

THE WEST

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



CANUCKS (1)
vs.
KINGS (8)

Season Series:
Tied, 2-2

Schedule

April 11 at Van, 10:30
April 13 at Van, 10:00
April 15 at LA, 10:30
April 18 at LA, 10:00
April 22* at Van, TBD
April 24* at LA, TBD
April 26* at Van, TBD

* - if necessary

Streaking: Canucks C Henrik Sedin has one goal, seven assists in past five games, but C Ryan Kesler has gone 12 games without a goal. Kings C Mike Richards finished regular season with a five-game points streak. Kings C Anze Kopitar had points in five consecutive games before he was shut out in the regular-season finale.

Difference-makers: The Sedin brothers, Henrik and Daniel, have made life miserable for Vancouver's opponents for years. The only real flaw in Kings G Jonathan Quick's game is that, good as he is at preventing goals, he doesn't score any. Same has been true of many teammates.

Special teams: Both teams have quality penalty-killing units, but the Canucks' power play is decidedly more productive.

Intangibles: Vancouver should be highly motivated after coming within one victory of a Cup last spring. Kings had to finish strong just to qualify and should be able to play relaxed.

Who will win: Canucks in six.



BLUES (2)
vs.
SHARKS (7)

Season Series:
Blues, 4-0

Schedule

April 12 at StL, 7:30
April 14 at StL, 7:30
April 16 at SJ, 10:00
April 19 at SJ, 10:30
April 21* at StL, 7:30
April 23* at SJ, TBD
April 25* at StL, TBD

* - if necessary

Streaking: Blues LW David Perron had five goals in past six games. San Jose LW Patrick Marleau and RWs Joe Pavelski and Martin Havlat finished regular season with points in four consecutive games.

Difference-makers: David Backes of St. Louis is a good two-way center, and goaltending tandem of Brian Elliott and Jaroslav Halak developed into the NHL's best this season. San Jose's Joe Thornton, one of league's best centers, has yet to live up to his enormous potential in playoffs.

Special teams: San Jose's power play is excellent, but its penalty-killing is awful. St. Louis, conversely, is very good when down a man, but nothing special with

an extra one.

Intangibles: The Blues staged remarkable turnaround after Ken Hitchcock took over as coach and play defense-oriented style conducive to success in the playoffs. San Jose has been the Western Conference's answer to Washington, always finding way to get upset in playoffs.

Who will win: Blues in six.



COYOTES (3)
vs.
B'HAWKS (6)

Season Series:
Coyotes, 3-1

Schedule

April 12 at Pho, 10:00
April 14 at Pho, 10:00
April 17 at Chi, 9:00
April 19 at Chi, 8:00
April 21* at Pho, 10:00
April 23* at Chi, TBD
April 25* at Pho, TBD

* - if necessary

Streaking: Coyotes goaltender Mike Smith gave up just two goals in the final 16 periods of regular season. Chicago LW Patrick Sharp accumulated three goals and two assists in past five games, but RW Marian Hossa didn't get a goal in final eight.

Difference-makers: Phoenix RW Radim Vrbata scores goals that count — he tied Steven Stamkos for the NHL lead with 12 winners — and Smith is coming off Vezina-caliber season. Blackhawks C Jonathan Toews missed final quarter of the regular season (concussion), but is an excellent leader and better player.

Special teams: Although Phoenix has worst power play of any playoff team, it kills penalties well. Chicago can send out an imposing power play, but scored on just nine of its final 99 chances with man-advantage, and its penalty-killing is surprisingly weak.

Intangibles: Phoenix has the higher seed, but the Blackhawks, just two years removed from a Cup, will be the ones facing intense scrutiny.

Who will win: Blackhawks in six.



PREDATORS (4)
vs.
RED WINGS (5)

Season Series:
Tied, 3-3

Schedule

April 11 at Nas, 8:00
April 13 at Nas, 7:30
April 15 at Det, 12:00
April 17 at Det, 7:30
April 20* at Nas, 8:00
April 22* at Det, TBD
April 24* at Nas, TBD

* - if necessary

Streaking: Detroit can't be happy that C Valtteri Filppula failed to get a goal in his final 11 games, but Predators LW Sergei Kostitsyn countered that by not scoring in his last 14.

Difference-makers: Shea Weber and Ryan Suter lead Nashville defense corps that produced league-leading 47 goals in regular season. Detroit's lineup is liberally sprinkled with veterans who can alter the pace and course of a game, from Pavel Datsyuk to Henrik Zetterberg, Johan Franzen to Nicklas Lidstrom.

Special teams: Nashville owns top-ranked power play, with a conversion rate of 21.6 percent, and allowed just six goals in past 61 short-handed situations.

Both of Red Wings' specialty units placed in the bottom half of league rankings.

Intangibles: Nashville has won just one series in franchise history and must earn the confidence that comes with playoff success. Detroit's wealth of playoff experience could be invaluable, even though Red Wings' mystique seems bit less imposing than it has been in previous years.

Who will win: Predators in seven.