

NHL

Expect more upsets and surprises

2020 Stanley Cup projection

By Neil Greenberg
Washington Post

After a qualifying round full of overtime thrills, unlikely comebacks and surprise upsets, the traditional NHL playoffs start today with 16 teams destined to provide more excitement and unpredictability.

The Chicago Blackhawks, ranked 23rd out of 31 teams at the end of the regular season, are still alive along with the Montreal Canadiens, who were 24th and not given much hope of pushing past Pittsburgh and into the first round. The Boston Bruins, winners of this year's Presidents' Trophy, winless in the round-robin games and fell to the No. 4 seed. They will face a Carolina Hurricanes squad that swept past the New York Rangers in three games. The Philadelphia Flyers and Vegas Golden Knights, won all three of their round-robin games, earning them the top seed in their respective conferences. Meanwhile, the Tampa Bay Lightning could be without superstar forward Steven Stamkos and former Norris Trophy winner Victor Hedman for at least the start of their series against the Columbus Blue Jackets.

The NHL has adopted a "seeding" format for this year's postseason. The highest remaining seed in each conference will face the lowest remaining seed, the

second-highest remaining seed in each conference will face the second-lowest remaining seed, etc. Each series will also be a best-of-seven, not a best-of-five seen in the qualifying rounds. In the first round, second round and Conference finals, the higher-seeded team will be designated as the home team in Games 1, 2, 5 and 7. The lower-seeded team will be designated as the home team in Games 3, 4 and 6. In the Stanley Cup Final, the team with the higher regular season points percentage will be designated as the home team in Games 1, 2, 5 and 7.

EASTERN CONFERENCE

(Scotiabank Arena, Toronto)

No. 1 Philadelphia Flyers vs. No. 8 Montreal Canadiens

Carter Hart's second pro season for Philadelphia was a mixed bag. His overall save percentage dropped slightly but he provided the team a much higher rate of quality starts than he did in 2018-19, showing some maturity in net. He, along with Selke finalist Sean Couturier, should be enough to get past the surprising Canadiens.

No. 2 Tampa Bay Lightning vs. No. 7 Columbus Blue Jackets

At full strength, the

Lightning should run away with this. However, concerns over Stamkos and Hedman make this one closer than it might otherwise be. Tampa Bay's second line of Tyler Johnson, Anthony Cirelli and Alex Killorn were on the losing side of scoring chances in the round-robin games and Nikita Kucherov was limited to a goal and assist in the qualifying round.

Columbus, meanwhile, allowed the second-lowest rate of high-danger chances at even strength during the regular season and the lowest rate of the same on the penalty kill.

No. 3 Washington Capitals vs. No. 6 New York Islanders

The Islanders look poised to upset the Capitals in the first round. Washington's defenseman John Carlson, a finalist for the Norris Trophy, did not play in the round-robin after sustaining an injury in an exhibition game against the Carolina Hurricanes. With Carlson and the top unit on the power play, for example, the team scored 7.1 goals per 60 minutes. Without Carlson that dropped to 5.9 goals per 60 minutes. Ovechkin also had no points in three round-robin games.

The Islanders top line of Mathew Barzal, Anders Lee and Jordan Eberle, by comparison, outscored opponents 3-0 at even strength with an edge in scoring chances.

No. 4 Boston Bruins vs. No. 5 Carolina Hurricanes

Only the Vegas Golden Knights generated a higher rate of high-danger chances than Carolina during the regular season and their penalty kill was also one of the top teams in the league at suppressing scoring chances from the opponent's power play.

WESTERN CONFERENCE

(Rogers Place, Edmonton)

No. 1 Vegas Golden Knights vs. No. 8 Chicago Blackhawks

Vegas has depth. Max Pacioretty produced the third-most high-danger chances at even strength during the regular season. Jonathan Marchessault was 15th among forwards for high-danger chances, too. Paul Stastny led the team with six during the qualifying round. Plus, Golden Knights forward Mark Stone is still producing. The 28-year-old scored 63 points in 65 games (21 goals and 42 assists) during the regular season and led the team with five points (two goals, three assists) in the round-robin games.

No. 2 Colorado Avalanche vs. No. 7 Arizona Coyotes

Colorado's center Nathan MacKinnon is a finalist for the Hart Trophy, awarded to the



Andre Ringuette / TNS

Philadelphia's James van Riemsdyk takes a shot on Tampa Bay goaltender Andrei Vasilevskiy under pressure from behind by the Erik Cernak in Toronto on Saturday. The Flyers won, 4-1.

league's most valuable player, after finishing fifth in the NHL with 93 points (35 goals and 58 assists) in 69 games. He also scored three points (one goal and two assists) in three round-robin games.

In addition, goaltenders Philipp Grubauer and Pavel Francouz will provide the Avalanche with a strong presence in net. Grubauer posted a .857 save rate against high-danger chances at even strength during the regular season (fifth-best) and Francouz became the franchise's first netminder since David Aebischer in 2003-04 to finish in the top 10 for save percentage.

