



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 1, 2020

THE NEWS & OBSERVER

For 'Fishy, Svechy, Turbo, Slavo,' their time has come. The Hurricanes', too.

By Luke DeCock

The old warhorse Jordan Staal, veteran of many a lengthy playoff series, mentioned his four younger star teammates by their nicknames during a Zoom call on Friday, and it sounded like he was naming the Four Horsemen of the Modern Apocalypse.

In Staal's parlance, they are known as "Fishy, Svechy, Turbo, Slavo." These are only aliases. Their real names are Aho, Svechnikov, Teravainen and Slavin. They form the vanguard of the Carolina Hurricanes.

As the Hurricanes prepare to open the NHL's first-ever qualifying round against the New York Rangers in the NHL's Toronto bubble Saturday afternoon, for all the talk about which goalie will start and how the Hurricanes will fare without Dougie Hamilton, the real dividing line in the series will be young stars vs. young stars, talent on talent, skill on skill.

The Hurricanes have Sebastian Aho, the Rangers have Mika Zibanejad. The Hurricanes have Andrei Svechnikov, the Rangers have Artemi Panarin. The Hurricanes have Teuvo Teravainen, the Rangers have Ryan Strome. The Hurricanes have Jacob Slavin, the Rangers have Jacob Trouba. Of that group, only Panarin, a Hart Trophy finalist, is older than 25, and he's only 28.

Both franchises have built themselves around cores of young talent, especially in terms of depth on defense. That's always been the Hurricanes' way, by necessity. It has become the Rangers' way, in a cap world, after years of wasteful overspending on high-priced veterans. For the Hurricanes, last season was this group's introduction to playoff hockey. The Rangers are getting it now.

So the questions about where and how this series will be won have to start there, with each team's fastball, a combination of forwards with dazzling moves and skilled defensemen suited

for the modern game. And from the Hurricanes' Four Horsemen, it'll have to be more than last season.

Aho had 12 points in the 15 playoff games, but struggled with an injury that kept him from taking faceoffs for a big chunk of the playoffs. Svechnikov started hot, got knocked out and never really found his footing when he came back. Teravainen wasn't the playmaker he can be at his best. Slavin was ... well, Slavin is always Slavin.

Which is to say, last year wasn't bad, but it wasn't anywhere close to what these players can achieve. Aho in particular has so much more to offer. Svechnikov is a completely different player than he was 15 months ago. Teravainen was having a remarkable regular season before it ended abruptly. Slavin was ... well, Slavin is always Slavin.

"The group we had last year, the core that we have, those kids ... all those guys, they know how to do it," Staal said.

This is a chance for all of them — and others, to be sure — to show what they can do on this largest of stages, presumably unencumbered at this point by any of the usual 82-game wear-and-tear on their bodies. The Hurricanes envision this group at the heart of considerable future success for many years to come. Last year was a beginning, an introduction, and the Hurricanes went farther than anyone expected. There can be no turning back.

Because in a salary-cap world, even one tweaked and altered by the NHL and NHLPA amid the pandemic, the window doesn't stay open forever. Svechnikov is only a year away from a new contract that will rival Aho's; someone (or someones) will have to go to make room for that. Change is the only inevitability. It may seem like this group is only getting started, but the clock is already ticking.

Fishy, Svechy, Turbo, Slavo. By any names, their time has come. It is here. It is now.

Hurricanes enter qualifying series against Rangers without Dougie Hamilton

By Chip Alexander

For the Carolina Hurricanes, it's time.

The Canes put in two weeks of training camp in Raleigh, left for Toronto, practiced and played an exhibition game. Off the ice, they've played poker and Catan and mini-golf, all the typical team-bonding stuff, while adjusting to life in a "bubble" designed to keep them secure and healthy during the coronavirus pandemic.

But it's now time to begin what brought them together: pursuit of the Stanley Cup.

When the NHL players voted on the league's Return to Play playoff scenarios, the Canes voted against a 24-team format, preferring only the top 16 teams compete. The New York

Rangers, who were outside the 16 when the season was paused, took notice and took issue.

So here we are. The Canes and Rangers play Game 1 of their best-of-five qualifying round Saturday at Scotiabank Arena, and Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour said Friday they would do it without defenseman Dougie Hamilton.

Hamilton, injured during training camp, missed the last two practices in Raleigh and the three in Toronto, plus the exhibition game Wednesday. Brind'Amour said Hamilton, who got in some skating Friday after practice, was "getting better" but was still "unfit to play" — the NHL Phase 4 terminology — although the coach did not rule out a return during the series.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 1, 2020

"You would hope so but we're certainly not going to rush him back," Brind'Amour said in his media call. "But if he's close to being able to play he's going to get in there. We know the importance of having him in the lineup. It's a huge, huge loss for us. So we want to get him back in there ASAP."

Hamilton suffered a broken left fibula in January that required surgery, forced him to miss the 2020 NHL All-Star Weekend and kept him out of the last 21 games of the season before the pause. He was back skating and ready for training camp, only to leave the ice in pain during the July 22 practice at PNC Arena.

While Hamilton is out, the Canes could have forward Martin Necas in the lineup for Game 1. Necas, who left the final practice in Raleigh last Saturday with an undisclosed injury, had not been in team on-ice workouts in Toronto before returning Friday.

"Marty looked really good today and felt good," Brind'Amour said of Necas, a speedy winger who scored 16 goals and had 36 points as a rookie. "We'll see how that goes (Saturday), see if he feels the same way. We hope to see him in the lineup."

Brind'Amour did not say who Necas would replace among the forwards, should he play. Nor did he name his starting goaltender, saying he was waiting until Friday night to let the starter know he would be in net for Game 1.

Petr Mrazek started the exhibition game, allowing the three goals on 16 shots in the 3-2 loss to the Washington Capitals, albeit with scant defensive help. James Reimer stopped all nine shots he faced after entering in the second period.

"I envision that both guys will probably get action here," he said. "There's a lot of games in a short time frame. I think we'll probably get both guys in there."

The Canes were one of the best feel-good stories of the 2019 Stanley Cup playoffs, reaching the Eastern Conference finals. The games were intense, the crowds loud and lively at PNC Arena and the atmosphere frenzied.

The winner of the 24-team Return to Play format will be the 2020 Stanley Cup champion. But will the games have the real feel of playoff games given the impact of the virus, the lack of fans in the building, the confinement of living in a bubble in Toronto.

"I would say for sure the intensity will be there," Canes captain Jordan Staal said Friday in a media call. "As for momentum shifts, with the crowd and all that stuff, that might not be quite the same, obviously. But I know for a fact once that pucks drops it's going to be intense. It's going to be a good game, a good battle."

The Rangers swept the Canes in the regular season but that now seems like eons ago. Carolina made some changes at the trade deadline in February, bringing in center Vincent Trocheck and defensemen Sami Vatanen and Brady Skjei, giving the Canes a different cast and look.

Skjei was with the Rangers. Now, he'll be trying to beat the Rangers and said he won't be lacking motivation and should be playing with a "chip" on his shoulder against the team that traded him away.

And here's an intriguing stat: according to Dan Rosen of NHL.com, the NHL has not held a five-game postseason series since 1986. Of the 56 five-game series held in the 1980s, the winner of Game 1 won the series 49 times.

"The stress level goes up if you don't win that first one," Brind'Amour said.

CAROLINA HURRICANES VS NEW YORK RANGERS

What: Game 1, Qualifying Round.

When: Saturday, Noon

Where: Scotiabank Arena, Toronto.

Watch, listen: FOX Sports Carolinas is broadcasting the game remotely from PNC Arena, with Mike Maniscalco handling play by play and Tripp Tracy the analyst.

Look for: Who's in net. Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour will have either Petr Mrazek or James Reimer as his starting goalie. Rangers coach David Quinn could go with rookie Igor Shesterkin or the old pro, Henrik Lundqvist, who beat the Canes three times this season with a .947 save percentage and has dominated them in the past.

Questions: Can the Canes find a way to contain the Rangers' skill guys such as Mika Zibanejad and Artemi Panarin? That will be harder with defenseman Dougie Hamilton unable to play Game 1. The Rangers can quickly transition to offense and have the speed to get down ice. The Canes must establish a forecheck early and maintain pressure in the offensive zone, and be cleaner in the defensive zone.

Of note: As the designated home team and the higher seed, the Canes will have "last change" in Game 1. During any stop in play, Quinn must first send out any line or defensive changes and Brind'Amour then can counter with what he hopes presents favorable matchups for Carolina.

Quotable: "I'm fired up. I think when the playoffs come around you get amped up. You get to that extra level." -- Canes defenseman Brady Skjei.

Up next: Game 2, Monday at noon in Scotiabank Arena.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 1, 2020

THE ATHLETIC

Bag of Jerks: Brett Pesce's bubble entrance, Dougie Hamilton's timeline

By Sara Civian

Folks.

Folks!

Folks.

The NHL has pulled it off (so far). Real, meaningful hockey is hours away.

Mentally prepare yourself with some exhibition takeaways, a series preview and a Bag of Jerks.

Note: Submitted questions have been edited for clarity.

Just heard that Dougie Hamilton is out again. Will we see him against the Rangers? I know the injuries are undisclosed but is it a long-term thing? — Thomas B.

A few days after Hamilton left a training camp session in visible discomfort, I reported July 25 that:

Good news: It was not an aggravation of his season-ending broken fibula.

Bad(ish) news: Recovery time was most likely a matter of weeks.

As of July 31, I can tell you that's still the case. Hurricanes website writer Michael Smith (who is inside the bubble with the team) reported Friday that Hamilton skated with a tinted visor after practice, so that's a good sign. But still, head coach Rod Brind'Amour told the media that Hamilton is "getting better for sure, but he's unfit so he won't be in there tomorrow (Game 1)."

So, it depends what your definition of long term is — and injury timelines are imperfect — but I'd say he has a good chance of returning for Round 1. Anything is possible, and I'm not totally ruling it out, but I wouldn't bank on his return during the play-in.

What is the projected time frame for bringing Brett Pesce into the bubble? — Janet D.

Sometime in September is the best I can do for now, Janet. There will be updates as he gets closer to a return.

Do you think the door is still open for the team to re-sign John Forslund after the playoffs end or is all hope lost on that front? Thank you! — Michael A.

No problem, Michael A.

I'll let a quote from Forslund himself start us off.

"(General manager Don Waddell) has said (the Canes are 'leaving the door open') multiple times and I appreciate it," Forslund said. "That's nice of him to say. But what does that really mean, though? There's no dialogue. I would never look at a statement like that and scoff at it, but I want the reality to be there, too, of there isn't anything happening. I don't want any false pretense or anything like that with the fans. There's nothing happening between myself and the team. And until

that happens — or if it never happens, that's understandable — then I have to deal with the reality of being free for the first time in my career."

Technically the "door is open," but does that matter if neither side is walking through it?

Do you see Martin Necas back in a center role in the upcoming season or two? Or is he going to play mostly on the wing? He's a natural centerman, who played that position until this season. But the right wing seems to be a good spot for him — it's easier for him to create cross-zone passes and make plays. — Jakub H.

The good thing about being a "natural centerman" is that sometimes playing the wing makes life a little bit easier — especially when you're transitioning from the AHL to the NHL. Look at Tyler Seguin, another would-be star (pun actually not intended, but it made me giggle upon realization) coached by Mike Vellucci. Necas has the luxury of time — especially with the addition of Vincent Trocheck, whom he has been excellent alongside.

I definitely think Necas will get a crack at center, but there's clearly no rush. Like you said, he can make a play from anywhere — reminiscent of another Canes winger, Teuvo Teravainen. You could tell by Brind'Amour's sparing usage that he isn't 100 percent comfortable with Necas yet (not a knock on Necas, let's remember #depthchartSvech), and we know Brind'Amour expects even more than he already does in general out of centers.

If I had to guess, he'll get an opportunity the season after next season.

Hey Sara, how do things work for team staff and all the support staff, arena personnel, etc.? Are they all in the bubble? How do the folks not making millions feel about everything? I imagine being in Canada helps manage the health fears, so maybe it's a non-issue the way the league has designed things, but I'm curious what life looks like for non-competitors. — Blake A.

Hey Blake A., great question.

I have to say, I was incredibly skeptical of all of this when rumblings of a return to play emerged in May. I don't think I'd be doing my job if I just blindly went along with it. But — at least for now — it seems like the NHL is setting a really good example of what happens when you actually follow the rules, wear your mask, practice social distancing and keep your in-person social circle tight.

Training camp at PNC Arena was the safest I've felt in public since the start of the pandemic. You could tell everything had been planned out meticulously even for us media folk — so many precautions, signs indicating 6 feet apart, daily temperature checks, not even letting us use the same pens when checking in, etc. I'd imagine it's somehow 10 times safer than even that in the bubble, and that's where all the team staff is. I can't speak for anyone, but this seriousness, paired



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 1, 2020

with hub cities located in Canada, makes me confident that everyone is safe.

I would recommend following Smith on Twitter at @MSmithCanes and digital media extraordinaire Zack Brame at @Zackary_Brame to get a better idea about life in the bubble.

What elements will the team bring to Toronto to make it feel like a home game at the PNC? Should we expect the siren?
— Russell F.

I swear I heard a “cheaters never win” and quite possibly a “Raise Up” during the exhibition game. On top of that, The Athletic’s Joe Smith wrote a great story about what the NHL is doing to create home ice in the hubs.

Who will have the best coverage of bubble life? Trochek, Svech or Dzingel? — Lindsey H.

Svech is the art, Marty is the artist.

How are you adjusting to covering the team remotely? — JP L.

It’s pretty weird, to be honest. I got used to the gigantic privilege of traveling to almost every Hurricanes away game over the past two seasons, and now I’m not there for the most meaningful ones?

I miss all the little quirks and nuances I used to report on, but I totally get why I’m not there. It’s not worth it when we have reporters already in Canada and all the interviews are conducted via Zoom, anyhow. And I understand why it has to be the way it is — because they want to actually pull this off — but it still kind of stinks.

At the same time, it’ll be fun to lean into the kinds of stories I normally wouldn’t while so caught up in in-game coverage. Let me know what y’all want to see more of in the comments. I’ve probably never been more open to suggestions.

Hi Sara, Quick question for you. I saw that Haydn Fleury was the seventh defenseman yesterday but ended up playing more than (Trevor van Riemsdyk). Do you think he will play in the first game versus the New York Rangers? — Khaleel J.

Hi, Khaleel J.

I think that’s one of the questions Brind’Amour and his staff are still debating, but he sure made a case for himself during the exhibition.

Are you watching any player/pairing/line as a barometer for how ready or in their groove the Canes are come Saturday?
— David Z.

Great question. The answer is Sebastian Aho. His pattern of taking a month or so to turn on the jets has spanned throughout his Hurricanes tenure. It hasn’t been much of a concern in normal times because you know he eventually gets that first goal and the floodgates open, but things have never been more time sensitive. Will he find his game in time? He and the goaltending — whatever that ends up being — are my main Game 1 focus.

If the Canes lose the play-in series, would you consider this a disappointing year when viewed as a whole? Or, rather, does COVID-19 change how fans/pundits/writers view success/failure this year? — William H.

I mean, I’m impressed we even have playoff hockey at all. I’m chalking that up to a win if we see it through to the end. It’s too early to tell if I’d consider it a disappointment, but I’m inclined to appreciate the little things these days. To me right now, the only disappointment would be if someone gets unnecessarily sick and I’ll leave it at that.

Plus, if the Canes bow out early, there’s a huge chance they get a shot at Alexis Lafrenière. They’ve got a young core primed for years of success. Sorry for the hot take, but I think he’d help them out.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 1, 2020



Gold: Canes (real) gameday preview

By Adam Gold

This one counts.

Whatever that was against Washington on Wednesday afternoon doesn't matter. The questionable decisions, poor puck management, lack of offensive punch, etc., just water under the proverbial bridge. Saturday at noon against the Rangers is all that matters. Let's hope that the rust is gone, the timing is back and the speed returns. Because, judging from what we saw from the New Yorkers this year, Carolina is going to need all of their pistons firing to escape the Qualifying Series.

The Hurricanes have had two very important players on the "unfit to participate" list as Dougie Hamilton and Martin Necas have both missed practice for the better part of the last week or so. Hamilton's absence is troubling since he's so vital in all situations. He's the quarterback on the top power play unit, he was actually a pretty good option on the penalty kill, and his 5-on-5 play was probably the best it's been in his entire career. Sami Vatanen is a good player, but he's played just one (utterly meaningless) game with this team and he looked pretty mechanical.

Necas gives the Canes a high-end weapon, and would make a 3rd line absolutely lethal when you consider the way Vincent Trocheck looked in the exhibition against Washington. But, Morgan Geekie is a very smart player and with him centering the fourth line, Carolina is still a very good offensive team should Necas remain "unfit".

UPDATE: Necas was a full go in practice on Friday and will take the warm-up expecting to play. Stay tuned. It also appears that Hamilton could return at some point during this series, so it seems sunnier than usual here in North Carolina.

Before we take a complete guess at the lineup, a quick thought or two....

James Reimer was better than Petr Mrazek Wednesday afternoon against the Caps. Logic tells you that Rod should go with "Reims", but Rod has his guys and Petr is his guy. Hunch tells me Mrazek will get Game 1 and we'll go from there. Rod did say that he expects both goalies to play in this series anyway.

If Necas does draw in — a likelihood, given that he practiced in full on Friday — that leaves a decision to make for the head coach. Keep Geekie, a natural right handed center, in the lineup, or move Martinook to the middle on the fourth line. For my money, Geekie makes the bottom trio good, and dangerous. He has never looked out of place in the moment and I expect he stays in.

As for who comes out...here's where it gets tricky. Do you see Martinook, McGinn or Foegele not in the line up? I don't. For my money, those are guys that help you win, especially when they're all healthy. All three are part of the penalty kill,

one is part of leadership, one is a fearless shot-blocking fool and the last can play up in the line up and score goals. If you're asking me who draws the short straw, it's between Ryan Dzingel and Nino Niederreiter. Both can be huge offensive lifts, especially in a short series. Give Nino the edge for past performance with the club.

The look...(assuming Necas draws in the line up)

Svechnikov-Aho-Teravainen

Foegele-Staal-Williams

Niederreiter-Trocheck-Necas

Martinook-Geekie-McGinn

Slavin-Vatanen

Fleury-Skjei

Gardner-Edmundson

Mrazek

Reimer

Take me to your leaders...

Hurricanes

Points: Sebastian Aho, 66; Teuvo Teravainen, 63; Andrei Svechnikov, 61.

Goals: Aho, 38; Svechnikov, 24; Martin Necas 16, Teravainen 15.

Power play points: Teravainen, 21; Svechnikov, 20, Aho, 17.

Rangers

Points: Artemi Panelin, 95; Mika Zibanejad, 75, Ryan Strome, 59.

Goals: Zibanejad, 41; Panerin, 32; Chris Kreider, 24.

Power play points: Zibanejad, 27; Panerin, 24; Tony DeAngelo, 19.

Head to head...

The Rangers, as you are likely well aware by now, swept the season series from the Hurricanes. Not only did Carolina get skunked, but New York out-goaled the Canes by a 17-9 count. The Blue Shirts converted on 5 of their 15 power play tries (33%) while the Hurricanes were just 2 for 16 (12.5%). And, the New Yorkers were momentum killers, scoring three times within the last two minutes of a period and twice more in the first 90 seconds of others.

On the plus is that Carolina was probably better than the final scores might indicate. The Canes outshot New York 132-68 over the first three games only to get Hank'd each time. Henrik Lundqvist stopped 125 of those 132 shots (.947 SV%) as he



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 1, 2020

ran his career record against Carolina to 33-12-1 with a 2.00 GAA/.934 SV%.

Somehow, there's another bright side to this. It looks very much like the Rangers won't start Lundqvist, in spite of that mastery, as will instead go with rookie sensation Igor Shesterkin. He beat the Hurricanes in the season's final meeting, probably the Canes worst overall performance against New York this year, stopping 27 of 29 shots. And, he was clearly the Rangers top goaltender before the pause. He won 10 of his 12 starts with a 2.69 GAA and a .932 SV%.

Against the Rangers, Carolina was led in scoring by Jacob Slavin's 4 assists and Sebastian Aho's 3 goals. No one else scored more than one, with Brock McGinn, Dougie Hamilton and Ryan Dzingel each producing one goal and one assist.

On the other hand, New York has several "Canes Killers". Most notably, Mika Zibanejad who scored 4 goals and added 3 assists in just 3 games against the Hurricanes. Artemi Panerin actually led the Rangers in scoring in the season series with 3 goals and 6 assists. In addition, New York's blue line was uber productive as Tony DeAngelo, Jacob Trouba and Adam Fox (yes, THAT Adam Fox) combined for 11 points (2g9a) in the sweep.

The stakes....

Duh.

This isn't the beginning of the season, Game 1 matters. Game 1 matters a LOT. Is it the end if it doesn't turn up a Hurricanes win? No. But, in a 5-game series, there just isn't much margin for error. Statistically speaking, teams that win the opening game of a best of five series have gone on to win 87.5% (49 of 56) of the time. The Hurricanes all packed for a long stay in Toronto's secure zone and those bags will feel much heavier if their stay is less than two weeks

Storm Watch starring Alec Campbell begins at 11:30. Opening face off will follow at 12:08. Mike Maniscalco and Tripp Tracy will handle the play-calling responsibilities. Everything can be heard on 99.9 the Fan and Fox Sports Carolinas. As always, the Morning After Podcast will be in full effect following the game.

BONUS...

Why not....let's make some series predictions, shall we...

EASTERN CONFERENCE...

Top-4 Round Robin...

1-Tampa Bay, 2-Boston, 3-Washington, 4-Philadelphia.

The Lightning are crazy talented and added more grind to their game with some trade deadline moves. Barclay Goodrow is a good player and a perfect compliment to everything they need in the post season.

5-Pittsburgh vs 12-Montreal

Jake Guentzel is back and the Pens added depth with Jason Zucker and Patrick Marleau. Sidney Crosby is still the same guy and they won't have any trouble with the Canadiens.

Pick: Pens in 3

6-Carolina vs 11-New York Rangers

Would have been a whole lot easier if Carolina knew they'd have Dougie Hamilton for the series. It's a major question mark and means that Sami Vatanen will have to provide some answers. Carolina's big trio of Aho, Teravainen and Svechnikov have to produce.

Pick: Canes in 5

7-New York Islanders vs Florida

Isles are stingy, have good goaltending and solid from top to bottom. Only thing they really lack is high-end offensive talent beyond Matthew Barzal. Florida has more weapons, they were coming on strong before the pause, and Joel Quenneville will have them ready.

Pick: Panthers in 5.

8-Toronto vs 9-Columbus

Incredible contrast between these two teams. Leafs could pour in goals, especially if the game takes on a pond hockey feel — possible given the lack of game action for all clubs. But, the Jackets are such a grind and they're healthy and I see this being a test of character.

Pick: Blue Jackets in 5

WESTERN CONFERENCE...

Top-4 Round Robin...

1-Colorado, 2-Vegas, 3-St. Louis, 4-Dallas.

Speed, speed, speed, speed. Nathan McKinnon is back. Cale Makar is in his second go-round in the post season. I think the Avalanche will be the most ready out of the gate.

5-Edmonton vs 12-Chicago

The Blackhawks would be a great story. Dealt away a bunch of pieces at the deadline because they knew they weren't going to make the playoffs. Patrick Kane, Duncan Kieth, Corey Crawford returning from Covid-19. Sorry, only way Chicago beats Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl is if the Oilers get zero from their goaltenders.

Pick: Oilers in 4

6-Nashville vs 11-Arizona

Predators have been a little bit of a disappointment this year. The goaltending hasn't been as good. The stars haven't been as good. And, the coach got fired. Arizona is a team on the come and if Taylor Hall can slap a series together...

Pick: Coyotes in 5

7-Vancouver vs 10-Minnesota

The Wild were playing some of their best hockey at the pause. They'd won 8 of their last 11, which began with a shootout win at Vancouver. But, I think that had as much to do with the pressure being off as anything else. J.T. Miller is a perfect addition — not to mention their top scorer — to a young team on the rise.

Pick: Canucks in 4.

8-Calgary vs 9-Winnipeg



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 1, 2020

Another team in the west that went through the emotional ringer of a coaching change. The Flames have high end talent in Johnny Gaudreau and a determined star in Matthew Tkachuk. But, if the Jets get any kind of solid play behind

defensemen Neal Pionk and Josh Morrissey, they're going to cause trouble in Edmonton.

Pick: Jets in 5.



Game 1 Preview: Rangers vs. Hurricanes

Best-of-five Cup Qualifiers begin in Toronto

by Michael Smith

TORONTO - It's been 143 days - nearly 40 percent of 2020 - since the Carolina Hurricanes last played a hockey game.

That was their 68th game of the season, a midweek match-up against the Detroit Red Wings that ended in a 5-2 win for the Canes, their third in a row.

The next day, the National Hockey League paused the 2019-20 season due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Nearly five months later, the puck is set to drop on the Stanley Cup Qualifiers, a best-of-five postseason round that pits the sixth-seeded Canes against the New York Rangers.

"We're excited. It's been a long wait," said Brady Skjei, who the Canes acquired from New York at the trade deadline. "We've been itching to get back. Our team is fired up to play. Me personally, I'm really excited."

The Qualifying Round

Winning the Stanley Cup is said to be the toughest 16 wins in sports.

It's going to take 19 wins this year for the Canes to capture hockey's ultimate prize.

"To go through this type of playoffs ... whoever wins this is going to earn it," head coach Rod Brind'Amour said during Phase 3. "You've got to grind this out."

The lone asterisk beside this championship will be just how tough it was to win it. Every team has had multiple months to rest, refresh and recalibrate. Every team is at essentially full strength. And this year, there's an extra round to grind out just to get to the First Round of the Stanley Cup Playoffs.

Even minus a packed house and a raucous playoff atmosphere, the Cup Qualifiers are going to feature high-stakes hockey.

"The intensity will be there. As for momentum shifts with the crowd and all that stuff, that might not be quite the same, obviously, but I know for a fact as soon as that puck drops, it's going to be intense," Jordan Staal said. "It's going to be a good game. It's going to be a good battle."

It's been 34 years since the NHL last staged a best-of-five postseason series. In the 56 series that took place in the

1980s, the team that won Game 1 went on to win the series 49 times (87.5 percent).

"You always prepare to win every game that you play," Brind'Amour said. "The difference is, I think the stress level goes up if you don't win that first one. The runway is less to get back."

"Every game in the playoffs is extremely important, but getting off to a good start in a five-game series is definitely a huge thing," Skjei said. "You don't want to fall down."

Necas Hopeful, Hamilton Out

Martin Necas joined the Canes at practice on Friday, skating on the right wing alongside Vincent Trocheck and Nino Niederreiter. The hope that Necas, who had not practiced since leaving Saturday's skate in Raleigh, will be able to draw into the lineup.

Necas, who will be making his NHL playoff debut, has won championships in each of his last three professional seasons (HC Kometa Brno in 2017 and 2018, and Charlotte Checkers in 2019).

"Marty looked really good today. He felt good. We'll see how that goes tomorrow and make sure he feels the same way," Brind'Amour said. "We hope to see him in the lineup."

The Canes will not see Dougie Hamilton in the lineup, though. Hamilton, who hasn't seen game action since mid-January when he broke his left fibula, left last Wednesday's skate in Raleigh and hasn't been able to practice since. He did skate following Friday's team practice, but he won't be available for the weekend.

"He's getting better, for sure, but he's unfit, so he won't be in there tomorrow," Brind'Amour said. "We're certainly not going to rush him back. If he's close to being able to play, he's going to get in there. We know the importance of having him in the lineup. That's a huge, huge loss for us, so we want to get him back in there ASAP."

The Last Meetings

As Metropolitan Division opponents, the Canes and Rangers met up four times in the shortened regular season: twice in November, once before the new year and a final time in late February. The Rangers outscored the Canes, 17-9, and swept the season series.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 1, 2020

"I think the whole regular season is so gone far back, that even if we won four in a row or whatever, I just think it would be such a non-factor," Brind'Amour said. "Everybody is coming in different right now and starting fresh. That's the key."

The Opposition

The Rangers enter this 24-team postseason tournament as the 11th seed in the Eastern Conference after finishing the abbreviated regular season with a 37-28-5 record and 79 points. Artemi Panarin is a Hart Trophy finalist after ranking third in the league in points (95) and tied for second in assists

(63) in 69 games. Mika Zibanejad ranked fifth in the league in goals (41) and totaled 75 points in 57 games.

"They have some high-end skill," said Skjei, someone who can provide a detailed scouting report on the Canes' opponent. "A main part of our game is puck pressure and being aggressive, so if we can stay above them and take away their time and space, it will definitely play into our hands. You can't give those guys much room because they will make plays. Stay on them, keep that puck pressure up and limit their space."

Necas Hopeful, Hamilton Out for Game 1 of Qualifiers

Necas back at practice, Hamilton 'getting better'

by Michael Smith

TORONTO - It was a mixed bag of player health news for the Carolina Hurricanes on Friday morning at Ford Performance Centre.

Martin Necas, who had not practiced with the team since Saturday, returned to the ice with the Canes and was a full participant, a good indicator of his status heading into Game 1 of the Stanley Cup Qualifiers against the New York Rangers.

Necas skated on the right wing alongside Vincent Trocheck and Nino Niederreiter and was also utilized on the second power play unit.

"Marty looked really good today. He felt good. We'll see how that goes tomorrow," head coach Rod Brind'Amour said after practice. "We hope to see him in the lineup."

Dougie Hamilton did not practice again on Friday. He has been skating in Toronto, though, and he continued to put in on-ice work with Brind'Amour following Friday's practice.

Hamilton, who last played in mid-January before suffering a broken fibula in his left leg, departed a training camp skate last Wednesday with an undisclosed injury.

"He's getting better, for sure, but he's unfit, so he won't be in there tomorrow," Brind'Amour said. "We're certainly not going

to rush him back. If he's close to being able to play, he's going to get in there. WE know the importance of having him in the lineup. That's a huge, huge loss for us, so we want to get him back in there ASAP."

In his stead, Sami Vatanen will skate on the right side of Jacob Slavin on the Canes' top defensive pairing. Vatanen, a right shot, will also play the point on the team's first power play unit.

According to Vincent Trocheck, Vatanen has a "cannon" of a shot. Fellow Finn Sebastian Aho agreed. "Yeah, he has a pretty good shot," Aho said in his postgame comments.

