Columbus or Washington is nothing. I mean, it's miniscule. And I think Tampa is the deepest team in the league without a shadow of a doubt. They're the only team in the league — and to me the (Ryan) McDonagh trade did this — they've got great D, great forwards and a great goalie. They're the only team that can say they've got strength everywhere. That's why they won that many games."

But, the head coach continued, Columbus is mighty tough.

"Columbus is really good. They're not as good (as Tampa) by any stretch but they're really good. The interesting thing for me will be whether (Sergei) Bobrovsky can be a star. And if he can be a star, they have a chance. They can give them a real scare."

Head coach No. 2 also predicted a tougher than expected series despite Tampa's historical season.



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"I think it's going to be a tight battle," he said. "I think Columbus has really meshed as of late. The fact that they had to win their way in, you look at that group, they went all-in at the deadline but it wasn't smooth sailing. I just think the fact they had to win their way in and played really well down the stretch, I think that's really good for them and their confidence. Now that they're in, I think the players are going to be all-in, whether that's Duchene, Panarin, Bobrovsky — guys who may not be coming back. I see them having that all-in mentality. They're a little bit of a juggernaut that way, maybe peaking and gelling at the right time. That's important."

Head coach No. 1 says the key for Columbus is to play a slightly different game than the Blue Jackets would naturally desire.

"To me, the thing that hurts Columbus little bit is that they play a North game where they want to really transition fast," he said. "Now, they're good down low in the O-zone, especially that (Josh) Anderson line. But if you want to play a North game now you're going up and down the sheet with Tampa and you'll get crushed. Any team doing that will just get crushed by Tampa. You can't do that. The only way you're beating them is you have to make them defend. They do give you chances for sure if you make them defend. If Columbus can grind them, that will help them a lot."

Head coach No. 2 said Columbus' physicality will be key.

"Tampa can play any way you want. But Columbus has big, physical guys who can grind you," he said. "They're excellent in the offensive zone hanging onto the puck. That could give Tampa some problems. ... If Columbus is going to have an opportunity to win it, their bigger, heavier, stronger guys have to play that style; relentless forecheck, heavy on pucks below the goal line. I think they're one of the better teams in terms of getting to the net front, being hard to play against."

He added: "There has to be physicality on guys like Kucherov, Johnson and Point."

Neither coach would go all the way and pick the upset. But they both clearly believed Tampa will have its hands full in Columbus.

"Columbus has the potential to make a deep run. That's why I think this could be a tough series," said coach No. 2.

"Now that they're in, it changes so much. Had they not got in, it would have been a disaster. Now I feel like they're playing with house money."

My pick: Any other team in the East and I might have picked Columbus. The Jackets are deep, yes, but what really matters here is that this is a group — at least the guys that have been there a while — that have taken a few kicks at the can. They're not a first-year playoff team. They've had a few chances. That experience matters. But Tampa? This Lightning team is as deep as any club we've seen in the salary cap era.

They'll have to sweat a bit. But they will prevail.

Bolts in 6.

Capitals vs. Hurricanes

A Jackets-Caps rematch would have been so much more enticing in my mind.

The Caps would never admit this publicly nor even off the record, hockey teams are superstitious that way, but I guarantee you deep down they're relieved to get Carolina instead.

Hey, the Canes were dominant in the second half of the season and fully deserved to make their first playoff entry in a decade.

But this smells of a team happy to get there. As opposed to a team that truly believes it can go deep.

"I think in the end, Washington just have too much talent for Carolina," said head coach No. 1. "I know Carolina has been great the whole second half but I can easily see them hit a little valley

here. (Petr) Mrazek has been great, but if you look at his history, he's a guy that has 2-3 months of greatness but I don't think he's proven he can keep it going for a long period of time. Now, if he has to be great every night, it'll be really hard."

Head coach No. 2 also sees Washington prevailing.

"I think the heaviness and the size of Washington is going to give Carolina some problems," he said. "I think Carolina plays with a lot of energy, a great work ethic. But I think you're stepping into the playoffs for the first time in a long time with a young team going against the team that I think is the heaviest team in the Eastern Conference. I think they play an honest game. They play the right way. They're big, they're heavy, they're strong, they're physical. I think it's going to be a learning experience for a lot of those guys in Carolina in their first playoff series."

While both of these coaches would see a scenario where Columbus potential surprised Tampa, even though they both didn't go that far, neither here mustered up any feeling that the Canes would upset Washington.

My pick: The Michal Kempny season-ending injury and its impact on how the Caps' D lines up worries me for Washington. But not in the first round. Caps in 5.

Bruins vs. Maple Leafs

I love the reaction of head coach No. 2 when I started to bring up Leafs and Bruins.

"Oh boy," he said with great enthusiasm.

You get the sense he'll be pulling out the bag of popcorn for this one.

"I think Toronto has a heck of a team, I think there's going to be a tonne of pressure on them," said head coach No. 2. "I don't want to say dysfunctional but they're not as organized as they need to be ... I think when you look at Boston, I think to me Boston and Washington are your two teams in the East that have size, depth, heavy and hard, they have star power than can score. That's a Toronto team with a lot of pieces but ... I just think that the honest game that Boston plays and the depth that they have and how they're structured, I think it will be a very competitive series but I think at the end, very similar to Washington's qualities, Boston has guys that have been there and won. The Bruins can play any way. They can score, they can check very well, they're well-structured, I just think they play playoff-winning hockey."

Head coach No. 1 didn't pull punches when asked about Toronto's defensive play.

"It's amazing how many goals they give up right now," he said. "I think they've been bad defensively for a while and the goalie was masking it. But when the goalie isn't playing as well, they give up way too many goals."

The question he asked out loud is whether Toronto's depth and talent up front can control the puck enough to make Boston defend most of the series.

"If their forwards have the puck, they're great. If they got to defend, they're no good," he said. "Can they get Boston on their heels? I honestly don't think so. I think there's too much of Boston's game that is sound defensively, they won't get themselves on their heels, and if Toronto can't get Boston on their heels, they're going to have to defend them and I think they're just not good enough defensively."

There is one way, the coach said, the Leafs can beat the Bruins and it's about the most old-fashioned way that exists.

"Unless Anderson is that much better than Rask — which could happen — I don't think Toronto can beat Boston," he said.



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My pick: I'm surprised neither coach brought up the fact the Leafs now have John Tavares which is a significant difference from a year ago in terms of matchup scenarios. Patrice Bergeron can't match up against both Auston Matthews and Tavares/Mitch Marner. Bruins head coach Bruce Cassidy, I would imagine, will put Bergeron on one of those lines and veteran defenceman Zdeno Chara on the other. But it's a new edge the Leafs didn't have a year ago no matter how you shake it. For that reason alone I believe the Leafs have a better chance than most people think. But the defensive issues are worrisome from a Toronto perspective. The Leafs haven't been a tight team in terms of their defensive game in two months at least. The Bruins should not only scare the Leafs but every team in the league. They had massive injuries this season at different points and never slowed down. They missed their top offensive talent for a month in David Pastrnak and decided to win almost every game he missed. They have tremendous depth and can win games in different ways.

I think Tavares and Matthews each have big performances but the Bruins might just have the best team in the NHL not named Tampa.

Bruins in 7. Again.

Islanders vs. Penguins

No question there was clear hesitation from both coaches in figuring out who they liked in this series.

I'm similarly torn on this one.

"The Isles don't have an elite group, (Barry Trotz) has done a hell of a job to get them where they're at," said head coach No. 1. "Their goalies have played elite but they're not elite. But something's not right with Pittsburgh.

"Their secondary guys aren't as good as they used to be. I'll pick the Islanders because I love their mojo right now, that barn will be going. It's a real home-ice advantage. But it's really a toss-up of a series."

Head coach No. 2 went the other way, but not with any real conviction.

"I'm going to go with Pitt," he said. "I think that playoff experience, I think the star power they have, I think when Pitt is dialed in, Mike (Sullivan) will have them going.

"My concern with the Islanders is that they overachieved this year, they bought in to the defensive part of the game, their goalies have been excellent. I think if the other team checks them just as well, I don't know if they'll be able to score enough. This is a tough one for me because I think they actually could check Pittsburgh out of the series but I just don't have that feeling. I think Pittsburgh has been better down the stretch."

But again, it's close for him.

"I do think Matt Murray will have to be the difference in the series," said coach No. 2. "I don't think Pittsburgh is that strong defensively. But I just don't know if the Islanders have enough high-end talent to pull it off."

My pick: One could actually make the argument Sidney Crosby is having one of his most impressive seasons if you consider how he's carried this squad at times. Overall, the Penguins have lacked consistency but No. 87 has been there every night to pull them into the fight. Kris Letang, too, has been all-world. But I, too, see a fading Penguins team overall. The Isles' work ethic and defensive commitment is second to none this season. They just suffocate the opposition. Imagine being the league's 31st team in goals against a year ago and then winning the Jennings 12 months later. Barry Trotz magic. But can they score enough to win a playoff series? I struggle with that. They're the lowest-scoring team among the eight Eastern playoff teams.

I have very little feel for this series. I can easily be talked into why each side would prevail. When in doubt, the tiebreaker goes to the team with the guy who has done a lot of winning in his life.

Penguins in 7. Game 7 goes to double OT.

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The Athletic / Why Kaapo Kakko could be considered with the No. 1 pick in the NHL draft

By Corey Pronman Apr 8, 2019

Kaapo Kakko has been phenomenal in Finland for the past two years, establishing himself as a premier prospect for the 2019 NHL Draft.

Today we'll look at why he's in the conversation as one of the top two in this draft class, why some teams would consider him with the No. 1 pick and what he brings to an NHL team.

Physicality

Kakko is a very skilled and smart player, and he can do impressive things with the puck, but his mentality and the hard elements of his game are what make him different.

I've seen highly skilled players like Kakko before. What I don't typically see are 17-year-old forwards with his skill who can win pucks from grown men consistently.

This play here shows how Kakko can be so strong on the puck in Liiga to win a battle and create a chance at the net right after:

That play may not seem like that big of a deal, but when we're talking about teenagers in pro leagues, often they are highly talented players who get outmuscled and have to learn to compete versus men. You rarely hear about a 17-year-old who can outmuscle men and create offense.

This assist here is a direct result of him shoving a check off quite easily to create an odd-man rush:

Kakko scored a ton of goals this season. More than any 17-year-old ever in Liiga. But I wouldn't characterize him as a sniper. He's got a good shot but it's not how he'll score in the NHL. Rather he gets so many chances and goals because of how well he attacks the net.

There are so many examples I can pull from the season of how Kakko gets to the net and shows courage in attacking the paint area:

This is what Kakko's game is for me. He's highly skilled, but he's a player who attacks. He's not on the perimeter deking out players.

He's not exactly an overly mean type of physical player, nor is he what you think of as a "power forward" from prior decades. But he's strong and shows no hesitation to get into the dirty areas. He's also not doing this because he filled out early. He's 6-foot-2 and 194 pounds. There is still room to fill out in his frame.

Skill Level

Kakko's ability to make highly skilled plays with the puck is high-end, if not elite. He's got the ability to make the flashy dekes to create chances.

This is one of my favorite plays that Kakko made all season. This embodies his game in a few seconds. He uses his physicality to



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bump a check off him and then tries to flip a pass to a teammate in front of the net.

We see a similar play at the Liiga level where Kakko muscled his way through several players and floats a pass in the crease area trying to get a good redirection. Both of these plays are examples of how his physicality creates space for him to use his fantastic skill level.

He's got the hands to dazzle in open ice, seen on these flashy goals:

And he can also make plays through defenders to create opportunities, like he does here:

You may notice this highlight reel isn't as lengthy as the one in the Jack Hughes column. While Kakko does have other skilled plays he's made over the season, the fact is he's played at a very high level all season, either playing in Liiga (one of the best leagues in the world) or at the U20 international level (facing the best players in the world who were also older than him). The fact he was able to play so well, with how well he produced and how many chances he created, is a testament to the player. If he had played in the CHL all season I'm sure there would be many more highlight reel plays.

Vision

Kakko is a top prospect because he has so many high-end elements. I've talked to scouts who feel his compete level is his best trait, scouts who feel his hands are his best trait, as well as scouts who feel his hockey sense is his best trait.

I showed above he can make super creative plays like those flip passes over the net, but he set up so many chances throughout the season despite the fact his goal totals outpace his assists.

I will show some examples of that here, as Kakko is a top-end passer who can make plays at a pro-level pace. He has the ability to make plays while moving, which is what translates versus men, the ability to think quickly and move the puck while moving your feet:

He also has the ability to run a power play. Kakko is a half-wall guy on the man advantage typically and a player who the man advantage typically runs through. He's got a high level of offensive IQ to make the right plays quickly and hit seams, as he shows here:

None of those plays are particularly outstanding though. These next few ones for me illustrate his high-end vision more clearly.

In this play, as Kakko receives the puck, he could easily shoot. He keeps his head up the whole way and sees an open teammate across the crease. The play doesn't work but it's the thought that counts:

This play is a weird one because of how fast it happens and how tight the play is, but if you look closely or pause/play the clip, this is not a shot on goal. Rather, Kakko directs the puck toward his driving teammate who kicks it on goal. While it's tough to figure out Kakko's intent without talking to him, it seems to me like he's putting the puck in a position for his teammate to get to it, which at the speed this play is taking place is an impressive read.

And finally, I remember really liking this assist from the World U18's last spring where Kakko capitalized on a loose puck to quickly get it on net toward his teammate Niklas Nordgren. This wasn't a blind pass, as you see a half second before he passes it he takes a quick look into the net area:

It's hard to produce and be relied on as much as Kakko did as a 17-year-old in Liiga without great hockey sense unless his physical tools were insanely elite. He understands the game very well, can make top-end plays and projects to be an important part of an NHL power play.

Skating

Kakko doesn't have a true weakness in his game. For all his tools I give 20-80 grades to, not one of them is below a 50. However, if you had to pick apart something about the way he plays, it would be the fact he's not a blazing fast skater. If you've watched all the video to this point, you may have noticed Kakko is not making a ton of plays due to high-end speed or agility. We see times where he gets by folks and he has some speed for sure. I like his first step and how well he maneuvers in small areas, especially around the net. There are times where his zone entries look pedestrian, though, in terms of pace:

When he does decide to turn on the jets, he has enough to turn the corner on some defenders:

For me his skating is about average, maybe a half-tick above, but it's not what drives his value. He's not spinning off checks with his edge work or blazing down the wing. He relies on his skill, power and sense to make plays.

"It's not going to hold him back, but it's not a strength," said one NHL scout about Kakko's skating.

