

It's finally back: Stanley Cup playoffs boasts some homegrown talent

If you think about it, it took a pandemic to bring the Stanley Cup finals back to Canada.

Under these circumstances, it's what no hockey fan in this country ever imagined. Let alone, to play the playoffs at the beginning of August.

Around this time last year, King City's Alex Pietrangelo and Aurora's Robert Thomas were celebrating their time with beloved Lord Stanley's Cup. Now, the St. Louis Blues teammates will be competing in the 24-team playoff bracket for another shot at the sport's greatest prize.

In the Western Conference, the Blues will play the Colorado Avalanche, Vegas Golden Knights and Dallas Stars once each to determine who gets the top seed in the west.

In the Eastern Conference, the Boston Bruins, Tampa Bay Lightning, Washington Capitals and the Philadelphia Flyers will do the same to determine the top four seeds in the east.

While these eight teams anxiously await their unforeseen opponents, the rest of the 16 teams will be participating in their play-in series in a best of five games.

In the west, the Edmonton Oilers kick off their home-ice defence against the Chicago Blackhawks, the Nashville Predators take on the Arizona Coyotes, the Vancouver Canucks go up against the Minnesota Wild, and the Calgary Flames take on the Winnipeg Jets in an all-Canadian matchup.

In the east, the Toronto Maple Leafs defend Scotiabank Arena against the Columbus Blue Jackets, the Montreal Canadiens take on the Pittsburgh Penguins, the Carolina Hurricanes take on the New York Rangers and the Florida Panthers take on the pesky New York Islanders.

The Auroran broke down each Canadian matchup and predicted who will emerge from the best of five series.

Toronto Maple Leafs vs. Columbus Blue Jackets

The Columbus Blue Jackets had the Toronto Maple Leafs' number in their last matchup. Gustav Nyquist scored the overtime winner back in December in a 4-3 victory in Scotiabank arena.

This time, it's a whole different game. Maple Leafs head coach Sheldon Keefe has some history with Blue Jackets head coach John Tortorella. Keefe was drafted by the Tampa Bay Lightning in 1999 and never found a place on the roster when Tortorella took over the team.

How the Leafs will do it will be on the backbone of their big-four; John Tavares, William Nylander, Auston Matthews and Mitchell Marner.

But that won't be all what the Leafs will need. The Buds will need secondary scoring, outstanding goaltending from Frederick Andersen and arguably the x-factor in this one will be the special teams.

The Leafs ranked 6th in the league in power play percentage, tallying 45 power play goals on 195 opportunities (23.1 per cent). That is much better than Columbus (rank 27) at 16.4 per cent.

Prediction: Leafs in 5.

Pittsburgh Penguins vs Montreal Canadiens

The Montreal Canadiens will muddle with some of the league's top stars in this five-game bout.

The Habs will be up against veterans Sidney Crosby, Evgeni Malkin, Kris Letang and newly-acquired Penguins forward Jason Zucker from the Minnesota Wild earlier this year.

Should the Penguins see Omaha, Nebraska native Jake Guentzel return to the lineup after suffering a season ending shoulder injury back in December, the Penguins will be looking to redeem themselves after being swept in last year's playoffs against the New York Islanders.

It will be a lot of work for Carey Price, Shea Weber, Max Domi and company. However, if the Habs upset the Penguins, this wouldn't be the first time. In 2010, the eighth-seed Canadiens upset the President's Trophy-winning Washington Capitals in the first round before upsetting the Pittsburgh Penguins in the second round. The Habs made it to the Eastern Conference finals that year, losing to the Philadelphia Flyers.

With the number one overall pick Alexis Lafreniere up for grabs, the Habs could increase their chances of securing that number one overall pick should they lose to Pittsburgh.

Prediction: Penguins in five.

Vancouver Canucks vs Minnesota Wild

The Vancouver Canucks finished one point ahead of the Minnesota Wild in the standings this year. The Canucks ended the year off with 78 points to the Wild's 77.

It will be a thriller between two teams almost evenly matched in points. The Canucks will have a very healthy lineup heading into the playoffs, with their goaltender Jacob Markstrom back in the mix.

J.T Miller (72 points) and Elias Pettersson (66 points) will be at the fore for the Canucks offence along with Bo Horvat, Brock Boeser and newly acquired forward from the Los Angeles Kings Tyler Toffoli.

The most interesting matchup is both teams' defence cores. Rookie Quinn Hughes has been on fire with 53 points this season while Alexander Edler and Tyler Myers will be tough to get by.

But, the Wild have a defence core arguably as strong, if not stronger, with veteran Ryan Suter (47 points on the year), Jared Spurgeon, Matt Dumba and Jonas Brodin. Kevin Fiala has caught fire and with other veterans such as Eric Staal and Zach Parise, the Wild won't be a walk in the park.

Prediction: Canucks in 5.

Edmonton Oilers vs Chicago Blackhawks

It's the old versus the new.

The Oilers have arguably the greatest tandem in the NHL with Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl. Draisaitl led the league with 110 points and is up for MVP while McDavid was second on the team with 97.

The two can lead the Oilers past a dynamic Chicago Blackhawks team. The former Stanley Cup champions will be going up against

the Oilers in their own house with Patrick Kane leading the way with captain Jonathan Toews, Dominik Kubalik and Alex De Brincat.

This round may not be in the Blackhawks' favour as the Oilers might be hungrier defending home territory.

Prediction: Oilers in four.

Calgary Flames vs Winnipeg Jets

In the all-Canadian matchup, the Winnipeg Jets and the Calgary Flames have had no shortage of drama this year.

The Flames have dealt with plenty of inconsistencies since the beginning and the firing of former coach Bill Peters in November has surely left a sour taste in all of their mouths.

The Flames entered the playoffs with a 3-2 record in their last five games. Johnny Gaudreau, Sean Monahan and Matthew Tkachuk will have to be at the top of their game.

The Jets, on the other hand, have had to deal with the absence of their number one defenceman Dustin Byfuglien. The 35-year-old took indefinite leave last September and is now an unrestricted free agent.

With the strength of the Jets offence with Kyle Connor, Blake Wheeler and Mark Scheifele leading the way and Vezina trophy finalist Connor Hellebuyck on the back end, the Jets should pull through.

Prediction: Jets in four.

The Stanley Cup playoffs kick off this Saturday, August 1, with the New York Rangers taking on the Carolina Hurricanes at 12 p.m.

By Robert Belardi**Opinion**