Elsewhere in the Canes' lineup, Brind'Amour said a decision has been made on the starting goaltender, but don't be surprised to potentially see both Petr Mrazek and James Reimer.

"The amount of games and the short timeframe there is between games, I think we'll probably get both guys in there," Brind'Amour said. "I'm glad both guys look really good and feel good about their game. We're good either way."

The puck drops in Game 1 of the Stanley Cup Qualifiers at noon on Saturday. FOX Sports Carolinas will carry the game locally, while NBCSN has the national broadcast. You can hear the game on 99.9 The Fan in Raleigh, 730 the Game in Charlotte or through the Canes mobile app.

Stanley Cup Qualifiers Preview: Hurricanes vs. Rangers

Canes return to postseason, begin with best-of-five series

by Michael Smith

TORONTO - The Carolina Hurricanes are supposed to be here.

Not necessarily "here," as in playing in a 24-team postseason tournament in a bubble in Toronto in August.

No, no one could have predicted that.

But they are supposed to be here, as in competing for the Stanley Cup.

This is what they're built for, and this competition is one to which they've been building since the first whistle of training camp.

"We've got a very strong team, and we're pretty confident," Brock McGinn said.

"We've got a group that is hungry for another run and hungry for a Cup," Jordan Staal said.

On March 12, the Hurricanes were trending upward. They had won three games in a row and were climbing in the standings in a tight playoff race in the Eastern Conference. They occupied the first wild card spot but had their eyes set on the top three in Metropolitan Division. With seven of their remaining 14 games against divisional opponents, including three against Pittsburgh alone, it seemed a realistic possibility.

Then, everything came to a screeching halt when the NHL had to pause its 2019-20 regular season due to the COVID-19 pandemic.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 1, 2020

Almost five months later, the NHL has returned to the ice in two hub cities, and the Canes are back in the postseason in consecutive years for the first time since 2001 and 2002.

"We're a hungry team," Sebastian Aho said.

"We're ready for it," Jaccob Slavin said. "We know what we're going up against, and we know what we have to do to win."

It's a little different this year, of course. There are 24 teams involved in this one-of-a-kind postseason tournament. There is a best-of-five qualifying round series. There are no fans. There is no home-ice advantage. It's the middle of summer.

But, it's still hockey, and there's a championship on the line. The 19-win quest to hoist Lord Stanley's Cup begins for the Canes in the Stanley Cup Qualifiers.

"It's going to be a hard, hard one to win," Jordan Martinook said. "Everybody is kind of at level playing ground. We're excited for the challenge."

By the Numbers

2019-20 Regular Season Stats

38-25-5	Record	37-28-5
81	Points	79
3.19	Goals per game	3.33
2.84	Goals against per game	3.14
22.3%	Power Play	22.9%
84.0%	Penalty Kill	77.4%
33.3	Shots for per game	31.1
29.3	Shots against per game	34.0

Revisiting the Season Series

Even though the 2019-20 regular season was cut short, the Canes and Rangers played the entirety of their four-game series.

The Rangers outscored the Canes 17-9 en route to a series sweep, but a lot has changed since prior to the trade deadline in late February.

"I think the whole regular season is so gone far back, that even if we won four in a row or whatever, I just think it would be such a non-factor," head coach Rod Brind'Amour said. "Everybody is coming in different right now and starting fresh. That's the key."

"It's going to be a tough team, but I think the way we match-up against them, we match up well. Whatever happened in the regular season is behind us now. The playoffs are a completely different story. I like our chances, and I like the team we have," said Vincent Trocheck, a key trade deadline acquisition. "We're built for the playoffs."

Nov. 7: Rangers 4, Hurricanes 2

The Canes liked pretty much everything about their game except the final result. In just the first 20 minutes alone, the Canes dominated possession, shot attempts (44-11) and shots on goal (22-6). The Rangers, though, led 1-0 at the first intermission.

In total, Carolina peppered Henrik Lundqvist with 47 shots, but the King, starting for the second consecutive night in a back-to-back for the 85th time in his career, made 45 saves in a sterling performance.

"We dominated that game. The bounces didn't go our way. A couple key saves for them," Warren Foegele said after the game. "The result isn't what we wanted, but we worked really hard tonight and had so many grade-A chances."

"I think we were the better team from start to finish, and their goalie was great. That happens," Brind'Amour said in his postgame remarks. "In 82 games, your goalie steals one here and there. That's what happened."

Nov. 27: Rangers 3, Hurricanes 2

While the Canes were satisfied with their first period (score aside) against the Rangers 20 days prior, this one was one to forget.

Mika Zibanejad, Brendan Smith and Adam Fox buried the Canes in a 3-0 hole in the first period, and that was pretty much that, despite the Canes' best efforts to erase the rotten start.

"It's tough to climb out of a 3-0 hole," Ryan Dzingel said. "You can't do that in the NHL. You're going to be behind the eight ball, and you're not going to be able to get it done."

The Canes did at least fight back with a markedly better second period.

Dzingel netted a power-play goal to get the Canes on the board, and just 89 seconds later, Foegele, who finished the night with a game-high nine shots on goal, made it a one-goal game.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 1, 2020

Martin Necas was inches away from tying the game, but Lundqvist, who made 41 saves on 43 shots, made his timeliest and best stop of the night, paddling away Necas' look at an otherwise wide-open net.

"It's a 60-minute game. You have to play for 60 minutes. We weren't ready at the start," Brind'Amour said. "We were a little sluggish. Bing, bing, bing, and now you have to dig yourself out of a hole. We weren't able to do that."

Dec. 27: Rangers 5, Hurricanes 3

In about 17 minutes of game time, the Rangers scored four straight goals, including two power-play markers from Zibanejad, to turn the Canes' 1-0 lead into a three-goal deficit.

"We worked hard, but we gave them too many easy goals," Aho said. "The game was right there. We played it well enough and had a lot of scoring chances. The system works, obviously. When we have a chance, we have to be a little bit sharper."

The Canes were able to put three pucks past Lundqvist, with Lucas Wallmark, Brett Pesce and Aho finding the scoresheet, but the Rangers' netminder still made 39 saves. In total, Lundqvist stopped 125 of 132 shots (.947 save percentage) he faced in the first three games of the season series.

"Lundqvist always plays pretty solid against us. I feel like we had really good chances tonight. I think, for the most part, we played a pretty good game," Slavin said. "But, there were little turnovers we had, little lapses we had that ended up costing us the game." cember 27, 2019

Feb. 21: Rangers 5, Hurricanes 2

Though the Canes finally drew a different Rangers starting goaltender, they couldn't change the result, as New York skated away from Raleigh with a 5-2 win and a season series sweep.

Again, it was a string of goals that dropped the Canes in a multi-goal hole. McGinn, playing in his 300th career NHL game, tied the score at one in the second period. From there, Jesper Fast, Brady Skjei (just three days before he was dealt to Carolina) and Artemi Panarin put the Rangers up 4-1. Aho answered back with a power-play goal a little more than five minutes into the third period, but that's as close as the Canes came to evening the score.

Rookie netminder Igor Shesterkin made 27 saves.

"We've got to be playing better hockey and find ways to beat them with our own game," Staal said. "We had to be more desperate. It wasn't there. That's frustrating this time of year."

Why the Hurricanes Pose a Challenge for the Rangers

Depth

The Canes' depth, especially on the blue line, is one of the team's greatest strengths heading into the postseason.

Even with Dougie Hamilton's status a question mark - he has not practiced with the team since last Wednesday - the Canes have seven viable NHL options on defense.

"One of the deepest D corps in the league, and our offense is right there, too," Joel Edmundson said. "We've got a stacked team."

"We're as deep as we've ever been," Brind'Amour said on the first day of camp. "It's a great problem to have."

Now, the challenge is to figure out who plays and who sits for Game 1.

"We've got a lot of decisions to make now. We all along knew this time would come," Brind'Amour said following the exhibition against Washington. "We've got two days to put the best lineup out there possible."

The lineup could be a fluid situation throughout the series, too. That, after all, is the benefit of quality depth.

"The team that wins this, they're going to have to have depth. I can tell you that," Brind'Amour said. "If you want to win it, you've got to have it."

Experience

What a difference a year makes.

In April 2019, the Canes were a scrappy, young bunch that surged their way up the standings and into the postseason for the first time in a decade. The playoffs - the emotion, the intensity, the highs and the lows - were a fresh experience for many.

The Canes had just 11 players on their roster who had previous postseason experience, combining for 363 games. Justin Williams accounted for 140 of those games alone.

A year later, the Canes' roster boasts 696 combined games of playoff experience and includes 16 players who competed in the team's run to the Eastern Conference Final in 2019.

"I think [experience] is extremely beneficial," Williams said. "We had some great experiences last year, some great breakthroughs, and guys learned about playoff hockey. That was really important."

"Going into this postseason, obviously it's different for everybody, especially with the play-in round, but I don't expect that round to be any less intense than the First Round or the Conference Final was last year," Slavin said.

A Fresh Pair of Eyes

It's not that one player - aside from a goaltender, perhaps - is going to shift a series one way or the other, but Skjei could be a valuable resource for the Canes. He's already going to play a key role on the team's blue line, and he also has a wealth of insight about the team with which he played 307 of his 314 career NHL games.

"I don't want to give away too much, but we've talked to Brady a little bit," Brind'Amour said during Phase 3. "We'll definitely use him as a resource when we start dialing up more talking about our opponent."

"These two teams have seen each other enough to where everyone kind of knows each guy's game," Skjei said. "I'll definitely give some inside scoops to give us the best chance to win."



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 1, 2020

When there is a championship on the line, there isn't much added motivated needed. But, Skjei?

"I can tell you I'm really excited and looking forward to it. I've got a ton of motivation," he said. "I really enjoyed my time in New York and loved every part of it, but now I've got a ton of motivation, a chip on my shoulder going into this playoff series. I'll do everything possible and everything I can to come out of this series victorious."

Why the Rangers Pose a Challenge for the Hurricanes

Goaltending

The Rangers' goaltending, specifically the play of Lundqvist, was one of, if not *the* biggest difference maker in the season series.

Lundqvist was 3-0-0 with a 2.33 goals-against average and a .947 save percentage against the Canes in 2019-20. In his last 11 appearances against the Canes, he's an even more impressive 10-1-0 with a 1.64 goals-against average and a .956 save percentage. Pulling back even further to Feb. 2011, Lundqvist is 24-4-0 with a 1.73 goals-against average and a .947 save percentage over the course of 28 appearances against the Canes.

And he might not even start in Game 1.

Shesterkin went 10-2-0 with a 2.52 goals-against average and a .932 save percentage in 12 starts after being recalled from the AHL in early January.

High-End Power Play

If not the team's goaltending, it was the Rangers' power play that helped turn the tide in the season series. New York was 5-for-15 (33.3 percent) on the man advantage, while the Canes were 2-for-16 (12.5 percent).

The Rangers finished the season ranked seventh in the NHL on the power play (22.9 percent), but the Canes were tenths of a percentage point behind them in eighth (22.3 percent).

"Special teams are always the key. They've got a good power play with high-end players. That's going to be crucial, and it always is," Brind'Amour said. "We're going to have to be better on the kill. Our power play wasn't great either. Although, when I went through it, we actually had quite a few opportunities. Sometimes those stats can be a little deceiving, but at the end of the day, we've got to kill penalties."

Zibanejad and Panarin are dangerous enough offensively. Panarin finished the abbreviated regular season ranked third in the league in points (95) and tied for second in assists (63) in 69 games and is a Hart Trophy finalist. Zibanejad ranked fifth in the league in goals (41) and totaled 75 points in 57

games. Both are key contributors on the Rangers' man advantage, accounting for a combined 51 power-play points.

"They've got some elite players," Foegele said during Phase 3. "They definitely have some threats. We just have to stick to our system. We've been practicing all week on special teams. We'll try to limit their high-danger scoring chances."

Unpredictable Randomness

A best-of-five series, especially one following an extended break and a lone exhibition game, is likely going to be a toss-up. The hockey could be sloppy, the execution could be rusty and the results could be chaotic, much like you'd find in the preseason and even the first couple of weeks in the regular season.

This poses a challenge for the Canes, just as it does for anyone involved in the Cup Qualifiers.

Starts are constantly emphasized, whether it's starting off strong in the regular season so as not to get buried in the standings in October and November, or starting off strong in a game so as not have to climb out of a multi-goal deficit.

The team that establishes its game first in a best-of-five series will undoubtedly have the upper hand with very little margin for error for the opposition.

"You're not going to wait around on anybody for too long, whether it's the goalies or a player. If you feel like their game's not there, I don't think you can wait to get them going," Brind'Amour mused. "Now, a guy might have a bad game, but he still could be ready, you know what I mean? That's a different scenario. But if you feel like they're just not up to speed, I don't think any coach can wait around too long here. There's just not enough games."

The Bottom Line

In September, some four months removed from being ousted in the 2019 Eastern Conference Final, the Canes began a new journey with renewed expectations and a strong foundation of the culture they fostered with a deep playoff run.

The Canes didn't set out to simply qualify for the playoffs again. They want to be the best team in the league and capture hockey's ultimate prize.

It's been a long wait, but a preseason, 68 games in the regular season and a near five-month pause later, the Canes finally have the opportunity to fulfill their day-one goal.

"I've been itching at the bit to get going here," Trocheck said. "I know all the guys in here really want to win a Stanley Cup. That's what we're fighting for."



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 1, 2020



3 Keys: Rangers vs. Hurricanes, Game 1 of Cup Qualifiers

Starting goalies unknown; defenseman Hamilton out for Carolina

by Dan Rosen

No. 11 Rangers vs. No. 6 Hurricanes

Noon ET; NBCSN, NHL.TV, SN, TVAS, FS-CR, MSG

The New York Rangers and Carolina Hurricanes will begin their best-of-5 Stanley Cup Qualifier series at Scotiabank Arena in Toronto on Saturday.

The Rangers went 4-0-0 against the Hurricanes in the regular season, winning all four games in regulation by a combined 17-9.

Carolina defenseman Dougie Hamilton will not play, but coach Rod Brind'Amour said Friday he is hopeful he will return in the series.

There hasn't been a best-of-5 series in the NHL since 1986. The League used them for the preliminary round of the Stanley Cup Playoffs from 1980-86, and the team that won Game 1 went on to win the series 87.5 percent of the time (49 of 56).

Here are 3 keys to Game 1:

1. Who's in net?

It remains unknown who will be the starting goalies. Brind'Amour and Rangers coach David Quinn each declined to make an announcement Friday.

Rookie Igor Shesterkin is considered the favorite for the Rangers and started their exhibition game against the New York Islanders on Wednesday, making six saves on seven shots in 29:10. Henrik Lundqvist and Alexandar Georgiev are the other options.

Petr Mrazek was considered the favorite for Carolina going into its exhibition game against the Washington Capitals on Wednesday but allowed three goals on 16 shots in 32:25. James Reimer made the save on all nine shots he faced in relief, perhaps pushing himself into a starting role in Game 1.

2. Creating emotion

The Rangers and Hurricanes will be the first teams to play a game in the Qualifiers without fans in the arena.

Each got a taste of what that was like in their exhibition game, but with the added meaning of the qualifier series, they'll have to generate their own emotion without the typical roar of the crowd to fuel them.

"It's the first thing you notice when you skate out, that energy and the buzz, kids asking for pucks and signs and all that fun stuff, it wasn't there," New York defenseman Marc Staal said. "Definitely a bit adjustment for everyone out there. Once you're in your shift on the ice, your focus goes solely into what you're doing, but you still notice that it's quiet. It'll be something that as you go forward, it'll get more comfortable and you'll get more used to because that's the new normal right now."

3. Forecheck vs. transition

The Hurricanes are one of the best and most aggressive forechecking teams in the NHL. They create havoc getting the puck in below the goal line and sending two forecheckers in to aggressively chase it down. It's how they create turnovers that lead to scoring chances.

The New York defensemen must be ready to turn and go get the puck, strong when they do, and quick with their decisions in order to limit the effectiveness of Carolina's forecheck.

If they can, the Rangers will be able to play to their strength, which is their transition game and generating chances off the rush.

Rangers projected lineup

Chris Kreider -- Mika Zibanejad -- Pavel Buchnevich

Artemi Panarin -- Ryan Strome -- Jesper Fast

Phillip Di Giuseppe -- Filip Chytil -- Kaapo Kakko

Brett Howden -- Greg McKegg -- Julien Gauthier

Brendan Smith -- Jacob Trouba

Ryan Lindgren -- Adam Fox

Marc Staal -- Tony DeAngelo

Igor Shesterkin

Henrik Lundqvist

Scratched: Alexandar Georgiev, Steven Fogarty, Tim Gettinger, Vitali Kravtsov, Vinni Lettieri, Danny O'Regan, Brandon Crawley, Libor Hajek, Darren Raddysh

Unfit to play: None

Suspended: Brendan Lemieux

Hurricanes projected lineup

Andrei Svechnikov -- Sebastian Aho -- Teuvo Teravainen

Nino Niederreiter -- Vincent Trocheck -- Martin Necas

Warren Foegele -- Jordan Staal -- Justin Williams

Brock McGinn -- Morgan Geekie -- Jordan Martinook



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 1, 2020

Jacob Slavin -- Sami Vatanen

Brady Skjei -- Joel Edmundson

Jake Gardiner -- Haydn Fleury

Petr Mrazek

James Reimer

Scratched: Ryan Dzingel, Trevor van Riemsdyk, Clark Bishop, Steven Lorentz, Max McCormick, Jake Bean, Roland McKeown, Anton Forsberg, Alex Nedeljkovic

Unfit to play: Dougie Hamilton, Brett Pesce, Martin Necas

Status report

DeAngelo will be a game-time decision after he didn't practice Friday, Quinn said. Hajek likely would replace him. ... Lemieux, a forward, will serve the first of a two-game suspension for interference against Colorado Avalanche forward Joonas Donskoi on March 11. ... Hamilton, who left the ice in discomfort during power-play drills July 22 and has not practiced since, skated on his own Friday. ... Brind'Amour is hopeful Necas will be able to play. The forward practiced Friday for the first time since the Hurricanes arrived in Toronto, the Eastern Conference hub city.

Hamilton out for Hurricanes in Game 1 of Cup Qualifiers against Rangers

Defenseman left practice last week; Carolina won't reveal starting goalie

Dougie Hamilton will not play for the Carolina Hurricanes in Game 1 of the Stanley Cup Qualifiers against the New York Rangers at Scotiabank Arena in Toronto on Saturday (Noon ET; NBCSN, NHL.TV, SN, TVAS, FS-CR, MSG).

The defenseman has not practiced since July 22, when he left the ice in discomfort during power-play drills. He skated on his own after practice Friday in Toronto, the Eastern Conference hub city.

"Dougie is getting better for sure, but he's unfit [to play] so he won't be in there tomorrow," Carolina coach Rod Brind'Amour said Friday.

Brind'Amour said he's hopeful Hamilton will play at some point during the best-of-5 series.

"We would hope so, but we're certainly not going to rush him back," he said. "But if he's close to being able to play he's going to get in there. We know the importance of having him in the lineup. That's a huge, huge loss for us, so we want to get him back in there ASAP."

The Hurricanes are the No. 6 seed against the No. 11 Rangers.

Hamilton hasn't played since having surgery Jan. 17 to repair a fractured left fibula. He scored 40 points (14 goals, 26 assists) in 47 games this season.

Forward Martin Necas practiced Friday and is questionable for Game 1. It was his first time on the ice since leaving practice July 25.

"Marty looked really good today, felt good, so we'll see how that goes tomorrow," Brind'Amour said. "Make sure he feels the same way, obviously, and then we hope to see him in the lineup."

Brind'Amour would not reveal whether goalie Petr Mrazek or James Reimer would start Game 1. Mrazek started and played 32:25 in a 3-2 loss to the Washington Capitals in an exhibition game in Toronto on Wednesday. He allowed three goals on 16 shots. Reimer relieved Mrazek and made nine saves without allowing a goal.

"We're going to tell them tonight," Brind'Amour said. "I definitely have a plan but I don't want to say it now when I haven't told them. I envision that both guys will probably get action here with the amount of games and how short time frame there is between games. I think we'll probably get both guys in there. I'm glad both guys look really good and feel good about their game, so we're good either way."

First-day teams take goalie decisions for Qualifiers down to wire

Drama builds before naming Game 1 starters

by Adam Kimelman

The drama of the NHL postseason already has started, with seven of the 10 teams scheduled to play Saturday, the first day of the Stanley Cup Qualifiers, unwilling to reveal their starting goalie.

"As far as the goaltender ... there's an old hockey movie called 'Slap Shot,' where somebody walks up to Paul Newman and asks him how his power play is," Edmonton Oilers coach Dave Tippett said Friday. "And all he said was, 'We're working on it.'"

"That's my answer for the goaltenders: We're working on it."

New York Rangers coach David Quinn is among those still working on it, saying he would wait until game time to announce which of his three goalies would start Game 1 of the best-of-5 series against the Carolina Hurricanes at Scotiabank

Arena in Toronto (Noon ET; NBCSN, NHL.TV, SN, TVAS, FS-CR, MSG).

Igor Shesterkin allowed one goal on seven shots playing the first half of the Rangers' 2-1 loss to the New York Islanders in an exhibition game Wednesday. Henrik Lundqvist played the second half and made 14 saves on 15 shots. Alexandar Georgiev was scratched.

Shesterkin is a 24-year-old rookie with 12 games of NHL experience who had a .932 save percentage this season. Lundqvist is second to Marc-Andre Fleury of the Vegas Golden Knights among active NHL goalies in playoff starts (140-128) and wins (78-61). The 38-year-old also helped the Rangers reach the Stanley Cup Final in 2014. Georgiev had a .910 save percentage in 34 games this season but has never played in the NHL postseason.

Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour was unwilling to announce whether Petr Mrazek or James Reimer would start



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 1, 2020

Saturday, in part because he hadn't told the goalies prior to his media session Friday.

"I definitely have a plan but I don't want to say it now when I haven't told them," Brind'Amour said. "I envision that both guys will probably get action here with the amount of games and how short a time frame there is between games. I think we'll probably get both guys in there. I'm glad both guys look really good and feel good about their game, so we're good either way."

Mrazek allowed three goals on 16 shots playing the first half of the Hurricanes' 3-2 exhibition loss to the Washington Capitals on Wednesday, and Reimer made nine saves. Mrazek had a 2.69 goals-against average and a .905 save percentage in 40 games (38 starts) this season; Reimer had a 2.66 GAA and a .914 save percentage in 25 games (24 starts).

Calgary Flames coach Geoff Ward said he knows who their Game 1 starter will be against the Winnipeg Jets at Rogers Place in Edmonton (10:30 p.m. ET; NBCSN, NHL.TV, CBC, SN), but also did not reveal it. The Jets are expected to start Connor Hellebuyck.

Cam Talbot allowed two goals on 21 shots playing the first half of the Flames' 4-1 exhibition loss to the Oilers on Wednesday, and David Rittich allowed two goals on nine shots.

Rittich had most of the work early in the season, starting 32 of the Flames' first 42 games, but after the break for the 2020 NHL All-Star Game, Rittich made 12 starts to Talbot's eight.

"I'm not willing to divulge mostly because I haven't told the guys yet," Ward said. "We have a practice coming up shortly. I'll be meeting with them after practice at some point, but we have made a decision."

Islanders coach Barry Trotz would go as far as confirming that his team would have someone standing in the net when the puck drops for Game 1 against the Florida Panthers in Toronto, the Eastern Conference hub city (4 p.m. ET; NBCSN, NHL.TV, SN1, TVAS, MSG+, FS-F). Sergei Bobrovsky is expected to start for the Panthers.

"We will have a goaltender, correct," Trotz said.

Semyon Varlamov made 19 saves in two periods against the Rangers on Wednesday. Thomas Greiss allowed one goal on eight shots in the third.

Varlamov and Greiss alternated starts for the first 33 games of the regular season. Varlamov had a 2.62 GAA and a .914 save percentage in 45 games (39 starts) and Greiss had a 2.74 GAA and a .913 save percentage in 31 games (29 starts).

Greiss had a .944 save percentage in six games against the Panthers during the 2016 Eastern Conference First Round then an .890 save percentage in the second round against the Tampa Bay Lightning. Varlamov hasn't played in the NHL postseason since 2014 with the Colorado Avalanche.

Pittsburgh Penguins coach Mike Sullivan also was waiting one more day to announce whether Matt Murray or Tristan Jarry would start Game 1 against the Montreal Canadiens in Toronto (8 p.m. ET; NBC, CBC, SN, TVAS). It's expected Montreal will start Carey Price.

Murray allowed two goals on 12 shots playing the first half of a 3-2 overtime loss to the Philadelphia Flyers on Wednesday. Jarry allowed one goal on 10 shots.

Jarry said the unknown hasn't affected his approach, with the series winners advancing to the Stanley Cup Playoffs.

"It's just taking it day by day, making sure our practice habits are staying where they need to be," he said. "For Matt and I, I think it's just preparing like we both would be playing, and whoever gets the call on Saturday, we'll be ready."

Murray has more experience, helping the Penguins win the Stanley Cup in 2016 and 2017, but he had an .899 save percentage and a 2.87 GAA in 38 games (38 starts) this season. Jarry had a 2.43 GAA and a .921 save percentage in 33 games (31 starts).

"We're fortunate to have both of these guys," Sullivan said. "They're both capable of being real good goaltenders and helping us win."

The Chicago Blackhawks haven't announced if their two-time Stanley Cup champion goalie, Corey Crawford, will start Game 1 against the Oilers in Edmonton, the Western Conference hub city (3 p.m. ET; NBC, SN), but Crawford said he felt good after making 11 saves playing the first half of a 4-0 exhibition win against the St. Louis Blues on Wednesday. Malcolm Subban made 10 saves.

Crawford practiced once during training camp after testing positive for COVID-19.

"I should be ready to go, unless something crazy happens last minute," he said Thursday. "I should be all right."

Tippett and his staff still are working on if Mike Smith or Mikko Koskinen would start Game 1 for Edmonton. Koskinen made 17 saves playing the first half of the 4-1 exhibition win against the Flames. Smith allowed one goal on 20 shots.

They split play during the season; Smith had a .902 save percentage in 39 games (37 starts), and Koskinen had a .917 save percentage in 38 games (34 starts).

Skaters around the NHL said that whoever their coach chose, they would be behind that goalie.

"The thing with our two goalies is, no matter who goes in there, we have so much confidence in them," Oilers defenseman Darnell Nurse said. "At this point we've played over 70 games, so when either guy goes in there you know what to expect. They're both really, really good goaltenders that we're fortunate to have."



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 1, 2020



Hurricanes' Dougie Hamilton out for Rangers series opener

TORONTO (AP) — All-Star defenseman Dougie Hamilton won't play for the Carolina Hurricanes in Saturday's opener against the New York Rangers in the Eastern Conference's expanded playoff qualifying round.

Hamilton has missed multiple practices, though the league has prohibited teams from disclosing whether a player is injured or ill amid the coronavirus pandemic. A team reporter tweeted a photo of Hamilton taking the ice to skate after Friday's practice.

Carolina coach Rod Brind'Amour says Hamilton is "getting better for sure," and the team hopes he will play in the best-of-5 series.

"We're certainly not going to rush him back, but if he's close to being able to play, he's going to get in there," Brind'Amour said.

Hamilton broke his left leg in January and was sidelined until the NHL suspended the season because of the pandemic, but he had returned for the beginning of training camp. He had 14 goals and 26 assists in 47 regular-season games.

Center Martin Necas returned to practice Friday after missing recent workouts. Brind'Amour said the team would wait to see how he feels before deciding his status Saturday.

Brind'Amour declined to publicly announce his Game 1 starter between goaltenders Petr Mrazek and James Reimer.



1,000 miles away, Canes broadcasters will call action as NHL playoffs begin

By Bridget Condon

RALEIGH, N.C. (WTVD) -- Tripp Tracy has been working on the Carolina Hurricanes broadcast for more than two decades and Wednesday's exhibition game was a first for him, commentating from more than 1,000 miles away.

"I sort of stand up for probably 60 percent of a normal broadcast and then sit in my seat for the other 40 percent," he said. "The only reason I stand up is because I feel like it keeps me sharper. In this particular case, you have to sit down because your monitors are right there. That's one adjustment that I made."

It was an adjustment for play-by-play broadcaster Mike Maniscalco, too.

"That was the first time I've ever done play-by-play off of a monitor," Maniscalco said. "It was a little strange, but once the game got going and you found a rhythm, it got a little bit easier, but you always feel like you're behind the play a little bit trying to follow what's going on."

Tracy and Maniscalco are sitting in the same position as they would if the game were being played at PNC Arena -- in the broadcast booth. The only difference is now there's plexiglass separating them.

"If there was a situation where I just wanted to make a quick point during play to get his attention, I might have just knocked on the plexiglass that was separating us," Tracy said. "I don't want to disturb him but just knocking on the plexiglass ... I think in a way it simplifies things and it gives you a chance to storytell more ... I enjoy that part of it."

Being in the booth gives the broadcast a feel of authenticity.

"Getting into the booth with Tripp, it was like putting on a good pair of shoes that fit just right for me," Maniscalco said. "All I had to do was put one foot in front of the other; I knew he was going to take care of the rest."

Maniscalco, who had a health scare last October, said he's incredibly grateful for the opportunity to do play-by-play for the Carolina Hurricanes.

"There has not been a day that's past since what's happened in October and the wrong turn that I took there in San Jose where after I got the diagnosis and after everything happened and I got the all-clear, that I haven't been thankful and grateful for these moments just to get back," he said. "The thing about hockey is it really is ... these guys are my family. I just know how lucky I am, literally how lucky I am to be in this position."

Maniscalco is highly regarded by peers and players alike, Tracy said.

"If you knew how much individually and collectively, and that's led by Jordan Staal, how much the guys care about Big Rig Maniscalco, that's what hockey is all about," Tracy said.

After four-and-a-half months away from the game and stepping into a new role, Maniscalco said everyone behind the scenes has made him feel more comfortable and excited for the restart.

"Jim, the producer, he's the best in the business," Maniscalco said. "I was nervous yesterday, and Jim made everything super easy and calm. I can't thank him for that, everybody



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 1, 2020

behind the scenes I don't think I can give the people behind the scenes enough praise.

"We played the national anthems yesterday in their entirety; that was the moment for me," he added. "Before the game and before the call, where the hairs on my arm started to raise up, and I was like this is happening again, and I really missed it."

As for the on-ice action...

