

That Time of Year Again

Written by Jeff Angus

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The flowers are out, the birds are chirping, and the beers are being chilled. Playoff hockey is every hockey fan's favourite time of the year. Can't beat watching multiple hockey games a night, hanging with your friends and enjoying a cold one. This year in the West looks to be potentially the best hockey since the Vancouver Canucks improbable run during the 1994 Stanley Cup. From Nashville right through to Calgary, every team looks to have a shot at earning the title of Western Conference Champion. Let's break down each team – four this week and four next – and certain players to keep a close eye on for your playoff pools.

We'll start off with some fantasy advice. Don't pick a few guys from every team. You will never win your pool that way. You have to go hard at the teams you think will win. Often times the third liners on cup winning teams outscore the top guns of teams that are ousted in the first or second round.

This week I will cover Vancouver, Calgary (sorry Colorado fans), San Jose and Minnesota.

Vancouver:

This team goes as Roberto Luongo goes, that should be obvious to everyone. He is the best goaltender on the planet and has the ability to steal a game, a series, and potentially more. The Canucks are in the top 10 in goals for since Christmas, after a horrible start offensively. The twins, Henrik who sits fourth in league assists, and Daniel, who is first in scoring for Western left-wingers, carry this offense. Two players who really step up come playoff time are Brendan Morrison and Matt Cooke, so their value goes up in terms of playoff pools. Markus Naslund has been a huge disappointment, but many feel he will be able to turn it around come playoff time.

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I'm not so optimistic. Vancouver also possesses one of the best defenses in the West, with a stellar top four – Ohlund, Salo, Mitchell, and Biekse. They will form two elite shutdown pairings, with Krajicek and Sopel on the bottom pairing. Vancouver will win a lot of one goal games in the postseason – they lead the NHL in both one goal games and one goal wins – because of clutch goaltending and team defense. A **dark horse** to keep an eye on is Ryan Kesler. He is slated to come back mid-first round, and his speed and tenacity will provide a huge boost to the leagues best PK.

Calgary:

Calgary is a team that is hard to get a read on. After a strong start, they faltered in January and February, but have recently picked it up again. Like Vancouver, they rely heavily on their stud goaltender, Miikka Kiprusoff. Calgary also possesses one of the best offenses in the West – boy that felt weird typing. Kristian Huselius has added a ton of skill to that team, as has the addition of Alex Tanguay. We all know what Iginla is like come playoff time. Daymond Langkow is in there too; he is my pick for Selke winner this season. The Flames also have a solid defense, but one prone to careless blunders and mistakes. Which team will show up in the playoffs, the offensively talented physical team, or the sloppy, disinterested team? Definite **dark horse** is Langkow. He plays playoff hockey basically every night for Calgary at both ends of the ice.

San Jose:

San Jose has a scary good offense on paper, one that will give opponents fits. They are also one of the bigger teams up front, so they also possess the potential to punish opposing defenses. They still don't have a definite starting goaltender, but it looks like Nabokov might get the nod. I won't bother posting about Thornton in the postseason, to me his play last spring affirmed he can play in this environment. Patrick Marleau is one of the better playoff performers around, and has the potential to offensively dominate a series. San Jose is a very young team on defense, and that might eventually be their undoing against a more experienced team. It will be interesting to see how San Jose chooses to assemble their menacing group of forwards, as the line combinations are endless. Jonathan Cheechoo is also getting hot at the right time, providing them with a bona fide sniper. **Dark horse** is Craig Rivet. He has provided the Sharks with a much-needed right shot for their PP, as well as a strong veteran presence for the rookies to look up to.

Minnesota:

The Wild are my pick for the cup right now, but they are not without their own question marks. Many wonder how first year sensation Niklas Backstrom will hold up under the extreme pressures of playoff hockey. Backstrom has been very good in the majority of his starts after stealing the starting job from Manny Fernandez. On the backend, the Wild have a very unassuming group of defensemen. They are all mobile players, and can move the puck well – a key for any Jacques Lemaire team. Brent Burns has been great this season, he has really developed a nasty edge and is using his size and skating to his advantage. Up front, Marian Gaborik is arguably the most explosive player in the West, and inarguably the fastest. He presents a match up problem for any team besides Anaheim, as his speed coming up the middle is scary. The Wild possess a wealth of fast, smart checking players who thrive in playoff hockey, like Wes Walz (**dark horse**). Brian Rolston has developed into an elite two-way winger

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with a howitzer that haunts goalies league wide. The Wild are going to rely on strong team play and a dazzling Gaborik to carry them far this year.