



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • April 27, 2018



Season in Review: Goaltenders

by Michael Smith [@MSmithCanes](#) / [CarolinaHurricanes.com](#)
April 26th, 2018

This is the fourth installment in a four-part Season in Review series. Part One: [Canes Fall Short of Postseason](#) | Part Two: [Forwards](#) | Part Three: [Defensemen](#) | Part Four: [Goaltenders](#)

The Carolina Hurricanes made strategic moves in the summer of 2017 to improve its goaltending. What played out on the ice unfortunately didn't live up to expectations.

Here is a breakdown of the two goaltenders who tended the nets for the Hurricanes this season.

[Scott Darling](#)

*43 games played, 13-21-7 record, 3.18 goals-against average, .888 save percentage
Under contract through the 2021-22 season*

"It was like Murphy's Law for me this year: anything that could go wrong went wrong. That was my season," Darling said in his end-of-season interview.

And, that was pretty much it.

Acquired by the Hurricanes and then signed to a multi-year extension in the summer, Darling was pegged as the team's next starting goaltender. Coming off a season in which he posted an 18-5-5 record, a 2.38 goals-against average and a .924 save percentage with Chicago, the thought was that Darling was ready to take the next step.

Things didn't go as planned. Darling finished with a 13-21-7 record, a 3.18 goals-against average and a .888 save percentage.

"I think I wanted to do so well being new here. It's kind of like quicksand: the harder you fight, the faster you sink," he said. "When it wasn't going well, I was overdoing it, trying too hard and not playing my game. It was a tough first half, but I think I had a better second half."

After playing in 24 of the Canes' first 33 games of the season, Darling played in 19 of the final 49.

"The coaches were great. They know I was doing what I could trying to stay positive and working as hard as I could," he said. "Through all of it, I stayed positive, maintained a good attitude in the room and worked hard. It's all going to turn around."

Darling said he plans on training in Raleigh with Hurricanes head strength and conditioning coach Bill Burniston over the summer.

"I want to make sure I'm doing everything I can to be 100 percent ready for next year," he said. "That's what I'm looking forward to. I'm planning on having a real big summer."

Anyone familiar with [Darling's story](#) knows how many speedbumps he's faced in his life - and how much stronger he is for having gone over them.

"I've faced plenty of adversity in my life. It's tough," he said. "I'm the first to admit that it didn't go my way. It's been a long year. The media, the fans, all that stuff. But that's life. I'm excited about the challenge."

[Cam Ward](#)

*43 games played, 23-14-4 record, 2.73 goals-against average, .906 save percentage
Unrestricted free agent*

It's possible that Ward has played his last game in a Hurricanes sweater, and he's well aware of that.

"It crosses my mind. Against Tampa Bay, the last game, game 82, sure, it crossed my mind that this could be potentially be my last game as a Hurricane," he said. "I was nervous before playing that game, to be honest, just knowing that. I'm emotionally invested in this organization and have been for the last 13 years. I want to continue that, but there's a lot of uncertainty."

That uncertainty begins with the expiration of Ward's contract and his pending status as an unrestricted free agent.

"Everybody knows I love playing here. I take pride in being a Carolina Hurricane," he said. "I've certainly enjoyed my time here, and I'd like to keep that going."

For the first time since he was a rookie in the NHL, Ward entered the 2017-18 season as the Hurricanes' back-up goaltender. It was a role in which he supported and flourished in early.

"When I came into the year, it was clear my role changed. It was something I embraced and wanted to handle appropriately," he said. "I'm comfortable with where I am in my career that I could be a real solid No. 2. I feel like I did that job that was asked of me to do, and I'd like to have that opportunity to do it again."



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When Darling's season began to slide, Ward was pressed into service more regularly. In the second half of December, beginning with his 300th career win (in Vegas on Dec. 12), Ward strung together six consecutive wins and posted a .935 save percentage in that stretch. The Canes' veteran netminder capped his season with 32 saves on 34 shots in the team's 3-2 overtime win against Tampa Bay on April 7.

Ward's future with the Hurricanes is unknown, but his career accomplishments with the organization are well-established. If 2017-18 was the end of the road for No. 30, it was a good ride, only cut short again by a missed trip to the postseason.

"I enjoyed coming to the rink every day. I still love the game. It wasn't a grind for me to come in and play with these guys. It's a great group of guys," he said. "I write 'Have Fun' on my stick, and I felt like I had fun. I broke a few sticks where I wrote 'Have Fun' - by accident - but that happens because I'm competitive. You want to be emotionally invested in winning and losing. We all know we've done way too much losing here. It's time to change that - it's over time to change that."



Checkers Sweep Penguins To Advance To Second Round For First Time Since 2011

Written by Nicholas Niedzielski

Published: April 26, 2018

Hitting the road didn't seem to faze Charlotte as the Checkers flew by the Penguins 7-3 to secure a sweep of Wilkes-Barre/Scranton and advance to the second round for the first time since 2011.

As they did in each of the first two games, the Checkers ceded an early lead to the Pens, as the home squad scored twice in the first eight minutes of play to jump ahead. The visitors were undeterred, however, as a Lucas Wallmark rocket was followed up just 21 seconds later by a smooth individual effort from Greg McKegg that evened the score through 20 minutes of play.

The middle frame didn't have the fireworks that the previous one did, but the Checkers were able to break through late and snag the lead thanks to an Aleksii Saarela centering pass that careened off of a Penguins' defender and in.

With their season on the line, the home squad came out firing in the third but it was the Checkers whose offense would continue rolling. Clark Bishop banged home a Warren Foegele-feed from behind the net to extend Charlotte's advantage, then Andrew Miller followed up moments later with a seeing-eye snipe to blow the game open not even halfway into the third. The Pens would claw their way to one more tally later in the frame but it was too little, too late, as a pair of empty netters buried Wilkes-Barre/Scranton and secured the Checkers 7-3 win in the game and 3-0 win in the series.

NOTES

Charlotte has won 10 games in a row. The team ended the regular season on a 10-game point streak (9-0-1) and has not lost in regulation since March 18 ... Charlotte awaits the winner of the Lehigh Valley/Providence series that is currently tied 1-1. Dates and times for second-round playoff games will be announced upon the conclusion of that series ... This is the first series sweep in Checkers history. Prior to tonight, they had never won the first two games of a series ... The Checkers did not score the first goal in any game of this series. They trailed 2-0 in two of the three games ... Charlotte won a playoff series for the first time since its inaugural 2010-11 campaign. Each of its last two series wins were against Wilkes-Barre/Scranton (2011 second round, 2018 first round) ... The Checkers set a new team record for most goals in a playoff game, eclipsing the old mark of six set on May 1, 2013, against Oklahoma City ... Former Penguin Greg McKegg led the Checkers with five points (1g, 4a) in three games. He now has 28 points (10g, 18a) in 22 games with the team. He is also tied for the team lead with a plus-6 rating ... Forward Marcus Kruger and defenseman Jake Chelios missed the game due to injury ... Forwards Mike Ferrantino, Nick Schilkey, Zack Stortini and Sergey Tolchinsky, and defensemen Matt Finn and Dennis Robertson were healthy extras.

UP NEXT

The Checkers have now advanced to the Atlantic Division Finals. They will play the winner of Lehigh Valley-Providence, a series that is tied at one and has Games 3,4 and – if necessary – 5 scheduled for Friday, Saturday and Monday.



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Carolina Hurricanes host fitness day for middle school students

The Carolina Hurricanes hosted a fitness field day for Heritage Middle School students.

By [Gloria Rodriguez](#)

Thursday, April 26, 2018 05:05PM

WAKE FOREST, NC (WTVD) --

On Thursday, students at Heritage Middle School in Wake Forest enjoyed a fitness field day hosted by the Carolina Hurricanes.

"In here, you get to put on all the hockey gear and do a relay race," said eighth-grader Avery Wilson. "It's really fun and it gets you moving and more active."

The students used their dedication and fitness to beat out other Wake County middle schools in order to win the Hurricanes Power Play program.

Students logged their hours online over a four week period and ended the program with the greatest percentage of time

devoted to fitness activities.

"A lot of people do more sports and after-school activities to earn those hours," Wilson said.

Wake Young Women's Leadership Academy middle schoolers came in a close second. They will also enjoy a celebration next week.

"We'll be out there with Jaccob Slavin, our star player, whose the spokesman and role model for the program, and we'll be doing fitness field day for them as well," said Carolina Hurricanes Senior VP Tom Ward.

These students are learning the importance of fitness, something the school already stresses.

"We try to get them to really appreciate different types of activity, different types of fitness for lifelong appreciation," said Erin Norris, of Heritage Middle School.



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Guentzel, Penguins rally past Capitals in Game 1

Has goal, two assists for Pittsburgh, which scores three straight in 4:49 span in third

by Brian McNally / NHL.com Correspondent

April 26th, 2018

WASHINGTON -- The Pittsburgh Penguins scored three goals in a 4:49 span in the third period to rally for a 3-2 win against the Washington Capitals in Game 1 of the Eastern Conference Second Round at Capital One Arena on Thursday.

[Jake Guentzel](#) had a goal and two assists, [Patric Hornqvist](#) had a goal and an assist, and [Matt Murray](#) made 32 saves for Pittsburgh.

[Sidney Crosby](#) had two points (one goal, one assist) and passed Jari Kurri for third-most multipoint games in the Stanley Cup Playoffs (61).

[Alex Ovechkin](#) had a goal and an assist, [Tom Wilson](#) had two assists, and [Braden Holtby](#) made 22 saves for Washington, which led 2-0.

Game 2 of the best-of-7 series is here Sunday.

Hornqvist scored to cut it to 2-1 at 2:59 of the third, redirecting [Justin Schultz](#)'s shot from the point.

"It was just a big play by [Hornqvist] to get us going," Crosby said. "We had some good looks throughout the night. He goes hard to the net, makes a great play, and it jump-started us. When you're down, I think everybody's just on their toes trying to get ourselves back in it."

Crosby tied it 2-2 at 5:20. After receiving a cross-ice pass from Guentzel, Crosby beat Holtby five-hole from the right circle.

They said it

"Early on especially, you're just focusing on playing. You make adjustments as you go along, and so does the other team. So I think things will tighten up as the series goes along." -- *Penguins captain Sidney Crosby*

"[Holtby] was unbelievable today. You know, one mistake, one bad bounce and they're back in the game. That's it.

"I just think we complement each other well," Guentzel said. "We get on the forecheck and we're always around each other. Playing with Sid, it makes it pretty easy and opens up a lot of space for us. Just try to take advantage of it."

Guentzel gave the Penguins a 3-2 lead at 7:48, deflecting Crosby's shot along the left boards short side.

"They had good looks, we had good looks, but those three shifts changed the game," Capitals forward [Evgeny Kuznetsov](#) said.

Murray made a blocker save on a rebound attempt by Capitals forward [Brett Connolly](#) at 17:31 to keep the score 3-2.

Kuznetsov scored glove side on a breakaway 17 seconds into the first period to make it 1-0.

Ovechkin gave the Capitals a 2-0 lead 28 seconds into the third period, beating Murray glove side from the left circle on a 2-on-1. With the goal, Ovechkin became the first player in Capitals history to have 100 points (52 goals, 48 assists) in the playoffs.

"We gave up some good chances and [Holtby] was really good early, but we played a pretty good game," Capitals defenseman [Matt Niskanen](#) said. "They scored on Crosby's three shifts in a row in the third period to win the game. Otherwise, we played pretty good. I don't think you need to overanalyze that."

Goal of the game

Guentzel's goal at 7:48 of the third period.

Save of the game

Murray's save on at Connolly 17:31 of the third period.

Highlight of the game

Crosby's goal at 5:20 of the third period.

Nothing you can say. It's over. We have to focus on our next game." -- *Capitals captain Alex Ovechkin*

Need to know

Guentzel leads the NHL with 16 points (seven goals, nine assists) in the playoffs. He is the 10th player to have at least 16 points through his team's first seven postseason games, third with the Penguins (Mario Lemieux, 1992; Crosby,



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2010). ... Crosby, who has 15 points (seven goals, eight assists) in the playoffs, trails Mark Messier (77) and Wayne Gretzky (108) for most multipoint games. ... Washington has blown a two-goal lead in three of its four postseason losses. ... Ovechkin has 10 points (six goals, four assists) in seven playoff games.

Golden Knights score 7, shut out Sharks in Game 1

Fleury makes 33 saves in fifth straight playoff win

by Danny Webster / NHL.com Correspondent

2:46 AM

LAS VEGAS -- Seven players scored and [Marc-Andre Fleury](#) made 33 saves for the Vegas Golden Knights in their fifth straight Stanley Cup Playoff win, a 7-0 victory against the San Jose Sharks in Game 1 of the Western Conference Second Round at T-Mobile Arena on Thursday.

The Golden Knights are the only undefeated team (5-0) remaining in the playoffs; the Sharks swept the Anaheim Ducks in the first round. The Golden Knights are also the first NHL team to win its first five postseason games.

[Cody Eakin](#), [Erik Haula](#), [Jonathan Marchessault](#), [Alex Tuch](#), [Shea Theodore](#), [Colin Miller](#) and [James Neal](#) scored for the Golden Knights, who swept the Los Angeles Kings in the first round and played their first game since April 17. [William Karlsson](#), [Reilly Smith](#) and Marchessault each had three points.

"We did a great job to prepare and get ready for this game," Smith said. "Long layoffs can be tough."

It was the 67th playoff win of Fleury's NHL career, moving him within one of Andy Moog for 10th all-time. It was his third shutout of the playoffs and 13th of his NHL career, tying Turk Broda for ninth all-time.

Fleury became the first goaltender since 2004 to have three shutouts in his team's first five playoff games, joining Nikolai Khabibulin (Tampa Bay Lightning) and Ed Belfour (Toronto Maple Leafs).

"I try not to think too much," said Fleury, who has a 0.54 goals-against average and .982 save percentage this postseason. "Just get out there and play my best, try to help these guys any way I can. They've been playing great in front of me too. It goes hand-in-hand."

[Martin Jones](#) allowed five goals on 13 shots for the Sharks, who hadn't played since April 18. [Aaron Dell](#) made 19 saves after Jones was pulled in the second period.

"We had a laundry list of issues tonight," Sharks coach Peter DeBoer said. "We weren't good. They beat us. Whether you lose 2-1 or 7-0, they don't get extra points for it. It's not pretty and we know we have to be better across the board."

Sharks forward [Evander Kane](#) was given a major penalty and game misconduct at 3:25 of the third period for cross-checking Golden Knights forward [Pierre-Edouard Bellemare](#) after the whistle.

What's next

Game 2 of Eastern Conference Second Round at Capital One Arena on Sunday (3 p.m ET; NBC, CBC, TVAS)

"I'm not a dirty player by any means," Kane said. "Obviously, it was unfortunate. I just went into a scrum and cross-checked him in the arm. Obviously, there was no intent. I'm glad he wasn't hurt on the play. It was good to see [Bellemare] on the ice.

"I don't want to put my team in that situation. We'll put this one behind us and look forward to the next game."

The Golden Knights scored four goals in the first period, three in a span of 1:31. Eakin (4:31), Haula (4:57) and Marchessault (6:02) gave Vegas a 3-0 lead. Tuch scored a power-play goal at 11:43 when he took a pass from William Karlsson at the blue line, weaved through four defenders and scored stick-side to make it 4-0.

"We were ready for the game," Marchessault said. "We managed the puck well in the first period and we played well. We didn't want to give them any life."

San Jose outshot Vegas 17-9 in the first period.

Theodore scored his second goal of the playoffs at 3:28 of the second period to make it 5-0.

Miller (4:32) and Neal (8:09) made it 7-0 in the third following Kane's ejection.

"I think we just got better in practice," Neal said. "We ramped it up. We talked about having a good first shift, and I think everyone did that tonight."

Goal of the game

Theodore's goal at 3:28 of the second period.

Save of the game

Fleury against [Brent Burns](#) at 14:43 of the first period.

Highlight of the game

Tuch's goal at 11:43 of the first period.

They said it

"It's the first adversity we've faced in the playoffs. It's on us to respond now. You don't get extra points for winning by a touchdown like they did. We have to be better. That's the message they sent, and we have to respond to that." -- *Sharks coach Peter DeBoer*

"They're going to be a hungry team, they're going to be a lot better. They'll be putting that one behind them pretty quick and looking to be a better hockey team. So we've got to be ready." -- *Golden Knights forward James Neal*

Need to know



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The Sharks allowed more goals in Game 1 than they did in the entire first round against the Ducks (four). ... The Golden Knights were 3-for-10 on the power play. ... Vegas scored seven goals in the four-game sweep of Los Angeles.

What's next

Game 2 of the Western Conference Second Round at T-Mobile Arena on Saturday (8 p.m. ET; NBC, CBC, TVAS, SN)

TODAY'S LINKS

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

1093879 Websites

The Athletic / No longer bored: Alex Tuch and high-flying Golden Knights are spectacular in return from long layoff

By Michael Russo 2h ago

LAS VEGAS — Maybe it was eight days of pre-scouting.

Or, maybe it was the energy that built up inside Alex Tuch's large 6-foot-4 frame after eight days "of sitting around doing nothing" inside the apartment he shares with teammate Shea Theodore.

"Bored to death since we last played. I was itching to go," Tuch said Thursday night after the Vegas Golden Knights power winger routinely skated through the gut of the San Jose Sharks' defense like he was zig-zagging on that high-speed roller coaster next door at New York-New York.

"Yeah, I was anxious to play after watching a lot of playoff hockey on TV the last week."

Boy oh boy, the Sharks have some regrouping to do after this second-round, series-opening 7-zip beatdown by the Golden Knights matched the most lopsided playoff loss in team history.

If you didn't know better, you would never in a million years guess that the high-flying team dressed in gray on this night was the actual expansion team.

Tuch, the 21-year-old 2014 first-round pick of the Minnesota Wild, set the tone by shooting right through the Sharks' defense three different times in the first 12 minutes of the game.

This is a kid who once, in good fun, high-stepped by the opposing bench during a hilarious shootout goal celebration during Wild development camp. But nobody would ever have envisioned that Tuch could pretty much pull off the same thing over and over again during a live Stanley Cup playoff game against a real-life, respected opponent.

PIC.TWITTER.COM/RYSZHBFI

— WELDIE (@MOARCLAPPERS) APRIL 27, 2018

On one of Tuch's moves, the upstate New York native pulled to the inside of Logan Couture, skated deep into the right circle and left a puck sitting for old Wild teammate Erik Haula to bury his second playoff goal.

On the prettiest of Tuch's maneuvers, he took William Karlsson's neutral-zone pass in front of the blue line on a power play. Tuch literally skated through four flat-footed defenders before capping the highlight-reel move with a perfect blocker-side shot on Martin Jones.

DANCING THROUGH TO A FOURTH GOAL IN THE FIRST LIKE...
#STANLEYCUP PIC.TWITTER.COM/IKOZEUKEKR

— NHL (@NHL) APRIL 27, 2018

"I knew they were standing up at the blue line," Tuch said. "We've played them a good amount and we pre-scouted it. They made adjustments and they made improvements and they were actually able to pick us off a couple times in the second and third. But I was able to catch them a couple times early."



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That fourth first-period Golden Knights goal by Tuch shook T-Mobile Arena as the infant hockey team's diehards danced and partied the game away.

"The fans helped out a lot," Tuch said. "I didn't know how it was going to be not playing in nine days. As soon as they yelled, 'Knights!!!' in the national anthem, I knew we were in for a good game. We started off hot and kept the pace and kept, pushing, pushing, pushing. Everyone contributed."