Production

Kakko was one of the best U18 players in Liiga's history, up there with Patrik Laine, Mikael Granlund and Aleksander Barkov in terms of production. Liiga changed a bit since Barkov and Granlund's years, particularly the fact Jokerit left for the KHL. It is still one of the top leagues in the world though.

Kakko was one of the most productive juniors ever in Finland as a U17, outscored in the Finnish junior league at the same age only by Granlund and Sebastian Aho, but Kakko scored at a higher rate than the latter.

Liiga provides data for shot attempts, and Kakko's shot production is among the best 17 year olds in recent memory.

At the U18's last spring, Kakko had one of the better tournaments 16-year-old. Relative to fellow Finns he was up there with Eeli Tolvanen, Artturi Lehkonen, Granlund and Teemu Pulkkinen. Despite scoring the golden goal at the World Juniors, Kakko's production wasn't among the best U18 Finns, but it still placed him 11th all-time at that event among his countrymen.

Hockey World's Impression

An NHL executive said: "Kakko plays an advanced game for his age with a great deal of success versus men already. He has excellent two-way details and the versatility to play both center and wing. His transition to the North American pro game will be seamless given his pro-ready body, excellent hockey sense and small area skills."

An NHL scout said: "There's a lot of what he does that translates to the NHL. His skill, his IQ, his ability to win battles and hang onto the puck."

TPS manager Antero Niittymaki said: "His stick handling and overall skill level is one of the best I've ever seen at his age. We put him on the top line early in the year, and even though he was this young, skinny guy you, could see right away he's strong with the puck in the corners. He's really balanced on his skates. It's tough to knock him off the puck. Since the world juniors he was dominant in regards to [his physical play]. He can hang onto the puck as long as he wants. He's NHL ready."

Finland U20 coach Jussi Ahokas said: "His overall game is impressive, but in the offensive zone, his skill with the puck, how he makes plays, how he competes every day, even in practice, is what stands out to me."

Finland U18 coach Tommi Niemela said: "He can make plays out of nowhere. His puck skills, his size, his ability to make plays in small areas is what really impresses me."

Projection



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Kakko has done nothing but impress over the past two seasons. It's hard to pick apart his play or skill set given what he's shown at the international and pro levels. He's given every indication he can be a star forward in the NHL and, given what he's done versus men already, every indication he could step in right away next season and make a seamless transition into a top-nine, if not a top-six forward role.

The question on Kakko is if he's dynamic enough to rise to the level of a true superstar, a guy who can define a franchise. I think there is reasonable doubt there, but from what he's done this season at one of the highest levels of hockey, it is certainly possible. I know more than one team who would take him over Hughes, citing that Kakko's skill set and the way he plays will translate better to the NHL.

I would not bet currently on him reaching the highest echelons of production in the NHL, but I can see him in the very next tier. In that sense, I see him as a roughly comparable prospect talent-wise to Andrei Svechnikov at this time last season, except with added value given what Kakko's proven versus men.

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The Athletic / Who is on the hot seat as the NHL playoffs begin?

By Scott Burnside Apr 8, 2019

And now a brief pause between one ending and a greater beginning, the beginning of all that truly matters in the game of hockey: the Stanley Cup playoffs.

A year ago, Philipp Grubauer was a starter in Washington, and Barry Trotz and Alex Ovechkin had never experienced playoff hockey beyond the second round.

The Vegas Golden Knights were an expansion team trying to keep a chip on their collective shoulders after a Cinderella inaugural season.

Tampa was, on paper, the beasts of the East.

The 2018 playoffs were going to be the Winnipeg Jets' seminal spring. Unless it was Nashville's, where the Predators were the league's best regular season team and seemed poised to step up after their trip to the 2017 Cup final.

Two months later, Ovechkin was handing the Stanley Cup to Trotz on the ice in Vegas, with all the rest left to answer questions about what went wrong.

Who bears the burden of expectation this spring? Well, start with the juggernaut that is Tampa where the hottest of the hot playoff seats are located.

Steven Stamkos/Nikita Kucherov, Tampa Bay Lightning

We could have penciled in anyone from the leadership group of the runaway regular season champion Tampa Bay Lightning or head coach Jon Cooper or the person who dusts off the statue of Phil Esposito outside Amalie Arena, because if the Bolts don't win it all this June, this is going to be an enormous opportunity squandered. This is a team without any significant flaws, so on paper it should roll to its first championship since 2004. Shouldn't it? Guess what? That's not how it works. Just one Presidents' Trophy winner in the past decade won a Cup (Chicago in the lockout-shortened 2013 season). So those sparkling record-tying 62 wins and the 128 points, 21 more than its next closest competition, mean diddly now.

And it's worth remembering that the Lightning should have defeated the Capitals in the Eastern Conference final last year but came up lame in the later stages of a series they led 3-2. Specifically, their big guns went popgun when it really mattered. Stamkos, who had managed at least a point in 12 of the Lightning's first 14 playoff games, had zero points in the Lightning's final three games of the season. He was a minus-2 and had just four shots in those three games as the Capitals advanced to the Cup final. Kucherov, who won his first NHL scoring championship in a runaway this season, besting Connor McDavid by 12 points, and is the odds-on favorite to win the Hart Trophy, was just as ineffective as Stamkos in the clutch against Washington last spring, collecting one assist in his final four games. He had nine shots on goal in those four games and was minus-3.

The playoffs are always about the moment. Stamkos and Kucherov are elite players. This spring they'll need to be both elite and clutch players if the Lightning are going to fulfill their destiny.

Former NHLer and longtime analyst Alan May thinks the Lightning's elite players have already matured from last spring. "Kucherov, Stamkos and (Brayden) Point have been almost perfect offensively all season," May said. "They've been better in all aspects of their game. I'm sure they (Stamkos and Kucherov) were bothered by that series loss all summer and came back more determined to lead the Bolts to the Cup."

One Eastern-based scout noted that playing with the enormous expectations that now follow Tampa is a different part of the dynamic. But even with the pressure as high as it's ever been for Stamkos and Kucherov, the Lightning's incredible depth up front will be – or should be – a mitigating factor. Columbus has to hope to get Stamkos and Kucherov off their games and thinking negative thoughts if it is going to have a chance to produce an enormous upset in the first round.

"You know what the head of the snake is for the Lightning, that's what you have to go after," analyst and former player Jody Shelley said. By containing the Lightning's top players you create that seed of doubt. "That's got to be your game plan," he added.

Pekka Rinne, Nashville Predators

There is no disputing that Rinne is one of the elite netminders of his generation. He is without a doubt the greatest goaltender in Predators history and arguably the most important player in franchise history. But equally without question is that the 36-year-old Rinne faltered at the most inopportune time the past two postseasons. After a sensational start in the 2017 playoffs, Rinne foundered in the Cup finals, allowing 11 goals on just 45 shots in three games against Pittsburgh. The following year, with Rinne en route to his first Vezina Trophy, he got the hook from coach Peter Laviolette four times in 13 games – including Game 7 against Winnipeg, when he was yanked in favor of Juuse Saros in the first period after giving up two goals on seven shots as the Jets eliminated the Predators. There was nothing quite as heartbreaking as watching Rinne shoulder the blame for his team's loss after the game.

This spring offers a chance at redemption for one of the game's classiest players. One scout familiar with Rinne's evolution praised his growth as an elite netminder. "He's a superb individual. I'm a big fan of his. I cheer for him," he said. But he agreed there is a red flag given the past two playoff years.

Some observers felt that Laviolette was too quick to pull Rinne last spring, especially in the Winnipeg series. "When you get pulled a few times it's only normal to look over your shoulder," said veteran NHL netminder and analyst Darren Pang.

He noted that Rinne's technique improved the past two years and other scouts have commented on his less aggressive style under goaltending coach Ben Vanderklok. Rinne's regular season stats back that up; this season's numbers (2.43 goals-against average



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and .917 save percentage) are off compared to last year, but most goalies' numbers are off. And the style the Predators play sometimes leads to quality chances for opponents, Pang said.

They're a team built on timing, he said, and if their timing is on, they're impeccable. If it's a pinch off that can create good chances against. That's why Rinne is such a good fit in Pang's opinion.

"I don't think much fazes him," he said.

Jamie Benn, Dallas Stars

So, not exactly a textbook season for one of the game's best-paid players. Called out by the team's president, Jim Lites, for basically not earning his keep Dallas, Benn didn't exactly respond with a performance that put those claims to rest. Injuries slowed the Dallas captain but he's still well below a point-a-game pace, which is the bare minimum a guy making \$13 million in real money and carrying a \$9.5 million cap hit through 2024-25 should be at. His 27 goals are well below his 36 goals last season and 41 two seasons ago, and his 53 points are a whopping 26 fewer than last season. But none of that will matter one iota if the beast version of Benn shows up for the playoffs.

The Stars, on their third coach in the past three seasons, haven't exactly been the model of consistency. Making just their third appearance in the playoffs in the past 11 years, facing Central Division champion Nashville in the first round, the Stars need Benn to shoulder a heavy load if they're going to affect the upset and move on. That means producing at timely moments, keeping his emotions in check and not succumbing to the undisciplined penalties that have periodically marked his play the past couple of seasons.

Hard to believe but, at age 29 and having completed his 10th NHL season, Benn has played in just 19 playoff games, posting 20 points.

"When I see him I wonder if the speed of the game takes the physical part of his game away," one longtime player and analyst said. "That's a huge component of his success when he was 'the' power forward."

But another longtime Western-based scout likes Dallas' chance at being a Western Conference dark horse and believes Benn is poised to be a big part of that. "The one thing I like about Dallas is that they're able to play the 2-1 game," he said. "Their skill players have bought into winning that game."

"The thing that I like about Jamie Benn, that impresses me, is that when he brings his 'A' game he goes right through you," the scout added.

Longtime NHLer and analyst Keith Jones is of a like mind.

"I'm more impressed with Jamie Benn's play this season than when he was top five in scoring," Jones said. "I think there's so much to appreciate about a player who gets publicly ripped into from management and then doesn't go out and become an individual looking to produce solely with his point production."

Instead, Benn's commitment to Montgomery's structure helped Dallas become a team that is very difficult to play against. "If you look at Dallas, they are a very dangerous team in the Western Conference because of the way they defend. And Jamie Benn's a big part of that," Jones said.

Mark Stone, Vegas Golden Knights

Mark Stone wasn't quite a household name in the hockey world outside of Ottawa when the season began, but that certainly isn't the case now after the frenzy to acquire the gifted two-way forward at the trade deadline. Now that he signed an eight-year contract extension with a \$9.5 million annual cap hit, is a Stanley Cup next? Multiple scouts and analysts believe that Stone's arrival in Vegas dramatically alters the complexion of the Western Conference and reestablishes the Golden Knights as viable contenders after an up and down first half of the season.

"Mark Stone? Are you kidding me? ... This guy's phenomenal" said former Stanley Cup winner Bret Hedican who provides analysis for the Golden Knights' first-round opponents, the San Jose Sharks. With Stone usually lining up with Max Pacioretty and Paul Stastny, the trio represents as good a "second" line as there is in the playoff tournament.

What is so impressive is that Stone seems not to have had the transitional growing pains that often accompany a trade deadline acquisition, even as he works the power play, skates important even strength minutes and periodically kills penalties. The Golden Knights are 11-5-2 with Stone in the lineup for 24 points – the most in the Pacific Division over that period – and are the only team in the league with two players who scored at least 20 goals, blocked 50 or more shots and had 70 or more takeaways this season with Stone and William Karlsson.

One former NHL player and coach said he was surprised at how quickly Stone transitioned to his new team. "His type of play has worn off on some of the other players," the veteran talent evaluator said. "When I watch them now, oh boy, you just have to be careful with that group." The ripple effect is obvious up and down the lineup, especially with the team's (other?) top line of Karlsson, Jonathan Marchessault and Reilly Smith taking advantage of the matchup challenges created for opposing coaches by collecting 51 points in the 18 games since Stone's arrival.

Mike Babcock, Toronto Maple Leafs

It's been clear for literally weeks now that Boston and Toronto would clash in the first round. But there's been no shortage of storylines prefacing the second straight postseason meeting between these Original Six rivals. This will be Toronto's third straight playoff appearance after qualifying just once between 2006 and 2016, but it has not won a playoff round since 2004. This dearth of playoff success is juxtaposed by the fact this is without question the most talented Leafs team since the 2004-05 lockout and maybe the most talented, top to bottom, since their last Stanley Cup in 1967. And yet, they're considered slight to heavy underdogs in facing a deep, talented, well-coached Bruins team that defeated them in seven games last spring. That means that every little element has the potential to be a series-decider.

On paper, the Leafs, behind Babcock, should own a significant edge in the coaching department with all due respect to his counterpart Bruce Cassidy. Babcock is a Stanley Cup champion. He guided Team Canada to two Olympic gold medals in 2010 and 2014, and a championship at the 2016 World Cup of Hockey. But (and you knew this was coming, didn't you?) Babcock's recent playoff success is more miss than hit, having failed to win a playoff round since 2013 in Detroit. In fact, Babcock-coached teams have not been beyond the second round since 2009 when his Red Wings lost in the Cup final to Pittsburgh.

Is that a function of declining teams in Detroit and emerging teams in Toronto? Maybe. This spring, though, there should be no excuses. That goes for netminder Frederik Andersen, newcomer John Tavares, Norris Trophy hopeful Morgan Rielly and franchise center Auston Matthews. But the buck stops with Babcock, especially given the buzz around the hockey world about a disconnect between the veteran coach and rookie GM Kyle Dubas. Babcock took the unusual step of addressing the rumors recently in an effort to tamp down the angst that has been building around his up and down Leafs team approaching the playoffs.

One longtime NHL executive and player said that while this might be the best collection of talent in Toronto in years, "I don't think they're a team. I think that's what they're struggling with now."

He suggested the coach and the GM "are on totally different wavelengths," when it comes to how to build a Cup-winning team.

The depth on defense remains an issue even with Jake Muzzin coming over from Los Angeles prior to the trade deadline and Jake



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Gardiner returning from injury on the eve of the playoffs. There's also the backup goaltending controversy that saw the team lose both Curtis McElhinney and Calvin Pickard to waivers, and then less than a week before the start of the playoffs banish backup Garrett Sparks from the team in favor of Michael Hutchinson.

More troubling, according to this source, is the question of the team's overall toughness, especially when facing a team like Boston. "That'll raise its voice in the playoffs," he said. It's not like the pressure in Toronto is an issue. Nobody drives Babcock like Babcock. "That's the type of motor that drives him," the former player said. Still, it's also fair to say this is as much pressure as Babcock will face as a coach since the 2010 Olympics. "Boston, they're too strong," one longtime NHL executive said. "It's going to be Toronto out again in the first round. Now what? Now what?" Exactly.