"We had a birds-eye view," Tracy said referring to last year's playoffs. "We were practically reaching out and touching Jordan Staal when he scored that beauty in overtime to win Game 1 against the Islanders and, I was so excited for Mike, I reached out and grabbed him, and I said, 'consume me,

consume me!' And unfortunately with the plexiglass, if he calls a winner tomorrow and it goes to overtime, I am certainly going to respect the plexiglass and social distancing, but I will be doing the jig myself in full-blown consumption, happy for Mike and most happy for this outstanding Hurricanes group and let's just hope it goes that way."

Gameday will look a lot different for Hurricanes reporters as well, including The Athletic's Sara Civian, who said she's hoping to keep things as normal as possible.

"It's strange," she said. "I know they're doing it in a bubble to protect us and protect them and make sure we get hockey back and see it until the end. I totally support that."



Looking for advantages as 'Canes, Rangers prepare to open 2020 NHL playoffs

by: Alyssa Rae, Michael Prunka

RALEIGH, N.C. (WNCN) – The beginning of August, oddly enough, marks the beginning of the NHL playoffs. The Carolina Hurricanes and New York Rangers kick off the play-in action as hockey aims to finish out the season after a nearly four-month pause due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The best-of-five series, which begins Saturday at noon, is among the most intriguing matchups in the play-in round. The Hurricanes a year ago made a run to the Eastern Conference Final that surprised many. The Rangers have had their rebuild kicked into overdrive by the signing of winger Artemi Panarin and the emergence of Mika Zibanejad.

New York has had Carolina's number for the better part of the last decade. The Rangers are 15-5-0 against the 'Canes in the last five years alone. But does that really matter? The 'Canes were 0-3-1 against Washington in the regular season last year, but went on to eliminate the Capitals in the first round of the playoffs. Anyways, the pandemic forced the season to be put on hold in mid-March, so it's hard to draw much meaning from trends that are almost four months old.

Carolina goes into the series with what should be the advantage in defensive talent. Even with questions surrounding the health of Brett Pesce and Dougie Hamilton, the 'Canes have trade-deadline acquisitions in Sami Vatanen and Brady Skjei to shore things up. Of course, much depends on how they and Vincent Trocheck acclimate given their limited time with the team.

Up front, the 'Canes have the offensive weapons to keep up with most anyone in the NHL. Their top line with Sebastian Aho centering Andrei Svechnikov and Teuvo Teravainen was a consistent fixture throughout the regular season. Jordan Staal and Justin Williams bring a hard-working veteran

presence to the second line. Carolina will hope Nino Niederreiter can consistency that has eluded him throughout much of his tenure with the team and that rookie Martin Necas can build the 16 goals and 20 assists he had in 64 games.

Much of the same can be said of the Rangers and their offensive weapons. Panarin and Zibanejad each drive their own line to make up one of the strongest top-six groups in the NHL. Panarin led the team with 32 goals and 63 assists in 69 games. Zibanejad had 41 goals and 34 helpers in 57 games.

While a healthy Carolina blue line may have the edge, the Rangers have plenty of young talent on the backend that can contribute on offense. Tony DeAngelo and Adam Fox combined for 98 points.

Goaltending may be where this series is decided. Petr Mrazek showed last year during Carolina's run that he's as good as they come when he gets hot, but reaching that level consistently has never been a strength of his.

But New York may look to a relatively unproven netminder in Igor Shesterkin. He was 10-2-0 with a 2.52 goals-against average and a .932 save percentage in a dozen appearances this season. If it doesn't work with him in net, the Rangers do have veteran Henrik Lundqvist to turn to.

Both coaches have their work cut out. With it being a best-of-five series, there's little time to grow into the matchup. Whichever team hits the ground running will have a decisive advantage.

Predictions:

Alyssa Rae: Carolina in four

Michael Prunka: New York in five



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 1, 2020



Brady Skjei: "I'm fired up"

Carolina Hurricanes captain Jordan Staal and defenseman Brady Skjei spoke with the media via Zoom Friday ahead of the Canes' qualifier round series with the New York Rangers.

By Alec_Sawyer

With less than 24 hours to go before the Carolina Hurricanes and New York Rangers kick off the 2020 NHL playoffs, Canes' captain Jordan Staal and defenseman Brady Skjei, who was with the Rangers earlier this season, spoke with the media via Zoom from Toronto.

Here is everything Staal and Skjei had to say:

Jordan Staal

On the quality of the ice during the exhibition: It's fine. It wasn't unbelievable, but I'm assuming four games in a short period of time can do that. I'm sure it will be fine.

On if this will have the same feel and intensity as a normal playoffs: I would say for sure the intensity will be there. As for momentum shifts with the crowd and stuff, that might not be the same, obviously. I know for a fact that as soon as that puck drops it's going to be intense, it's going to be a good game. It's going to be a good battle.

On what Brind'Amour had to say after the exhibition, and also what the team saw on film: I think everyone worked through a little bit of stuff during that game. I think every player kind of wanted to feel out what they wanted to do. Obviously, I had a big turnover at the blue line on a PK. I saw a couple other plays that were cute. I think towards that third period our group started to feel that out and started to play the game we know how. We have to make sure we are going to jump right to that. It's keeping it simple, getting those shots off and getting that chaos out front. That's been our style from the start, and it's worked for us.

On how he's shepherding the group as the captain: I think the group we had last year, with the core we had, those kids, [Sebastian Aho, Andrei Svechnikov and Teuvo Teravainen], all those guys know how to do it. I saw it from day one. I don't have to talk to those guys too much. They are going to be competitive every night. They know what it takes to win. You

saw it last year. It's going to be a big challenge to try and jump right into that and get into it as fast as we can, but we have a group that has bought in, can buy in and can get to our game quick and find ways to win games right away.

Brady Skjei

On what the team is feeling like with meaningful hockey so close after such a long time away: We're excited. It's been a long wait. We've been itching to get back. I know our team is fired up to play. Me personally, I'm really excited. I think the excitement is going to be there, and we're ready to go when that puck drops.

On how you approach a five-game series differently than a seven-game series: Obviously every game in the playoffs is extremely important, but getting off to a good start in a five-game series is definitely a huge thing. You don't want to fall down in the first game or the second game. Getting off to a good start is going to be crucial in a five-game series.

On if he has any MLB friends from New York that he's talked to about playing a five-game series: Unfortunately, I don't. I've never talked to anyone about it. This will be new for all of us. But like I said before, it just puts a huge emphasis on those first few games in the series.

On what the key to stopping the Rangers in transition is: I think stay on top of them. For defensemen, it's keeping a tight gap. I think obviously they have some high-end skill in their forwards. I think the main part of our game is puck pressure and being aggressive, so if we can stay above them and take away their time and space, it definitely will play into our hands. You can't give those guys much room because they'll make plays. Staying on them, keep that puck pressure up and limit their space.

On his emotions getting to play the Rangers: I'm fired up. I think whenever the playoffs come around you get amped up. You get that extra level. For me going up against my old team, I'm just as excited if not more than previous playoff years. It'll be a fun battle. I'm going to do whatever I can to make the Canes come out on top.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 1, 2020

Rod Brind'Amour: 'You always prepare to win every game that you play.'

The Canes' head coach spoke to the media via Zoom ahead of tomorrow's game one against the Rangers.

By Andrew Schnittker

The long wait is nearly at an end. Tomorrow, for the first time since March 10, the Carolina Hurricanes will play a hockey game that counts. Without Dougie Hamilton, and hopefully with Martin Necas, the team will drop the puck for game one of its Stanley Cup Qualifier series with the New York Rangers Saturday at noon.

Head coach Rod Brind'Amour spoke to the media via Zoom Friday about the state of the team going into that game.

On Martin Necas and Dougie Hamilton: [Necas] looked really good today. He felt good, so we'll see how that goes tomorrow, make sure he feels the same way and then we hope to see him in the lineup. Dougie is getting better, for sure, but he's unfit, so he won't be in there tomorrow.

On a starting goalie: We're going to tell them tonight on that. So, I definitely have a plan but I don't want to say it now and I haven't told them. I envision that both guys will probably get action here with the amount of games and how short of a time frame there is between games. I think we'll probably get both guys in there. I'm glad both guys look really good and feel good about their game. So I think we're good either way.

On thoughts from the exhibition game: Obviously we had a lot of teaching stuff. That's the one good thing about playing that game. The other good thing was to get the rust off individually. I think the guys felt better as the game went on, talking to them. You hope that now that's not something we have to worry about. Overall, it wasn't a great game, but I think it was a great game to get that stuff out of the way, and hopefully we'll see a better product tomorrow.

On stopping the Rangers' transition game: It's any team in this league. If you're creating offense off the rush, it's going to be a long night for the other group. I think that's why teams try to bottle everything up in the neutral zone and try to defend that, because you score on the rush or on the power play in this league. They have the high-end talent, we know that. Good transition game. Their back end's good. I mean, this is a good

team we're playing. How do you stop it? We need to play with the puck. If we have the puck, that's one way to do it. I think both teams are trying to do the same things, and it's whoever gets to that game first that's probably going to have the most success.

On preparation differences for a five-game series: I don't know that there's a difference in preparing. You always prepare to win every game that you play. I think the difference is that the stress level goes up if you don't win that first one. The run way's less to get back. But in the preparation aspect, I don't think it's different. Whether you win or lose the first game, I don't think it's going to change your preparation either. You're always about winning that next game. Nothing's really changed on that front.

On preparing for overtime: The overtime part, obviously, you don't prepare for that too much. We know we don't have shootouts anymore, and so you certainly take that element out of your practice and preparation. So I never really prepare for overtime. That's the conditioning thing, so I guess you're preparing a little bit if that ever gets to that point. The lay off is interesting, because you really are starting over, even though your systems might not be too much different from where you were. We were playing really well at the pause, but everything kind of goes out the window, because everyone came back in different spots and we have some new guys in the lineup now. So everything's kind of different there and a little bit unknown.

On the possibility of Hamilton playing in this series: We would hope so. We're certainly not going to rush him back, but if he's close to being able to play he's going to get in there. So we know the importance of having in the lineup. That's a huge, huge loss for us. We want to get him back in there ASAP.

On who sits up front if Necas can play: As far as tomorrow up front, it really depends on if [Necas] can go. We've got two different ways we're thinking about going, so we haven't quite figured that out quite yet. We're hoping he can play, for sure. If not, we know what the group's going to look like, and if he goes in, we still have a couple little moves to make so we're not sure.

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CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 1, 2020

SportScan

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

1189703 Carolina Hurricanes

How to watch Carolina Hurricanes vs New York Rangers, Game 1 on Saturday

BY CHIP ALEXANDER

JULY 31, 2020 05:26 PM

CAROLINA HURRICANES VS NEW YORK RANGERS

What: Game 1, Qualifying Round.

When: Saturday, Noon

Where: Scotiabank Arena, Toronto.

Watch, listen: FOX Sports Carolinas is broadcasting the game remotely from PNC Arena, with Mike Maniscalco handling play by play and Tripp Tracy the analyst.

Look for: Who's in net. Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour will have either Petr Mrazek or James Reimer as his starting goalie. Rangers coach David Quinn could go with rookie Igor Shesterkin or the old pro, Henrik Lundqvist, who beat the Canes three times this season with a .947 save percentage and has dominated them in the past.

Questions: Can the Canes find a way to contain the Rangers' skill guys such as Mika Zibanejad and Artemi Panarin? That will be harder with defenseman Dougie Hamilton unable to play Game 1. The Rangers can quickly transition to offense and have the speed to get down ice. The Canes must establish a forecheck early and maintain pressure in the offensive zone, and be cleaner in the defensive zone.

Of note: As the designated home team and the higher seed, the Canes will have "last change" in Game 1. During any stop in play, Quinn must first send out any line or defensive changes and Brind'Amour then can counter with what he hopes presents favorable matchups for Carolina.

News Observer LOADED: 08.01.2020

1189704 Carolina Hurricanes

For 'Fishy, Svechy, Turbo, Slavo,' their time has come. The Hurricanes', too.

BY LUKE DECOCK

JULY 31, 2020 02:15 PM

The old warhorse Jordan Staal, veteran of many a lengthy playoff series, mentioned his four younger star teammates by their nicknames during a Zoom call on Friday, and it sounded like he was naming the Four Horsemen of the Modern Apocalypse.

In Staal's parlance, they are known as "Fishy, Svechy, Turbo, Slavo." These are only aliases. Their real names are Aho, Svechnikov, Teravainen and Slavin. They form the vanguard of the Carolina Hurricanes.

As the Hurricanes prepare to open the NHL's first-ever qualifying round against the New York Rangers in the NHL's Toronto bubble Saturday afternoon, for all the talk about which goalie will start and how the Hurricanes will fare without Dougie Hamilton, the real dividing line in the series will be young stars vs. young stars, talent on talent, skill on skill.

The Hurricanes have Sebastian Aho, the Rangers have Mika Zibanejad. The Hurricanes have Andrei Svechnikov, the Rangers have Artemi Panarin. The Hurricanes have Teuvo Teravainen, the Rangers have Ryan Strome. The Hurricanes have Jacob Slavin, the Rangers have Jacob Trouba. Of that group, only Panarin, a Hart Trophy finalist, is older than 25, and he's only 28.

Both franchises have built themselves around cores of young talent, especially in terms of depth on defense. That's always been the Hurricanes' way, by necessity. It has become the Rangers' way, in a cap world, after years of wasteful overspending on high-priced veterans. For the Hurricanes, last season was this group's introduction to playoff hockey. The Rangers are getting it now.

So the questions about where and how this series will be won have to start there, with each team's fastball, a combination of forwards with dazzling moves and skilled defensemen suited for the modern game. And from the Hurricanes' Four Horsemen, it'll have to be more than last season.

Aho had 12 points in the 15 playoff games, but struggled with an injury that kept him from taking faceoffs for a big chunk of the playoffs. Svechnikov started hot, got knocked out and never really found his footing when he came back. Teravainen wasn't the playmaker he can be at his best. Slavin was ... well, Slavin is always Slavin.

Which is to say, last year wasn't bad, but it wasn't anywhere close to what these players can achieve. Aho in particular has so much more to offer. Svechnikov is a completely different player than he was 15 months ago. Teravainen was having a remarkable regular season before it ended abruptly. Slavin was ... well, Slavin is always Slavin.

"The group we had last year, the core that we have, those kids ... all those guys, they know how to do it," Staal said.

This is a chance for all of them — and others, to be sure — to show what they can do on this largest of stages, presumably unencumbered at this point by any of the usual 82-game wear-and-tear on their bodies. The Hurricanes envision this group at the heart of considerable future success for many years to come. Last year was a beginning, an introduction, and the Hurricanes went farther than anyone expected. There can be no turning back.

Because in a salary-cap world, even one tweaked and altered by the NHL and NHLPA amid the pandemic, the window doesn't stay open forever. Svechnikov is only a year away from a new contract that will rival



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 1, 2020

Aho's; someone (or someones) will have to go to make room for that. Change is the only inevitability. It may seem like this group is only getting started, but the clock is already ticking.

Fishy, Svechy, Turbo, Slavo. By any names, their time has come. It is here. It is now.

News Observer LOADED: 08.01.2020

1189705 Carolina Hurricanes

Roundtable preview: Key factors and predictions for Rangers-Hurricanes

By Rick Carpiello and Sara Civian

Jul 31, 2020

With the Rangers-Hurricanes best-of-five play-in set to start Saturday at noon ET, beat writers Rick Carpiello and Sara Civian joined forces for a roundtable discussion on what we can expect from the series.

Rick Carpiello: Sara, do you have any reasonable (or unreasonable) explanation for the Rangers' record against the Hurricanes over the years? They've won 31 of the last 37 meetings, including all four this season — some of which Carolina dominated territorially.

Sara Civian: Well, Rick, I think we'd have to consult the hockey gods on this one but I can tell you why they snapped the Curse of Madison Square Garden last season — Rod Brind'Amour's attitude. There has been no shortage of jokes about the Rangers' home-ice situation amongst Canes fans ahead of this play-in series. Do you think no MSG will have an actual effect on this series at all? How about the best-of-five format?

RC: Yeah, I can't figure it out either. I mean, in the early-to-mid 2010s the Rangers were clearly a Cup contender and the Canes were clearly not, so that's where a lot of the damage happened. But the last couple of seasons, the Rangers have been in rebuild mode and the Hurricanes a very good team in the league, and yet it continued. Obviously the easy answer is Henrik Lundqvist (since Feb. 22, 2011 he's 24-4-0, 1.73, .947 against the Canes, a team that piles up shot-attempt and actual shot numbers). But ... that can't be the only explanation. I will say that the last time they met, in Raleigh and with Igor Shesterkin in goal, the Rangers played one of their best and most complete games of the season. That said, Carolina had some important players out that night.

As far as MSG being a non-factor, I certainly haven't seen it as an advantage for most of the Rangers' playoff games over the years. Actually, the last time they had a serious chance, they lost Games 5 and 7 to Tampa Bay at home in the ECF in 2015. Both by shutout. The next year they lost both home games and went out in the first round to Pittsburgh. The following year they were eliminated at home by Ottawa, which was the last time they played a playoff game (2017). So ...

And you're right. Best-of-five makes it much more of a coin toss, right?

SC: I'd argue yes and no. I keep saying — and I keep hearing from Brind'Amour — that maybe nothing is more important than goaltending in such a short elimination series. The Rangers have roughly 17 goaltenders that play almost comically excellent against the Canes. The Canes have a goaltender in Petr Mrazek that has been historically inconsistent but on fire through some really tough stretches. If he can find that fire — without fans — for three games, the Hurricanes have a chance. If he can't, they don't. Period. Some familiar faces on both sides, eh?

RC: I do agree that goaltending could and likely will sway this series, and that the Rangers sure look like they will have an edge in that department with Shesterkin (and if needed Lundqvist ... and if needed Georgiev). But it also isn't smart to rely on that goaltending to win, and the Rangers do lapse into defensive malaise from time to time. Part of that is youth. Part of it is lack of time in the offensive-zone. Part of it is having some key forwards who aren't particularly good in the south end of the rink. I think the Canes tend to have the puck more — even though I think their possession stats are padded by the shoot-from-everywhere mentality — and the Rangers do the opposite. They don't shoot it often, and they don't spend a lot of time in the offensive zone. So their goalie(s) tend to be under siege fairly often. To me that's not a great recipe. I also happen to think Mrazek is completely capable of having a good stretch in a short series.

SC: Unfortunately for the Canes, a healthy defense with the exception of Dougie Hamilton is not a healthy defense. Sources have indicated that it's not impossible for him to return for the series or at some point in the series, but they wouldn't count on it. The Hurricanes will have to play with the assumption that they have to beat the Rangers without their Norris-caliber All Star and without trusty Brett Pesce. That's why they acquired Brady Skjei and Sami Vatanen in the first place, though. I think Vatanen could be a huge pleasant surprise for the Canes — that's where I'll say the group will have improved from the last time the Canes met the Rangers. By all accounts, he had a great camp and he won't hold Jaccob Slavin back on the first pairing.

The Canes also have a luxury of a deep corps, with Haydn Fleury more than capable of cracking the lineup, and reinforcements in AHL defenseman of the year Jake Bean and Roland McKeown. While I don't see this blue line causing severe problems for the Hurricanes, I don't think it's the same dominant strength without Hamilton and Pesce. This makes it especially important for the Canes to get an early lead on the Rangers — something they've failed to do for the majority of the season series. Speaking of defense evolution, how about that Adam Fox?

RC: What a gift from the Canes! It's actually very unfortunate that they were able to acquire a young talent like him and not get him signed. I guess he controlled his own destiny and surely wanted to take advantage of it. That's his right per the CBA. But, again, what a gift.

Fox has star written all over him, and his learning curve into pro hockey was a short and straight line. He will get better, too, as the defending part of his game continues to improve and as he gets more ice time, particularly on the first power play — Tony DeAngelo earned and got those minutes this season. I think the arrival and growth of Fox, and his partner Ryan Lindgren, really allowed the Rangers to make the strides they did this season — almost as much as the arrival of Artemi Panarin. Seriously.

And speaking of Panarin, I believe the splitting of he and Mika Zibanejad early in the season gave the Rangers unforeseen offensive depth that could be a major factor in this re-start. Zibanejad centers Chris Kreider and Pavel Buchnevich, and Panarin plays with Ryan Strome in the middle and Jesper Fast on the right. Two scoring lines, then a third line of kids — Kaapo Kakko, Filip Chytil and Phil Di Giuseppe — whose effectiveness or lack thereof could be crucial keys to the series. Kakko even slid up to Panarin's right for a bunch of shifts in the exhibition game.

The Hurricanes pile up their one big line, then fill in behind it, right? And the addition of Vincent Trochek could be immense. Tell me about their forward lines.

SC: It's funny, Brind'Amour put off piling up that Svechnikov-Aho-Teravainen line until he absolutely had to, then they immediately caught fire. I'd expect them to stick together for the duration of the series. I was just going to say, Trochek has been excellent ever since he got to the Hurricanes and his exhibition outing was a reminder. We all know by now not to count out Justin Williams in the playoffs, either — especially when it seems like this really might be his last go of it. Something to watch that might otherwise fly under a Rangers fan's radar is the status of Martin Necas. Necas was 3 or 4 players behind Fox on the fringes of the Calder



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 1, 2020

Trophy, in my opinion. He was playing great on Trocheck's wing. If he can make a return everything falls into place quite nicely, if he can't, the Canes will have to make do.

RC: And so it comes to our predictions. I'm not sold either way, and think this, like many series, if not this entire playoff season, will be a crapshoot. I believe the Rangers will get better goaltending, most likely. I also think their youth and inexperience could be a problem with the ebbs and flows of a playoff game, and their tendency to occasionally lapse in their defensive play is an unknown factor. I think it goes the distance. Hurricanes in five.

SC: I'm going to say Hurricanes in five. I'm hesitant to do so, but here we are. The season series counts for something, but I think people overhype its importance in a situation like this. Lundqvist played lights out during that game at PNC Arena, that isn't sustainable no matter who is in net for the Rangers. Again, it'll depend on if Mrazek can turn it on well enough for the big scorers to find their game faster than ever. But I'm always hard pressed to count out a Justin Williams team in a peculiar elimination situation.

The Athletic LOADED: 08.01.2020

1189764 New York Rangers

Rangers' Tony DeAngelo will be game-time call vs. Hurricanes

By Mollie Walker

August 1, 2020 | 3:27am

Rangers defenseman Tony DeAngelo did not practice with the team Friday and is expected to be a game-time decision going into Game 1 of the qualifying round against the Carolina Hurricanes on Saturday.

Asked if he would be more inclined to slot in a right-handed defenseman to replace DeAngelo, who is also a righty, coach David Quinn said his decision wouldn't be based on the shot. It's likely that defenseman Libor Hajek will step in should DeAngelo be unavailable Saturday.

Darren Radysh, who is coming off his first season with the team's AHL affiliate, is the right-handed option. He is yet to make his NHL debut.

The 22-year-old Hajek, who has just 33 NHL games under his belt, was an addition to the Rangers expanded playoff roster during training camp. Hajek made the Rangers' roster out of training camp in October but a knee injury kept him out of the lineup for over a month. He was sent down to AHL Hartford in mid-January and wasn't called back up for the rest of the regular season.

"It's like anything, if a guy doesn't play or a guy gets injured during a game, you have to adjust," Marc Staal said on a Zoom call Friday. "It'll be no different throughout this playoff series. We're always ready for anything, it'll be no different come game time tomorrow."

Additionally, Staal — who left Wednesday exhibition game with the Islanders for an undisclosed reason — is expected to play Saturday. Quinn had said that keeping Staal out in the third period Wednesday was "cautionary."

"No issues, I felt really good today. I'll be ready tomorrow," Staal said.

Hajek recorded five assists in 28 games with the Rangers this season.

The Rangers announced that they agreed to terms on an entry-level contract with Morgan Barron Friday.

Barron, 21, spent the last three seasons playing for Cornell in the NCAA. He was appointed captain before the 2019-20 season before going on to tally 14 goals and 18 assists in 29 games, bringing his career total to 84 points in three years with the Big Red.

"I'm very happy to be joining the Rangers organization at such an exciting time," Barron said in a statement to The Post. "It was definitely a difficult decision because of how much I enjoyed my time at Cornell, but at the end of the day, I felt like it was time to take the next step. I'm really looking forward to getting to training camp, whenever that may be."

Barron was also a top 10 finalist for the Hobey Baker Memorial Award, given to the top player in college hockey, and was named EAC Hockey Player of the Year following the 2019-20 season.

The coronavirus pandemic suspended the final stretch of Barron's junior season at Cornell, making his decision on whether to stay or go pro that much more difficult. But it appears Barron will be foregoing his senior year to sign with the Rangers.

The Rangers will take the ice for Game 1 without forward Brendan Lemieux as he serves a two-game suspension for a hit on Avalanche forward Joonas Donskoi in March.

Rangers forward Ryan Strome said Lemieux's presence to be missed, but is anticipating a significant boost once he returns to the lineup for Game 3.

"That's ultimately something we can't control, I think the first two games are important to feel out the series and then I'm sure if he gets back in the lineup he'll definitely provide that spark or uptick," Strome said. "Just his personality, you can always hear him, runs around not afraid of anybody, a playoff-hockey-type player."

Both Strome and Staal said they were pleasantly surprised with the ice conditions during Wednesday's exhibition game.

"I thought it was going to be horrible and it wasn't too bad," Staal said. "First 10 minutes were actually pretty clean and the last 10 it gets a bit choppy. I thought they did a pretty good job."

Quinn said he wouldn't make the starting goaltender announcement until before Game 1 Saturday.

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1189765 New York Rangers

Marc Staal on Rangers' playoffs hopes and overcoming early struggles

By Steve Serby

August 1, 2020 | 12:45am

Before the Rangers open up their best-of-five series vs. the Hurricanes on Saturday, The Post's Steve Serby takes time for a Q&A with veteran defenseman Marc Staal:

Q: Your brother Eric won a Stanley Cup with the Hurricanes, your brother Jordan, your Hurricane opponent on Saturday, won one with the Penguins. How hungry is Marc Staal to win a Cup, so he can have some bragging rights of his own?

A: (Laugh) I could care less about the bragging rights right now with the brothers. I want to win because I want to win. I've been chasing this thing obviously my whole career.

Q: What was it like for you being so close to winning the Cup (2014 versus the Kings) and not coming home with it?



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 1, 2020

A: It was heartbreaking. Definitely one of the most devastating nights of my life. You work so hard to get there and not to come home with it was really hard. On the flip side of that, I have so many great memories of that run and so many good friends and teammates that it's definitely not regrettable. I would do it over again. But it was definitely one of the hardest nights of my life for sure.

Q: How agonizing was that plane ride home (from Los Angeles)?

A: We flew out the next morning. Everything hurts, your body hurt, and on top of that you have no energy because you just lost. It was quiet the whole flight home. As a group, we were proud of what we did, we just couldn't finish it off.

Q: What is the mindset of this Rangers team.

A: I would say kind of a nervous excitement. We have a young group not really knowing what to expect, and I think today at practice, everyone had some really good energy and you kind of see it and feel it on the guys' faces.

Q: What have you told the younger players about what to expect in the playoffs?

A: Obviously no one has played playoffs like this (in the coronavirus era) before so I'm a little green like everybody else. I think the biggest thing in any playoff series is managing your highs and lows. You're not going to win the series in the first shift or first period, you're not going to lose the series in the first shift or the first period. So keeping that positivity and belief in your team every shift is very important, especially for a young team. ... It means not being frustrated, just keep playing your game and then believe that you're going to be able to do it.

Q: What do you like best about this team?

A: I like the way we came together. I like how much talent we have, how we can put the puck in the net. I think we're very dangerous, I think we've scared some teams with the plays that we can make and the different types of ways we can score goals. And what I really like the last couple of months is we've started to defend better.

Q: How far can this team go?

A: Really I think we could beat anyone. You get into the playoffs, and you start getting some momentum and that belief in your room, you win one game and then you have the confidence, and then you win another one and then it just keeps rolling that we have enough talent in our room to make the big push.

Q: Does being 4-0 against the Hurricanes during the season give you any psychological advantage?

A: I think it definitely helps. Playoffs, it's a whole different animal, and we understand that. Nothing's going to come easy. They are a very good hockey team and they know they can win. We definitely feel like we are the underdogs and we're coming into this thing hungry, and I think a lot of guys are hungry to prove themselves on a big stage.

Q: Is Artemi Panarin similar to anybody?

A: Not that I've played with, to be honest. When he has the puck, something always seems to happen in a positive way. Guys are scared to go at him.

Q: Jacob Trouba?

A: Trouba's a workhorse. He's big, strong, physical, he plays the game hard, he plays it the right way. He's really good at everything. He's a big, calming force for our blue line. Power forwards don't like playing against him.

Q: Mika Zibanejad?

A: The moment he got here, he worked so hard to bring himself to another level. He's a big leader on our team. His voice has gotten stronger in the room.

Q: Igor Shesterkin?

A: Doesn't seem like he had a pulse in net, he's very calm. He reads the game very well. He controls the puck off rebounds, he plays the puck extremely well.

Q: Henrik Lundqvist?

A: Hall of Famer, and all-time Ranger. He's worked extremely hard these last few weeks, he's looked very sharp. His competitiveness and his work ethic are second to none.

Q: Adam Fox?

A: Very talented with the puck. He makes some plays every game where you're kinda just like Wow! He's strong defensively, he's got a very good stick, he's very reliable back there. He is an absolute massive addition for us.

Q: Ryan Lindgren?

A: Doesn't back down from anyone, plays tough in front of our own net, he's tough in the corners, he's just an agitator.

Q: Kaapo Kakko?

A: He's another big, strong guy who can intimidate the other team's defense. Only exciting things ahead for him.

Q: Chris Kreider?

A: He's an absolute beast. When he's flying down the lane, he's a scary player to play against when he's going to net. He opens up a ton of ice for his linemates and does a lot of the grunt work.

Q: Coach David Quinn?

A: He demands a lot from you in practice. He tries to push as much as he can to get the best out of every guy, and that's all you can ask for a coach.

Q: Sebastian Aho?

A: He's a special player. He's extremely smart, very quick, uses his teammates really well. He's very dangerous off the rush, very good on the power play. He kind of does it all. He's definitely someone that I'm really gonna be aware of when he's on the ice.

Q: Favorite actress?

A: Maggie Siff.

Q: How did you rebound from your early-season healthy scratches?

A: I took my time and got myself in a better mental place and physical place and when I got back in, tried to make the most of it. You never want to sit and watch as a player, no matter at what point in your career you are. I definitely used that as motivation.