No. 3 Dallas Stars vs. No. 6 Calgary Flames

Calgary averaged four goals per game in the qualifying round with 11 different players scoring. Only one of those, Rasmus Andersson, was a defenseman. Goaltender Cam Talbot also emerged for the Flames, stopping 104 of 110 shots faced.

Dallas struggled to create quality chances during the qualifying round while allowing a lot to the opposition.

No. 4 St. Louis Blues vs. No. 5 Vancouver Canucks

The Canucks have the momentum. Vancouver, after dropping its first match up, won the last three games of its series against the Minnesota Wild, including a come-from-behind overtime win in Game 4. St. Louis, on the other hand, lost three games in a row in the round robin.

Calder candidate Quinn Hughes led the Canucks with six points in the opening round. Bo Horvat, Elias Pettersson and Brock Boeser each had four points, with Horvat leading the team in individual high-danger chances produced (five in four games). Vancouver's Jacob Markstrom gave the team three quality starts in four games, stopping 112 of 121 shots faced, including a league-leading 28 of 30 shots originating in the slot or crease.

Kaprizov expected in Twin Cities soon

By Dane Mizutani
St. Paul Pioneer Press

Minnesota Wild general manager Bill Guerin told reporters that top prospect Kirill Kaprizov was expected in the Twin Cities on Monday. The announcement came after weeks of trying to get Kaprizov his U.S. work visa.

"He will have to be in quarantine for a little while when he gets here," Guerin said. "He's going to stick around here for a little while. We will get him acclimated a little bit, just introduce him to Minnesota."

Stops likely will include the Xcel Energy Center, where Kaprizov will play games, TRIA Rink, where Kaprizov will practice ahead of next season, and possibly tourist attractions to showcase life in the Twin Cities.

Maybe the most-hyped prospect in franchise history, Kaprizov signed his entry-level contract last month. He was ineligible to play in the postseason, per league rules, and thus had to burn the first year of his contract — not ideal, but at least Kaprizov is in Minnesota, five years after he was taken in the sec-

ond round of the 2015 entry draft.

Guerin wants reasonable expectations for the rookie heading into next season. There's a good chance Kaprizov isn't the 40-goal scorer everyone wants him to be — not right away, at least.

"We are all hoping and comes in and lights the world on fire," the GM said. "This is also a very good league. It's the best league in the world with the best players in the world, and he hasn't played here yet. There's an adjustment period. We don't want to put the weight of the world on his shoulders."

Mason let go

After expressing his displeasure with the goaltenders this season, Guerin confirmed the Wild have cut ties with longtime goaltending coach Bob Mason, who had been with the organization since 2002.

"He's a wonderful person," Guerin said. "He had an incredible run here."

The Wild will retain assistant coaches Bob Woods and Darby Hendrickson, according to Guerin, and will look to add another assistant coach this offseason.

WILD

From Page 9

"I was disappointed in the goaltending," Guerin said. "It needs to be better, that's just the way it is, and if I said anything different, I'd be lying because it was not a strong point for us."

The stats speak for themselves. Dubnyk was 12-15-2 with a 3.35 goals-against average and .890 save percentage. Stalock had a 20-11-4 record with a 2.67 GAA and .910 save percentage. Neither was up to Guerin's standards, and he didn't rule out looking outside the organization to fix it.

"If I have an opportunity to make it better, I will," he said. "I'm also confident if those guys come back that they're gonna be battling for a spot, and we've got Kaapo Kahkonen pushing them. It just has to be better, flat-out. I can't promise anybody a spot."

Talking to Koivu

From the moment the final horn sounded late Friday, the Mikko Koivu watch went into full effect. His contract has officially expired, and the 37-year-old captain retiring from the NHL is certainly on the table.

Koivu told reporters this week he needs some time to process before making such a big decision. He also needs to talk to Guerin to see if the Wild would even be interested in bringing him back. "You know what, I'm not going to comment on Mikko right now," Guerin said. "We need to talk before I start giving out any answers."

There's no timeline right now.

"I think Mikko needs some time for himself," Guerin said. "He's going to be around here. I'm going to be around here. There's no real rush."

Contract extensions

There are a handful of players on the roster eligible for contract extensions this offseason, notably including rising

star Kevin Fiala, lockdown defenseman Jonas Brodin, gritty winger Marcus Foligno and defense-minded forward Joel Eriksson Ek.

"We'd like to get started," Guerin said. "There are a couple of really important guys that we have to get re-signed."

Buyout candidates

There are Wild players who might fit the mold as possible buyout candidates.

Maybe the most obvious is center Victor Rask, who has completely fallen out of the rotation and carries a \$4 million cap hit until the end of the 2021-22 season. If the Wild decided to buy him out, they would be on the hook for a \$1.33 million cap hit until the end of the 2023-24 season.

"I guess we would use it if we had to," Guerin said. "It's definitely a last resort. To pay somebody to go play somewhere else is not something that I would love to do. Like I said, if we have to do it, we will do it."

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