



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • May 26, 2020

THE NEWS & OBSERVER

Canes opposed 24-team NHL return to play format but are eager to play

By Chip Alexander

The Carolina Hurricanes were one of two NHL teams to vote against a 24-team return to play format that has been approved by the NHL Players' Association executive board.

Why? Jordan Martinook, the team's player representative to the NHLPA, said Monday the Canes believed an extra play-in round, as proposed, would not only lengthen the 2020 Stanley Cup playoffs but also the odds against them winning the Cup.

"You play so hard throughout the whole season to kind of put yourself in a position to make the playoffs," Martinook said in a zoom media call. "Obviously we had a pretty good shot at making it and ... from where we were and where I think our team could get to, it kind of limits our odds and makes you play another playoff series, basically.

"Every playoff series is tough. When you have to win four to win the Stanley Cup I think the (St. Louis) Blues would tell you it's hard enough. Now that you'll have to win five it's obviously hard but it is what it is. We're fine with the way it's going to go. ...

"It wasn't like we didn't want to play or anything. It was just this particular option maybe didn't benefit us. It's just kind of the stance we took."

Because of the coronavirus pandemic, the NHL, along with all the other major leagues, suspended its 2019-20 season. On March 12 it announced a "pause" that now has stretched a few months and many of the NHL players returned to their home cities, whether in the U.S., Canada or outside North America.

But the NHL and NHLPA have been jointly working to try and restart the season. The NHLPA on Friday announced the executive board decision on the 24-team format, in which the top four teams in each conference would receive first-round byes while the other 16 go through a best-of-five play-in round to determine the top 16 teams to compete for the Cup.

The games would be played without fans, possibly at as many as four "hub" sites.

Another step was taken Monday by the NHL, which announced it soon would begin "Phase 2" of the restart. Players, after a self-quarantine period, will be allowed to participate in small, voluntary workouts — no more than six players in a group — on and off the ice at the team's facilities.

The NHL said it was "targeting" a date in early June for the transition to Phase 2. The league said it would "monitor developments" in each team's market in terms what's allowed because of COVID-19 restrictions and then adjust.

"The health of the Players and Club personnel is our top priority," the NHL release said.

And still the biggest question. Restarting a season during a global pandemic will have many challenges, the most pressing being keeping an outbreak from occurring. There is no virus vaccine and it is a very contagious virus. Constant testing and other stringent safety precautions — social distancing, cleaning and disinfecting — will have to be taken.

"I think it can be done safely," Martinook said. "I don't think they would let us come back if it wasn't safe. Safety is definitely the main key. It doesn't look good if we come back and then a bunch of guys get sick."

That would likely be a season-stopper, something no one wants.

"I think they've done their due diligence and hopefully and we can come back and we can play and everybody can get through it safely and give some people something to cheer about," said Martinook, a forward in his fifth full NHL season.

Martinook, 27, said the NHLPA player rep call was heated and that "other teams were on the fence." According to multiple media reports, the Tampa Bay Lightning was the only other team to vote "no" on the 24-team format.

In addition to opposing the format, there also is the problem of players potentially being away from their families an extended period of time, in workout, training and then in completing a 24-team format and awarding the Cup. Martinook is married and has a young child and said the idea of being away has caused some family stress.

"But there's probably a ton of doctors who are out there and not around their families because they're exposed to (COVID-19)," he said. "There's so many people in worse positions than us."

What might the playoffs look like? The Hurricanes were 38-25-5 after 68 games — ranking sixth in the Eastern Conference with 81 points — and held the first wild-card playoff spot when the season was suspended. If the teams are seeded and bracketed according to point percentage in a restart, the Canes would be the No. 6 seed and face the New York Rangers in the play-in round.



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Martinook wasn't sure how many of the Canes players are currently in the Raleigh area, saying maybe less than 10. With Phase 2 voluntary, he said some players might wait it out until a training camp schedule is set.

Despite the team's opposition to the format, Martinook said the Canes' players want to get back on the ice and compete for the Cup. He chuckled when noting returning to games,

NHL players approve 24-team playoff format

By Chip Alexander

The National Hockey League is moving closer to returning to the ice and resuming a season that was put on hold by the coronavirus pandemic.

The Executive Board of the NHL Players' Association on Friday authorized further negotiations with the NHL on a 24-team return to play format to determine the winner of the 2020 Stanley Cup.

The NHLPA, in making the announcement, stressed that several details still must be negotiated. It said an agreement on the format would still be subject to the parties agreeing on all issues relevant to resuming play.

The NHL said it was "pausing" the season on March 12 because of the rapid spread of the coronavirus. The pause turned into weeks and now months and many players returned to their homes and home countries to be with their families during the global health crisis.

The Carolina Hurricanes, who reached the Eastern Conference finals last season, will be among the 24 teams in the restart. The Canes, before the season suspension, were 38-25-5 after 68 games -- ranking sixth in the Eastern Conference with 81 points -- and held the first wild-card playoff spot.

One format that has been mentioned has the top four seeds in each conference receiving first-round byes while the other 16 first face off in best-of-five play-in rounds -- the seedings perhaps determined by points percentage. It has not been determined if "return to play" will include some regular-season games or warm-up exhibition games, or if the league would immediately begin the playoffs.

The games will be played without fans and the games could be played at as many as four "hub" sites.

because of safety concerns, could mean full face shields and such things as no spitting allowed.

"I know everybody on our team wants to win, wants to come back and play," he said. "It's going to be different. It's going to be crazy. It'll be something you can tell your kids one day, that you got to play this crazy playoff. And hopefully after this go back to some normalcy."

One seeding format has the Hurricanes, as the No. 6 seed, facing the New York Rangers (No. 11) in the play-in round. The Canes last played March 10 in Detroit, beating the Red Wings 5-2.

Canes president and general manager Don Waddell, in a recent interview, said he believed the season would resume - - "I'm assuming we're not going to have fans but I think we'll play at some point," he said -- while also noting there could be a few regular-season games before moving into the playoffs.

But more important issues need to be resolved before any game is played. How safe will it be? How much testing for the coronavirus can be done? What if players, coaches or staff members fall ill? What if players balk at playing, saying they don't feel safe? What about players and coaches who have underlying medical conditions or are at an age that they might be more likely to contract the novel coronavirus?

And there are other logistical questions. What cities are best suited to serve as a "hub" for the games? Is there adequate hotel space and practice facilities? How long will teams hold their training camps after a few months off the ice? When will the season start up again? How long might players be away from their families?

The Canes could be close to full strength. Defenseman Dougie Hamilton, who suffered a broken left fibula in January, has been medically cleared and has been skating the past few weeks. Defenseman Sami Vatanen, who was on the injured list when obtained in a Feb. 24 trade with New Jersey, should be ready. Vatanen did not play a game before the season suspension.

The Carolina Hurricanes are close to a deal to remain at PNC Arena through 2029

BY LUKE DECOCK

A term sheet is in place between the Carolina Hurricanes and the Centennial Authority on a five-year extension to the team's lease at PNC Arena, although the financial

implications of the coronavirus pandemic may delay a final agreement.

The authority, the city-county-state board which oversees PNC Arena, could potentially approve the extension as early as its next scheduled meeting June 4. But because the



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authority's primary source of funding is Wake County's hotel and restaurant tax, uncertainty over future finances could delay the process or even reopen negotiations.

"We've been discussing a term sheet but the board has not approved a term sheet at this point," authority chairman Thomas McCormick said. "Obviously with COVID-19, and not being able to have any person-to-person meetings, it has been difficult. I can't really comment on anything that might be in the term sheet since the board has not approved it yet."

The Hurricanes' current lease runs through 2024; the terms of the extended lease would take effect immediately and run for the next nine years.

The authority has discussed extensive renovations to the 21-year-old building and was promised \$9 million per year in hotel and restaurant tax revenue through 2034 to fund them. The authority asked architects Ratio and HOK to prepare a menu of possible renovation options and expects those documents soon, but plans to "pump the brakes" on moving forward with any until it has a better sense of the economy, authority executive director Jeff Merritt said Tuesday.

The Hurricanes and new owner Tom Dundon have been seeking an increased operational subsidy from the arena authority as a condition of any lease extension. Last year, the Centennial Authority hired a consultant from CAA Icon, Dan Barrett, to represent it in negotiations. Barrett asked for,

and received, access to the Hurricanes' finances for assessment.

"I think it's a fair deal," Dundon said. "This gives us the flexibility to focus on Raleigh. We want to stay. This puts us in a position to stay here long term. It gives us all the time we need to focus on a long-term solution."

Part of that long-term solution could potentially include the development of an entertainment district around the arena and Carter-Finley Stadium, amenities PNC lacks. Such an effort would require the involvement and approval of the Hurricanes, N.C. State and the authority.

The Centennial Authority last met in person March 13, a special meeting to discuss the proposed term sheet in closed session. Its next scheduled meeting, on April 2, was canceled. Later in April, the authority's building and construction committee met by phone and cut its capital project budget for the next fiscal year by \$2.6 million because of the lack of events in the building and expected decrease in tax funding.

"Our principal source of revenue is from the room and meal taxes," McCormick said. "Those industries are hurting as badly as anybody else in the whole country, not just here. We have to be really careful about what we end up approving, if we do approve something, because we have to live within our means."

Raleigh native Alex Wilkinson found a different kind of hockey success at Army

BY LUKE DECOCK

There's an ever-increasing number of hockey success stories out of Raleigh, but none quite like Alex Wilkinson, who is going pro in something that definitely isn't sports.

One of the last of the first generation of Triangle players to pick up the game after the Carolina Hurricanes arrived, like many of his peers, Wilkinson had to leave town to pursue his hockey dreams. He never expected where they would take them.

After a distinguished four-year hockey career at Army, Wilkinson will report to Fort Sill in Oklahoma in July to begin training as an artillery officer, giving new meaning to the old cliché of having a howitzer of a shot.

"It's definitely going to take a little bit of time to sink in and grasp my journey and where I come from," Wilkinson said. "Nowadays, hockey in Carolina has definitely progressed a lot. Some of the best coaches I've ever had have been from Raleigh and are still in Raleigh. Without those guys, there's absolutely no way that I nor the seven or eight other kids who are still playing or have played at D-I levels, pro levels would have made it.

"Coming from Carolina has made me a better player. It improved my work ethic. Those opportunities were never just there. It was always something we had to go out and search for rather than just being where we were."

Wilkinson was a second-round USHL draft pick in 2011, the top junior league for college-bound players, but was cut twice by the team that selected him. His junior career instead took him to Chicago and Connecticut, a four-year odyssey that led him to Army as a 21-year-old freshman.

He never saw himself at a military academy, but Army came looking for him after the coaching staff saw him play for the nearby Connecticut Oilers junior team, where everything clicked for him.

"He found a way," Raleigh youth coach Colin Muldoon said. "And thrived."

Wilkinson spent four years as the rock at the center of the Army defense from the day he stepped on campus, the Atlantic Hockey Association defenseman of the year in 2018 and AHA sportsman of the year and a first-team Senior CLASS Award student-athlete all-American in 2020 — the third Army hockey player to be so honored. Remarkably, he committed only one penalty over his final two seasons, none as a senior. In 132 games, Wilkinson had 17 goals and 58 assists.



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It's no coincidence these were four solid seasons for Army, which won 19 games in Wilkinson's freshman year and went 17-13-3 this season and had a shot to win 20 games for the first time in more than 20 years.

"'Wilkie' has been a huge part of that," Army coach Brian Riley said. "He came in here and had an unbelievable career. He's everything you hope players will be when they're part of your program. It goes without saying he was a very good player, but even a better person. It's hard to go through this place without having some tough days. You never would have known that from seeing Wilkie."

Under different circumstances, Wilkinson might be taking a run at pro hockey, giving the ECHL a shot, in many ways a prototypical modern defenseman, undersized — 5-foot-10, 186 pounds — but able to skate and move the puck. That's not an option for a cadet. After his training at Fort Sill, he'll head to Fort Lewis, outside of Seattle, to join the 2nd Infantry Division Artillery. That's his pro career.

