



In 2001, defenseman Ray Bourque walked around the locker room and did interviews wearing a hat with Mission 16W stitched on it. It takes 16 wins in the playoffs to hoist the Stanley Cup. He had been traded from the team he had spent his entire 20-year career in 2000, with the goal of winning a Stanley Cup. Even though he had been the face of the previous franchise as a phenomenal two-way hockey player, his former employer orchestrated a trade to give Bourque the opportunity he needed to go out on top.

That franchise? The Boston Bruins. The Bruins traded Bourque to the Colorado Avalanche in 2000 to give the then-39-year-old a chance he had not had in Boston since 1988. The 99-00 Avalanche would fall one game short of the Stanley Cup Finals, losing in seven games to Stanley Cup runner-up Dallas. However, in 2001, Bourque, who averaged over 28 minutes of ice time at age 40 during that playoff run, accomplished his mission. Bourque held the Cup high, with tears in his eyes, and retired on top of the mountain.

For many Boston hockey fans, this was as close as they could get. The city's favorite son, a man who had suited up for over 1500 games in the black and yellow was a winner. The Bruins hadn't won a Cup since 1972, having lost five Finals series in the meantime. To some, Bourque's victory with the Avalanche was somewhat theirs. This despite the fact that Patrick Roy, former Montreal Canadien and hated rival backstopped that Avalanche club.

The 2010-2011 Bruins are four wins away from Mission 16W.

On the other side of North America, the Vancouver Canucks are one of 13 current NHL franchises to have never taken a team photo with the Stanley Cup. The Canucks began play in the 1970-71 season and have been to two Stanley Cup Finals series. The first was in 1983-84 and the most recent in 1993-94.

The 1993-94 Cup Final broke a 54-year drought for the New York Rangers as they won the series in seven games, after Vancouver roared back from a 3-1 series deficit to force Game Seven at Madison Square Garden. The Canucks had just 85 points during the regular season and had a Cinderella playoff run just to play for Hockey's Holy Grail.

The Canucks also had a Cinderella run in 1983-84 to make the Cup. This year, however, the Canucks were the top seed in the Western Conference and have not faced adversity since their opening series against Chicago. In their two previous Cup Finals, they were a huge underdog. Now, they are a pretty big favorite.

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How They Got Here

The Boston Bruins and hated Original Six rival Montreal Canadiens squared off in the first round and the Bruins instantly dropped the first two games on home ice. Defying logic, they won both games in Quebec to even the series. Following the first of Tim Thomas's highlight reel saves this postseason, Boston won Game Five in double overtime and eventually won the series on home ice in Game Seven.

In the second round, the Bruins, who blew a 3-0 series lead to the Flyers last playoffs, put on an offensive clinic and smoked the Flyers in a series sweep.

The Conference Final round again saw the Bruins face some adversity, playing a back-and-forth series with the upstart Tampa Bay Lightning before taking Game Seven on home ice by a 1-0 score.

As for the Vancouver Canucks, they nearly became the second team in as many years to blow a 3-0 series lead as the Chicago Blackhawks threw everything including the kitchen sink at them to force a Game Seven in Vancouver. Vancouver would kill off an early penalty in overtime and win the game on home ice to dispatch their playoff nemesis.

The Canucks faced a stiff test in the Nashville Predators, with all but one game of the six ending in a one-goal differential. The Canucks won the series 4-2.

After the San Jose Sharks had been pushed to a Game Seven by the Detroit Red Wings by blowing their own 3-0 lead, the Sharks looked out of gas and outclassed by the Canucks, losing the series in five games.

Three Keys to The Stanley Cup Finals Series

1. Special Teams

The Boston Bruins are sporting the third worst powerplay percentage in the 10-11 playoffs. They are just 5-for-61 (8.2%). To compound their powerplay failures, their penalty killers have allowed 13 goals in 18 games.

The Vancouver Canucks powerplay is the complete opposite. The Canucks are averaging just shy of one PPG per game (17 in 18 GP) and clicking at a 28.3% clip. They have had their own penalty killing struggles, just slightly better percentage-wise than the Bruins at 80.6%.

Boston will absolutely have to stay disciplined in this series.

2. Zdeno Chara v. the Sedin Twins

Hockey games are a chess match. The home team gets the last line change, so they have the opportunity to get the matchups that they want. Even with that, Henrik and Daniel Sedin are going to see a lot of Zdeno Chara and Dennis Seidenberg in this series. The Sedins are world-class players and their ability to succeed in the offensive zone is incredible.

I look for the Bruins to use Chara and Seidenberg to play physical against the Sedins. This can get them in to trouble because the Sedins are very quick and intelligent, able to exploit out-of-position defensemen. At times this postseason, Henrik has looked dinged up, especially in the defensive zone. If they can attack him early, they can somewhat neutralize him.

That said, this is a tough matchup for Chara and Seidenberg. Overall, the entire Bruins defense is at a disadvantage. Vancouver will be the fastest team they have played and a fast, but less skilled, Tampa Bay team took Boston to the brink.

3. Faceoffs

Casual hockey fans will underestimate the importance of faceoffs. In this series, they will be magnified even further. Faceoffs give you puck possession. Both of these teams are successful in the offensive zone when they establish possession. Neither of them are particularly deadly in transition.

Entering this series, Boston is the third-best faceoff team in the playoffs, winning 52.3% of their draws. Vancouver is sixth at 50.4%, however a good portion of their faceoffs have been won by one guy, Ryan Kesler. But, Manny Malhotra has been cleared to play for the Canucks and he is a perennial top-ten faceoff guy.

To top it off, because of the speed advantage for Vancouver, Boston will need to keep their shifts shorter. To do this, you slow the flow of the game down and force whistles to stop play. When you stop play, you are banking on your center winning the faceoff. If Boston wants to upset the flow of the game, they have to win faceoffs early on in the series.

Prediction and Thoughts

On paper, and based on what I have seen this postseason, this series looks a mismatch that will be lucky to go six games. The Canucks have looked downright dominant at times while the Bruins have really struggled to put together consistent efforts except for the Philadelphia series. More importantly, Vancouver's players have given a good effort on almost every shift while some of Boston's guys have been lackadaisical and sluggish. If Boston takes a shift off, they will get scored on.

Coaching will be another key to this series. Claude Julien, bench boss for the Bruins, and Alain Vigneault, bench boss for the Canucks, have never been past the second round. From a leadership standpoint, both teams are fairly even, though the Bruins have Mark Recchi, a veteran of nearly 2000 games and two-time Stanley Cup winner.

Prediction: Canucks in 6. I always hope for whoever wins the Cup to do it at home in front of their home fans, but in this case, I'll cover myself and say Canucks in six because I'm not sure it's as short as five or as long as seven. The Canucks just have too much firepower. The Bruins have not played a team as talented as Chicago or as good as San Jose. Vancouver beat both of them. Roberto Luongo is playing well and the Canucks have a much better powerplay. I also believe that Zdeno Chara has looked tired and I question his agility to keep up with the speedy Vancouver forwards. He's the key to this series for Boston.

No matter how long it goes, Vancouver will be the first to accomplish Mission 16W.