Q: What has it meant to you to be a New York Ranger for so long?

A: You think as a young player you always want to be in one spot and play for one team, and the fact that I've been able to be here as long as I can, I gotta pinch myself, and I do realize how lucky and grateful I am for it. To be a part of this community and this fan base and play as long as I have has been incredible.

Q: If you could defend against any center or forward in NHL history, who would it be?

A: Wayne Gretzky in his prime, I think that would have been something.

Q: You can pick the brain of any defenseman in NHL history?

A: Fortunately for me, my agent was Bobby Orr. I've been grateful to have him in my corner all these years.

Q: Did you pick his brain before your first playoffs?



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 1, 2020

A: His big thing is, "Enjoy it." He always just taught me not to think or worry about the pressure. Be a good teammate and the winning will come after.

Q: That sounds like a message you might deliver on Friday night to your teammates.

A: Yeah, that definitely will be a large part of it. Playoff hockey, it's all team. We were grasping that for sure the last couple of months and we'll have to bring that ultimate team to beat the Hurricanes. They're going to be a tough out.

Q: What's the key to winning this series?

A: I think it's all about us. If we come out and play our game and execute and do the things we need to do at the level that we're used to doing that over the last couple of months, I think we have a very good opportunity to win the series. We have to be ready right from the puck drop. Anything other than our best is not gonna cut it.

Q: What's your message to Rangers fans watching at home?

A: Tune in and keep cheering us on. I know it's going to be different for us not having them in the stands with us, but we know they're watching. We'll feel their support and we're excited to go and win some playoff hockey games for them.

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1189766 New York Rangers

Rangers need Mika Zibanejad to embrace this Big Game moment

By Larry Brooks

July 31, 2020 | 9:23PM

The last time the Rangers competed in the postseason was 2017, the intervening two-year absence representing merely a blink of the eye in the life of a franchise. But to give you an idea how long it has been in hockey years, in 2017 Mika Zibanejad was being compared unfavorably to Derick Brassard.

Well not exactly to Derick Brassard, in exchange for whom Zibanejad had been acquired from Ottawa the previous summer, but to "Big Game Brass," who went 18-26-44 in 59 playoff games while centering the 1A/1B line for the Cup contending Blueshirts.

And in the 2017 playoffs in which the Blueshirts took out the Canadiens in six games before losing in six to the Senators, Zibanejad posted two goals and nine points in 12 matches, not bad, and scored the overtime winner in Game 5 in Montreal. But it was Brassard — Big Moment Brass — who scored the Game 5-tying goal against Henrik Lundqvist with 1:26 remaining in the third period before the Senators won it in OT to irrevocably twist the series his underdog team's way.

As sands through the hourglass, there is no comparison at the moment between Zibanejad, who has ascended to the upper echelon of the league, and Brassard, who has become a bit player bouncing from team to team. Then, too, there may be more than just a bit coming from Brassard with his Islanders in their qualifying round against the Panthers.

The Rangers, though, they will need far more than just a bit from Zibanejad with the qualifying round best-of-five against Carolina beginning just after noon Saturday in Toronto in the opening game of this entire extravaganza.

They will need No. 93 to become Big Game Mika.

"It's moments like these that define players," Ryan Strome said on a Zoom call. "You've seen a ton of guys on our team grow during the year and this is another opportunity to grow.

"You've got to take these challenges head on and try to embrace it fully because it's going to ultimately help the team and help you in your career as a player. As I said, these playoff moments usually define players in their long careers."

Strome was specifically speaking to his own opportunity and responsibility in centering his 1A/1B line with Artemi Panarin on the left side, but the sentiments apply directly to Zibanejad, who blasted into the NHL stratosphere off a final kick in which he registered 19 goals in the final 16 games and 23 in the final 22 to finish with 41 in 59 games. That equates to an 82-game pace of 57 goals.

That tear, of course, included the five-goal game against the Capitals. During the final 16 games, Zibanejad's shooting percentage was a remarkable 30.2. For the season, it was 19.7 as the 27-year-old Swede became only the seventh player in the hard-cap era to score at least 40 goals with a shooting percentage above 19.5.

The Blueshirts may be overly reliant on their top two lines, but when one has Zibanejad and the other has Panarin, well, they've been reliable guys. It is a top-heavy group and everyone knows it. The team rides its horses and so does David Quinn.

Indeed, Zibanejad's 2019-20 average ice time of 21:38 represented the most for a Rangers center since at least 1997-98, when the league began tracking the stat. Five-on-five, first power-play unit and first penalty-kill tandem. If there were such a thing, he'd be the club's Swede Army knife.

Neither Zibanejad nor Panarin was especially visible through either summer camp or in Wednesday's exhibition match, but no one should be unduly concerned. The coach sure wasn't on the eve of his first NHL postseason game.

"I think [they] just want to play hockey," Quinn said. "I think this has been a long 2 1/2 weeks for them. Obviously our top players weren't on top of their game in the exhibition but they just want to play a hockey game.

"Now that we're this close, they're excited to get going, they're confident in what we're capable of doing. We're very fortunate to have players of that caliber who can lead the way."

Panarin was traded by the Blackhawks to the Blue Jackets in exchange for Brandon Saad (!) primarily because of looming cap issues but was deemed expendable by Chicago management after he was limited to one assist in the team's 2017 first-round sweep by Nashville in which Patrick Kane and Jonathan Toews each had two points.

So there is something to prove here for No. 10, who did record 18 points (7-11) in 16 playoff games for Columbus the last two years. And there is something to prove here for Zibanejad, a supporting piece in 2017 who must become much more than that under the bubble.

Who must become Big Game Mika.

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1189767 New York Rangers

Rangers won't say if it's Igor Shesterkin or Henrik Lundqvist in goal for Game 1 vs. Hurricanes

By Colin Stephenson

Updated July 31, 2020 6:40 PM



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 1, 2020

You can tell it is the playoffs when normally relaxed coaches suddenly get tight-lipped about things they never have a problem sharing in the regular season – such as, who is starting in goal for Game 1 of your playoff series?

“We will announce our goalie before the game tomorrow,” Rangers coach David Quinn said on his media Zoom call Friday.

The affable Quinn usually doesn't mind announcing his starting goaltender the day before a game during the regular season. But this isn't the regular season. When the Rangers take on the Carolina Hurricanes at noon Saturday in Toronto's Scotiabank Arena, to kick off the NHL's return to play from the league's COVID-19 pandemic-caused shutdown, it will be Game 1 of a best-of-five play-in series to see which team will advance to the league's regular 16-team playoffs.

The league restarts Saturday after more than four-and-a-half months since games were last played. The league shut down on March 12 but it resumes now, with the goal of crowning a Stanley Cup champion by early October. Twenty-four teams – 12 each in one of two neutral sites, either Edmonton or Toronto – return, with teams playing games inside a “bubble” created by the league and designed to keep the players safe from the coronavirus. The Eastern Conference teams are in Toronto, and the Rangers, 37-28-5 in the regular season, are the No. 11 seed. Carolina, 38-25-5, is No. 6.

Quinn wouldn't say Friday whether he will stay with Russian rookie Igor Shesterkin as his No. 1 goaltender, or turn to franchise icon Henrik Lundqvist, who has dominated the Hurricanes over his 15-year career. Both were excellent during the two-week training camp the Rangers had before entering the bubble in Toronto (as was third goalie Alexandar Georgiev). The way Quinn doled out ice time in the second week of camp, though, and the things he said, indicated he likely will start Shesterkin, who was 10-2, with a 2.52 goals-against average and .932 save percentage during the season.

That's what MSG TV Rangers analyst Joe Micheletti thinks, anyway.

“The way David has talked about ... keeping the lines the same, keeping the defense pairings the same, his response is, ‘I'm not going to forget the previous two-and-a-half months before we stopped,’” Micheletti said in a telephone interview with Newsday this week. “So, if that's part of your thesis, then how can he forget what Shesterkin gave you when your team was 10 or 12 points out of a playoff spot? And the spark that he gave you?”

While Quinn knows which goaltender he intends to start Saturday, he is uncertain about the status of defenseman Tony DeAngelo, who missed practice Friday. Whether DeAngelo – the point man on the first power play unit and the team's top scoring defenseman (15 goals, 38 assists, 53 points) – plays will be a game-time decision, Quinn said. If DeAngelo can't play, rookie Libor Hajek is likely to take his spot in the lineup.

Carolina, meanwhile, will be without two of its top defensemen, Dougie Hamilton and Brett Pesce, at least for Game 1. Hamilton has been ruled out for Saturday with an injury that caused him to miss several days of practice, while Pesce didn't travel with the team to Toronto.

Blue shorts: The Rangers announced they have signed Cornell University forward Morgan Barron to an entry level contract, beginning in 2020-21. The 6-4, 220-pound Barron, a sixth-round draft pick in 2017, had 14 goals, 18 assists (32 points) in 29 games in 2019-20 and was named the ECAC Hockey Player of the Year. He was also a finalist for the Hobey Baker Award, given to the top player in college hockey.

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1189768 New York Rangers

Three questions for Rangers in Stanley Cup qualifier round vs. Hurricanes

By Colin Stephenson

Updated July 31, 2020 6:05 PM

1. Who's No. 1?

David Quinn won't name his starting goaltender for Game 1 of the play-in series against Carolina until just before gametime Saturday. Will he go with rookie Igor Shesterkin, or franchise icon Henrik Lundqvist? Everything the coach has done indicates he's going to stay with Shesterkin, who was the No. 1 when the NHL paused on March 12. But it's impossible to completely count out Lundqvist, who has owned the Hurricanes in his career and had a great two-week training camp. As a coach, this is the kind of problem you like to have.

2. Where does Kaapo Kakko belong?

The 19-year-old Finn, the No. 2 pick overall in last year's NHL draft, has stood out since the Rangers returned to practice July 13, and while Quinn has mostly stuck with the lines he had in place at the time the NHL paused play – with Kakko on the third line – the coach did experiment with Kakko on the second line in Wednesday's warmup game against the Islanders. Might Kakko be in line for a promotion? Maybe. Quinn said he probably will keep the lines as is at the start, but he said he's open to moving Kakko up, depending how the game is going, how he's playing, and if the coach just wants a shakeup.

3. Who are Mr. and Mrs. Staal rooting for?

Rangers D Marc Staal will likely match up at some point with his brother, Carolina C Jordan Staal. “I lost to Jordan, when he was on Pittsburgh, and it's screwed up, as, you're happy for him but you're also crushed,” Marc Staal said of playing against his brother. “It's fun to compete against him, but it's never fun to -- I mean, either way, shaking hands when you win, shaking hands when you lose -- that's never fun.”

Marc Staal said he and his brother likely won't talk to each other for the duration of the playoff series.

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1189769 New York Rangers

Roundtable preview: Key factors and predictions for Rangers-Hurricanes

By Rick Carpinello and Sara Civian

Jul 31, 2020

With the Rangers-Hurricanes best-of-five play-in set to start Saturday at noon ET, beat writers Rick Carpinello and Sara Civian joined forces for a roundtable discussion on what we can expect from the series.

Rick Carpinello: Sara, do you have any reasonable (or unreasonable) explanation for the Rangers' record against the Hurricanes over the years? They've won 31 of the last 37 meetings, including all four this season – some of which Carolina dominated territorially.

Sara Civian: Well, Rick, I think we'd have to consult the hockey gods on this one but I can tell you why they snapped the Curse of Madison Square Garden last season — Rod Brind'Amour's attitude. There has been no shortage of jokes about the Rangers' home-ice situation amongst Canes fans ahead of this play-in series. Do you think no MSG will have an actual effect on this series at all? How about the best-of-five format?



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 1, 2020

RC: Yeah, I can't figure it out either. I mean, in the early-to-mid 2010s the Rangers were clearly a Cup contender and the Canes were clearly not, so that's where a lot of the damage happened. But the last couple of seasons, the Rangers have been in rebuild mode and the Hurricanes a very good team in the league, and yet it continued. Obviously the easy answer is Henrik Lundqvist (since Feb. 22, 2011 he's 24-4-0, 1.73, .947 against the Canes, a team that piles up shot-attempt and actual shot numbers). But ... that can't be the only explanation. I will say that the last time they met, in Raleigh and with Igor Shesterkin in goal, the Rangers played one of their best and most complete games of the season. That said, Carolina had some important players out that night.

As far as MSG being a non-factor, I certainly haven't seen it as an advantage for most of the Rangers' playoff games over the years. Actually, the last time they had a serious chance, they lost Games 5 and 7 to Tampa Bay at home in the ECF in 2015. Both by shutout. The next year they lost both home games and went out in the first round to Pittsburgh. The following year they were eliminated at home by Ottawa, which was the last time they played a playoff game (2017). So ...

And you're right. Best-of-five makes it much more of a coin toss, right?

SC: I'd argue yes and no. I keep saying — and I keep hearing from Brind'Amour — that maybe nothing is more important than goaltending in such a short elimination series. The Rangers have roughly 17 goaltenders that play almost comically excellent against the Canes. The Canes have a goaltender in Petr Mrazek that has been historically inconsistent but on fire through some really tough stretches. If he can find that fire — without fans — for three games, the Hurricanes have a chance. If he can't, they don't. Period. Some familiar faces on both sides, eh?

RC: I do agree that goaltending could and likely will sway this series, and that the Rangers sure look like they will have an edge in that department with Shesterkin (and if needed Lundqvist ... and if needed Georgiev). But it also isn't smart to rely on that goaltending to win, and the Rangers do lapse into defensive malaise from time to time. Part of that is youth. Part of it is lack of time in the offensive-zone. Part of it is having some key forwards who aren't particularly good in the south end of the rink. I think the Canes tend to have the puck more — even though I think their possession stats are padded by the shoot-from-everywhere mentality — and the Rangers do the opposite. They don't shoot it often, and they don't spend a lot of time in the offensive zone. So their goalie(s) tend to be under siege fairly often. To me that's not a great recipe. I also happen to think Mrazek is completely capable of having a good stretch in a short series.

SC: Unfortunately for the Canes, a healthy defense with the exception of Dougie Hamilton is not a healthy defense. Sources have indicated that it's not impossible for him to return for the series or at some point in the series, but they wouldn't count on it. The Hurricanes will have to play with the assumption that they have to beat the Rangers without their Norris-caliber All Star and without trusty Brett Pesce. That's why they acquired Brady Skjei and Sami Vatanen in the first place, though. I think Vatanen could be a huge pleasant surprise for the Canes — that's where I'll say the group will have improved from the last time the Canes met the Rangers. By all accounts, he had a great camp and he won't hold Jaccob Slavin back on the first pairing.

The Canes also have a luxury of a deep corps, with Haydn Fleury more than capable of cracking the lineup, and reinforcements in AHL defenseman of the year Jake Bean and Roland McKeown. While I don't see this blue line causing severe problems for the Hurricanes, I don't think it's the same dominant strength without Hamilton and Pesce. This makes it especially important for the Canes to get an early lead on the Rangers — something they've failed to do for the majority of the season series. Speaking of defense evolution, how about that Adam Fox?

RC: What a gift from the Canes! It's actually very unfortunate that they were able to acquire a young talent like him and not get him signed. I guess he controlled his own destiny and surely wanted to take advantage of it. That's his right per the CBA. But, again, what a gift.

Fox has star written all over him, and his learning curve into pro hockey was a short and straight line. He will get better, too, as the defending part of his game continues to improve and as he gets more ice time, particularly on the first power play — Tony DeAngelo earned and got those minutes this season. I think the arrival and growth of Fox, and his partner Ryan Lindgren, really allowed the Rangers to make the strides they did this season — almost as much as the arrival of Artemi Panarin. Seriously.

And speaking of Panarin, I believe the splitting of he and Mika Zibanejad early in the season gave the Rangers unforeseen offensive depth that could be a major factor in this re-start. Zibanejad centers Chris Kreider and Pavel Buchnevich, and Panarin plays with Ryan Strome in the middle and Jesper Fast on the right. Two scoring lines, then a third line of kids — Kaapo Kakko, Filip Chytil and Phil Di Giuseppe — whose effectiveness or lack thereof could be crucial keys to the series. Kakko even slid up to Panarin's right for a bunch of shifts in the exhibition game.

The Hurricanes pile up their one big line, then fill in behind it, right? And the addition of Vincent Trocheck could be immense. Tell me about their forward lines.

SC: It's funny, Brind'Amour put off piling up that Svechnikov-Aho-Teravainen line until he absolutely had to, then they immediately caught fire. I'd expect them to stick together for the duration of the series. I was just going to say, Trocheck has been excellent ever since he got to the Hurricanes and his exhibition outing was a reminder. We all know by now not to count out Justin Williams in the playoffs, either — especially when it seems like this really might be his last go of it. Something to watch that might otherwise fly under a Rangers fan's radar is the status of Martin Necas. Necas was 3 or 4 players behind Fox on the fringes of the Calder Trophy, in my opinion. He was playing great on Trocheck's wing. If he can make a return everything falls into place quite nicely, if he can't, the Canes will have to make do.

RC: And so it comes to our predictions. I'm not sold either way, and think this, like many series, if not this entire playoff season, will be a crapshoot. I believe the Rangers will get better goaltending, most likely. I also think their youth and inexperience could be a problem with the ebbs and flows of a playoff game, and their tendency to occasionally lapse in their defensive play is an unknown factor. I think it goes the distance. Hurricanes in five.

SC: I'm going to say Hurricanes in five. I'm hesitant to do so, but here we are. The season series counts for something, but I think people overhype its importance in a situation like this. Lundqvist played lights out during that game at PNC Arena, that isn't sustainable no matter who is in net for the Rangers. Again, it'll depend on if Mrazek can turn it on well enough for the big scorers to find their game faster than ever. But I'm always hard pressed to count out a Justin Williams team in a peculiar elimination situation.

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Edmonton, 'City of Champions,' Readies for a Hockey Marathon

By Carol Schram



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 1, 2020

EDMONTON, Alberta — It is said that hockey is the heartbeat of Alberta's capital city. If that's so then the 2020 N.H.L. playoffs are like a defibrillator that has shocked the city's rhythm back to life.

For months it looked like Las Vegas — with its massive resorts and status as host to the league's off-season awards — would be chosen as the primary hub city for the N.H.L.'s summer restart after the regular season was paused in March because of the coronavirus pandemic. But Edmonton, a city of just less than 1 million people, persisted and the dogged effort paid off in early July when the league instead selected it and Toronto as the sites for postseason play.

"We've had a great staff doing a ton of work," said Bob Nicholson, the Edmonton Oilers' chairman. Nicholson singled out the team's owner, Daryl Katz, for pestering N.H.L. Commissioner Gary Bettman during deliberations. "But really it was Daryl, starting with the vision. He called Gary a ton."

On Saturday, 12 Western Conference teams will begin the qualifying round and round-robin seeding tournament at Rogers Place, the four-year-old arena that sits at the center of the city's Ice District, a \$2.5 billion (CAN) mixed-use sports and entertainment zone. It will be the site of both conference finals and the Stanley Cup final.

The Ice District may not have the same global profile as the Las Vegas Strip, but in Edmonton, which once billed itself the "City of Champions," hockey keeps the community pumping.

"We are oil country and we are a hockey town," said Janet Riopel, the president of the city's chamber of commerce. "Our kids start early. They play through most of their lives, male and female. We are a hockey community and we've been very proud of our team. Oil country fans are die-hard fans."

In all likelihood, if you grew up in Edmonton during the '80s, you probably either were in a bar with a couple of us, or you might even have had a sip from the Cup," former Oiler Kevin Lowe said.

Kevin Lowe, the six-time Stanley Cup winner, Hall of Famer and former Oilers general manager, arrived in the city in 1979, the year the former World Hockey Association franchise joined the N.H.L. Championship hockey quickly became a way of life for the city. Building around the league's career leading scorer, Wayne Gretzky, the Oilers won five Stanley Cups between 1984 and 1990 — and made sure they shared their success with the community.

"In all likelihood, if you grew up in Edmonton during the '80s, you probably either were in a bar with a couple of us, or you might even have had a sip from the Cup," Lowe said.

Sandy Langley, 53, is one of those people. She started working for the Oilers as a 15-year-old usher at the old Northlands Coliseum. Since 1993, she has worked in the team's front office in various administrative capacities.

"My husband was a bouncer at one of the main bars here," Langley said. "Back then, all of us became really, really good friends. They were just very approachable. They went out quite a bit, so you saw them, you know, at the grocery store. People felt that they could talk to them."

Through another schoolmate, Langley said she got to know the former Oiler Esa Tikkanen and his first wife, Lotta.

"I think as soon as a player feels comfortable with you, they kind of welcome you into their whole group. So when we became friends with Lotta and Esa, we would go to their house. Grant Fuhr and his wife would be there, and Jari Kurri and his wife. We were almost like a family for them, because they didn't have family here."

Here's what's happening as the world of sports slowly comes back to life:

The N.B.A. returned, and the Lakers held on to beat the Clippers in a thriller. Zion Williamson played in the first game of the night for the Pelicans.

Players, coaches and analysts are watching this season's baseball games to see what effect the absence of fans has.

With no summer tournaments to play in, top high school basketball stars are committing to colleges earlier. Villanova is one of the beneficiaries.

Langley and her husband got married in June 1988, two months before the blockbuster trade that sent Gretzky to the Los Angeles Kings. The Tikkanens were wedding guests.

"It wasn't anything, to ask them if they would come to our wedding," Langley said. "Then, for my husband's stag, Esa brought the Stanley Cup. That was unbelievable."

When the regular season was paused in March, the Oilers were on track to return to the playoffs for the first time in three years. Forward Leon Draisaitl led the league's scoring race by 13 points, and is the favorite to win the Hart Trophy, awarded to the league's most valuable player. The team also plays behind the 2017 Hart winner, Connor McDavid, and got a spark in December when winger Kailer Yamamoto, 21, was called up from the A.H.L. and scored at a point-per-game pace.

The Oilers start the postseason facing the Chicago Blackhawks in a best-of-five series but fans won't be able to pierce the league's "bubble." That means some of hockey's most hard-core supporters not allowed to cheer from inside Rogers Place or stake out the player entrance to ask for autographs.

They'll be on the outside looking in as the local arena hosts up to three games a day in the early rounds, a feat that required packing what should have been months of planning into the span of two weeks.

"As soon as we started to get inklings that we were going to be in — because we kind of felt that we might not be — we really had to time it right, because a lot of our staff were not working," said Stu Ballantyne, the Oilers' senior vice president of operations.

Their preparation included bouncing back when a storm ripped away part of the building's roof in mid-July, causing flooding that damaged a small portion of the entrance and mezzanine. Ballantyne said the damage did not set the organization's plans back in a significant way.

Among the other considerations were sanitizing and facilitating social distancing as teams come and go from the building's six dressing rooms. Arena staff will also have to maintain the ice for more than 12 hours of daily hockey, cooling down the building temperature even more than usual, since there will be no fans in the stands to keep comfortable.

In essence, Rogers Place has become a massive soundstage for a made-for-television event.

"At times you think, 'Holy smokes, you won't get there,'" Nicholson said. "Hopefully, we add things and we're going to get better every day from here on out, too. You know, we have to do that for the players."

Outside the building, the plaza near the main entrance to Rogers Place has been turned into an outdoor recreation area where players can get a bite to eat or play basketball, enjoying the pleasant Edmonton summer, where daily temperatures top out in the 70s and there are 16 hours of daylight.

Though fans aren't allowed inside to watch games, Lowe believes they'll find new ways to enjoy summer hockey.

"I think the biggest difference is that people will be sitting on their patios, next to their pools, by a lake, by a river," Lowe said from his off-season home in British Columbia's Shuswap region.

"It's summertime, right? So they'll be, in all likelihood, watching in the strangest of places."

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CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 1, 2020

1189834 Websites

The Athletic / Duhatschek Notebook: How coaches can be innovative during unprecedented playoffs

By Eric Duhatschek Jul 31, 2020 3

TSN analyst Ray Ferraro was on the phone this week from his home office, which was also doubling as a nap room for his grandchild.

With the NHL's postseason starting on Saturday, that Ferraro at home and not planning on being inside an NHL arena, marks one of the many ways that the world is different right now. Some television studios are going to remain a little low tech throughout this postseason. Play-by-play and colour analysts may be making the call from inside the arenas, but the intermission panels will be scattered around the continent. Overall, the broadcast intermissions may look more like your family Zoom call than your traditional postseason presentation.

Welcome to 2020 NHL playoffs, with 24 teams instead of the usual 16 making a run at the Stanley Cup – and where you can throw out almost all the old rules, expectations and permutations. Time to buckle up for the ride.

With the resumption of play imminent, the primary questions rattling around my brain before the Hurricanes-Rangers opener on Saturday were all about the 11th-hour preparations.

If you were a player, going into this unprecedented tournament, what would you want to hear from your coach? And if you were a coach, what would your message be?

For answers (and more), I called up two of the smartest people in the game – Ferraro, to get the perspective of a former player; and Dave King, to get a sense of what a coach might be thinking.

Ferraro played two decades in the NHL and his son, Landon plays professionally. Pre-pause, Ferraro's usual perch was between the benches during regular TSN broadcasts. The bottom line, he's seen a lot of hockey over the years. King, meanwhile, coached for almost half a century at the junior, international and professional levels and is currently nursing a pet project – a coaching manual – to its finish line.

Right now, one of the prevailing theories about the 2020 playoffs is that coaching will be more important than ever – on two levels.

One is tactical.

Tactically, you might think playing games in a neutral site bubble would eliminate home-ice advantage because there is no energy to be drawn from a friendly, boisterous crowd. The reality is, having the designation as the home team will matter in terms of line matchups. Any coach that wants a hard matchup – of a defence pair against a top forward line or a shutdown trio of forwards against the opposing team's most dangerous group – will have to work far harder to get it on the days they are designated as the visiting team.

The other area that a coach in these playoffs can make a difference? Their messaging. Does the message change at all because of the urgency and the uncertainty of the task at hand?

According to King, his final words should be as uncomplicated as humanly possible.

"I would simply be saying, 'why not us?'" King answered. "That would be my theme – why can't we do this? Everybody's in the same boat. Your team has had four months off. Their team has had four months off. We're healthy. They're healthy. Whatever psychological advantage a good team might have built up in the regular season is gone.

"So why not us? And I think a lot of coaches will be emphasizing that. They'll say, 'This is a unique situation with a chance to win a Stanley Cup in a format that's never been done before. So why can't we be the ones who do it?'"

In a playoff where there's so much uncertainty – and so many potential pitfalls – Ferraro says that as a player, he would want to hear a strong, confident, nuts-and-bolts message from his coach.

"I don't want a coach talking about the uncertainty of anything," Ferraro said. "I don't want to hear the coach say, 'look guys, none of us have been through this before.' I want him to be in charge. I want to hear a plan. 'Guys, we're going out in the first period and we're doing this, this and this. Second period, third period, OK, the game's over, we've got a meal now, we're going to have a video meeting tomorrow at 10.' I want that sort of surety.

"As a player, I've got my own questions. I don't need the coach telling me he doesn't know what's going on either."

How the tactical picture could change

Strategically, King said one of the key factors will be how a coach can deploy his top players during this postseason. He reasoned that in a normal regular season they would have all logged heavy minutes for 82 games, but due to the pause, they are unusually fresh and rested.

King believes that means coaches can load up the minutes on their top players without the fear of burning them out, which could be the case if they had a season's worth of wear and tear on their bodies. It presents some interesting coaching options.

So, for example, Edmonton's Leon Draisaitl and Connor McDavid led all NHL forwards in ice time this year, at 22:37 and 21:52 average TOI per night. Winnipeg's Mark Scheifele was at 21:48. New York's Mika Zibanejad was 21:38. Toronto's Mitch Marner was 21:33. Colorado's Nathan MacKinnon was 21:13.

Older stars such as Chicago's Patrick Kane (21:20) and Washington's Alex Ovechkin (20:40) were also among the ice-time leaders on teams that qualified for the play-in round.

All will be able to handle heavier workloads in this postseason as opposed to other years, said King, because of the pause.

"It'll give a coach more chances to load up and really give your best players, the guys who make a difference, the chance to play a lot of hockey because they're fresh," King said. "And that's going to affect some of the coaching decisions.

"The other part of that whole equation is, if teams are going to load up and play their top 10 to 12 players a lot, how's that going to affect the bottom two units that now are not getting enough ice time to get into a game. I'm going to be watching those kinds of things."

For most NHL teams, the current game hiatus is now roughly 140 days – from the time they last played a meaningful regular-season contest until now.

That time with nothing to do but ruminate has given coaches far more preparation time than they normally would receive to prepare for a playoff series.

Just what they came up with during all that time to brainstorm is something that has King intrigued.

"Has somebody found a way to get an edge?" King asked. "Has somebody realized something that others maybe haven't yet? Because you're not coaching in a normal situation right now. You're coaching guys who are fresh and energized and capable of playing big minutes if they're asked to.

"So, the latter few minutes of the first and second periods, I think you're going to find everybody loading up the minutes on the top players – and trying to score late in a period to get an edge going into the break."



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 1, 2020

During his NHL coaching days, King would occasionally assign a player with a lot of hockey sense to shadow a top forward on the other team. While it's a tactic that has mostly disappeared from the game, King wonders if someone might resurrect it now, especially in the opening round, which could go by in a hurry. Sometimes, you only need a new wrinkle for a game or two to make a difference in a best-of-five series, he said.

"Bench management is going to be interesting to watch," King said. "Will they go to matchups? In a short series, I think there are all kinds of ways to do it. Now, we basically use a defence pair against a top line, or a good forward line against a top line. Here, you may find some other ways to do it, going back to shadowing for example.

"If I'm playing McDavid in a short best-of-five, if I can get him off his game for one or two games, that might be enough to win a series. So, in the first part of a series, you might see some teams going close to man-to-man on some of the key people who are difference makers.

"As a coach, everybody always analyzes every single thing you do, but in this situation, there's almost total freedom. Even your GM probably isn't going to ask you questions. He'll say, 'OK, let's go for it. Let's do it.'"

The health picture

Thus far, one of the things that the NHL has done quite well is keeping its player pool healthy. Earlier this week, the league announced that it had completed Phase 3 of its return-to-play protocol with no positive results for Covid-19 among the 4,256 tests administered during the July 18-25 period.

Life in the bubble could become increasingly challenging as the playoffs move along. Right here, at the start, does Ferraro believe there's value in reminding players of their professional responsibilities, in an era of a global pandemic?