Brad Marchand, Boston Bruins

There is a theory espoused by some NHL observers that the biggest threat to Tampa Bay's rolling to a Stanley Cup this June comes from its own division in the form of the Boston Bruins. And there's lots to like about the Bruins, especially from a leadership perspective, starting with imposing captain Zdeno Chara and future Hall of Famer Patrice Bergeron. But if there is one critical element for this Bruins team and its ability to navigate first Toronto and then likely Tampa in the second round, it is the peskiest of pests Brad Marchand.

There are few more polarizing figures than the man who last playoff year licked Ryan Callahan. Marchand's been suspended multiple times, he's been vilified from coast to coast, won a Stanley Cup and a World Cup of Hockey, and this season he might well find himself a finalist for the Hart Trophy. Saying a player "does it all" it is sometimes a throwaway line. With Marchand, he truly does it all. This season he hit 100 points in spite of the fact some of the top talent in the Boston lineup, including oft-times linemates Bergeron and David Pastrnak spent time on the shelf with injuries. Marchand kills penalties and collected seven shorthanded points over the season. He led the Bruins in power play points, and he continues to be a royal thorn in opposing teams' rumps. If he can stay on the right side of the emotional line and not become a distraction and a disruption to his teammates, something that was the case last spring, Marchand can help propel his Bruins team deep into the postseason.

"I think he's the X-Factor of the entire playoffs," Jones said. "He's a remarkable player." Jones believes Marchand showed more maturity this season while still being an antagonizing force. Bergeron and Chara are two of the most respected leaders in the game. But the player that has the most influence on what lies ahead is Marchand, "just because he can do so much," Jones said. Another longtime scout and former player agrees, saying that even if Marchand does step over the line during a game, "then he gets back at it again and does the right thing."

Sergei Bobrovsky, Columbus Blue Jackets

When I think of Sergei Bobrovsky I think of the sharks in Finding Nemo (in Australian accent): "Denial!" Because if we are reading the tea leaves correctly, one of the reasons that the two-time Vezina Trophy winner is skedaddling out of Columbus this summer as a free agent is that he feels his work has not been fully appreciated in Ohio. Certainly he has bristled at suggestions that he hasn't answered the bell in the playoffs. But the truth of the matter is that Bobrovsky hasn't been nearly good enough in the postseason to help a middle-of-the-road Blue Jackets team get even as far as the second round of the postseason.

Two years ago he allowed 20 goals in five games in a first-round loss to the Penguins. Bobrovsky's up-and-down play made this series look like more of a rout than it was. Last season Bobrovsky was better but only marginally, as the Blue Jackets coughed up a 2-0 series lead against Washington with Bobrovsky failing to match Braden Holtby's level of play in the final four games.

This season, though, produced more capital 'D' drama surrounding Bobrovsky as he made it clear from the start of training camp that he has no intention of returning to the team and will hit the market as an unrestricted free agent in July. Things hit a low point in January when Bobrovsky was pulled from a game in Tampa and then left the bench area, angering teammates, coaches and management. That led to a one-game banishment from the team and there was much discussion about whether the team would or could continue to have Bobrovsky in the lineup. All of this upheaval came against the backdrop of the team's move to strengthen itself at the trade deadline, adding top forwards Matt Duchene and Ryan Dzingel from Ottawa and defensive depth in Adam McQuaid from the New York Rangers. Although they struggled in the aftermath of the trade deadline, the team righted the ship and will face the Lightning in the first round.

Bobrovsky was a huge part of the team's late-season revival, going 6-1 in his last seven starts when the Blue Jackets were scratching and clawing to crack the top eight in the Eastern Conference. The Blue Jackets have never won a playoff round and the odds are stacked heavily against them this spring. But any chance they have of effecting what would be an epic upset rests squarely on the shoulders of Bobrovsky, who enters the postseason with a lamentable 5-14 career playoff mark – another illustration of the marked divide between his regular season performances and postseason play.

The two-time Vezina Trophy winner led the league this regular season with nine shutouts and turned in a respectable 2.58 GAA and .913 save percentage in spite of all of the negative buzz around him. How he performs in the coming days will not only reflect on Columbus, but Bobrovsky's options on the open market.

Shelley has had a bird's eye view of Bobrovsky's tumultuous time in Columbus. He thinks working with goaltending coach Manny Legace helped Bobrovsky be less "jumpy" in facing top opponents. "He looks calmer and confident," Shelley said. In the past, Bobrovsky would get too fired up, jumping at pucks during important contests, Shelley added. Mentally, Shelley thinks Bobrovsky found a nice groove in spite of the upheaval earlier this season. "To his credit, he just went to work," Shelley said. "He looks really good. He's just so focused on himself. I think he's ready for the playoffs. I think he's in a place he hasn't been mentally."

Erik Karlsson, San Jose Sharks

With regards to Jerry Garcia, what a long, strange trip for two-time Norris Trophy winner Erik Karlsson, who nearly ended up in Vegas a year ago at the trade deadline, then was dealt to San Jose on the eve of the regular season and will now face Vegas in his first (and possibly last) playoff run as a Shark.

It took a month or so to get into a groove with the talented Sharks with Karlsson collecting just seven points in the team's first 11 games, but then Karlsson took off and it looked like it would be a dream hockey fit, working the power play with another former Norris Trophy winner Brent Burns, along with Joe Thornton, Joe Pavelski, Logan Couture and Evander Kane. At one point starting in early December, Karlsson blazed as he normally does with a 14-game point streak. But a groin injury cost Karlsson more than the last month of the regular season, and in spite of his return to action in the Sharks' season finale Saturday night, there is much uncertainty about his place in this lineup, his ability to contribute on a meaningful basis and, bigger picture, his long-term future. As an unrestricted free agent in July one has to imagine that the ability for the Sharks to lock up the dynamic Swede long term depends on a robust playoff run.

Or perhaps the shoe is on the other foot as the desire to keep Karlsson in the fold with other contractual issues facing GM Doug Wilson (captain Pavelski is nearing the end of his current deal) will be dependent on Karlsson fulfilling the significant promise that



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accompanied him to the Shark Tank. In short, maybe this is as much a tryout for Karlsson as it is the other way around.

Adding a little spice to the mix is that the Sharks will face Vegas for the second straight year. Given past attempts by the Golden Knights to land Karlsson, what better way to showcase their wares than by knocking Karlsson and the Sharks out of the playoff tournament? "It's a big hole," one Western-based scout said of Karlsson's uncertain status. "Because they're trying to figure out the matchups, who's partnering with who."

The scout has loved Brent Burns' game in the second half – "He's been through the roof," he said – but there is a depth question for the Sharks given the uncertainty over how effective Karlsson might be given the ramped-up pace of playoff hockey. He is a guy who doesn't skate all that well backwards to begin with, the scout said. His defensive game requires turning and pursuing with speed to break up attacks. And given how long it took Karlsson to fit in with the Sharks, does this latest absence make returning in an effective manner more difficult?

"It just goes to show you it's hard to go into a new team and be who you were," the scout said. "He's a smart player, don't get me wrong. He does so many other things well." But, well, let's just say there are lots of 'buts' around a San Jose team that has faded significantly down the stretch.

It's interesting that, for many, the Sharks are underdogs to first-round opponent Vegas. Hedican thinks Karlsson is a guy who could return from the groin injury and get better and better as the playoffs go along, if they can get out of the first round. Hedican said he was "blown away," by Karlsson's play when he hit his groove with the Sharks earlier in the season. "He does things at such an elite level. It's just the way his brain is wired," Hedican said. "This is a huge piece of the puzzle that they need to get them over the top to get by Vegas. I think Erik Karlsson's a huge part of what they hope to accomplish."

Dustin Byfuglien, Winnipeg Jets

Here's the image of imposing Jets defender Byfuglien that sticks from last spring: End of the first period of Game 2 of their second-round match against Nashville, and Byfuglien has two Predators by the scruff of the neck, jerking them around like they were puppets. Big Buff. Don't have many memories of him from the Western Conference final when Byfuglien and the rest of the Jets ran out of gas against Vegas, losing four straight after winning the series opener.

This spring Byfuglien remains a key part of a Jets lineup that still has Stanley Cup aspirations in spite of a disappointing second half that saw them slide into a tie for second place in the Central Division, setting up what should be a titanic struggle against surprising St. Louis. Byfuglien played in just 42 games this season thanks to injury, but he still collected a more than respectable 31 points. But what he brings to the table this spring – or conversely what he fails to bring to the table – will say much about the Jets' chances at building on last year's trip to the Western Conference final.

Jones said the Jets have a lot of game-changers in their lineup but it's Byfuglien who is the catalyst. "He can flat out change a game with his physical presence and his offensive abilities and also (change a game) with some of his defensive liabilities," Jones said. "He is one of the most interesting men in the league to watch play, and I think the playoffs are a much better place when Byfuglien's around."

One scout familiar with Byfuglien said it's often said Byfuglien can be considered the best player on the ice for both teams; as in he can be the Jets' best player and his lapses can sometimes make him more valuable to the other team. His stretch of good play is much more consistent now, the scout added. But there seems an inevitable dropoff every three or four games. "Then fatigue sets in and the wheels are wobbly and that affects his thought process," he said.

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1139857 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Oilers can't let effects of Old Boys Club dictate new GM search

Mark Spector | April 8, 2019, 4:24 PM

EDMONTON — As interim general manager Keith Gretzky sat next to CEO Bob Nicholson at another nervous year-end Edmonton Oilers press conference, a video of Wayne Gretzky's Top 100 goals ran on a loop on a giant screen high on the wall of the Oilers Hall of Fame room.

Back near the dressing room, the eventual new coaching hire will inherit a "war room" with a 15-foot picture of Mark Messier hoisting a Stanley Cup. Again, high up on the wall, looking down from the past on the here and now.

The physical symbolism runs thick here, to the point where Nicholson — in charge of the year 2019 and the immediate thereafter — still fields questions that either directly or indirectly reference the "Old Boys Club" at availability some 29 years after the last Stanley Cup parade was held in Edmonton.

As for the less tangible effects, we bring you Keith Gretzky — the acting GM who is a genuine candidate for the vacant GM job that Nicholson is actively seeking to fill.

Only in Edmonton does it matter who a candidate's brother is — but to this fan base it matters acutely. Including the acting GM in his press conference was, we would surmise, Nicholson's way of gauging public reaction to the notion of taking the interim tag off of Keith Gretzky's GM status.

"Keith has built his own resume," Nicholson said. "Anyone who has been around hockey has seen Keith's (work). I will say, I've really liked the job Keith has done in the interim. But there is Wayne Gretzky and there's Keith Gretzky, and Keith has built his own resume."

I will say, I quite like Keith Gretzky as well. He comes from amateur scouting roots, the way a Jim Benning does in Vancouver, and in my conversations with him I find a realistic evaluator who neither over-values a player just because he's Edmonton property, nor is he unrealistic on possible acquisitions who may or may not see Edmonton as a plausible destination.

Where his brother soared above his peers, Keith is a grinder. In a time when the single most important skill of a GM is talent evaluation — you can hire cap guys, contract guys, analytics people — in Gretzky we see a true bird dog who would turn around this organization's decidedly losing record in the trade market.

Nicholson is embarking on a GM search that will carry him to the four corners of the hockey world. Will Gretzky ultimately prove out to be the most qualified choice? That we don't know.

But, is there a person more in tune with the players Edmonton has under contract? Likely not.

Either way, if Gretzky gets hired because of his last name, it's a mistake. If he is deemed the best man for the job, but doesn't get hired because of his last name, then the Oilers are compounding their mistakes.

And what about Bill Guerin?



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Seven years working in the Pittsburgh front office. Four years as the Pens assistant GM. Runs the farm team in Wilkes-Barre/Scranton. Worked under GM Jim Rutherford, one of the league's wildest GMs.

Guerin is highly qualified and has every skill required to do the job. And he knows the ill effects the Old Boys Club had in this franchise from his time here — because he was an Oiler from 1997-2000.

Does that disqualify Guerin? It had better not.

These are the issues that are more complicated in Edmonton than they are elsewhere, due only to the Oilers mismanagement over the last two decades.

Here were some other highlights of Nicholson's address on Tuesday:

- Nicholson all but dismissed Ken Hitchcock from returning as head coach next year:

"When we signed Ken it was to be the head coach to the end of the year. That is up at this time. Ken will be with this organization in some fashion. Will he be the head coach? That will be determined as we name the general manager."

- On accessing GM candidates who currently work for other teams: "I've got a lot more leeway than I thought I would. Most of the general managers have been very good, and I'll get to have those discussions right away."

- On the (mostly) Eastern-based talk of Connor McDavid wanting out soon: "It's not the time to be deflecting those (comments). It's the time for us to put our work boots on and get it right. There's a lot to do."

- On firing any current scouts or front office personnel before the new GM hire: "I've made the decision that I won't. I want to do this in conjunction with the new general manager."

- On hurrying, before all the good head coaches get snapped up: "There is always going to be the reason you should hurry. I'm going to take the patient route. I'm not here to delay the process ... but I really want to make sure we're comfortable with that first step."

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Sportsnet.ca / Canucks' Green vows team is 'going to be better next year'

Iain MacIntyre | April 8, 2019, 7:32 PM

VANCOUVER – For a team emerging from a rebuild, there is no good answer to the loaded question: When will you be in a position to win a Stanley Cup?

Certainly, there are no smart answers (see ridiculed Ottawa Senators owner Eugene Melnyk).

Vancouver Canucks general manager Jim Benning seemed to be stumbling towards a bad answer on Monday when he volunteered that good teams "win with 26- to 35-year-old players."

Benning's best player is 20-year-old centre Elias Pettersson. Defenceman Quinn Hughes is 19, top winger Brock Boeser is 22 and team leader Bo Horvat, 24. If the Canucks don't make the National Hockey League playoffs next season, Benning probably isn't going to be around until these young core players are all 26 or older.

What Benning was getting at during the festival of press conferences the Canucks staged for the media on Monday is that Pettersson and others are not yet in their primes, and when they are, this Vancouver team will be the best it can be.

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Until then, the Canucks need to continue to get better. And in that regard, the most concrete promise wrangled during two hours of year-end press conferences and interviews came from Vancouver coach Travis Green, who said: "We're going to be better next year. I have no doubt about it. I thought we took a good step this year, and we'll take another one next year."

The Canucks improved this season by eight points which, if adjusted to reflect the universally dismal predictions for them, is about 12 points better than most people thought.

Even missing the Stanley Cup Playoffs for a fourth straight year, that's a good season.

