The city of Cleveland right in the middle of the Stanley Cup Finals? That's right. Two of our closest NHL neighbors, the Pittsburgh Penguins and the Detroit Red Wings will meet starting Saturday to decide who gets to hoist Lord Stanley's Cup as this year's NHL champion. Many Clevelanders have ties or an allegiance to one of these two teams, and we called on TCF hockey guru Adam Burke to break it all down for us.

If I told you that Cleveland would be right in the middle of the National Hockey League Stanley Cup Finals, would you look at me like I was crazy? Perhaps you would look at me like I was on a severe bender, after drinking so much Great Lakes Christmas Ale and Jack Daniels, that functioning was impossible and that incoherent babble was the only vocabulary I had. Clearly, we do not have an NHL franchise. But, if you grew up watching hockey like I did, we Northeast Ohioans were forced to choose between two cities that we abhor in present times.

I'll admit it. As a kid, growing up in the 90s, I was a Detroit Red Wings fan. I never made it to a game, but I had a customized winged wheel jersey with my name and favorite number. I walked into Joe Louis Arena one day when my mother decided it was a good day to go sightseeing in Detroit (I guess a new gun ban was in effect?). I celebrated their 1997 and 1998 Stanley Cup championships. I felt sadness over the tragic accident that paralyzed defenseman Vladimir Konstantinov, just days after the Wings won the Cup. As some might remember, Konstantinov was at the top of his game after the 96-97 season, finishing second in the Norris Trophy voting.

Meanwhile, some of my older friends grew up watching Super Mario Lemieux and the Pittsburgh Penguins. Lemieux transformed Pittsburgh into a hockey town after being drafted in 1984. The city's hockey team was in shambles, averaging 7,000 spectators a night. Lemieux scored on his first shift, on his first shot, and for the

first time, in all Pittsburgh hockey fans' hearts. Other accolades by Mario include being the only player in NHL history to score five goals in all five ways in one game (powerplay, short-handed, penalty shot, even strength, and empty net).

While I was a stumbling four-year-old, pretending I was Candy Maldonado while hitting a wiffle ball off a tee in the front yard, Mario Lemieux was leading the Penguins to their first Stanley Cup. Lemieux's Penguins would win back to back Stanley Cups in 1991 and 1992, effectively ending the Edmonton Oilers three cups in four years dynasty.

So, how are we in the middle, you may ask. Outside of being almost the geographical midpoint (Detroit and Pittsburgh are 280 miles apart, Cleveland is 160 from Detroit and 130 from Pittsburgh), many hockey fans in this area had to choose between the two teams growing up because it was before the Columbus Blue Jackets. Now, the team of your childhood may be hoisting Lord Stanley's Cup, the oldest professional sports trophy in North America.

The Pittsburgh Penguins come in after steamrolling the Philadelphia Flyers 6-0 to end their Eastern Conference Final series with a 4-1 triumph. These are no longer Lemieux's Penguins on the ice. Though he is part of the ownership group that controls the team and has helped to organize a project to build a new arena, the team belongs to Captain Sidney Crosby. Sid the Kid and his supporting cast have romped through the postseason, losing only two games out of their 14. Crosby only has four goals, but has assisted on 17, making him the playoff leader with 21 points. The Penguins have three of the five top scorers in the playoffs (Malkin 19, Hossa 19, and Crosby).

In the first round, Pittsburgh took care of the banged up Ottawa Senators in a compact four-game sweep where they won each game by at least two goals. The Penguins were also pretty much untested in the second round, losing only game four to the New York Rangers in a 4-1 series victory, winning game five in overtime.

The Penguins are looking for their first Stanley Cup win since 1992 and have a fresh group of faces leading them there. Marc-Andre Fleury has been magnificent in net, reeling off a 12-2 record with a 1.70 goals against average. Aided by some good defense and a great transition offense, Fleury has three shutouts to lead all playoff goaltenders.

The Detroit Red Wings gave their fans a scare in the Western Conference Finals taking Dallas to six games after leading the series 3-0. They punched their ticket in game six, dominating the Stars on their rink en route to a 4-1 win and a 4-2 series victory. Pavel Datsyuk and Henrik Zetterberg are the story on offense, both with double digit assists and nine and 11 goals, respectively. Johan Franzen, out for nearly the entire Dallas series with concussion-like symptoms, still leads all scorers with 12 goals.

Chris Osgood has been brilliant in net. He has only faced 22 shots a game on average, thanks to, arguably, the best defensive corps in the game. Nicklas Lidstrom leads that group with a +9 rating. Zetterberg and Datysuk lead the playoffs in +/- with a +15 and a +12. Back to Ozzie, who is 10-2 with a 1.60 GAA so far in these playoffs. Osgood took the reins from Dominik Hasek in the opening round series and has never relinquished the job.

The Red Wings are looking for their first Stanley Cup win since 2002. None of the top four scorers from that Red Wings team wear the winged wheel any longer, and two (Brett Hull and Steve Yzerman) are out of the game completely. A handful of Wings from that previous cup team are on the current team, along with several other battle tested playoff veterans.