"I'm going to say yes," Ferraro replied. "There's nothing wrong with reminding the guys and saying, 'hey guys, what we need to do here is pretty obvious. Let's make sure we're not the group that lets the entire group down. There's a responsibility to this. We all look at what happened with the NBA – a couple of guys goofing around. MLS went in like a tire fire, and since then, it's been virtually perfect. The guys have locked themselves down. They've done what they needed to do. The protocols are working well enough.

"That's the example I would present. 'Guys, this can be done – and we have a couple of real-life examples of how it can be done, both in men's and women's soccer.' Let's make sure we're doing it too.

"But as I think this through, that should almost come as a league decree. There should be a video shown the night before the first game when the teams are in their meetings, maybe 45 seconds to a minute, from (Commissioner) Gary Bettman that says, 'guys thanks for the co-operation in getting the CBA and the right-to-play details hammered out but it's critical that we stick to the protocols, as hard as it's going to be at times. Let's give ourselves the best chance to be the most successful league.'

"To me, I think that would be valuable."

Life in the bubble

Some have likened the upcoming playoffs as the hockey equivalent of a science experiment.

But King stressed that it's also an experiment in social science as well.

"It's going to take some mentally strong guys to deal with the bubble for any length of time," King predicted. "You know how you always see shows, where guys are in a prisoner-of-war camp and suddenly, someone cracks and does something rash. In the bubble, it's going to take a really disciplined guy to deal with it – because some guys could break. Some guys could just say, 'I've had it.' And it might not become publicly known, but some players may not play as well as they could

because they're burned out by their time in the bubble. The whole thing's fascinating."

Keeping players on track as the postseason moves along will be part of the motivational toolbox that coaches will need to employ. In sport, people sometimes reference Vince Lombardi-style pep talks, or how a team leader might stand up in the dressing room and make a point that ultimately rallies their teammates and turns the tide.

As someone who only hears about these narratives from the outside (and usually only after the fact), I've always had a healthy skepticism about how effective they are – or even how common they may be.

Ferraro says he sides with me there – that sometimes, win-one-for-The-Gipper is wildly overstated.

"I'm with you there. But the best coaches, what they will be able to convey to their players is a sense of urgency right away," Ferraro said. "Everybody's quite aware of the oddity of it all. The coach that can get his players to jump on board, and to understand this is a three-out-of-five and if we lose Game 1, it might not seem like a big difference usually, but getting down in Game 1 is doubled in importance now.

"Also, and I don't know if this message comes from the coach or the manager, but these guys need to realize they're also playing for their position next year. There is going to be a big turnover, as there is every year in the league – 75 to 100 players that just disappear. They retire or never make it back. I would say: Don't let these three-to-five games determine your fate.

"If I were coaching, I would not only talk about the immediacy of this, but also what the long-range implications are. Teams are going to be making decisions at the end of this tournament and there are going to be changes. These may be the oddest set of circumstances, but don't let yourself get burned because you had three bad games."

In conclusion

As Ferraro noted, a lot is different about the timing and circumstances of the 2020 NHL playoff, but one thing doesn't change. If all goes well, at some point in the not-too-distant future, one team will be circling the ice, celebrating a Stanley Cup championship. They may be doing it in an empty arena, in front of a television as opposed to a live audience, and presumably, there'll be some sort of appropriate social-distanced celebration that can take place after the fact. But it will be a championship and it will almost certainly be a memorable journey to get there.

Ferraro says he doesn't mind pointing out when things aren't right in the NHL or need a tweak, but he believes that what's happened so far is really good.

"They've done an unbelievable job, in my opinion, of getting this to the starting gate in good shape – and that's really all you can do," Ferraro said. "Now that we're at the starting gate, if it's a 100-metre sprint, the preliminary round is going to be the first 10 to 15 metres of the race. Let's get through that. Let's take a breath. Let's move on to the next round.

"When a bunch of players leave, I think it gets easier in the bubbles as this moves along – because you're going to have fewer people there.

"So right now, is just a critical time. You can't start behind the eight ball."

King and Ferraro both spent the past three nights watching intently as each team played their single exhibition game in preparation for the tournament. The urgency seemed greater for the 16 teams in the qualifying round than for the eight that are playing for seeding. It showed too – good teams such as St. Louis and Boston weren't quite as sharp as teams that will be playing with far greater desperation come Saturday.

The bye teams can work their way into the tournament.

The others can't.

"It wasn't a traditional preseason warmup," King said. "The players knew this was their one opportunity to get something close to game speed. I mean, I saw guys going down to block shots. So, it's going to be



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 1, 2020

interesting, because if teams can generate some momentum early, they might ride it through a series – and then you never know. Other than Edmonton and Toronto, no one has home-ice advantage. It makes for a very wide-open competition.”

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1189835 Websites

The Athletic / Down Goes Brown: Get ready for the weirdest playoffs ever by taking our quiz

By Sean McIndoe Jul 31, 2020 125

The NHL postseason starts for real tomorrow, and nobody knows what to expect. Will the quality of play be high, thanks to healthy, well-rested stars, or a disaster due to rust, bad ice and barren arenas? Will it be chaos, or will the favorites have the advantage? Will the eventual winner feel like a real Stanley Cup champion? Will they even make it that far?

We don't know. But we know one thing: It's going to be weird.

Like, super weird. This will almost certainly be remembered as the strangest postseason in NHL history. And that's saying something, because man, the NHL has a habit of serving up bizarre moments when the games matter most.

Today, let's get ready for tomorrow's madness by revisiting some of NHL history's weirdest playoff moments. I've created a 19-question quiz to see how many postseason oddities you remember. Why 19? It seemed fitting since it's going to take 19 wins to capture this year's Cup. Well, for some teams it will. Other teams will only need 16. Although come to think of it, there's also a round-robin for them so they'll probably end up winning more, but 16 is the minimum so I guess we should say 19. See, as I said, it's weird.

Enough with the preamble, let's remember some goofy stuff.

(Editor's note: Readers who are using our app on an Android device may need to use two fingers to scroll through the survey. Still unable to get to the survey, though? Try this direct link.)

How'd you do? Find out using this handy chart:

0 – 2 right answers: You were eliminated in the play-in round like a chump.

3 – 6 right answers: You made it to the first round but lost.

7 – 10 right answers: Hey, you won a round, that's not bad.

11 – 14 right answers: You made it to the conference final and got to see your family.

15 – 18 right answers: You made the Final but fell just short of ultimate glory.

A perfect 19 right answers: You looked up the answers on the internet like a big dumb cheater.

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1189836 Websites

The Athletic / The longest intermission: Inside hockey's 5-month journey from pause to playoffs

By Craig Custance and Dan Robson 26

It was an NBA video clip that first put hockey on high alert.

Mark Cuban looking at his phone, his jaw dropping and then the Mavericks owner leaning back into his chair in disbelief. Cuban's reaction to the NBA shutting down its season was televised live as he watched his Mavericks play the Nuggets and then it was shared immediately throughout the NHL's small, connected world.

Around 9:30 p.m. on March 11, the NBA sent out a statement saying simply that it was suspending play following the conclusion of the night's games because a player on the Jazz had tested positive for COVID-19.

Around the same time, the Edmonton Oilers entered their dressing room at Rogers Place in Edmonton following the first period of their game against the Winnipeg Jets. Earlier that night, when Connor McDavid arrived for the game, he heard players talking about the possibility of sports shutting down.

"I was like, 'Yeah, right, no chance,'" he said.

During intermission, when the NBA news hit the Oilers dressing room, that stance changed.

"That's when we were like, 'This is for real,'" McDavid said.

In the visitor's room at Rogers, a few of the Jets' scratches had their cellphones in hand and whispered to players who passed by them about what was happening.

"We went out for the second period, and the Oilers guys were saying, 'Hey, did you hear about the NBA?'" said Jets forward Mark Scheifele. "That was a strange thing."

In New York, a group of Carolina Hurricanes players were having dinner together when the news hit. They were coming off a win in Detroit, a game they had no idea was their last of the regular season. The Jazz were in Detroit just two days earlier.

They realized they stayed in the same hotel as Utah, the Westin Book Cadillac, a refurbished building from 1924 that was now a part of an entirely new historic moment.

Their minds started to race, adding up the points of contact.

"You start backtracking and think, maybe I got it from somebody," said Hurricanes forward Jordan Martinook.

The players thought about the shared locker room space. The shared hotel lobby. The arena workers and security guards.

In Dallas, several of the Florida Panthers were hanging out in their rooms at the Ritz-Carlton downtown when they saw Cuban's reaction live while watching the local Mavericks game.

"Oh, geez, we need to play in that building tomorrow," Panthers defenseman Mike Matheson said.

They never would.

Like other professional leagues, the NHL slammed to a halt in early March as the novel coronavirus reached North America to devastating effect. At the time, very little was known about COVID-19. It was unclear just how long arenas across the continent would be shuttered as the health crisis engulfed the globe. Five months later, the NHL is back — attempting to finish its season under unprecedented conditions — a feat that at various times seemed nearly impossible. It took an exhaustive effort by the players and the league to reach this point, and they collaborated in unprecedented ways.

This is the story of how hockey's longest season played out behind the scenes.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 1, 2020

Gary Bettman, the NHL commissioner, sat inside a conference room at the Boca Beach Club on March 4, a sunny Wednesday morning. Bill Daly, the deputy commissioner, was on his right and Colin Campbell, the executive vice president, was on his left. They sat in front of long tables arranged in a large square with placards in front of the seats that NHL general managers had occupied during the just-completed annual three-day meeting.

Just outside the sliding glass doors to Bettman's right, Atlantic Ocean waves kissed the shore as hotel guests filled chairs surrounding a nearby pool, one of five at the property. It was nearly as relaxed inside as the NHL execs addressed the media that had gathered to learn what had been discussed.

"I can characterize the last three days as upbeat," Bettman said. "I think it's safe to say everybody in the room is upbeat because the overwhelming view is that the game is in terrific shape."

Bettman listed topics that received the most attention during the GM meetings. The first two were an offside rule debate and the issue of emergency goalies, following the folk hero rise of David Ayres, a Zamboni driver who had recently finished and won a game for the Carolina Hurricanes.

The coronavirus was third.

At the time, there were 94,000 known cases of COVID-19 around the world, with 3,200 reported deaths. It was unclear how far it would reach or what its impact would be. It was the first time the commissioner had publicly addressed what was still considered an epidemic at the time.

Bettman said that he was in daily communication with the CDC and Health Canada about a virus of which most of the GMs knew very little — just enough that some wiped down their plane seats with disinfectant wipes on the flight down to be safe. He said he'd been in touch with the NFL, NBA and Major League Baseball about the potential impact to live professional sports. Then he was asked about canceling games or playing without fans.

"I don't think as we sit here today people should get too far ahead of themselves in terms of how they either react to this or report this," he answered.

A few days later, Bettman attended Roberto Luongo's retirement ceremony at BB&T Center in Sunrise, Fla.

That day, March 7, the league announced that it was shutting down media access to locker rooms because of rising concerns about COVID-19. In a scrum in the Panthers press box, Bettman was pressed on the decision. He answered by pointing out that if anyone in that scrum had the illness, they'd all have it.

"I remember that vividly," Bettman said in an interview this week. "That entire weekend and leading into the week, we were in a learning curve. We were most focused on the California teams, particularly San Jose, and whether or not we should be playing."

Bettman was back at his home in New Jersey on the evening of Wednesday, March 11, when he received a phone call from someone who urged him to turn on his television.

Everyone was paying attention now.

The news was everywhere. Rudy Gobert, a center for the Utah Jazz, had tested positive for COVID just as several NBA games were about to begin that night with fans packed in the stands. And then Adam Silver, the NBA commissioner, postponed the season indefinitely.

"I remember at that point saying, you know what, it's only a question of time until a player tests positive," Bettman said.

He decided then that the NHL season had to pause. He advised the board of governors on plans to pause the season the next day.

He flew to his home in Florida that Friday, planning to spend the weekend with his wife. Bettman planned to be there for only three days, but he wouldn't get back to New Jersey until the end of May.

A few days after the season paused, the inevitable reality of COVID-19 hit the league.

The Ottawa Senators already had plenty of news to monitor when they journeyed out West before the NHL shutdown, packing for a five-game trip that they fully intended on completing.

They played the Sharks on March 7. But even before that game, on March 5 with 20 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Santa Clara County, Calif., the public health department recommended that the Sharks postpone games to slow the spread of the virus.

"There was still this thought that, 'Oh, it's like the flu. You guys are fine. There may not be fans in San Jose, but don't worry about it. There's no issue,'" Ottawa defenseman Ron Hainsey recalled.

Ottawa had two more games in the Western loop, in Anaheim and Los Angeles — losing to the Kings in front of 12,020 fans at the Staples Center in what would be the last game of the regular season on March 11.

By the time they were getting dressed to play the Kings that final night, they started hearing the news out of the NBA. The next morning, their scheduled trip to Chicago became a flight home to Ottawa.

The team boarded the plane, passed around hand sanitizer and waited. First, there was a two-hour wait on the ground because the flight plan was changed. Then came a five-hour flight. Then ...

"By Sunday, the whole world changed," Hainsey said.

Five players on the Senators tested positive for COVID-19. One staffer. TSN color analyst Gord Wilson tested positive as well. The rest of the team went into quarantine with tests reserved only for those showing symptoms because of a test shortage. Hainsey said he was called every day to check his status. His temperature never went above 97 degrees. Never had a cough. Never had a sore throat. So he never took a test.

"We were on that plane for seven hours. Fifty people. It was everywhere," Hainsey said of the virus. "We were all very close in proximity for the 48 hours before we got on that plane. That's how it seems to spread very, very fast and very easily. The (positive test) number of the traveling party is anyone's guess."

The same day the Senators left Los Angeles, a group of Pittsburgh Penguins players and staff were gathered in the Le Meridien hotel lobby in Columbus. The modern gray squares on the floor looking like an M.C. Escher drawing, with a group of about 40 people mingling and talking about the immediate future of the game.

While some guessed hockey might be stopped for a few days or a couple weeks, Phil Bourque remembers hearing Penguins defenseman Kris Letang speak with a tone that added weight to the moment.

"He was more serious than most," Bourque said. "He was worried about his family. Bringing it back to his family or causing harm to someone on the team."

Penguins GM Jim Rutherford was notified that the game that night against the Blue Jackets was canceled. Anticipating that might happen, the team had the flight ready to go.

On Penguins flights, Rutherford sits in the very front seat to the left. Mike Sullivan in the front to the right. Then the assistant coaches. The trainers. The younger players, then the veterans and assorted media at the very back. On this flight, all sections were silent.

It was 49 minutes and entire futures were in the air.

"Quiet. Very quiet," Rutherford said. "Because, when you start to hear more and more about COVID, it's not just about playing a sport, it's about yourself, it's about your family, it's about friends and beyond. It's about



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 1, 2020

people. It's about what's going on in the world. You get a very quick wakeup call that things may not be normal. And they weren't."

Mathieu Schneider and his colleagues at the NHLPA started receiving calls from players almost immediately. His phone kept ringing throughout the first weeks of the NHL shutdown and never really stopped for four months.

The days would often stretch from 5:30 in the morning to 9 at night in Los Angeles, getting booted to different rooms throughout his house — and often outside or to the garage — as his four teenage kids did their high school classes from home. As an NHLPA executive, Schneider was almost always on the phone or in a meeting.

"I think there were times where my wife was considering kicking me out for sure," he says now.

But these were unprecedented times, especially at the start. No one was sure what to make of it.

At first, players wanted to know if they should stay close to their teams or if they should return home.

"Clubs wanted the players to hang around the NHL cities," Schneider said. "And each day it just became more and more apparent that this was going to be something longer term."

Islanders captain Anders Lee sat at home expecting that the pause would just last a couple of weeks. But cases quickly surged in New York and into Lee's neighborhood on Long Island. On March 2, Lee and his wife welcomed their first child, a daughter named Ruby.

"It really started to hit home," Lee said. "In our community out on the island, it's a couple degrees of separation. It was extremely serious."

Soon the NHL announced that it was postponing the NHL Draft, combine and awards all scheduled for June. The NHL extended its self-quarantine for another two weeks at the end of March.

Don Fehr, the executive director of the NHLPA, had led the players through the 2012-2013 lockout and had been part of many discussions with the NHL. But this was something entirely new. The pandemic changed the way information was communicated to the players. This was about much more than collective bargaining.

The players had concerns about their families — new babies, children with underlying health conditions. There were players dealing with adoptions and surrogate births, says Schneider. The NHLPA hired Dr. Isaac Bogoch, a top infectious disease expert in Canada, to advise the union on its response to the pandemic — and to speak directly with players who reached out with concerns about the virus.

The NHLPA began having executive board calls at least once a week, sometimes more, to make sure players were up to date on the latest information and discussions with the league.

"On some of the calls there were literally hundreds of players, because our rule is anybody that wants to join a call can join it," Fehr said.

"A very large portion of the time was spent on the telephone or on Zoom calls, or GoTo Meeting calls or whatever the hell service we were using at the time, answering questions as best you could, but being upfront with people and saying not only did you not have answers for them, no one had answers for them — the answers didn't exist."

While those questions were first and foremost about health and safety, the financial implications of the pause were a serious concern.

"It ramped up a couple weeks in," said Zach Hyman, a member of the NHLPA executive board. "One of our paychecks were due and we weren't playing any games. There was a decision, do we take the paycheck right away. What happens? As a group, you have to look towards the future. The virus didn't slow down during the first couple weeks. It was picking up. There was no return in mind. Nobody knew when we were going back."

On the conference calls, Fehr laid out the economic reality to the players. He didn't have to present the fine print. The players had a clear sense of what was at stake. They wanted to know when they would be paid again. And what would happen to signing bonuses. And would there be a season next year at all.

"You're talking about if we don't play the playoffs, sooner or later, the TV money is lost, whether it's lost this year, next year, it's lost. How much is it? OK, what does that mean in terms of the overall revenue loss? What does that mean in terms of escrow and so on?" said Fehr. "How does that translate into the individual?"

As an agent, that was one of the questions Octagon's Allan Walsh received the most.

What happens if there is no deal?

What is this going to cost each player?

The alternative to finding common ground with the NHL was going to be ugly. He estimated to his clients that if the NHL, a gate-driven league, played without fans next year, hockey related revenue will probably be around \$1.8 billion to \$2 billion, well below an estimated \$5 billion without a pandemic.

"If that happens, escrow would probably go up during the season to around 75 to 80 percent," Walsh said. "Many players were saying, 'Well, the league needs us. The league has never needed us as much as they do right now.' I would say, 'You're only 50 percent right. The other 50 percent is we've never needed the league as much as we need them now too. We're in the boat together.'"

The reality was that there was no way to predict what lay ahead for the NHL as COVID-19 continued to spread. But it was apparent that it was in the interest of both sides to work together.

"From the league perspective and a players' perspective, the number one thing was money, how you can create the most revenue," Martinook said. "Every time you're on a call, it was worst-case scenario, best-case scenario type thing."

On the other side of the table, Bettman kept the NHL Board of Governors updated in meetings every other Monday at 3 p.m. Daly kept the league's general managers informed with daily emails. In early April, Bettman told the board that the picture was cloudy at best. To reporters later that week, he suggested that games could reach into August and raised the possibility that the NHL season might not be completed.

The commissioner had calls with Dr. Bruce Farber, an infectious disease expert with Northwell Medical System in New York. He spoke with the White House Coronavirus Task Force and had a couple of conversations with Dr. Anthony Fauci.

"We had to know what our options are," said Bettman. "We had to be flexible, and we had to keep all of our constituent groups completely informed."

NHL deputy commissioner Bill Daly was in constant communication with the league's general managers about CBA negotiations. This memo, obtained by The Athletic, was sent after the NHL and NHLPA agreed to terms on a new CBA.

On April 15, the NHL extended its self-quarantine period to the end of the month. It was apparent that if the league was going to return, it wouldn't be for some time.

That meant there was a lot to lose.

While health and safety were primary, both the league and the players were concerned about the economic uncertainty.

Behind the scenes, Bettman and Fehr were on the phone several times a day, Bettman calling from his home in Florida and Fehr from New York.

It was a unique situation for two staunch negotiators used to facing off in prolonged discussions. Although still working from opposite sides of the



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 1, 2020

table, both men found that they were working toward a collective goal in a struggle against the same threat. Usually negotiations would involve large committees, Fehr said, with everybody getting their say. But it's more difficult for dozens of people to come to an agreement than it is for two. And these weren't normal circumstances.

"This was different because the parties were not in control of events. That's the starting point," said Fehr. "The pandemic controlled everything."

On top of negotiating with each other, the NHL and NHLPA had to be in discussions with public health authorities at multiple levels, with differing rules and regulations, and about what it would take to get the players back on the ice. They had no choice but to work together.

"The best way I can describe it is there was an unstated but clear mutual recognition that we were dealing with something fundamentally different and we had to approach this differently as a result," Fehr said.

The NHL and NHLPA had long been in negotiations for an extension of the collective bargaining agreement, with most of the key points already identified in the fall. But it still left a lot to be discussed. Between calls and virtual meetings with staff, players, public officials, stakeholders and each other, Bettman and Fehr's workdays sometimes stretched to 16 hours.

"This would start with phone calls coming in at 7 o'clock in the morning, and go to 11 o'clock at night," Bettman said. "I was finishing each day with a sore throat from so much talking."

Unlike previous and adversarial CBA negotiations, Fehr and Bettman did a lot of the heavy lifting one-on-one, with more common goals than not.

Before the end of April, the NHL had agreed to the union's request that if the league returned each player would be able to opt out without repercussion.

"There was never really a dispute about that. The NHL understood and they were not opposed to it," said Fehr. "They have families too. Everybody can put themselves in the player's position here."

In late April, the NHL had also agreed to one of the most publicized points of contention between the two sides — the players' participation in the next Olympic Games.

"I knew that this was important to the players," Bettman said. "And while we think it is disruptive, the fact is, based on what we were trying to accomplish together, it was important that we each recognize those issues that were important to each other."

But those details remained quiet for two months.

James van Riemsdyk isn't exactly sure how he ended up on the Return to Play committee, a collection of both players and league officials charged with determining how things would look if hockey returned. He joined Connor McDavid, John Tavares, Mark Scheifele and Ron Hainsey from the player side.

That first meeting in late April was like so many first attempts at pulling off a Zoom call.

"Certainly those who didn't know how to mute their lines and their faces popping up in the middle — they were definitely part of the older generation. I'll put it like that," van Riemsdyk said. "That made me laugh a little bit."

On the first call, it was clear that Bettman and Daly wanted to complete the season in full. That would have solved the ongoing debate of whether teams would have an unfair advantage under an altered format. It also meant all 31 teams would have to find a way back on the ice. It didn't take long to recognize that wasn't possible.

"We kind of just said, 'We'll wait,'" McDavid said, as the world changed around them. "A week or two went by and we really didn't hear anything."

"By the next week, every scenario had changed as far as what was going on in the world," Hainsey said. "As things changed and it was clear that nobody was going to be doing anything in April, May, June — the timeline of that just made it impossible — you were dealing with that changing as you went."

So brainstorming sessions kicked in. A variety of playoff solutions were kicked around. It was suggested that maybe the best solution was to roll back games so that everybody played the same amount in order to determine the 16 for the playoffs.

"How do you pick which games? There's a whole host of issues. Are you putting teams that deserve to be in? Then you start kicking around every idea you can come up with," Hainsey said.

There were formats proposed that would have sped through play-ins and opening rounds in order to get to a final four quicker than the plan in place now. But it was important to the players to keep the integrity of the playoffs, to make this Stanley Cup winner as worthy as any other. Even if it meant an extended summer of postseason hockey.

Every player on those calls weighed in with ideas but van Riemsdyk remembers being impressed with Tavares taking the lead to express the players' concerns.

"He was usually the guy who brought things up and talked them out," van Riemsdyk said. "He did a really good job of that."

For Hainsey, the turning point came when the league made it clear that cities were interested in creating the necessary bubble to keep players safe. When all these talks began, there were many unknowns, including whether or not cities would be willing to block off streets, cordon off hotels and close a golf course for players to enjoy on a day off. In late May, 10 cities eager to do exactly that were named — including Las Vegas, an early front-runner along with Edmonton and Toronto, the eventual winners. Seeing those in-depth proposals made this all very real to the players.

"I thought, OK, this is something we can take to the players and have a vote on," Hainsey said.

As return to play plans neared completion, NHL players gathered on a Zoom call in late May to discuss the specifics. There was a lot to talk about.

Scheifele, a member of the return to play committee, was impressed by the overwhelming engagement from his peers.

"I think that's the good part about it," he said. "You had a bunch of guys who wanted to get answers and throw their opinion around."

But there was contention. A vocal minority of players were concerned about returning to play.

Minnesota Wild player rep Devan Dubnyk was among those who had doubts early on. Initially, he wasn't a fan of the notion of returning to play mostly because it seemed like a lot of risk without much gain in the short term. Players would be leaving their families for a long stretch. They'd be putting their long-term health at risk.

But the more Dubnyk learned, the more he came around. When it became clear that there would be no new CBA without a conclusion to the 2019-20 season, that the two were inseparable, the cost certainly well into the future and the protection from the worst-case made everything more palatable.

"That made more sense," he said. "Remember, that's our job. You have to make it better for the guys coming."

Other players insisted that it was crazy. People were dying. How can playing hockey even be considered?

"There were some guys that just weren't going to be convinced that it was safe to come back in any way, shape or form," Schneider said.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 1, 2020

As June came to a close, the pressure was on to finalize a return to play agreement and a CBA extension. Both sides knew they were working against the clock.

"It would have made life easier ... if we had an extra month to prepare, OK, but everything was in flux," said Bettman. "And everybody knew that they had to be agile, so that there wasn't a hard and fixed timetable, but just at some point, we were going to run out of time to be able to accomplish what we wanted to accomplish together."

Used to hunkering down in a conference room, the NHLPA staff connected by Zoom from their living rooms, kitchens and garages to discuss the negotiations through their computer screens — while the union leadership jumped in and out of discussions with NHL brass. Schneider did his best to mute the barks of Newbury, the family's 12-year-old nearly deaf cocker spaniel, while being transplanted from room to room in the house.

Days were especially long through that final stretch as both sides tried to get the deal complete, knowing the future was uncertain. Discussions went late into the evenings.

"When you are dealing with a situation like we are faced with now, you realize that you're not dealing solely with a normal collective bargaining agreement, and how do you determine how salaries are going to be paid and what players get, what the owners get and how you handle the escrow and all the rest of it," Fehr said. "You're dealing to a large extent with 'Will the NHL be in a position to continue normal operations to generate that revenue? If so, when? And under what circumstances? And how do you get between here and there?'"

Other issues arose around the logistics of operating inside a bubble, like how players could get second opinions on injuries. The sides agreed that surgeons would have to be consulted through Zoom.

Although the NHL announced the plan for return to play in late May, there were many details to work out. Most importantly, where the games would be played.

By late June, the plan was to have hub cities in Vancouver and Las Vegas. But then British Columbia's health officials said that if a single player tested positive, the operation would have to be shut down. It wasn't tenable. The NHL wanted at least one Canadian city, so Toronto became the new destination.

Then, in early July, the NHL's health consultants told the league that Las Vegas wasn't safe. At the time, there were more than 3 million cases of COVID-19 in the U.S., with more than 131,000 known deaths. Around the world there were nearly 12 million reported cases — and more than half a million had died.

"It was one day. We woke up one morning and you know the docs were kind of waving a red flag, saying 'Hey, hey, hey — we need to pay attention to this,'" said Schneider. "It was just bananas. You'd just sit there holding your breath going, how are we going to get through this?"

Bettman gave the players the final call.

"Gary just said, listen, you tell us where you want to go," said Schneider.

The NHLPA and Return to Play committee gathered in an emergency video meeting and laid out the options.

"Guys were like, 'Listen, we want to have our best chance of success,'" Schneider said. "Whether we're in a bubble in Edmonton or in a bubble in Vegas, it's not gonna make that much of a difference. ... As one of our players said so eloquently, wherever we are, it's just like putting lipstick on a pig because we're stuck in a bubble. You're gonna be there for a long period of time."

At the same time, as the hub cities were being finalized throughout those first days of July, there were moments within the marathon negotiations when it looked as though an agreement wouldn't happen. Calls reached well into the evenings, as the sides bounced back and forth. The night of Thursday, July 9, went especially late as the final terms were hammered

out. Bettman and Fehr ended the call around 12:30 a.m. — with a plan to reconvene one last time in the morning.

On the afternoon of July 10, Billy Daly sent the NHLPA a signed copy of the memorandum of understanding, finalizing the agreement. The copy was faded and difficult to read, as though it had been photocopied on an old fax machine.

Pending final ratification by the players, the NHL was set to return in August. That night the NHLPA staff shared a beer over Zoom to celebrate. The NHL's long pause appeared to be over.

By the time it was presented to the players for a vote, they were well informed about what was inside. Those players working on the deal fully expected it to pass. In talking to the players, Dubnyk remembers Fehr being very clear. It's his job to work until he believes he has the best possible deal available. Then, it's up to the players.

"He said, 'I believe this is the best deal we have at this moment in time with the situation we're in with the pandemic,'" Dubnyk said. "It's our job to decide if it's yes or no."

By a vote of 502-135, the players agreed it was.

As attention turned to the sprint toward the Stanley Cup playoffs just a few weeks away, both sides pointed to the other as key to finding a way to get back on the ice. In unprecedented circumstances, both sides navigated toward their shared interests. Fehr likened the experience to guiding a vessel through uncertain waters.

"We're sitting on a shore. And here's an island for five miles out and the islands is where you have normal collective bargaining. But in the meantime, there's a hurricane, and you got to kayak. To make it even worse, it was a two-person kayak that Gary and I were in," he said. "So one person wasn't going to get it there. I don't know how to describe it otherwise. The pandemic took over everything."

"I think that's a pretty good analogy," Bettman said.

On Tuesday evening, in a darkened Rogers Arena in Edmonton, with red spotlights flying around the ice and AC/DC's "Hell's Bells" blaring throughout the rink, Connor McDavid glided through a warmup. His last shift on the ice had come 141 days earlier, an attempt with Leon Draisaitl and teammates to try and tie up that game against the Jets.

He was playing in his first game in the NHL bubble, where life felt a bit like a music festival to him. The food trucks. The courtyards. Players just walking around chatting. It's definitely surreal. But being on the ice, that felt good. The excitement returned. And with it came a moment of pause.