But now Benning and Green must manufacture another 12 or 15 points next season for the Canucks to take the next step in their resurrection by actually making the playoffs.

The team is going to improve organically as Pettersson and Hughes mature and get stronger while Boeser, Horvat and the Canucks' many other 20-somethings refine their games.

But to get to 95 points from 81 – the Canucks finished 35-36-11 to extend their upward trend to three seasons – Benning is going to have to add a significant player or two this summer.

He reiterated Monday that he'll be exploring free agency and the trade market for a top-six winger and another reliable defenceman. So he'll be looking for what nearly everyone else in the NHL seeks.

The advantages the Canucks have are salary-cap space and the opportunity to be part of a future brightened dramatically by the emergence this season of Pettersson and the expected impact next year of Hughes.

"In free agency, we're going to look at all of our options," Benning said. "We're going to try to be aggressive to address those weaknesses. That's a priority."

"I'm excited about the future. I'm excited about what happened this year and with the growth of those young players. We have lots of work to do this summer to continue to add to this group to get to the next step."

Benning's first business, after practising his grimace for Tuesday's NHL Draft Lottery spectacle that annually kicks Vancouver in the teeth, is to restart negotiations with Boeser on a long-term extension. He'll also try to get 32-year-old defenceman Alex Edler re-signed to a short-term contract that won't encumber the Canucks during the Seattle expansion draft in two years.

Benning said skilled winger Sven Baertschi is healthy and will be relied upon next season despite playing only 26 games in 2018-19 due to a serious concussion. The team hasn't given up on perplexing forward Nikolay Goldobin either.

Hockey operations meetings will determine how veterans Brandon Sutter, Chris Tanev and Loui Eriksson fit the Canucks' future after another season of injuries and, in Eriksson's case, disappointing play. And winger Antoine Roussel won't be fully recovered from knee surgery when training camp opens in September.

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"We just have to keep pushing forward," Green said. "I don't think there's a magic formula. Simplest version: score more, allow less."



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You look at the teams that make the playoffs, just goal-differential is a big part of it."

The Canucks finished 25th in the NHL with 219 goals and scored only one more goal this season than last, which is better than what was expected after Daniel and Henrik Sedin retired last spring. Vancouver's 248 goals-against ranked 17th and were an 11-goal improvement from 2017-18.

"I think as a team we surprised a lot of people around the league this year and started to earn a little bit of respect," 25-year-old defenceman Troy Stecher said. "But it can't just be a one-off. We've got to show up to camp ready to work and ready to do it again, and add a little more to it, too."

Veteran centre Jay Beagle said: "Next year, it's 100 per cent in all our minds that we need to make the playoffs. This was a year of growth. There's no doubt that we need to be in the playoffs next year. Even this year, halfway through the year, we were very hopeful and determined to make the playoffs. That was encouraging."

The Canucks held the Western Conference's final playoff spot on Feb. 2 before another avalanche of injuries led to a 4-10-3 crash in the standings. It was further proof that the team needs to be deeper, especially on defence.

"I'm excited, as I hope the fans are," Green said. "I think our team has taken a step this season. I think we're going to take another step next year. And we've got young players I believe you can win with."

Hughes, Pettersson and Boeser were first-round draft picks by Benning. As the NHL's 23rd-place team this season, the Canucks are ninth in the 2019 draft order and have a five per cent chance of winning the top pick in Tuesday's lottery. Vancouver has a 16 per cent chance of moving into the top three.

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Sportsnet.ca / Maple Leafs' Jake Muzzin looks to elevate game as parenthood awaits

Luke Fox | April 8, 2019, 5:25 PM

TORONTO – A priceless sum is withdrawn from Jake Muzzin's memory bank on those days he pulls out that little turquoise box and opens it to take another peek at the Tiffany ring that sparkles with his name and number, the logo of his former team gleaming and 136 round diamonds.

The three Game 7s swiped on the road.

The pains and joys shared by the first and only group to require the maximum 21 games to reach the Stanley Cup Final.

The double-overtime championship-clinching goal, fired off the blade of a fellow defenceman.

His own six-goal, 12-point post-season contribution to the improbable run — no small feat from a mild-mannered NHL sophomore pegged as Drew Doughty's security blanket.

"The older I get, the more I appreciate the opportunity I got to be on a good team, to take advantage of a good opportunity like we had in L.A.," says Muzzin, 30, following his first full playoff preparatory practice with the Toronto Maple Leafs.

"I just want that here, too. I want guys to understand: It's not always easy to be on a good team and have a shot at winning every year. It's tough. When you have an opportunity, let's make the most of it."

Think there's anticipation and anxiety in your house as hours to puck drop tick away? Try being Muzzin, who missed the last week of work due to an illness — "I don't know what it was, but it was bad," he says — while preparing to become a first-time father.

He's also steadying himself for a top-four shutdown role against a Boston juggernaut after only 30 games of getting used to a new team and whatever pressure comes with being the reason why Kyle Dubas won't have a first-round pick at this June's draft.

"Lots of excitement going on," Muzzin smiles through a beard that is likely the envy of his younger teammates.

"As far as looking at it like, 'Let's see what Muzzin can do'? Being 'The Guy', I don't like having that on me. I just want to do my job and help the team win."

Muzzin's job, if Monday's lines are an indication of Mike Babcock's Game 1 deployment, is to build on his growing chemistry with Nikita Zaitsev on the Leafs' second (and only lefty-righty) pairing, help neutralize the Bruins' frightening top six and free up the offensive Jake Gardiner-Travis Dermott partnership to orchestrate scoring chances.

While Muzzin dealt with his share of the criticism levied at Toronto's D corps after an eight-game honeymoon period wore off, Zaitsev's underlying possession numbers are better with Muzzin than without.

Muzzin has only been a minus defender in two of his 15 games and is a plus-21 on the year (plus-11 with 11 points since the trade). Among all Leafs defencemen, only the more sheltered Dermott and Igor Ozhiganov have a better 5-on-5 Corsi for than Muzzin's 53.9 per cent.

Add the fact Gardiner, taking shifts on the second power-play unit, and Dermott aren't long removed from serious injuries, and the Muzzin-Zaitsev tandem should be key.

"They play hard. Muzzin moves the puck forward, and Z (Zaitsev) competes. Z closes better than anybody on our team, he's got better edges and better defensively that way than anybody else. Gives less time and space," Babcock explains.

"They're both not going to be backed off by anybody, and as a pair, they've seemed to have moved the puck good enough that we're not spending a ton of time in our own zone. So that's critical for us to have success."

Muzzin is upfront with the trail-and-error he and Zaitsev endured the past couple of months as they nail down their communication on reads.

"We've messed up, and that's how you learn, really—when you make mistakes on certain stuff. You want me to go? You go? Or we both don't go? We've had a stretch here where we've learned a lot and got some of the stuff ironed out," Muzzin says.

"Mentally, physically, it's hard. We need everyone in here 100 per cent buy-in to do what it takes to win, no matter what the situation is."

Of all those with stalls in the Leafs room, only Muzzin and veteran Ron Hainsey truly grasp what that climb to the mountaintop takes and how delicious that view can be.

"Those guys are invaluable to us. It's real important that they step up at this time with their play but more so with leadership, letting guys know what's acceptable and what's unacceptable," Babcock says.

We ask Muzzin, a 526-game vet, who among this young Leafs core has picked his brain and tried to borrow a few lessons from his 50 playoff games.



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"None. None. No," he replies. "If they want to, they can. If not, then so be it. That's fine too. I ain't got no problem with that.

"If guys are feeling nervous or I can tell maybe they're a little jittery, maybe I can talk to them."

Unless, of course, Muzzin is bolting from the rink to attend the birth of he and wife Courtney's daughter. She's only due sometime around Game 7, but Muzzin assures that the house is in order and a contingency plan is in place.

"Friends and family are so close that we need help or we're in a sticky situation, we have it," Muzzin says. "We're going to have [the birth] scheduled, so we'll hopefully plan it so I don't have to miss."

An April baby? In NHL circles, planned parenthood means counting backwards nine months from the post-season.

"This was obviously not planned," Muzzin chuckles.

Such is hockey life at the most unpredictable page on the calendar.

That fond spring Muzzin earned his ring, Patrick Marleau's Sharks didn't plan on squandering a 3-0 series lead to the Kings in San Jose. The division champ Ducks and defending Cup champion Blackhawks weren't supposed to be taken down by Muzzin's team either.

No wonder the man with the two-lap head start on playoff beards believes underdogs about as much as unicorns or leprechauns.

"One thing I did learn is, you're never out," Muzzin says. "As long as there's a game left, there's an opportunity. What I learned is, whoever wants it the most, at the end of the day wins the games."

He surveys a room in which the vast majority have never won Round 1, let alone have a ring they can pull out to remind themselves of winning Round 4.

"These guys are hungry, man. They want to win. They want to prove themselves, and so do I," Muzzin says.

"Let's go."

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1139860 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Maple Leafs looking at Kadri to be X-factor against Bruins

Chris Johnston April 8, 2019, 5:05 PM

TORONTO — What most people see when they look at Nazem Kadri's regular season is a precipitous drop in production: He followed up consecutive 32-goal years for the Toronto Maple Leafs by scoring just 16 times in 2018-19.

What Kadri sees in his own performance, however, is a little more nuanced. He points to a massive improvement in the faceoff circle — he shot up to a 55 per cent success rate, after making that an area of emphasis — and a run of unfavourable puck luck as his primary takeaways from the Opening 82.

"It's been an unlucky year for me with lots of posts and my shooting percentage being down," Kadri said Monday. "Could I have easily been in the mid-'20s [in goals]? I think so. But it is what it is and I'm going to try to contribute whatever I can."

As the Leafs prepare for another first-round meeting with Boston, he is their X-factor.

This team is deepest down the middle and Kadri is a luxury most teams don't have at third-line centre. There has been a trickle-down effect since the off-season signing of John Tavares, and it should create a different matchup challenge for Bruins coach Bruce Cassidy in this best-of-seven.

He will be most concerned about trying to neutralize the lines centred by Auston Matthews and Tavares at 5-on-5.

That should mean easier competition for Kadri and wingers Patrick Marleau and William Nylander, not to mention more shifts starting in the offensive zone. Those two themes ran consistently through Kadri's regular season and helped boost his underlying numbers. He saw year-over-year gains in Corsi (53.2 per cent, from 48.4), scoring chance share (54.2 per cent, from 50.7) and goals-for percentage (52.9, from 50.6) while producing more assists and points per 60 minutes played, individually.

In years past, Kadri was Mike Babcock's preferred shutdown centre. He almost exclusively drew top competition and faced the toughest zone starts of any Leaf in each of the last two playoff series: Seeing just 18 per cent in the O-zone against Washington in 2017 and 21.4 per cent against Boston last spring.

He'll be up close to the 50 per cent range starting with Game 1 on Thursday night.

Rather than preparing for a healthy dose of Patrice Bergeron and David Krejci this time around, he's likely going to see Charlie Coyle and Co. And the Leafs are expecting to gain an edge there.

"That's an important piece for us," said Babcock. "That's supposed to be where we have our depth. You've got to outplay the guy across from you and you've got to be nasty while you do it. And you've got to be real solid defensively.

"Those are the things for us that we need from Naz. We've talked about it lots. He understands what's needed."

Kadri was downright beaming after Monday's practice, speaking about how addictive he finds the atmosphere and intensity you get during the playoffs. You can count him among the Leafs who thought the regular season dragged on.

The 28-year-old is trying to reach the second round for the first time in his NHL career — only he and Jake Gardiner are left over from the 2013 Leafs team that had the Game 7 collapse in Boston — and he's planning to make a more positive impact on this series than he managed last April, when he earned a three-game suspension for dangerously boarding Tommy Wingels late in Game 1.

He could only watch as Toronto fell behind 3-1 while rolling out Matthews, Tyler Bozak, Tomas Plekanec and Dominic Moore down the middle. Those were among the final NHL games Plekanec and Moore ever played.

"Honestly I think [the series] was pretty even," said Kadri. "It was unfortunate missing a few of those games because I felt like maybe it could have been a little bit different."

As we prepare for the rematch, the talk in Toronto is largely centred around Matthews' quest for a more productive spring and how Tavares and linemate Mitch Marner might follow their career offensive seasons.

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We all hyper-analyze the stars at this time of year. But a playoff series comes and goes inside a two-week span — much quicker, if it ends shy of seven games — and the intense focus on matchups can see players like Boston's Jake DeBrusk tip the offensive scales in his team's direction.



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"Often what happens is those [top] guys cancel each other and it's the rest of the guys that matter," said Babcock. "I've been in a lot of playoff series where your stars had no points after the first round, hardly anything after two rounds, but by the end, they were leading your team in scoring. The other guys got 'em through."

On this team, in this moment, Kadri resides outside of the spotlight.

Where he was once central to the Leafs fortunes, he now fills a different role. He can stand behind the franchise pillars and pull on the rope from there. Toronto doesn't need him to score to finally beat the Bruins, but the odds will go up considerably if he does.

"I'm definitely looking to step it up and hopefully come up big," said Kadri. "I think that's important to going deep in the playoffs, is having those unsung heroes and those guys that can contribute."

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Sportsnet.ca / Three areas of concern facing Maple Leafs against Bruins

Jeff Blair | April 8, 2019, 9:44 AM

Let's be honest for a minute as we settle in for the buildup to the NHL playoffs: the getting here was more difficult and at times confusing than we thought it would be but, really, would Toronto Maple Leafs fans feel any different if they'd finished ahead of the Boston Bruins and had home-ice advantage?

Given the weight of history? No. But that's beside the point. The proof was always going to be in the post-season pudding; our best hope was that all the ingredients would be in place. In the very least, we wanted the chefs to be using the same recipe.

The over-riding concerns for me ahead of this series are three-fold:

Too many smart hockey people pin-pointed the Leafs blue-line as an Achilles heel before the start of training camp and none of them appear to have had their mind changed. As I've said on my radio show for the past two weeks, if at the start of the season I'd told you that calling on Calle Rosen would be seen as a life-and-death necessity and a clear improvement over a third of the defence corps, you'd have laughed.

Frederick Andersen posted a shocking .890 save percentage in March, and the question is whether that sample size supersedes everything else he did this year. After all, he posted a goals-against average of 2.77 that was 22 percentage points higher than his career average, and his save percentage matched his career high. The other question is how much to read into his public musing about getting worn down. Too many smart hockey people say the Leafs can't max out unless Andersen is brilliant. He hasn't been for much of the last two months.

Babcock was out-coached by the Bruins' Bruce Cassidy in the first-round last season. There, I've said it. It's been six years since he's won a playoff series and while that's not all on him... some of it must be, right?

