



Strap in for some NHL (and AHL) playoff action. Year in and year out, the NHL playoffs provide off the charts excitement for even the most casual of hockey fans. Deciding game sevens, multiple overtime thrillers, and raucous atmospheres are just some of the many things that you can expect from this, and every, NHL postseason.

This is your TCF NHL Playoff Primer!

Eastern Conference

The Eastern Conference playoff teams have been set for most of the year except for the final couple of spots. The New York Rangers controlled their own destiny for a berth in the postseason and put together a poor effort against the hapless Atlanta Thrashers in their second-to-last game of the season. Carolina then held destiny in their hands as they faced off against a Tampa Bay team that was locked in to the fifth seed with nothing to play for. Carolina gave their fans a sh*tburger to eat and lost 6-2, allowing the Rangers to sneak in to the playoffs.

#1 Washington Capitals v. #8 New York Rangers

Goaltending will be the key to this series. Two years ago, in 2009, the Capitals and Rangers squared off in the first round, with the Capitals holding home ice. The Rangers went in to Verizon Center and won the first two games, before losing four of the last five and the Capitals moved on in seven games.

Simeon Varlamov was the hero of that series with two shutouts. Now, Varlamov has lost his starting job and the Capitals have played musical chairs with their netminders.

This series is big for TV networks because you have the mega-market Rangers and the widely-popular Capitals featuring Alexander Ovechkin. You may see more of this series than you want to if you are looking to tune in to the nightly Versus game.

Prediction: Capitals in 6. I love Henrik Lundqvist's advantage over Michal Neuvirth, the Capitals projected starter, but the loss of Ryan Callahan to a broken ankle will be the kiss of death for the Blueshirts. He would have been on the line to match up with Alexander Ovechkin and attempt to shut him down. The Rangers do have more leadership, especially in the form of US Olympian Chris Drury, but there's a talent gap here that makes me worry about the Rangers' ability to score goals.

#2 Philadelphia Flyers v. #7 Buffalo Sabres

Again, goaltending will be the key to this series. The Flyers stumbled their way in to the playoffs, losing the overall number one seed, and really making people question how good they are. I will not question how good the group of 18 skaters is, but both goaltenders are huge liabilities entering a series against a Buffalo team with lots of offensive firepower.

That said, Ryan Miller of Buffalo will have to stand on his head for the Sabres to win this series. The Flyers may be the deepest team at forward and will punish the smaller Sabres' forwards in

the offensive zone. Last year, the Sabres won the Northwest Division and played the sixth-seeded Boston Bruins. The Sabres looked to be the better team and then Thomas Vanek was injured in Game Two and did not return. The Sabres fell apart and lost four of the next five.

There are two contrasting styles in play here. The Sabres focus on speedy transition because they are small, but skilled. The Flyers are a puck control team to the extreme. That's not to say that they lack speed, but that they are a bigger team up front and can raise hell in the offensive zone. With a young, mistake prone Sabres defense, the Flyers can cause lots of problems.

Prediction: Flyers in 7. How good can Ryan Miller be? If he is unbelievable, the Sabres will pull the upset. Miller has been rested down the stretch due to some nagging injuries. The Flyers have no idea what to expect from Sergei Bobrovsky, Brian Boucher, or Michael Leighton in net. This series could go either way if Miller is terrific.

#3 Boston Bruins v. #6 Montreal Canadiens

A throwback to the Original Six NHL franchises as two of the most storied team's in NHL history square off. Long gone are the days of Cam Neely, Andy Brickley, Patrick Roy, and Chris Chelios. But, this series will be loaded with storylines and have two very proud fan bases pitted against one another.

For once, goaltending will not be the key issue, because both Tim Thomas and Carey Price are very solid netminders. Price could very well be in the consideration for the league's MVP. There are some interesting undertones to this series. First, these are two division rivals, unlike the other East series. Second, the Max Pacioretty-Zdeno Chara incident is fresh in everyone's mind. And third, these teams have a legacy to live up to.

For me, the key is Montreal scoring enough goals to win. Jaroslav Halak led a magnificent run to the Eastern Conference finals for the Habs last year while Price was booed off the ice. Price should not be a concern this year, but the Habs only scored 216 goals this season, 17 less than any other East playoff team. By comparison, the Bruins scored 30 more and had the best goal differential of any team in the East.

Prediction: Bruins in 6. The Bruins have it all. They were fifth in the league in goals scored, second in goals-against-average, and nine of Tim Thomas's 35 wins were shutouts. Carey Price had eight shutouts this year. So in a series full of 2-1 and 3-2 games, I like Boston's chances to get more timely goals because they have more guys capable of getting them.

#4 Pittsburgh Penguins v. #5 Tampa Bay Lightning

Sidney Crosby still has not yet been cleared for contact, though he is skating with the team. That's a huge loss for the 2008-2009 Stanley Cup champions and one that they are going to have a tough time overcoming against a highly-talented, very young Tampa Bay Lightning bunch. Let alone that, Evgeni Malkin is still out after tearing his MCL and ACL a few weeks back.

The key to this series is, shockingly, a goaltender. Marc-Andre Fleury has to be the best player on the ice to help Pittsburgh avoid an upset. Pittsburgh allowed just four more goals than Boston, who was tops in the conference. Tampa Bay scored just four goals in their last three games against Pittsburgh.

Special teams are also a big storyline with this series. Tampa Bay has the sixth best powerplay while Pittsburgh has the league's top penalty kill. The Penguins powerplay took a nosedive without Crosby and Malkin, while Tampa Bay had the eighth best PK.

Prediction: Pittsburgh in 7. Pittsburgh still has a nice group of leaders in their locker room while Tampa Bay has a young team and a rookie coach in Guy Boucher. The Penguins have a definitive edge in net. Generally, the nod goes to the better team defense. Tampa Bay allowed 41 more goals than the Penguins.