"You just reflect on all the hard work everyone has had to do," McDavid said Thursday night. "The sacrifice everyone has had to make. Not only the players, but everyone helping us in the bubble. It's taken so many people to put this together. It's been pretty amazing that it's worked so far."

It's an exhibition game that is both meaningless and everything. McDavid, the game's biggest star, has returned to the ice and so much is different. The world, of course. We're all different. But unlike Sidney Crosby before him, McDavid now has a chance to play his entire career without the interruption of a lockout, the first generational star to have that chance in generations. There is labor peace until 2025-26. Maybe even longer. And like Crosby, McDavid now has the opportunity to represent his country in the Winter Olympics. When the NHL stopped playing, this was far from a certainty. Everything was.

Compared to the others who are asked what they'll remember from this moment in time, this unforgettable stretch of NHL history, McDavid's answer is slightly different. To him, this isn't the end.

"I hope it's not over for a couple months," he said.

That's the hope.

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CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 1, 2020

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The Athletic / LeBrun: Q&A with Bill Daly on NHL's return to play, new CBA and 2020-21 season

By Pierre LeBrun Jul 31, 2020 9

As the pucks drops for real this weekend, it is a reminder of just how astonishing it really was for the NHL and NHL Players' Association to work together as they did to come up with a return to play plan plus tack on a CBA extension on top of it.

There was a level of craziness attached to the process when things really got serious in June in trying to pull both of those things off. You could tell in the exhausted voices of sources at both the NHL and NHLPA during those days just how daunting all this was, how many late-night calls were needed. The volume of it all was unreal.

So when the tournament opens Saturday with five games, there's a certain level of pride, and maybe relief, for those involved in creating it. Although nobody will sleep well until the Stanley Cup is awarded in a couple of months.

But right now? Pure excitement.

"It's going to be fantastic, I'm very excited by it," Bill Daly told The Athletic.

The work hasn't stopped for the NHL's deputy commissioner, who put in crazy long days throughout this process along with his NHLPA counterparts to make this all work. Now there's work ahead on next season, whenever that may start. More on that later.

But for now, it's time to enjoy the fruit of the work from the past few months. Here is my interview with Daly.

I was thinking to myself, had somebody reached out to you back on March 12 after that Board of Governors' call where you're putting the season on pause, and told you, "By the way, come Aug. 1 there's a 24-team postseason tournament that's going to kick off." What would your reaction have been in that very moment given the level of anxiety and unknowns that obviously you were facing that day in March?

Well, I would say that March 12 we didn't even really know how bad the situation was going to be. I think it was not until the following days and weeks that we saw how serious the situation was, not only throughout the world but specifically in North America; and the devastating impact that the (coronavirus) and the pandemic had, the shutdown of the economy was having on businesses and individuals everywhere. I will tell you my deepest points of despair was probably, you know, after March 12 and it looked like we were in a hole; and the hole was getting bigger, not smaller. So it was going to take a lot to dig ourselves out of that hole. To be where we are now, understanding we haven't really accomplished anything yet, but to be where we are now where we are about to drop the puck and play hockey, we've come a tremendous distance from where we were then to where we are now. Certainly, there's a sense of optimism about what we're about to embark on.

It came with a lot of work. From your perspective, you were front and centre for a couple of major CBA negotiations in 2004 and 2012. Those experiences come with pressure and countless hours. How would you compare those experiences with what you just went through the last five months in terms of pulling all this together along with the NHLPA?

You know, they're hard to compare. All three were difficult time periods, for sure. A lot of hard work, for sure. But this one had a totally different dynamic. I say that in a positive way. We and the Players' Association were allies in trying to figure out the solutions that we had to figure out

together. We recognized early on that we shared a common problem and that we needed to work together and do everything we could as a team really, to dig ourselves out of it. I felt that from the start we were aligned in purpose and objective and that, in some respects, made it easier to deal with. Now, we were dealing with something that we don't know a lot about still, and we didn't know what we were facing and still don't know to a certain extent and that presents its own challenges. But I think the fact that we were aligned in trying to get the sport back on the ice safely, really went a long way to helping us get to where we are today.

And I personally feel that it was a key decision for the league to establish the Return To Play Committee, with players on it, so quickly in the process, right? Because I think it put everyone on both sides on the ground floor when you're trying to tackle this, don't you agree?

Yeah, for sure. And I give the commissioner a lot of credit. He wanted to focus on what our return to play looked like very quickly and very early on. I think he viewed it as a way to establish kind of an end goal that everybody could work toward, even though the timing and a lot of other things remained so uncertain. So the fact that we were able to get our arms around that with the Players' Association, as you said, with active players, with their input, and with their input clearly valued, in the sense that there's a lot of things about our final return to play plan which were really player-specific and player-motivated, the fact we got our arms around that relatively quickly and really in advance of any of the other sports leagues was a real credit to us setting that goal and viewing it as important to set that goal as early as possible.

Now you get a CBA done on top of it. What would you say is the most important change in the new CBA from a league perspective. Is there something you're happy you addressed?

I think the most important objective from the league's perspective was getting four more years of labour peace. And an extended period of time, the next six years going forward, which will be critical. And which is still important to the growth of the sport, the growth of the business. We know we're not going to be starting on par with where we've been. We've got a little bit of catching up to do; all sports will have some catching up to do. We still have a lot of unknowns that we have to deal with, with respect to the return of fans in the stands, and full buildings and timing of next season and all those things kind of remain out there for us to have to solve. But we're in no different position than any other professional sports leagues or really any other business in having to tackle those issues. We feel very well-positioned to have to take on those challenges now that we have six years of labour peace. The issues that we have resolved in the collective agreement, obviously some of the economic issues became important as a result of the situation we're facing with the pandemic, both from their side and from our side, and you saw a lot of macro-economic positions as part of our (memorandum of understanding) that deal with the needs of both sides in the short- and medium-term in recognizing that we have six years, and potentially seven years, to get to the end of the agreement and everything is not going to be the same overnight. I think I've heard you say this before, I think it provides a foundation for the continued growth and popularity of the sport. It will be an important building block for where we want to get to.

Well the way I was describing the need for a CBA extension was that it provides the stability that the business needs to get through this pandemic. Because you're going to need that to navigate these waters. You mentioned next season, and obviously the stated goal is to start Dec. 1, but let me ask you this: can you start without fans? Can you start with some fans (but not full buildings)? What's some of the game theory right now as far as the league is concerned with next season? Can you delay next season into January potentially?

I don't think there's any answers to those questions right now. And luckily I don't think we have to answer those questions right now. I think time will tell. Obviously we're doing a lot of contingency planning. Obviously to the extent time is an asset, we want to use that asset, we want to use that time. And if it looks like while we can't have full arenas on Dec. 1 but we can on Jan. 1, we'd be foolish not to go to Jan. 1. If it looks like we're not going to have fans at all until, you know, who knows when, maybe a



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 1, 2020

different judgement is made. Again, I know people want to nail decisions now as soon as they can. I think we like to keep them open as long as we can so we have as much information as we can when we're making them. Just like we did with the hub cities, and drove the media crazy by prolonging that decision, but at the end of the day, it was one of the smartest things we ever did. We will take advantage of the time we have and we will make appropriate decisions as we need to make them.

The league announced the other day zero positive tests in the latest batch of testing. Now you've got all the players and team staff in the hub cities, which must provide some comfort that you've gotten through camp, and meanwhile you've got the news in Major League Baseball with all the positive test on the Miami Marlins. I know there's been a lot of cross-league communication and examination through all this, Bill, what does the Marlins situation communicate to you as far as lessons learned?

Well hopefully it doesn't really have much of a translation to us because of the model we chose to go with with the hub cities. But I'll address your first question, the training camp phase I think was critical for us and certainly there was some level of ... concern is probably too strong a word, but certainly curiosity as to what Phase 3 would bring because we were moving to mandatory team training camps with an influx of a whole bunch of players who had not been under the club's control, who had not been tested regularly, and what was it going to bring us. Knock on wood, I'm thrilled with the results we got in Phase 3 and I think what it tells me is that our players and our club staff and our coaches and our managers, they all are taking this very, very seriously. And they should, right? It's a serious matter. But the fact that we have almost a zero infection rate going into the bubble certainly puts us in a really good position to start out the next two months of tournament. So far, so good. So I'm very pleased with the way Phase 3 transpired. I think the bubble, if anything, is going to be safer as an environment than team training camps were, particularly in some of the markets in which teams were training where (COVID-19) was rampant. And now we've moved to two markets where (COVID-19) is not rampant and they get the benefit of pretty strong parameters of a strong bubble. I'm very encouraged, I'm very optimistic, again we still have a long way to go, but really pleased with where we ended up in Phase 3.

Seattle revealed its team name last week, lots of buzz with that. But in terms of the expansion draft, does the Seattle team know when it will go down yet?

Fair question. I have not addressed the date of the expansion draft with the Seattle franchise since the pandemic hit. I would imagine that the date of the expansion draft is really more specific to the critical dates calendar, where we are next season, etc., than it is to a date certain. So we're not going to see a situation where if we're still playing regular-season games in June next year, that we're going to plop an expansion draft down in the middle of that. It will follow the normal transgression of how our events take place. So I expect the Seattle expansion draft to take place after the conclusion of our 2020-21 season and before, obviously, the offseason period between 2020-21 and 21-22.

And nothing has changed as far as when Seattle comes in, they go into the Pacific Division, and Arizona moves over to the Central?

No, no changes.

Speaking of the Coyotes, any concern about how things played out with John Chayka leaving the Coyotes as GM and some of the harsh words exchanged from both sides?

That's not really something I'm prepared to comment on, or really that is something for the league to comment on. It's really a matter that's between the club and the executive involved.

Finally, last question, regarding the seven teams who aren't coming back to play here this summer. I've heard some talk of perhaps those seven teams being allowed to conduct a camp of some sort. Anything to divulge at this point on that?

Well I can tell you that I have been in fairly regular communication with the seven clubs and I'm certainly aware with their concerns with respect to a long layoff for their players, between playing competitive games last March and whenever we might drop the puck on the 2020-21 season. So I'm aware of those issues. I'm sympathetic to those issues. I have begun preliminary discussions with the Players' Association on those issues. I do expect that there will be some kind of accommodation made that will allow players a fair ability to train and condition in advance of a 2020-21 season. So it's an issue that's on the burner. I can't say that it's a front-burner issue as we sit here today, but it's definitely something that I'm aware of and working on.

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1189838 Websites

The Athletic / Which player should get the Stanley Cup second? A team-by-team breakdown

By Joshua Kloke Jul 31, 2020 57

Cliché as it might be, one of the reasons hockey fans eagerly await the Stanley Cup playoffs every year is its many traditions.

Even if some of those traditions will be threatened in these highly unusual playoffs — from the storied handshake line at the conclusion of every playoff series, to players kissing the Stanley Cup — there's one tradition hockey fans can still look forward to: Guessing who will be handed the Cup immediately after the winning team's captain.

If you're anything like me, by the time the Stanley Cup has been awarded, you're probably placing your bet out loud on who will get the Cup after the captain takes his lap. In those seconds that the captain's twirl comes to an end, many announcers also wonder aloud who will be the first to take the Cup in something of a ceremonial handoff.

Penguins captain Sidney Crosby didn't wonder in 2017. He knew he was going pass the Stanley Cup to defenceman Ron Hainsey, who at that point had played 14 seasons without a Cup.

"We probably did keep that in the back of our mind, if we did get around to winning, I thought it would be really nice to give it to him," Crosby told Sportsnet in 2017.

Sometimes it's a grizzled veteran who has long waited for his first Stanley Cup. Sometimes it's a player whose play propelled the team to the Cup. And other times it's a player beloved by his teammates for reasons the public might only learn about later on.

And so on the eve of these unprecedented playoffs, it's still fair for fans of every team to wonder who will take part in this Stanley Cup tradition.

With the help of The Athletic's army of talented NHL beat writers, we looked across the 24 playoff teams to guess who might hoist the Stanley Cup after every team's captain. Disagree? That's what the comments are for.

Arizona Coyotes

The Coyotes are beginning their playoff run in turmoil, with former general manager John Chayka having departed the team in strange circumstances. I don't love their chances, nor do I love their chances of escaping Chayka as a talking point the longer they go in the playoffs. But should they do the damn thing, there's no shortage of names for Oliver Ekman-Larsson to hand the Cup off to. Alex Goligoski, 35, is an option, but he's won a Stanley Cup already. Derek Stepan, 30, is a consideration as well.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 1, 2020

But really, how can you deny Taylor Hall his time to finally step into the postseason spotlight? He's suffered through some bad teams in his career, having played just five playoff games in 10 NHL seasons. I know he can be classified as a rental for the Coyotes, but Hall's always had a lot of doubters and there are few players on this list who would probably have the kind of grin that Hall would when raising the Cup.

Boston Bruins

Tough one here. Mark Recchi lifted the Cup after Zdeno Chara when the Bruins won in 2011. It's a dead heat for me between veterans Patrice Bergeron and Tuukka Rask, both of whom are integral to any Bruins success and both of whom have had strong seasons. But Bergeron gets the slight nod here. That's no slight against Rask, who could end up being the Conn Smythe Trophy winner should the Bruins win another Stanley Cup, but Bergeron is just in a class of his own. Our Bruins writer extraordinaire Fluto Shinzawa called him a "co-captain" and that's good enough for me.

Calgary Flames

No one really sticks out, but Flames beat writer Scott Cruickshank makes a good point: If the Flames somehow won the Stanley Cup despite having been a team that allowed their fair share of goals this season, their goalie would likely be in consideration for the Conn Smythe and would be next in line after Mark Giordano. Whether that's 32-year-old Cam Talbot or 27-year-old David Rittich remains to be seen. But should the Flames even just get by the Jets in the qualifying round, they're going to need one of those two to have themselves a time. And that likely wouldn't go overlooked later this fall when the Cup is awarded.

Carolina Hurricanes

Justin Williams may have won three Stanley Cups but he has not received the Cup from his captain on any of those occasions. The 38-year-old is on a one-year deal with the Hurricanes. Perhaps Williams takes the Cup first from Jordan Staal as less of an acknowledgement of what he contributed to the Hurricanes in 20 regular-season games this season and more of an ode to a great career.

Chicago Blackhawks

Jonathan Toews has a history of passing the Cup off to a deserving veteran. And in this case, should the Hawks defy the odds and win their fourth Stanley Cup, Corey Crawford is that deserving vet. He'll need to have an incredibly strong playoff run for the Hawks to win it all. But beyond that, Crawford has had to battle through his own health concerns, from multiple concussions to testing positive for COVID-19. He's as deserving of getting the Cup straight from his captain as any other player on this list.

Colorado Avalanche

This one isn't cut and dry. The easy choice here is Nathan MacKinnon, one of the best players on the planet. And sure, MacKinnon could very well play out of his mind, be awarded the Conn Smythe Trophy and make this choice a slam dunk. Erik Johnson, the team's longest-serving player, is also an option. But maybe Avalanche captain Gabriel Landeskog hands the Stanley Cup off to 30-year-old Matt Calvert, who lost his mother Alice to cancer in April. These playoffs would undoubtedly take on an unprecedented emotional weight for Calvert, a popular player in the Avalanche dressing room.

Columbus Blue Jackets

Aaron Portzline recommended a few names, including Boone Jenner as the prototypical hard-working forward and Seth Jones as the team's best player. Those are definitely worthy choices, but the third name Portzline recommended is the one that sticks out: 31-year-old Cam Atkinson, who is one of just two players from the 2012-13 team that captain Nick Foligno joined still on the team, along with David Savard. I have a feeling a John Tortorella team is going to adhere to the honour of the whole thing, and bypass a young player, regardless of their contributions, for a veteran. Atkinson gets my vote here.

Dallas Stars

It was a long 13 seasons in San Jose without a Cup for Joe Pavelski. Sure, the 36-year-old's offensive numbers dipped this season and he didn't produce as well as fans probably would have hoped from a player with a \$7 million AAV. But Pavelski has had to wait a long time to win the Cup, enough that captain Jamie Benn's running mate, Tyler Seguin, should be passed over in favour of Pavelski.

Edmonton Oilers

Yes, Mike Smith is the veteran who has bounced around the league and struggled, at times, to find his footing as a starting goalie. But there's no guarantee Smith would even be in goal for the final game. So how does Connor McDavid not go right to Hart Trophy finalist Leon Draisaitl, who would himself have to be in top form for the Oilers to win it all? At 24, Draisaitl isn't exactly a tested veteran but he has suffered through some disappointing recent seasons in Edmonton alongside McDavid.

Florida Panthers

Aaron Ekblad, the career-long Panther is a decent shot, but he's not the guy. Having played for seven NHL teams and having logged 114 playoff games throughout his 13 seasons in the NHL, Brian Boyle would easily be second in line for the Stanley Cup should the Panthers go on an unexpected run. It's hard to not root for Boyle, who battled chronic myelogenous leukemia in his career and it still chasing that first Cup.

Minnesota Wild

Zach Parise, come get your Cup. After captaining the New Jersey Devils to the Stanley Cup Finals in 2012, only to lose in six games, Parise left the Devils for the Wild as part of a massive free agency investment from the organization. Since then, Parise and the Wild have won just two playoff rounds. The 36-year-old is third on the team's all-time scoring list. This one is a no-brainer.

Montreal Canadiens

A few quick looks at some sports betting websites all reveal the same conclusion: There is not a lot of faith in the Montreal Canadiens winning the Stanley Cup. Another look at The Athletic's own Stanley Cup predictions doesn't inspire much confidence in the Canadiens either. The only way the Canadiens win the Stanley Cup is if Carey Price finds himself a DeLorean, kidnaps the 2015 version of himself and brings him back for these playoffs. Shea Weber would have no choice but to pass the Cup to Price by that point.

Nashville Predators

This is a two-horse race. The safe bet here is 37-year-old Pekka Rinne, the best goalie in franchise history and in many ways, the all-time face of the franchise. But goalies generally aren't first in line for the Cup. So if it's not Rinne, then I'd look at 37-year-old Dan Hamhuis. Originally drafted 12th overall by the Predators in 2001, Hamhuis spent six seasons with the club before returning for his second stint in Nashville. Only Patrick Marleau has more games played without the Stanley Cup among active players. Of course, Hamhuis doesn't have the recognition that Rinne has with the Predators, but the length of his career without a Cup can't go overlooked.

New York Islanders

Another team in which there's no clear cut player who would automatically be second in line for the Cup, though 37-year-old Andy Greene is certainly an option. But what about Josh Bailey, the longest-tenured Islander? From a production standpoint, his last few seasons have been some of his best. And the 30-year-old has won just one playoff game after the first round since beginning his career with the Islanders in 2008. That might make someone feel a lot older than 30.

New York Rangers

This is a tricky one, given that the Rangers are one of two teams in the playoffs without a captain. Maybe one of their alternate captains, Jesper



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 1, 2020

Fast, Chris Kreider, Marc Staal or Mika Zibanejad, grabs the Cup from Gary Bettman first. But a far more likely event, and one we're classifying here as the player who should be handed the Cup either first or second, is 38-year-old lifelong Ranger Henrik Lundqvist. Who knows if Lundqvist is even in net for the Rangers by that point in the playoffs, given the options they have in net. But who's going to get in the way of Lundqvist, one of the greatest goalies of his generation and one who has never won a Stanley Cup? Even if he walks onto the ice without his equipment, which might be preferable given how well-dressed a dude he is, he's still getting that Cup.

Philadelphia Flyers

There have been some easy choices on this list, but none easier than the Flyers: If 23-year-old Oskar Lindblom is anywhere near the ice after Claude Giroux raises the Stanley Cup, he's going straight for Lindblom, who was diagnosed with Ewing's sarcoma, a rare bone cancer in December. His last game was Dec. 7. He's been cleared to play in the postseason. Seeing him back out on the ice, let alone raising the Stanley Cup, is the type of good news we could all stand to see right now.

Pittsburgh Penguins

There's no need to overthink this one. Sidney Crosby has a (justified) history of taking his time on his lap with the Stanley Cup, but he probably won't waste any time heading to 40-year-old Patrick Marleau, the NHL's active leader in games played and the NHL player with the most games all-time without a Stanley Cup. In what might be his last twirl around the ice, Marleau would undoubtedly savour his time with a trophy he's long chased.

St. Louis Blues

Last year, Alex Pietrangolo spent literally only 10 seconds with the Cup before he handed it to veteran Jay Bouwmeester. He was a deserving candidate, but given that so many members of the current Blues team hoisted the Stanley Cup a little over a year ago, this is a difficult one to handicap. Jeremy Rutherford makes a good point: Why not, then, one of the team's new players, such as 28-year-old Justin Faulk, who in eight seasons previously with the Carolina Hurricanes, only made one playoff appearance?

Tampa Bay Lightning

There would certainly be a chorus of "Finally!" if the Lightning end up raising the Cup in Edmonton in a few months, wouldn't there? But there's still no clear cut vet who's been waiting for his chance to hoist a Cup who can also echo that chorus. Kevin Shattenkirk is an option, but he's only one year older than captain Steven Stamkos. So it's entirely possible Stamkos turns right to fellow franchise cornerstone Victor Hedman, who has 11 seasons under his belt in Tampa Bay, and hands him his first Stanley Cup. Given that Hedman has established himself as arguably the best blueliner in the league, I doubt anyone would complain.

Toronto Maple Leafs

It's hard to imagine the Leafs winning the Stanley Cup if Auston Matthews and William Nylander don't play the best hockey of their careers. But even bearing that in mind, how does John Tavares not pass the Cup to Jason Spezza? Only three players in these playoffs have played more games than Spezza and not won a Stanley Cup. The 37-year-old hockey nut is adored by teammates and has acted as a mentor all season to some of the Leafs younger players. Seeing "Vintage," as he's called, grab his first Cup would undoubtedly make a lot of those same teammates smile.

Vancouver Canucks

This choice is an easy one: 34-year-old defenceman Alex Edler, who is one of just two Canucks remaining from the 2010-11 team that lost Game 7 of the Stanley Cup final (along with Chris Tanev). Edler has survived through the low years of the club's rebuild and probably knows what a Cup would mean to the city of Vancouver as much, if not more, than any of his teammates. This would be one of the quicker hand-offs.

Vegas Golden Knights

As one of two playoff teams without a captain, there's a few choices here for players who could raise Vegas's first Cup. What about Marc-Andre Fleury, who remains the face of the franchise? Would it be strange for a goalie to raise the Cup, especially one with three Stanley Cups already and one who still isn't the sure-fire bet to be in net for the entirety of the playoffs? Or what about Mark Stone, who isn't the captain now, but as Golden Knights beat writer Jesse Granger points out, could be by next season? I'm inclined to stick with tradition and nominate 38-year-old Deryk Engelland, who ticks a lot of boxes: Older player who spent many seasons in the minors, respected by teammates, and no Stanley Cup to his name.

Washington Capitals

Alex Ovechkin went straight to Nicklas Backstrom after he raised the Stanley Cup in 2018, so it's time for John Carlson to get the Cup first after he was seventh in line in 2018. Ovechkin tried to get #Johnny4Norris trending earlier this season, and you can see him tossing the Cup to the 30-year-old defenceman pretty quickly.

Winnipeg Jets

The Jets are a relatively young team, with captain Blake Wheeler the second oldest skater at 33. So in the absence of a grizzled vet, maybe Patrik Laine explodes in the playoffs and is a natural choice to pass the Cup off to? The safer bet here though is 27-year-old franchise cornerstone Mark Scheifele, who was exceptional in the Jets' run to the Western Conference final in 2018. He's worn a letter since the 2016-17 season and is loved by fans and respected by his teammates.

The Athletic LOADED: 08.01.2020

1189839 Websites

The Athletic / 2020 NHL round-robin preview: Examining each team's strengths and weaknesses

By Dom Luszczyszyn Jul 31, 2020 41

Over the past week, we've previewed all eight of the qualifying round series and now it's time to turn our attention towards the round robin, the final piece of the NHL's return to play format.

Essentially, the remaining four teams in each conference will each play each other once and those three games – not the 70 regular-season games before it – will determine seeding for the first round of the playoffs. To be fair, in the event of a tie, the team's regular-season record will be the deciding factor and while that does have a sizeable effect on seeding probabilities, it's still rather insane that three games can decide whether the Boston Bruins will have the first or fourth-highest seed. A reminder, they had an eight-point cushion on the next best team in their conference and were already a virtual lock for the Presidents' Trophy.

It's unjust, but at this point, it feels like teams and players have a "c'est la vie" attitude with the format and are just ready to take matters into their own hands by playing some hockey. I'm not even sure how much they care about seeding (they should!), but either way, it's time to embrace the chaos and enjoy the spectacle. It's not like the sport is ever the most just anyways, right?

With just three games to play, no seed is a lock. Anything can happen in such a small number of games, especially with eight of the league's best teams involved against each other. The games should be relatively tight as a result, especially without any explicit home-ice advantage, and that means most of the seeding probabilities will be relatively close. Every



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 1, 2020

team is projected to have between three-to-four points which might just make the tie-breaker more important than expected.

Here's how the round robin should shake out.

Boston and St. Louis are your favourites from each conference with both managing a higher probability thanks to the tie-breaker. It's evident that actually has a pretty substantial effect on things by the fact my model rates Tampa Bay higher than Boston, but the Bruins still finish as the top seed more often. Ditto with Washington and Philadelphia.

In due time, we'll go in-depth with each top seed once they have a series to play in, but for now, we can take a sneak peek at what to expect from each team, look at their projected depth chart and analyze their main strengths and weaknesses.

East

Boston

Expected win percentage: 0.628

Odds of winning top seed: 41 percent

Odds of winning Stanley Cup: 16 percent

The league's best team this season comes into the playoffs with the second-best odds of bringing home the Stanley Cup thanks to their elite talent and strong depth. Under regular circumstances, the Bruins would have to go through a tough Atlantic division gauntlet, but the one major benefit of the NHL's return-to-play format is the re-seeding that will take place after each round. That means no guaranteed date against one of Tampa Bay or Toronto in the second round, and they would also be the beneficiary of any major upset in the East. That's if they win the top seed of course and though they're the most likely team to do so, Boston still finishes anywhere but first nearly 60 percent of the time.

Strengths

First and foremost, it's the team's elite talent. The top line remains the best in hockey and is a major reason the Bruins have the second-most valuable forward group in the league. They have pretty capable depth this year too. On top of that, they also have two elite defencemen leading to one of the highest-rated defence groups, plus Tuukka Rask in net, one of the game's better starters who was excellent this season. The Bruins are pretty set.

That all led to a top-five expected goals rate at 5-on-5 and on both special teams units with the results to back it up. It's not often a team is so good in every situation. At 5-on-5 it's a product of the team's sparkling team defence, rated first in expected and actual goals against this season. Boston is going to be a problem for any team it plays.

Weaknesses

Finding flaws on the Bruins feels very nit-picky in all honesty. The team has some poorer rated players at the edges of the lineup, but that fourth line has proved its mettle in prior postseasons. At 5-on-5 the team struggles to generate chances finishing 27th in the league in expected goals for, but given its finishing talent and elite defence, it's a problem they can probably live with just fine.

Tampa Bay

Expected win percentage: 0.650

Odds of winning top seed: 34 percent

Odds of winning Stanley Cup: 23 percent

The league's best team according to my model thanks to the level of play they've been able to reach over the last two seasons. In 2018-19 the Lightning were a juggernaut that won just about every regular-season game, obliterating whatever opponent stood in their path. And yet, this version of the Lightning might be even better. At 5-on-5 they were top three in goals and expected goals, finding great success at both ends of the ice.

They're deeper, more mature and ready to avenge the embarrassment that came with last year's first-round exit. They appear to be more talented overall than Boston, but the tiebreaker isn't in Tampa Bay's favour, leading to the team having the second-best odds at winning the top seed. Either way, there's a pretty sizeable gap between the Lightning and the next two teams, making a top-two seed more likely than not.

Strengths

If there's any team that can challenge Boston's Ratanouille line, it's Tampa Bay, who experimented with putting its three superstars all on the same line too. It led to some excellent results and the emergence of Anthony Cirelli helped make it possible. The Lightning are the deepest team in the league at forward and are up there for defence too – even with Zach Bogosian. From top to bottom there's not a lot to hate here and the team looks even stronger with the deadline addition of Blake Coleman.

The star-studded and deep roster unsurprisingly contributed to the best 5-on-5 offence in the league, powered mostly by elite finishing ability. These boys can score and they're not bad at defending either. When your third pair features Ryan McDonagh and Erik Cernak, one of last season's best shutdown pairs, you know you're in a good spot

Weaknesses

Bogosian is an obvious one, an outlier on an otherwise excellent team. Next to Victor Hedman he should be passable though, and if he isn't, Jan Rutta can capably step in.

A previous version of me would list Andrei Vasilevskiy in this space as his elite save percentage looks to be mostly a product of the strong defence in front of him. It's something I noted in the team's season preview and that opinion is based on Evolving Hockey's expected goals model which doesn't include rink-bias or rebound adjustments. That might be underrating Vasilevskiy's ability.

So ... basically, just Bogosian then.

Washington

Expected win percentage: 0.531

Odds of winning top seed: 14 percent

Odds of winning Stanley Cup: three percent

It's no secret my model hasn't been as high as public opinion on the Capitals for a while now. Analytics has come a long way over the past decade or so, but that doesn't mean there won't be blind spots or exceptions to the rule, a bill the Capitals seem to fit annually. Bad expected goals rate? Well, it's the Capitals, so it probably doesn't matter.

That's the usual story, but this season was a bit more interesting as the gap between their expected goals rate and actual goals rate shrunk to under two percentage points. That's the lowest it's been in a long while and though the team has improved its expected goal rates to average, it's actual goal rates weren't elite like usual. They ranked ninth which is around where my model has them ranked league-wide.

The Capitals have a deep roster that can contend, but the difference between them and the teams above are its best players, who aren't as impactful as they used to be. That might be part of the reason their possession rate jumped up this season to a more respectable territory, but their actual results saw a decline. That, and poor goaltending.

Strengths

As mentioned above, the Capitals are a deep team, especially at forward. Only one player, Nic Dowd, grades out below the top nine, while Ilya Kovalchuk looks like a savvy add to beef up the top nine. The bottom six, in particular, earned terrific results and Lars Eller might be one of the better third-line centers in the league. A fourth line featuring Richard Panik and Garnet Hathaway is hard to match too, considering their respective performances this year. As for the top six, the second line is one of the best in hockey after the emergence of Jakub Vrana, while Alex



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 1, 2020

Ovechkin remains offensively elite. Add the dynamic play of John Carlson from the blue line to the mix and it's no wonder Washington once again had one of the top-rated offences this season, finishing third in goals-per-60. That was thanks to top-five scoring chance generation and top-three finishing ability.

