



Just one series remains undecided as of Wednesday morning as the NHL comes to terms with the fact that the Western Conference Final series is pretty much their worst-case scenario while desperately rooting for the New York Rangers in Game Six against Washington. That, and a quick Columbus Blue Jackets update, in this week's regularly scheduled playoff update.

The Western Conference of the NHL can be counted on for perennially having one of the best regular season races in all of sport. Usually, there are 12 or more capable teams vying for eight spots, separated by mere points, and fighting for home ice as a division champion. Ironically, the most-contested division, the Pacific Division, where the top three teams finished with 97, 96, and 95 points, respectively, is the home of the two Western Conference finalists.

Many people believe that teams can ride a hot goaltender through the NHL playoffs. That is exactly what the Phoenix Coyotes and Los Angeles Kings are doing. Mike Smith (PHX) and Jonathan Quick (LA) have been playing on another level since day one and both are poised to play for the Stanley Cup for the first time.

While that may sound like a great story, NHL and TV execs have to be disappointed with the end result in the Western half of the bracket this postseason. Except for the weekends, every game in the series will start at 10 pm, with two teams that nobody in Canada will care about and nobody on the East Coast will stay up to watch. On one hand, there is a silver lining with the enormous Los Angeles TV market in play, but the Lakers are also still alive in the NBA playoffs

and, well, it's hockey.

Detroit, Chicago, and San Jose, the three most recognizable teams in the Western Conference, were eliminated in the first round. The Kings swept the St. Louis Blues and the Coyotes bounced the Nashville Predators in five short games. Hockey purists and goaltending fanatics will love the matchup, but there probably aren't many of those willing to stay up until nearly one a.m. Not to mention, this is the kind of series that could feature a marathon overtime game.

Here's a quick (pun intended) synopsis of the series:

### **#3 Phoenix Coyotes v. #8 Los Angeles Kings**

Not many people would consider Phoenix a hockeytown. Attendance during the regular season has been sparse, to put it kindly. When the playoffs roll around, Phoenix becomes a hockeytown. With all of the ownership headaches and the team playing under a cloud of uncertainty almost every season, the Coyotes' playoff run serves as payback for the fans who stuck it out through thick and thin. Hopefully, the exposure and success entices a reputable buyer for the franchise.

The Kings mowed right through the two best teams, standings-wise, in the Western Conference en route to their date in the desert. With an 8-1 record this postseason and media headlines abound, Jonathan Quick is on the fast track to being mentioned among the game's elite goaltenders. Hollywood's hockey team has gotten contributions from plenty of players along the way and an extremely consistent effort from 2010 U.S. Olympian Dustin Brown.

**How the Coyotes can win:** Slow down the juggernaut. The Kings are 5-0 on the road this postseason. Phoenix, just like their series with Chicago, is outmatched in this series on the talent front. Mike Smith has to outplay Jonathan Quick and the best way to do that is to defend home ice in the first two games and put the pressure on LA. Phoenix did that against Nashville scoring nine goals in the process, but then managed just three goals in the final three games of the series.

**How the Kings can win:** Be more than a name. Mike Richards and Jeff Carter both have their name on the Stanley Cup. Dustin Brown, Anze Kopitar, and Drew Doughty do not. Those three players do not want to be viewed like Joe Thornton, the Sharks world-class center who doesn't rise to the occasion in April and May. As reference above, the Kings have the talent and the superstars that the Coyotes do not. Those players need to make an impact.

**Deciding factor:** Lucky bounces. This projects to be a low scoring series with a lot of one-goal games. The Coyotes have benefited from the luck factor, going 5-2 in one-goal games this postseason. With both goaltenders playing extremely well, goals will be hard to come by and be the "garbage" variety. A bounce one way or another could very easily decide this series.

**Prediction:** Kings in 6. They're destiny's team. They've rolled right through the best of the West and have barely broken a sweat doing it. They have the talent edge and look like the better team on paper. We'll see how they respond to being in the favorite's role and possibly some adversity for the first time in the playoffs, but they are on a mission.

In the East, the Rangers took a 3-2 series edge over the Washington Capitals in Game Five with some late heroics, tying the game with 6.6 seconds left and winning in overtime. The New Jersey Devils sent the Philadelphia Flyers to the golf course with a five-game series triumph. Now, the Devils await their next opponent. With Game Six on Wednesday night and Game Seven on Saturday, it won't be long until the final four is set.