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After the Leafs were eliminated last season, many smart hockey people were wondering whether he was comfortable or knew what he had in Auston Matthews. They were also wondering whether he'd

ever move away from his constipating obsession with line matching or falling in love with the likes of Zach Hyman, Connor Brown and Nikita Zaitsev. Hyman has turned out to be worth it. The others? Disposable.

In the meantime, we've just finished a regular season replete with whining about a lack of right-handed defencemen, a lack of faith in Jake Muzzin until injuries forced his hand, and whispers that Babcock is using some of his willing media allies to instigate some discontent with general manager Kyle Dubas, who appears to have committed the grievous sins of being:

1. Young, and...
2. Smart.

Babcock's too old to be playing these silly games, isn't he? Maybe it's just a way of deflecting attention from his team or a way of handling boredom, although I'd suggest the fact three coaches have already been fired and Marlies head coach Sheldon Keefe seems to be flavour of the month might be enough to hold his interest.

As it is, right now all we have are brave words and assurances that the Leafs are ready and set to take on the Bruins. The Leafs' post-season picture has been painfully clear for the past couple of months so they've spent practices and video sessions in the Brad Marchand Theatre, before going out and fiddling around against other teams for a couple of hours. It's been all Bruins, all month.

The flip side is the Bruins have probably been doing the same. In effect, we're being asked to trust Babcock and his players that they've got a handle on this thing, which absent recent playoff success would have been the same whether it was home ice or not or against the Bruins or Tampa Bay Lightning or whomever. I'm not sure that wasn't always going to be the case this season but, yeah, it would be nice to feel a bit more comfortable waiting for the answer, wouldn't it? I've got the Bruins in six games and I'm lighting some candles right now in the hopes that I'm wrong ...

NOW TWEET THIS

In which we salute all three of you who thought the Flames would finish with the highest point total among Canadian teams... muse about Bo Bichette getting up here sooner as opposed to later... remember the player formerly known as Josh Donaldson... have a pithy comeback to those who wonder about where the NHL is headed...

- Does this constitute balance? With one game remaining in the regular season, the Raptors are the only NBA team with different leaders in total minutes (Siakam); points (Leonard); rebounds (Ibaka); and assists (Lowry) #options
- Hands up all of you who thought the Flames would be the Canadian team with the easiest first-round matchup this season. Uh-huh #thoughtso
- If Dallas Kuechel is still a free agent after the draft – when the compensatory draft pick expires – I'd offer a multi-year deal. If Marcus Stroman or Aaron Sanchez is traded, innings will be needed next year. Adding a Scott Boras client might get an extension with Sanchez #counterintuitive
- Reds manager David Bell instigated Sunday's dug-out clearing incident with the Pirates, running onto the field of play in front of Pirates pitcher Chris Archer to argue with home plate umpire Jeff Kellogg after a warning was issued to Archer. Bad form, skip #suspension
- I'll say this right now: the NHL needs Connor McDavid to not be with the Oilers for the duration of his contract #freeconnor
- As per NHL.com there were 138 multi-goal comeback wins in the NHL this season, an all-time high and in 41 per-cent of all games teams came back from at least a one-goal deficit to win. I love this game the way it is now #kudos



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• Just a gut feeling here: I'm not certain the Blue Jays have Bo Bichette on the same service time clock they did with Vladimir Guerrero, Jr. I wonder if we might really see Bichette this summer #advanced

• Sultan of Schadenfreude: Braves 3B Josh Donaldson, a career .275 hitter who averages eight extra-base hits in the first month of the season has started 2019 9-for-36 (.167) with one double and nine strikeouts #chopthis

Each week, Jeff Blair and Stephen Brunt tackle the most impactful stories in the world of sports and their intersection with popular culture. Come for the sports; stay for the storytelling and cigars.

THE ENDGAME

Welcome to the rebuild; we've got no runs or names.

Oh man, it's on, isn't it?

Kevin Pillar gets traded to the San Francisco Giants after the Giants blink first in a stand-off and the Blue Jays get away without having to kick in any money. Randal Grichuk signs a five-year extension and hears some cat-calls from the Westjet Flight Deck in his first game in centre field post-Pillar. People take to social media outraged that Alen Hanson wears No. 19 – good lord, those Jose Bautista wounds ought to be closed by now, no? It's not like he did anything after he left here – but seem OK when he puts on No. 1, worn by Tony Fernandez.

Fred McGriff wore No. 19, folks, and although he finished his final year of Hall of Fame eligibility well short of Cooperstown, I'm not sure Jose Bautista will get much closer. Talk about a caca-phony (see what I did there?)

In other words ... this is going to be a long, hard slog without picking dumb-ass battles.

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Sportsnet.ca / What is Maple Leafs' path to first-round victory vs. Bruins?

Andrew Berkshire April 8, 2019, 3:02 PM

For the third time in six seasons, the Toronto Maple Leafs will open up their post-season against the Boston Bruins, hoping to finally slay that dragon and give the NHL's hungriest fan base some playoff success for the first since 2004.

The second half of the season the Bruins had in terms of wins and losses, not to mention the Leafs' record over that same time, doesn't exactly fill you with confidence that this is the year the Leafs can finally get over the hump, but as I've written recently, the win-loss record can be deceiving, and the Leafs have actually been playing better as the season has gone on.

The Bruins are an excellent team, one of the most challenging opponents the Leafs could have drawn, but they're also not the Tampa Bay Lightning, so let's go over the path to victory for the Maple Leafs – what they'll have to focus on in order to take control of and win their first-round series.

After breaking down each Canadian team and where they rank across the league recently, I think that's a good place to start to directly compare the Leafs and Bruins in order to see how they match up in several key facets of the game.

With the puck on their sticks, the Leafs are a significantly more dangerous team than the Bruins, creating far more high danger scoring chances, more scoring chances and a similar number of shots.

Neither team is particularly great at east-west passes in the offensive zone, but the Leafs connect on more slot passes and the Bruins are better at finding each other off the rush.

However, the Leafs turn their opportunities off the rush into chances more often, even though the Bruins remain dangerous there.

The Leafs are far more successful at beating players one-on-one with dekes in the offensive zone, and attempt it more often, and they're also better at gaining the offensive zone with control, exiting the defensive zone with control and creating odd-man rushes.

Surprisingly, the Leafs are also more careful with the puck than the Bruins are outside of the offensive zone, where Toronto takes more risks.

In the defensive zone, the gap between the two teams in turnovers is massive, with the Leafs really pushing for improvement in that area this season.

The Leafs are one of the NHL's best offensive teams, so being ahead of the Bruins there isn't exactly surprising, it's how far ahead they appear to be that sticks out.

Playing with the puck is only half the game though, so let's bring in the stats without the puck as well.

As far as the Leafs rank ahead of the Bruins offensively, Boston blows Toronto out of the water without the puck.

No team has allowed fewer scoring chances at 5-vs-5 than the Bruins have, they barely allow any high danger chances, pre-shot puck movement to the slot is shut down extremely effectively, and no team cuts down rushes like the Bruins do. Zdeno Chara is no longer an elite defenceman in many facets of the game, it's almost impossible to be when you're 42-years-old, but off the rush? His slow feet don't matter much when he has the best stick check in the league and the wingspan of a 747.

The Bruins are also excellent at breaking up cycles. They allow the second-fewest cycle chances against in the NHL, but they do have one area of vulnerability: chances off the forecheck.

The Leafs are also susceptible to strong forechecking pressure, but remember in the breakdown of league ranks with the puck that the Bruins have an extremely high turnover rate in the defensive zone? Combine that with the Leafs being the eighth-most effective team in the NHL at creating chances off the forecheck, and you have a very clear area for Mike Babcock to exploit with one of the league's most versatile offences.

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The problem here comes from the fact the Bruins were actually a slightly more effective forechecking team than the Leafs were this season, and the other avenues that the Leafs are so good at using to create offence are rarely available against Boston.

The Leafs are a brilliant team off the rush, create tons of controlled entries, but the Bruins allow the third-fewest rush chances against in the league, the third-least controlled entries overall and force teams to dump the puck in the third-most often.

So are the Leafs stuck focusing only on forechecking to get around the Bruins' excellent neutral zone defensive structure and phenomenal passing lane coverage on opposing cycles? Not entirely, they're also going to create a lot of counterattacks.

The Leafs aren't particularly effective at forcing turnovers during the opponent's offensive zone possessions, but the Bruins do give the



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puck up a lot in the offensive zone, and when they do, they allow about a league average number of odd man rushes.

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Toronto is just as susceptible in that area, but since the return of William Nylander and the addition of Jake Muzzin, their neutral zone defence has significantly improved and cut those opportunities down.

The defensive gap is bigger than the offensive gap between these two teams, which means it's going to be a tough uphill climb for the Leafs to win this one, with counterattack offence and forechecking likely to play a huge role for the Leafs to pull it off.

For this reason, one player who has to have a great series for the Leafs to win is Zach Hyman. Hyman is a player who I always find a little overrated by Babcock and Leafs fans in general, but his dogged puck-pursuit style is the kind of thing that gives the Bruins fits, and playing with Mitch Marner, who excels at intercepting passes, is going to mean a lot of counter attacking for that line. Because of that line's importance to creating offence in this series, I would guess that Babcock will attempt to keep it away from Patrice Bergeron, even though it's likely the line that matches up best against him, you don't want to get shut down.

Just like last year, the matchup game might fall to Nazem Kadri, who may have had a disappointing offensive year, but should be hungry to play a big role.

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Sportsnet.ca / Season Takeaways: NHL's young guns spurring '80s-esque offensive revival

Ryan Dixon | April 8, 2019, 9:56 AM

For the most part, we tend to see NHL seasons through the lens of a single player or team. Did my guy have a big year? Did the boys realize their potential?

At the end of 82 for all 31, though, it's important to zoom out and take stock of the big picture. All season long, I've been doing 'Weekend Takeaways' in this space. But with the off-season having already hit for half the league, this is a great time to look back on the season that was as a whole, point out some trends and draw some conclusions.

So before the playoffs land, here are a few thoughts on the hockey we saw from October through early April.

Keep Scoring, Young Man

NHL games averaged 5.96 goals per game this year, up from 5.86 last season and 5.32 five seasons ago in 2014-15. This year featured a record 138 multi-goal comeback wins, meaning fans had to be careful leaving the building or couch. As was the case last year, roughly 28 per cent of the goals scored were buried by players aged 23 or younger. The kids haven't been scoring this much since the goal-crazy 1980s. Basically, 20 per cent of the league set a new personal high for points.

Nikita Kucherov's 128 points were the most since Mario Lemieux had 161 in 1995-96 and this was the first season to feature two 50-

goal men — Alex Ovechkin and Leon Draisaitl — since Steven Stamkos and Evgeni Malkin both hit the magic mark in 2011-12.

Ahead by a Century

Six players hit the 100-point plateau this year. That's three more than last season and the most we've seen since seven turned the trick in 2005-06 coming out of the lost season, when the game really opened up thanks to the rules crackdown.

Draisaitl and Connor McDavid became the first teammates to notch 100 points in the same year since Ovechkin and Nicklas Backstrom achieved that feat in 2009-10. More dubiously, McDavid and Draisaitl are the first players to both hit 100 on a team that missed the playoffs since Lemieux and Paul Coffey did it with the Penguins in 1989-90.

If it's any consolation, Oilers fans, the Pens came back and won the next two Stanley Cups.

Decreased Workloads in the Crease

You know the old saying that goes, if you have two No. 1 goalies, you actually don't even have one? It's almost time to retire it.

More and more, teams are relying on two stoppers. Only two goalies — Montreal's Carey Price and Minnesota's Devan Dubnyk — appeared in 65 games this year. Five goalies played at least 65 in each of the past two years and in 2009-10, 10 creasemen — one third of the league's starters — manned the net that many times. Overall, 54 goalies played 25 games or more, compared to 51 last year and 47 a decade ago.

Dallas (Ben Bishop, Anton Khudobin), Nashville (Pekka Rinne, Juuse Saros), the Islanders (Thomas Greiss, Robin Lehner) and Pittsburgh (Matt Murray, Casey DeSmith) all had two guys play at least 25 games and post a save percentage of .915 or better.

Red and White Revolution

I did Red and White Power Rankings all year in my Weekend Takeaways, so I understand as well as anybody that the Leafs and Jets flattened out in the final quarter of the year. Still, both those teams — along with Calgary — are brimming with talent and enter the post-season as legit threats to make a deep run. It's hard to see why any of these clubs will take a major step backward any time soon.

At the other end of the spectrum, I'd understand if fans of Ottawa and Edmonton decided the only way to get through life was to relinquish hope. But as awful as things have been in the board room — in Ottawa's case, I've been saying things became a parody five disasters ago — Edmonton's new GM will be building around McDavid and Draisaitl, while Ottawa's selloff and sneaky strong drafting has resulted in a raft of young talent that's already landed or is about to. From a pure on-ice perspective, both places still have a lot to put your arms around.

That leaves Montreal and Vancouver. The Canadiens missed the playoffs by a hair during a year in which Carey Price completely re-discovered his form and several young players — either in the NHL already or on the way — took big steps. Then there's the Canucks, who showed the 2017 Draft actually did have a generational player at the top, only he went at No. 5 when they called Elias Pettersson's name. Vancouver has never been this loaded with high-end youth.

There's lots of room for debate, depending on how the light hits these seven teams for you. But hold them up at a certain angle, and things seem bright.

The New Islanders

Tampa Bay is rightfully getting lauded for its 62-win season, but the organization has been building toward something like this for a long time. The Islanders' defensive turnaround, however, is equally sudden and astonishing.



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New York was the only squad to allow fewer than 200 goals this year, landing at 191. That is 102 fewer than last season, when the Isles allowed 293. In fact, in the five seasons leading up to this one, the only squads to allow more goals than New York were the Oilers and Sabres.

Related: Barry Trotz will be getting many Jack Adams votes in the next couple days as the ballots are filed.

Speaking of awards, let's quickly hand out some hardware:

Hart Trophy: Nikita Kucherov, running away. I do wonder, though, if Brad Marchand will get some second-place votes.

Norris Trophy: Do-it-all Mark Giordano, who exceeded his previous best for points by 18 (74 to 56) at age 35.

Vezina Trophy: Darcy Kuemper nearly dragged an injury-ravaged Coyotes team to the playoffs with his sparkling second-half performance. In a year when you can poke holes in every candidate's case, I love what he did for that team.

Calder Trophy: Mathew Barzal won it last year, but if Brock Boeser had not missed 20 games, you wonder if he'd just be walking this award across the Canucks room and giving it to Pettersson.