In 15 periods of hockey and five Vegas victories in five Vegas playoff games, Marc-Andre Fleury has as many shutouts as he has allowed goals — three. Seven Golden Knights had at least two points, with the Karlsson-Jonathan Marchessault-Reilly Smith line combining for nine points. The Sharks showed frustration late. The Golden Knights drew a ridiculous 10 power plays with Evander Kane possibly facing league discipline for a predatory cross-check to Pierre-Edouard Bellemare's face.

Along with linemate James Neal, Tuch and Haula had a goal and assist apiece to continue to give Wild fans severe indigestion during a week in which the team cut loose nine-year general manager Chuck Fletcher.

Back in June, it was Fletcher who traded the prospect Tuch to Vegas so they'd select Haula in the expansion draft and lay off a defenseman like Matt Dumba.

Ten months later, it's hard to imagine the Golden Knights would even be willing to trade Tuch and Haula to Minnesota for Dumba.

Tuch scored 15 goals in the regular season, Haula a career-high 29.

They each have two playoff goals, including a double-overtime Game 2, first-round game-winner by Haula.

When they dominated once more Thursday, Twitter back in the Twin Cities went ablaze.

Believe this, the two of them notice this stuff, too.

"I take it as a compliment," Haula said.

"I'm not going around favoriting the tweets or anything, that's for sure, but it's good to see some love," Tuch said.

It has been a rewarding season for Tuch, who began the year with AHL Chicago because the Golden Knights had salary-cap challenges. He tore it up there by scoring four goals and an assist in three games before being recalled for good.

Like all young players, Tuch showed flashes of what he displayed Thursday throughout the regular season. But then he'd fall into an abyss for two or three games. But Golden Knights coach Gerard Gallant never dealt with Tuch with a heavy hand.

He'd let him know his mistakes, correct them and patiently throw him back into big situations.

"I saw him play a couple games (at Boston College) and I saw some of that, and the big thing is confidence for him," Haula said. "He's a great player and he's proving it right now. He's got to be happy the way he's playing, but me and Nealy try to keep him in check a little bit."

Tuch laughs.

"I'm just trying to prove myself," Tuch said. "That's what I tried to do all year long, prove myself to be a fulltime NHL player. Now, playing in the Stanley Cup playoffs is something really special honestly. It's pretty surreal. It hasn't really sunk in yet that we're playing for a Cup."

Former Wild defenseman Shane Hnidy has watched Tuch play all season as the Golden Knights' TV color analyst. He came to Vegas after broadcasting for the Winnipeg Jets.

If Wild fans weren't nauseated enough over what they feel their team threw away in Tuch, Hnidy says Tuch has a lot of Blake Wheeler in him.

Wheeler, the former University of Minnesota standout, only scored ... 91 points for the Jets this past season.

"For a 6-4 guy, I think Blake Wheeler too when he came in, ... when Wheels learned to use his size, his game went from here to here," Hnidy said. "Big, fast, strong. When they can start learning to utilize that on the puck, that's when these guys are scary. One thing I like about Tuch, he's got a real good long defensive stick. Not as good as (Ottawa's) Mark Stone, but similar, like takeaways from behind because Alex can skate.

"He does really smart things that way. But like Wheels, the thing that stands out with Alex is the way he can move up and down the ice. For him, it's just confidence and consistency, and that's any young player that's got talent coming in.

"What we saw tonight, we've seen those flashes all year of what type of player he can be and probably will get to. It's just a matter of when."

Yeah, Wild fans are going to be ill.

The Athletic LOADED: 04.27.2018

1093880 Websites

The Athletic / Don Sweeney has found just the right balance of old and young on Bruins

By Fluto Shinzawa Apr 26, 2018

Don Sweeney flashed a smile, raised his hands, and crossed his fingers.

It was the Bruins general manager's response today, one day after his team progressed to the second round, to a question regarding contagion.

The trick that Sweeney and his 30 counterparts is trying to turn is organizational balance. Every GM wants a good mix: veterans leading the charge into battle, and young players providing the energy and new-age skill to swing the outcome of the conflict in their direction. There is a crucial interplay between kids, graybeards, and the players in between. If the veterans' experience rubs off on the youngsters, teams can play well into June.

Sweeney's vision, put into place by Bruce Cassidy, had Jake DeBrusk ready to be a productive NHL rookie, most likely on David Krejci's left flank. One reason Danton Heinen gained NHL traction after starting the season in Providence was how he could lean on the grizzled David Backes, his right-side linemate, to show him the way.

But until this blend hits the ice, it is all just a theory.

"I think Jake and Danton and any other guys that have grown throughout the course of this year, you hope that continues," said Sweeney. "But you just don't know. You just don't know. That's the unknown. The best-laid plans sometimes go sideways."

Today's NHL emphasizes speed and skill at a level unseen in its history. Young players, more than old, own those commodities in bunches. Youth, enthusiasm, and fresh limbs yet to be ground into powder make a 21-year-old like DeBrusk, for example, a faster and sleeker forward than Krejci, who turns 32 on Saturday.

But GMs like Sweeney have to find balance. A mix is unlikely to work if it leans too far toward youth. Speed and skill are not enough to advance organizations to and through the playoffs without experience doing its thing.

To that end, it was probably not a coincidence that DeBrusk was feeling it in Game 7 at the same time as Krejci, hushed in Games 5 and 6, played with boisterous pace.



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"You look at David Krejci's performance in particular in the second and third period last night," Sweeney said. "He's been there. He's done it. It's good to be able to lean on those guys."

Cassidy has regularly noted how David Pastrnak cannot help but fall in line while playing with Brad Marchand and Patrice Bergeron. Pastrnak's linemates pursue the puck with a hunger that is unmatched around the league. They treat it as if it is their birthright. Once they corral it, they do not give it up without a fight.

Through osmosis, Pastrnak has learned to play the same way. But Pastrnak is also a self-made man, one who grew from circumstances outside of his partnership.

In last year's playoffs, Pastrnak discovered that competitiveness, to say nothing of meanness, advances to another degree in April. The sublimely skilled right wing scored two goals and two assists in six first-round games against Ottawa last season. In overtime of the deciding Game 6, Pastrnak's penalty led to the Senators' game-winning power-play goal.

Pastrnak has grown this year. He is no longer the wispy 18-year-old that looked more like the skinny guy in Nintendo's 8-bit ice hockey game. The 21-year-old is a man — thicker, more muscular, and better equipped to sprout the playoff beard that hangs farther off his chin with every game his team wins.

But the mental growth that adversity delivered has been just as important as his physical maturation. Pastrnak (5-8—13 through Round 1) better understands the gravity of his position. Not many players earn the right to skate with Marchand and Bergeron. He does not want to disappoint.

"David Pastrnak was an emerging player last year," Sweeney said. "He went through a tough stretch in the playoffs and certainly understands it now. Went out and had a monster playoff for us, playing against top-level competition every night in the top matchups. That's growth of a player."

The ties that bind are in place well after principals have moved on. Nearly seven years have passed since Mark Recchi once played in the position Pastrnak currently occupies. Recchi's influence lives on in his former linemates.

"To me, it was the poise and the calmness that he had about him before those games," Bergeron recalled of Recchi before Game 7. "Not necessarily something that he said. He told me to enjoy this, have fun, and embrace the challenge. To me, that's exactly what it is. We play a game that we love. It's a great opportunity. It's a great challenge. Just embrace it and go play."

Bergeron and Marchand learned their lesson from Recchi. They passed it on to Pastrnak and their younger teammates before Game 7 and during second intermission when they trailed the Leafs, 4-3. Zdeno Chara relayed the same message to Charlie McAvoy, his 20-year-old partner.

And so it went viral. The Bruins, old and young, rose to the challenge in the third period. Torey Krug, who signed a year after the Bruins won the Stanley Cup, scored the tying goal. DeBrusk punched in the winner. Pastrnak and Marchand closed it out, the latter waving his arms to signal the end of the night following his empty-netter.

Old leading the young. The young energizing the old. It's how Sweeney wanted it to be. He just didn't know if it was going to happen.

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The Athletic / Sizing up Lightning-Bruins: Five keys that could decide the series

By Joe Smith Apr 26, 2018

TAMPA, Fla. — Well, the Bruins and Leafs didn't do what Lightning owner Jeff Vinik said he hoped they would during Wednesday's Game 7: "Go four overtimes and beat the crap out of each other."

But at least, now, Tampa Bay finally has an opponent for its second-round Stanley Cup playoffs series, which begins Saturday at 3 p.m. at Amalie Arena.

The Bruins, who nearly overtook the Lightning for first place in the Atlantic Division on the final day of the regular season, are coming into town. This is a step up in class from the eighth-seeded Devils, whom Tampa Bay dispatched in five games in the first round.

And the Lightning, for one, are just ready to go.

"The rest is good," wing Alex Killorn said. "But at a certain point, we're just itching to get back into it."

This promises to be a long and nasty series, with the Eastern Conference's top two teams going head-to-head. Boston won three of four regular-season meetings, but the Lightning delivered a statement 4-0 shutout victory April 3. It served as a blueprint for the kind of defensive game the Lightning have showcased in the playoffs.

How will this series turn out? Here are five things to WATCH:

The 'Perfection Line'

If the Lightning want to advance, tackling the Bruins top line of Patrice Bergeron, David Pastrnak and Brad Marchand will be a top priority. The trio was dominant at times in its first-round series with the Maple Leafs. Bergeron had eight points and strong possession numbers (64.9 F%). Pastrnak and Marchand both scored in Game 7. They're the total package. Bergeron, a four-time Selke Award winner as league's best defensive forward, can own the face-off circle. Marchand, as much of a pest as he can be, is incredibly skilled. Pastrnak can score from anywhere.

The Lightning likely will try to match up the Brayden Point line (Point, Tyler Johnson and Ondrej Palat). Bergeron has dubbed Point a formidable foe, a "special player," one who has taken a unique path.

But what the Bruins didn't see too much of during the regular season was the Lightning's new shutdown defensive pair of Anton Stralman and Ryan McDonagh, who was acquired at the Feb. 26 trade deadline from the Rangers. And Boston's top line also will see its share of Norris Trophy finalist Victor Hedman.

But Stralman and McDonagh shadowed Devils MVP candidate Taylor Hall in the first round, and are the ideal complement for that role.

"They're more detailed-oriented than anybody else," said Fox Sports Sun analyst Brian Engblom, a two-time Stanley Cup winning defenseman. "They read the rush better. They see what's coming at them — quicker and more efficiently. They know what's important around the net, they know how to box out and be on the stick side of the player and not let them get many deflections. They know how to tie them up."

"McDonagh boxes out better than nearly every defenseman in the league. He gets inside body position and doesn't let them back. And they recognize who is the most dangerous player — before he gets the puck."

Rookies will play a key role

Lightning wing Yanni Gourde recorded a franchise rookie-record 25 goals this season, passing Conn Smythe winner Brad Richards.

Gourde's linemate, Anthony Cirelli, has been a key cog in the team's penalty-kill resurgence. Cirelli, just 20 games into his NHL career, has also been trusted to play in big situations, including in the final minutes. The Gourde-Cirelli-Alex Killorn third line could play a pivotal role in this series.



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Defenseman Mikhail Sergachev scored the go-ahead goal in the series-clinching victory over the Devils, showing his education — on and off the ice — has paid off.

But don't sleep on the Bruins' rookies. It's not just defenseman Charlie McAvoy, who had an up-an-down first-round series against Toronto. Wing Jake DeBrusk, who had two goals in Game 7 Wednesday, could be a dynamic factor in this series against the Lightning. The Athletic's Fluto Shinzawa details DeBrusk's season, and impact, here.

The edge in net?

Lightning goalie Andrei Vasilevskiy lived up to his billing as an All-Star and Vezina Trophy finalist during the first-round series victory over the Devils. Vasilevskiy gave up two goals in the final two games, on a 5-on-3 power play and on a 6-on-5 advantage.

The moment hasn't seemed too big for him, which hasn't surprised those who have followed his career. It's a role he was born to play. "He's imposing," Canadiens Hall of Fame goalie Ken Dryden says.

Bruins goalie Tuukka Rask has typically owned the Lightning, winning seven of his previous eight regular-season meetings until getting beaten 4-0 April 3 in Tampa. Rask appeared shaky at times during the Leafs series, especially in a 7-4 Game 7 victory.

As our Cat Silverman wrote in her goalie breakdown today, "When Rask plays well, he's a Vezina-caliber goaltender. When he's off his game, his style is full of holes. ... Which version of Rask Tampa Bay faces could determine the entire pace of the series."

Structure sets the tone

When the Bruins humbled the Lightning in a 3-0 shutout in a St. Patrick's Day showdown in Tampa, Stralman was pretty frank in his assessment on the difference.

"They did what we can't do — shut it down in the third period," he said.

The Bruins are an incredibly smart and structured defensive team. The Lightning, however, had its share of issues in its defensive zone, especially the second half of the season. But Tampa Bay appeared to find its identity, and structure in the final weeks. It started, coincidentally, in a 4-2 loss in Boston on March 29, when the Lightning felt it had the better of the play in the final two periods.

The 4-0 shutout of the Bruins in Tampa on April 3 showed how far the Lightning had come. It's carried over into the playoffs, with the third period of the Game 4 victory in New Jersey a textbook example. What's helped is Tampa Bay has solidified its pairings, with the Stralman-McDonagh shutdown pair allowing Hedman to do his thing offensively. The fact Sergachev so smoothly transitioned to the right side has helped Braydon Coburn, who is playing his best hockey of the season.

Veterans in the Lightning room say their defensive play and mentality reminds them of the 2014-15 team that reached the Stanley Cup Final by racking up two shutouts in Madison Square Garden in the Eastern Conference Finals.

How has the Lightning found it's "D"?

"The stakes are higher," Stralman said. "I think that's part of it. Everyone is giving their max. And sometimes, during the regular season, you lose that. And we definitely lost that edge. But now we've got it back. We're playing some really good 'D'."

The most powerful power play

Remember when the Lightning's penalty kill was its biggest weakness heading into the playoffs? Our Evan Sporer did a great job breaking down how Tampa Bay completely turned that unit around in the first round of the playoffs.

Both the Lightning and Bruins power plays have been potent this postseason, with Boston scoring on 9 of 27 chances (33 percent) and Tampa Bay on 5 of 19 opportunities (26.3 percent).

That's where Nikita Kucherov has done a lot of his damage. Kucherov, with five goals and 10 points in five playoff games, is very deceptive and a skilled double threat from the right side wall.

And now the Bruins penalty kill has struggled, giving up four power-play goals in 15 attempts in the Leafs series.

The special teams' battle is crucial to any series, and this Boston-Tampa Bay one will be no different.

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The Athletic / Built from nothing, Golden Knights are 'riding the wave' of an extraordinary run

Michael Russo Apr 26, 2018

LAS VEGAS — It was hard not to recall the angry scene of last April and recognize the sharp contrast.

Almost one year ago to the day, the Minnesota Wild had lost in five games to the St. Louis Blues. Erik Haula, sunk deep in his corner stall at the far left of the locker room next to the door that allowed others to escape out of sight to the safe haven of showers, saunas and jacuzzis, was simmering.

"What is this, five years in a row?" Haula, spitting mad, said of the Wild's playoff exit. "I'm sick of it. We're all sick of it. We'll say this or that or whatever, but I'm just so pissed off."

Yet, here Haula was on Wednesday, once again sitting at the edge of his now-new corner stall at the far left of the Vegas Golden Knights' locker room next to the door that leads to showers, saunas, and Lord knows what other cool perks there must be inside this gorgeous Summerlin, Nev., practice facility.

Only this time, Haula was relaxed, content and supremely satisfied with his new lot in life.

And, why wouldn't he be?

In this inaugural season of the Golden Knights, Haula was one of the poster children on a team full of players who got to prove their worth — and, perhaps, stick it to their former teams — by scoring 29 goals (14 more than he had in his best of four seasons with the Wild) and 55 points (21 more than he had in his best Wild year). Haula also played the hero role in Game 2 of the Golden Knights' first-round sweep of the Los Angeles Kings with a double-overtime game-winner. And finally, after not playing since April 17, the Golden Knights' final practice was complete so Haula and the rest of these expansion castoffs could begin their second-round series with the San Jose Sharks on Thursday night in front of what's bound to be a rabid crowd at T-Mobile Arena.

Yeah, this was a sharp contrast to Haula's mood just one year ago.

"We have just been riding the wave all year," Haula said.

Across the room, there was defenseman Nate Schmidt, and he, too, was all smiles.

OK, OK, OK — if you know the bubbly St. Cloud, Minn., native, he's often all smiles.

But last August, after playing in a 4-on-4 game in Minnesota's Da Beauty League, there wasn't one hint of a beam from the defenseman's face when he flashed back to how uncomfortable it was to be taken through the contentious process of arbitration by the Golden Knights before the new club even dropped the puck on its maiden season.



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An arbitrator had just met the two sides in the middle; Schmidt was awarded a two-year contract worth \$4.45 million, and he just hoped no bridges would be burned with this new franchise and he'd be able to find a home on their crowded blue line.

"To start from where we were eight, nine months ago and you look at where we are now, there were just so many unknowns, right?" Schmidt said Wednesday.

The former University of Minnesota standout isn't just talking about his individual situation.

He's talking about the situations with all of his teammates and a first-year franchise that originally had 150/1 odds to win the Stanley Cup and an over-under point total of 68.

Months later, according to Bovada, the Golden Knights, who won the Pacific Division with the fifth-most points in the NHL (109), are favorites to beat the Sharks and have 6/1 odds to win the Stanley Cup.

With a band of players that were largely healthy scratches, fourth-liners and depth players previously on 30 other franchises, the Golden Knights are one of eight organizations still alive and not in golf-mode despite the fact there are golf courses on just about every corner in this affluent suburb.

"It's really cool to see everyone grow together," Schmidt said. "That was the coolest thing about this whole year. Everyone's role increased and really only Marc-Andre Fleury or James Neal were proven guys before. Other than them, we've had 20-odd guys doing something special with their careers."

The Golden Knights are no longer a cute little story. This is no fluke anymore.

There's a reason why they became the first modern-era expansion team from any of the four North American professional sports leagues to start from scratch and win its division. There's a reason they became just the third team from the NHL, NBA and MLB to complete a four-game sweep to win their first-ever playoff series — and first to do so in their inaugural season.

Inside this locker room, there is a real belief that since they've come this far, they may as well continue to shock the hockey world and ... win it all.

Depth forward Ryan Reaves considered himself one of those non-believers before he was traded to Vegas from the Pittsburgh Penguins two months ago. When the Golden Knights started the season 8-1, he thought, "Oh, that's kinda cool."

"At the beginning, you're like, 'This is a fluke,'" Reaves said. "Two months in, you're like, 'No way they can keep this going.' Three months in, you're like, 'OK, maybe they're for real' and you start to take notice. Now that I've seen it, and how we've been rolling since even before I got here, you definitely realize what we're fighting for. We want to make something of this."

Sure, new expansion rules made it so Vegas would have a chance to be competitive right off the hop. That was the gift of a \$500 million expansion fee.

But the breakthrough seasons are plentiful.

Start with William Karlsson, who finished third in the NHL with 43 goals after starting his career in Anaheim and then, like Haula in Minnesota, not being able to find an elevated role in Columbus. That's 34 more goals than his career-high with the Blue Jackets two seasons ago and 37 more than last season, the third-highest goal increase from the previous season in the history of the NHL. Not only did the Golden Knights get to claim Karlsson in the expansion draft, they acquired a first- and second-round pick to take on injured David Clarkson's contract.

There's the 5-foot-9 Jonathan Marchessault, on his fourth team in five years. After scoring 30 goals for the Florida Panthers last season, he scored 27 goals this year and 75 points, which is 24 more than last year's

career high. Not only did the Golden Knights get to claim Marchessault, they acquired Reilly Smith as added incentive to take Marchessault.