"I just think he was a great fit for West Point and West Point was a great fit for him," Riley said. "He has tremendous leadership qualities. I am so confident and excited to see this next journey for him as an officer."

As for his college career, it ended abruptly when Army's season was cut short on the eve of the AHA playoffs in March, and thanks to the coronavirus pandemic, he's not even on campus for the end of his final semester at West Point, although he'll have to go back — and quarantine for two weeks — for graduation in June.

He has to shave for his Zoom classes, but there are no virtual inspections of his quarters. It's an unusual finish to his time at Army, but he took an unusual route to get there.

"I would almost certainly choose West Point again, knowing what I know now," Wilkinson said. "It was always important to me that I was setting myself up for success after hockey. No matter how good you are, hockey is always going to end. I wanted to ensure I had something to fall back on whether my career ended after juniors or college or pro or whatever. Being a cadet, learning what I've learned through the experiences that I've had, it has been a phenomenal path for me. I'd choose it again if I could go back."

It turned out to be the right fit, and at the end of one journey, he begins another.

THE ATHLETIC

The Hurricanes want to play, but here's why they voted 'no' on 24-team format

By Sara Civian

Hurricanes NHLPA representative Jordan Martinook confirmed Monday that Carolina was one of two teams to vote no on the proposed, 24-team return to play format. While Tampa Bay Lightning's main concerns were that their bye wouldn't adequately prepare them for the intensity of a playoff run, the Hurricanes felt their odds — and those of other middle-of-the-pack teams' — were negatively impacted. Meanwhile, bottom-barrel teams get a pretty generous advantage.

The Canes were in a wild-card playoff spot, in the midst of a three-game win streak at the time of the NHL pause. The proposed playoff format pits them against the Rangers for a best-of-five play-in series while the top teams get a bye.

"It's not like we didn't want to play or anything, it's just that we felt this particular option maybe didn't benefit us — and it's not gonna benefit every team, but this is just the stance that we took. ... Our team felt like we could have kept climbing and climbing in the standings, I'm not taking anything away from the top teams, but we felt like we could have kept climbing the ladder," Martinook said on a Zoom call Monday. "(This format) doesn't really benefit the teams that are in 5, 6, 7 and 8 so it kinda hinders those teams.

Then it obviously gives a lot to 9, 10, 11 and 12. It didn't really benefit our team in any way."

To be clear, it was never that the Hurricanes didn't want to return to play. If you think about it, they went from an 80 percent chance to make playoffs to an unprecedented best-of-five scenario against an opponent that went 4-0 against them in the regular season. And this obviously wasn't Martinook's decision alone — the Hurricanes almost unanimously agreed that this format doesn't exactly benefit them.

"We had four or five guys present what we thought about it, a few guys had questions but for the most part pretty much everyone agreed, pretty much everyone was on board and it wasn't just for our team's situation — it was kind of looking at teams that had a 10 percent chance to make (the playoffs) now they're pretty much on a 50/50 playing field," Martinook said. "But it's going to be good for the game. It's going to grow the game. It's going to keep a lot of fan bases in it and we want to do anything we can to keep people excited in the times that we're in. We're not looking past that, we want the NHL to do the best we can, and we want the players to help the world and give people something to rally around."

While the Hurricanes were one of only two teams to vote "no," that doesn't mean other players and teams didn't have



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concerns about it. When The Athletic asked Martinook if he felt players with concerns about leaving their families, etc., felt comfortable speaking up, he said:

"It's definitely a unique situation. I think the NHLPA has been in contact daily. I think they've done everything they can. I know the return to play committee has worked so hard, with so many different options. As players, I think we're just playing the waiting game. We're in limbo and it's nice to finally get Phase 2 potentially going and have an idea that we're going to be coming back. ... I'm sure guys aren't worried about speaking out about that, but there are probably a ton of doctors out there not around their families because they're exposed to it. There are so many people in worse positions than us, and if we have to be away from our families for two or three weeks, I think guys understand that."

As for safety, Martinook trusts the NHL and the Players Association have done their due diligence.

"I think it can be done safely, and I know just by being on every PA call that they've enlisted help from so many different doctors, I don't think they would let us come back if it wasn't safe," Martinook said. "All the stuff that's been sent out to us, safety has been the main key. It doesn't look good if we come back and a bunch of us get sick. I think they've done their due diligence. ... I'm obviously back in Canada so

I would have to come back and do a 14-day self-isolation then obviously I'd be doing small groups at the rink. I have a wife and a small child so I'm in between if I should be bringing them back right away or feel it out, it's definitely a stressful time, this weekend has been kinda hard on me knowing this decision could be coming right away but it is what it is. That's still stuff that needs to be talked about and it's basically personal decisions at this time."

But, again, it was never that the Hurricanes didn't want to return to play — and they're prepared to do so, even if they aren't in love with the proposed format. Sportsnet's Elliotte Friedman asked Martinook if he thinks the vast majority of players want to play.

"For 70 games, you put a ton of work and emotions into this and at the end of the year your goal is to win the Stanley Cup," he said. "Obviously this gives a lot more teams the chance at it. I'm sure every team wants to win it and they're going to everything they can to win it. I know everybody on our team wants to win it, and wants to come back and play ... it's going to be different no matter what, it'll be something you can tell your kids one day that you got to play this crazy playoff and hopefully after all this we can go back to somewhat normalcy."

Keeping up with the Canes: 10 questions with Hurricanes.com's Michael Smith

By Sara Civian

Each week until hockey returns, The Athletic will ask 10 rapid-fire questions to and receive 10 rapid-fire answers from folks all around the Hurricanes organization. First up was color commentator Tripp Tracy. Last week, we caught up with in-game host Abby Labar. Today's guest is scrum lurker extraordinaire and Hurricanes.com Senior Editor Michael Smith.

1. First of all, how are you doing and where in the world are you?

I'm doing well, and I hope you and the readers are, too. The first few weeks of quarantine were a shock to the system, and I have to remind myself that we're all still trying to wrap our heads around dealing with a global pandemic. I'm just grateful that both my wife and I are in good health and can effectively work from home.

And our dog, Wilfred, is thriving.

2. How are you spending all the time you would normally spend tweeting the line combinations?

Wait, I'm not supposed to still be doing that?

In lieu of line combinations, there have been plenty of walks and questionably effective at-home workouts. Content-wise, we've had to think a bit outside the box, but it's been fun

digging into notable days in team history and compiling retrospectives from memorable moments. I've been over to the new practice rink a couple of times, too.

Hopefully, we'll have actual hockey things to discuss soon.

3. What do you miss the most about hockey?

Everything, really.

If I had to pick one specific thing, it's the sense of community that exists around the game and within my job. There are my coworkers in the digital marketing suite (or DMS, if you're hip) that I miss seeing each and every day. We've tried to replace that with video chats, and it's great, but it's still not the same. There are the folks — friends, really — that I spend countless hours with at the rink and on the road. I miss those adventures. There's the local media contingent and those we get to see in the various cities we're lucky enough to travel to. There's the team itself. There are the fans. It's all of these people who make the long, odd hours worth it — and I miss them all.

4. Which Hurricanes player would you most like to be quarantined with?

I'm going to say Jordan Martinook because we could both enjoy some of R&D Brewing's crispy Storm Brew, official sponsor of CanesCast.



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5. Are you enjoying all the re-airs on Fox Sports Carolinas?

The Canes Classics have been a ton of fun to re-watch. The Hurricanes arrived in North Carolina in 1997, and for two years, they played home games a short 30-minute drive from where I grew up. Being able to experience a handful of games, plus a Stanley Cup Playoff double-overtime heartbreaker, made me fall in love with the sport.

I remember watching all of these Canes Classics as a fan when they happened, and reliving them through a slightly different lens now has been enlightening.

It's really amazing to consider all of the memorable moments this franchise has experienced in its first 22 seasons in the state, especially early on. The run to the Finals in 2002 and the Stanley Cup championship in 2006 were critical to building the fan base in this market.

One thing that has stuck out to me now that I probably didn't appreciate years ago: just how many game-changing plays — a game-tying goal, a game-winning goal, a game-saving play — Rod Brind'Amour was involved in, whether it was on the "BBC Line" in 2002 or as a captain in 2006. He did all the little things, the potentially overlooked play, and maybe that's part of what makes him such an effective head coach.

6. What do you consider your favorite game you've worked covering the Hurricanes, and can you tell us any behind-the-scenes stories about it?

My initial answer was going to be Game 7 of the first round in the 2019 Stanley Cup Playoffs. Obviously, right?

But, I'm going to give the nod to the Jorge Alves game from Dec. 31, 2016. It was something we all silently rooted for, that one day Jorge would get to suit up for the Canes. And then for him to see 7.6 seconds of NHL ice time? I couldn't contain my joy. It was the best. I remember hearing rumblings of it happening that afternoon, and once we got to the rink in Tampa, the wheels were in motion. It was Jorge time. He signed his professional tryout contract with his pointer finger on Mike Sundheim's iPhone. And then he got to lead the team out for warm-ups. Being in that hallway and watching that happen was special.

The Canes lost the game, and I honestly don't even remember the score. That was Jorge's game, his moment. And to be able to experience that and help tell his story was something I'll always remember.

7. Have you learned anything interesting or perhaps developed a new skill during this NHL pause?

I've tried to write more outside of what I write for my job. Heavy emphasis on "have tried," though. I probably should have been more productive.

8. Any book or TV recommendations?

I have a growing stack of unread books, and I told myself when the pause began that I would take advantage of the extra time at home to do more reading.

That's been wildly unsuccessful. I've not opened one.

(Sara's note: relatable.)

But! I have done plenty of bingeing. "Tiger King," "The Last Dance," all of it.

OK, three quick TV recommendations.

"Middleditch and Schwartz" on Netflix. It's long-form improv. It's so impressive the worlds they build. It's a fun time.

"Dead to Me" on Netflix. The second season just dropped. Christina Applegate and Linda Cardellini are so, so good as the leads. It's dark. It's funny. It's a perfect show to binge.

"Community," the six seasons of which recently landed on Netflix. I never saw this show while it was on the air, but it's another that's well-suited for bingeing. It's punk. It's meta. It's sharp-witted. The first three seasons are arguably the show at its best. Now, all we need is a movie.

And I can't let a TV recommendation question pass without mentioning "Lost." It's my favorite. You can find it now on Hulu and Amazon Prime, apparently.

9. Do you have any thoughts on the proposed options to finish the season?

I do have some thoughts, but I'll try to be brief because I've probably gone on too long already. I can already hear the music playing me off stage.

Realizing that this is such a unique situation ("in these uncertain times," right commercials?), we have to also realize there is no perfect proposal. I would like to see some sort of conclusion to this season. Let's toss out the regular season. That's over and done with. So, playoffs. Can you start with the 16 that were in — by points percentage, of course — as of March 12? Ehh. I don't know. That's why I'd be in favor of expanding the field this year to allow for some sort of play-in. I feel like 20 is the sweet spot, but it will probably end up with 24. It's not hard to understand why, even if it doesn't make a lot of sense from a competitive standpoint.

I feel like this is where Justin Williams would say something like, "It doesn't really matter how many teams are in the playoffs. You just have to win." And he would be correct.

10. What was your favorite moment of the 2019-20 season, pre-pause?

Everything about Banff. That should be a scheduled detour each and every season.

Why NHL teams should gamble on defencemen over forwards later in the draft



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By Jonathan Willis

Broadly speaking, NHL scouts do a great job of identifying teenagers with major-league talent. It's easy to pick on the handful of high-profile disasters at the top end of the draft, but there's a remarkable statistic that shows this truth: five.

