While I have been picking the winners at a close-to 70 percent clip all season, it is very important for my summer well-being to close out the final two Saturdays of the season just as strong. Intensity each team will put forth due to their playoff picture is a key factor in late season games. Teams already secure in the playoffs and their seed will not be as hungry as a team fighting for their playoff lives. Teams that have been eliminated on the other side of the coin, have players fighting for jobs next season. Intensity is a motivating factor in my late season picks and should be in yours as well. Good luck with your picks, but in all honesty, just mirror my Saturday selections below if you want a happy and winning Easter of hockey prognostication.

Atlanta at Pittsburgh 1:00 PM EDT

The Thrashers – with only 4 games left in the season are only 2 points back of 3 teams for the final spot in the Eastern playoff picture. Although Atlanta is 6-3-1 in their last 10, they are struggling lately by letting 7 of their last 12 points slip away in losses to Boston, Toronto, Carolina and Washington. Two of Atlanta's final 4 games are against Pittsburgh – a team they have already lost to in both of their games this season. Chris Chelios has played 5 games for the Thrashers down the stretch with no success as they are 0-5 with the 48-year old in the lineup. In goal, with Hedberg and Pavelec splitting duties recently, let's look at the career numbers for both goalies against the Pens.

Hedberg is 1-2 with a 3.45 GAA and an .862 SV%. Yikes! Pavalec is 0-4 and sports a 5.22 GAA and a dismal .843 SV%. Not good! The Pens are struggling lately as well and in their last 11 games have gone 4-4-3. Pittsburgh is playing their 4th game of a season long 6 game homestand. Malkin has missed his last 5 games with a bruised foot (probably heel) and has always targeted this afternoon game as his possible return date. We will see. The Thrashers haven't had many mid-day games this season, but don't seem to mind them as they are 3-1-2 before dinner. The Pens are very familiar with early games going 7-4-3 overall, this after starting the year 0-3. As motivated as Atlanta will be in this game, Pittsburgh should be able to match the Thrashers intensity as the Pens are trying to win their division.

Pittsburgh by 2 or more – Home plus Win – H+ (ProLine)

Ottawa at NY Islanders 2:00 PM EDT

Ottawa will be a dangerous 4th or 5th seed if they can roll into the playoffs as hot as they are right now. Winners of their last 6 games, Ottawa plays the Isles, Panthers, Lightning and the Sabres to close out their season. While it is unlikely the Sens can catch the Sabres for the division title, the last game of the year against the Slugs may mean something as far as the division title goes. It is very realistic that the Sens can go 4-0 in their final 4 games, that would mean Ottawa would be 10-0 entering the post-season and 25-8-1 in their last 34. A first round matchup against New Jersey or Pittsburgh is not ideal for Sens fans, but the confidence going in would make an exciting series. Back to this game, (why do I get side-tracked so often with the Sens?) The Sens can sweep the 4 game season series against the Isles by taking this game. Ottawa has won all three games by one goal in every possible way – regulation, OT and a shootout. Can they finally win big? Leclaire may start in goal as Elliott has done everything that has been asked of him and clinched a playoff berth for the Sens in his last game. The Islanders are all but mathematically eliminated from post season contention, but due to the intensity factor I talked about in my introduction, they have been playing some inspired hockey recently going 6-3-2 in their last 11 and have played spoiler to the Devils, Canucks, Flames and the Flyers most recently. Long Island is on fire at home and have won seven of its last 11 and three of four overall at Nassau VM Coliseum. The Sens don't mind afternoon games as they are 5-3-1 on the year while the Isles could do without them as they are 4-7 after lunch. This is crazy – 41 of the Islanders 77 games have been decided by only one goal. Another 8 have had an empty-netter scored to make the game decided by more than one goal. They have the most one goal outcomes in the NHL. I think Ottawa can win this by 2 or more, but Leclaire may start for Ottawa so I am going to play it safe.