Washington's other big strength is its penalty kill. For the year, the Capitals did a great job limiting chances, finishing third in expected goals against and in the top five for actual goals against. That's a huge asset going into the playoffs and in a round robin featuring some of the league's best power play.

Weaknesses

Generating such prolific offence came at a cost and the reason some of the team's top players don't grade out so hot is their defensive ability. They scored their fair share, but they gave it right back the other way. The team's entire top six landed at the bottom of the team for goals percentage and only two, Jakub Vrana and T.J. Oshie were above break-even for the year. That suggests a lot of the team's 5-on-5 success this season was driven by the bottom six which doesn't seem ideal in an environment against some of the best players in the league. The Capitals may not be able to go power versus power anymore and come out on top. To add to that, the team was below average on the power play for the first time since the 2011-12 season.

Team defence could be better, and the Capitals are thin in this department. That doesn't excuse Braden Holtby's performance this season though and he's looking like a potential Achilles' heel for the team.

Philadelphia

Expected win percentage: 0.542

Odds of winning top seed: 12 percent

Odds of winning Stanley Cup: three percent

Up front, the Flyers aren't so different from Washington. They're led by a single elite player and a strong support system of top-line calibre players, guys who have the potential to deliver more value than projected. After that, there's depth throughout the ranks and it's what led to strong offensive results this season – too bad neither team could manage a half-decent power play for the year though. The Flyers' bottom six isn't as strong as the Capitals, but only 0.4 wins separate the two groups.

The rest of the lineup leans towards Philadelphia though, and it's the reason the Flyers carry a slightly higher expected win percentage than the Capitals. There's no Carlson here, but the entire group is more balanced throughout the top four. They've got a great goalie too, something Washington can arguably no longer boast.

The Flyers finished the year really strong and have a lot of upside to be better than shown here because of it. But their full-season baseline isn't nearly as strong, looking close to average in a few places. That's not necessarily a bad thing, but it's why they're not in the same class as Boston and Tampa Bay.

Strengths

Sean Couturier is the team's best player and one of the league's strongest two-way forwards. Where he goes, the Flyers will follow, as this is his team now. My model may not give him enough credit for his value either and that can be pointed to as a reason this team is underrated.

Like Washington, the Flyers' forward group is pretty deep with some strong contributors throughout the top nine. James van Riemsdyk is a nice luxury to have on your third line and Travis Konecny was a revelation on the second line. Don't sleep on Scott Laughton and Nicolas Aube-Kubel either who were incredibly efficient scorers this season. The defence is similarly deep, especially with Matt Niskanen and Justin Braun both bouncing back after rough seasons last year. Niskanen really solidified the top four and helped Ivan Provorov's game blossom towards

elite status. He'll get there soon. With Carter Hart in net, the Flyers are set at every position.

At 5-on-5 the Flyers finished the season strong and looked like one of the league's best teams down the stretch. If they can find that level of play again, they'll be a lot to handle at evens.

Weaknesses

The biggest issue is the team's bottom-six centers. I'm not sure Derek Grant is a great option as a third-line center and Nate Thompson is a big issue on the fourth line considering his relative value. The team's winger depth might be able to help shelter them, but in any sense, it's not an ideal loadout.

This team doesn't have many overwhelming strengths, but they also have no obvious weaknesses either. That's what makes them a good team that's well balanced at every facet. Still, there's room to nitpick. The team's forward group is deep, but against some of the league's best, the top end might not be strong enough – it's a similar problem that the Capitals face.

On defence it may be an even bigger issue. The main contrast between Philadelphia and the other East heavyweights is a lack of an elite No. 1 defenceman. Boston has Charlie McAvoy, Tampa Bay has Victor Hedman, Washington has John Carlson and the Flyers' best answer to those guys is Provorov. He's inching closer to that level and was excellent this season, but he's not there yet.

For the year, the only stat that was of major concern was Philadelphia's ability to generate chances on the power play, but they may have already fixed that problem. Down the stretch, the Flyers were a top-five team in that regard.

West

St. Louis

Expected win percentage: 0.597

Odds of winning top seed: 37 percent

Odds of winning Stanley Cup: 12 percent

The defending Stanley Cup champions enter the playoffs as the team to beat in the West, an even stronger version of the dominant group that went all the way a year ago. This team has very few holes throughout their lineup and are among the league's deepest groups at every position, full stop. They were excellent for most of the season and that was primarily without Vladimir Tarasenko too. That's another weapon added to a dangerous team.

St. Louis got to where it did last season by way of dominant possession metrics, but the Blues had a bit of a Cup hangover in that regard to start the season. Nevertheless, they got better as the season chugged along and were a top-five 5-on-5 team down the stretch, exactly where they belong. That was shaped by their elite defence which was the formula for their success one season ago. At 12 percent they have a damn good chance at repeating this year and should get a cushy first-round series with the highest odds of winning the West's top seed at 37 percent.

Strengths

It's defence, through and through. The Blues' defence corps rates as one of the league's best and that's led by the dynamic duo of Alex Pietrangolo and Colton Parayko manning each of the top two pairs. Pietrangolo put in a Norris-calibre season while Parayko really got going once the team added Marco Scandella to his left side. Vince Dunn is a luxury on the third pair and gives the team a top-pairing option on every line.

Behind them, the team has Jordan Binnington, who remains one of the league's better-rated goaltenders. His sophomore season wasn't as strong as his first, but throughout his career, he's proving to be near the league's upper echelon. He ranks seventh in goals saved above expected over the past two years and combining that with St. Louis'



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 1, 2020

excellent defence gives the team a near-impenetrable wall to get through for opposing offences. They were a top-three team by goals against at 5-on-5 and allowed the fewest attempts all season.

The forward group has lots of depth on every line featuring a loaded top six that has five first-line calibre forwards. That's hard to match up against. On the power play, the team was third in goals-per-60, another major strength that might only get scarier with the addition of Tarasenko.

Weaknesses

On the roster there aren't really any holes, especially if Tarasenko can get back to the level of play he was at in the back half of last season. He's on the cusp of the elite tier which would give St. Louis two such forwards. Only three players grade out as bottom of the lineup talents.

The offence could stand to generate a few more chances, finishing 24th in expected goals rate this season, but that might be by design, considering the team's focus on defence first and foremost. By their season numbers, the only real troubling sign is a slightly below-average penalty kill. Other than that, there isn't much to hate here.

Colorado

Expected win percentage: 0.594

Odds of winning top seed: 28 percent

Odds of winning Stanley Cup: 11 percent

The Colorado Avalanche have officially arrived as one of the league's best teams and are the biggest threat to St. Louis in the West. By expected win percentage, very little separates the two teams, and it wouldn't be surprising to see either one represent the West in the Stanley Cup Final.

The Avalanche are anchored by a trio of elite forwards and one of the game's best defencemen, but they've become much more than that this season. They have depth, and that's the biggest thing separating them from the team's prior two playoff runs. Their strong supporting cast allows a more balanced attack up front, while boasting terrific defence on the back end. Team defence may actually be the most underrated aspect of this Avalanche team as they were top five league-wide at limiting chances and allowing goals. Terrific goaltending definitely helps that latter number and no matter who starts between Philipp Grubauer and Pavel Francouz, Colorado is in really good shape.

Colorado was the league's best 5-on-5 team this year when it came to goals percentage and though that was partially induced by getting some favourable bounces throughout the year, they look like they can do that at a reasonably sustainable rate. The team is still a strong possession team and has finishing talent to add to that equation. It's a scary mix when coupled with the team's strong goaltending and makes Colorado one of the league's most imposing teams.

Strengths

Star-power. Depth. Forwards. Defence. Goaltending. You name it, the Avalanche got it. Their biggest strength is just how bright that star power is though as both MacKinnon and Makar are rated very near the top of their respective positions. Makar unlocked a lot of potential for this team and I don't think it's a stretch to consider him among the league's 10 best defencemen. I don't think he'd be near the bottom of that list either.

Colorado is an elite 5-on-5 unit that scored the most goals this season there thanks to capable finishing talent and was among the stingiest on defence. Few teams are as balanced at both ends of the ice.

Weaknesses

The most surprising thing about the Avalanche this year is their power play, which ranked 17th in the league. With the talent available they should be top five in the league, but they didn't get there this season. It's not just that the results weren't there, it's that they weren't really generating many chances either, perhaps depending too much on their

god-given skill to make it work. Injuries likely disrupted the top unit's flow, but there's still a lot of room for improvement here.

Ditto for the penalty kill which was also only just average and allowed a high volume of chances. If any game turns into a special teams battle, the Avalanche may not have the upper hand in that regard.

It's also worth mentioning that the Avalanche's sparkling 5-on-5 offence depends a lot on the team's finishing ability. They finished first in goals but were just 16th in expected. Perhaps they're doing something that public expected goals models don't fully capture, but it's something to watch for if the team runs cold. You expect strong finishing from this group, sure, but if you look at the names actually leading the team in shooting percentage – and how much they're shooting – there's plenty of room for healthy skepticism.

Vegas

Expected win percentage: 0.585

Odds of winning top seed: 21 percent

Odds of winning Stanley Cup: nine percent

If there's any team that might be a sleeping giant ready for a long run, it's Vegas, who doesn't seem to be getting the same level of hype as some of the other top teams. They're brimming with upside though and were by far the league's most dominant 5-on-5 team. Their expected goals rate of 56.5 percent trounced the competition this year and was even better down the stretch at 58.8 percent.

Their issue all season – and last season too – was getting that dominant territorial edge to line up with results. In a short playoff series, controlling the puck more may lend itself to better luck and their immense volume of chances gives them a lot of room for error. One of the team's biggest issues was goaltending this year and that's also solved with the presence of Robin Lehner as the team's 1B. He might just steal the job outright, but even if he doesn't, he adds motivation for Marc-Andre Fleury to perform or as an insurance policy if he doesn't.

The Golden Knights have solid depth and are led by one of the scariest top six groups in the league. When either of the top two lines are on the ice, good luck getting the puck back. The top line is especially frightening with William Karlsson posting up between the team's two best wingers, Mark Stone and the resurgent Max Pacioretty who might've been one of the best left wingers in hockey this season.

Strengths

As mentioned, that top line is going to be very tough to handle and a lot of Vegas' success runs through them. The two wingers with Paul Stastny were exceptional in last year's playoffs and Karlsson represents an improvement up the middle. The trio only played 100 minutes together this season, but in that time they had a 66 percent expected goals rate. Good luck with that rest of the West.

Vegas is a dominant 5-on-5 team at both ends of the ice, but their biggest strength is unsurprisingly their offence. The Golden Knights are a relentless team that peppers opponents with a ton of quality chances. That translates to the power play too where they were top 10 in the league off the strength of the second-most expected goals in the league.

Also, watch out for Shea Theodore who will soon be on everyone's radar as one of the game's best defencemen. My model loves him for his ability to influence play at 5-on-5 and when he gets time with the top line, the quartet will have the ability to make opponents feel like they're penalty killing.

Weaknesses

The strong expected goal rating is nice, but the reason Vegas isn't rated higher is that the team struggles to turn it into tangible results. New coach Peter DeBoer helped a little bit with that and it'll be interesting to see if that trend continues. But even in the team's final 25 games, they were over two percentage points under their expected rate. For the year



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 1, 2020

they finished 21st in shooting percentage and 28th in save percentage. It's that latter number that really needs to improve and though some of it was on the team's former backup Malcolm Subban, Fleury's numbers have tumbled since his first season with the club. The sooner they switch to Lehner, the better.

The goaltending problems manifested on the penalty kill too where the team ranked 27th in the league for the year. That was despite a strong stretch of chance prevention in the team's final 25 games, and yet that didn't matter, because the team ended up allowing even more goals during that time.

Dallas

Expected win percentage: 0.551

Odds of winning top seed: 14 percent

Odds of winning Stanley Cup: 5 percent

There's no doubt Dallas is a strong team, better than of the other challengers from the West in the qualifying round, but it's clear there's also a substantial divide between the Stars and the three teams above them in the West.

The separating factor is that all three of St. Louis, Colorado and Vegas can deliver at both ends of the ice. That's not so for Dallas, who are about as one dimensional as any team in the qualifying round. Now, that's not necessarily a bad thing, not when a team is as elite at that dimension is as Dallas, but it is something that keeps the team from reaching the next tier. The Stars still managed a near top-five expected goals rate this season, but their actual results were below average, with the team being specifically undone by their lacking dimension: offence. That's something they'll need to find more of in these playoffs.

A stroll through the names on the roster suggests they should be able to, but it was those very players who didn't really pull their offensive weight this season. The team's best offensive players – Tyler Seguin, Jamie Benn, Alex Radulov and Joe Pavelski – didn't score as much as expected and it means there's potential for the Stars to surprise, but also that it may be difficult within this system as currently designed. With the defence and goaltending the team has, even just getting the team's offence up to average would go an extremely long way.

Strengths

Defence, obviously. The Stars were second in goals allowed at 5-on-5 this season off the strength of the league's fifth stingiest defence. The team's defence corps is deep, led by two legitimate No. 1 defenders and a strong cast of support. It's also has a forward group that's responsible in their own end and offers plenty of support. The Stars defend as a five-man unit better than almost any other team.

On top of excellent defence, the Stars also boast exceptional goaltending, making the team extremely tough to score on. Ben Bishop at 3.7 projected wins rates as one of the league's strongest goalies and he looks even better playing behind this team's defensive structure.

Despite the team's weak 5-on-5 offence, they were actually decent on the power play, finishing 12th with the fourth-best chance generation rate. With the talent on this team, that's not surprising and makes me feel like the anemic 5-on-5 offence is a choice, one for the greater good to create such a strong defensive team.

Weaknesses

Offence, obviously. But as mentioned above, it's just at 5-on-5. The Stars are actually OK at generating chances, but finishing them is a whole different story. I love the idea of giving Denis Gurianov a look on the top line as he was one of the team's most efficient goal scorers and could breathe new life into Seguin and Benn. That duo was among the team's best 5-on-5 scorers as well, but the fact they scored 1.50 and 1.36 points-per-60 respectively is a huge issue. Those are middle six rates and they need to find a way back up to the top line rates they used to

play at, without completely sacrificing the team's defensive identity. It's a delicate balance.

Aside from offence, the penalty killing was only average this year which is surprising, given the effectiveness of the team's defence at 5-on-5. It's also worth noting the team didn't exactly finish the year strong with the third-worst penalty kill and a 46 percent goals rate at 5-on-5 thanks to an even worse offence than what they started the season with. Hopefully, four months off resets the team and has them back to playing their best hockey.

The Athletic LOADED: 08.01.2020

1189840 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / One player to watch closely on each of the NHL's 24 playoff teams

Rory Boylen | @RoryBoylen July 31, 2020, 5:44 PM

This is going to be fun.

Beginning Aug. 1, the next two months or so are going to be jam-packed with Stanley Cup Playoff action, with up to six games a day — all day long — to start off. That's a lot of hockey to watch, but after a four-month hiatus, we'll take it.

The only truth is that no one knows how anything will play out. No one knows what impact bubble life will have on individuals and teams. There's no telling what, if anything that happened in the regular season, has any relevance any more. All we can do is watch, and find out.

So ahead of the drop of the puck on Saturday, we present you one player to watch closely on each team.

From the Stanley Cup Qualifiers to the Stanley Cup Final, livestream every game of the 2020 Stanley Cup Playoffs, blackout-free, on Sportsnet NOW.

QUALIFYING ROUND TEAMS

Pittsburgh Penguins: Jake Guentzel

The third-most important forward on the team behind Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin, Guentzel was Pittsburgh's leading scorer when he was forced out of the lineup due to injury on Dec. 30. The only game action we've seen him in since was this week's exhibition game, and it took him just over five minutes to record a primary assist. In 41 playoff games, Guentzel has 24 goals and 43 points.

Montreal Canadiens: Phillip Danault

It's going to be a tough assignment for the should-have-been Selke Trophy finalist. But if Danault plays a key role in limiting (or, less likely, shutting down) Crosby and/or Malkin, he'll probably open eyes and garner more "defensive forward of the year" attention next season. But he needs to find time for offence, too — Danault was Montreal's second-highest point-getter at the pause. He'd really make a name for himself on a national scale with a strong playoff.

Carolina Hurricanes: Sami Vatanen

In case you forgot, yes, the Hurricanes added another defenceman at the trade deadline, picking up Vatanen from the Devils (they got Brady Skjei from the Rangers, too). They always seem to have depth at the position and it is really going to come in handy right now. Both Brett Pesce and Dougie Hamilton will not be ready for Game 1 and that's going to clear room for someone to get an expanded role. And even though Vatanen, who was injured at the time of his trade, hasn't played an official game



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 1, 2020

for Carolina yet, in the one exhibition game he suited up for, he logged a game-high 20:16 of ice time and saw action on both the power play and penalty kill.

NY Rangers: Igor Shesterkin

We've only seen 12 NHL games from the hyped 24-year-old and his stat line reads: 10-2-0, .932, 2.52. In 25 AHL games earlier in the season he was 17-4-3, .934, 1.90. That's the reason why there's so much excitement around him. Still, 12 NHL games is such a small sample and the numbers he posted were so outrageous that it's hard to know exactly where he'll settle — especially under playoff pressure. Can he be a series-stealer right away, or are there inevitable bumps ahead? The silver lining for Rangers fans is that if Shesterkin falters, Henrik Lundqvist will be as motivated a backup as there is. But let's see just what Shesterkin can provide.

NY Islanders: Anthony Beauvillier

New York's strength is in its structure and they're at their best when playing tight defence that frustrates opponents. But they're not quite where they were in this department last season — and offence is also a bit of a sore spot. Most of the pressure to produce will fall on Mat Barzal, Brock Nelson, Jordan Eberle and the like, but Beauvillier slides way under the radar. The 23-year-old had a career-best season even though it was shortened and his return to play has started well, scoring once and recording four shots in the exhibition game. He's an X-Factor in the Isles' search for goals.

Florida Panthers: Erik Haula

Haula joined the Panthers for seven games after being dealt there at the trade deadline and produced only two assists. This is a player two years removed from a 29-goal campaign, but who has also changed teams twice since then and is up for unrestricted free agency this off-season. He's got work to do if he's to re-establish himself as a second-line scoring threat and the Panthers will give him all the leeway to do it. He's their second-line centre and only Jonathan Huberdeau logged more ice time among Panthers forwards in their only exhibition game. What impact can he have?

Toronto Maple Leafs: Morgan Rielly

There are bigger names on the Leafs who must have larger impacts, but on a team that's primary weakness is depth on the blue line, Rielly needs to be a standout performer. He returned to register three points in the exhibition game, but the playoff-ready Columbus Blue Jackets are built to slow down a team as skilled as Toronto. Rielly has to be terrific at both ends, not just on the attack, and he's going to pull in monster minutes.

Columbus Blue Jackets: Oliver Bjorkstrand

While Columbus isn't known for its offence, the 25-year-old Bjorkstrand has potential, at least in a short series. Over the past three seasons combined, Bjorkstrand ranks 23rd league-wide in goals per 60 minutes played at five-on-five, but his career-best is just 23 goals in a season because he's never sustained a big-minute role. That started to change in the late stages of this season. He logged over 20 minutes of ice time in 11 of his last 23 games played and scored 15 goals in that time. A breakout is coming.

Edmonton Oilers: Ryan Nugent-Hopkins

RNH has been a key cog for the Oilers this season. Drafted as a centre, he's now more often used on the wing next to Leon Draisaitl or Connor McDavid and finished with the best points per game mark of his career — 61 points in 65 games. But the playoffs are a different beast, and in the one season he was exposed to them, Nugent-Hopkins logged only four assists (and no goals) in 13 games. The Oilers can't afford for him to go quiet again.

Chicago Blackhawks: Corey Crawford

After joining the Hawks late due to a positive COVID-19 test, Crawford is a full go for their qualifying-round series against Edmonton. The two-time

Stanley Cup champion has the benefit of experience and was able to put together a good season behind a porous defence, but he's also 35 years old and there's no telling what effect the pause and illness could have on his conditioning. He's going to continue to get peppered with shots against Edmonton and needs to be big for Chicago to have a chance.

Nashville Predators: Viktor Arvidsson

Over the past three seasons only Auston Matthews, Alex Ovechkin and Brendan Gallagher have scored more goals per 60 minutes of five-on-five play than Arvidsson — and that includes the fact he struggled to just 15 in 57 games this season. Arvidsson scored twice in Nashville's exhibition game and has huge scoring upside after the pause. We know Nashville's defence is their strength, and that there's a bit of a goalie controversy between Juuse Saros and Pekka Rinne, but that either should be fine. Scoring has been the challenge, and Arvidsson is the key to unlocking it.

Arizona Coyotes: Taylor Hall

We're trying to stay away from naming every team's best player in these (because of course you're watching them!), but Hall's situation is too juicy to ignore. There's money motivation here, as he's a pending unrestricted free agent, but he's also just hungry for playoff action — Hall has been involved in just five post-season games across his entire 10-year career. He had 27 points in 35 games after being dealt to Arizona this season. To what heights can he go?

Vancouver Canucks: Micheal Ferland

There was certainly a time when it looked like Ferland may have had to call it a career. He's dealt with major concussion concerns recently and played just 14 times for Vancouver this season. But he returned to their camp, looked well, and is now projected to be in the team's Game 1 lineup. He could be a real force, too. It's not that Ferland would be a likely candidate to lead Vancouver in scoring, but he'll add experience and sandpaper to the third line, and he's not a liability on offence either. More than anything, though, we're rooting for a safe and successful return for him.

Minnesota Wild: Mats Zuccarello

Last season Zuccarello was a trade deadline pickup by Dallas and he went on to be a key contributor in their two-round playoff run. He earned a big contract from Minnesota in the off-season, but fell flat in his first year with the Wild, posting just 15 goals and 37 points in 65 games. "We really expect some really good things of Zuccy," Wild coach Dean Evason said.

Calgary Flames: Sam Bennett

While all the pressure is on Calgary's top line, Bennett was an important factor in their playoff lineup a year ago, leading the team with five points in five games. And it's not just that — Bennett plays with the kind of edge and intensity that tends to thrive in the post-season. As long as he's drawing more penalties than he's taking, Bennett will be a positive contributor.

Winnipeg Jets: Nikolaj Ehlers

Zero goals in 21 playoff games for a locked-in 20-goal scorer is a clear sign that Ehlers is due. He did score in Winnipeg's exhibition matchup, but also had to leave the game for "precautionary reasons." As long as he's not nicked up too bad, this is shaping up to be the post-season where he does get rolling. Winnipeg could use him, too — one of the worst defences in the league will need all the scoring support it can get.

ROUND ROBIN TEAMS

Boston Bruins: Jake DeBrusk

Without Ondrej Kase around, DeBrusk's place on the second line next to David Krejci seems secure. What can he do with it? He seemed to get better as last year's playoffs went on, finishing with four points in the



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 1, 2020

Stanley Cup Final. His goal rate did drop a little this season, though, so let's see if he can get it back at the right time.

Tampa Bay Lightning: Steven Stamkos

Stamkos is listed here mostly because he's missed recent practices and Tampa's exhibition game due to injury, but he was back with the team on Friday and appears set to go for their first round robin game. Conditioning is a question mark for anybody right now, but especially so for someone like Stamkos who missed a large chunk of Phase 3 training camps. At least he'll have a few games to work it out before it really starts to matter for Tampa Bay, but it goes without saying Stamkos needs to be a big producer for them.

#TBLighting lines at today's practice, according to the team

Palat-Point-Kucherov

Killorn-Cirelli-Stamkos

Goodrow-Johnson-Coleman

Maroon-Gourde-Paquette

McDonagh-Cernak

Coburn-Schenn

Sergachev-Shattenkirk

Rutta-Bogossian

— Lightning Insider (@Erik_Erlendsson) July 31, 2020

Washington Capitals: Braden Holtby

Goalie Ilya Samsonov did not join the Capitals in the Toronto hub and it was revealed on Friday that he's out of these playoffs due to an injury sustained over the pause. Had Samsonov been healthy, this would have had the makings of an interesting goalie controversy. The Russian was the better of the two this season and Holtby is a pending UFA. Now it's unquestionably Holtby's crease again. His save percentage finished under .900 this season and his GAA was over 3.00, so it's not really clear what Washington will get from him. Will we see a rebound that could up his value in free agency, or will the spiral continue and make it a real tough go for the Caps?

Caps GM Brian MacLellan said goaltender Ilya Samsonov had an off-ice injury back home in Russia during the pause and he didn't pass his physical upon return. Should be good to go for the start of next season.

— Samantha Pell (@SamanthaJPell) July 31, 2020

Philadelphia Flyers: Travis Konecny

The 23-year-old had a breakout season this year, posting 61 points in 66 games. But any time this happens with a young player, you wonder how it will go in the playoffs. This is Konecny's second post-season try after scoring just once in six games two years ago. He looked quick in the Flyers' exhibition game and ready to start strong again.

St. Louis Blues: Vladimir Tarasenko

Tarasenko only played 10 games this season before sustaining a shoulder injury that required surgery, and aside from the exhibition game this week, he hasn't played with the Blues since Oct. 24. St. Louis went on to be the best team in the Western Conference anyway, and now they have a 30-plus goal man back. Tarasenko scored 11 times with two game-winners in last year's run to the Stanley Cup, but it's been such a long layoff for him, the adjustment back to that form may take a little time.

Colorado Avalanche: Nazem Kadri

Kadri was having a solid season for the Avalanche after an off-season trade sent him there from Toronto, and that's no big surprise. He was a third-liner on the Leafs, but his contributions are more level with a

second-liner. He's a good agitator, too, and that generally plays well in the playoffs, although part of the reason Toronto traded him was that in two consecutive post-seasons, Kadri overstepped and was slapped with a suspension. He's got to toe that line a little better, and if he does, he could have the best post-season of his career.

Vegas Golden Knights: Shea Theodore

Ask most analytics-leaning writers and it won't take long to mention Theodore's name among the most underrated defencemen in the game. That distinction should have become a little more obvious in 2019-20 as Theodore scored a career-high 46 points in 71 games and was Vegas' time on ice leader. Watch him closely and see what's so special.

Dallas Stars: Roope Hintz

A personal favourite, Hintz came on strong towards the end of last season and then had five goals and eight points in 13 playoff games. Dallas doesn't score a bunch (even though their lineup looks like it should have no trouble on offence) so they need all the contributors they can get. Hintz is just fun to watch and comes with sneaky-good upside.

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Sportsnet.ca / Oilers' young leaders, veteran depth hungry to write new playoff narrative

Mark Spector | @sportsnetspec July 31, 2020, 8:01 PM

EDMONTON — We've waited for it to be real in Edmonton, for how long?

Since their first No. 1 overall pick, Taylor Hall, in 2010? Since they picked at No. 1 in '11 and '12?

Since Edmonton finally added an experienced general manager, hiring Peter Chiarelli in 2015?

Since McLellan? Since McDavid?

They took a nice run to Game 7 of Round 2 back in 2017, and we all thought, "OK. Finally. This will be a good team now, for a long time."

Then they missed the playoffs two years in a row.

Failure has dogged this franchise through four No. 1 overall picks, through new GMs, new coaches, new game plans and road maps. Twelve of 13 playoffs missed prior to this season. Miss one more and it was history: In a 14-year window, the least successful franchise in the history of the National Hockey League.

Today, with the Oilers fixing to open their Qualifying Round series on Saturday against the Chicago Blackhawks, we return to that place we were three years ago. An Oilers team that seems impossibly promising, embarking on a playoff run that, surely this time around, will be the first of many.

"We're all just hungry to get back and play [playoff hockey], the guys who went through that experience," said defenceman Darnell Nurse, one of the young internal leaders around which this team is built. "Yeah, it was a great year, 2017. But the let-off came the following couple of years. We're hungry to prove ourselves. That we're capable of being in this position, and capable of playing at this level of hockey."

So, what's the difference now?

Why does the football stay on the tee for Oilers fans this time, as opposed to all those other times (like 2006) when the sky was the limit — and then it wasn't?



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 1, 2020

And don't tell me it is because they have Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl. They had both of those players in 2018 and 2019 and missed the playoffs.

"Those young, high-end talent guys have all matured," points out Dave Tippett, head coach and chief psychologist in Edmonton. "They're not only great players, but they've matured into figuring out how to win a little bit in this league."

So, we're hitting on something here.

It used to be that the best players were all aged 20 and 21, and the so-called "leaders" were often washed up imports who couldn't believe the entitlement that was allowed to fester among young players who hadn't won anything yet.

Now, those young skilled guys ARE the leaders, for the most part. McDavid is 23, but mature beyond his years. Draisaitl is 24 and also an old soul. Nurse is 25, Oscar Klefbom 27. Not grizzled veterans but not teenagers either.

"Our leadership group is a little bit younger, yet they're engaged with the veteran guys on our team, and we've got better depth," said Tippett. "All in all, we've talked about building a team that's not just competitive in the high-end skill part, but competitive in winning. The things you don't normally think about when you think of a high-skill team, we've made improvements on."

The older guys, the imports, fulfill roles that younger players traditionally struggle with. Like killing penalties, an area that has plagued the Oilers for many, many seasons.

Today, veterans like Riley Sheahan, Josh Archibald, the drafted and developed Jujhar Khaira, Kris Russell all take a PK into the playoffs that was better than any other team in the tournament.

Tippett's Oilers have some nice skill on the blue line, but also possess defencemen like Adam Larsson and Kris Russell who do the unquantifiable dirty work on a nightly basis. Two guys who never make a highlight package — the same way Rob Scuderi, Ken Daneyko, Sami Pahlsson or John Madden never did.

They don't have individual awards for players like these. Just Stanley Cups.

"They're the heart and soul of our team," Draisaitl declared in a Zoom call this week, looking to his left where Larsson and Russell sat. "We all know we can score and fans like that part of the game a lot more, appreciate it more. But these guys go unnoticed a lot of times. They should get some recognition. Rusty blocking the shots, Larsson playing the minutes, the toughest competition against the other team every night. They set the tone."

The "tone" they set is simple: We're not that old Oilers team that is easy to play against. That would rather the game wasn't painful, or left a bruise. That rushed home to catch themselves on the highlight packages, often scoring the second goal in a 5-2 loss.

Everyone talks about the Oilers' skill and speed. They've been doing that for a decade.

