Usually, the NHL playoffs are celebrated for multiple-overtime thrillers, heroic comebacks from game or series deficits, and moments that could not be scripted.

Unfortunately, this year's postseason has been marred by questionable hits and even more questionable rulings. There has been one multi-OT game, San Jose had a 4-0 comeback in Game 3, and the Phoenix Coyotes' faithful gave a rousing send off to their franchise which appears poised to move to the Great White North.

Overshadowing all of that has been a series of suspendable offenses and criticism toward the NHL and its dedication to player safety. Referees have been put in tough spots, not wanting to be the guy who misses a major penalty call or decides the outcome of a game based on his ruling. The playoffs have sauntered onward, but the NHL's disciplinary policies are cloudier than ever. I will break down each series individually, including the plays in question from that series.

Eastern Conference

#1 Washington leads #8 New York Rangers 3-1

On Wednesday night, this series gave us our first multiple overtime game with an odd bounce deciding the game on Jason Chimera's game winning goal. So far, this series has been everything you could want in an NHL playoff series. Three games decided by one goal, with two of them going to OT. The other decided in a 2-0 Capitals victory. Great goaltending and mind games have directed this series, including Bruce Boudreau's calling out of the Madison Square Garden crowd.

The Capitals go on home ice on Saturday on NBC to look to finish off the Rangers.

#2 Philadelphia and #7 Buffalo tied at 2.

On Wednesday night, Ryan Miller recorded his second shutout of the series to send it back to the City of Brotherly Love knotted at two. In Miller's two losses, he has allowed nine goals.

In last night's game, uber-pest Patrick Kaleta took this five-minute major elbow from Philadelphia captain Mike Richards.

http://www.youtube.com/embed/_FS3xMoEFJU" frameborder="0" allowfullscreen>

In no way, shape or form is this a five minute major penalty. Kaleta is known as a dirty player,

and Richards was going to protect himself against a hit from behind. Getting the elbow up is worthy of a two minute minor, but there is zero malicious intent with this play.

Later in the game, Kaleta did what he does best.

http://www.youtube.com/embed/O-MC9ZBn7eE" frameborder="0" allowfullscreen>

This is a suspendable offense and the NHL needs to seriously look at this. It is a highly dangerous play that has no place in the NHL. Quite frankly, it's pathetic.

#6 Montreal leads #3 Boston 2-1.

The Bruins woke up in Game Three, after playing poorly on home ice and being stifled by Canadiens goaltender Carey Price. Game Four on Thursday night will be pivotal for both teams. Montreal does not want to have to win another game in Boston, while Boston has no desire to go home down 3-1.

So far, this series has been kept pretty clean, especially considering the Max Pacioretty-Zdeno Chara incident from a month or so ago. Chara was admitted to the hospital for dehydration following Game One. His health and ability to play is paramount to the Bruins success because their defensemen are serviceable, but not great without Chara.

#4 Pittsburgh leads #5 Tampa Bay 3-1.

The train keeps rolling despite the losses of Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin.

The big stories, however, from this series came from Game Three. Two reckless and careless plays resulted in suspensions. Steve Downie delivered this hit to the Penguins defenseman Ben Lovejoy.

http://www.youtube.com/embed/yKM9s230HiE" frameborder="0" allowfullscreen>

Downie received a one-game suspension. Downie, as a member of the Philadelphia Flyers threw this preseason hit a few years ago on Dean McAmmond. He got 20 games for that one. Both hits are very similar. He left his feet prior to the point of contact. Because Pittsburgh scored on the delayed penalty, no penalty was assessed.

Earlier in the game, however, Chris Kunitz delievered this blatant elbow to the head of Simon Gagne.

http://www.youtube.com/embed/ZMFITMESvVc" frameborder="0" allowfullscreen>

Gagne, a player with a history of concussion problems, has played with no ill effects. Kunitz was also suspended a game. A completely avoidable play by Kunitz, and one that should have been punished stricter.

Western Conference

#1 Vancouver leads #8 Chicago 3-1.

Vancouver dominated both games at home and continued right on in to the Windy City taking Game Three. Playing without a real sense of urgency, they got bombed in Game Four. The series heads back to Vancouver on Thursday night and the Blackhawks will have to let it all hang out again if they want to get the city back to Illinois.

This series could have taken a very ugly turn in Game Three following this Raffi Torres blindside hit on Chicago's Brent Seabrook.

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The purpose of hitting a player is to separate him from the puck. Brent Seabrook was not in possession of the puck. In and of itself, that is a penalty, and was called interference. To me, the biggest issue lies in the recklessness of Torres and the lack of respect between players.

Should Brent Seabrook have been better prepared for getting hit? Absolutely. But, you also do not expect a guy to completely blindside you while you don't even have the puck. Torres was not suspended for this play and I think that's indefensible. The NHL had a chance to send a message. Seabrook spent part of the 2nd period in the dark room after that hit for fear of a possible concussion. If the NHL wants to get serious on blindside hits, shoulder-to-head contact, and concussion safety, I don't see it. This was a chance to send a clear, direct message to the players. The league failed.

#2 San Jose leads #7 Los Angeles 2-1.

The Kings had a terrific chance to take a 2-1 lead in the series and put themselves in the driver's seat. They led 4-0 early in the second period against the Sharks in their first playoff game on home ice. By the end of the second period, the game was tied at five. By the end of four minutes of overtime, San Jose won 6-5.

That game will probably serve as the backbreaker for Los Angeles, who played 80 minutes of outstanding hockey between Game Two and the first period of Game Three. Now, they have to look to what little veteran leadership they have to dig deep and tie the series.

#3 Detroit sweeps #6 Phoenix 4-0.

A bad way for the Coyotes to go out and begin packing the equipment trucks for Winnipeg. While nothing is set fully in stone, popular opinion and common sense has the Coyotes being renamed the Jets and playing in Manitoba. The sale of the Coyotes has fallen through several times and the league is running out of options.

Simply outmatched, the Coyotes fell 6-3 in the deciding Game Four and the Red Wings are moving on. None of the games were really in doubt and the Red Wings will now get to rest while waiting on the other series to end.

#4 Anaheim and #5 Nashville tied at 2.

In the series that nobody is talking about, the Ducks and Preds are tied at two, with each team winning a road game. These two teams are very evenly matched despite their contrasting

styles. Again, however, a suspension has overshadowed this series.

Anaheim's Bobby Ryan, while trying to loosen the puck, stomped on the ankle of Nashville defenseman Jonathon Blum.

http://www.youtube.com/embed/r7MEmL6EqOs" frameborder="0" allowfullscreen>

The NHL did the right thing here and immediately suspended Ryan for two games. There can be no doubt that when skates are involved, any misuse of them will be punishable. The league succeeded here and should be commended for that.

Regardless of the suspensions and the other questionable plays, the NHL playoffs still are one of the most exciting postseasons in all of sports because of the speed, the passion, and the thrilling overtime games. Plays like the ones in this column should not deter casual observers from watching the game. These are outliers. They are not representative of the sport. However, where the league failed to condemn some of these plays, the reaction of the fans has.

Enjoy the rest of the first round.