Ottawa – Visitor Win – V (ProLine)

Nashville at Detroit 2:00 PM EDT

Over the last 10 games, these two teams have the best records in the NHL. When facing each other though, Nashville has lost 4 of 5 against Detroit this season. The Preds only win was in the first meeting of the season. Since that victory, Nashville has been outscored by the Wings by a combined score of 13-6 in the four losses. Keeping Nashville in the post-season picture has been the goaltending of Pekka Rinne. Rinne is 8-2-1 with a 1.51 GAA in his last 11 starts overall. Joe Louis Arena hasn't bothered him either as he has 2 victories there in his short career. On the other side of the ice, Jimmy Howard has Vezina-type numbers against the Preds this season. Howard is 3-0 with a 1.30 goals-against average. His last game was a 33 save 1-0 shutout victory over Nashville on March 27th. This is a tough game to call. Both offenses are rolling, both defences are keeping things on lock-down and both goalies are in a zone. Each team is safe in the playoff picture and can't really make up any ground on the teams above them. Intensity should be at the same level. Everything about this game is screaming extra

time.

Detroit – Home Win – H (ProLine)

Boston at Toronto 7:00 PM EDT

Boston has won 3 of 5 this season against Toronto. In the season series, the home team has won all 5 games. Both Bruins goalies have great career numbers against Toronto; Thomas sports a 14-4 record, even though his GAA is 2.98 and Rask is 3-1 with a more respectable 2.01 GAA and a nice .938 SV%. Boston has a good record on Saturdays this season as they are 10-5-5. Toronto is roughly the same at 9-10-2, but the Leafs have won their last 5 Saturday nights. Intensity factor: equal. Boston needs points to stay in the playoff picture and they want to keep Toronto sitting in 29th spot to solidify one of Hall, Seguin or Fowler thanks to these same Leafs. Toronto has a team full of players trying to prove they are actually NHL calibre. This is another tough game to call.

Toronto – Home win – H (ProLine)

Buffalo at Montreal 7:00 PM EDT

The Sabres are 4-0-1 against Montreal this season with their lone loss coming on opening night in a shootout in Buffalo. Ryan Miller should be up for the Hart Trophy after winning MVP at the Olympics as well. Buffalo would like to clinch the division title over Ottawa as soon as they can so they can rest some of their aches and pains before the playoffs. A win here, all but guarantees that. Miller has great career numbers against the Habs going 17-5-5 with a 2.43 GAA and .917 SV%. Montreal will be playing back-to-back games and also their 3rd contest in 4 nights after playing in Philly on Friday night. Halak started that game against the Flyers and I think he may start Saturday as well in this game. Price was booed throughout his last home start even though he played well and was a star selection of the game. “Oh, lay, oh lay, o ley o ley”, or whatever the heck the fans say in Montreal. The Habs are fighting for a playoff spot with

4 other teams at the bottom of the East playoff picture and their intensity level should be a bit higher than Buffalo's, - who has lots of time the secure the Northeast division. Montreal's fatigue should not be a factor, but Buffalo is the much better team.

Buffalo – Visitor Win – V (ProLine)

New Jersey at Carolina 7:00 PM EDT

In this 4 game season series, the Devils have a 2 games to 1 lead. The home team has won every game. New Jersey won the first two, Carolina won the last one. The Devils don't seem to

want to grab hold of the Atlantic division, but they are hanging in because neither does Pittsburgh. Parise is being held back as all Lemaire coached players are and he (as all others have been as well) will fall victim to Lemaire never having an 85 point player. Kovalchuk, who was on pace with Atlanta to break 85 points, is now under that pace as well. Too funny. Carolina is hot and has been for awhile, they are playing for the future. The Canes are 5-3-2 in their last 10 and were 9-2-1 before that. Add those 2 streaks together you have a 14-5-3 team recently. That record over 82 games amounts to close to 120 points.

New Jersey in a shootout – Tie – T (ProLine)