Anaheim traded young Shea Theodore to Vegas so they'd take on Clayton Stoner's lucrative contract and stay away from defensemen like Sami Vatanen and Josh Manson.

And, of course, there's Haula. In exchange for Vegas taking him over a defenseman like Matt Dumba or Marco Scandella, the Golden Knights received prospect Alex Tuch, who scored 15 goals and 37 points in his rookie season and scored the other goal in the Game 2 win that, coincidentally, Haula secured.

"It's very rewarding, and I haven't really had time to look back at the season, but I'm happy," Haula said. "I wouldn't take anything back. I'm happy with the way everything happened. Our group is special because we came into this season pretty much where the team said, 'Show us what you got and we'll place you where you belong.' It created this good, healthy competition and made our group a lot stronger."

It'll be interesting to see if GMs change their strategies in 2020 when Seattle is expected to enter the league as the 32nd franchise. The price tag for that expansion team is \$650 million, so the rules aren't expected to be altered.

But after so many teams made side deals with Vegas and had them seemingly backfire by watching players with elevated roles erupt in the desert, maybe GMs will just go into the expansion draft and simply accept they're going to lose one good player.

"You can't protect everyone, and a lot of our players had something that maybe some GMs didn't see or maybe just the timing wasn't right for that player on that team," Reaves said. "But there's no doubt we have a bunch of players thriving because they had something to prove. When you're not put on a protected list or traded to protect somebody else, it sends a message that they're willing to give you up, and it's got to be tough. Thriving in this new circumstance is good for the ego, good for the confidence."

Ask anybody in that Vegas locker room, and they say it was around December and January when they even started to truly understand they were for real.

"For me, it was probably when we got to first place in December and passed, I think, L.A. A week before, we won back-to-back in Nashville and Dallas, and we outplayed both teams," said Golden Knights coach Gerard Gallant, referring to part of a 12-0-1 stretch in December and early January. "It was the first time I said, 'You know what, this team's for real. It's not just a fluke.' I kept waiting for the shoe to fall. Everybody did."

"But the way we were playing, I just knew this was not a team that was going to lose six, eight, 10 in a row. I saw the confidence of the guys in the room, and I just knew it would happen. We were too good. Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying I thought we'd win the division or be in this spot. But I just knew we were going to be competitive all the way to the end."

Early in the season, the Golden Knights lost Fleury to injury, then saw goalies drop like flies. They ended up using five this season.

"But we'd have these key injuries, and we just seemed to get by them all the time," Gallant said. "Early in the season, when we had all that adversity with the goaltending and kept winning, it was amazing. And every time we brought somebody up during all our injuries, they played their asses off."

The Golden Knights play fast hockey and swarm teams on the forecheck. They enter the postseason having given up only three goals in the playoffs.

Fleury, who has won three Stanley Cups with the Penguins, has a 0.65 goals-against average and .977 save percentage with a pair of shutouts. He has stopped 127 of 130 shots and is the fifth goalie since 1967-68 to win all four games in a playoff series with a goals-against average of 0.70 or less.



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On paper, Vegas and San Jose are two evenly matched teams.

They'll also be fresh. Like Vegas, the Sharks swept Anaheim. Since the NHL changed to best-of-seven first rounds in 1986-87, this is the first time both second-round combatants are coming off sweeps.

So, the first 10 minutes Thursday night could feature some exciting, high-speed hockey once the rust scrapes off.

Players, frankly, are tired of practicing and lounging around their homes for more than a week.

"I did spring cleaning yesterday, which was not that cool," Schmidt said.

What was cool?

"Just got the pool put in two weeks ago, and I got an outdoor TV, so I've been sitting on the floatie catching up on some TV shows," Schmidt said, laughing.

But he's ready to strap on the skates once again and shock the hockey world by soaring to the conference final.

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The Athletic / No task too small for Vegas' everyman coach Gerard Gallant

By Eric Duhatschek Apr 26, 2018

LAS VEGAS — On the same day Gerard Gallant was named a finalist for NHL coach of the year, he was running his Vegas Golden Knights team through a practice, preparing for the opener of their second-round playoff series against the San Jose Sharks.

Because the Golden Knights will be off for nine days after their four-game sweep of the Los Angeles Kings, this was an actual practice with actual work and actual teaching, something that rarely happens amid the grind of the NHL playoffs. Just as things seemed to be wrapping up, Gallant unexpectedly paused the practice and then, along with the rest of his coaching staff, grabbed shovels and began clearing the ice of excess snow by themselves.

Typically, this job belongs to the ice crew or the Zamboni driver. But this time? Gallant didn't want to stop the momentum of practice, but he did want fresh ice to conduct a power-play drill. Accordingly, in that everyman, let's-get-the-job-done fashion that has characterized his NHL coaching career, Gallant pitched in, wielding a shovel. There was something utterly charming — and telling — about the matter-of-fact way the whole process unfolded.

Afterward, as Gallant was holding court with a growing media herd, I asked him about that — and ventured that he looked as if he knew what he was doing out there.

Gallant nodded — and acknowledged this was not a first for him.

"I grew up as a kid, doing that," Gallant explained. "In exchange for extra ice (time), as a young player, in my hometown in PEI, we used to do that all the time — and we'd sweep the stands, and they'd give us extra ice time. I'm sure everybody did that back in the day. Whatever it takes to keep everybody happy."

That sentiment — keeping everybody happy — nicely sums up the quietly effective way in which Gallant has overseen the Golden Knights' success this season. When you cast about for all the reasons this unlikely collection of players has advanced to the second round of the playoffs — after winning a record 51 games in the regular season, the most ever by

a first-year NHL team — much of the credit goes to Gallant and the way he turned a disparate group of mostly cast-off players into a cohesive whole.

The Golden Knights play a high-paced aggressive style that is not only successful, but also pleasing to the eye. Long ago, Gallant realized the game of hockey had to be fun, even when played at the highest level — and that's what you see when the Golden Knights are on the ice, practicing or playing. It doesn't seem like just another day at the office to them, the way it sometimes does to other NHL teams.

In everyday hockey parlance, the traits Gallant demonstrates make him a so-called "players' coach." But that's a broad, all-encompassing term that borders on cliché and can mean wildly different things to different people. If I were defining the term, I would say a "players' coach" is demanding but respectful, honest and communicative, and even-keeled in good times and bad.

"It can mean different things," acknowledged James Neal, the Golden Knights' forward. "Obviously, for sure, it's a guy you respect. It's a guy who played the game, knows the grind, knows what the players go through day in and day out — and he's been through it. He's positive. He knows the game so well. If you have a tough loss or a tough game, he never holds anything against you. He's happy and excited to get back to work. He lets things go really easily — and that's been a really good thing for our group."

Gallant was a heart-and-soul player in his 615-game NHL career, which included four seasons of 70-plus points and one in which he managed 93 points and was selected to the NHL's 1989 All-Star second team. Defenseman Deryk Engelland, a Vegas resident who is a bit of a throwback as a player himself after coming through the ranks from the ECHL to the NHL, appreciates what Gallant brings as a coach.

"Approachable but demanding," Engelland said. "He wants your best, but off the ice and away from the rink, he's very easy to talk to about things, and it doesn't matter if it's about hockey or not. He jokes around with the guys, and when the game starts, he's all business."

"He demands the same from everyone and that gains a lot of respect. If you're in the lineup or not in the lineup, if you're playing lots or not playing much, he's wanting the same from you — and that respect goes a long way."

Then there's this from goaltender Marc-Andre Fleury, a three-time Stanley Cup champion: "I've been lucky. I've had a lot of good coaches in my career. But he's honest and he's fair. He can be tough, but I think he's fair with everybody. He's good, a good boss."

So much of the focus in the Sharks-Golden Knights series focuses on the time off. For only the eighth time in NHL history, this series features two teams, each of whom advanced to the next round with a sweep. The usual narrative, when there's a week or more off between games, is that it's a bad thing because teams will be rusty coming out of the gate. I see it differently — that while the play might be a little sloppy in the opening period, the time to rest and heal will ultimately produce a better overall quality of hockey over the course of a best-of-seven series. Training camps opened in September. It's now almost May. The wear-and-tear of a long season sometimes causes a team to falter.

"I agree with that," Neal said. "After your first few shifts, and probably your first period, you're good to go. People forget how long of a year it is. It's 82 games. Guys play a lot of hockey. To have this time to regroup and have a few days, rest, recover and just work out and practice again and get your body straight, it makes a huge difference."

The sweep over the Kings has left the Golden Knights with everybody is healthy and available, according to Gallant, who figured the biggest issue coming off the layoff will be adjusting to contact again.

"In the regular season, it would be a major issue, with that much time off," Gallant said. "But in the playoffs, the guys are so focused and mentally ready for the games, the guys'll be fine. Besides, it's going to be the same for both teams — so that's a good thing."



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Gallant was a finalist for the NHL's coach of the year just two years ago after he led the Florida Panthers to a franchise best 103-point regular season and first place in their division. Inexplicably, the Panthers fired him 21 games into the next season, a colossal error that they still haven't completely recovered from. It also permitted the Golden Knights to hire an experienced hand behind their bench.

Two years ago, Gallant travelled to Vegas to attend the NHL awards ceremony and applauded politely as the Washington Capitals' Barry Trotz took home coach of the year honors. This year, it'll be a commute for Gallant – and a certainty that he'll take home the Jack Adams Trophy ahead of the other finalists, Colorado's Jared Bednar and Boston's Bruce Cassidy.

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The Athletic / By the numbers: Vegas Golden Knights vs. San Jose Sharks series preview

By Dom Luszczyszyn Apr 26, 2018

Each division had at least one big mismatch in Round 1. Not the Pacific though. The general consensus among both models and media alike was that both series looked to be wide open nail-biters where either team could come out ahead.

That obviously isn't what happened.

Round 1 in the Pacific Division wasn't close at all with both Vegas and San Jose sweeping in stunning fashion. Now the two square off in what should be an epic Round 2 clash that should be close – even closer than their respective first round series should've been. So close that you might think we're copping out with the listed probability – it's literally 50/50 (well... 49.9/50.1). As we found out in the first round though, what should happen isn't what always does.

The Numbers

Contrary to what coach Peter DeBoer says about his team, the Sharks will not be "heavy, heavy underdogs in this series." Not by a long shot.

It may seem that way based on Vegas's record and the season series between the two, but every game was close (three one-goal games, two overtimes) and the shot attempt, expected goal, and special teams numbers all suggest these are two evenly matched teams. The series win probability is basically a coin flip with San Jose taking a slight edge in what should be the closest playoff series yet. Those odds are so close the favourite can change depending on who plays or doesn't for either team (we'll get to that).

Going by regular season numbers, both teams look just a cut below the remaining eight teams. When it comes to most 5-on-5 metrics, both teams come up slightly above average which makes them two of the worst remaining teams any way you slice it. There's also little separating the two. Vegas is the slightly better Corsi team, but only by the tiniest of margins. San Jose closes that gap when it comes to expected goals, but Vegas has them beat on actual goals on the strength of some stronger percentages.

In the playoffs though, Vegas was the much more impressive team at evens, though both are due for some heavy regression. The Golden Knights controlled the shot share much more favourably than San Jose did and they were even more impressive by expected goals, ranking as one of the best teams in the first round. They made the Kings look like the most listless offensive team most of us have ever seen with a defence that smothered the life out of any attack and a goalie that

stopped 99 per cent (!) of all shots at 5-on-5. That has to be one of the best defensive performances in a series since the Dead Puck Era routinely sucked the life out of many buildings.

Vegas will have a much tougher job stopping San Jose's offence which is clicking at a very high rate. The Sharks went into the playoffs with a scorching shooting percentage down the stretch (9.6 per cent over their last 25 games, ranking first in the league) and the magic continued through the first round. Their 3.27 goals per 60 ranks second in the playoffs at the moment behind only the sizzling Penguins.

While Vegas may have the playoff edge at 5-on-5, the special teams edge belongs to San Jose. That was narrowly true for the regular season too, but San Jose was even better in the opening round. The Sharks offence has been explosive at evens, but it was somehow even better on the power play. They scored on 30 per cent of their chances, but even more impressively, rattled off over 14 expected goals per 60 with the man advantage which was miles better than the next best team. That's a big step up from the regular season as the Sharks absolutely picked the Ducks apart in Round 1 in that department. Having nine more power-play opportunities obviously helped and they lead all playoff teams in that department. Vegas won't be parading to the penalty box like Anaheim did and the team won't be as easy to figure out on the penalty kill either. The Golden Knights had one of the stingiest penalty killing units in the first round.

Looking at any playoff data in the playoffs should be done with heavy caution as small sample sizes abound – and that's especially true for two teams that have only played four games each. Both teams looked unstoppable in Round 1, but it'll be difficult for each team to keep up those efforts going forward. You don't need me to tell you that both goalies won't continue to stop north of 97 per cent of their shots at 5-on-5. Expect something closer to what the teams showed during the regular season. Expect two teams playing very tightly contested hockey as there isn't much separating these two.

The Roster

Just like their last series, the Sharks have the edge at forward and on defence (just barely), but not in net. We saw how that turned out for them in Round 1.

That series was a good example of how fickle goaltending predictions can be, though Anaheim's defence did them no favours. Goaltending being arguably the worst thing to bank on in the playoffs because of how volatile it can be was something I alluded to in that series preview – and this post does a really good job explaining things – but even I didn't imagine such a stunning role reversal between the two netminders.

Based on past regular season data, the gap between Anaheim's and San Jose's starters looked to be the largest in the first round, but that's not how it played out. John Gibson has been one of the league's best and most consistent goaltenders over the last few seasons while Martin Jones has mostly looked like an average starter. The difference between the two was so large that I didn't even bother writing anything about Jones. I won't make that mistake again.

Over the last three seasons, he's been the bonafide starter for the Sharks and has posted a .918, .912, and .915 save percentage in that time, good for a combined .915 save percentage. That's 24th over that time frame. Factor in shot quality and he moves up to 17th. A bit more impressive, sure, but you can forgive me for thinking those numbers weren't anything to fawn over, especially compared to Gibson.

What's less forgivable is glossing over his playoff numbers. It seems as if Jones has another gear when it comes to playoff hockey, something I shouldn't have ignored, even if it is just one-sixth of the sample size. He had a .935 save percentage in a first-round loss last season and was at .923 during the Sharks Stanley Cup run two seasons ago. This year he's at .970. He seems to be built for these games and is fourth among goalies who've played 10 or more games with a .931 save percentage over the last three seasons.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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Still, 30 games is not a lot to go off of, and it's still more than likely that he's closer to a .915 goalie than a .931 goalie – but it still probably shouldn't be ignored. Combine his regular season and playoff stats and he jumps up to 15th in save percentage with a .917 and 10th in delta save percentage. That's a bit better than I gave him credit for.

The thing is that Marc-Andre Fleury is no slouch either and he was even better than Jones in the first round, while having stronger regular season and playoff numbers. He ranks fourth and seventh, respectively, for combined regular season and playoff numbers. Maybe the edge isn't as big as it looks above, but it's still hard not to side with Fleury in this series.

Outside the crease though, it's the Sharks that have the slight advantage, especially with the way everyone played in the first round. Joe Pavelski and Evander Kane continue to be a force while Tomas Hertl and Logan Couture have found some chemistry, giving the Sharks a potent top six. Those lines might not have even been the most impressive this series as the fourth line really came to play, scoring big goals and controlling player. Marcus Sorenson, Eric Fehr and Melker Karlsson have been one of the league's scariest fourth lines so far and in 27 minutes together at 5-on-5, the trio outscored the Ducks 3-0 and outshot them 35-16. That's huge and something San Jose hopes they can maintain.

The big x-factor is the health of Joe Thornton. That San Jose made it this far without him is remarkable and a testament to their role players, like that fourth line, stepping up. He's unlikely to be available for the start of the series, but the current probability is based on him returning midway through the series (around Game 4). His health is the difference between San Jose being slight favourites or slight underdogs in this series as his value is worth roughly one-and-a-half wins. If he were to play every game the Sharks chances would be around 51 per cent. If he were to miss the entire series, they would drop to around 49 per cent.

Vegas doesn't have a big injury to deal with, but they have their own roster problems, mainly finding room for Tomas Tatar, their big deadline acquisition. He's not the player he looked to be last year, but he's still arguably a better option than some of the other players the team is trudging out in the bottom six. His presence is worth less than Thornton's, but with the series so tight, him being a healthy scratch still makes a difference. Every lineup spot matters and I'm not sure him being on the outside is the right move, especially with the way the bottom six played in the Kings series.

The top of the lineup carried the team, as expected, with some spectacular play at 5-on-5, but they still struggled to score. The top line shut down Anze Kopitar handily (earning 55 per cent of the shot attempts for the series), but they will still need more from Jonathan Marchessault and William Karlsson on offence. Both of them played very well, but they need to execute better as Vegas, funny enough, looks to have the star power edge once again. Pavelski is an elite centre but he's in tough considering what the underrated duo did to an even better player in Kopitar. That top line, along with Reilly Smith, will be the key to Vegas finding success as they're the ones keeping things close with the Sharks up front.

On defence it looks like the Golden Knights are mostly outmatched thanks to their lack of a Brent Burns-calibre player (though Shea Theodore was excellent in the opening round). As good as their defenders have been, they probably don't have someone as capable as Marc-Edouard Vlasic either, a guy who gets very underrated by this particular model. Vegas has good depth, arguably better, but the lack of a star back there carries some weight. That was the same story against the Kings though and we'll see if the defence by committee approach can work its magic again. The Sharks non-star defencemen can be exposed and they were rather pedestrian in Round 1.

The Bottom Line

This one will be tight and I don't blame you for picking either side – there's good reasons for both as demonstrated by the near 50/50 odds. The Sharks, even without Thornton, have the slightly stronger roster with a goalie who steps up big time in the playoffs and took the biggest leap in

the opening round using Elo adjustments (by virtue of dismantling a stronger team). The Golden Knights were second and have the slightly stronger underlying numbers for the season and playoffs. As they have all season, the Golden Knights are playing better than the sum of their parts. They also have home ice advantage which is what bridges the gap in this series even though the Sharks have a better team.

Who wins is anybody's guess at this point (that's why they play the games, right?), but any series that looks this tight should be highly entertaining regardless. I'm skeptical either team can get past either of Nashville or Winnipeg, but there'll be a small chance. For now, they'll have to flip a coin to decide who gets that chance.

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The Athletic / Crease to Crease: Evaluating the second-round goaltending matchups

Cat Silverman Apr 26, 2018

It's going to be a quick turnaround between the playoff rounds, thanks to a pair of rapid-fire sweeps out West and then a dragging, grueling seven-game battle between Boston and Toronto.

The last time these two teams faced off in the postseason, Toronto overcame a heavy handicap as the underdog to make a Cinderella run to Game 7.

Of course, we all know how that one went. And while the situation in Game 7 five years later wasn't quite as drastic a collapse on Toronto's part, that's not going to serve as quite the consolation Toronto fans will want to hear.

There's a lot to be said for how goaltending can turn a series, though. Frederik Andersen deserves plenty of credit for keeping Toronto in the series as long as he did — but, like Tuukka Rask, Andersen deserves some criticism for a very poorly executed 60 minutes in Wednesday night's game.

His first few games of the series boasted some poor short side goals allowed and some sloppy overall play, much like the play fans saw from him down the backstretch of the season.

Although he cleaned things up in games three through six, his start to Game 7 was nearly as poor as Rask's — and that certainly won't serve as a ringing endorsement for teams riding their goaltenders as heavily as Mike Babcock did Andersen this year.

Both goaltenders started out the game overcommitting and playing their depth to extremes, appearing as if neither would be able to buy a goal before the game was over.

Andersen cleaned things up before Rask did, helping Toronto to extend things to a 4-3 lead by the end of the second.