Five here means fifth overall. That's the median draft position of the 31 most-used forwards in the NHL in 2019-20. This elite group of forwards, all of whom play 20-odd minutes per game, were picked out early by the league's bird dogs. Two-thirds were top-10 picks. Twenty-six were first-rounders.

Only one, Artemi Panarin, was undrafted.

In hindsight that decision is practically criminal: he played 20 games in the KHL at 18. That's the world's second-best league, and somehow he slipped through the scout's fingers to become one of those high-profile blunders. Panarin is living proof that as recently as a decade ago, NHL professionals were too biased against Russian-developed talent.

Leaving aside that piece of outlying datum, it's also true that the scouts are better at some things than others. It follows that a team with a keen appreciation of the strengths and weaknesses of the scouting community can exploit that knowledge.

First, let's establish the thing scouts are best at – drafting forwards.

If we take the 372 most-used forwards in the NHL this season – 12 for each team – we find that 47 percent were taken with a top-31 pick in the draft. Mostly those are the best forwards, too. If we split that collection of 372 into 12 roster slots we find that the top end disproportionately arrives via the draft's first round:

Line up all 372 of those forwards by draft position and scroll down to the very middle and we arrive at Alex Chiasson, drafted 38th overall in 2009. His 519-and-counting career games represent a very decent return for his draft slot, as evidenced by the fact that only five other players from 2009's second round have played more, and only three have scored more.

NHL rosters are loaded with high picks. It's easy to look at some prospect drafted just outside the first round and get dreamy about his potential, forgetting that for most of them, a long career as a competent bottom-six forward is a remarkable outcome.

If you want to dream about the potential of some non-first round prospect, don't waste your time on forwards. The scouts are all too good at snapping up the talent before the second day of the draft. Dream about defencemen.

The scouts are good at identifying defencemen, too, just not at the same success rate as identifying forwards. Critically, it's entirely possible to grab a future top-pairing defenceman outside the first round.

Using the data from this past season, we found that more than half of the players inhabiting six of the top seven forward slots on NHL rosters were first-rounders. It's different for defencemen. League-wide, No. 2 defencemen taken in the first round are outnumbered by players taken later on, and the gap only grows larger as we move down the depth chart.

Line up all 186 of those defencemen by draft position and the median player is Shea Weber, taken 49th overall in the loaded 2003 draft. Weber's been a first-team All-Star twice and a second-team All-Star two more times; his string of 10 consecutive years collecting at least some Norris votes didn't end until injuries in 2017-18 limited him to 26 games.

Weber certainly comes close to being the best possible return on a second-round pick, but he's far from alone. Players like Roman Josi, Kris Letang and Duncan Keith were all drafted in the same range.

The league's defending Norris winner, Mark Giordano, was never even drafted and there's not even the bad Panarin excuse built in there. He was passed over after playing his draft year in Brampton and then passed over again after a 48-point campaign in Owen Sound. Perhaps no league is more scrutinized than the OHL; Giordano had to play an overage season there before the Flames finally signed him.

All of these players are exceptions; one doesn't simply trip over obvious future Norris candidates late in the draft. Yet, those exceptions exist.

Look at it this way: 62 percent of the NHL's top-six forwards in 2019-20 were first-round picks. Less than half of the NHL's top-three defencemen were. A non-first rounder climbing to the top half of an NHL forward corps is an outlier; on defence he's standard.

The numbers, as one might expect, are even wilder for goalies.

There are more undrafted players (three) among the 31 NHL starting goalies than there are (two) among the 93 NHL first-line forwards. That's an insane number when one remembers how much more important a No. 1 goalie is to a team's success or failure than a No. 3 forward.

Teenage talent assessment follows a curve. Relatively speaking, NHL scouts are very good at identifying high-end forwards, not as good at picking out high-end defencemen and significantly worse at flagging high-end goalies.

The best way to exploit this would be to find some way to be better than the rest of the league at identifying defencemen and goalies. Presumably there's some scouting approach that would yield superior results, and 31 teams busily looking for it. Constant improvement in this regard is a difficult, if necessary, exercise.

The easy thing to do is draft forwards early, and increasingly shift to defencemen and goalies as the draft goes on.



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NHL teams realize this, at least to some extent. A look at where positional players are drafted is revealing.

That chart might be a little vague, and there's an easier way to illustrate the point. Imagine a hypothetical ideal where NHL teams were equally good at identifying talent regardless of position, and all draft years had the same distribution of talent across positions. Since there's a fixed ratio of roster spots available in any given game (12 forwards to six defencemen to two goalies), that's easy to do. It looks like this:

The big difference we see between these two charts is mostly a result of the NHL being good at some things and worse at others.

Look at that goalie curve, and the way it differs from our hypothetical chart. If teams were really good at spotting future starters, we'd expect to see three goalies a year go in the first round. Not all that long ago, that was commonplace. In the last three years, however, just two goalies have gone that early: Jake Oettinger in 2017 and Spencer Knight in 2019.

NHL teams aren't good at picking out future starters at age 17, so they don't usually invest those high-value top picks in them. But even though they can't identify those starters, they're out there, and hitting on one with a late pick represents a great return on investment, so starting in the third round we see teams drafting lots of goalies. In fact the trend is to overdraft goalies relative to our hypothetical scenario, and that's smart because late-round goalies have the kind of upside teams just don't get with a pick spent on a skater.

(If there is a secret sauce for drafting goalies and some team finds it, there's a lot of value on those draft boards ready to be harvested, but until it's found this is the right way to operate.)

Where I can't help but wonder if there's room for improvement is on the skater side.

NHL teams love drafting forwards early, and rightly so. Teams need to get a return on those first-round picks, and

scouts are good at identifying quality forwards. Moreover, the best forwards are disproportionately taken early, so grab them while they're there.

The question is why they also love grabbing forwards late.

The trend was particularly pronounced in 2019. After drafting 21 forwards in the first round, the league's teams selected 21, 20 and 20 in the fifth, sixth and seventh rounds respectively.

In fairness, NHL teams need depth forwards, too, but these are picks with limited home run potential. The biggest benefit to drafting players is when there's a pronounced difference between the price of the cost-controlled talent and that available on the open market. When any old team can buy a minimum-wage fourth-liner in free agency or lure one out of Europe, there's precious little tangible advantage to having one on an entry-level deal.

There's more uncertainty with defencemen, which means there's more chance at generating an outsize return. That late-round pick might be Jaccob Slavin or Mattias Ekholm or Josh Manson or John Marino. It might also be Johnny Gaudreau or Mark Stone, but as we've seen, there's a better chance of getting that kind of return on a defenceman than a forward.

To their credit, NHL teams slightly overdraft defencemen compared to our hypothetical perfect-insight model. Perhaps that's in recognition of the strengths and weaknesses of their scouting department or a nod to the general belief that defencemen have more positional value than wingers.

But it's not a big difference, and it drops off in the final four rounds of the draft. I'd suggest that the draft pattern for defencemen should move a little bit closer to what we see with goaltenders, with blueliners increasingly prioritized over forwards in the final few rounds of the draft.

It's hard to steal an elite player late in the draft. It's easier to manage with a defencemen than a forward.



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SportScan

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

The Athletic / Misunderstood NHLPA vote: Many hurdles remain before next vote on Return to Play

By Michael Russo May 25, 2020

Devan Dubnyk is one of the elder statesmen on the NHL Players' Association's 31-player executive board.

Between Edmonton and Minnesota, this is the 34-year-old's eighth season representing his teammates on either the Oilers or Wild.

So, the Wild goaltender has cast countless votes on behalf of teammates, whether it be critical issues like passing the collective bargaining agreement to end the 2012-13 lockout and electing against re-opening that same CBA last fall, to things like pulling the trigger on salary cap escalators and consenting to NHL realignment.

But Dubnyk isn't sure there has been a vote as misconstrued as last week's one by the players to approve a 24-team Return to Play format in the event the NHL resumes the 2019-20 season later this summer.

"In the event" is still the key phrase.

On Monday, the NHL announced a comprehensive protocol that must be followed to begin Phase 2 (the opening of team facilities so players can voluntarily work out in maximum groups of six) early next month. As early as Tuesday, the NHL is expected to announce exactly how the 24-team return to play format will work.

"But that does not mean hockey's back," Dubnyk asserted during a phone conversation with The Athletic. "We still have a long way to go."

Dubnyk doesn't want to be a buzzkill, but he thinks it's important for everyone to understand there are still lots of hurdles ahead as both sides try to navigate the murky waters of return to play in the midst of a global pandemic.

"We voted strictly on the format," Dubnyk said. "In other words, 'If we are to come back, this is how it's going to be played.' But we have not even touched on logistics or cities or travel or testing or how the economics will work or what this quarantine bubble (the players are) supposed to live in will be like or any of that stuff yet."

"Nothing else has been voted on ... yet."

Again, yet is the operative word.

Dubnyk made clear that another vote will "absolutely" be necessary by the players once all these details are negotiated between the NHL and NHLPA.

"I think it's really important to start having these conversations with as many players as we can about, 'Guys, what scenarios are we OK with?'" Dubnyk said. "From what it sounds like, it's going to be some sort of hub city scenario, so we've got to talk about that. How long are guys OK with being away for? When we are in this city, are we locked in our hotel room? Going from the hotel room to the rink and back only, are guys OK with just doing that? Can our families come with us, or if there's a family emergency and we leave the bubble (to go back into society), can we return to the bubble or are we done? What's the food situation? Like, can we only eat in our hotel rooms? How often are we tested? Who pays for that? What's the damage economically to the sport?"

"All of these things, and there's so many variables, need to be talked about and we've got to start getting a grasp on it now so that it doesn't just hit us in the face all of a sudden. This stuff hasn't been discussed with the players. Everything's just been so hypothetical. So that's what I'm hoping is going to come out of this now because we don't want a situation where it seems like, 'OK, everybody's ready to go, let's get back and play,' and then all of a sudden guys are like, 'Whoa, Whoa, Whoa. I'm not OK with that.' And then it goes from like super-positive to super-negative. So that's why we've got to talk about everything, and then have a vote once and for all."

An NHLPA spokesman confirmed it'll be up to the executive board to determine if there's another vote, and there's a good chance of that happening. Several NHL players queried by The Athletic concurred with Dubnyk's assessment that another vote is a must.

Then, if the players approve the myriad logistical issues the union is discussing with the NHL regarding actual return to play scenarios, that's when the league and players can push forward with Phase 3 – the opening of 24 training camps later next month or into July.

To give you an idea of the logistics, here's a look at the reported protocols by Major League Baseball, Major League Soccer and the PGA.

The NHL's Phase 2 protocols were 29 pages. Imagine what it'll read like once protocols are announced for training camp and a return to actual hockey games.

COMPREHENSIVE PHASE 2 NHL-NHLPA PROTOCOLS. GRAB A POT OF COFFEE AND PERUSE [HTTPS://T.CO/0B9WDS8FSC](https://t.co/0B9WDS8FSC)

— MICHAEL RUSSO (@RUSSOHOCCY) MAY 25, 2020

As an executive board member, Dubnyk and his 30 counterparts are required to be in constant communication with their teammates to know where the players sit on various issues. That's because the executive board members represent their team's wishes by casting the votes for the rest of the players on most issues.

But like the end of the 2012-13 lockout, Dubnyk thinks there's a good possibility that the executive board will want to call on a full-member vote of 700-plus players.

"There's certain times when it's not as important to have 700-plus voices, but this is a scenario where we need to hear from as many players as we possibly can," Dubnyk said, "and those conversations are going to start to happen very soon here with small group conversations. Then, as an executive board, we can decide if we feel this needs to be an entire union vote with 700 players. We can do that. It rarely happens, but this might be a case where it should."

"And (NHLPA executive director Donald Fehr) is terrific with this stuff. Don's always so adamant about having as many people involved as possible. He constantly preaches, 'Everybody, as many guys as we can get involved, as many guys that we can get educated, as many voices as we can hear from.' And that's a difficult job because he's managing 700-plus players. You have 31 owners, you've got 700-plus players, so it's a completely different dynamic."