Jack Adams Award: I wasn't kidding, it's going to Barry Trotz, even though Jon Cooper and Bill Peters have rock-solid cases.

Selke Trophy: Mark Stone wins it for all the wingers out there.

Lady Byng: This will be Sasha Barkov's jumping off point to claiming some of the big-boy awards in the very near future.

Conn Smythe: We're not there yet! Come back tomorrow for all our playoff predictions.

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Sportsnet.ca / Oilers' Connor McDavid will not play at world championships

Josh BenetEAU | April 8, 2019, 2:00 PM

Edmonton Oilers captain Connor McDavid will not be playing for Team Canada at the upcoming world championships, according to Sportsnet's John Shannon.

I'm told Connor McDavid's injury is not as severe as many thought...but he will not play for Canada at the World Championships.

— John Shannon (@JSportsnet) April 8, 2019

McDavid suffered a leg injury in the Oilers' season finale against the Calgary Flames on Saturday. McDavid had to leave the game as a result, but team CEO Bob Nicholson said Monday that an MRI on the leg indicated the injury wasn't as serious as originally feared.

"We can't go too far in it. We're still evaluating it, but it's not as serious as we thought," he said. "But it's Connor, it's an injury, it's serious for our organization."

McDavid has played for Canada on the world championship stage twice before, in 2016 and 2018. He's coming off his third consecutive 100-point campaign and tied a career-high with 41 goals this season.

"We still don't know too much. Things look fairly positive right now but we haven't had a picture in there so we'll see," McDavid said Sunday. "To be completely honest with you, I thought my leg was in two pieces when I was sitting on the ice.

"But thankfully the bone's OK, thankfully I was able to get up and with a lot of help I was able to get off."

The world championships begin May 10 in Bratislava and Kosice, Slovakia.

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TSN.CA / Jets, Blues prepare for epic playoff battle

Paul Edmonds

WINNIPEG – For the first time in the history of both franchises, the Winnipeg Jets and St. Louis Blues will meet in the postseason.

Their first playoff meeting was finally decided in Game 82 of the 2018-19 regular season, which fittingly meant something for both teams. So the table is set for a first-round, best-of-seven series with both teams determined and home ice secured for Winnipeg.

Now in order to perhaps handicap what might transpire over the next two weeks, here's a preview of what to look for and how either team could fare in a matchup that no one back in December predicted would take place.

DEFENCE

When the calendar turned to 2019, the Blues found themselves dead last in the 31-team NHL. On Jan. 2, they were 15-18-4 and possessed a goal differential of minus-21. Since then, they posted a 30-10-5 run to finish third in the Central Division with a plus-24 goal differential – an incredible 45-goal swing in just over three months.

You don't have that kind of turnaround by simply relying on outscoring your mistakes. Something changed in the Blues' defensive scheme shortly after Craig Berube took over as interim head coach on Nov. 19 following Mike Yeo's firing. The Blues were also buoyed defensively by the emergence of stable goaltending following the surprise call-up of rookie Jordan Binnington on Dec. 9. Those two single transactions in large part started the about-face for St. Louis and as a result they defended better to surrender just 223 goals against this season, the third fewest in the Western Conference behind only Dallas and Nashville. And that's 21 goals-against fewer than the Jets allowed. As a result, these changes catapulted the Blues into a position to challenge for a Stanley Cup, a situation last Christmas that was considered unfathomable. Therefore, you have to believe the Blues are not going to abandon the investment they made to defensive hockey just because the playoffs have arrived.

The Jets, meanwhile, struggled defensively for most of the season. After shaving off 38 goals-against from a year ago for a total of 218, the club's goals against swelled again to 244 this season. Winnipeg wasn't horrible defensively this year, but they were prone to turnovers, ill-advised passes in the middle of the ice, some bad sort outs and soft goals. Of the eight playoff teams in the Western Conference, they allowed the second-most goals against, only two fewer goals than the Colorado Avalanche, the second wild card qualifying team who allowed 246.

Advantage: St. Louis



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OFFENCE

The Jets have the ability to outscore their mistakes. In fact, they have the offensive leverage to blow the doors off teams. Offence came so easy to the Jets at points this season that they appeared to look bored after lighting the lamp and their celebrations were.....well.....lame! But facts are facts and they were among the top 5 in the league with 272 goals for and the highest-scoring team in their division for the second straight year. Their goal differential was plus-28, second highest to only Calgary, the Western Conference's best team when the dust settled on the regular season on Saturday.

The Jets can score on the power play, short-handed and five-on-five. They possessed three 30-goal scorers in Mark Scheifele (38), Kyle Connor (34) and Patrik Laine (30) and another two players with 20 or more in Nikolaj Ehlers (21) and Blake Wheeler (20). They also had 34 goals from their blueline even with Dustin Byfuglien missing 40 games.

The Blues scored 25 fewer goals than Winnipeg this season with Russian sniper Vladimir Tarasenko the only player to top the 30-goal mark at 33. Ryan O'Reilly (28) and David Perron (23) were the only other players to amass over 20 goals this season for St. Louis. For what's it worth, the Jets won the season series between the two teams 3-1 and outscored the Blues 18-10, including 8-4 in St. Louis on Nov. 24 when Laine scored five times. In the last 14 games between the two teams the Jets have won 11 times.

Advantage: Winnipeg

SPECIAL TEAMS

The Jets' power play finished fourth in the league at a 24.8 per cent conversion rate. It was an area of the team's game that was fairly consistent and motored along to a second-best, league rating on home ice at 31.4 per cent. However, it did sputter down the stretch, going four for 26 (15 per cent) over the last 10 games and Laine, who led the club with 15 man advantage goals, scored just once on the power play in the last 20 games. But the Jets' power play is more than a one-trick pony and there is certainly enough weapons to get the job completed as Scheifele (12 PPG) and Connor (11 PPG) were also prolific on the team's top power play unit.

The Blues' power play was top 10 this season, finishing at 21.1 per cent. Their power-play units scored 12 fewer goals than Winnipeg on 13 fewer chances. Tarasenko led St. Louis with 12 PPG, but after that there was a sharp drop off behind him with Perron (seven) and O'Reilly (six) next in order. For what it's worth both teams allowed seven short-handed goals against this season,

On the penalty kill, the Blues were stingy, finishing at 81.5 per cent (ninth overall) and were shorthanded 18 fewer times than Winnipeg. The Jets were at 79.2 per cent (22nd overall). Winnipeg did produce 10 short-handed goals while the Blues managed just five. Based on the old theory about a better penalty kill trumping a solid power play in the playoffs, the edge here belongs to St. Louis.

Advantage: St. Louis

GOALTENDING

Experience in goal is crucial at this time of year. Whether it was memorable or forgettable, each time you step further beyond your mental background you gain knowledge to draw from in the future. The pressure, expectations and momentum swings are acute.

As such, the Jets should be well prepared in this department for whatever comes their way in the series, especially based on the team advancing to the Western Conference final last season and the adversity they faced down the stretch of the regular season. Now, there will be a lot of chatter about Binnington's play since his call-up from San Antonio (AHL) before Christmas and how he backstopped the Blues' turnaround – and rightly so. He is also an exceptional puck handler and will provide a challenge for the Jets to make

effective shoot-ins and hard rims to capture puck possession on the forecheck. But zero NHL playoff games amounts to just that – zero experience on the NHL's biggest stage.

Enter Connor Hellebuyck, who witnessed first-hand last May what playoff experience in goal can do for a team when he was understandably outdueled by Vegas Golden Knights starter Marc-Andre Flueury in the conference final. But what he learned from that involvement was invaluable moving into this year. The 25-year-old began trending upward significantly since the end of February and it could be argued he played his best hockey of the regular season in the last six weeks while the organization made sure he wasn't overworked toward the finish line.

Sure, Binnington's (1.89 GAA; .927 SV%, 32 games) numbers were better than Hellebuyck's (2.90 GAA; .913 SV%, 63 games) in half the outings, but the experience Hellebuyck possesses over the rookie 25-year-old Binnington should provide Winnipeg with an important edge. Hellebuyck's playoff past performance sheet is decent too, with a 9-8 record, 2.36 GAA and .922 SV% and nearly 200 more games in NHL service time than his counterpart for St. Louis.

Advantage: Winnipeg

INTANGIBLES

Is there a bigger wild card in this series than Jets defenceman Dustin Byfuglien? Of all the players involved in this first-round set, he is the only one that has hoisted the Stanley Cup. He is also a unicorn of a player or "one-of-one" as teammate Blake Wheeler calls him. In other words, there is no other player like him and the fact that he was able to find his way back into the lineup for the final five regular season games coming off a lower-body injury could allow him to be the difference-maker in the series, and quickly.

Byfuglien was a force early on in last year's post-season against the Minnesota Wild and he sure looked playoff snarly in the last few games last week with the way he manhandled the likes of Chicago's Drake Caggiula and Arizona's Vinnie Hinostroza. It is also all but confirmed the Jets will have Josh Morrissey in the lineup for the series. He is arguably the team's best defenceman and his return will certainly shore up the team's defensive play and its ability to advance the puck up the ice quickly and precisely.

The Blues do have one of the best faceoff centres in the league in O'Reilly. He finished at 57 per cent effective on draws this season (eighth overall), but of the players in the top 10 in that category he took 30 more faceoffs than anyone else. He is also extremely tough at home, winning nearly 60 per cent of his draws and will be thrust into taking almost every important draw in his own zone. Starting with the puck will be an asset for St. Louis because of O'Reilly.

Advantage: Winnipeg

FINAL THOUGHTS

Aside from throwing a bevy of numbers around to make our point as to which team has the advantage in this series, there are some determining factors that you can't attach something numerical to. For instance, how much will home ice mean to the Jets? Does the experience of advancing to the Western Conference last year really account for anything to Winnipeg? Where is Laine's interest level in all of this? Does the bubble burst on Binnington?

The bottom line is this is not a just-happy-to-be-here mentality for the Jets. It's business – unfinished or incomplete – for a team that feels it's ready for the next step and excited to jump through the window of opportunity for a Stanley Cup right now. It is acknowledged the Jets weren't clicking on all cylinders when the season concluded, but they'll be a tough out based on many of the items we presented above.

On the other hand, the Blues are elated with their advancement to the postseason and tickled with their resurrection mid-season. But



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you wonder if the Cinderella component to their second-half awakening might end abruptly in the first round of the Stanley Cup playoffs. Both teams fought adversity this season – with St. Louis early on and the Jets later – although none of that counts now and with Winnipeg's playoff experience and home ice advantage it's their series to lose.

Prediction: Winnipeg in seven

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1139866 Websites

TSN.CA / Matthews feeling 'free' in pursuit of playoff redemption

Mark Masters

TSN Toronto reporter Mark Masters checks in daily with news and notes on the Maple Leafs, who practised at the MasterCard Centre on Monday.

An intriguing scene played out at the end of practice on Monday as Mike Babcock called Auston Matthews over and delivered a message. The Leafs head coach did all the talking while the star centre listened for about 40 seconds. They both wore serious expressions.

So, what was that all about?

"You think I'm going to tell you?" Matthews shot back at the questioner.

Coach, care to shed some light on this?

"No," Babcock stated flatly before smiling, "but thanks for asking, I appreciate it. But you guys go ahead and speculate."

Welcome to the playoffs in the centre of the hockey universe where everything is under the microscope. And the seats are a little warmer than usual here considering what happened last season. Matthews led the Leafs in shots (27), but was held to one goal and one assist during the seven-game loss to Boston. Afterwards questions were raised about his relationship with Babcock and the coach flew to Arizona for a meeting.

Now, Babcock and Matthews are again in the spotlight getting ready for another battle with the Bruins. Matthews confirmed that redemption is on his mind.

"Everybody on this team is going into this very hungry," the 21-year-old said. "We want to make up for last year. We felt it could've gone either way there in that last game and to not move on was really frustrating, left a bitter taste in a lot of our mouths so we definitely want to use that as motivation."

"Last year's last year," said Babcock, "there's no sense spending any time on that. They have a different team, we have a different team and our guys are growing and they're going to get older and they're going to get better and some of those losses in life, those little hardships are the best things for you. They allow you to grow and make you grow."

Matthews, Babcock refuse to shed light on post-practice interaction

Maple Leafs head coach Mike Babcock pulled Auston Matthews aside to have a quick discussion following Monday's practice. Neither would elaborate on what the powwow was about when speaking to the media. Mark Masters has more.

Matthews took a big step forward in his development this season posting a career-high 73 points despite missing 14 games with a shoulder injury.

"I just feel better overall physically, mentally, going into it these last couple weeks, couple months," he said. "I just feel, you know, just I guess more free in a way ... Just mentally going out there and not thinking too much, just playing hockey and trusting in my abilities and instincts and just going out there and playing and not overthinking, just having fun."

Last year, Matthews missed time with three separate ailments, including a shoulder injury that kept him sidelined from Feb. 22 to March 22. This year, his lone injury absence occurred early in the season and he's played every game since Nov. 28.

"No. 1 is he's skating twice as good," noted Babcock when asked how Matthews has grown. "He's way more physical on offence. If you're a rush player it's not as much fun at this time of year, nothing much happens for you, so his game's come a long way. You got to remember he's just a young player in the league."

The third-year forward seemed to really hit his stride down the stretch scoring seven goals and adding six assists in the final 14 games.

"Just demanding the puck more from our D," Matthews said in explaining his evolution, "and carrying it myself whether it's chipping it into the zone and getting after it or taking it in myself. I think that's more of a confidence thing as well ... Last probably 15 games or so just the energy level and the skating for myself and just competitiveness every night was pretty solid and I want to continue that and take my game to another level here come Thursday."

Asked if he had a broader message for Matthews heading into the playoffs, Babcock hit on a familiar refrain.

"There's going to be no room, there's going to be no time, there's going to be no space and the better player you are the less there's going to be and so you have to understand what the playoffs are about and what it's going to take to be successful and our whole team has to. Early in the season, when we were fun to watch and it's racing around, there's tons of room, it's a lot of fun, your sweater's flapping, it feels good, it's just not real. It's just not living in the real world. The real world's coming right away here. No time. No space."

And no reason to live in the past.

"We're not looking at it like we're underdogs," Matthews said. "I think we know we can play with this team and compete at their level regardless of what the standings are."

Matthews feeling 'free' as he pursues playoff redemption

Auston Matthews registered one goal and one assist in last year's seven-game loss to the Bruins. Matthews says he is feeling more "free" this year and hopes his play over the last few weeks will translate into the playoffs.

The Leafs didn't look ready to go last year, losing Games 1 and 2 in Boston by four goals each. It was the first time all season that Toronto lost by that big a margin. Is there something about the TD Garden that rattles the players?