Rask calmed his own game down in the final period, though, while Andersen and the Leafs eventually got outrun by a heavy offensive period for Boston to lose 7-4 in the end.

It wasn't quite as sloppy as the goaltending seen in the Pittsburgh-Philadelphia series, particularly in that series' own elimination game earlier this week. Wednesday night's game certainly wasn't pretty, though; after the almost reverent goaltending showdown seen between Vegas and Los Angeles earlier in the month, these games looked almost comically bad in comparison.

EASTERN CONFERENCE



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TAMPA BAY LIGHTNING vs. BOSTON BRUINS

The Starters

Tampa Bay: Andrei Vasilevskiy

Boston: Tuukka Rask

The Storyline

Heading into the first round, the Tampa Bay series was set to be a test of momentum versus on-paper talent. Every year, at least one series sees an upset when the 'hot' goaltender or lineup manages to ride the wave right into the next round despite boasting the less impressive overall stat sheet heading into the postseason.

Vasilevskiy struggled down the backstretch admitting he was tired in his first full season as an NHL starter with little in the way of consistent help from his No. 2s. The Devils' Keith Kinkaid, on the other hand, usurped an injured Cory Schneider following a winless return from the IR list and was white-hot en route to the team's postseason berth.

Since May 2016, though, Vasilevskiy has only dropped below a .912 save percentage in a playoff game once and only posted a sub-.921 three times, spread out among a 12-game sample size. It's small and it's largely meaningless, but Vasilevskiy certainly has some physical attributes to back it up. With impressive flexibility and fantastic reaction speed, the young starter has a 'higher gear' that works in his favor during the postseason, at least for now. In comparison, Kinkaid's limited toolkit, as we mentioned earlier in the first round, left him scrambling at the higher pace of play in an NHL postseason game, and he was quickly usurped by Schneider.

Schneider played incredibly well, but Vasilevskiy allowed just one goal apiece in both Games 4 and 5 to clinch the series.

Across the ice, that's going to be a huge wakeup call for Rask if Vasilevskiy continues to play that well. The Leafs capitalized on the ability to draw Rask out from his optimal crease depth and get him playing an overactive style, which catches him off-angle and leaves wide holes around him for easy tallies by his opponents.

Analysts were a little off when they suggested that Rask was 'playing small' in Game 7, where he allowed an abysmal four goals in the early stages of the game to nearly cost Boston their second-round ticket.

In order to play small, he would have had to be considered an obstacle for the puck. When he over-slid his angles and favorited explosive, last-second actions over set edges and controlled positioning, he all but moved out of the way of the puck to get beaten point-blank more than once in the crucial elimination game Wednesday night.

The Leafs were faster than Boston in the long run, and they offered a highly skilled offense that only seemed to gain confidence as the playoffs progressed.

Boston's skin was saved by Andersen's inopportune depth choices and absolutely shoddy defense in front in their Game 7, which isn't something the Bruins can necessarily count on from Tampa Bay.

If they allow four goals, it's a pretty safe bet that's going to be a game they lose; this version of Rask doesn't seem like he'll stand a chance across the ice from the only Eastern Conference Vezina finalist this year.

The Biggest Question

When Rask plays well, he's a Vezina-caliber goaltender. When he's off his game, his style is full of holes. Figuring out which version of Rask Tampa Bay faces could determine the entire pace of the series.

PITTSBURGH PENGUINS vs. WASHINGTON CAPITALS

The Starters

Pittsburgh: Matt Murray

Washington: Braden Holtby

The Storyline

In the first round, a surprising number of teams saw their starter usurped by someone else: Braden Holtby took over for Philipp Grubauer, Schneider for Kinkaid, Michal Neuvirth for Brian Elliott, and Jonathan Bernier was replaced by Andrew Hammond (albeit for injury).

Of all the teams that saw the switches, though, only Washington managed to pull through to the second round, although there's certainly a theory to explore there.

As a solid, reliable backup, the Capitals believed they weren't risking much putting Grubauer in to start the series and resting Holtby. When that plan started to fall through, they seamlessly traded places — and after falling well below league average in the regular season, Holtby is back to his old self.

Something similar happened in New Jersey/ Although Vasilevskiy was more than the Devils offense could handle, Schneider bounced back from his own poor regular season finish to post a .950 save percentage in four appearances for New Jersey to create an incredibly close series of games for the underdog.

Both Schneider and Holtby have been worked to the bone over the past three to four seasons, and it always seems to catch up (at least for Holtby) in the playoffs.

Meanwhile, the last two Stanley Cup winning teams — Pittsburgh and, well, Pittsburgh — managed to split their regular seasons and postseason starts between two NHL-caliber goaltenders, seemingly eliminating that intense fatigue that seems to show up in the league's biggest regular season workhorses.

It should be interesting to see what happens when the Penguins, who don't have a second NHL starter on their roster to pair with Murray again, face off against the Capitals and a more-rested Holtby.

Murray hasn't been terrible through the postseason, but he's been getting a lot of (deserved) criticism for his glove hand getting sloppy and for some inopportune lateral movement and depth on plays with passing options. He's hard to beat when he uses his reach properly to get himself across the crease quickly, but his fundamentals are still a work in progress — and this year, that's been exposed a bit.

On the other side of the ice, Holtby seemed to only get stronger as Sergei Bobrovsky fell victim once again to his own playoff demons. Holtby managed to post a .921 save percentage or better against a relentless offensive drive by the Blue Jackets in each of the final four games of the series, helping the Capitals overcome a 2-0 deficit to start the series and come back to win in six games.

Holtby's style is something entirely his own, and it works for him when he's able to use his explosive, almost choppy lateral movements to follow the puck with his body alongside a strong tracking game.

At this point, Pittsburgh will have to try to capitalize on his durability. In the past handful of seasons, Holtby's been one of the top performers in the regular season before ultimately falling victim to postseason woes. This year, with a bit of extra rest to get him ready for the playoff push, it should be interesting to see what he does with the equally-lethal offense that Pittsburgh has to offer in round two.

The Biggest Question

Pittsburgh's strong offense helped them overcome Philadelphia's early lead in Game 6 to ultimately win the series, but the Penguins' goaltending was inconsistent and posed a red flag during the regular season. Will Murray be as capable of stopping Alex Ovechkin and Nicklas Backstrom as he was Wayne Simmonds, Sean Couturier and Claude Giroux in Round 1, or will he look more like the goaltender who allowed nine goals in two games?

VEGAS GOLDEN KNIGHTS vs. SAN JOSE SHARKS

The Starters



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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Las Vegas: Marc-Andre Fleury

San Jose: Martin Jones

The Storyline

This isn't the playoff series that boasts a pair of Vezina finalists; neither Jones nor Fleury made the final cut. And it's highly unlikely that Jones' lackluster .915 save percentage through 60 games even earned him a fifth-place vote.

The playoffs are certainly a different animal from the regular season, though, and this matchup could be the best one of the second round.

Fleury had arguably the best showdown in the first round, when his opponent, Jonathan Quick, was one of the top-five best playoff performers in the round — and still managed to get swept. Allowing just three goals in four games, Fleury was unbelievable in continuing his Vezina-worthy performance in the regular season, and the second round will be just another chance to see if he's capable of putting up these numbers on an even longer-term sample size.

His style renaissance started under Mike Bales in Pittsburgh a few years ago, and it only continued when Dave Prior gave Fleury a little bit more creative freedom and aggressive depth again this season.

He only missed out on a Vezina nod this year because a concussion at the start of the season caused him to miss a significant chunk of time before finishing the year with less than 50 total games played. Still, he was one of the best statistical performers on the year, and his stellar first round of play is a suggestion that, whatever golden touch Vegas has, it hasn't flamed out just yet.

Across the ice, Jones was significantly less impressive during the regular season, although that's not to say that he struggled considerably.

His season started off with some poor play due to easily exploitable holes in his game. He's a bit weak with his lateral movement to his blocker side, and he can get pulled out of position on high-low cycle plays when he isn't paying attention.

In the postseason, though, controlling the pace of play with cycles and deceptive lateral movement rather than a run-and-gun style of offense can be what kills a team's momentum, so Jones might not be quite as vulnerable when it comes to playoff hockey.

At the moment, it's hard to tell, because the Anaheim Ducks were shamefully lackluster in their own four-game sweep. But just looking at the numbers and the results, it's easy to see this one being another low-scoring series full of saves that pull fans to the edges of their seats.

The Biggest Question

If both goaltenders play the way they did in the first round, this is going to be an unbelievable — and potentially unbelievably long — series. Figuring out which goaltender will succumb to pressure first (or which one can allow less than a goal-per-game again) might be what it takes to determine the winner.

NASHVILLE PREDATORS vs. WINNIPEG JETS

The Starters

Nashville: Pekka Rinne

Winnipeg: Connor Hellebuyck

The Storyline

The Western Conference goaltending just couldn't get any better.

Although the Vegas-San Jose series currently boasts the most impressive statistical numbers from the first round, it would be ill-advised to sleep on the potential quality that could emerge from this battle, which offers a showdown between two of the three Vezina finalists.

Rinne is currently in the midst of a technical renaissance, boasting a crisper, more controlled game that harnessed his quick movements and sharp glove attacks to control his depth and limit his risk of overshooting his positioning.

His edge work has improved in the past few seasons, as he sets his skates in the ice more frequently as opposed to sliding through and leaving holes open when the puck releases on a shot. And although his first-round series wasn't perfect, his body of work from the regular season was proof that he's no longer a goaltender anyone can begin to argue is a liability for his team.

Across the ice, he'll face one of the two younger Vezina finalists in Hellebuyck, the American-born high school hockey product who finally displayed his full potential over the course of this past season.

Like Rinne, Hellebuyck is working with a new technical game to offer, although his new approach strongly focuses on biomechanics and controlling his movements to follow his head in comparison to Rinne's new depth management. While both have improved their tracking techniques, the other areas they've cleaned up are starkly different. Hellebuyck has always played a more conservative game in his crease (albeit not quite on the same level as Henrik Lundqvist and Mike Smith), and his confidence in his positioning and tracking has provided positive results even prior to this season. He's a bronze medalist at the World Championships from 2015 and an NCAA Mike Richter recipient. While the Vezina likely isn't actually going to be his this year, he's quickly becoming one of the league's best.

Recent years have seen arguments made that Vezina finalists are burning out too quickly with heavy regular season workloads, and it's costing them in the postseason with early exits.

Unfortunately, the fact that Hellebuyck and Rinne are facing each other in the Conference semifinals means that only two of the three finalists will be able to reach the third round of the postseason this year. But the good news is that their head-to-head matchup now also guarantees that there will be a finalist in the third round no matter what, even if Boston manages to upset Tampa Bay and eliminate Vasilevskiy.

The Biggest Question

Both goaltenders, unlike the pair in the Vegas-San Jose series, looked human in at least one game in the first round. This series may come down to which one looks more human again, and first.

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Sportsnet.ca / Takeaways: Penguins take Game 1 of Crosby vs. Ovechkin show

Kristina Rutherford

It looked oh-so-good for Alex Ovechkin and his Washington Capitals, until it really didn't.

Jake Guentzel continues to be a playoff hero, Sidney Crosby continues to be himself, and despite the fact the Penguins didn't even have Evgeni Malkin in the lineup, Pittsburgh won the opener of this highly-anticipated Round 2 playoffs rematch—the Crosby vs. Ovechkin show.

It sure didn't disappoint.

The Penguins clawed back from a 2-0 deficit and scored three unanswered goals in the third period to earn a 3-2 win over Washington, in Washington, to the dismay of the sea of red fans at Capital One Arena.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • April 27, 2018

Here are six takeaways from Pittsburgh's 3-2 win over Washington on Thursday.

No Time Wasted

If you needed any indication that this rematch was going to be a doozy, it revealed itself in the opening 17 seconds.

At the drop of the puck, Crosby won the faceoff and the Penguins got a shot away, but then the play turned the other way and everything happened oh-so-fast.

Tom Wilson dished it to Ovechkin, who threw up a beauty of an airborne breakout pass, which Evgeny Kuznetsov jumped on and promptly wristed past Penguins goalie, Matt Murray, glove-side, to make it 1-0.

Only 17 seconds had expired. Kuznetsov's release was filthy, and the hometown crowd was in a tizzy.

And after that one, you couldn't help but wonder: Will this be the Capitals' year? Finally? Maybe?

Oh-Vee

In the first five minutes, Ovechkin was teed up for a one-timer on a nearly wide-open net, and he shot well wide, then dropped to his knees. It could've been 2-0 early on for the Capitals.

Ovechkin didn't even record a shot in the first or second periods.

But No. 8's first was a real beauty. It came in the opening seconds of the third and on another two-on-one, and Ovechkin clearly had no intention on passing. From his off-wing, he rifled a wristed, top shelf, glove side. It was 2-0 Capitals, just 28 seconds into the third.

How'd we know Ovechkin was going to shoot? He stuck out his tongue just before he fired it.

Gone in 4 minutes and 49 seconds...

Washington's hopes of winning this game, that is. Kind of.

The Penguins have won the last two Stanley Cups for a reason. There were moments in their first-round series against Philadelphia when the Flyers were pressing and pressing and pressing and got a dozen chances, and then suddenly Pittsburgh would take it the other way and score on a single shot and suck all the hope out of the opposition, and win.

It was the same thing here. It took the Penguins, down 2-0 in the third, just 2:21 to tie this thing up and 4:49 to take a 3-2 lead they'd never relinquish.

A little over two minutes after Ovechkin made it 2-0, Patric Hornqvist tipped one home to cut Washington's lead to one.

And then, you can probably guess who tied things up. Who else? Crosby, co-leader of these playoffs in goals (7) and points (13), slapped one home.

Little more than two minutes after that, Crosby threw one at the net from the side boards, and Guentzel got a stick on it. Capitals goalie Braden Holtby could only look up at the ceiling after that one.

A 2-0 lead, gone in a flash.

If you ask Guentzel, it was never in doubt. "Just got to stay with it," he told reporters, after the game. "Right from Sid, he led the way for us and it's right down the lineup. we knew we were getting chances."

We really have to talk about Jake

Here are some facts about Guentzel: He's a third-round pick. He's 23. He's from Omaha, Nebraska. In the regular season, he played all 82 games and scored 22 goals and had 48 points. That's pretty good.

Through seven games in these playoffs, Guentzel has scored seven goals. Through seven games in these playoffs, Guentzel has 13 points. That ties for the best in the playoffs.

He had a team-leading three points on Thursday.

In 32 career playoff games, Guentzel has 20 goals. That's ridiculous.

The man is a playoff machine.

One day, we'll have to get him to explain it.

Malkin-less

It's early on, but Pittsburgh looks awfully good. Clinically good. They didn't even have their leading scorer in the regular season, Evgeni Malkin, in the lineup on Thursday.

That's not good news for Washington.

Malkin skated on Thursday morning, and could be back on Sunday for Game 2.

Holy Holtby and Murr-aculous

The first period star definitely goes to Holtby. He was dialed right in, and he played a good game throughout, but especially in the first, which could've easily seen Pittsburgh score a goal or two.

In that first frame, Holtby made some highlight-reel saves, somehow got a piece of a shot from Dominik Simon, which then ricocheted off the post. His nicest save came when he slid across the net and made a pad save on Guentzel.

"We had some Grade-As and obviously he made some saves," Guentzel told reporters, of Holtby.

Down at the other end, Murray, too, was spectacular. Twice, he dove across the net and made an insane save with his blocker. The biggest came in the dying minutes of the game, on Brett Connolly, to preserve the lead and the win.

"It's a good feeling," a grinning Murray told Sportsnet's Christine Simpson. "This is a hard building to win in, especially at this time of the year."

We'll see if the defending champs can take a 2-0 lead when the Penguins and Capitals meet again for Game 2 on Sunday afternoon, back at Capital One Arena.

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Sportsnet.ca / 31 Thoughts: How different will Maple Leafs look in 2018-19?

Elliotte Friedman April 26, 2018, 12:25 PM

18-22 minutes

- Roster churn coming for Leafs?
- Gulutzan, Yawney make sense for Oilers
- Ducks want to play faster

The Toronto Maple Leafs headed into 2017-18 knowing some important long-term decisions loomed. They made a bold and interesting choice: They would wait and see how things turned out, allowing the results to determine the organization's path.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • April 27, 2018

"If you have time, use it," GM Lou Lamoriello is fond of saying.

Sooner than they hoped, time is up.

Wednesday's painful Game 7 defeat in Boston brings the end of the season, and the beginning of a critical decision-making process. And it starts near the top, with team President Brendan Shanahan needing to clarify the front-office structure.

Lamoriello signed a three-year contract as GM, but there is a provision for two extra years in some kind of advisory role. Shanahan doesn't have to do it that way. He can choose to keep the status quo. In March, a week after Nick Kypreos, Chris Johnston and I speculated on the future, I ran into Shanahan at an Air Canada Centre morning skate. He stressed that any outside speculation was pure guesswork, because he had not made a final decision.

Complicating the process is how the decision affects Lamoriello's lieutenants, assistant GMs Kyle Dubas and Mark Hunter. Both are very valuable. The Maple Leafs think so highly of Dubas that they blocked Colorado from hiring him last summer. In most businesses, that means internal promotion is inevitable — and imminent.

As for Hunter, he finds players, and he's great at it. At the 2015 NHL Draft, with head coach Mike Babcock pushing for a defenceman like Noah Hanifin, Ivan Provorov or Zach Werenski, Hunter stuck with his choice, Mitch Marner. This season, Marner validated that decision, pushing back against Babcock's tough love with an impactful season, and it continued against the Bruins. From Game 1 to 89, he was Toronto's best player.

Sportsnet's newest podcast is a weekly deep dive into the biggest hockey news in the world. New episodes every Thursday.

Dubas and Hunter are OHL rivals from London and Sault Ste. Marie. What does promotion for one mean for the other? And, what does it mean for Lamoriello? Would he want to stay in an advisory role? Or could another organization come calling?

Honestly, I don't have a great feel for it. There are some executives who believe Shanahan will change things, others who believe he will keep status quo into 2018–19. We're guessing, but we're soon to get our answer.

It was interesting, however, to watch Lamoriello the past few days. He has the ultimate poker face, never showing his cards. One of the best stories about him comes from when he was still running the Devils, who were coming to Toronto for a Hockey Night in Canada game. Their flight had a scary landing, with players saying iPods flew around the cabin. Scott Gomez laughed that the only unruffled guy was the GM, who calmly sat there like nothing happened.

Before Game 5 in Boston, Lamoriello interrupted Frederik Andersen's pre-game routine on the bench, ostensibly to offer words of encouragement. That caught us by surprise, because pre-game routines are rarely interrupted and we didn't see that all year. He had a big fist-pump after that win, too. It stood out because it was different, especially from him.

The games are done, but heavy lifting remains.

31 THOUGHTS

1. We will get back to Toronto in a moment, but first a word about the Draft Lottery. Not sure how it will end up, but the NHL is considering a "split" on Saturday night. The first 12 picks would be unveiled during the pre-game prior to San Jose/Las Vegas, the final three during the second intermission.

2. This is always subject to change, but it looks like nine GMs will be at the lottery: Jim Benning (Vancouver), Marc Bergevin (Montreal), Stan Bowman (Chicago), Jason Botterill (Buffalo), John Chayka (Arizona), Peter Chiarelli (Edmonton), Pierre Dorion (Ottawa), Jeff Gorton (Rangers) and Ken Holland (Detroit). Also on the guest list: Bill Armstrong (director of scouting, St. Louis), Eric Joyce (assistant GM,

Florida), Chris Lamoriello (director of player personnel, Islanders), Rich Peeverly (player development, Dallas) and Don Waddell (president, Carolina).