As we just saw with the 29-2 vote to approve the 24-team return to play format, it was quickly leaked that Tampa Bay and Carolina voted against the format for different reasons. That put respective player reps Alex Killorn and Jordan Martinook in the uncomfortable position of having to explain why their teams voted a certain way.



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CANES WENT FROM 80% CHANCE TO MAKE PLAYOFFS TO A COIN FLIP VS A NYR TEAM THAT WAS 4-0 AGAINST THEM. LOTS OF TEAMS FELT THERE WAS SOME INEQUITY; CAROLINA JUST HAD THE FORTITUDE TO VOTE AGAINST THE FORMAT. BUT IT WAS NEVER THAT THE CANES DIDN'T WANT TO PLAY
[HTTPS://T.CO/WMFFAX79WQ](https://t.co/wmffax79wq)

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This next decision by the players will be such a delicate and personal one that if by chance the players vote down a return to play, it would be unfair if members of the executive board become the front men to have to explain to fans why they chose not to bring hockey back this summer.

The 29-2 vote on the 24-team format may seem like a landslide, but that's a little deceiving.

First of all, let's be honest, the vote started 7-0 because it's fair to presume the seven teams that weren't going to be included had no motivation to return to play anyway so they would not oppose the format.

Also, as TSN's Frank Seravalli reported, "designated player representatives from at least six or seven teams asked to discuss the matters internally with their teammates on Friday before casting a vote."

Dubnyk wouldn't discuss voting specifics, but reading between the lines, the Wild were one of those teams. By the time a lot of those player reps returned to vote, it's thought that Fehr already had enough votes to continue the negotiation process anyway.

The next vote could be a lot closer.

"There's so much uncertainty with everything that's gone on in the world and different guys feel different ways when it comes to return to play and health and safety," Dubnyk said. "It's difficult because in the past I've always had good confidence in voting on things and knowing that I was voting for what the guys would want. In this scenario, it's hard because a lot of stuff is split down the middle or very close.

"Like, one question a lot of players have is the revenue thing. How much revenue are we getting from coming back and playing versus how much money are we spending on all these things that need to happen for this to happen – all the hotels, the food, the testing. These are a lot of expenses, so is it worth it?"

Dubnyk, who has played more games (328) and minutes (18,883) than any other NHL goalie since his Jan. 15, 2015, Wild debut and ranks second in victories (177) in that span, says one of the biggest concerns by the players is this anticipated "bubble" players will isolate into and, "Can you truly create a bubble?"

In other words, if the players are isolated in one or two hotels in a hub city, wouldn't it defeat the purpose if chefs, waiters and waitresses, hotel clerks and engineers, and housekeepers go home to their families and then return to the bubble? At arenas where fans likely won't get to attend at least the majority of the playoffs, what about the dozens of people that are needed to make a game happen that go beyond team personnel, from television crews, broadcasters and reporters, to custodial staffs, NHL off-ice officials and technicians?

"Personally, that's why I wonder if this is going to truly happen unless things relax enough where that bubble doesn't necessarily need to exist as tightly as we think it does right now," Dubnyk said. "Even with the players, it's like, if your wife's having a baby or something and you have to leave, do I have to miss an entire series now or suddenly quarantine for two weeks?"

"That's why I just feel like it doesn't seem feasible to make this happen unless those rules relax by the time we're going to play later this summer. There's just so much stuff that hasn't been figured out yet that we've got to start figuring out what are we OK with or not OK with, and then once that's discussed, have another vote.

"But, at least things are becoming more real now, which is exciting for us and the fans. Because let's be honest, everybody wants to play. But

you're asking a lot of guys to come back and do this in a strange scenario, so it's got to be safe, make sense and be worth it."

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The Athletic / Key points of the NHL's Phase 2 protocols for small group workouts

By Scott Burnside May 25, 2020

As the hockey world awaits the NHL's formal announcement on a return to play model, the league and its players are plotting the first tentative steps toward a resumption of play later this summer by revealing protocols for the first post-quarantine hockey activities.

The document governing the Phase 2 transition period from self-quarantine to small group workouts at NHL team facilities was sent to the NHL's Board of Governors, NHL GMs, team presidents, the heads of medical and training staff, and NHL players on Sunday evening.

The document, which covers a vast array of issues from testing to on-ice protocol to the cleaning of equipment and transport to and from rinks, was sent by deputy commissioner Bill Daly, senior vice president and deputy general counsel Julie Grand and the NHL's chief medical officer Dr. Willem Meeuwisse.

The league is targeting early June for the introduction of Phase 2, although when exactly it will begin and how long it will last is as yet unknown.

The specific circumstances different markets are dealing with vis a vis the COVID-19 virus may impact this timing and, in fact, individual teams were asked as part of the protocol delivered Sunday to provide feedback to the league on their ability to implement the various procedures outlined.

In short, this is very much a work in progress.

Worth noting is that no discussion of a training camp that would logically follow a successful Phase 2 and the actual return of on-ice competition was addressed in this document.

Player participation in Phase 2 is strictly voluntary and teams cannot force players to take part or even return to their club cities, which might require further self-quarantine depending on where players have been located during the cessation of league activity in mid-March.

NHL teams can reopen their training facilities to allow a maximum of six players at any one time plus a limited number of club staff. This will only be permitted in communities where health officials have agreed that such activities can be undertaken. If there are areas where teams can't open their facilities, the league will work with those teams to find alternative arrangements to address issues of competitive balance.

Players who must travel to their team cities but do not have a permanent residence in those cities will be provided hotel accommodations for Phase 2, including family if families are accompanying them.

Even if local health regulations don't require a 14-day self-quarantine, players traveling to team cities by public transportation of any kind such as commercial air or rail must undergo a 14-day self-quarantine before taking part in these small group sessions. Team medical staff may also request self-quarantine if players are returning from "high-risk" environments.

Testing of asymptomatic players and staff is only to be conducted in communities where there is an excess of testing capacity so as not to take away from health care workers, those who are most vulnerable to contracting COVID-19 and those members of the community who are showing symptoms.

All players and staff who have access to players taking part in Phase 2 are to be tested 48 hours prior to returning to club facilities with the

expectation that results will be available within 24 hours. If those results aren't available, players and staff cannot enter the team facilities until the test results are available. Assuming testing can be arranged, teams are expected to arrange for regular testing of players and staff who will interact with players at least twice a week.

The league is also exploring a league-wide polymerase chain reaction (PCR) testing program.

Each team will appoint a hygiene officer who must be a nurse, occupational health and safety professional or infection control professional. The hygiene officer will provide all staff with color-coded badges to indicate their level of contact with players. Hygiene officers will prepare a weekly report ensuring that protocols laid out for Phase 2 are being observed and further provide information regarding non-compliance.

Teams will be required to record symptoms and temperatures of individuals on a daily basis. All personnel who will be taking part in Phase 2 activities will have an app that they would use to record those details prior to arriving at the team facilities. Additionally the team's designated hygiene officer will establish procedures for a separate temperature and symptom check at the facility before players or staff can enter.

Similar tests will be administered for staff entering the building/rink who don't have access to the players and a daily log will be kept for all those entering the facilities.

All players will undergo a pre-Phase 2 medical evaluation with a focus on existing injuries, medical conditions and cardiac screening. Staff with access to players will also undergo a medical evaluation and teams could ask that staff not in contact with players do the same. Anyone confirmed to have had COVID-19 or is suspected of having had the virus will undergo further testing.

Anyone who develops symptoms or is sharing a home with someone who develops symptoms must notify club medical staff and self-isolate. They must also inform team medical staff if they believe they've come in contact with someone who is positive for the virus. Medical staff will direct care for anyone who tests positive. Contact tracing will be conducted by the team or in conjunction with local health officials immediately after a positive test has been reported.

It isn't anticipated that an isolated positive test would require a widespread quarantine of the club, although those teammates and staff that may have had contact with a person with a positive test will be tested and the league and NHLPA are to be alerted if there is a positive test.

Activities that are permitted during Phase 2 include skating without contact. No coaches of any kind can participate in on-ice sessions. Goalies may get additional ice time but skaters must have equal access to ice time and a schedule will be established that must be followed. Players can also access in small group exercise and weight training areas at the team's facility.

Players are not allowed to work out or skate at any other facility and cannot organize their own player skates.

Coaches and hockey operations staff can observe the on-ice activities but must sit in an area separate from players and player access staff and aren't to have in-person contact with those people.

Fitness testing of players is not permitted during Phase 2.

Players will stay in the same small group (six or less) for all of Phase 2 to lessen the potential for the virus to spread throughout the team. The number of those players who can work out at any one time will be determined by the physical space of the workout or weight area and will be based on social distancing guidelines. Players aren't to enter the facility except for designated workout and on-ice times.

Players must maintain social distancing during on-ice workouts as well.

Seven days after the start of Phase 2, goaltenders can employ an independent goalie coach, contracted by them, to work with them on a



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one-on-one basis. Those coaches will have to follow established guidelines for social distancing and testing.

The schedule of workouts on and off ice must allow for proper disinfecting of equipment, and workout and change areas, and prevent overlap of different groups.

Players are encouraged to shower at home and must leave all workout gear at the team facility where it will be washed by team staff.

Each team will have the same number of staff per small group session and cannot exceed one athletic trainer, one strength and conditioning coach, one equipment manager, one or two dressing room attendants, club doctor and, as described above, one goalie coach hired by the goalie.

As much as possible, each group of up to six players will have a different athletic trainer, strength and conditioning coach, and equipment manager to reduce the possibility of cross-infection. Teams may employ staff from their AHL affiliate to accomplish this.

The following groups of people are not allowed access to the team facilities during Phase 2: media, player agents, massage therapists, chiropractors, player performance personnel, family members and other members of the public.

Players from other teams who are sheltering in place near another team's facilities can ask to use those facilities for on-ice and weight room workouts. Teams can deny such requests but must inform the league and NHLPA of such a refusal for their review.

Players are expected to wear face coverings (cloth or surgical style masks) at all times when entering and leaving team facilities and where social distancing cannot be maintained. These are not required when players are exercising or on the ice.

Players should avoid carpooling and/or taking public transportation to the team's facilities. This includes taxis and ride-sharing services.

Players aren't to use saunas, steam rooms, hot and cold tubs.

There is to be no shared use of supplements, gels, balms or creams. Water bottles must be marked by the player's number and not shared. Meals that are provided by the team will be individually wrapped or packaged and must be consumed at home and not at the team's facility.

All towels must be considered single-use and should not be shared.

The Athletic / How the NHL handles immigration and what it means for the Return to Play plan

By Sean Shapiro May 25, 2020

The NHL is doing everything it can to return. But before the league returns to the ice, it will need to ensure that a large base of international players can immigrate back to the United States and Canada, and have the approval to work there legally after doing so.

There's a long to-do list as the NHL moves forward with its 24-team return-to-play proposal. The NHLPA approved the format on Friday, and the plan is expected to be formally announced by the league on Tuesday. While many of those key questions will be answered directly, solving for player immigration and expiring visas will require cooperation between the players, teams, the league and dozens of countries.

The NHL will be the most-impacted amongst the major sports leagues as return-to-play protocols are tackled. With 24 teams in the United States, Americans are the minority in the NHL; at the time of the stoppage, only eight teams in the 31-team league had 10 Americans or more on their roster.

Players still under contract for the 2020-21 season, in most cases, won't be an issue. When teams apply for their work visa, the length of time typically coincides with the contract. Tyler Seguin's visa, for example, runs through 2027 just like the contract he signed in 2018.

But players on expiring contracts, both pending restricted and unrestricted free agents, can't legally work in the United States after June 30. The Dallas Stars have eight players who fall under this category — plus Miro Heiskanen, whose visa expires this summer because his entry-level contract had a rookie slide after he spent the first year of the deal in Finland.