"I wouldn't say (we're) intimidated," centre Nazem Kadri told a group of reporters including Leafs Nation Network. "This is a team that's confident and isn't scared of anything and we want to embrace the challenge. We've been a good road team this year so we believe in ourselves to go get it done."

The Leafs matched a franchise record with 23 road wins this season.

"As much as we say it's a 'hostile environment,' I haven't seen a fan play yet," Babcock said. "It's going to be on the ice, for sure. It's going to be amongst two teams and they know what we're about and we know what they're about and now we have to go out and execute



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and make it happen. There's going to be moments in the game where they have momentum and don't do anything silly, just be patient and play. And that patience that you talk about, we can all talk about it, but sometimes you got to go through it to understand what it's all about."

Babcock on hostile environment in Boston: 'I've never seen a fan play'

When asked about the hostile environment in Boston, Maple Leafs head coach Mike Babcock jokes about how he has "never seen a fan play" and explains that the series will come down to who executes on the ice.

For the first time since last Monday's game against the New York Islanders, Jake Muzzin joined his teammates on the ice. The defenceman had been sidelined by an illness missing the final three games of the regular season.

"It's important to get a little rest and you want to feel as close to 100 per cent as you can going into playoffs and that's kind of where we're at," he said.

Muzzin was paired with Nikita Zaitsev at practice.

"They play hard. Real hard," Babcock said of the duo. "Muzz moves the puck for him. Z closes better than anybody on our team. He's got better edges and is better defensively that way than anybody else, gives less time and space. They're both not going to be backed off by anybody and have moved the puck well enough that we're not spending a ton of time in our own zone. That's critical for our success."

Acquired in a January trade from the Los Angeles Kings, Muzzin is one of two Leafs players with a Stanley Cup ring, with the other being Ron Hainsey.

"What I've learned is that whoever wants it the most, at the end of the day, wins the games," Muzzin said. "Structurally everyone's set, you know, and lineups and power play and penalty kill and all the situations are what they are, but whoever executes and wants it the most will win."

How hungry for success are his teammates?

"These guys are hungry, man. Yeah. They want to prove themselves, they want to win and so do I so let's go."

Muzzin isn't just playoff tested, he looks playoff ready thanks to his thick beard. So, how does he handle the playoff beard tradition?

"It will get bigger," he said with a grin.

Leafs Ice Chips: Healthy Muzzin likes what he sees from 'hungry' teammates

The Maple Leafs held their first practice of the postseason and Jake Muzzin was back. Muzzin returned after missing a week with an illness. His return is a big boost because of what he can do for the young team off the ice. Mark Masters has more.

Lines at Monday's practice:

Forwards

Hyman-Tavares-Marner

Johnsson-Matthews-Kapanen

Marleau-Kadri-Nylander

Moore-Gauthier-Brown

Petan, Ennis

Defencemen

Rielly-Hainsey

Muzzin-Zaitsev

Gardiner-Dermott

Rosen-Marincin

Goaltenders

Andersen

Hutchinson

Power play units at Monday's practice:

Rielly

Matthews-Kadri-Marner

Tavares

Gardiner

Kapanen-Johnsson-Nylander

Marleau

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1139867 Websites

TSN.CA / Quenneville hiring opens the gates on NHL's spring coaching derby

Frank Seravalli

And they're off!

In a nod to noted horse racing fan Joel Quenneville, it's fair to say that Coach Q opened the gates on the NHL's spring coaching derby when he joined the Florida Panthers on Monday.

Quenneville's hiring came just a few hours into Day 2 of the off-season.

The Panthers' hiring of the three-time Stanley Cup winner, maybe the best coach of his generation, has sent teams with vacancies scrambling toward the finish line for the best thoroughbred bench boss.

Officially, seven teams have openings after one of the bloodiest years for in-season coach firings on-record: Anaheim, Buffalo, Edmonton, Los Angeles, Ottawa, Philadelphia and St. Louis.

Nearly one-third of the NHL's coaching positions could change over since the puck was dropped on the start of this season.

And the Minnesota Wild could make it eight vacancies, with GM Paul Fenton believed to be deliberating Bruce Boudreau's fate. Like Quenneville, Boudreau would have his pick of the litter. This marked the first full season that Boudreau failed to make the playoffs and hit 100 points in his 12-year coaching career.

Yes, these things tend to move quickly in hockey's version of musical chairs. No GM wants to be left holding the bag.

Case in point: Todd McLellan has reportedly been linked to engaging in discussions with both the Kings and the Sabres in the last 24 hours. The former Oilers coach is likely the top candidate in both markets, though no decision appeared to be imminent.

How quickly can it happen in St. Louis? All GM Doug Armstrong has to do is hammer out a new contract and take the interim tag off coach Craig Berube if he so desires. It was Berube who helped



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orchestrate a historic turnaround, from 31st place on Jan. 3 to playing for the Central Division title in Game 82.

A similar in-house promotion may be in order for Dallas Eakins with the Anaheim Ducks. He is believed to be the front-runner to take over for his boss, GM and interim coach Bob Murray, since Eakins, who coached the Oilers in 2013-14 and 31 games into the 2014-15 campaign, signed a multi-year extension with the Ducks last spring to coach their AHL affiliate in San Diego.

If the Wild decide to part ways with Boudreau, his replacement may have been on the bench this year in Dean Evason. Fenton brought Evason with him to Minnesota after working with him in the Predators organization.

After that, the field is wide open – with plenty of questions to answer.

How much is it hurting the Oilers that they don't have a GM in place? Peter Chiarelli was fired nearly three months ago, on Jan. 22. Presumably, the next coach of the Oilers will be the choice of the next GM, but team CEO Bob Nicholson doesn't appear close to making that hire yet. The top coaching candidates may be off the board by then.

Will the Senators wait to hire a president of hockey operations first? Right now, it is believed that GM Pierre Dorion has been given the green light to pick the Senators' next coach. Mike Yeo, who was fired by the Blues in November, was the runner-up to Guy Boucher in the interview process in 2016.

Where do the Philadelphia Flyers go next? Chuck Fletcher said Monday that interim coach Scott Gordon will be a "strong candidate" for the job. But there is no question the Flyers had a burning desire to land Quenneville. They weren't going to be outbid by the Panthers, but they couldn't match the pull of being reunited with Dale Tallon in sunny South Florida.

Speaking of the Flyers, don't be surprised to see former coach Dave Hakstol mentioned as a candidate for multiple openings. Hakstol is well respected in the NHL coaching fraternity. He spent a chunk of February shadowing coach Rikard Gronborg in Sweden at the Beijing Hockey Games to get a fresh perspective on the game.

Alain Vigneault, Marc Crawford, John Stevens and Bob Hartley are former coaches who could see their phones light up. Ditto Dave Tippett, who is working for the Seattle NHL franchise as an advisor, but might be tempted to jump back behind the bench again.

There are, of course, up-and-comers on the rise. Montreal Canadiens assistant coach Dominique Ducharme turned heads with the job he did helping Claude Julien turn around the Habs this season. It was Ducharme's first season in the NHL after leading Team Canada at two World Junior Championships and a seven-year run in the QMJHL.

Toronto Marlies coach Sheldon Keefe has been mentioned as a possibility. Same with Syracuse Crunch coach Benoit Groulx, especially after Jon Cooper signed a multi-year extension with the parent club Lightning just a couple weeks ago.

Nate Leaman will generate the most NHL interest from the NCAA level. Leaman, 46, has led Providence College to a second Frozen Four in five seasons – which will coincidentally take place in Buffalo.

All of that just makes the Panthers happy they landed their man. Tallon struck fast, working through back channels over the past couple weeks to seek permission to speak to Quenneville and get it done.

"The proudest I have ever been to be a Florida Panther is right now," Tallon said Monday. "This man to my left is a champion, a champion of champions."

Now we'll see if Tallon can reunite Quenneville with pending free agent Artemi Panarin in what promises to be another fascinating off-season.

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TSN.CA / Sens players feel like the worst is truly behind them

Ian Mendes

A year ago at this time, the Ottawa Senators were cleaning out their lockers after a disastrous season that saw them plummet to 30th place in the overall standings.

There was a genuine feeling that the club had bottomed out and would start to climb back up in the standings after a tumultuous 2017-18 campaign. The marketing slogan for this season was actually 'Ottawa Rising' – a not-so-subtle nod to the fact the club felt its darkest days were in the rear-view mirror.

Then this year's edition of the Senators managed to sink one spot lower in the standings – finishing dead last in the NHL with just 64 points.

But there was a palpable sense of optimism around the room as the players cleaned out their locker stalls Monday morning, which certainly might seem counterintuitive when measured against the overall standings. But those players who were around for both catastrophic seasons in Ottawa say there's no comparison as to which season was more taxing on them.

"Everyone had high expectations for us last year and this year was a bit different," said centre Zack Smith. "We heard right from the start it was going to be a rebuild and they made that evident with some of the moves they made too. It's never easy finishing at the bottom of the league, but we're growing. So there is more positive out of this year for sure, even though we're still at the bottom."

"I can say there is a better feeling," added Jean-Gabriel Pageau. "I think two years ago we went to the conference final and the year after that we finished pretty much last. That was a big slap in the face."

"I think it's different because the expectations this year were not what they were last year," said Craig Anderson. "I think there were a lot of heavy hearts and letdowns last year because of where we finished. I think this year, from the outside sources, we were expected to be in this situation."

Anderson went on the record last summer that he wasn't keen on another season full of drama and politics swirling around the club. But the 2018-19 edition of the club still had its fair share of controversial moments, including the waiving of popular veteran Smith, a leaked Uber video that showed a disconnect between the coaches and players, the trading of star players Matt Duchene and Mark Stone and the firing of head coach Guy Boucher.

But somehow the past six months seemed relatively tame compared to the previous 12-month cycle when it felt like the Senators were producing negative stories on a weekly basis. Sure, the club could be a laughingstock again on Tuesday at the NHL draft lottery in Toronto if the Colorado Avalanche ends up with the first-overall pick with Ottawa's draft selection, but the players now feel like the worst is truly behind them.

"I think last year was particularly hard because of the guns we had here. This year, we knew it was a rebuild and we would probably take our lumps on some nights," explained veteran defenceman Mark Borowiecki. "We kind of mentally prepared for that a little bit more. I think the year prior to this was probably a bit worse."



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A major difference between the two seasons is the fact there is more stability with the roster moving forward. Last summer, there were questions surrounding the futures of Erik Karlsson, Stone and Duchene. The biggest questions this off-season surround the front office and coaching staff as the club needs to hire a new head coach and potentially a president of hockey operations.

General manager Pierre Dorion didn't address the media on Monday, but when he does he will likely be peppered with questions about not having his own first-round pick this June.

Dorion's gamble to punt his first rounder to Colorado this year has obviously backfired as his rationale of the club finishing higher in the standings in 2018-19 didn't come to fruition. However, Dorion's decision to keep the club's fourth-overall selection last year and take Brady Tkachuk has looked slightly better, given the emergence of the teenager in his rookie campaign.

In a season that left many fans feeling jaded and bitter towards ownership's inability to keep star players, even the most cynical hearts were melted by Tkachuk's boyish enthusiasm and 22-goal campaign.

A year ago, it felt like the Senators could not commit to a face of the franchise because of the uncertain status of Karlsson, Stone and Duchene.

Now it seems like Tkachuk and Thomas Chabot – who had a breakthrough season of his own with 55 points – will be the central figures in the club's marketing campaign going forward. Tkachuk and Chabot are the young, fresh faces who embody the rebuilding effort.

For his part, Chabot led the team by averaging more than 24 minutes per night – a significantly high number for a player still on his entry-level contract. But the trades of Karlsson and other veterans pushed the likes of Chabot and Tkachuk to the forefront this season, allowing Senators fans to get a glimpse into the future.

"I think everybody took a bigger role. I don't think it's that easy of a task to be that young and have that kind of role on an NHL team, but I think everybody responded well," said Chabot. "For the future, we know we will be guys to play a lot for the next couple of years. I think everybody is looking forward to that and looking forward to the challenge."

Tkachuk took time Monday to express appreciation for the support he received from Senators fans in his rookie campaign.

"For them, they support us through thick and thin. We just want to make them proud. That's a message that we can show – that we're just getting started – and I think that's the message we want to leave with them," said Tkachuk.

The Senators saw their attendance figures dip into the bottom five in the NHL this past season, averaging just 14,553 in 41 home games. While much of the decline has been attributed to a lack of faith in the direction of the organization, Anderson believes that the product on the ice is the most important factor in whether or not the fans are in the seats.

"I think a lot of it has to do with our play. I think if we as players play the way we're capable of playing on a nightly basis, the fans will respect that and support us," he said.

The players are acutely aware of the restlessness in the marketplace and are echoing management's plea to fans to buy into a long-term plan that might take two or three more years to realize.

"People need to be a little bit patient with us, but I get it from a fan base's perspective," Borowiecki said. "My dad and I, we've been with this team for a long time and we went through some lean years around here. It sucks as a fan, but there needs to be patience in a rebuild."

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1139869 Websites

TSN.CA / Refreshed Muzzin back skating with 'hungry' Leafs

Kristen Shilton

TORONTO – Jake Muzzin spent the better part of a week in virtual quarantine from his Maple Leafs teammates while battling an illness.

Sitting out those final three regular-season games wasn't fun, but it did provide the veteran defenceman with a rejuvenating break. He rejoined the group Monday, three days ahead of Game 1 of Toronto's first-round playoff series against the Boston Bruins.

So far, Muzzin likes the postseason feel in Toronto's dressing room.

"These guys are hungry, man," Muzzin said after the Leafs' practice on Monday. "They want to prove themselves. They want to win and so do I. Let's go."

Muzzin knows a thing or two about what it takes to go all the way in the playoffs. Before being traded to the Leafs in January, Muzzin spent eight seasons with the Los Angeles Kings, winning a Stanley Cup there in 2014 after acting as a black ace during the Kings' Cup run in 2012.

The 30-year-old saw firsthand what's required of a team to go all the way. Now, as one of two Leafs in the room with a championship ring (Ron Hainsey is the other), Muzzin hopes lessons from his past success will prove useful as the Leafs face the Bruins for a second straight year in the first round.

"I just have to see if guys are feeling nervous or maybe they're feeling a little jittery – maybe I can talk to them," Muzzin said. "Hopefully my experience can help me and if some of the guys need it, [help them] as well. There's lots of little stuff that goes in [to winning a Cup], into the sacrifice that everyone puts in mentally, physically to win. It's hard. We need everyone in here 100 per cent buying in to win, no matter what the situation is."