3. With six unrestricted free agents, there is potential for roster churn in Toronto. Kasperii Kapanen is going to have an NHL job, and Andreas Johnson will be given every opportunity, too.

Last summer, as James van Riemsdyk headed into the final season of his contract, he came up from his off-season home for meetings with the coaches and front office about his role. Van Riemsdyk loves Toronto, wanted to stay and agreed to make it work. He had an excellent season, a career-high 36 goals in limited minutes. It's hard to see how it can fit. Auston Matthews's contract negotiations will dominate discussion, but Marner really raised his value, too. Matthews clearly wasn't himself in the post-season.

4. Another decision Toronto held off was upgrading the blue line. The Maple Leafs kicked tires on some in-season options (Ryan McDonagh and Chris Tanev among them), but the feeling is they were never really close to making anything happen. Maybe they wanted to wait and see how the current group did. They know another Russian defender, Igor Ozhiganov, has made a commitment should he test the NHL. Travis Dermott earned more time, but this search is going to go deeper.

5. This is me thinking out loud, but I'd be curious to see if the Islanders ask to speak to Lamoriello should Toronto not keep him in the same position. Son Chris is already there, and Lamoriello has a good relationship with GM Garth Snow. There's some logic to it.

6. There was a rumour floating around the league that Dean Lombardi was a consideration for the Islanders. But I don't believe that's happening.

7. Carolina made contact with University of Denver head coach Jim Montgomery, but that doesn't appear to be a likely scenario. No harm in asking. It's probably Rod Brind'Amour or Mike Vellucci behind the Hurricanes' bench. Buffalo assistant GM Steve Greeley is there for another interview, and, apparently, there are others Dundon's spoken to. I think there's also been some contact with Montreal's Rick Dudley, but I'm not sure that's for the GM position.

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8. Word on the team is that Carolina feels it needs some edge — that they're too easy to play against. Jeff Skinner is one year away from unrestricted free agency, and they're going to test his value. You know who could be interested? The Los Angeles Kings.

9. The Hurricanes have asked Ron Francis to work from home. Business is brutal sometimes, but sad it ends this way between the organization and one of its greatest players.

10. Quietly, Edmonton locked down KHL goaltender Mikko Koskinen a little while ago. It is believed that the Islanders, who drafted Koskinen in 2009, were also looking. He had a 1.72 goals against average in 35 regular-season and playoff games this season. Word is he was asking for two years at \$2.5 million per, but no idea yet what the agreement is.

11. Another Canadian team that may dip into European free agency: Vancouver. The Canucks are looking at Par Lindholm, a 26-year-old Swedish centre. Several NHL clubs were interested, but believe Vancouver has a good shot at him.

12. There are a few Russian free-agent defenders to keep an eye on at the upcoming World Championships: New Jersey is expected to sign 26-year-old Egor Yakovlev. Overseas reports link Arizona to Ilya Lyubushkin. I can't pin down the team, but it appears there is an agreement somewhere with Alexander Yezesin. And several clubs continue to chase Bogdan Kiselevich. He's 28. That's two years older than Yakovlev, four above Lyubushkin.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • April 27, 2018

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But the lure of the job is a powerful one.

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Sportsnet.ca / 31 Thoughts: How different will Maple Leafs look in 2018-19?

Elliott Friedman April 26, 2018, 12:25 PM

- Roster churn coming for Leafs?
- Gulutzan, Yawney make sense for Oilers
- Ducks want to play faster

The Toronto Maple Leafs headed into 2017-18 knowing some important long-term decisions loomed. They made a bold and interesting choice: They would wait and see how things turned out, allowing the results to determine the organization's path.

"If you have time, use it," GM Lou Lamoriello is fond of saying.

Sooner than they hoped, time is up.

Wednesday's painful Game 7 defeat in Boston brings the end of the season, and the beginning of a critical decision-making process. And it starts near the top, with team President Brendan Shanahan needing to clarify the front-office structure.

Lamoriello signed a three-year contract as GM, but there is a provision for two extra years in some kind of advisory role. Shanahan doesn't have to do it that way. He can choose to keep the status quo. In March, a week after Nick Kypreos, Chris Johnston and I speculated on the future, I ran into Shanahan at an Air Canada Centre morning skate. He stressed that any outside speculation was pure guesswork, because he had not made a final decision.

Complicating the process is how the decision affects Lamoriello's lieutenants, assistant GMs Kyle Dubas and Mark Hunter. Both are very valuable. The Maple Leafs think so highly of Dubas that they blocked Colorado from hiring him last summer. In most businesses, that means internal promotion is inevitable — and imminent.

As for Hunter, he finds players, and he's great at it. At the 2015 NHL Draft, with head coach Mike Babcock pushing for a defenceman like Noah Hanifin, Ivan Provorov or Zach Werenski, Hunter stuck with his choice, Mitch Marner. This season, Marner validated that decision, pushing back against Babcock's tough love with an impactful season, and it continued against the Bruins. From Game 1 to 89, he was Toronto's best player.

Sportsnet's newest podcast is a weekly deep dive into the biggest hockey news in the world. New episodes every Thursday.

Dubas and Hunter are OHL rivals from London and Sault Ste. Marie. What does promotion for one mean for the other? And, what does it mean for Lamoriello? Would he want to stay in an advisory role? Or could another organization come calling?

Honestly, I don't have a great feel for it. There are some executives who believe Shanahan will change things, others who believe he will keep status quo into 2018-19. We're guessing, but we're soon to get our answer.

It was interesting, however, to watch Lamoriello the past few days. He has the ultimate poker face, never showing his cards. One of the best stories about him comes from when he was still running the Devils, who were coming to Toronto for a Hockey Night in Canada game. Their flight had a scary landing, with players saying iPods flew around the cabin. Scott Gomez laughed that the only unruffled guy was the GM, who calmly sat there like nothing happened.

Before Game 5 in Boston, Lamoriello interrupted Frederik Andersen's pre-game routine on the bench, ostensibly to offer words of encouragement. That caught us by surprise, because pre-game routines are rarely interrupted and we didn't see that all year. He had a big fist-pump after that win, too. It stood out because it was different, especially from him.

The games are done, but heavy lifting remains.

31 THOUGHTS

1. We will get back to Toronto in a moment, but first a word about the Draft Lottery. Not sure how it will end up, but the NHL is considering a



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"split" on Saturday night. The first 12 picks would be unveiled during the pre-game prior to San Jose/Las Vegas, the final three during the second intermission.

2. This is always subject to change, but it looks like nine GMs will be at the lottery: Jim Benning (Vancouver), Marc Bergevin (Montreal), Stan Bowman (Chicago), Jason Botterill (Buffalo), John Chayka (Arizona), Peter Chiarelli (Edmonton), Pierre Dorion (Ottawa), Jeff Gorton (Rangers) and Ken Holland (Detroit). Also on the guest list: Bill Armstrong (director of scouting, St. Louis), Eric Joyce (assistant GM, Florida), Chris Lamoriello (director of player personnel, Islanders), Rich Peeverly (player development, Dallas) and Don Waddell (president, Carolina).

3. With six unrestricted free agents, there is potential for roster churn in Toronto. Kasperii Kapanen is going to have an NHL job, and Andreas Johnson will be given every opportunity, too.

Last summer, as James van Riemsdyk headed into the final season of his contract, he came up from his off-season home for meetings with the coaches and front office about his role. Van Riemsdyk loves Toronto, wanted to stay and agreed to make it work. He had an excellent season, a career-high 36 goals in limited minutes. It's hard to see how it can fit. Auston Matthews's contract negotiations will dominate discussion, but Marnier really raised his value, too. Matthews clearly wasn't himself in the post-season.

4. Another decision Toronto held off was upgrading the blue line. The Maple Leafs kicked tires on some in-season options (Ryan McDonagh and Chris Tanev among them), but the feeling is they were never really close to making anything happen. Maybe they wanted to wait and see how the current group did. They know another Russian defender, Igor Ozhiganov, has made a commitment should he test the NHL. Travis Dermott earned more time, but this search is going to go deeper.

5. This is me thinking out loud, but I'd be curious to see if the Islanders ask to speak to Lamoriello should Toronto not keep him in the same position. Son Chris is already there, and Lamoriello has a good relationship with GM Garth Snow. There's some logic to it.

6. There was a rumour floating around the league that Dean Lombardi was a consideration for the Islanders. But I don't believe that's happening.

7. Carolina made contact with University of Denver head coach Jim Montgomery, but that doesn't appear to be a likely scenario. No harm in asking. It's probably Rod Brind'Amour or Mike Vellucci behind the Hurricanes' bench. Buffalo assistant GM Steve Greeley is there for another interview, and, apparently, there are others Dundon's spoken to. I think there's also been some contact with Montreal's Rick Dudley, but I'm not sure that's for the GM position.

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8. Word on the team is that Carolina feels it needs some edge — that they're too easy to play against. Jeff Skinner is one year away from unrestricted free agency, and they're going to test his value. You know who could be interested? The Los Angeles Kings.

9. The Hurricanes have asked Ron Francis to work from home. Business is brutal sometimes, but sad it ends this way between the organization and one of its greatest players.

10. Quietly, Edmonton locked down KHL goaltender Mikko Koskinen a little while ago. It is believed that the Islanders, who drafted Koskinen in 2009, were also looking. He had a 1.72 goals against average in 35 regular-season and playoff games this season. Word is he was asking for two years at \$2.5 million per, but no idea yet what the agreement is.

11. Another Canadian team that may dip into European free agency: Vancouver. The Canucks are looking at Par Lindholm, a 26-year-old

Swedish centre. Several NHL clubs were interested, but believe Vancouver has a good shot at him.

12. There are a few Russian free-agent defenders to keep an eye on at the upcoming World Championships: New Jersey is expected to sign 26-year-old Egor Yakovlev. Overseas reports link Arizona to Ilya Lyubushkin. I can't pin down the team, but it appears there is an agreement somewhere with Alexander Yezhin. And several clubs continue to chase Bogdan Kiselevich. He's 28. That's two years older than Yakovlev, four above Lyubushkin.

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Sportsnet.ca / Breaking down how the Winnipeg Jets matchup against the Nashville Predators

Andrew Berkshire April 26, 2018, 1:28 PM

Before the playoffs even began, fans around the hockey world were circling a potential second round matchup between Nashville and Winnipeg that everyone wanted to see. This series has been almost pre-destined since the mid-way point of the regular season.

This clash of titans provided us with some of the best games of the entire regular season and everyone is hoping the series lives up to that hype.

But aside from how entertaining it's bound to be, which team has the edge?

I like to look at the second half of the NHL season when comparing playoff teams. Not because the first half doesn't matter at all, it's just slightly less relevant to the way teams are currently playing. Since these teams have both already played a series, that's relevant information too, but we'll get to that later.

After the return of Ryan Ellis to the lineup, the Predators went on an absolute tear for the rest of the regular season, while the Jets remained as excellent in the second half as they were in the first.

The Predators were more effective at getting their scoring chances on net and attacking off the rush, while the Jets generated more pre-shot movement and more scoring chances overall. The Jets are specifically very good at generating chances by cycling the puck down low and finding one-timer options in the middle of the ice from either behind the net or behind the goal line from the corner, and by forechecking teams into making mistakes.

Defensively, the Predators were a little exposed by the Colorado Avalanche and showed a weakness in defending off the rush, but luckily for them, the Jets don't attack off the rush very often. The Predators' vaunted top-four on defence is quite good at breaking up cycles and evading forechecking forwards to initiate clean breakouts.

That will be something to watch in the Predators' end, to see if the Jets are able to establish their trademark meat grinder of a forecheck and extend offensive zone possessions off the cycle.

Livestream every single game of the 2018 Stanley Cup Playoffs—blackout free—plus the Toronto Blue Jays, key Raptors & NBA Playoffs matchups and the 100th Mastercard Memorial Cup, all in one subscription.

In the Jets' end of the ice, Nashville has excelled more than any other team in the league at generating second chance opportunities in close. This is likely because a larger than average percentage of their shots come from their defencemen, and the forwards all know where to go to get those rebound chances.

The Jets, meanwhile, allowed opponents to recover the third-fewest rebounds in their zone of any team in the league this year. It appears on paper that both these teams are strong at defending the other's biggest offensive strengths, which is really interesting.

Defensively, the Jets were better at keeping scoring chances and pre-shot movement down than the Predators were this season, which might give them the edge in this series. But goaltending is always a huge factor as well, and Pekka Rinne lead the league in save percentage – but the gap between he and Hellebuyc in high danger save percentage was .814 for Rinne, and .813 for Hellebuyc.

Another storyline heading into the series is that the Jets looked dominant in their entire series against the Minnesota Wild, while the Predators, until Game 6, were pretty soundly outplayed by an Avalanche team no one gave much of a chance.

The Predators will need to elevate their game to a degree we haven't seen in a while in order to match the Jets' intensity. Logically, based on the games between these teams we've already seen, that shouldn't be an issue, but if the Predators get too complacent and try to run all their offence through their defence like they did against the Avalanche, they'll be in trouble.

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Sportsnet.ca / Maple Leafs need more Frederik Andersen in playoffs next season

Damien Cox | April 26, 2018, 11:46 AM

That was a helluva season for the Toronto Maple Leafs, and any attempt to suggest otherwise is just foolish.

It was another step forward. More learning for their young players, including the advancement of Travis Dermott and Kasperii Kapanen to the big leagues, apparently for good. A record number of points and wins. A strong season by James van Riemsdyk in the last year of his contract. Another 30-goal campaign from Nazem Kadri. Good years offensively from Morgan Rielly and Jake Gardiner. A workhorse season from Freddie Andersen in net.

All in all, progress. From 30th to 14th to sixth overall. This remains a young team on the rise, and the disappointment of losing Game 7 to Boston on Wednesday night doesn't change that.

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But it does change a few things.

A loss is a loss and can't be dressed up like a victory. In seven games against Boston, it would be hard to say the Leafs played their strongest game for more than five or six periods. At least half the time, it seemed, they were under siege in their own end.

Things were revealed about the club, and the key for Lou Lamoriello and his group is to fit those revelations into the overall performance of individual players over the last two or three seasons. For example, it would be absurd to decide Gardiner must go now because he had a bad night on Wednesday. You don't dismiss all the good things he's done, the ways in which he has progressed.

Might he be traded? Sure, but not because the mob is screaming for his neck. Because that's what mobs do. Kadri's suspension hurt the team, and that will be evaluated within the context of his overall season. Cap considerations, meanwhile, will dictate the futures of JVR, Tyler Bozak and Leo Komarov outside of how they did or did not deliver against Boston. Komarov wasn't even in the lineup at the end.

The goaltending situation, meanwhile, is among the most complex, and what the Leafs do in this regard before next season will be interesting.

There was a great deal of foolish chatter about how Andersen should have been a candidate for the Hart or Vezina, but the truth is his numbers just don't get him into that upper echelon of netminders. He has had basically the same statistical regular season two years in a row,



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which essentially puts him into the upper half of goalies who play more than 50 games a season.

He's a very good, reliable regular season goalie, and on a very affordable ticket at \$5 million a season for three more seasons.

The bad news is he was lousy against Boston. You can't hide an .896 save percentage. Covering up for the mistakes of others is the very definition of his job, and he did it notably well in Games 5 and 6, and that's it. That's not even close to good enough. At 28 years old, he is in his prime, and based on the past two playoff seasons, he has defined himself as a very good goalie in the regular season who falls off a little or a lot in the post-season when the competition gets tougher.

For the Leafs to become more than a first round casualty, they are going to require better goaltending. The question is whether Andersen is the man to deliver it. Certainly, his play in this series suggests he isn't, but not to such a degree that it's reasonable to advocate that he needs to go elsewhere. He's established essentially what he is at this level, and while he might still have another level to his game, he also might not. The Leafs need to upgrade that position, and sitting around just hoping the Dane gets better seems like a very passive approach.

There's a few ways to achieve an upgrade.

One, they can elevate Garrett Sparks, the AHL's top goalie, and give him 30 games next season. Two, they could give this year's backup, Curtis McElhinney, more work next season, at least partially to give Andersen more rest. Or, they could go out, either through free agency or trade, and get another goalie to compete with Andersen.

The number of options here are too many to count. There are 16 teams who missed the playoffs who might want better goalkeeping next year, and now another eight clubs who lost in the first round that may be convinced they need better performances between the pipes.

But it seems logical that having allowed Andersen to play without meaningful internal competition the past two years, now's the time to find out whether having another goalie compete with him for minutes might motivate him and keep him more rested.

Again, this isn't only one element the improving Leafs need to evaluate. You can't say Andersen lost the series to the Bruins, but he sure didn't come close to winning it, either.

This is a hockey team that is going to improve as its young players mature, but also one that will have holes to fill because of the cap and will also want to find ways to get better, particularly defensively and with penalty killing. Of the eight remaining teams, five were better defensive teams than the Leafs this season.

Goaltending is a big part of that. Andersen certainly can't be exempt from the hard analysis that Toronto's front office will have to do over the next few months to get this team past the first round a year from now. Sure he stopped a lot of rubber this season. That's what he's paid to do. But it doesn't mean you don't examine all possible ways to give this team better goaltending when it matters most next season.

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Sportsnet.ca / Stanley Cup Playoffs Round 2 Primer: Trends to watch in each series

Dimitri Filipovic April 26, 2018, 12:03 PM

In the first round of these Stanley Cup Playoffs, things actually held relatively true to form. None of the biggest teams were upset, though

there was the unfortunate unravelling of a trendy sleeper pick in the Columbus Blue Jackets and two surprisingly abrupt exits in Southern California. Putting a bow on it all was the exhilarating Game 7 in Boston.

But all of that is ultimately an appetizer for what promises to be a delectable slate of second round matchups. Since the moment the brackets were locked in, the hockey world was eyeing the second round collision between the first and second seeds in each conference — and though this will lead to qualms about the playoff structure, once the puck drops that will be replaced by excitement and awe at the skill level.

We've also got the [insert comically large number] consecutive installment of Penguins versus Capitals, and a sneaky fun matchup in the Pacific that'll surely reward those willing to stay up late to tune in.

Let's set the table for it all by highlighting a notable matchup or two in each series that warrants extra attention.

1. Will the Golden Knights' speed play as well against a more evenly matched opponent?

While doing colour commentary for Vegas' first series, Ray Ferraro had a great line about how we typically tend to only think about team speed for offensive purposes, but how there's also a component of defensive utility to it.

We saw that idea in action when Vegas skated Los Angeles into submission. If there were any lingering doubts about how a stylistic matchup of speed versus size would play out in the post-season, we quickly got our answer with how decisively Vegas moved on.

Any time Los Angeles attempted to move the puck there was a Golden Knight ready to intercept and get moving the opposite direction. The speed they possess throughout their lineup was suffocating and disrupted any Los Angeles attack.

The final score lines in each game indicate it was a tight series, but that's a bit misleading. The Knights thoroughly outplayed and outskated the Kings throughout, and if not for Jonathan Quick's heroics in net things very easily could've escalated towards more lopsided totals.

The lopsidedness of the series really shows in the neutral zone. The Kings had a nightmarish time stringing together any series of passes exiting their own zone and were often forced to settle for meek dump outs off the glass, or bad passes up the middle that led to turnovers. When that happened, the Knights were quick to pounce and transitioned the puck back into the Kings' defensive zone to create chances off the rush.

There are so many examples to choose from, but here are two randomly selected ones. Both come off clean faceoff wins by the Kings in their own zone and led to similar results. The Kings defenceman goes back and aimlessly fires the puck out, only to have it relayed back into the zone immediately.

Exhibit A:

Exhibit B:

Those struggles were only augmented when Drew Doughty missed a game, Jake Muzzin missed two, and the Kings had to cobble together a patchwork defence group for a game that went on for nearly 100 minutes. The final totals weren't pretty:

Team	Exit Attempts	Possession Exit %	Failed Exit %
Knights	227	53.30	12.33
Kings	223	38.12	17.49

These numbers were compiled during five-on-five action and only account for transition attempts generated by the team's group of defencemen.