Stars director of team services Jason Rademan helped explain the visa process to The Athletic in a phone call this weekend.

Across the NHL, directors of team services handle immigration in a similar fashion. Early in the offseason, usually in early July after free agency has been completed, teams will send visa applications to United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). When Rademan submits the applications for Stars players, he also includes a copy of the press release from when they signed and their career statistics; immediate proof to fulfill the P-1A requirement that the applicant is an exceptional athlete coming to work in the United States.

In the offseason, the typical turnaround time for the visa is 10 to 14 days, according to Rademan. Once approved by USCIS, the next step varies by nationality. Canadians are now cleared after getting the green light from the U.S. Government. Players in Europe and Russia have to take an additional step and need to visit the American consulate in their home country. The players will take the document that Rademan sent them and go in for an interview. Once completing that interview, the player will get the stamp in their passport that makes it legal for them to come and work in the United States.

There is another twist when dealing with Russian players: Russians also need an additional visa to work in Canada. So if one of the locations for NHL hub cities is in Canada, the Stars will need to apply for a Canadian visa for Anton Khudobin and Denis Gurianov. But the visa is obtained for the country where the employer is based, so the Stars would not need to apply for visas for all their players who are not Canadian to work in Canada.

In most cases, it's a smooth offseason process. But there are hurdles that can pop up.

In August 2017, the United States reduced the staff of the American Consulate in Moscow and scaled back visa operations. At that time Alexander Radulov, who had recently signed a five-year deal with the Stars, still hadn't gone to the consulate to complete the interview and final steps for his visa. In order to expedite the process, the Stars called the American Consulate in Helsinki, Finland, and were able to coordinate Radulov flying to Finland to complete his visa before flying to Dallas.

Visa hoops are more common in the middle of the season when a player is traded from a Canadian team to an American team or vice versa at the deadline. When the Stars traded for Kris Russell from the Calgary Flames in 2016, he didn't have a visa — he was a Canadian playing for a Canadian team. In that case, the Stars worked to super-expedite Russell's visa and the team was waiting on results in Nashville to see if he could play less than 24 hours after a trade.

"I remember pacing and calling back to the office down here (in Frisco) just waiting for the fax to come through," Rademan said. "Throughout the day, the question from (then coach) Lindy (Ruff) was, 'Can he play or not?' And we didn't get the fax in Texas until close to 4 or 5 p.m. Once we got that he was ready to go."

Players being traded from one American team to another make for an easier process. While there is paperwork to file, teams have 30 days from the date of the trade to change the 'employer' line on the player's visa. This is what happened last season in the Mats Zuccarello trade, and why he was able to play for Dallas less than 14 hours after the trade was completed.



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Rademan said teams across the league have their own visa stories, and each year at the draft, team services directors often get together to discuss best practices and things that have or haven't worked for individual teams. The Stars have a large Finnish contingent. If a team is bringing in their first Finn, they might turn to Dallas to ask about best practices the Stars have used when it comes to securing their visas.

"This year with Andrej Sekera, it was the first time in a while I've dealt with immigration from Slovakia, so if I needed help I know other team services people I could turn to about their experiences," Rademan said. "It's not like you've got teams trying to screw each other over; we do our best as a league to make sure all of this stuff goes smoothly in any situation."

It's that collaboration and the NHL's leadership that make Rademan confident any and all visa issues will be sorted out before the 2019-20 season resumes. The NHL and NHLPA are working on a document that will officially extend expiring contracts to the end of the 2019-20 season instead of June 30, according to The Athletic's Michael Russo. That should be enough proof to extend visas for international players.

Rademan said the NHL was proactive back in March about finding any potential immigration issues. Teams were asked to send an updated list of when visas and green cards expire so the league could take that into account when trying to get back on the ice. Green cards are good for 10 years before they need to be renewed; the Stars' only player with a green card, Jamie Benn, is still covered. So are the Stars coaches, most of whom have green cards.

Last Friday, United States acting secretary of homeland security Chad Wolf signed an order lifting travel restrictions on professional athletes returning to the country. That's a measure that could indicate there won't be too much pushback when it comes to expediting the process of extending visas for players as the league moves forward, although for players who returned to Europe or Russia the rules in their country will also have to allow them to leave the country.

The Athletic / DGB weekend power rankings: Please enjoy this rerun from January 1980

By Sean McIndoe May 25, 2020

Editor's note: Due to the ongoing pause to the NHL season, we are once again dipping into the archives to air a Weekend Rankings rerun from a previous season. Please enjoy this week's power rankings, which originally ran on Monday, Jan. 7, 1980.

The Philadelphia Flyers played last night, and stop me if you've heard this one before, they didn't lose.

Oh wait, you have heard that one. In fact, you've heard it for nearly three straight months, because the Flyers haven't lost since their second game of the season. That's 35 in a row, if you're keeping track.

You figured that if the streak was ever going to end, last night would be the night. The Flyers were five games into their road trip as they prepared to face the Sabres, the league's second-best team. With six wins in their last eight games, Buffalo has started to pull away in the Adams. Add in the extra motivation of having lost to many of these same Flyers in the Stanley Cup final just a few years ago, you would think that if anyone could end the streak, it would be Buffalo.

Nope. Bill Barber broke a third-period tie, Rick MacLeish added the insurance marker with five minutes left, and the Flyers cruised to a 4-2 final. Ho-hum. Throw another win on the pile.

With 35 straight games without a loss, the Flyers have already shattered the NHL record, set just a few years ago by the Canadiens; that milestone came and went weeks ago. Friday night's 4-1 win over the Rangers nudged them ahead of 1971-72 Los Angeles Lakers for the longest undefeated streak in pro sports history. Granted, that Lakers

team had to win all those games because the NBA doesn't have ties, which are a fundamental and immutable part of hockey, but it's still an impressive feat.

And there's no end in sight. I mean ... what are we even holding the rest of the season for? Just give the Stanley Cup to the Flyers, and let's be done with it. They're literally unbeatable.

OK, I'm being a little facetious here – obviously you can't just shut down an NHL season before it's finished. But it sure does feel like everyone else is playing for second place at this point. And to make matters worse, there's no reason to think that the Flyers' dominance is a one-year phenomenon. Mark my words, there's a new dynasty on the horizon, and it's coming straight out of the Patrick Division.

In the meantime, the Flyers cap off their six-game road trip tonight in Minnesota. The North Stars are a good team, but we know how this is going to turn out. It's going to be a long time before the Flyers lose another game this year. Or maybe that should be if they lose another game.

On to this week's rankings. Hey, I bet you'll never guess who's No. 1.

Road to the Cup

The five teams that look like they're headed towards a summer of Rubik's Cubes, Pac-Man and taking the Stanley Cup to see Empire Strikes Back.

I don't know about you, but I'm still adjusting to the new playoff format. After years of having an even dozen teams make the playoffs, the NHL is expanding the format to 16 teams this year. And let's just come right out and say it: That's way too many.

Yes, the league went from 17 teams to 21 this season due to the WHA merger. There's some logic to adding extra playoff spots when you add more teams. But having 12 out of 17 teams make the playoffs meant that 70 percent of the league got in. Now, with 16 out of 21, it's all the way up to 76 percent. That's crazy. Yes, you want to get as many teams involved in the playoff race as possible, because that's how you keep all your markets interested. But there has to be a limit.

I mean, imagine if the league keeps this up. We're told that further expansion will arrive someday. What are we going to do when there are 24 teams? Or 28? Or, to pick an odd number at random, 31? If you kept the same ratio of playoff teams in a 31-team league, you'd end up inviting 24 teams.

A 24-team postseason. Good lord. Let's start handing out points for losing too, while we're at it.

Anyway, the one piece of good news is that at least we got rid of that weird preliminary round where only some of the teams had to face off in shorter series. That was a total crapshoot, and nobody even knew whether it was supposed to count as a real playoff series or not. I won't miss those.

But yeah, 16 teams are making the playoffs this year. I know it seems like a lot, but we'll have to get used to it.

5. Chicago Black Hawks (15-13-12, +1 true goals differential*) – They're barely .500 and they can't score, but they're still running away with the Smythe because it's the worst division in hockey. Hey, at least it won't be won by a 73-point team like it was last year. Man, the Smythe is terrible. I guess we might as well get used to saying that because some things never change.

4. Montreal Canadiens (18-16-6, +12) – I know, I know, I should show the defending champs more respect. They've won four straight Cups, after all. Shouldn't a dynasty team be the favorites?

Yes, they should, but this isn't that dynasty team. There's no Ken Dryden, or Yvan Cournoyer, or Jacques Lemaire. There's no Scotty Bowman. Another year without Sam Pollock. They're already on their second coach, after literally giving their first coach ulcers. This isn't the same team that rolled over everyone for the last half-decade.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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They're still good. Guy Lafleur should get 50 goals, and Steve Shutt might get there too. So could Pierre Larouche. They've still got Larry Robinson and new captain, Serge Savard. Rod Langway looks like a future Norris winner that they'll definitely hold on to. And on the right night, the combo of Mario Tremblay and Rejean Houle can drive a goaltender crazy.

So they deserve some respect, which is why they're in the top five. Can they win a fifth straight Cup? I guess we can't count them out. But at the risk of overdoing my Philadelphia love-in, I'd advise Montreal fans to watch tonight's Flyers/North Stars game, because good luck getting past that team in the playoffs.

3. Boston Bruins (21-11-5, +32) – First-year head coach Fred Creighton continues to do a great job, and seems like the long-term answer behind the bench. But the big story is rookie defenceman Ray Bourque, who's stepped in as a 19-year-old and already looks like one of the best blueliners in the league. He's not especially big or physical, so you have to wonder how long he can last in the league. But he can do just about everything else, and it's not hard to envision him being the guy who brings the Stanley Cup back to Boston.

2. Buffalo Sabres (26-11-3, +45) – They're running away with the Wales, which is impressive even if it feels a little bit meaningless since conferences don't matter in the new playoff format. Last night's loss to the Flyers was tough, but this team is less than a month removed from a nine-game winning streak, the goaltending tandem of Bob Sauve and Don Edwards is among the best in the league, and Danny Gare is on pace for 50 goals. They should have an easy run to the final as long as none of the middle-of-the-pack teams magically get way better over the next few weeks.

1. Philadelphia Flyers (26-1-10, +53) – Of course. Look, there's still half a season left, and nothing is wrapped up, but this might go down in history as the greatest NHL team of all time. Certainly, one that everyone will recognize among the most dominant.

And sure, they'll lose again at some point during the season, probably more than a few times. But in the playoffs? Four times in one series? That seems like it's over the line.

*Goals differential without adjusting for how many players on each team can't skate backward.

Not ranked: New York Islanders – There's just something missing.

I'm not sure what it is, but it's there. Or rather, it's not there. And unless they can find it, a franchise that's just one year removed from finishing first overall and that seemed to be on its way to becoming a powerhouse is going to be an early out in the playoffs.

That's if they even make it; they're only eight points up on the 17th-place Whalers, so it's no sure thing. They're lucky that the format was expanded this year because that might be the only thing that gets them in. They're sitting at 15-16-6 today, trailing 11 teams in the standings. They're tied with the Maple Leafs, for goodness sake, and the Leafs are last in the Adams.

So yeah, something is missing. And that's a problem because it's next to impossible to make significant changes midway through a season. Could they make a trade? Probably. I'm not even sure. I think there's a deadline at some point during the year, but nobody ever pays attention to that.

And sure, I know what the Islander fans are saying: The missing piece is Ken Morrow, the young American defenceman who's expected to join the team in a few weeks once the Olympics are done. He's playing for that national team now, and Islander faithful keep telling me how much experience he'll gain in Lake Placid. To which I always reply: Experience with what? Getting his ass kicked by the Soviets?

Maybe Morrow ends up being the guy. Miracles happen. But I don't like their odds, and if he's not the answer, I'm not sure where else they can turn. But they'd better figure out what the missing piece of the puzzle is. Because right now, the hole in the lineup is king-sized.