Muzzin said to this point none of his teammates have picked his brain ("If they want to they can, and if not, so be it") but it's not just verbal guidance that is expected of him. Where Muzzin's contributions will matter most – and be most heavily scrutinized – is on the ice.

There's bound to be extra pressure from the outside on Muzzin specifically because of what his acquisition represented.

Swapping a pair of prospects and the Leafs' 2019 first-round pick for Muzzin was the only major move Toronto's general manager Kyle Dubas made to improve the club prior to the trade deadline.

Along with his ability to improve the Leafs' blueline, Muzzin's playoff pedigree was a contributing factor in the trade. That's noise Muzzin would rather ignore.

"I don't really look at it like, I'm 'The Guy,'" Muzzin said. "I'm part of the puzzle here in this room. I'm going to try and help where I can and do my best. I'm new, but being, 'The Guy' – I don't like having that on me. I just want to go out and do my job and help the team win."

That's included Muzzin adding some offence from the blueline and earning power-play time, producing five goals and 11 assists in 30 games.

While Muzzin has cycled through a few different partners over that stretch, he's settled into a rhythm on Toronto's second pairing with



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Nikita Zaitsev. Leafs' coach Mike Babcock has been pleased with the pair's growth.

"They play hard. Real hard," he said. "Muz moves the puck for him. Z closes better than anybody on our team. He's got better edges and is better defensively that way than anybody else, gives less time and space. They're both not going to be backed off by anybody and have moved the puck well enough that we're not spending a ton of time in our own zone. That's critical for our success."

"I feel like we've ironed out a lot of reads and certain situations and talking and details," added Muzzin. "We've messed up and that's how you learn... We've had a little bit of a stretch here where we've learned a lot and we've got some of the stuff ironed out."

As positive as those developments are before playoffs, Muzzin realized years ago that not everything is measured by X's and O's when each game has so much meaning. The Kings entered playoffs as the eighth seed in the Western Conference the season Muzzin won a Cup, falling behind three games to none against San Jose in the first round before storming back with four straight wins.

"What I've learned is whoever wants it the most, at the end of the day, wins the games," Muzzin said. "Structurally, everyone is set with lineups and power play and penalty kill. All those situations are what they are. Whoever executes and wants it the most will win. I think anything can happen."

That's a mantra Muzzin has had to embrace since being traded to Toronto, a mid-season change that coincided with his wife being six months pregnant. She's due with the couple's first child in the next few weeks, timing that Muzzin jokingly said "obviously wasn't planned."

Both of them being from the Woodstock, Ont., area has allowed friends and family to help out though, freeing Muzzin more to focus on the challenges Boston will present.

For those among the Leafs who fell in Game 7 to the Bruins last spring, the series will be a shot at redemption. It will also be a first step up the mountain that Muzzin has scaled before, and he'd tell any teammate who asks his advice to not only enjoy the grind, but embrace it.

"The older I get, the more I appreciate the opportunity I got to be on a good team," Muzzin said. "To take advantage of a good opportunity like we had in L.A. I want that here too, I want guys to understand it's not easy to always be on a good team and have a shot at winning. It's tough. And when you have an opportunity, let's make the most of it. Let's take advantage."

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1139870 Websites

TSN.CA / WHL, former players battle over confidentiality in minimum-wage lawsuit

Rick Westhead

A fight is unfolding in the Western Hockey League minimum-wage class-action lawsuit over the privacy of current and former players who pursue a claim against the league for minimum wage, back pay and overtime.

A year and a half after an Alberta judge certified a minimum-wage lawsuit against the WHL, lawyers for the plaintiffs and the league are now battling over how to notify those players about their right to proceed with a case or, if they choose, withdraw from the litigation.

The two sides will appear at a hearing in Calgary on Monday to make arguments about the notice the players will be given regarding the lawsuit.

The Canadian Hockey League and its three leagues have been battling minimum-wage lawsuits for the past five years. Current and former players suing the leagues have argued the teams are for-profit businesses and that players should enjoy protection under employment rights legislation.

The leagues have countered that players are amateur student athletes and that they already have access to valuable educational scholarships.

The legal battle has been pitched at every step.

Lawyers for the current and former players want the judge overseeing the WHL case to help keep the names of players who proceed with a case against the league confidential.

The plaintiffs are also seeking an order that would bar the WHL from communicating with players or their family members regarding the lawsuit, or from asking current and former players if they plan to pursue the litigation.

The plaintiffs have proposed that the CHL, the WHL and all of its Canadian-based teams be forced to post a notice on their websites and in Canadian team locker rooms about the lawsuit. The plaintiffs also want the leagues and teams to provide a court-appointed administrator with a list of the potential class members and their phone numbers, email addresses, and last known addresses.

While the plaintiffs have said the personal information of those who opt out should be kept private, the WHL's lawyers want the judge to allow the league access to that information. The information of participant in class-action lawsuits is typically available to defendants.

In this case, lawyers for the players say an exception should be made so that players and their families aren't pressured to drop out of the lawsuit.

In court filings, the WHL and its Canadian teams also have suggested they shouldn't be required to post the class-action notice on team and league websites.

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1139871 Websites

TSN.CA / Breaking down the Eastern Conference playoff matchups

Travis Yost

With 1,271 regular-season games in the books, it's time for the real fun to begin.

Saturday's slate of games wrapped up the 2018-19 regular season, so we now turn our attention to the Stanley Cup Playoffs. As is tradition, we will preview each of the eight first-round series by conference, paying specific attention to the statistical strengths and weaknesses of the respective participants.

I've broken out performance across key performance indicators over the last 25 games of the regular season for every series. Then, I calculate the advantage/disadvantage from the home team's perspective – the higher the relative percentage, the bigger the gap between the two teams. I'll include the usual key performance indicators, the lineups coaches have been utilizing since the trade



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deadline concluded (blue: increasing role; red: decreasing role), and my qualitative thoughts on the series.

We will open up with the Eastern Conference, and what better place to start than Boston?

There is an irony in the two best first-round series also being the two match-ups we have seen coming for quite some time – Boston and Toronto in the Atlantic, and San Jose and Vegas in the Pacific. (Consequently, I would argue that Toronto and Vegas have the two toughest roads to the Stanley Cup).

Toronto has had a roller coaster of a season and the last month or so has been relatively unpleasant to watch. It's hard to know how much the Maple Leafs have throttled back lately – their matchup with the Bruins has been all but guaranteed since the trade deadline, and their defensive indifference (and a heavy rotation of backup goaltenders) down the stretch ensured that they would be the road team in this series.

The Maple Leafs compare favourably – in some cases, very favourably – against the majority of teams that reached the postseason, but the Bruins are not one of them. The painful history is one thing, but the fact that they've drawn a Bruins team that finished second overall in the NHL (underpinned by the league's third best goal differential) and owned the head-to-head matchup (+6 in goals over four games) is a bit of a nightmare.

Both teams are fantastic at even strength, but they are polar opposites in other areas. The Bruins grade out as one of the league's best teams at suppressing shots (No. 1), scoring chances (No. 1) and goals (No. 5). Toronto, on the other hand, is known for their hyper-aggressive attack. Their impressive grades tend to come in the offensive zone where they are among the best at generating shots (No. 1), scoring chances (No. 1) and goals (No. 9).

The differentiator – and why the Bruins show as having a slight edge at 5-on-5 in the series – is largely due to Toronto's leakiness in the defensive third. The Leafs have been defensively indifferent for quite some time now, and when the goaltending fell into a similar slump, their numbers took a considerable dip.

Two interesting wrinkles within this series: One, the return of defenceman Jake Gardiner should really help Toronto. The Maple Leafs saw what life might look like in the post-Gardiner era thanks to his mid-season back injury, and let's just say that the team still doesn't have the competency or the depth on the blueline to replace him. His return should be massive.

Two, keep an eye on Patrice Bergeron. The Bruins have been aggressively managing his minutes late in the season. Bergeron has taken on a monstrous power-play and penalty-killing role, but is just the eighth most utilized forward for the Bruins at 5-on-5. That sort of minute management should pay dividends for the Bruins in this series. Bergeron is the exact type of two-way player that has given the Leafs attackers trouble over the years and the Bruins will need to stretch him out in those critical even-strength minutes in what should be an ultra-competitive first-round series.

Pick: Boston in seven

Tampa Bay vs. Columbus

The Lightning were going to be the biggest favourite to advance in the first-round regardless of who they played, and they'll likely be the biggest favourite in each round until they either win the Stanley Cup or are eliminated. That's just what happens when you pick up 62 wins in a single regular season – a number we have only seen once before, from the 1995-96 Detroit Red Wings, who reached the Western Conference Finals that year.

I won't rehash all of the reasons why this Tampa Bay team was so much better than the field, but I will emphasize that this is a team with no weakness. A lot of time has been spent dissecting them from a 5-on-5 standpoint, where they posted a ridiculous +55 goal

differential, but they are also backstopped by a likely Vezina finalist and have a power play and penalty kill combination that's second to none in the NHL. This is, unquestionably, the best team in the league.

It will be interesting to see whether or not this semi-new Columbus team had enough time to gel before this David versus Goliath matchup. The Blue Jackets did manage to pick up some steam down the stretch, rattling off a series of wins to steal one of the last playoff spots up for grabs. New acquisitions Matt Duchene and Ryan Dzingel have given Columbus an abundance of scoring talent within the top six, but their impact has really only been felt at even strength.

That's something worth noting, because this Blue Jackets team has been notoriously bad on the power play for years now. The 2018-19 season was no different: Columbus converted on just 15 per cent of their man advantages this season (5.4 goals per 60 minutes) – nearly half of Tampa Bay's 28 per cent (10.9 goals per 60 minutes). It's the biggest game state disparity you will find in the first round, and quite frankly that alone might be enough to sink Columbus' chances of stealing this round.

It's worth mentioning that Columbus does have one of the league's better kill units – they sat top-five all year long – but again, Tampa Bay is just as good.

The Blue Jackets turning it on late – and with their added star power since Feb. 25 – might have made them a sexy upset pick in other matchups, but they feel like cannon fodder against Tampa Bay. Pun absolutely intended.

Pick: Tampa Bay in five

Washington vs. Carolina

This year's Carolina Hurricanes finally capitalized on years of comically advantageous shot and scoring chance differentials, turning those opportunities into goals, wins, and their first playoff berth 2009. Now they get to wrestle with the defending Stanley Cup champions in the first round.

Much like Toronto and Boston in the Atlantic, these two teams couldn't be more different. The Capitals are one of the few teams in the league that can offset seemingly average underlying numbers because of how much shooting talent and skill is scattered across the roster.

Alexander Ovechkin – the Rocket Richard winner for the eighth time in his career – is at the top of that list, but this is a team with seven 20+ goal scorers and plenty of complementary players throughout the lineup. Put that in front of a quality goaltender like Braden Holtby, and you certainly have your hands full.

But don't count Carolina out. One of the most effective ways of neutralizing teams with this much talent is to keep the puck off of their sticks, and no team has been better at doing that than Rod Brind'Amour's club. The Hurricanes finished the year with the league's most decisive even-strength shot advantage (55 per cent) and second-most decisive scoring chance advantage (54 per cent), decimal points behind the Vegas Golden Knights. The question for Carolina has never been about puck control; it's always been about them proving they can turn those attacking sequences into goals.

Newly acquired winger Nino Niederreiter is a piece that has certainly helped Carolina on this front. The Swiss forward is Carolina's leading goal scorer since the Jan. 17 deal with 14, and is third in overall in scoring behind Teuvo Teravainen and Sebastian Aho over the same period. If anything, it has given the Hurricanes another credible attacker with a track record of scoring (save for his bizarre one-goal season in 2011-12, which is now looking like one of the weirdest single-season outliers we've ever seen).

One last note: If you put stock into the regular-season series, you may want to take a glance at what Washington did to Carolina this



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year. The Capitals swept the series and carried a +6 goal differential with one shootout win in the process.

Pick: Washington in seven

Pittsburgh vs. New York Islanders

The New York Islanders have had a tremendous season, especially considering the loss of superstar forward John Tavares last summer. The mere fact they reached the postseason – and rather comfortably – is a huge testament to the work from this lineup under new head coach Barry Trotz.

But, like every other team, we must grade the Islanders at this point of the season relative to other playoff-calibre clubs. Unfortunately, the theme of this Islanders season is that the (often fleeting) percentages have been a big driver of their success, especially within the crease.

Over the full season, the Islanders goaltending tandem of Robin Lehner and Thomas Greiss has been sensational, stopping 93.7 per cent of shots at 5-on-5 and 92.5 per cent of shots across all situations. Both were comfortably first overall.

There are surely ranging opinions on how good of a goaltending group this duo is, but Lehner and Greiss both have respectable NHL resumes prior to the surge in 2018-19. For that reason, I think this Islanders' goaltending duo is an advantage of sorts, but I'm also disinclined to bet heavily on a team that seems rather reliant on the goalies to win games. (And, as you can see in the graph above, their save percentage has started to regress a bit. Their save percentages since the trade deadline: 93.0 per cent at 5-on-5 (No. 9), and 92.3 in all situations (No. 5).)

The Islanders do have some degree of skating competency, but graded relatively to the likes of the Penguins, it's hard to see. Mathew Barzal, Josh Bailey, Brock Nelson, Anders Lee, and Jordan Eberle offer obvious firepower on paper, but the scoring wasn't really there for this group this season. The Islanders only had one 60-point skater (Barzal), and a lot of that had to do with a completely ineffective power play.

It's kind of amusing that the power-play disparities in the Tampa Bay-Columbus series also exist here. The Islanders converted on just 14.5 per cent of their man advantages this year (4.9 goals per 60 minutes), which is shockingly bad. But it's actually gotten worse as the season has developed. Since the trade deadline, the Islanders have three goals on the power play. Three! Pittsburgh's Phil Kessel, Sidney Crosby, and Jake Guentzel have met or exceeded that number individually over the same interval.

In Pittsburgh, there's never doubt about the capabilities of the forward group. The blueline, at least historically, has been a different story. The Penguins will enjoy the luxury of having the core of their defensive group available to start the series – something that didn't seem as apparent six weeks ago. No player is more important on the back end than Kris Letang, but getting a healthy Olli Maatta back from his upper-body injury could be quite consequential.

All said and done, my confidence in the Islanders' goaltending may be more than the average person, but it's not enough to pick them in this series. The Penguins have a better lineup top-to-bottom with more finishing talent and should be able to dictate pace and tempo against an Islanders team that finished 16th in scoring chances and 26th in shot rates over the full season.

More opportunity is always a good thing, but it's even better when your lineup is flush with bona fide goal scorers.

Pick: Pittsburgh in six

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