What that means is the Kings were only able to exit their zone with full possession of the puck 38.1 per cent of the time when one of their



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rearguards was leading the charge, while getting hemmed in 17.5 per cent of the time (whether it was due to an icing or a turnover).

Coming back the other way, here's how the two teams did when it came to protecting their own blue line against zone entries:

Team	Targets	Carry-In %	Dump-In %	Failed Entry %
Knights	148	48.65	38.51	12.84
Kings	156	55.13	35.90	8.97

This is where things get especially interesting looking ahead to Round 2. While Vegas was able to take full advantage of their speed and skill advantage against the Kings, they're going to have a much tougher go of replicating that success against the Sharks.

San Jose laid waste to the Ducks in the opening round and similarly feasted on a team that couldn't get out of its own way in the neutral zone.

Team	Exit Attempts	Possession Exit %	Failed Exit %
Sharks	150	56.00	12.67
Ducks	174	45.98	15.52

Team	Targets	Carry-In %	Dump-In %	Failed Entry %
Sharks	136	52.21	36.76	11.03
Ducks	113	63.72	30.09	6.19

The Sharks showed themselves to be particularly lethal on the rush, quickly counterattacking before the opponent could recover and get back into position. They benefit from the chaos that ensues in transition following a change in possession:

While they're certainly armed with an array of defencemen who can all move the puck effectively, there's no question Brent Burns is San Jose's most dangerous weapon. He has an uncanny ability to sit back and throw passes on target from his own blue line that pick apart an opposing defence before it can get set:

It looked like the Sharks and Golden Knights were playing an entirely different sport than their opponents in Round 1. While the opposition was trying to rough it up, these two neutralized them rather easily by moving the puck and leaving before the checkers were ever able to get there.

Neither team will have that luxury this time, as the Sharks and Golden Knights match up far more closely with each other. Both teams want to play the same way, and both do a lot of the same things well. If everything goes according to plan, it could make for one hell of a fast-paced, back-and-forth track meet.

2. Will the Jets be able to take advantage of the Predators' lack of discipline?

In projecting this series, it's awfully difficult to find any real areas of separation where the Jets or Predators could separate themselves from one another. In the regular season they were the number one and two teams in the league for a reason.

• They were both a league-high plus-57 in goal differential (when eliminating shootouts).

• If you slice the campaign down into just the final 25 games and look at shot share metrics as an indicator for playoff success they're both hovering around the elite 54 per cent mark.

• Both teams turned what was once considered to be an unavoidable weakness in net into a massive net positive, with Connor Hellebuyck and Pekka Rinne having been recently recognized as Vezina Trophy finalists.

• Both teams have bottom-six forward groups that can play and neither saddled with any anchors who need to be meticulously sheltered.

• The Jets have a slight advantage up front in terms of offensive weaponry, but if there's a team capable of combating their devastating 1-2 punch up front it's the Predators with their unmatched top two defence pairings.

In a series this tight, the outcome could really come down to on little thing here or there.

That could possibly come on special teams, where the Jets' lethal power play may be afforded a couple of extra opportunities to strike unless the Predators can fix one of the few areas they've struggled in all year.

Throughout the regular season Nashville was whistled for a league-high 4.48 penalties per hour of play in all situations, and 4.61 at five-on-five. The Jets power play, meanwhile, generated goals per hour at the fourth-highest rate in the league this year (behind just the Penguins, Leafs, and Lightning), and with all of the options it's blessed with it's easy to see why.

Just look at the bind they put Minnesota's penalty kill in during their first-round series. At first blush it seems like blown coverage to leave a player of Mark Scheifele's caliber this open from such a prime scoring location, but that's largely the byproduct of a Jets power play that makes you pick your poison.

The Predators walked a fine line throughout the regular season and in their first round matchup against the Avalanche when it came to discipline and taking penalties. They were able to get away with it largely because, on most nights, they were the superior and more skilled team than their opponents, which helped cover these flaws.

That wiggle room disappears in this series, though. If they're not able to tighten the screws and stay out of the box, that could provide Winnipeg with the slightest of openings, which is all it might take between two teams so tightly bunched together.

3. Will Braden Holtby's redemption story continue?

We're certainly not short on storylines to choose from in the Washington-Pittsburgh series. Evgeni Malkin's injury casts an ominous shadow as he's set to miss the opener; Crosby versus Ovechkin will always generate buzz; and the fact both teams were devastatingly effective on the power play in Round 1, converting on north of 30 per cent of their opportunities, all warrant extra attention.

Let's instead look at the battle in net. For the Capitals, Braden Holtby reclaimed his crease midway through the Blue Jackets series after Philipp Grubauer fumbled away his opportunity in the first two games. While Holtby was uncharacteristically pedestrian throughout the regular season – dropping below .920 in save percentage and starting fewer than 60 games for the first time since 2013-14 – the time off looks to have done him good.

He was tremendous in the third period and overtime of Game 5 and held the fort until they scored the winner. He was rock solid in Game 6 and shut the door on Columbus for good, helping withstand a late desperate flurry from a team that was on the ropes.

That's nothing new for Holtby in the playoffs. Despite the fact he's somehow only won two more games than he's lost in his playoff career, Holtby's been stupendously good at stopping pucks throughout. Here's every series he's appeared in since coming into the league, and how he's fared in each individual one:

Opponent	Season	Games	Save %
Bruins	2011-2012	7	0.940
Rangers	2011-2012	7	0.929
Rangers	2012-2013	7	0.922
Islanders	2014-2015	6	0.943
Rangers	2014-2015	7	0.945
Flyers	2015-2016	6	0.968



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Penguins	2015-2016	6	0.923
Leafs	2016-2017	6	0.925
Penguins	2016-2017	7	0.887
Blue Jackets	2017-2018	5	0.932

The one wart on the resume is last year's second round tilt against the Penguins, in which Marc-Andre Fleury outdueled him.

Which brings us to the other end of the ice, where Matt Murray is far from a guarantee heading into this series. After an injury-filled regular season, he showed flashes of being back to his old dominant ways in the opening round matchup against the Flyers. His two shutouts will get the most attention, but his best work came at the start of Game 3 when Philadelphia had nothing to show for blitzing Pittsburgh early on, allowing the Penguins' offence to take control of the game.

While it's true that the goaltending will decide almost any playoff series, it feels like there's an added layer of intrigue in this particular matchup. Considering the type of firepower both teams possess up front, it might ultimately come down to which one of the two can just hold up better than the other.

4. Will Jon Cooper be able to continue to free up his big guns offensively?

I thought one of the more interesting takeaways from a tactical Xs and Os perspective in the first round was how Jon Cooper went about attacking the New Jersey Devils. Or more specifically, how he went about attempting to corral their only real means of generating offence at five-on-five (which was through Taylor Hall's line).

In Games 1, 2, and 5, which were played in Tampa Bay when the Lightning had last change, rather than going power versus power Cooper instead opted to almost exclusively blanket Hall's line with the five-man combination of Brayden Point, Tyler Johnson, Ondrej Palat, Ryan McDonagh, and Anton Stralman.

Player 5v5 Ice Time vs. Taylor Hall

Ryan McDonagh	32:41
Brayden Point	30:26
Victor Hedman	10:26
Steven Stamkos	7:14

Tasked with important shutdown defensive duties, the Triplets Version 2.0 Line held up just fine. In the 30-plus minutes the two went head-to-head, Point and his group essentially played Hall to a draw in all shot metrics, while outscoring the Devils 4-1. It didn't wind up mattering because Stamkos and Kucherov did a lot of their damage offensively on the power play (and in Game 4 on the road), but having the luxury of freeing the two of them up to run wild offensively could be a useful card for Cooper to play against the Bruins.

Of course, that doesn't necessarily mean he will in Round 2. Boston is an entirely different animal than the Devils, and present a variety of different problems. First and foremost, with how well Bergeron, Pastrnak and Marchand are playing right now, it may not matter who you throw at them. Beyond that, with Jake DeBrusk's outburst against the Leafs and the other weapons the Bruins have up front, there's more to contend with than just the one line, as was the case with the Devils.

Regardless, with the first two games set to be played in Tampa Bay, it bears watching how Cooper and the Lightning move their chess pieces to squeeze the most juice out of their forward lines.

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Sportsnet.ca / Humboldt survivor has breakthrough as support continues to pour in

Eric Francis | April 26, 2018, 4:49 PM

In the midst of a charity hot stove event for his son's Humboldt Broncos on Wednesday night, Tom Straschnitzki left the room to answer his phone.

It was Ryan calling from his bed in the Foothills Hospital's spine unit with big news.

He moved his toes.

Hours earlier Ryan had been surrounded by a throng of journalists at his first press conference as the unofficial face of the Broncos, reiterating his goal of proving doctors who say he'll never walk again wrong.

Later in the evening, during a quiet visit with a friend, the 19-year-old defenceman with no feeling below his chest willed toes on both his feet to move ever so slightly.

Well aware his father would accuse him of a hoax, Ryan immediately sent over a video of the small but not insignificant triumph.

So buoyed by the news, Tom shared it with the emcee whose announcement elicited a loud, emotional roar and ovation from those gathered as they collectively turned their gaze to Ryan's mother, Michelle.

Unsure how to digest the revelation, she bowed her head with a smile, and wept.

"I don't want to get too ahead of myself and put thoughts in my head," said Ryan on Thursday morning in a room cluttered with gifts from an endless stream of visitors.

"I'll take it as a positive for now."

As Tom adds, as only a hockey dad would, "it's just another shift."

Lots more shifts ahead in a game of life horrifically altered 20 days ago when 16 of the 29 people on his team's bus died after it crashed into a crossing semi-trailer on a Saskatchewan highway on their way to a playoff game.

On Tuesday, the Nipawin Hawks team the Broncos were en route to play against won an emotional seven-game series over Estevan to clinch the Saskatchewan Junior Hockey League championship.

Meanwhile, the Broncos survivors continue a battle to overcome the emotional and physical scars from that sunny Friday afternoon when everything changed.

On Wednesday, teammate Graysen Cameron was discharged from Foothills Hospital, returning to his home in Olds, Alta., an hour north of Calgary.

"His spine was fused – he won't be able to do contact sports, but he can skate," said Ryan, an Airdre, Alta., native who takes great solace and inspiration from every one of his teammates' progress.

"We're all staying in touch. We're doing this together."

The nation feels similarly.

Canadians aren't finished wrapping their arms around Humboldt and want to continue supporting the survivors by relishing every bit of good news possible.

"We feel that," said Tom of the groundswell of support that's been offered up from around the world



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"Every single day we feel that. For our support group in Calgary and Airdrie, I don't think it will ever end. We hear every day, 'What do you need?'"

While their son was in intensive care in Saskatoon the first two weeks, strangers brought home-cooked meals into the waiting room and offered up endless hugs and love.

Cab drivers, pubs and restaurants refused to take their money as another generous show of support.

One of the most heart-warming moments came when an older couple approached Tom, Michelle and their three other children in the hospital cafeteria with a gift card for \$53 and a note that said, "This is all we could scrape together, but hope it can buy you a meal."

Essentially, \$53 at a time Canadians pieced together \$15 million in well-publicized GoFundMe contributions.

Best Buy officials walked into Ryan's room this week with a free Xbox gaming system and when they realized they couldn't hook it up to the room's TV, they brought him one to keep.

WestJet has flown Ryan's family to and from Saskatoon for free and Air Canada gave them 90 per cent off.

Neighbours are shuttling their other three kids around while Tom and Michelle are bedside with Ryan, returning home every night to meals provided by their network of friends.

"I've never eaten better – don't tell Michelle," joked Tom, who has kept up a tremendously positive attitude he clearly shares with his son.

"Our six-year-old wants to move in with the neighbours now because he says they're more fun."

Several home builders have offered to pay for the renovations needed to make their Airdrie home wheelchair accessible when Ryan comes home in July or August.

Good thing too, as Michelle was laid off by an energy company in November and Tom laid off by an oil and gas firm one week before the bus crash.

The road ahead will be long, and Ryan knows the spotlight will soon fade and the stream of visitors will subside.

"Without the attention I'll have a lot more time doing rehab and practicing moving my feet so it might get more challenging for sure," said Ryan.

"It could get tougher."

One of the toughest things he's had to deal with was not being able to attend any of the funerals of those he lost.

It prompted a tear on national TV he swore he wouldn't shed for fear it would look like he wasn't being strong for his teammates.

Connor McDavid, Justin Trudeau, Sheldon Kennedy, Jonathan Toews, Glen Gulutzan, Todd McLellan and Bret Hart are just a few of the high-profile visitors he had early on. On Wednesday, Brian Burke, Brad Treliving, T.J. Brodie and Mark Giordano dropped by with gifts that have made his room look like that of most teens.

"It's a mess," he laughed.

"There's no more room anywhere with all the jerseys and stuff. Amazing."

Sometime between his morning shower and daily physio, he planned on trying to move his toes again.

His mom refuses to get too excited about it, but understands baby steps are what will buoy everyone involved in the process.

"It's progress," she said.

"That's all we can ask for."

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Sportsnet.ca / Down Goes Brown: Golden Knights vs. all-time expansion rosters

Sean McIndoe | April 26, 2018, 11:01 AM

The Vegas Golden Knights are the greatest expansion team we've ever seen. That point isn't really up for debate anymore — by earning 109 points during the season and then sweeping their way to the second round of the playoffs, the Knights have already surpassed anything any other newcomer had ever accomplished. Forget the NHL — they're the best expansion story in pro-sports history.

So today, as the Knights prepare to open their second-round series against the Sharks, let's see how they stack up against the rest of the NHL's expansion teams. As in, all of them.

We're going to put this year's Golden Knights up against a roster made up of the best picks of all the other NHL expansion teams of the modern era combined. That's 25 teams, if you're keeping track, assembled through a dozen different drafts dating back to 1967.

First, a few ground rules. We'll count the four WHA teams from the convoluted 1979 process as part of our pool, but only the players who were part of the actual expansion draft, not the dispersal or reclamation portions — sorry, Wayne Gretzky and his personal-services contract can't suit up for our team. We're also looking at only the first year after the player was picked (since that's all we have to go on for the Knights), so players like Bernie Parent and Billy Smith that blossomed into stars years later won't help us. And we're only counting players who were chosen in the expansion draft, not any first-year draft picks or trade acquisitions.

That last bit gives the Knights a slight advantage, since they had the benefit of adding players like Reilly Smith and Shea Theodore from trades, but we'll allow it given they're otherwise outnumbered 25-to-1 here. The Knights may be the most successful expansion team ever, but surely the best of the rest of the league's history can unite to take them down.

Or can they? Let's figure it out.

Goaltenders

Starter: John Vanbiesbrouck (Panthers)

This one isn't an especially tough call. Vanbiesbrouck had already won a Vezina in New York, but with only one spot to protect a goalie and a younger Mike Richter on the roster the Rangers couldn't keep both. He was phenomenal in the Panthers' first season, finishing as a finalist for both the Hart and Vezina while leading the team to within a point of the playoffs.

Backups: Glenn Hall (Blues) and Guy Hebert (Ducks)

Goaltender is historically the deepest position for expansion teams to choose from, so there's no surprise that we have plenty of strong choices available. Heck, arguably the greatest goalie of all time was once exposed in the same expansion draft that saw Vanbiesbrouck and Hebert snapped up — but Dominik Hasek went unclaimed, one year before winning his first Vezina.

Still, we could have also gone with names like Terry Sawchuk, Doug Favell or Tomas Vokoun, among others. (But not Darren Puppa — he didn't join the Lightning until their second season.)



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The Knights: Marc-Andre Fleury's season rivals Vanbiesbrouck's as the best ever recorded by an expansion goaltender. But while the rest of the Knight's goalies filled in admirably early in the year when Fleury was hurt, they don't match up to Hall and Hebert.

Edge: The all-expansion squad wins on the basis of depth, although it's closer than it should be.

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Defencemen

First pair: Filip Kuba (Wild), Noel Picard (Blues)

Picard may be best known for his role in a very famous photograph, but he was a dependable defensive defenceman who gives us some veteran leadership. We'll pair him with Kuba, a well-rounded player who anchored the Wild's blue line in their early days.

Second pair: Brad Shaw (Senators), Bill Houlder (Mighty Ducks)

Houlder had scored a total of five goals in parts of six NHL seasons before arriving in Anaheim, where he exploded for a career-high 14 in year one. Shaw managed 41 points for a terrible Senators team and we're going to need some offence, so we'll overlook the fact that he was also a -47.

By the way, if you're a Sens fan wondering where Norm MacIver is, he wasn't actually an expansion pick; he came over later in the waiver draft. The "expansion-picks only" rule also costs us players like Doug Wilson (trade), Mark Howe (protected WHA spot) and Dale Tallon (draft pick).

Third pair: Leo Boivin (Penguins), Shawn Chambers (Lightning)

Our all-expansion blue line is basically a mess — once you get past the first few picks, you're down to dozens of similar journeymen types. If you want to swap in someone like Lyle Odelein, Gordie Roberts, Yannick Tremblay, Rob Ramage or Gord Murphy, be our guest. We'll go with Boivin, since he at least lets us claim our team has a Hall of Famer on defence, and Chambers, since we still feel sorry for him over the whole NHLPA '93 thing.

The Knights: They got 41 points from Colin Miller, well-rounded play from Nate Schmidt and (eventually) Shea Theodore, tough minutes from Brayden McNabb and veteran presence from Deryk Engelland. The team loaded up on defencemen at the expansion draft, and while the whole "hold the rest of the league for ransom on the trade market" strategy never really panned out, it resulted in a dependable-if-not-spectacular unit, especially once Theodore was called up.

Edge: I think we have to call it even. That seems crazy — again, this is one team against 25 — but there's a good case to be made that Schmidt and Theodore are the two best expansion-draft blue line picks ever, and the Knights have them both.

In related news, man the NHL made it tough to find defencemen in those old expansion drafts. Sorry, everyone. They say you can't put a price on a serviceable blue line, but in the NHL's eyes apparently it's \$500 million.

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Forwards

First line: Brian Bradley (Lightning), Scott Mellanby (Panthers), Geoff Sanderson (Blue Jackets)

Bradley is the big star here; his 42-goal season was the standard for out-of-nowhere expansion success stories until the Knights came along. Sanderson managed 30 goals for the Blue Jackets, while Mellanby chipped in 30 of his own and gives us a solid power forward.

Second line: Phil Goyette (Sabres), Wayne Maki (Canucks), Bobby Leiter (Flames)

We're cheating just a little bit here, since both Leiter and Goyette were centres, but you do what you have to do. This trio gives us a second line made up entirely of 60-point players, which is pretty solid. Granted, this was 60 points in the early '70s, but we'll still take it.

Third line: Eddie Joyal (Kings), Andy Bathgate (Penguins), Wayne Connelly (North Stars)

Again, our picks-only rule costs us a few solid players here, including 50-point campaigns from Atlanta's Andrew Brunette and Columbus's Espen Knutsen and a whole bunch of WHA guys who weren't actually part of the main expansion draft, including big seasons from Blaine Stoughton, Mike Rogers and Real Cloutier.

So instead, we wind up with three reasonably good picks from the original 1967 expansion class. Bathgate even gives us a Hall of Famer, although he was in his 16th and (and next-to-last) season by the time he arrived in Pittsburgh.

Fourth line: Simon Nolet (Scouts), Sylvain Turgeon (Senators), Terry Yake (Ducks)

Our fourth line consists of a guy whose team lasted two years, a guy whose younger brother was way better, and a guy whose name was mispronounced "teriyaki" by new fans. Let's just say they won't see a ton of ice time.