The bottom five

The five teams that are in the running to finish dead last and earn the first overall pick.

The bad news for the teams in this section is that they're awful. The worse news is that this year's draft isn't anywhere near as good as last year's edition. Granted, we knew that would be the case since the 1979 draft was a double-cohort that may go down as among the very best in history. Bourque will probably win the Calder, but guys like Mike Gartner, Mark Howe and Michel Goulet have shown flashes too. It's an impressive rookie class.

Next year? Not so much. Sure, there are a handful of can't-miss prospects who should be available a few picks in, like Rick Lanz and Doug Wickenheiser. But other than that, the top ten figures to mainly be a bunch of indistinguishable blue line prospects like Darren Veitch, Larry Murphy, Fred Arthur and Paul Coffey. I'm sure they'll all turn out to be solid depth guys, but I don't see any Hall-of-Famers in that bunch.

5. Atlanta Flames (14-18-5, -11) – The talent is there, and you keep waiting for them to climb up in the standings. It hasn't happened yet, but you figure it has to at some point. I'll rank them here for now, but don't be surprised if they're making a big move north by the end of the year.

4. Hartford Whalers (9-18-10, -19) – Man, these new WHA teams all suck.

Sorry, I know that's harsh. But all four newcomers are struggling, with the Whalers and Oilers sitting in last place in their divisions and the Jets only slightly ahead. The Nordiques are at least hanging around .500, which is good news considering they've already sent their first-round pick to the Hawks. But when "almost .500 and without much hope for the future" is your success story, you know it's been a rough merger.

Still, it's been undeniably cool to see Gordie Howe in the NHL again, even at 51 years old. The old guy can still produce, so here's hoping the league does the right thing and finds a spot for him in next month's All-Star Game in Detroit.

3. Edmonton Oilers (9-19-9, -35) – The story of the season is still Wayne Gretzky, who's on pace for the greatest debut season in NHL history. The league insists that he's not a rookie, for reasons nobody is entirely clear on, but that hardly matters. He's giving Marcel Dionne a run for his money in the Art Ross race, and might even get a few Hart votes.

Is he already the face of the league? Let's slow down. Forgive me for being skeptical, but it's one thing to rack up points when your team is losing high-scoring games every night. But in the playoffs, everything tightens up, and you have to figure out how to win a tight 5-4 struggle. Not to mention the physical side – this kid looks like he's about 120 pounds, and he's not going to go his whole career without getting hit. Let's see him last a few years and maybe get the Oilers into the playoffs before we start placing this kid among the great ones.

But sure, Gretzky is decent. The rest of the team, not so much, largely because of what's looking like a disastrous 1979 draft. They used their first-round pick in a stacked draft to grab mediocre defenceman Kevin Lowe, third-round pick Mark Messier already looks like a bust who'll barely crack 30 points and fourth-rounder Glenn Anderson is off playing for the national team instead of the NHL. They'd better smarten up for this year's draft. I'd suggest trying to find a defenceman with some speed, and maybe a winger with some finish.

2. Washington Capitals (10-23-6, -29) – They're going to miss the playoffs, they give up almost four goals a game and they'll have to finish strong down the stretch just to get into the mid-60s for points.

This is the most successful season in franchise history. Really. That's not a joke.

These poor fans. I can't wait until this team starts making the playoffs and they can finally be happy.



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1. Colorado Rockies (12-23-3, -22) – They're duking it out with the hopeless Caps and ugly Oilers for dead last. But that's not even the worst part, because unlike those teams, the Rockies don't even have their own first-round pick.

Thank Sam Pollock for that one, as he ripped off the Rockies way back in 1976 by sending them Ron Andruff and Sean Shanahan for their 1980 first. Those two combined to play four seasons and score 20 goals in Colorado. Today, Shanahan is out of hockey, while Andruff is in Europe. And the Habs own what might be the first overall pick in the NHL draft.

It's almost unfair. I mean, these are the Canadiens we're talking about. They could win a fifth straight Stanley Cup this spring. And if they get the top pick, we all know who they're taking: Denis Savard, the next great young French superstar. He's the consensus top pick, literally plays in Montreal right now and is on pace for a 180-point junior season. He's the kind of player that teams trade Norris winners for, and the Habs might get him for basically nothing.

Curse you, Colorado Rockies. You're devils in disguise.

Not ranked: Toronto Maple Leafs – Speaking of bad trades involving the Rockies, the dust is still settling on last week's four-player deal that sent Lanny McDonald to the Rockies.

Leaf fans aren't happy about the move, and you can understand why – McDonald was one of the team's most popular players. At the same time, Pat Hickey and Wilf Paiement aren't bad. And while you never want to give up early on a young defenceman, it's not like Joel Quenneville is the sort of guy who's going to lead a team to multiple Cups.

So we'll see. For now, the Leafs are last in the Adams, but still comfortably in a playoff spot. More importantly, they finally made it out of the 1970s. Man, that was an awful decade for Maple Leaf fans. When it began, the team was only three years removed from a championship. In the ten years since, they've faded into irrelevance, not even so much as making it to the final. The drought is at thirteen years and counting, by far the longest in franchise history. And it doesn't show signs of ending any time soon.

Still, there's room for some optimism. They've still got Borje Salming. Darryl Sittler is mad about the McDonald trade now, but he'll get over that quickly. Tiger Williams seems like the sort of guy who'll be around for a while. Punch Imlach is a GM who knows how to win. Carl Brewer is back, and his teammates will probably love playing with him. And they've got their long-term goalie in Mike Palmateer.

So yeah, good riddance to the 1970s, the most embarrassing decade the team has ever known. Will the 1980s be better? Don't worry, Leaf fans, they'd pretty much have to be.

Sportsnet.ca / NHLers face new normal as league prepares to ramp up toward return to play

Chris Johnston May 25, 2020, 4:39 PM

Before NHL players are permitted to step back inside a team facility they must first have a swab inserted roughly four centimetres into their nasal cavity.

Laboratory-based RT-PCR testing is used to detect any active or recent infection with COVID-19, and will be administered 48 hours prior.

The next stage of life in the time of the novel coronavirus for players and team staff will then include at least two more of those tests each week, plus daily temperature and symptom checks — one self-administered at home and another from medical personnel upon arrival at the facility.

All of that just to walk through the door.

You want to get on the ice? Well, there's a pre-participation medical exam, which includes an EKG test and screening for pre-existing conditions, to be administered before that can happen.

What resonates most about the NHL's return-to-sport protocol is how much meticulous effort will be required just to get six players working out inside the rink together, never mind what's still to come when teams progress to training camps or actually start playing games again.

The league hopes to reopen team facilities for small-group workouts as soon as next week and has set out the requirements for doing so. The protocol distributed to teams and players early Monday leaves no detail uncovered and paints a scene unlike any that would typically play out in these buildings.

On the ice, no more than six players are allowed to participate in non-contact skates at a time. Coaches, including those for skating and skills, can't take part (an exception will be granted for goalie coaches after the first week of training).

Off the ice, everyone must remain at least six feet apart and players are discouraged from socializing with one another. A cloth or surgical mask must be worn when entering and exiting the building and at any point where social distancing can't be maintained. Exercise and weight room equipment is permitted for use, providing a spotter isn't required, and players can receive individual treatment from athletic therapists and team doctors.

But they won't be granted access to saunas, hot tubs or steam rooms and are encouraged to shower at home whenever possible.

The groups of six (or less) will remain constant and essentially be assigned a rotating shift for when they're allowed in the facility. Where possible, teams have been told to assign a different athletic trainer, strength and conditioning coach and equipment manager to each group.

That will ensure any infection or exposure will be contained within the group and should help facilitate contact tracing.

The facility must be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected between each training session. That includes locker-room areas and circuit-based training equipment. Players are required to leave all workout gear inside the facility for cleaning and can only take supplements provided in single-dispense packs.

Single-use beverages or snacks such as power bars can be consumed by players inside the facility, but any meals prepared and packaged by the catering staff must be taken home before they're eaten.

This promises to be a different experience for players who largely haven't been back inside team facilities since the season was paused on March 12. The small-group sessions starting in early June are strictly voluntary, but they're viewed as an important step in trying to complete a 24-team tournament for the Stanley Cup — especially for the large number of guys unable to skate during the last three months.

The detailed nature of protocols being put in place reflect how challenging it is to contain the spread of germs in a team environment, and the NHL acknowledged in its Monday memo that they "cannot mitigate all risk."

"A range of clinical scenarios exist, from very mild to fatal outcome," the league wrote.

Anyone who develops symptoms and/or tests positive for COVID-19, or shares a home with someone who does, must immediately notify the team's medical staff. They will be isolated and provided treatment, if needed.

There could be serious consequences for any teams that don't comply with the measures put in place by the league. Penalties include fines, loss of draft choices, and ineligibility to participate in the resumption of play.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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The Athletic / Bourne: Despite complexities, flaws in NHL's proposal still worth discussing

By Justin Bourne May 24, 2020

I've recently had an epiphany about what wears me down about everyday sports arguments. (And they really do, I should note.) It's that many questions pertaining to people, sports strategy and billion-dollar businesses can be nuanced and at times, complex. So unless we're really going to sit down and dig through a topic to get to a solution, I find it a waste of effort to go in circles arguing whether something is "black" or "white" with some other guy in the pub.

One of the reasons I've liked doing systems analyst posts in the past is that I do them solo, and I reach a conclusion over a period of hours, looking at video and stats. It might not always be the right answer, but at least I've taken the time to try to get somewhere past "the goalie sucked" or whatever.

Another important qualifier to my distaste for sports arguing: It doesn't boil down to thinking "people are stupid" or anything close to that. People, it turns out, have jobs and families and lives, and sports are supposed to be a fun reprieve, not something they care to "dig through" in the hopes of getting ideas correct. There's often an element of "that guy sucks" to a sports argument that's true enough, and so generally, that's good enough. Thinking beyond that is more laborious and unnecessary.

We're in the midst of rather unprecedented times in the NHL right now. Big decisions are being made, and fans are reacting on the fly without any real idea which ideas are good or bad. I don't have those answers, the players don't, and as things stand, we're all just kind of hoping the league can figure it out. But there's a sports argument I've seen recently that I'm happy to rebut regarding whether fans, players and teams should bury criticism of the NHL's proposed solution, because ... well, insert an overly simple line of logic in a place where finding a solution is probably more complex.

Regarding the four bye teams per conference and play-in series, I hear a lot of:

- If you can't beat the No. 12 seed, you don't deserve to make playoffs, or
- People were going to complain about any solution, or
- A team's regular-season success earned it weaker opponents for the play-in series, isn't that enough?

I share this following tweet with the utmost respect because I think Carlo Colaiacovo was a great player, seems like a great dude and does a great job moving the sports conversations along. But I don't want you to think I'm going after a straw man here, so I picked this tweet because it captures the general tone of what I'm talking about:

The last part of that, yes, 100 percent. My problem with the idea of the NHL's proposed solution is how badly it devalues roughly a 70-game regular season to date. The NHL was already a league that undervalued its regular season in my estimation, prior to all this.

Yes, a No. 5 seed should beat a No. 12 seed. But parity in hockey is insane compared to other sports, and a best-of-five format leaves room for more randomness. So the Edmonton Oilers go from a likely home-ice advantage playoff team when the season was halted, to being slight favourites in a best-of-five series against the Chicago Blackhawks ... to make the first round of the playoffs. Remember, these play-in games are just the "end" of the regular season. I'd say there's a 55 percent chance they win (very unofficial, as Dom Luszczyzyn called that estimate "about right" in a text message) to qualify as one of the top 16. Call it 60 percent if you like, but that still leaves a 40 percent chance the Blackhawks, who

had a 2.6 percent chance of making playoffs (according to sportsclubstats.com) when the season ended, win. (The Oilers' playoff chances in mid-March were 94.9 percent.)