Western Conference

As if the Western Conference playoff chase didn't spoil us enough, there's a whole postseason to determine the conference's Stanley Cup representative. The Dallas Stars choked on the road against the Minnesota Wild to allow last year's Stanley Cup champs, the Chicago Blackhawks, a chance to defend their title. Perennial playoff participants, San Jose and Detroit, are again near the top of the conference, while Vancouver looks to lose the label of being a "regular season team".

#1 Vancouver Canucks v. #8 Chicago Blackhawks

The Chicago Blackhawks are to the Vancouver Canucks what ropes and adult films are to David Carradine. The Blackhawks have eliminated the Canucks in each of the last two playoffs. Last year, they did it en route to winning Lord Stanley's Cup. The Blackhawks are 5-1 in Vancouver in their last two playoff series.

Goaltending is again the key to yet another series. Roberto Luongo, and in his defense, the team in front of him, has been terrible in series with the Blackhawks. They will need to exorcise their demons to move on. Corey Crawford is unproven in the playoffs for the Hawks and will be under immense pressure. Antti Niemi was also unproven, and he led them to a Stanley Cup last year.

This year's Blackhawks team is without Dustin Byfuglien and Kris Versteeg, who both tormented the Canucks last year. The Canucks are still in tact, except for the loss of center Manny Malhotra to a horrific eye injury. Malhotra, a faceoff specialist, is a big loss, but the Blackhawks are a middle of the pack faceoff team.

Prediction: Canucks in 5. The Hawks barely snuck in while the Canucks have played well down the stretch, even with very little to play for. They will be looking for retribution and Ryan Kesler is having a career year and should be a huge factor in the series.

#2 San Jose Sharks v. #7 Los Angeles Kings

This series lost some its luster when Kings center, and best player, Anze Kopitar went down

with an ankle injury a couple weeks ago. He is out for the duration of the playoffs for the Kings. The Sharks come in to the series healthy and ready to go, with last year's Stanley Cup winner Antti Niemi in net.

The Sharks have a lot of firepower and the Kings will have a hard time keeping up without Kopitar. Drew Doughty and Jack Johnson are two of the best defensemen in the league, so it will have to be the Sharks' secondary scorers who carry the load for the team. The Sharks may be the deepest forward unit in the West, and that will be tested with the Doughty-Johnson pairing playing against the Thornton line.

Goaltending is pretty even in this series, though Jonathan Quick may be slightly better than Niemi. With next to no travel between games, fatigue should not be much of a factor.

Prediction: Sharks in 4. I like the Kings, but overcoming the loss of your best player is tough at this time of year. The Sharks played strong down the stretch to get in to the number two seed. If there is a sweep in the first round of either conference, this is the best chance at one.

#3 Detroit Red Wings v. #6 Phoenix Coyotes

Another repeat matchup out of the West as the incredible Red Wings take on the quietly consistent Coyotes. The Coyotes made the playoffs yet again with ownership questions hanging over the franchise.

Detroit took seven games last year to dispatch of the 'Yotes, who play a sound defensive game with good goaltending. Jimmy Howard is a year better and the Red Wings are fielding about the same team as last year, except they added longtime Dallas (and Minnesota North) Star Mike Modano. Modano has said he will retire if the team reaches the Cup final.

The biggest story of this series is that Henrik Zetterberg is out for at least Game One and possibly longer. It's a big blow to the Wings, but, they always seem to overcome every single bit of adversity that comes their way. Phoenix has one has the most unheralded players in the game in Shane Doan, who missed the majority of last year's series with an injury.

Prediction: Red Wings in 6. Last year's series was incredible, and people all over the hockey world were rooting for the upstart Coyotes. This year, they're the sexy upset pick, and while it is possible, I cannot see Red Wings Coach Mike Babcock exiting in the first round.

#4 Anaheim Ducks v. #5 Nashville Predators

Two very different styles in this series. The Ducks are an explosive team who scored just four more goals than they allowed, while the Predators were one of three teams to allow less than 200 goals. Pekka Rinne was outstanding for the Preds this season and his success will need to continue for the Predators to move on.

Some of the best players the casual fan has never heard of will play in this series. There's Ryan Getzlaf and Corey Perry, this year's Rocket Richard trophy winner for most goals, on the Anaheim side and then defenseman Shea Weber, with the league's second-hardest shot from this past skills competition, and defenseman Ryan Suter, of the famous Suter hockey family.

This is probably my favorite series out west because it features two different hockey ideologies and two highly skilled teams. The Predators, fully embracing their team concept, acquired Mike Fisher from Ottawa prior to the trade deadline, so hopefully we get some camera shots of Carrie Underwood during the series.

Prediction: Predators in 6. I think the travel factor impacts this series a lot. That is where depth and goaltending come in to play. Personally, I think Nashville has more of both. Ray Emery as Anaheim's starter with Jonas Hiller's injury will be a big component to this series.

AHL Playoff Primer

#2N Lake Erie Monsters v. #3N Manitoba Moose

The Lake Erie Monsters are participants in the AHL Calder Cup playoffs for the first time in franchise history. They draw an interesting opponent in the Manitoba Moose, who are a perennial playoff team and have won Calder Cups over the last 10 years. The Monsters got some help from Colorado, while the Vancouver Canucks called up some help from the Moose.

The Monsters were one of the league's best teams from January to the end of the regular season and they cannot let up now. The series is a best-of-seven with a 2-3-2 format, so the Monsters will have games 1, 2, 6, and 7 at the Q.

Check out a game if you can, starting with Saturday's Game One at Noon or Sunday's Game Two at 3 p.m.

Enjoy the playoffs, everybody!