Now they talk about the parts of the game that used to be easy wins for the opponent. Penalty killing, puck battles, discipline in a 1-1 game — they're a problem for the Blackhawks now.

And isn't that something new in these parts?

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Sportsnet.ca / Canadiens must use Game 1 vs. Penguins to build winning belief

Eric Engels | @EricEngels July 31, 2020, 6:19 PM

TORONTO — This starts with belief and ends quickly without it.

So, what do these Montreal Canadiens, who finished with the 24th-best record before the NHL season was suddenly halted by COVID-19, believe about themselves? What does a team that had two eight-game winless streaks and four losses in four games to the last-place Detroit Red Wings believe about itself?

What does a team that sold off four important pieces prior to the trade deadline really believe ahead of do-or-die games against a Pittsburgh Penguins team that could've finished with the league's best record but finished seventh (largely) because their infirmity was a revolving door for their best players from October to March? And what are these Canadiens holding to, beyond the intangible of anything being possible — and certainly after a four-month pause in the action and with the Stanley Cup on the line — to convince themselves they can win?

Because "why not?" isn't quite the same as "why not us?"

"This is an opportunity for us to show that we are a good team," said Canadiens general manager Marc Bergevin before Phase 3 training camp got underway on July 13. "It is a chance to show that we are a good team and we belong in this, and it's going to be up to us to show it when we get to the hub city."

We were looking for the signs on Tuesday, when the Canadiens took on the Toronto Maple Leafs in their only exhibition game before their Stanley Cup qualifier series, but we couldn't find any of them.

We saw a disjointed team that fell into the same bad habits that plagued them all season — questionable decisions at both ends of the ice, a goal against on the first shift of the game, a goal against in the final minute of a period (they allowed more than a baker's dozen of them over the winter) and an embarrassingly dysfunctional power play that whiffed six times and cost them two goals and much of the precious momentum.

We saw the Canadiens lose, just like they did in 40 of their 71 games, and it was hardly inspiring.

Granted, nothing was on the line and rust was to be expected.

But this was still an important opportunity for the Canadiens to build some much-needed confidence, and they squandered it.

"We're such underdogs, people are acting like we're not even an NHL team, like we're not even expected to win one game," was the text I received from one Canadiens player on Wednesday.

But it doesn't matter what you or I think.

Good morning from Toronto! A day ahead of Montreal-Pittsburgh locking horns in their best-of-five Stanley Cup qualifier series, what do you think will happen?

— Eric Engels (@EricEngels) July 31, 2020

The only thing that matters is what they think.

"I agree we were awful against Toronto," the next text read. "But if we buy in, we can definitely beat Pittsburgh."

This can't be an "if" proposition. Not at this stage of the game. But what else do the Canadiens have to go on?

For them, the feeling that they can definitely beat Pittsburgh has to be built during Game 1, because there's not much else for them to draw on to find true conviction. In a best-of-five, against a team that's expected to run them over, winning that first game can inspire that true conviction and change the entire complexion of this series.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 1, 2020

But to achieve that outcome, the Canadiens are going to have to disengage themselves from their recent past and forge on as a team starting a new journey, with a clean slate and a great sense of opportunity.

It would seem they're on that page, according to captain Shea Weber.

"We're excited. [It's] almost like a new season to start here as everyone's in the same spot," Weber said on Friday. "No momentum, no nothing, and you don't really know what's going to happen. Setup is the way it is now and we've got to get through this qualifier and hopefully build some momentum in Game 1 tomorrow."

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From a technical standpoint, the Canadiens are going to hope the best aspects of their game are present and sharp right from the start.

"It's pretty obvious when we move the puck well, when we play fast, the puck comes out of our own end," coach Claude Julien explained. "When we play fast, we're able to kill plays quickly. When we play fast, our transition game is good. When we play fast, our forecheck is good, our scoring chances are good."

"So, you know, we've relied a lot on playing fast, and it's not about all speed and all recklessness. But I think it's playing fast in the facets of the game that we think is important for us. And today we had a good practice. I thought we had good pace, guys seemed excited about tomorrow, so hopefully we can bring that to the forefront there when they drop the puck tomorrow night."

Even if the Canadiens manage to do that, the balance is still tilting heavily towards Pittsburgh's side of the scale.

The Penguins have a massive edge in the talent department, they have Stanley Cup-winning pedigree and their players have over 1,400 games of playoff experience.

Up against Montreal's players, who have just 400 games of playoff experience between them, the Penguins have a decisive advantage.

And the Canadiens are under no illusions about any of that.

"I think we've got a young team and we know we're going to have to be playing as best we can, maybe even a bit over our heads, if we plan on moving forward here," said Julien. "We're very aware of that, but we're also aware that we can do that. And I think the confidence and the will to want to do it has to be there and, hopefully, we can start showing that tomorrow night."

The Canadiens had better, or this thing will be over in a hurry.

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Sportsnet.ca / Five bold predictions for the 2020 Stanley Cup Playoffs

Rory Boylen | @RoryBoylen July 31, 2020, 12:00 PM

When you try to make bold predictions, all you're really doing is setting yourself up for failure. This year's playoffs are a special kind of wild card, too — nobody knows how anything will translate after such a long pause.

But I'll give it a try anyway.

The following five bold predictions aren't meant to be presented as surefire, or even likely, results. They're also not completely outlandish (at

least to me). You won't see a Montreal Canadiens Stanley Cup pick here. In this article, we're trying to predict some long-odds result, but with a basis in reality.

Yell at me in the comments.

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NEW YORK RANGERS ARE THIS YEAR'S CINDERELLA TEAM

New York is a popular upset pick over Carolina in the first-round, though the 'Canes could easily blow up this whole prediction. You pretty much know what you'll get from them and if they go out, it won't be quietly. The Rangers did, however, sweep the season series 4-0 (take that with a grain of salt).

But let's go a step further and say New York will be the surprise team of this post-season and win a few rounds. The Rangers are an intriguing mix of established star power and a whole bunch of high-upside uncertainty.

Take goalie Igor Shesterkin for example. A highly touted prospect, the plan was to keep him in the AHL this season but he was too darned good to keep down. He earned 12 NHL appearances in the late stages of the season and immediately snatched the starter's job by posting a .932 save percentage and 10-2-0 record. But what can he sustain, really?

If he's going to be anything close to that, it'll combine with an offence that was top-five on the season and top-three from Jan. 1 until the pause. Artemi Panarin is the headliner, but Mika Zibanejad is a back-to-back 70-point player and Chris Kreider is always a handful. And what about the younger players? Adam Fox had a stellar rookie campaign — how will that translate to the playoffs? Kaapo Kakko's transition to the NHL wasn't as smooth, but will the pause help him find a higher level?

The Rangers will be fun either way. In the back half of the shortened regular season they were one of the highest-event teams — second in shots for at 5-on-5 and bottom-eight in shots against. If the goaltending stands up, they could be a tough out. And, hey, if Shesterkin starts slow, you could do worse than having Henrik Lundqvist as your Plan B.

WINNIPEG JETS WILL BE CANADA'S LAST TEAM STANDING

The biggest question in Winnipeg is whether or not Connor Hellebuyck can be in the playoffs what he was all season: an absolute wall behind one of the leakiest defences in the league. If his exhibition showing is any indication, he and the Jets will be just fine.

But the Jets are about more than their goalie. They can score and they can be hard to play against. After losing the likes of Jacob Trouba, Dustin Byfuglien and Tyler Myers from last year's roster, the team size isn't quite as big this season but they're more of a hybrid. They can play big and physical, and they can play fast and loose.

And while that blue line is a real concern, Winnipeg may actually have the fewest questions of any Canadian team. Few teams have better goaltending. Few teams have as nice a spread of skill and traditional "playoff grit" in the lineup. They're two years removed from reaching the Western Conference final. Most of this roster has been there and done that before — which you can't say for Edmonton, Toronto, Calgary, Montreal or Vancouver.

Winnipeg's qualifying round matchup against the Flames appears to be a good one, too. Neutralize Calgary's top line and this could be a quick series. It was last year when Colorado limited Elias Lindholm, Johnny Gaudreau and Sean Monahan to five points. Hellebuyck himself could eliminate the trio.

On top of that, Nikolaj Ehlers is due for a playoff breakout. Still without a goal in 21 post-season games, Ehlers has scored 100 times over the past four regular seasons and converted once in the exhibition. If he can be unlocked and add to what Winnipeg already throws at you with Mark



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 1, 2020

Scheifele, Blake Wheeler, Kyle Connor and Patrik Laine, they could have the best offence in Canada.

SERGEI BOBROVSKY LEADS ALL GOALIES IN SAVE PERCENTAGE IN QUALIFYING ROUND

Florida's \$10-million man garnered a lot of negative attention for posting the worst season of his career as a starter after signing a monster free-agent contract last summer. But there's a path for him to redeem himself.

Consider that last season Bobrovsky finished with a .913 save percentage, but that through January he was sitting at .901. It took a great push late in the year and through two playoff rounds for him to come out of it somewhat of a hero, leading Columbus to a sweep of Tampa Bay. The two-time Vezina winner could find that form again at the drop of a hat.

But Florida's defence leaks high quality chances against and will make it harder on the goalie.

So does Winnipeg's and Hellebuyck keeps them in the running.

If Florida was up against a team like Toronto or Pittsburgh this prediction would be hard to fathom, but the Islanders offence doesn't have that kind of high upside. While the Isles ranked middle of the league in 5-on-5 scoring chances this season, they converted the fewest of any returning Eastern Conference team. They don't have a game-breaking goal-scorer and rely on structure to win. When the Islanders play a bit boring, they're on the right track.

If Bobrovsky plays as we've come to expect, the Islanders are going to be in an even worse spot on offence. Florida's defence perhaps doesn't need to be an improved unit in this series, though that is a concern for them. This is a series Bobrovsky can absolutely steal. He's one year removed from a stellar post-season, three from a Vezina-winning year. The break could have done some good, to clear his mind and provide rest from his heavy workload.

Florida needs the real Bobrovsky back.

KEVIN FIALA WILL LEAD THE QUALIFYING ROUND IN SCORING

Over the 2019-20 regular season, only Chicago, the Rangers and Ottawa allowed more shots against per game than Vancouver and they were getting progressively worse in that department all year. From January to the pause, only New Jersey averaged more shots against than Vancouver, and in just the last six weeks of action no one allowed more than the Canucks' 35.2.

Minnesota, meanwhile, was finding a groove and piling up wins. Fiala was front and centre to that charge, with 14 goals and 26 points in his final 19 games.

Now, it's impossible to tell what, if anything, will carry over from a regular season that concluded nearly five months ago, but Fiala was far and away Minnesota's best player in their exhibition game. It certainly looks like he's achieved some level of a sustainable breakout, though we need more evidence to be sure. A strong playoff series or two will do that.

The Wild-Canucks series is, on paper, one of the closest of the qualifying round and a popular pick to run the full five games. It could be a high-scoring one as well — these are the eighth- and ninth-best offences from Jan. 1 on.

The Canucks do have Jacob Markstrom back healthy and that could be a game-changing addition for them, but if the defence in front of him is as loose as when we last saw it, his return may not matter enough.

It's not bold enough to say Fiala will lead the Wild in scoring — he'll have to be a productive player for them to win. But if this thing goes the distance, he could come out of it with a pile of points.

MORE THAN HALF OF ROUND 1 SERIES WILL BE UPSETS

Note: Remember, first up is the qualifying round, which will be followed by 'Round 1.'

Upsets regularly happen in Round 1 of the playoffs, so it would be just as bold to predict a clean sweep in favour of all the teams that are getting a bye through qualifying. But having at least five lower-seeded teams knocking out a favourite in the opening round is much less common. It did happen in 2019, but that was the first time since 2013 there had been so many upsets. In the past 30 years, it's only happened one other time (1993).

The rationale for this one is simple: the eight teams that survive their qualifying series will have already played high-stakes playoff hockey and lifted their game to the required levels of intensity. And while the eight round-robin teams will be playing for seeding, there's just not as much on the line there. Sure, you'd rather put yourself in position to play a Florida or Columbus than a Pittsburgh or Carolina, but the threat of elimination just won't be there. We'd expect those games to have a higher sense of urgency than the exhibition matches we've seen, but it's just not exactly a playoff atmosphere.

The qualifying winners could just be better from the get-go and running on the inside of the track. Home-ice advantage is just not really a factor this year. The bigger advantage could be a short best-of-five introduction back to game action. Injuries, of course, could blow this right up.

But this is a two-fold prediction. While the qualifying-round winners could have an advantage to start, over the long haul playing fewer games may favour the higher seeds. They're still having to play four official rounds to win it all, while the rest have to play five. The regular playoffs are enough of a grind. An extra round — even if short — could wind up being a curse.

So while Part 1 of this prediction is that a ton of upsets will happen in the first round, Part 2 is that a bye team will win the Stanley Cup. It's certainly less spicy to predict that one of the best regular-season teams will end up as champion, but since I've eliminated five of them early, it's hot enough.

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Sportsnet.ca / Stanley Cup Playoffs Qualifying Round Preview: Maple Leafs vs. Blue Jackets

Luke Fox | @lukefoxjokebox July 27, 2020, 10:17 AM

The results are nearly identical, but the paths to get there couldn't be more different.

The Toronto Maple Leafs and Columbus Blue Jackets — seeds eight and nine, respectively, in the Eastern Conference bracket — finished the truncated 2019-20 campaign with an identical 81 points and .579 points percentage. They also split their head-to-head series, all the way back in October, when a virus was mostly something you worried about your computer getting.

Yet these play-in round foes' paths and identities couldn't be more distinct.

One has been cutting lottery-sized cheques to attract and keep happy some of the greatest offensive talent in the land. The other watched three of its best players, including a 2020 Hart Trophy finalist and a two-time Vezina champ, leave in free agency last summer and tried to fill that gaping hole with... Gustav Nyquist.

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CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 1, 2020

One pummels its opposition with high-danger offence off the rush and wields its \$43 million power-play unit as an enforcer. The other ekes out low-scoring W's by cycling and shot-blocking and forechecking its enemies to death.

One will ride or die with a bona fide NHL No. 1 goaltender who has gone 0-for-3 in playoff series since he moved to Toronto. The other runs out the tournament's least-experienced goalie tandem and may need to put its starter on a shorter leash than a pit bull in a dog park swarming with chihuahuas.

One fired its head coach midstream and got faster and freer under a rookie bench boss who lightens his players' spirits by cranking Travis Scott during practice. The other is run by a five-time Jack Adams finalist who doesn't give a bleep if the microphones catch him cursing out a winger who forgets to stay above the puck.

One hasn't won an NHL elimination series since Miracle was in theatres. The other is hot off pulling its own miracle by sweeping the 2019 Presidents' Trophy-winning Tampa Bay Lightning the last time stakes were this high.

Offence versus defence. PP versus PK. Skill versus will.

Should be a doozy.

ADVANCED STATS

(5-on-5 via Natural Stat Trick)

Maple Leafs: 52.03 CF% (6th), 50.16 GF% (17th), 91.15 SV% (28th), 8.57 SH% (11th), 0.997 PDO (20th)

Blue Jackets: 49.11 CF% (20th), 50.61 GF% (15th), 92.81 SV% (5th), 6.80 SH% (28th), 0.996 PDO (21st)

TEAM STATS

Maple Leafs: 23.1 PP% (6th), 77.1 PK% (21st), 237 GF (2nd), 222 GA (25th)

Blue Jackets: 16.4 PP% (27th), 81.7 PK% (12th), 180 GF (28th), 183 GA (3rd)

HEAD-TO-HEAD RECORD

Maple Leafs: 1-0-1

Blue Jackets: 1-1-0

THE SKINNY

"It's no secret that we've got really good offensive players," says Leafs coach Sheldon Keefe.

Handpicked by GM Kyle Dubas to replace the fired Mike Babcock — no other candidates were interviewed for the position — Keefe is here to let the horses run. So, he's teasing his "All-Star Game line" and experimenting with teenage sniper Nick Robertson on his third line at training camp, knowing full well the Maple Leafs need to outscore their defensive deficiencies in order to succeed.

Toronto, the NHL's highest-scoring outfit since Keefe took the reins, can wow with its speed, drop jaws with its creativity, and strike fear with its power play. But the Maple Leafs will also tote the burden of pressure from the Royal York to Scotiabank Area. Their star players are already being paid like world champions but are 0-for-3 in elimination series and, thus, their killer instinct has been questioned.

Conversely, the Blue Jackets couldn't be more comfortable in the plucky underdog role. The off-season departures of superstars Artemi Panarin and Sergei Bobrovsky have furthered their us-against-the-world scrappiness, and an influx of healthy bodies (Seth Jones, Cam Atkinson, Oliver Bjorkstrand, possibly Josh Anderson) has renewed confidence in a group that already stunned the hockey world by knocking off Cup favourite Tampa last spring.

Columbus coach John Tortorella has downplayed the less-than-full participation of captain Nick Foligno and Pierre-Luc Dubois at camp and is doing his damndest to instill a mature mindset in the tournament's youngest roster.

"It's playoff hockey, right? You're gonna have to fight for every inch of ice," reminds Nyquist.

If the blue-collar Jackets are to upset the white-collar Leafs, it will be because they won the trenches. If the Maple Leafs can survive this test, however, an injection of confidence could propel them to great heights.

Maple Leafs X-Factor: Ilya Mikheyev

The last time we saw the borsht-loving rookie in NHL game action, he was skating off the Prudential Center ice as fast as possible, a frightening crime scene of blood spatter behind him. Since having his wrist sliced by a blade in late December, Mikheyev has diligently committed himself to coming back stronger, skating throughout the pause, polishing his English, and wowing rehab pal Jake Muzzin in the gym.

"He came in and worked his b— off," Muzzin marvels. A standout at reset camp, Mikheyev has washed away concerns about Andreas Johnsson's early unavailability and injected both the second line and a mediocre penalty kill with renewed energy. Souperman could be a late-round steal in your playoff fantasy draft.

Blue Jackets X-Factor: John Tortorella

On paper, the Jacks Adams finalist has the weaker roster, but we all know the games aren't played on loose-leaf. An ornery motivator supreme — and one who's already in midseason form — Torts has a track record of conjuring sum-greater-than-parts efforts from his teams, and we need only look back to 2019's sweep of Jon Cooper's stacked Lightning as proof.

Toronto's Sheldon Keefe vows he's ready for this chess match against his former coach, but Tortorella would love nothing more here than to reinforce the value of committed defence and a willingness to sacrifice individual reward for group gain.

Biggest question facing Toronto: Can they get out of their own end before it all goes to hell?

"There's no area of our game defensively that we were satisfied with," Keefe said at the outset of camp. "We fully expect our guys to be a lot better defensively when we come back here, and of course we're going to need to be given what's at stake." Clear the zone quickly with possession, limit the Grade-A chances against, and the Maple Leafs should be able to run-and-gun the Blue Jackets into submission. Easier said than done. Columbus is one of the NHL's best at sustaining a heavy cycle and forcing its opponents into own-zone turnovers. The less time the Leafs are forced to spend on their heels, the better.

Biggest question facing Columbus: Can they score?

Tortorella plans to inject his lineup with youth and speed — Hello, Liam Foudy! No pressure, Alexandre Texier! — in an effort to keep pace with one of the fastest teams in the East. But the young Blue Jackets have just one 20-goal forward (Oliver Bjorkstrand); Toronto has four of them. Who would you rather have as your second-line centre, John Tavares or Alexander Wennberg? The Jackets can defend all they like, but at some point the likes of Atkinson, Dubois, Nyquist, Foligno, and Boone Jenner will need to put the puck in the net.

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TSN.CA / Winnipeg Jets, Calgary Flames set to face off in playoff format not seen in decades



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 1, 2020

Paul Edmonds

The last time the National Hockey League hosted a playoff series that was scheduled for less than seven games was 34 years ago. It was a best-of-five set in 1986 that had the Hartford Whalers sweep the Quebec Nordiques in three games.

As both of those cities are no longer in the league, it illustrates the rarity of what eight pairs of NHL teams will be involved in starting Saturday in the NHL hub cities of Edmonton and Toronto.

So as the Winnipeg Jets and Calgary Flames prepare for their best-of-five 2020 Stanley Cup qualifier the same day in Edmonton at 9:30 p.m. CT (TSN 1290 Radio), they'll be playing in a series unlike anything the league has formatted in decades.

And while starting any playoff series with a victory is advantageous, it likely becomes more crucial when you have less opportunity to battle back if you fall behind. Thus, Game 1 of the series could be the most important in swaying any momentum toward one team over the other.

"The puck is going to drop and you're going to have to decide on guys pretty quickly," said Jets head coach Paul Maurice. "If it's not going for them you're going to have to make the adjustment quickly. And I would think that's even more true in a five-game series."

Now, all is not lost if you lose the opener, but as the series continues on Monday and Tuesday with back-to-back games, a loss in Game 1 followed by a misstep early in the week and you could blink and be heading back home for the balance of summer.

"We're all aware that this is a sprint more than possibly any other series we've been into," Maurice added. "The first 10 minutes matter because that game (Game 1) carries a more percentage weight on what you need to do to win the series."

Game On!

VS. CALGARY

The Jets met the Calgary Flames just once this season. It was during the 2019 Heritage Classic at Mosaic Stadium in Regina with Winnipeg prevailing 2-1 on a Bryan Little overtime winner on Oct. 26. Winnipeg outshot Calgary 45-30 in the game and Connor Hellebuyck outdueled David Rittich in the respective goals. The Jets were 1-2 the previous season to the Flames, but have won two straight over their Alberta rivals. For the record, Winnipeg was 9-3 against other Canadian teams this season.

Here are the expected but unconfirmed lineups:

Jets

Connor-Scheifele-Wheeler

Ehlers-Eakin-Laine

Copp-Lowry-Roslovic

Perreault-Shore-Appleton

Morrissey-DeMelo

Kulikov-Pionk

Beaulieu-Poolman

Hellebuyck

Brossoit

Flames

Gaudreau-Monahan-Lindholm

Tkachuk-Backlund-Mangiapanne

Lucic-Bennett-Dube

Ryan-Jankowski-Rieder

Giordano-Brodie

Hanifin-Andersson

Forbort-Gustafsson

Talbot/Rittich

PREDICTIONS

From this chair, here are my predictions for the eight 2020 Stanley Cup qualifiers:

Eastern Conference

Pittsburgh over Montreal (4)

Carolina over NYR (5)

NYI over Florida (5)

Columbus over Toronto (5)

Western Conference

Edmonton over Chicago (3)

Nashville over Arizona (5)

Vancouver over Minnesota (4)

Winnipeg over Calgary (5)

CRACKEN ON THE KRAKEN

When Seattle - the NHL's newest team - announced that its nickname would be Kraken, I couldn't help but reflect on the Pirates of the Caribbean series and three movies that included the character of Davy Jones, who debuted in the second movie, Dead Man's Chest. As a family we are fans of the films, thus I muse if the NHL's expansion franchise might ever have a player with the same name. If so, it would make for some easy quips. A quick search reveals that several players named David Jones have played hockey at various levels, including former NHLer David Jones of Guelph. The 35-year-old played 462 games in the league with Colorado, Calgary and Minnesota before retiring after the 2015-16 season. There is another David Jones still playing. He's a 17-year-old defenceman currently with the New England Knights of the North American 3 Hockey League - a Junior A loop that spans across the United States. By the way, he's draft eligible in 2021 - the same year Seattle officially begins play in league. Just saying!

HE SAID IT

"At the end of the day we all go out there with a plan and the players make you right or wrong by their execution." Maurice on his coaching preparation for the Flames.

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TSN.CA / 10 storylines to watch as the NHL presses play

Frank Seravalli

Hockey is back.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • August 1, 2020

So much time passed – and so much changed – over the 142 days between meaningful National Hockey League games that it feels like an entirely new season rather than the restart of 2019-20.

Here is a refresher, along with 10 storylines to watch during this sprint for Lord Stanley as the NHL hits play on Saturday after a historic pause:

1. **Bringing Stanley Home:** With the Stanley Cup being contested in Canada in its entirety for the first time in 95 years, how many of Canada's six clubs will make it through to the qualifiers? The maximum is five, with one of the Flames or Jets bound to be knocked off in five or fewer, but none earned a guaranteed chance to end the 27-year drought.

2. **Lose for Lafreniere:** Given the commitment to testing, protocol and life in the bubble, no team will be happy with a five-game showing in Toronto or Edmonton. But a 12.5 per cent shot at the No. 1 overall pick and Alexis Lafreniere is a heck of a consolation prize. Teams would need to finish in 30th place over a full 82-game season for those odds. The NHL's second phase of the Draft Lottery will be held on Aug. 10.

3. **Baby Boosters:** Five players from Team Canada's gold medal-winning 2020 World Junior entry are on return-to-play rosters: captain Barrett Hayton (Arizona), Bowen Byram (Colorado), Ty Dellandrea (Dallas), Liam Foudy (Columbus) and Connor McMichael (Washington). Foudy, Byram, McMichael and Toronto's Nick Robertson are making the jump from the CHL. Edmonton's Philip Broberg, 19, is also knocking on the door of a spot in the Oil's top six after playing this season in Sweden.

4. **No Home Cooking:** Bubble life will bring the purest experiment yet on the benefits of home-ice advantage. Historically, the home team has a .575 winning percentage (2393-1774) in Stanley Cup playoff games. In addition, the home team has enjoyed an advantage of 1,042 fewer penalties than the road team over the last three regular seasons, according to The Athletic. We will soon find out the impact of missing fervent fans in buildings, which could also put a dent into game intensity – while broadcast microphones pick up everything.

5. **Remember These Guys?** Trade-deadline acquisitions only got two weeks to get acclimated before the NHL hit pause. Don't be surprised when you see these guys on the scoresheet with their new clubs: Tyler Toffoli (Vancouver), Andreas Athanasiou (Edmonton), Cody Eakin and Dylan DeMelo (Winnipeg), Jason Zucker (Pittsburgh), Jean-Gabriel Pageau and Andy Greene (Islanders), Robin Lehner and Alec Martinez (Vegas), Ondrej Kase (Boston), Erik Haula (Florida), Ilya Kovalchuk and Brenden Dillon (Washington), Patrick Marleau and Conor Sheary (Pittsburgh), Blake Coleman and Barclay Goodrow (Tampa Bay), with Vincent Trocheck, Brady Skjei and Sami Vatanen in Carolina.

6. **Break out the Brooms?** There are eight juicy best-of-five showdowns in the qualifier round, the first five-game NHL series in more than 34 years. The last time there were five-game series, in 1986, six of those eight ended in three-game sweeps. Nearly half of all best-of-five series – 27 of 56 – held between 1980 and 1986 ended in a sweep.

7. **Information Trickle:** Unlike the NBA, the NHL has no independent media inside the bubble. Media are not permitted to view practices or morning skates, and teams have the option to skip morning skate media availabilities until the Conference Finals. The NHL has already clamped down on injury information in deference to medical privacy laws with COVID-19. But will the NHL-approved information flow leave knowledgeable fan bases in the dark on changes and developments until puck drop each game?

8. **Friendliest Playoffs Ever?** The Stanley Cup playoffs are legendary for the healthy hate that ratchets up during every series. It's one of hockey's great calling cards. But with players sharing communal spaces while staying in the same hotels in the bubble, it's possible this once-in-a-lifetime playoff run won't feel the same. One player described the scene in his Toronto hotel as a 'minor hockey tournament with booze.' Will there be a record set for fewest fights or suspensions? Will the hockey be any less fractious? Without the energy supplied by home crowds, will players be calmer? We'll see.

9. **Fashion Forward:** The NHL abolished its traditional, buttoned-up dress code for these most unusual playoffs. Get your popcorn ready. Players will have a chance to express themselves in ways we haven't seen before and fans are ready to gobble up their new game-day threads on social media.

10. **The David Ayres Effect:** With no way to replace goaltenders in the bubble, even in the event of injury, more teams have four goaltenders (13) than three goaltenders (11) on their 31-man roster. There are also a number of tantalizing tandems where the bona fide starter is still to be determined: Mike Smith/Mikko Koskinen (Edmonton), David Rittich/Cam Talbot (Calgary), Elvis Merzlikins/Joonas Korpisalo (Columbus), Juuse Saros/Pekka Rinne (Nashville), Matt Murray/Tristan Jarry (Pittsburgh), plus Marc-Andre Fleury figures to have a relatively short leash in Vegas with Lehner on the bench. Then again, all leashes might be short in a five-game series.

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USA TODAY / NHL predictions: Here's how the qualifying round and Stanley Cup playoffs will unfold

Jimmy Hascup

Playoff predictions are always difficult.

After all, who could have foreseen last season that the record-tying Tampa Bay Lightning would be swept in the first round or that the St. Louis Blues, who were in last place in January, would win the Stanley Cup?

But this year is even more difficult because of all the variables as the league plays amid the coronavirus pandemic. Eight additional teams, one additional round, no fans and 4½ months of rust to shake off, all while trying to keep COVID-19 from disrupting the tournament.

Regular-season numbers and trends are ancient history. So here is our best effort to sort through the unusual circumstances and try to predict winners:

BEST-OF-FIVE QUALIFICATION ROUND

► No. 12 Montreal Canadiens vs. No. 5 Pittsburgh Penguins

Jimmy Hascup: Penguins in four.

Mike Brehm: Penguins in three.

Jace Evans: Penguins in three.

► No. 11 New York Rangers vs. No. 6 Carolina Hurricanes

Hascup: Rangers in five.

Brehm: Hurricanes in five.

Evans: Hurricanes in five.

► No. 10 Florida Panthers vs. No. 7 New York Islanders

Hascup: Islanders in four.

Brehm: Islanders in three.

Evans: Panthers in five.

► No. 9 Columbus Blue Jackets vs. No. 8 Toronto Maple Leafs

Hascup: Maple Leafs in four.



CAROLINA HURRICANES

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Brehm: Blue Jackets in five.

Evans: Maple Leafs in four.

► No. 12 Chicago Blackhawks vs. No. 5 Edmonton Oilers

Hascup: Oilers in three.

Brehm: Oilers in five.

Evans: Oilers in four.

► No. 11 Arizona Coyotes vs. No. 6 Nashville Predators

Hascup: Predators in four.

Brehm: Predators in four.

Evans: Predators in five.

► No. 10 Minnesota Wild vs. No. 7 Vancouver Canucks

Hascup: Wild in four.

Brehm: Canucks in four.

Evans: Canucks in five.

► No. 9 Winnipeg Jets vs. No. 8 Calgary Flames

Hascup: Flames in five.

Brehm: Jets in four.

Evans: Jets in five.

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