What to watch for in this series

Here are some of my keys to the series and storylines to watch for:

1. Sidney Crosby v. Nicklas Lidstrom: Perhaps the best two players at their respective position with get the chance to go head to head against each other in

this series. Crosby's faced a much tougher physical game from other teams, but the highly intelligent Lidstrom will not play an overly physical game with the young phenom. Lidstrom is exceptionally crafty and is the best one on one defensemen, both in the corners and while entering the zone. Crosby will have to be quicker and much more agile than Lidstrom to get the best of him, and that will be a very tough task.

2. Mike Babcock v. Michel Therrien: Let the mind games begin between these two bench bosses. Mike Babcock and Michel Therrien have both experienced the playoffs, Babcock with more success at the NHL level. Babcock and his Anaheim Mighty Ducks advanced to the Stanley Cup Finals on the back of Jean-Sebastien Giguere and lost in a fantastic seven game series to the New Jersey Devils. Babcock lost in the Conference Finals last year to the eventual champion Mighty Ducks. Michel Therrien has never been past the second round as an NHL coach, losing last year in the first round to Ottawa and in 2003 with the Canadiens to the Carolina Hurricanes.

One of the advantages to home ice, outside of the support of the fans, is that the home team gets the last line change. This is crucially important. First, the home team gets the line matchups that they want. For example, Pavel Datsyuk's line matched up with Pittsburgh's worst defense pairing is a huge advantage. Another benefit is that teams will have to change on-the-fly while the game is going to avoid mismatches. Changing on-the-fly can become very risky, and especially in the playoffs.

3. Marc-Andre Fleury v. Pavel Datsyuk and Henrik Zetterberg: Fleury will without question have to be the best player in the series for Pittsburgh to win it. He is going to have to steal a game early on in Detroit to give Pittsburgh a real shot.

4. Staying out of the penalty box: Both teams come in to this series having scored 16 powerplay goals. Nearly 30% of both teams' goals have come with the man advantage. Both teams also come in with the exact same percentage of killing penalties, 87.3%.

5. Faceoff circle domination: Detroit has won 130 more faceoffs than the Penguins, which comes out to almost 10% more. Detroit's 55.7% winning percentage could be an enormous factor in this series. Faceoffs help to control momentum, dominate the offensive zone, and win key defensive zone battles.

6. Postseason experience: The Red Wings, as a team, have 1,978 postseason games under their belt. The Penguins have 934, only 19 a piece for Crosby, Malkin, Whitney, and the like. In net, a difference of 187 games between the two teams could strongly factor into this series.

The stats appear equally dominant. Pittsburgh motored through a much weaker conference than Detroit, however. For Pittsburgh to win this series, they will have to shut down Datysuk and Zetterberg, and that will have to start with netminder Marc-Andre Fleury. For Detroit to win this series, they will have to continue what they have been doing. Play suffocating defense, frustrate Crosby and Malkin, and cut off the cycling of highly skilled players like Hossa, Crosby, and Malkin. Detroit is a team that masterfully creates offense from defense, and this series will feature more of the same.

Despite the numbers, this is a bit of a David vs. Goliath matchup. Both teams are extremely talented but Detroit is a much more balanced team and much more experienced. Youthful exuberance may carry Pittsburgh deep into the series, but they are going to rely on players who have never been this far at the NHL level.

With the support of a hockey hungry city, desperately begging for Lord Stanley's Cup to return, Pittsburgh will be tough to beat on home ice. The only problem with that might be coming home down 2-0 to a superior opponent.

For me, I am going to go with my childhood favorite, the Detroit Red Wings in seven games. Pittsburgh's going to will their way to taking this deep, despite being overmatched in nearly every facet of the game. Faceoffs will prove crucial, and if Michel Therrien can outfox Mike Babcock, Pittsburgh should have no problem taking care of business at home. Overall, Detroit's just too powerful.

Series schedule:

1. Sat, May 24 - at Det, 8:00 pm EDT (VS.)
2. Mon, May 26 - at Det, 8:00 pm EDT (VS.)
3. Wed, May 28 - at Pit, 8:00 pm EDT (NBC)
4. Sat, May 31 - at Pit, 8:00 pm EDT (NBC)

*5. Mon, Jun 2 - at Det, 8:00 pm EDT (NBC)

*6. Wed, Jun 4 - at Pit, 8:00 pm EDT (NBC)

*7. Sat, Jun 7 - at Det, 8:00 pm EDT (NBC)

For others who are not that interested in hockey, these are two top notch teams. It is going to be an incredibly exciting series, with lots of athleticism, and boatloads of talent. This won't be the kind of series that has a marathon overtime game, but it will be end to end, non-stop action. Without question, it is a series that I recommend all hockey fans and casual sports fans to enjoy.

I would like to take the time to thank those who have read my columns and enjoyed them. Hopefully, I have helped to educate some of you on the game and some of its players. A big thank you goes out to Rich Swerbinsky for the opportunity to cover hockey for TheClevelandFan.com and for running the pieces despite a lack of interest in hockey. I'd also like to thank my fellow contributors to the site. Without all of you, there would be no place for my columns on the site and everybody, top to bottom, does an excellent job! Barring any huge news stories that dominate in mid-late June, I hope to be bringing you a detailed NHL Entry Draft preview, and then I will quietly go off into the sunset until coming out

with a season preview in late September.

Enjoy the Stanley Cup Finals!