

DAVE MOLINARI'S SCOUTING REPORT:

THE EAST

The veteran Post-Gazette hockey writer breaks down each of the first-round series in the Eastern Conference (with conference seeding):



RANGERS (1) VS. SENATORS (8)

Season Series:

Senators, 3-1

Schedule

April 12 at NY, 7:00

April 14 at NY, 7:00

April 16 at Ott, 7:30

April 18 at Ott, 7:30

April 20* at NY, 7:00

April 23* at Ott, TBD

April 26* at NY, TBD

* - if necessary

Streaking: Rangers RW Marian Gaborik had six goals, four assists in final eight regular-season games, while C Brad Richards had one goal, eight assists in same span. Senators RW Daniel Alfredsson scored five goals in last six games and C Jason Spezza put up five in final seven.

Difference-makers: New York's Henrik Lundqvist is favorite to win Vezina Trophy as the top goalie, but RW Ryan Callahan provides Rangers' heartbeat. Spezza is one of league's top talents, and Sergei Gonchar will be counted on to stabilize a Senators defense that figures to be under heavy pressure.

Special teams: Ottawa's power play owns a significant edge (18.2 to 15.7 percent),

but Rangers have advantage in penalty kill, 86.2 to 81.6.

Intangibles: Rangers owner James Dolan said a few months ago that his team is "pretty close" to winning a Stanley Cup. Not to set the bar high, or anything. Ottawa started the season in rebuilding mode, anything Senators achieve now is a bonus.

Who will win: Rangers in five.



BRUINS (2) VS. CAPITALS (7)

Season Series:

Capitals, 3-1

Schedule

April 12 at Bos, 7:00

April 14 at Bos, 3:00

April 16 at Was, 7:30

April 19 at Was, 7:30

April 21* at Bos, 3:00

April 22* at Was, TBD

April 25* at Bos, TBD

* - if necessary

Streaking: Bruins goaltender Tim Thomas ended regular season on 6-1-1 roll, and C David Krejci had three goals, six assists in last seven games. Capitals LW Alex Ovechkin scored 12 times in final 16 games; RW Alexander Semin had two goals and three assists in last four.

Difference-makers: Bruins C Patrice Bergeron, a front-runner for the Selke Trophy, is one of hockey's top two-way forwards. Getting C Nicklas Backstrom back after he missed 40 games (concussion) is huge for Washington, especially since Ovechkin had a strong finish.

Special teams: Washington's power play, which had lackluster 16.7 percent conversion rate, should get boost from Backstrom's return. It

certainly won't hurt against Bruins' penalty-kill, which is a bit better than average.

Intangibles: Boston is trying to become first Cup champion to repeat since Detroit in '98. The Capitals have made habit of losing to lower-seeded teams in play-offs; going in as No. 7 seed should allow them to take low-stress, nothing-to-lose approach.

Who will win: Bruins in six.



PANTHERS (3) VS. DEVILS (6)

Season Series:

Tied, 2-2

Schedule

April 13 at Fla, 7:00

April 15 at Fla, 7:30

April 17 at NJ, 7:00

April 19 at NJ, 7:00

April 21* at Fla, 6:30

April 24* at NJ, TBD

April 26* at Fla, TBD

* - if necessary

Streaking: Panthers RW Kris Versteeg has one goal, four assists in past five games after going scoreless in previous eight and D Brian Campbell had nine assists in final 13. The entire New Jersey team, however, is on a major roll, having won its last six regular-season games, and LW Ilya Kovalchuk registered seven goals in the final nine.

Difference-makers: Panthers C Stephen Weiss finally has reached the playoffs after appearing in 637 regular-season games, and that alone could inspire his teammates. Although Kovalchuk has just nine playoff games on his resume and is largely untested in postseason, he has proven that he can be a game-breaker.

Special teams: Florida has solid power play, but Panthers are vulnerable when they are down a man. New Jersey not only had the NHL's most efficient penalty-killing, but also led it with 15 short-handed goals. Of course, the Devils also gave up league-high 13 short-handed goals.

Intangibles: Devils coach Pete DeBoer was fired in Florida a couple of years ago, so he surely will take this series personally. The rebuilt Panthers exceeded all expectations by winning the Southeast Division and won't be under any particular pressure to succeed in the playoffs.

Who will win: Devils in five.