The thing about simplistic arguments like "the Oilers should beat them" or "the Blackhawks suck" is how badly it devalues the fact that the Oilers did beat them, into near-submission, in the race for playoff positioning during 70 games of the season. This format tells Edmonton to "do it again," which I say makes conversations questioning the fairness of the set-up worthwhile.

There isn't an easy solution, but there are solutions. One that I liked was to say, "Sure, pit those teams against each other, but Edmonton needs just two wins to advance to the playoffs, the Blackhawks would need four." (This could be limited to the 5-12 and 6-11 matchups.)

The other suggestion was to have a tournament in which the top teams have an 80 percent chance to advance and the bottom teams more like a 20 percent chance (by spotting ascending points to those top teams pre-tournament). It came out that the league found formats where bottom teams would win the bulk of their games but still not advance, but my understanding is that there are proposals where tweaks have been made to avoid that outcome. It's doable.

My belief is that the league likes that 24 fan bases are suddenly all the way back in it, and that engagement on a larger scale is what it's after. You wouldn't blame the NHL one iota for prioritizing that over digging in and getting it exactly right.

So this all comes back to sports arguments and how we're going to be told that people would've complained about anything and that if you can't beat Team X then you don't deserve to move on, etc. Better solutions take mental effort, and in this case, math skills most of us don't have to create a format that respects what's already happened in the regular season.

There is some potential for cruel irony here for the league if teams that were on the outside looking in beat the bigger-market teams that the league would presumably like to see go deep in the playoffs. Ninth-seeded Columbus can certainly beat Toronto. Tenth-seeded Florida can certainly beat the Islanders. Is the league gonna love it if a star-laden Penguins team bows out to a Canadiens team that almost certainly doesn't have a deep run in them? My guess is no.

If or when this all gets going, I'm gonna be all-in. None of the above means that these series won't be pull-your-hair-out compelling, or that the Cup will need an asterisk. I can't wait. But it does mean that we don't have to ignore the flaws of the proposed format in the interest of awarding the teams and players that deserve the best chance to win the Stanley Cup, the best chance to win the Stanley Cup.

TSN.CA / Searching for the NHL version of Jordan and Pippen

Reliving the Chicago Bulls duo's dominance in 'The Last Dance' made Travis Yost wonder which NHL player combinations over the past decade might be comparable.

By Travis Yost

Like everything in Michael Jordan's orbit, The Last Dance – a 10-part documentary series that concluded on ESPN and Netflix last week – was iconic and memorable. If not for the fact that it was virtually the only fresh sports content available during a global pandemic, then because it gave us incredible insight into one of the most dominant athletes of all time.

One part of the series that really stood out were the middle episodes that focused on Jordan's famous sidekick, Scottie Pippen. Jordan and Pippen are perhaps the most legendary duo in sports, the core underpinning Chicago's six titles from 1991-98.



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Like Jordan, Pippen was an electric two-way player who could beat you on both sides of the floor. When the two were on the court together, they outscored opponents at a disproportionate rate. Relative to their 1990s peers, Jordan and Pippen ranked first and seventh respectively in Box Plus/Minus.

Reliving the duo's dominance made me wonder which NHL player combinations over the past decade might be comparable. No duo has even come close to winning that amount of team hardware over the period – in large part because parity in hockey is omnipresent, and it's much less a star-driven league than the NBA. But we do know of a number of player combinations that drove similarly disproportionate differentials against the opposition.

Let's try to find some comparables for the Jordan/Pippen combination. First, we will focus on the player combinations that drove the most disproportionate goal differentials together over the past decade. Then we will look at the best single season net goal differential, searching for the magic Jordan and Pippen recreated during the 1995-96 regular season.

First, the full decade. I wanted to isolate on the combinations that we saw extensively, and the 4,000-minute cutoff (leaving us with 29 pairings) seemed the most appropriate. None of these combinations should surprise:

If you were solely looking at ice time, the longevity of two combinations – Brad Marchand and Patrice Bergeron in Boston, and the Sedin twins in Vancouver – would get first consideration.

Those duos are the only two members of the 7,000-minute club, and with both of Boston's premier forwards signed through at least 2021-22, they still have a good chance at building on their legacy. What is particularly incredible about these two combinations is they maintained outrageous goal differentials over nearly a full decade, aging curves be damned. Over thousands of minutes, both were about a full goal better than their opponents for every 60 minutes of even-strength hockey. That is incredible!

Of course, this first pass weighs longevity rather heavily. What about players who played less together for any variety of reasons, and were able to carry more impressive goal differentials than either of the above?

Consider the Boston duo of Marchand and Bergeron for one moment. If we looked at their net goal differentials when one of those forwards were playing with legendary defenceman Zdeno Chara, those numbers improve – in fact, none of the combinations posted better net-goal differentials than the likes of Marchand/Chara and Bergeron/Chara, who outscored their opponents by about 1.4 goals per 60 minutes this decade.

The caveat here is obvious: Marchand and Bergeron rarely play apart from one another, so when you bring Chara into the fold, you really are looking at the net goal differentials of all three skaters together. As a trio, there is no doubt this was the most dominant group in the league, and they have a Stanley Cup to boot.

The best non-Boston combination over the years? That honour belongs to Joe Pavelski and Joe Thornton, who put together an all-time run in San Jose. Pavelski and Thornton were about one goal better than their opponents per 60 minutes, and that discounts the magic they were able to create on the power play over the years.

Let's look at this in two other ways. What if we drop the ice time restriction and bring in players with, say, 2,000 minutes together?

One thing that's obvious is once you minimize the effect of longevity, teams with very strong peaks – the Pittsburgh Penguins and Tampa Bay Lightning being the most obvious – see a number of player combinations added.

No combination drove better goal differentials this decade than Pittsburgh's Chris Kunitz and Sidney Crosby, who were a whopping 1.8 goals per 60 minutes better than their opponents. And, I cannot

emphasize this enough: at their peak, they probably were the most unstoppable offensive force in the league. That's 3.8 goals scored per 60 minutes for years upon years! If you had to pick one pairing to match-up against any Boston combination, it probably would be these two.

Lastly, what about the best single season? This data gets noisier to be sure, so let's make sure the combinations were regular – minimum 500 minutes.

If you had Jamie Benn and Valeri Nichushkin as the best single-season combination of the decade, raise your hand. If your hand is raised, you are either a Dallas Stars fan or are lying! I did find it interesting that only one combination from the 2019-20 regular season made this list – that honour belonging to Nikita Kucherov and Brayden Point, who put together a pretty outrageous +2.1 goals per 60 minutes split this season in Tampa Bay.

If we learned one thing from *The Last Dance*, it's that even superstars of the highest order benefit from playing with great teammates. Bergeron isn't the same without his defensive anchor or winger pest; the Sedin brothers' story isn't the same if they aren't identical twins with incredible two-way skill sets, and so on.

Finding dominant player combinations in hockey over multiple years is quite hard, but perhaps that's what makes what we have seen in Boston (plus Vancouver, Pittsburgh, Los Angeles and Chicago) even more admirable.

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National Hockey League Edges Toward Restart With Detailed Plans

By Andrew Knoll

May 25, 2020

A game once played outdoors in subzero temperatures and wool sweaters may soon crown its champion during the swelter of summer.

On Monday, the National Hockey League sent a memo to players and members of the news media detailing a plan to resume its season with voluntary workouts as soon as early June after a layoff of more than two months.

The announcement came after a vote last week in which the executive board of the N.H.L.'s players association approved a proposal for a 24-team playoff, scrapping the dozen or so games remaining in each team's regular season. Discussions are continuing between the league and union on how, and where, to resume play, which would almost certainly occur without fans in the arenas.

Even with the framework of the season's finale taking shape, the plans underscored the concerns that hockey's stakeholders are weighing to restart.

The league's 22-page "Phased Return to Sport Protocol" would allow for a maximum of six players at a time to meet in a team's practice facility, along with a small group of team personnel. On-ice workouts cannot include coaches or trainers and players will have to wear face coverings elsewhere inside team facilities. Players and team personnel will be required to undergo testing in advance of returning to practice facilities or, if the local supply does not allow for widespread testing, to quarantine for 14 days before they can enter.

The league emphasized that these workouts would be voluntary — to allow for safety concerns and any immigration issues for players returning to the United States — and conducted only where local jurisdictions have relaxed restrictions to allow gatherings.



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"We are continuing to monitor developments in each of the club's markets, and may adjust the overall timing if appropriate, following discussion with all relevant parties," the memo said.

The plan looks to be a starting point for vetting the logistics of the return to play. The competitive and financial stakes of the league's return and the health risks associated with going back to normal, make any discussion complicated.

The players' union vote on the playoff format came after considerable debate but received near unanimous approval, with 29 of 31 team representatives voting to continue discussions.

Under the format, the playoffs would expand from 16 teams to 24, with the top four teams in each conference earning byes. Those top four teams would compete in a round-robin tournament to determine seeding, while the other 16 teams competed in best-of-five series. N.H.L. Commissioner Gary Bettman has said that the games would be played without fans and with limited travel. Competition would be confined to between two and four sites, the locations of which have yet to be determined.

The representatives for the Tampa Bay Lightning and the Carolina Hurricanes cast the only two votes against pursuing the proposal.

"You look at teams that had a 10 percent chance to make it, now they're pretty much on a 50-50 playing field," Jordan Martinook, the Hurricanes representative, said in a conference call on Monday.

Martinook said his team believed that the teams that were seeded fifth through eighth would face a disadvantage because they would have to play an additional five-game series under the new format.

"When you have to win four to win the Stanley Cup — I'm sure the Blues would tell you that it's hard enough — now that you're going to have to win five it's obviously harder," he said.

Alex Killorn, the Lightning's player representative said Sunday in an interview with The Athletic that his teammates opposed the format because of competitive imbalance between the top seeds and everyone else.

Sportsnet.ca / Quick Shifts: 24-team playoff injects hope, raises questions

Luke Fox | @lukefoxjokebox

May 23, 2020, 8:30 AM

A quick mix of the things we gleaned from the week of hockey, serious and less so, and rolling four lines deep. I ate the pizza. All by myself. Nobody else ate the pizza.

1. For the first time in two and a half months, I feel genuinely optimistic we're going to see a 2020 Stanley Cup champion.

Maybe you do too.

Maybe we're delusional.

But hope feels nice, my first tee time is booked, the glass is half full, and I'm guzzling like a kid who just discovered free refills.

As the players voted in favour of the proposed 24-team tournament Friday, the transition from "We're considering all options!" to "We're taking steps to execute this specific plan!" has given us something tangible to look forward to — or bicker about.

"As much as there is always debate," Calgary Flames GM Brad Treliving said Friday, "if the worst thing in our day right now is determining if there

are 24 or 20 or 18 or 16 teams in a playoff, we're having a pretty good day."

Yes, it's imperfect, but have you looked outside?

At the pause, the Montreal Canadiens had a zero per cent chance of making the traditional playoffs, per SportsClubStats.com. The Chicago Blackhawks had a 2.6 per cent chance. The Arizona Coyotes had a 16.6 per cent shot. And the resurgent New York Rangers' odds were at 21.8 per cent.

Now, the chances are great that at least one of them will upset their play-in opponent, who proved better over 70 or so games (that would be Pittsburgh, Edmonton, Nashville and Carolina, respectively). The shorter the series, the more it favours the wild card.

Three of those life-raft clubs represent massive TV markets. Hockey is entertainment. It's a business. And this format satisfies on both counts.

Pittsburgh's NHLPA rep, Kris Letang, told Sportsnet's Elliotte Friedman Friday night that the Penguins voted yes to the setup, and beat reporter Rob Rossi reported the vote wasn't even close.

"There's no perfect way to do this, because it's not like we've ever been through this before and there's a script to follow," Blues captain Alex Pietrangolo told Good Show Friday.

"There's not going to be any way to do this that satisfies everyone," echoes Tampa's Alex Killorn. "We're just going to try to make it as fair as possible."

