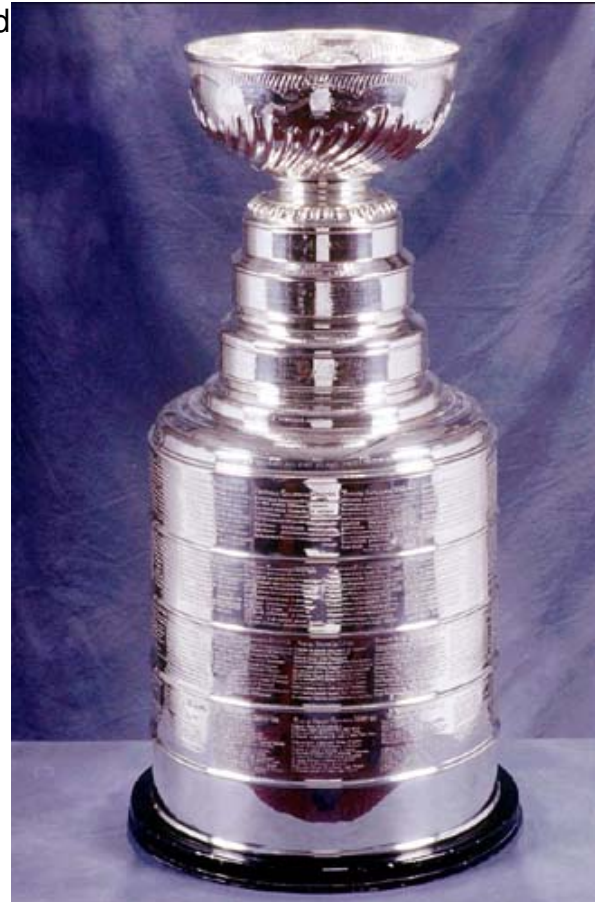


People who have a definite favorite sport will always try to validate how their choice of sport's playoff is better than the others. Even though, since I stopped



playing hockey regularly, baseball has become my favorite, I simply cannot appreciate any sport's playoff more than hockey. Part of the reason is that I do not have a hometown team for the NHL playoffs and that helps me remain more impartial and be able to enjoy all the games rather than the ones that are relevant to me. Like any other NE Ohio hockey fan, I have teams I pull for. To be honest, come playoff time, I pull for every game to go to overtime. Entering the semifinals, there have been nine consecutive nights of playoff action featuring a playoff game. In Webster's Dictionary, this is defined as awesome.

No real surprises in the first round of the NHL playoffs as six of the top eight seeds move on to the second round, with the lower seeds coming from the #4 v. #5 matchup. That outcome makes my picks go 7-for-8 in the first round, but I was way off on length of series for some. Looking back at the first round, we had some tremendous series. Chicago took Vancouver to overtime in Game Seven after erasing a 3-0 series deficit. Game Seven was one of the most entertaining hockey games I have ever seen and the crowd was incredible. The Bruins erased a 2-0 deficit to take Game Seven at home in overtime. Tampa Bay clawed back from a 3-1 disadvantage to win three straight, including a 1-0 decision in Consol Energy Center over the favored Penguins.

The second round begins on Thursday night, with the Vancouver Canucks in action with just one full day off in between their exhausting first round matchup with the Chicago Blackhawks. The Canucks will entertain the Nashville Predators, who were victorious over the Anaheim Ducks in six games.

However, I will start with a look at the Eastern Conference Semis.

#1 Washington Capitals v. #5 Tampa Bay Lightning

If you hate defensive hockey, this is the series for you. That's not to say that both teams are incapable of playing defense, but there is a lot of offensive talent and firepower on both rosters. The Capitals have been off since last Saturday when they dispatched of the New York Rangers. The Lightning had to expel a lot of energy to rattle off three straight to upend the 2009 Stanley Cup champion Penguins.

Surprisingly, 41-year-old Dwayne Roloson of the Lightning went 2-2-1 against the Capitals this season, allowing just seven goals in five games on 148 shots. Both wins were shutouts. Roloson will have to continue his solid play for Tampa to have a legitimate chance in this series. Roloson is the man who orchestrated the 2006 Edmonton Oilers improbable run to the Stanley Cup finals before getting injured.

Tampa Bay is brimming with confidence right now and with a young team and a young coach, that's a great weapon to have. But, in terms of weapons, very few teams can compete with the armory that the Capitals have. With Mike Green cleared to play after getting hit in the head with a shot in Game Five against NYR, the Capitals will be a fully-functioning arsenal.

Prediction: Caps in 6. Tampa Bay expelled a lot of energy to get to this point while Washington got to rest up and relax. There's no way of knowing what the 41-year-old Roloson has left, but there's a good chance that it will not be enough to knock off the Caps.