As far as depth goes, we'll try to find roster spots for Bobby Hull (to sell a few jerseys) and Gary Dornhoefer, just in case any Knights start running around. We'll also grab Chris Kontos, but only dress him for the first game.

The Knights: William Karlsson's season supplants Bradley as the best by any expansion forward ever, and with Jonathan Audy-Marchessault's 70 points in tow that gives the Knights the advantage as far as top lines go. James Neal and Erik Hauula make the second line close to a draw while David Perron's 66 points outscores anyone on the other third line. Our all-expansion squad makes up some ground based on depth, but not as much as it seems once you start adjusting the numbers for era.

Edge: I really think Vegas might take this one.

And the winner is: It's almost too close to call. The all-expansion squad has a slight edge in goal and maybe on the blue line, if you're feeling generous. They'd also be able to roll four lines better than the Knights could. But Vegas keeps it awfully close in goal and on defence, and the top line is more dangerous than anything the all-expansion roster can throw at them.

In a seven-game series, I think this one goes the distance. I was going to give a slight edge to the all-expansion team because they'd have a young Scotty Bowman as coach, but he spent the first few games in St. Louis as an assistant so I'm not sure he counts. Factor in team cohesion, intangibles and the best expansion crowd ever, and there's a really good case to be made that the Knights win this thing.

Think about how ridiculous that is — the Vegas Golden Knights' first season could stand toe-to-toe with the very best of every other NHL expansion team. We all know that the draft rules were tilted in the Knights' favour more than previous expansion teams, most of whom were left to pick through scraps. But still, we just threw 25 teams and 50 years' worth of history at Vegas. And it wasn't enough.

Well, at least until Seattle shows up to give them a run for their money. Let's just pencil that matchup in for the 2021 Western Conference final so we can figure it out for real.

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NEWS CLIPPINGS • April 27, 2018

TSN.CA / Statistically Speaking: Golden Knights send a message

Scott Cullen

Vegas slams the Sharks in Game One and Pittsburgh rallies to stun Washington; Marchessault, Guentzel, Fleury and more in Scott Cullen's Statistically Speaking.

HEROES

Jonathan Marchessault, William Karlsson and Reilly Smith – The members of Vegas' top line each produced three points in their 7-0 Game One rout of San Jose. Marchessault had a goal and two assists, giving him five points (1 G, 4 A) in five playoff games.

Karlsson and Smith both added three assists in Game One. Karlsson has five points (1 G, 4 A) and Smith has six assists in the playoffs.

Jake Guentzel, Sidney Crosby and Patric Hornqvist – Down 2-0 going into the third period of Game One at Washington, Pittsburgh's top line scored three goals to earn a 3-2 victory. Guentzel put up a goal and two helpers, and is the leading scorer in the playoffs with 16 points (7 G, 9 A) in seven games.

Crosby and Hornqvist both had a goal and an assist in Game One. Crosby has 15 points (7 G, 8 A) in seven games, while Hornqvist has eight points (3 G, 5 A) in five games.

Marc-Andre Fleury – Vegas' netminder stopped all 33 shots that he faced in a 7-0 Game One win against San Jose. He's stopped 160 of 163 shots (.982 SV%) in five playoff starts.

ZEROES

Carter Rowney – Pittsburgh's checking centre was locked in his own end (0 for, 14 against, 0.0 CF%, 0-6 scoring chances) in a 3-2 Game One win at Washington.

Brent Burns – San Jose's star blueliner was on the wrong side of the puck (8 for, 15 against, 34.8 CF%) and on the ice for a couple of 5-on-5 goals against in a 7-0 Game One loss at Vegas.

Martin Jones – After a stellar first round, when he stopped 97% of the shots by the Anaheim Ducks, the Sharks goaltender allowed five goals on 13 shots before getting pulled in a 7-0 Game One loss at Vegas.

STANLEY CUP HALF FULL/HALF EMPTY

Alex Ovechkin – Washington's superstar winger set up a goal and scored a goal to help the Capitals to a 2-0 lead, but was also on the ice for the next three goals against in a 3-2 Game One loss against Pittsburgh.

YOUR CAPTAIN, NUMBER 87, SIDNEYYYYYY CROSBYYYYY!
pic.twitter.com/tQKChLfb4b

— Pittsburgh Penguins (@penguins) April 27, 2018

VITAL SIGNS

Evgeni Malkin – The Penguins centre was out of the lineup for Game One against Washington, still suffering from a lower-body injury suffered in the first round against Philadelphia.

Carl Hagelin – The speedy Penguins winger didn't play Game One at Washington due to an upper-body injury.

SHORT SHIFTS

Golden Knights C Erik Haula, RW James Neal and RW Alex Tuch each had a goal and an assist in a 7-0 Game One win over San Jose. Haula has three points (1 G, 2 A), Neal has four points (2 G, 2 A), and Tuch has four points (2 G, 2 A) in five playoff games...Golden Knights LW David

Perron added a pair of assists, giving him three assists in three playoff games...Capitals RW Tom Wilson earned a couple of assists in a 3-2 Game One loss against Pittsburgh; he has five points (2 G, 3 A) in seven playoff games...Golden Knights D Colin Miller scored a goal and had stellar possession stats (16 for, 3 against, 84.2 CF%, 7-2 scoring chances) against San Jose...Penguins G Matt Murray stopped 32 of 34 shots, including all 18 shots that he faced in the third period, in a 3-2 Game One win at Washington. He has a .917 save percentage in seven playoff starts.

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TSN.CA / Statistically Speaking: Bruins rally to eliminate Leafs

Scott Cullen

Boston rallied against Toronto, with veterans and rookies stepping up when it was needed most. Bergeron, Krejci, DeBrusk, Marleau and more in Scott Cullen's Statistically Speaking.

HEROES

Patrice Bergeron – Boston's star centre put up a goal and two helpers in a 7-4 Game Seven win over the Maple Leafs. He finished the series with eight points (1 G, 7 A) and dominant possession numbers (64.9 CF%) in six games.

Jake DeBrusk – The Bruins rookie scored a pair of goals, including the game winner, in a 7-4 Game Seven win against Toronto. He was outstanding in his first NHL playoff series, producing seven points (5 G, 2 A) in seven games.

David Krejci – Boston's veteran playmaking pivot earned three assists in Game Seven vs. Toronto, giving him eight points (2 G, 6 A) in the series.

Patrick Marleau – Toronto's veteran left winger buried a pair of first period goals during a 7-4 Game Seven loss at Boston. He finished the series with five points (4 G, 1 A) in seven games.

ZEROES

Jake Gardiner – Toronto's veteran blueliner had a night to forget (if that's possible) in Game Seven at Boston. He was on the ice for five goals against at even strength in a 7-4 loss.

Tomas Plekanec – It wasn't an ideal night for Toronto's veteran checking centre, as he was on the wrong side of the puck (4 for, 13 against, 23.5 CF%) in a 7-4 loss at Boston.

Frederik Andersen – Toronto's netminder surrendered six goals on 35 shots in a 7-4 Game Seven loss at Boston. He had some strong games, notably in games five and six of the series, but ended the series with a .896 save percentage in seven games.

STANLEY CUP HALF FULL/HALF EMPTY

Tuukka Rask – He certainly wasn't at his best and it looked like he could have been pulled when the Bruins fell behind after two periods of play, but even with just 20 saves on 24 shots, Rask emerged as the victorious goaltender in Game Seven.

SHORT SHIFTS

Bruins RW David Pastrnak and LW Brad Marchand both contributed a goal and an assist in the third period of a 7-4 Game Seven win against Toronto. Pastrnak has moved back into a tie for the playoff scoring lead, with Pittsburgh's Sidney Crosby and Jake Guentzel, having put up 13 points (5 G, 8 A) in seven games against Toronto. Marchand had nine



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points (3 G, 6 A) in the series...Maple Leafs RW William Nylander produced a pair of assists in a 7-4 Game Seven loss at Boston and ended the series with four points (1 G, 3 A)...Bruins D Kevan Miller added a couple of assists, giving him four points (1 G, 3 A) in the series.

MAPLE LEAFS FALL

Auston Matthews scored one goal on 27 shots against the Bruins.

No matter which team lost Game Seven between Boston and Toronto, there was bound to be profound disappointment because both teams had impressive regular seasons, the type that could only be soured by losing in the first round of the playoffs.

Start in net, where Frederik Andersen finished the series with a .896 save percentage, and yet he was instrumental in Toronto's three wins, saving 114 of 120 shots that he faced (.950 SV%) in the three games that Toronto won. Of course that means it wasn't so good in the losses, and Andersen struggled (posting a .832 SV%) in those four games. It would have been nice for Andersen to perform better, but the Maple Leafs wouldn't have even been in a Game Seven if not for Andersen's play in Games Five and Six.

On defence, Jake Gardiner obviously had a brutal night in Game Seven but, through the first six games, the Leafs were controlling play with him on the ice and that was relatively rare. The defence pairing of Morgan Rielly and Ron Hainsey was stuck in its own end (37.3 CF%) far too often. Rookie Travis Dermott didn't have the trust of the coaching staff, at least in terms of playing time, yet finished the series with the best shot differentials (56.2 CF%) on the team. Roman Polak, who can be a polarizing figure, had okay possession stats (49.5 CF%) and the Leafs outscored the Bruins 5-3 with Polak on the ice in 5-on-5 situations.

Up front, the most glaring poor performance comes from the franchise player. Auston Matthews managed a goal and an assist in seven games, and was outscored 8-4 during 5-on-5 play. At the same time, he's 20-years-old, had solid possession stats (50.7 CF%) and had a team-leading 27 shots on goal. Toronto's fate may have been better had Nazem Kadri not been suspended for three games in the series, and Kadri struggled at times (44.2 CF%, 28.6 SCF%) when he did play.

On the plus side, Mitch Marner was outstanding in the series, recording nine points (2 G, 7 A) as he was Toronto's most consistent offensive threat. With his pair of goals in Game Seven, Patrick Marleau led the club with four goals in the series.

This loss will be painful for the Maple Leafs, not least of all because they had the lead going into the third period of Game Seven, but they lost to a better team. As much as Toronto has improved and appears to be a team capable of contending, they are currently the third-best team in their division, behind Tampa Bay and Boston, so they have some major work to do if they are going to get beyond a difficult first-round matchup.

The Maple Leafs are faced with the prospect of losing quite a few players as free agents in the summer, but it's also going to present an opportunity for Toronto to make some significant changes, and that may be necessary if they are going to enter next season with expectations that they can overtake Boston and Tampa Bay.

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TSN.CA / Takeaway: Canucks spent too much time playing catch-up

Jeff Paterson

In each of the five days leading up to the 2018 National Hockey League Draft Lottery, Jeff Paterson will present a different takeaway from the Vancouver Canucks season. He will examine areas of concern that led the Canucks to a 27th-place finish in the overall standings giving them a 7.5% chance of landing the first overall pick at this year's draft in Dallas.

When it came to team shooting percentage for the 2017-18 season, the Vancouver Canucks struggled. When the target was their own foot, however, the Canucks always seemed to hit their mark. As you know by now there were many flaws in the Canucks game this past season, but one of the biggest issues was regularly and repeatedly falling behind in hockey games. The Canucks simply weren't talented enough to spot opponents a goal (or two, or three) and think they'd be able to rally. Falling behind early in hockey games was of particular concern and it became well documented as the Canucks surrendered the opening goal of the game in the first five minutes on 24 occasions.

It happened on opening night at home against Edmonton and it happened in the final home game of the season against Arizona. So it was an issue early in the season and it never really got much better. The early goals were glaring because it put the Canucks in a hole not long after the opening faceoff and often set the tone for the night to come.

But the issue went far beyond the early ones that got past Canuck netminders. In 49 of their 82 games this past season, the Canucks fell behind their opponents. In those games, they posted a record of 14-30-5 earning just 33 of the 98 points available to them (that's .336 hockey). In the 33 games the Canucks managed to open the scoring, they went 17-10-6 and collected 40 of a possible 66 points (.606 hockey). Life's easier with a lead. Just look at the opening round of the playoffs where the team that opened the scoring won 29 of the 44 games played.

That's why Travis Green and his coaching staff have to figure out why the Canucks fell behind as often as they did. Players claimed preparation was never an issue and felt they were ready for opponents from the drop of the puck. The numbers tell a different story, however. Along with the New York Rangers and New York Islanders, the Canucks surrendered the most first-period goals in the NHL this past season. As such, they were outscored 87-64 in the opening 20 minutes of hockey games.

Clearly, the Canucks could have used a few more early stops along the way to allow them to settle into games. Six times their opponents opened the scoring in the first minute of play. That's hardly ideal. But it's unfair to pin all of this at the feet of the goaltenders. At some point, the scorers have to step up and provide the netminders with a lead to work with.

Opening the scoring puts pressure on the other team and forces them to make adjustments and perhaps take chances they otherwise would not. It also places a premium on the next goal and presents the opportunity to take a commanding 2-0 lead, a position the Canucks took advantage of only 11 of the 33 times they opened the scoring. That's not exactly kicking opponents when they're down.

The Canucks can say they're ready to go from the drop of the puck, but they need to prove it. The hope has to be that off-season changes will lead to a team more capable of controlling the puck and dictating the play more than this past season. It had to be demoralizing to look at the scoreboard nearly 50 times and see the opponent with the game's first goal. Eight times, the Canucks were shut out this past season so on those occasions that first goal was the winner. In 16 games they managed just one goal and on 17 others they put just two past opposing netminders. You get the idea. As a low-scoring team, it was a monumental ask to overcome deficits which made getting a lead that much more important.

Heading to next season, the Canucks have plenty of areas to work on in their game. From here, it seems better starts would be a good place to start.

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TSN.CA / Takeaway: Where can Travis Green improve as a 2nd year head coach?

Jeff Paterson

In each of the five days leading up to the 2018 National Hockey League Draft Lottery, Jeff Paterson will present a different takeaway from the Vancouver Canucks season. He will examine areas of concern that led the Canucks to a 27th place finish in the overall standings giving them a 7.5% chance of landing the first overall pick at this year's draft in Dallas.

It was understandable why, on so many nights this past season, Travis Green felt the need to scramble his line combinations. Whether because of injuries or inconsistency, the Vancouver Canucks head coach had a line-up which left him searching for an offensive spark. Outside of Brock Boeser, when the rookie was healthy, Green had few players he could rely on to score with any regularity. So it was hard to blame the first year bench boss for moving forwards around from game to game and quite often within games, too.

As the year progressed, Green found himself, as many coaches in today's game do, opting to seek chemistry in pairs. He kept Bo Horvat and Brock Boeser together for the most part, utilized Henrik and Daniel Sedin as a duo and primarily played Brandon Sutter with Markus Granlund until the Finn was injured in early February and then Darren Archibald slid into that spot.

That took care of six forwards on most nights, but it left the six others in the line-up wondering where they slotted in and how they would be used. And for some there really never was an answer. Jake Virtanen split his time between the top and bottom six. Sven Baertschi spent much of the season on the left wing with Horvat and Boeser, but also found himself shuffled into more of a defensive role at times before being a healthy scratch on February 15th in San Jose. Sam Gagner started the year on the wing, moved to the middle when injuries struck and then finished the season on the wing with the Sedins. Loui Eriksson has struggled under two coaches now to find a way to bring out the best in his game in large part because he hasn't found a consistent spot in the line-up. Even Thomas Vanek often wondered aloud about his ice time and usage during his time with the Canucks before moving on to Columbus.

With the Sedins riding off into the sunset, the Canucks are entering a period of transition. While the twins didn't play or produce as much as they once did, they still remained constants in the line-up, finished second and third in team scoring and were fixtures on the power-play. Travis Green has his work cut out for him figuring out how best to utilize the component parts left behind to help the Canucks improve after finishing 26th overall in offence with 218 goals. To make the challenge greater, Green's team finished 29th in 5-on-5 offence where the Canucks scored 138 of their goals.

A healthy Brock Boeser has shown an ability to score at an elite level and the hope has to be that he'll pick up where he left off before his season was cut short with a back injury on March 5th. The Canucks also have to find a way to inject Elias Pettersson into their line-up coming off the remarkable season he had in the Swedish Elite League.

But without the Sedins, getting anywhere close to the 53 goals the Canucks scored on the power play will be a monumental struggle. That, in turn, will put more pressure on the team to score at even-strength. And that brings the conversation back to the ways Green, as a coach, can optimize his line-up and put each of his players in the best position to succeed.

Green claims to have a keen interest in analytics and it will be fascinating to see how much he turns to the data collected in his first year on the job to discern which forward combos worked best and which ones didn't. The

same goes for his defensive pairings. Will he use the numbers to make line-up decisions for next season?

Without much depth up the middle, will Green continue to lean on Brandon Sutter as much as he did as a rookie head coach or can he scale back Sutter's even-strength ice-time? As long as the coach sees Sutter as a shutdown centre it's likely his ice-time will reflect that of the opposition's top players. From there, it's a legitimate concern to wonder if the Canucks can succeed with such little production from one of their ice-time leaders. Outside of Horvat, Boeser and Sutter, it's hard to know heading into next season how so many of the Canucks forwards will be utilized.

Can Green find roles for both Gagner and Eriksson that will allow them to be more productive than they've been in their time with the Canucks? No one is expecting them to carry the team offensively but neither has come close to the type of offensive output they displayed that earned them significant free agent contracts in Vancouver. That's a project this coach has to meet head on both at evens and on the power play.

From there, the coach has to figure out where the likes of Jake Virtanen, Sven Baertschi, Markus Granlund, Brendan Leipsic, Nikolay Goldobin, Tyler Motte, Darren Archibald and a few others fit into the puzzle allowing the Canucks to ice a balanced line-up capable of producing more and playing at the pace necessary to succeed in today's NHL.

Players in the league have to be versatile enough to respond to roster volatility and find ways to produce in various situations and with a variety of linemates. But there is also something to be said for stability and chemistry and keeping lines intact when possible and putting players in positions to succeed.

Travis Green used much of this first season to experiment in his quest to find what he repeatedly called 'players he can win with.' We should have a much better view at training camp which players the coach believes in and from there it'll be interesting to see how he uses them. Another season of putting names in a blender isn't likely to produce the best outcomes for the Canucks.

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TSN.CA / Takeaway: Find a way to beat divisional opponents

Jeff Paterson

In each of the five days leading up to the 2018 National Hockey League Draft Lottery, Jeff Paterson will present a different takeaway from the Vancouver Canucks season. He will examine areas of concern that led the Canucks to a 27th place finish in the overall standings giving them a 7.5% chance of landing the first overall pick at this year's draft in Dallas.

It sounds simple, yet was remarkably difficult for the Vancouver Canucks in 2017-18.

If the Canucks want to return to the post-season sooner rather than later, they simply have no choice but to muscle their way into the win column in more divisional games than they did this season. Under the current playoff format, three post-season berths are reserved for the top three finishers in each division. The best way to ensure you gobble up more points than the teams you're competing with for those divisional spots is to win your share of head to head match-ups.

Among the many amazing accomplishments of the first-year Vegas Golden Knights was their sterling 20-6-3 record against Pacific Division foes. That included feasting on the Canucks with wins in all four meetings. No other team in the league won more than 18-games within



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their division this season. The Canucks? Well, they won just nine. They went 9-17-3 in divisional contests this past season – that's nine wins in 29 games against the teams they're supposedly battling for playoff spots. Further to that, just seven of those wins were in regulation time which means that in 22 of 29 games, divisional foes took at least a point off the Canucks.

At home, the Canucks managed just four regulation wins against Pacific opponents: two against Edmonton and one each versus Los Angeles and Anaheim. They did not beat Vegas or Calgary on home ice this season and recorded overtime wins against San Jose and Arizona. Far too often, divisional opponents walked into Rogers Arena and left with parting gifts. On the road, the Canucks were worse winning just three of 14 divisional contests as visitors.