Without knowing exactly who New Jersey will play, here's a quick look at either matchup.

\* - to be determined

### **#1 New York Rangers v. #6 New Jersey Devils\***

The Devils were in the catbird's seat in Round One, drawing the Florida Panthers whose playoff merits were hotly debated. In Round Two, the Devils got an inconsistent Philadelphia Flyers team that they could expose in all three zones. The Rangers had to battle through two teams that they didn't match up well with speed-wise and now get an opponent that is more on their

level. Two long-time rivals face off in a very familiar matchup, including this [epic line brawl](#) from their March 19 game.

**How the Rangers can win:** Solve Brodeur. Nobody knows Martin Brodeur better than Coach John Tortorella and the New York Rangers. The Devils have done a good job preventing opponents from making Brodeur move laterally thus far and the results have been positive. The Rangers will have a gameplan focused on throwing pucks into his skates and making him use a lot of effort moving post-to-post.

**How the Devils can win:** Ilya Kovalchuk. The prized free agent acquisition has been underwhelming in the playoffs so far and that can't happen against the Rangers. In a series that will see a lot of close games, the Devils need offense from one of their few really talented players. Kovalchuk has to wake up.

**Deciding factor:** Discipline. There's no love lost between these two teams and both teams score a fair amount of their goals on the powerplay. Of the teams remaining, the Devils and Rangers are tops in powerplay success rate.

**Prediction:** Rangers in 7. Signs of Brodeur's age will start to show in this series as the Rangers will get in his crease and disrupt his rhythm. Nearly all of the Rangers are willing to pay a price in front of the net to score goals. The same can't be said about the Devils' previous opponents, Florida and Philadelphia.

### **#6 New Jersey Devils v. #7 Washington Capitals\***

The Devils never imagined having home ice in the Eastern Conference Final with the six seed, but that's exactly what happened as their host the Washington Capitals in Game One. Young meets old as 40-year-old Martin Brodeur squares off against 22-year-old Braden Holtby. These two teams are pretty evenly matched, setting the stage for a long series.

**How the Devils can win:** Martin Brodeur. The Capitals have been an opportunistic bunch in the playoffs, scoring a lot of goals off deflections and strange plays. Those are the kinds of things Martin Brodeur struggles with as his reaction time gets slower with age. Brodeur will have to be focused in this series.

**How the Capitals can win:** Keep playing the “David” role to perfection. The Caps, like the Kings, have knocked off the top two teams in their conference en route to this series. A team that was chastised for a lack of heart during the regular season has shown plenty of it to this point and gets rewarded with a decent matchup in the Conference Final.

**Deciding factor:** The star players. Zach Parise, Ilya Kovalchuk, Alexander Ovechkin, Mike Green. The stars, on paper, cancel each other out in this series but a couple of them really need to carry the load for their team. Both teams are filled with offensively-challenged role players, so the big money guys need to have an impact.

**Prediction:** Devils in 6. Martin Brodeur’s last hurrah continues into a winner-take-all chance to hoist Lord Stanley’s Cup for the final time. The Devils are too disciplined of a team for the Capitals to take advantage.

As for a quick Blue Jackets update...GM Scott Howson probably didn’t expect the LA Kings to roll through the conference’s best when he traded Jeff Carter to them for Jack Johnson and a first-round pick. The Blue Jackets had the option to acquire the 2012 or 2013 selection, depending on where it was. Had the Kings been knocked out of the first two rounds, they would have picked 17<sup>th</sup> in the 2012 NHL Entry Draft. By virtue of making the conference final, the Kings will pick no lower than 27<sup>th</sup>. Howson is forced into taking the 2013 draft pick with the hopes that the Kings don’t reach the Stanley Cup final next season.

Things have been quiet on the Blue Jackets’ front as no transactions can be made with other clubs and final scouting decisions are being looked at. With the second overall pick, the Blue Jackets have far more options now than they did with the number one pick because they

probably would have selected consensus top prospect Nail Yakupov. With the second pick, there is no clear selection and there are quality players available at both forward and defense. It should increase the pick's trade value or give the Blue Jackets more choices when keeping the pick.