Did Montreal earn their way into equal footing as Pittsburgh? Nope. But if the Canadiens can reel off 19 wins in two months against five teams supposedly better than them, arguing they didn't deserve that shiny prize at the end will make you look foolish and cranky.

2. So, I'm not complaining, but...

I do wonder about the intensity of the three round-robin games each of the top four seeds in the conferences will play. Not only are these not do-or-die contests, but "winning" the top seed doesn't guarantee the easiest Round 1 opponent.

The top seed in the East, for example, will definitely play Toronto (7) or Columbus (8). So even if Montreal (12) upsets, the No. 1 seed could face a superior first-round opponent than the No. 4 seed.

Also, there is a bit of magic that happens when a squad survives the danger of elimination and enters the next stage of their bracket hardened and confident.

"If that's the situation, I think there could be somewhat of a disadvantage. I know when you're playing a team that's been battling and actually went through a playoff series, it's a lot different than playing a couple exhibition games," Killorn concedes.

"The top teams that have a bye, I don't know how competitive their games will be going forward, whereas the teams that are in the bottom will be playing playoff games right away, and potentially they will be more prepared for the real playoffs."

Something I'm curious about: Since the best-of-five play-in round and the round-robin games will not technically be part of the Stanley Cup Playoffs, are they a continuation of the regular season? Can they impact individual stats, the Rocket Richard Trophy race, Alex Ovechkin's bid for 50, James Neal's strive for 21, my fantasy league?

3. A Mike Babcock sighting!

Seldom seen or heard from publicly since his firing from the Maple Leafs six months ago, Babcock donated a few hours after his morning waterski Wednesday to be a guest on a coaching and leadership seminar for McGill University.



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Babcock asked questions of his own to presenters Peter Smith, coach of the McGill Martlets, and Jamie Kompon, associate coach of the Winnipeg Jets, then fielded a few from participants.

Gotta say, I kinda missed the Babtalk.

- On the value of team-building activities: "I've been to every kind of professional thing you can think of, from ropes courses to camping to curing with gold-medal skips to canoe racing. Often the group of players you have determines the success of a team-building event. It isn't the event; it's the people.

"Team building to me: When you pay the price. A 250-pound D-man is coming down the wall to run you over and you get it out? That's team building. When you lay down in the last second and block a shot? That's team building. When you get into the room, you make each other better. You make each other accountable. And people love you for doing it. Sometimes we get confused with what team building actually is."

- On managing superstars: "What I found over the years is, this isn't as big a deal as you might think. The best players want to be the best players. They want to be great. They want a partnership with you. [Patrick] Kane's rules are different than someone else's rules. [Pavel] Datsyuk's rules are different. [Auston] Matthews' rules, [Mitch] Marner's rules are different because they have a different skill-set. They don't need you every time something goes wrong for you to be reminding them. But what they need is parameters.

"The best players have a skill-set and a feel. They don't turn the puck over that much anyway because they have that skill-set to handle the situation. I think understanding the parameters for them and having a partnership with you is what it's all about."

- On how to tell your team has curated the right culture: "You play the last game in pro hockey and you know you're never going to be together again — the guys don't want to take their equipment off. They don't want to leave; they want to be together. They create a family culture where everyone can be important. Everyone's accountable. Everyone's committed. In the end, those are the pictures that go on your wall, because the ones that you didn't create that in, they didn't win."

- On turning practice into internal competition: "The harder they compete against one another, the better they're going to become. ... As soon as you keep score, the energy level goes through the roof. And that's what they want to do — they want to compete. It doesn't matter if it's a one-on-one, small-ice game, a two-on-one, a forward versus a D, a line competition, it doesn't matter. But they want to compete. That's where the fun is."

4. Kompon's presentation was fantastic, as he detailed the vast differences head coaches Joel Quenneville and Darryl Sutter have in their approach to winning the Stanley Cup (Kompon served on both the Blackhawks and Kings staffs). Different styles, same champagne (hint: One was more of a players' coach than the other).

Kompon recalled the defensive-minded Quenneville's reluctance to put a young Kane out in the final two minutes with the lead because he was worried Kane might cheat for offence. Kompon encouraged a conversation, a trust.

"Kaner knew if he took this responsibility, that was another minute, two minutes on the ice. Another 10 points a season. Easy for him. He can put the puck in the [empty] net from the other end with his eyes closed," Kompon said. "We never had a problem with him waiting out in the neutral zone or anything. He was right where he needed to be defensively."

Kompon broke it down plainly: Players crave touches with the puck. That leads to confidence. In turn, that leads to more ice time and, likely, more points.

"Then, ultimately, what do you do? You get paid," Kompon said.

"We got Mark Scheifele and Blake Wheeler. They take 50 to 100 pucks off the boards every day, before or after practice. They know they need that, so it's second nature."

5. Ottawa 67's centre Marco Rossi was rewarded for a video-game-esque OHL season by winning the circuit's MVP award, the Red Tilson Trophy.

Rossi's 120 points (39 goals, 81 assists) in 53 games topped all juniors in the Canadian Hockey League, and his two-way, all-situations excellence has made him a plus-120 player over his two OHL seasons (he's also a 58.5-per-cent face-off man).

No wonder why the top-10 2020 draft prospect has no interest in a third junior year.

"In my opinion, I'm not focusing on playing in the junior hockey league anymore. I try to focus on pro hockey," the confident 18-year-old said Thursday.

"Ask about me in practice, or like anywhere where I have to compete, I'm probably one of the hardest-competing guys that they know. And I just hate to lose. I try to win every situation I can... I hate to just practice easy."

As he buries his disappointment of being denied another run at the Memorial Cup with a strong squad and awaits the draft, Rossi is training twice daily back home in Austria.

He doesn't hide the fact that he used all the positive press for contemporaries Alexis Lafreniere and Quinton Byfield as fuel for his tear through Ontario.

"Of course," Rossi said. "I could hear they were talking so much about them, and it just motivated me, and I just wanted to be better than them."

Love it.

Rossi's 2.14 points-per-game pace not only led the OHL, but it's the highest such figure by a Red Tilson Trophy recipient since Erie's Connor McDavid (2.55) in 2014-15.

Prior to joining the 67's in 2018, Rossi was playing pro in Switzerland — a 15-year-old weaving around some men more than double his age. He figured it took him all of six to eight games to acclimatize to the angles and speed of the smaller North American ice.

Ineligible for the AHL in 2020-21, Rossi concedes that whichever team he's drafted to will have a say where he skates next season. But in his mind, if he's not an NHLer, he'd prefer to set up goals professionally in Europe.

6. Cool touch by the QMJHL.

The league convinced Sidney Crosby to temporarily ditch quarantine dress code and don on a crisp shirt and jacket to announce its MVP, fellow Rimouski Océanic alum Lafreniere.

7. Heck of a column by Akim Aliu for The Players' Tribune.

Right from the piece's title, "Hockey Is Not for Everyone," a reality check for the NHL's Hockey Is for Everyone initiative, you know you're in for some required reading.

To think, Aliu's brave article arrives during the same pause that has seen Rangers prospect K'Andre Miller subjected to racial slurs during a video chat, Bill Peters land a head-coaching job overseas and the NFL explore hiring incentives to hire non-white coaches and general managers.

Aliu doesn't stop at detailing his own attacks by racists in hockey; he tries to look at solutions.

"But what we can do is promote diversity. I believe that the NHL should adopt something like the Rooney Rule, which requires NFL teams to interview minorities for head coaching and senior football operation positions," Aliu writes.



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"We should be showing off the diversity our game is capable of having. This has an immediate impact on youth involvement. Because I know there are kids like me out there who have a hard time seeing themselves in the NHL. Or there's a little black boy or girl who wants to be an NHL coach, but he or she doesn't see anyone in the league who looks like them."

8. Alex Killorn has himself a smash hit among Lightning fans with his Dock Talk Jetski-based mobile interview series.

Killorn is campaigning hard for his dream guest.

"Easy, man. Tom Brady," says the talk show host, who doubles as a 26-goal scorer. "Write that in all your articles."

Killorn, 30, has sold approximately 45,000 Dock Talk T-shirts, directing the proceeds to the Hillsborough Education Foundation, which helps children who don't have food or educational resources.

"We've far exceeded our expectations," says Killorn, a Harvard grad. "When I heard about it, it was a no-brainer to me. I think it's really important to give back, especially to kids who don't have the means to keep up with school.

"I just hope that with this money, a lot of these younger students that don't have Wi-Fi or don't have iPads can keep up with school and finish the school year the right way."

As much fun as Killorn has had with Dock Talk, media isn't the only route he's considering when it comes time for a second career.

"If I'm gonna stay in the game of hockey, I would see myself more on the management side," he says. "But if I didn't go that route, it would be probably TV or something, because I don't want to coach."

9. Way back during the first training camp of 2019-20, Evgeni Malkin described new teammate Brandon Tanev as "probably the fastest guy in the NHL."

Tanev is doing what he can to preserve his greatest asset during the pause. He ordered a set of Rollerblades online to work those intricate skating muscles. For sessions of 30 to 40 minutes, he'll sprint up hills, take advantage of fresh air on a long-distance rip, or find an open parking lot to hone his stickhandling at speed.

"Obviously, it's not the same as being on ice, but in a sense, it's pretty darn close to what we're used to. I think it's just the joy of getting on a pair of skates. Whether they're ice hockey skates or Rollerblades or feel the puck, it's something we all cherish," Tanev said on a Zoom conference.

"It kind of mimics the stride of being on the ice, as close as you can really get, so I've been trying to Rollerblade as much as I can, especially when the weather is nice."

Keeping his mind sharp? Puzzles. And he's graduated from a 500-piece to a 1,000-piece monster.

"It's great to keep the mental aspect of yourself strong during these times," Tanev explained. "To get your mind thinking and put it in situations like it is on the ice, when you're trying to think through a certain situation, I think you're able to do that when you're looking for a piece.

"Maybe you're getting frustrated and you don't want to do it anymore — your mind is telling you to give up — but at the same time, that puzzle needs to be finished. And without that piece you're looking for, the puzzle can't be finished. It's a mental grind at times, especially with the puzzles that have a ton of pieces."

Which is why my own puzzle game never extended beyond this bad boy.

10. One relatively easy but necessary task for returning to play will involve the free agents agreeing to push back the end date of their current contracts from June 30 to whenever the playoffs conclude (since they don't get paid during the postseason anyway and everyone

understands the financial benefits of salvaging a Cup champ, this shouldn't be a big concern).

With the Coyotes given a second life under the 24-team proposal — why couldn't they upset Nashville in a best-of-five with a healthy Darcy Kuemper? — this presents one last chance for Arizona to audition for pending UFA Taylor Hall.

Hall, 28, has been forthright about his desire to commit with a contender after playing just five playoff games in (gulp) 10 seasons.

"I'm not saying he is going to sign here, but I definitely think we're a team he's very interested in staying with," Rick Tocchet told Emily Kaplan and Greg Wyshynski on the ESPN On Ice podcast this week.

"You're talking about a guy who, before this, was going to make a ton of money," Tocchet said. "With this whole pandemic, like he told me, he doesn't want to go through another year trying to play on a one-year contract. He wants to get settled somewhere. So, he's got a lot of different options that [he has to] weigh.

Surely, a deep Cinderella run or, conversely, a swift exit could factor into Hall's decision.

11. The slick commemorative Terry Fox edition of the Adidas Orion shoes (modelled something lovely below by Ron MacLean) sold out fast.

In celebration of the 40th anniversary of Fox's Marathon of Hope, 100 per cent of the net proceeds were donated to The Terry Fox Foundation to support cancer research. Brilliant.

But that hasn't stopped some people from reselling them for as much as 10 times their \$130 retail price on eBay. Ugh.

Crossing my fingers Adidas does another, um, run.

12. The Tooth Fairy has been declared an essential worker.