To put the Canucks division struggles in context, Detroit was the only team in the league to win fewer games within its division. The Wings won eight times while Vancouver and Chicago won nine apiece. It's one of the main reasons all three of those teams will be clutching their lucky charms on Saturday hoping to strike it rich in the draft lottery while the playoffs go on without them.

Now, it stands to reason that a poor team is going to struggle against good teams more often than not. So the record within the division is a by-product of bigger issues facing the Canucks. But when you look around the Pacific, the division is hardly a powerhouse within the National Hockey League. In the next few seasons, an opportunity to push into the Pacific Division playoff picture shouldn't be entirely out of the question.

Vegas appears to be set up to have sustained success – perhaps not at the level it achieved in its inaugural season, but there shouldn't be any sort of precipitous drop-off any time soon given the construct of the team, the age of its key players and the benefit of multiple top draft picks to stock its ranks. San Jose has retooled reasonably well and gives the appearance of a franchise that is well-positioned as a playoff contender for the foreseeable future.

But after complete collapses in the opening round, both Anaheim and Los Angeles look like teams that have plenty of heavy lifting ahead of them and could well come back to the pack in the years ahead. Calgary and Edmonton had difficult seasons and still have challenges to round out rosters stocked with top-end talent. Although Arizona gained some traction in the second half of the season, the Coyotes seem like they are caught in a perpetual rut with no indication they will break the cycle any time soon, despite icing a line-up filled with promising young players. And it won't be long before Seattle joins the mix adding another team the Canucks will have to climb over in the push for a playoff spot.

As the balance of power shifts to other divisions, the Canucks have to look at their nearest geographic rivals as one of their fastest paths back to the post-season. Finding a way to beat those teams you play the most provides the quickest opportunity to climb the standings. All games are worth two points, but regulation wins against Pacific Division opponents are the proverbial four pointers and a springboard in the race to the playoffs.

The Canucks have to say 'enough is enough' and stand up for themselves. Getting steam-rolled by division rivals simply won't cut it any longer.

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TSN.CA / Takeaway: A case for overhauling the Canucks defence

Jeff Paterson

Already in the 2018 Stanley Cup Playoffs, 28 defencemen have scored at least one goal. It's a fair question to wonder if the Vancouver Canucks were part of the post-season picture would that total be any different? Logic would suggest that if the Canucks were in the playoffs, they'd be a much better team and likely would have addressed one of their most-glaring weaknesses: offensive contributions from their defence.

Head coach Travis Green made it abundantly clear at his year end media availability two weeks ago that increased offence from the blue-line is one of his priorities for the Canucks next season. However, saying it is one thing. Making it happen is something altogether different. Last season, the Canucks defence scored 21 goals and added 101 assists. The goal total was down by one from the previous season, but the overall point production was up by 11.

Alex Edler led all Canucks defencemen with 34 points while he and Michael Del Zotto shared the goal-scoring lead with a modest six goals apiece. As a group, the Canucks blue-line managed just eight road goals all season, or one every 10 games. It's not enough and it hasn't been for some time now.

When you examine the defencemen on the roster and try to figure out who has more to give offensively, one name stands out above the others: Ben Hutton. Coming off a highly disappointing no goal, six assist campaign, Hutton's point totals have dropped from 25 as a rookie to 19 a year ago to six this past season. But in order to produce, Hutton has to be in the line-up and his struggles in that regard and his battle to earn the trust of the head coach are well documented.

Based on a healthy line-up, Hutton likely projects as the seventh defenceman to start next season with Edler, Del Zotto and Derrick Pouliot ahead of him on the left side and Chris Tanev, Erik Gudbranson and Troy Stecher on the right side.

But coming back with the same players and simply hoping for a notable uptick in offensive production seems like a bad gamble. The right side of the defence as constructed offers next to no offence and very little hope of any kind of spike in production.

Obviously, the Canucks would address many of their needs if they win the Rasmus Dahlin sweepstakes on Saturday. But based on past lotteries, they should probably have a solid Plan B in place. And unless they are picking second or third overall, it seems almost certain that the Canucks will come out of this year's draft with one of the many available top tier defensive prospects. However, it's unlikely any of that next group of defencemen taken after Dahlin will step into an NHL line-up in the fall.

That's where the idea of chasing Washington's John Carlson as an unrestricted free agent makes perfect sense for the Canucks. A 28-year-old right-hander who led all NHL defencemen in scoring with 15 goals and 68 points this season, including four power play goals and 32 power-play points, would seemingly fit the bill on many levels. However, there is no guarantee Carlson makes it to the open market, nor is there any indication that he would have interest in the Canucks. Carlson is going to get paid regardless where he goes so it's not as simple as throwing a ridiculous sum of money at him. The Canucks will have to pitch him on the city, the role he'd play here and the opportunity he'd have to run a power play with the likes of Brock Boeser and Elias Pettersson. And there's still a strong chance none of that would get the deal done.

So that's where the Canucks need to get creative this off-season and look at transforming their defence via the trade route. While the organization may have missed the window for maximizing the return on a Chris Tanev deal, they still have to explore that idea. There is still significant value in the oft-injured blue-liner and these playoffs have shown there are teams that could certainly use his services. But it can't stop at just moving Tanev.

Taking one piece, that only played half the games last season, out of the equation won't solve the Canucks issues on defence. While they'd be selling low on Hutton, they should explore that avenue, too, if the coach won't play him. And perhaps the team should even look to move on from Erik Gudbranson although that seems unlikely after Jim Benning traded



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for the big blue-liner two summers ago and then reaffirmed that commitment to him with a new three-year/\$12 million dollar extension in February.

What the Canucks have assembled as a defensive group isn't working for them. As a team, the Canucks finished 26th in the league defensively averaging 3.16 goals against per game while yielding 32.2 shots against per game. And as a group the offensive issues are clear for all to see.

Returning the same collection of defencemen next season simply cannot be an option for a team claiming it wants to see a marked improvement in that area. More of the same will simply lead to more of the same, and it's hard to imagine anyone has an appetite for that.

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TSN.CA / An analytical preview of the second round of the NHL playoffs

Travis Yost

After Wednesday's Game 7 finale between the Toronto Maple Leafs and Boston Bruins, we've arrived at our elite eight in the NHL playoffs.

On paper this looks like one of the best second rounds we've seen in quite some time. Every team left in the postseason accumulated 100 or more points during the regular season, which should produce some fantastic matchups.

Like we did with the first round, we'll walk through the key performance and statistical measures, with some context around what each series could look like.

We will start in the Eastern Conference, where the Boston Bruins will take on the Tampa Bay Lightning.

No team was more tested in the first round than the Bruins. That's not surprising – Toronto finished seventh in the NHL in points and had the type of offensive firepower to make any team feel uncomfortable.

One of the key takeaways from Boston's opening-round series is that for all of their improved depth year-over-year, they still struggle from time to time when the Patrice Bergeron line (winged by David Pastrnak and Brad Marchand) is taking a breather. Bergeron's line absolutely crushed Toronto and probably grades as the most deadly trio in the NHL today, but even with such a ridiculous weapon the Bruins were still 20 minutes away from being eliminated.

For some context, the Bruins had a 50 per cent Corsi% and Scoring Chance%, and 46 per cent of the Goal% share in the head-to-head series with Toronto. That might be fine against some of the lesser teams around the league, but when you play deep groups like Toronto or Tampa Bay you can get into trouble quickly.

It doesn't help that Tuukka Rask isn't playing well right now – it's impressively rare in the modern era for a team to advance with a goaltender stopping less than 90 per cent of the shots he faced in a series. Or that Boston will have zero additional days rest – Tampa Bay, on the other hand, has been done since Saturday. Don't forget that Tampa Bay will also have home-ice advantage in the series. If Game 7 is needed, it will be played at Amalie Arena. Home teams in Game 7s often win. (Just ask Boston!)

Meanwhile, no team in the NHL has figured out how to slow Tampa Bay's offence. Their 3.5 goals per game during the regular season was comfortably tops in the league, and that number only increased during their gentleman's sweep of New Jersey in Round 1. Nikita Kucherov (five

goals, five assists in five games) also appears to be out of his mini-slump.

This, kind of like the Nashville/Winnipeg series out West, has the feel of a Stanley Cup-calibre series. But Boston didn't do themselves any favours with how Round 1 played out, and outside of their elite top-line, I'm not sure what advantages they hold in this series.

Prediction: Tampa Bay in six.

Our other Eastern Conference series features the Pittsburgh Penguins and Washington Capitals.

Of the teams I was most impressed with in the first round, Washington is certainly up there. Yes, their series against Columbus was very close – so close that four of their six games had to be resolved by way of overtime. But Columbus was a brutal first-round draw. For all of Columbus' flaws, they still entered that series as an elite 5-on-5 team with the type of weaponry and goaltending needed to throw a wrench in Washington's plans.

One thing that shouldn't go unnoticed from that series is that goaltender Braden Holtby really bailed the Capitals out of trouble. Holtby, curiously benched in favour of Philipp Grubauer, ended up stopping 93.2 per cent of shots and winning four of the five games he started. Add that to the more predictable mathematical developments – like Alexander Ovechkin scoring five goals in six games – and you have a real recipe for success.

The issue here though is that Washington is running into another buzz saw. Pittsburgh's offence looked completely unstoppable against Philadelphia. The Flyers averaged about 2.9 goals against per game on a 90.4 save percentage during the regular season. In the five games against the Penguins, the Flyers gave up 4.7 goals against per game on an 84.8 save percentage. And that was across three different goaltenders between Michal Neuvirth, Petr Mrazek, and Brian Elliott.

I'm not sure there's any sort of recipe for slowing Pittsburgh down offensively right now. You know guys like Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin are going to get theirs, but when their secondary guys – like Jake Guentzel, who picked up 13 points in six games – get going, it's like trying to defend a runaway train. And it's not even like Pittsburgh is just shooting the puck well right now. As you can note in the table above, they'll likely have a decisive territorial advantage in the head-to-head series with Washington – they were smoking teams down the stretch of the regular season and earned 54 per cent of the shots in the opener against Philadelphia.

The way I see it, Washington has two ways through this series. The first is obvious: Holtby needs to outplay Matt Murray, and probably by a considerable margin. Second, Washington needs to have a decisive special teams advantage. The Capitals did own the best opening round power play (33 per cent; 13.0 goals per-60 minutes), which is a strong carryover from the regular season. But Pittsburgh also owned the league's best power play during the regular season (26.2 per cent; 9.8 goals per-60 minutes.)

Can Washington at least trade chances at 5-on-5 with Pittsburgh and win the special teams battle? It seems like a tall ask but the Capitals at least have the weaponry in place to give it a run, which is more than you can say for most teams around the league. Still, I think Pittsburgh's firepower is going to be too much to handle. They generate scoring chances like it's going out of style and seem to be able to get themselves out of any hole with their offensive firepower.

Pick: Pittsburgh in six.

In the Central, we will see the Winnipeg Jets take on the Presidents' Trophy winning Nashville Predators:

There's a reasonable argument to be made that this series is Stanley Cup-calibre. As TSN colleague Ian Mendes pointed out, it's only the sixth time in the last 30 years that the top two regular-season teams will meet in the playoffs.



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The regular-season series between these two teams was incredibly competitive. Winnipeg actually outchanced Nashville (53.5 per cent of scoring chances in their favor) over the five-game series, but Nashville did end up winning three of five games. If you rate these two teams as highly as I do, the fact that the regular season couldn't separate them to any degree isn't particularly surprising. That's why I think the playoff series is going to go the distance.

There weren't many takeaways from Winnipeg's first-round series. The Jets overwhelmed an older, slower Wild team with pace and speed. At no point during that five-game stretch did the series feel competitive, even in the few minutes where the Wild were ahead. Winnipeg spent so much time in the offensive third – they owned a whopping 60.3 per cent possession against Minnesota – that Connor Hellebuyck and the defensive side looked sensational, wrapping up the series on back-to-back shutouts.

Nashville is a different animal. I think most Predators fans would concede that the Avalanche offered some interesting challenges with their team speed – something that may end up better preparing Nashville for a series against the fleet-of-foot Jets. Nathan MacKinnon had plenty of time and opportunity to work against a Predators team often regarded as the best skating group in the NHL. And it shouldn't go unnoticed that they were just +2 in goal differential heading into the eventual Game 6 clincher.

All year I have been tremendously high on both of these teams, and for good reason. They are elite even-strength teams. Winnipeg also has tremendous special teams (third ranked power play and 10th ranked penalty kill by goals per-60 minutes), which makes them dangerous across any game state.

The emphasis is on that last sentence. Nashville, for all of their strengths, were pretty average in any game state outside of 5-on-5. And the Predators actually were dead-last in the number of times they were shorthanded – their 299 penalty kills against was tops in the league. This was something that improved as the season progressed, but it's still a dangerous spot to be in – especially against the weaponry the Jets have.

I see this as maybe the biggest coin-flip series we could have. If you played this 100 times, the series would probably end 50-50. Nevertheless, I have to make a pick.

Prediction: Winnipeg in seven.

Let's wrap up in the Pacific, where the San Jose Sharks will take on the Vegas Golden Knights:

I'm not sure which team had an easier first-round opponent. I thought Anaheim would be more than game against a San Jose team that was still dealing with core player injuries, but they were absolutely blown off of the ice in emphatic fashion. (The only fight they put up was usually late in the game and involved objectionable/dirty plays.)

And yet somehow Vegas may have had it easier. It's hard to know how much credit to give Vegas versus how much to excoriate Los Angeles, but the Kings posted the most dreadful offensive performance in the playoffs we've seen in the modern era. It's not just that they couldn't score a goal. It's that they couldn't generate any scoring chances, sustain any type of offensive pressure, or more make Marc-Andre Fleury even feel uncomfortable.

San Jose does look like a different team post-trade deadline and Vegas continues to legitimize what they did during the regular season. Beyond that, I'm not sure we learned anything from Round 1.

Vegas does have a pair of small edges in this series. The most notable is they appear to be the better 5-on-5 team. Their Corsi%, Scoring Chance%, and Goal% numbers were all better during the regular season, and that's also true if you subset the regular season down to the last 25 games. In the regular-season games between these two sides, Vegas was better there too. In the four games played, Vegas had over 53 per cent of the shots.

The other edge is that I'm not sure San Jose has any sort of matchup answer for the William Karlsson, Jonathan Marchessault, and Rielly Smith line for Vegas. That line has beat up everyone this year and that was certainly true in the four games against San Jose.

There, the Vegas top line had 52 per cent of the shots and 80 per cent of the goals. L.A., who tried to match that line with elite checking centre Anze Kopitar and company, were skated off of the ice. In round one, the Vegas top line had 60 per cent of the shots and 67 per cent of the goals – this against an L.A. team that at least had credibility as a strong defensive group. There's no doubt San Jose has plenty of wrinkles they can throw at Vegas' depth to level the playing field, but it still seems to me a critical advantage in favour of the Knights.

It will be interesting to see how San Jose matches that line here. In the two home games this season, they tried Marc-Edouard Vlasic and Justin Braun as their shutdown pairing, with the Logan Couture line getting the most action up front. I would expect that to continue here, with San Jose hoping to break-even and win the matchups further down the lineup.

That's going to be easier said than done, though. At some point Vegas will probably be a legitimate underdog in a series – I'd expect that to happen regardless of who advances between Nashville and Winnipeg. But here they have more than a puncher's chance. I think they are marginally the better team and with four home games, they're my pick to win the Pacific.

Prediction: Vegas in seven.

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USA TODAY / NHL playoffs 2018: Second-round predictions

Kevin Allen, Jimmy Hascup, Mike Brehm and Jace Evans, USA TODAY
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After a 2017 first-round that set a record for games decided in overtime (18) the 2018 first round saw five games get decided after regulation (with four in the Capitals-Blue Jackets series). Only one lower-seeded team advanced to Round 2 in 2018, setting up a clash of must-watch matchups.

The second round begins Thursday when the Washington Capitals host the Pittsburgh Penguins at 7 p.m. ET (NBC Sports Network).

Here's how the USA TODAY Sports NHL staff sees it playing out.

(1) NASHVILLE PREDATORS VS. (2) WINNIPEG JETS

Kevin Allen: Predators in 6. As impressed as we are with the Jets' pure talent, the Predators are a more complete team. They have offensive depth, a skilled defense, the likely Vezina Trophy winner (Pekka Rinne) and experienced gained by reaching the Stanley Cup Final last season.

Jimmy Hascup: Predators in 7. The high-flying Jets will test the Predators, who get the nod here because of a Game 7 at home.

Mike Brehm: Predators in 7. This will be the best series of the entire playoffs. Give Nashville the edge in defense, a slight one in goaltending and enough offense to keep pace with the Jets' high-flying scorers.

Jace Evans: Jets in 6. Pekka Rinne struggled at times against the Avalanche, posting a .909 save percentage. The Predators can't afford a similar performance from Rinne against the Jets, especially when Connor Hellebuyck shined with a .924 SV in Round 1.



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(1) VEGAS GOLDEN KNIGHTS VS. (3) SAN JOSE SHARKS

Allen: Golden Knights in 7. No reason to stop believing in the Golden Knights' remarkable season. San Jose goalie Martin Jones can match Marc-Andre Fleury's save count, but the Golden Knights' relentless pursuit of the puck will be the difference.

Hascup: Golden Knights in 6. Proved the playoffs won't overwhelm them. San Jose won't be able to keep up with Vegas' relentlessness and all-around depth.

Brehm: Golden Knights in 7. Vegas is practically unbeatable at home. That and the fact that they never give up on the puck will help them in a long series.

Evans: Golden Knights in 7. With both teams boasting balanced scoring, the bet is the Golden Knights will advance thanks to having home ice - the magic they've flashed all year doesn't hurt them, either.

(1) TAMPA BAY LIGHTNING VS. (2) BOSTON BRUINS

Allen: Lightning in 6. In the first part of the season, the Lightning looked as if they could win the Stanley Cup. Nothing has changed. This is a full-service team, a squad hungry for a chance to win it all.

Hascup: Bruins in 7. Round 1 wasn't easy but that, along with a commitment to a 200-foot game, will help the Bruins against a team with more firepower.

Brehm: Bruins in 6. The Lightning looked like world-beaters in the first round and the Bruins showed flaws against the Maple Leafs. But I picked Boston for the Cup and am sticking with it. With two days off, the Bruins can regroup.

Evans: Lightning in 6. In a five-game win over the Devils, the Lightning flashed the combination of high-end skill (Nikita Kucherov's 10 points) and depth (10 different players scored a goal) that helped make them the best team in the Eastern Conference. Goalie Andrei Vasilevskiy also appeared to find his game again.

(1) WASHINGTON CAPITALS VS. (2) PITTSBURGH PENGUINS

Allen: Penguins in 7. Evgeni Malkin and Carl Hagelin are out for Pittsburgh. The Capitals are oozing with confidence. But it's hard to pick against a Penguins team that has won nine consecutive playoff series over three seasons.

Hascup: Capitals in 7. The Penguins were lucky that the Flyers' goaltending was worse in the first round. Matt Murray has been below average all season, and Braden Holtby has shown he's still a frontline goalie. That will be the difference.

Brehm: Penguins in 7. All signs point to the Capitals. The Penguins have key injuries, Washington's John Carlson is increasing his free agent value and Braden Holtby is playing better than Murray. But gut instinct says Sidney Crosby torments the Caps again.

Evans: Penguins in 6. The Penguins showed against the Flyers that they're just as potent offensively as ever, even as Evgeni Malkin dealt with an injury late in the series that will keep him out at least for Game 1. That's bad news for a Capitals team that is not as strong defensively as the teams that also lost to the Penguins the past two years.

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