#2 Philadelphia Flyers v. #3 Boston Bruins

Ryan Miller underachieved for the duration of the Flyers-Sabres series and the Sabres were still able to take the series to seven games thanks to the lackluster play of Philly's netminders. Now, the Flyers face a team who excels at not allowing goals and a team who roared back from beginning the series down 2-0, losing both on home ice. This series is going to be entertaining, tight checking, and hard hitting.

This semi will be a severe contrast to the other East series. While that one has the probability of being wide open and high-scoring, this series could see very low shot totals, a lot of big hits, and the potential for a very long overtime game. Both teams like to utilize their depth at both forward and defense. The difference in this series will be goaltending. Tim Thomas's [incredible save in the second overtime of Game Five](#) led to Nathan Horton's game winning goal. Horton would get another OT GWG in Game Seven to win the series.

Prediction: Boston in 6. Tim Thomas will be the difference maker. He got off to a slow start in the Montreal series, but he is a world class goalie and Philadelphia is lacking in the goaltending department. With a good chance at a lot of one-goal games, big saves are critical. Tim Thomas has that ability. The three-headed monster of Michael Leighton, Brian Boucher, and Sergei Bobrovsky largely do not.

Shifting gears, here is a look at the second round in the West.

#1 Vancouver Canucks v. #5 Nashville Predators

Despite [Bobby Ryan scoring one of the sickest goals I have ever seen](#), the Predators took control of the series in Game Five, splitting a 2-2 tie and eventually winning the series in six. (As a side, I cannot begin to describe how ridiculously amazing that goal is. First, he gets in the passing lane to intercept the puck, then he undresses Legwand twice, then roofs a backhander.

Complete play by a complete player) The Ducks are not a deep team and they had huge questions in net with Jonas Hiller sidelined with vertigo (that may end his career).

Now, the Vancouver Canucks are the opponent. The Canucks are an extremely deep team, with a gold medal winning goaltender, and a chip on their shoulder after several straight underachievements in the playoffs. The question is- how much do they have left? Chicago ended regulation in Game Seven with a 10-minute barrage of shots and offensive zone pressure. It took a [Herculean effort by Jonathan Toews](#) to tie the game. Plays like that, with sheer heart and an unreal amount of skill are what makes the NHL playoffs so great.

Can the Canucks beat a team who plays a much different style of hockey? The Blackhawks are skill-based, using the D a lot in the offensive zone. Nashville is a grind it out team along the wall in the offensive and defensive zone. The Canucks are reliant on good spacing and passing lanes. The Predators will attempt to take that away. Will Pekka Rinne outplay Roberto Luongo, who was benched three times during the Blackhawks series?

Prediction: Nashville in 7. My answer to the last question is yes. Pekka Rinne deserved MVP consideration. He is one of the most unheralded goaltenders in the game. Until Luongo proves me wrong, I am not a believer. He won a gold medal, but did so playing a very shaky tournament. The Canucks left a lot of emotion out on the ice and the Predators are a methodical bunch. I like their chances because of their style of play, because they are not the better team.

#2 San Jose Sharks v. #3 Detroit Red Wings

More so than any sport, hockey's home ice advantage is critical. The home team gets the last line change and can get the matchups that they want. San Jose took home ice in this series away from Detroit during the final week of the season and now they get a chance to prove what it's worth. These are two highly-talented teams with some of the sport's most recognizable names. The Sharks needed six games to beat the LA Kings while Detroit convincingly, and rather easily, swept the Phoenix Coyotes. What that means is that the Red Wings have not played a game since April 20. A rested team of veterans against a mix of young and old makes for a great series.

Detroit got healthy over the break while the Sharks have had enough time to recharge their

batteries. This is my favorite series of the semis because it is the most evenly matched and is full of bragging rights. Both San Jose and Detroit are perennial division winners and top seeds in the West and now they get to fight it out for supremacy. The Sharks have an opportunity to be one step closer to shedding the playoff choker moniker they have been saddled with. The Sharks do, however, enter the series with one enormous question. Who will be the goaltender? Antti Niemi will start the series, after having a 3.99 GAA and a paltry .860 SV% against the Kings. Antero Niittymaki saved the series for the Sharks allowing just one goal in his 91 minutes of play, entering Game Three which turned the tide of the series. The Sharks were down 4-0 when Niittymaki stepped in, allowing the Sharks to roar back and win in OT.

Prediction: Detroit in 6. With Ric Flair in mind, to be the best (woooooo!), you have to beat the best. Regardless of the fact that the Wings have not won a Stanley Cup since 2008, in my estimation, they are still the best organization in hockey. Jimmy Howard has been great all year and the Red Wings are a savvy, veteran-laden team who are fine with the layoff and fine with starting the series in San Jose. Like the previous series in regards to Luongo, San Jose needs to prove me wrong that they can't win a huge playoff series.

The semis should be outstanding as all four series have the chance to be long and contain a lot of close, one-goal games. With nine straight nights of OT games in the books, and a low probability of that continuing on the 28th due to just one game, the playoffs could very easily start a new streak the following night. No playoffs are better than these. Do yourself a favor and find that out firsthand by watching these games.