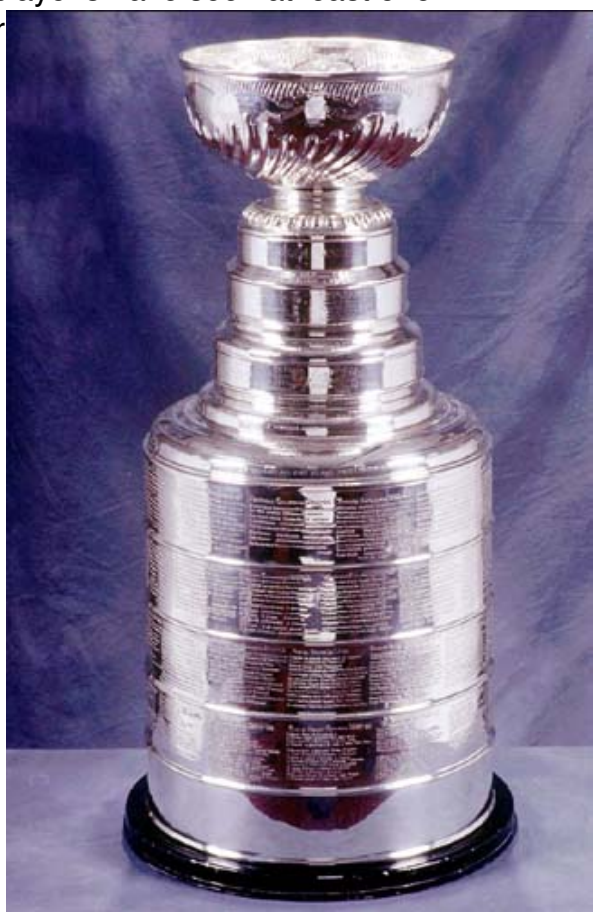
After one whopping day without an overtime game, the NHL playoffs have seen at least one game go to OT on every day of the semifinal round. After four



consecutive nights of all the games being decided in regulation, April 15-18, every night of the NHL postseason has featured a heart-pounding overtime game, usually with the series at a crucial point. There has yet to be a game requiring a third overtime, but it looks like only a matter of time.

Amazingly, one team is already booking tee times, while two others are on the brink of doing so. The semifinal round tends to be the round of surprises, and this year's postseason is no different. Players are creating niches as big game performers and others are part of their team's perennial April/May choke job.

Eastern Conference

#5 Tampa Bay sweeps #1 Washington 4-0.

Bruce Boudreau has never seen so many f'in guys look so f'in down . (highly NSFW video – language) The Capitals, regular season juggernaut, and playoff choke artist, were swept by the upstart Tampa Bay Lightning, who have picked one hell of a time to rattle off a seven-game winning streak. The Bolts entered the series having clawed back from a 3-1 deficit against the Penguins. This series comes as a real surprise to me, not so much the rest of the media because they expect this sort of playoff performance from the Caps.

I honestly thought TB would be out of gas. It was an emotional comeback with a 40-year-old goaltender. But, the train kept right on rolling and it rolls in to the Eastern Conference final. Never underestimate the power of playing regularly. The Caps had time off in between series. It hurt them because they played two lackluster games at home to open the series.

For the Capitals, this could signify huge changes. The team lacks leadership in the locker room and Bruce Boudreau appears to be an overmatched coach in the playoffs. The fact is, the team, as constructed, simply is not good enough. Their forward group is solid, but the defense group is lacking in mobility and veteran presence. Goaltending is an altogether different issue. It will be a different Washington Capitals team come October.

#3 Boston leads #2 Philadelphia 3-0.

Déjà vu for the Bruins. They also led this series 3-0 last year. The difference this year? Philly will not magically find a goaltender by Game Four that will get them back in the series. Philadelphia has used everybody but a fan from the stands in net and none of them have had any luck. Not all of it has been their fault, as the Flyers have looked uninspired and frustrated in this Eastern Conference semi.

After Boston got rolling in the Montreal series, they looked poised to go on a run. Tim Thomas was playing at the top of his game, role players were having big games, and the solidly put together defense unit was strong. Hard to expect them to go up 3-0 again against the Flyers, but this is hardly a shock.

Injuries have been a big factor. The Flyers best offensive player, Jeff Carter, has been out since Game Four of the Buffalo series. Former Norris Trophy winner Chris Pronger has missed significant time. Losing two of your top players is a difficult pill for any team to swallow, especially one with severe deficiencies in net. The Flyers, as a result, have allowed 15 goals in three games.

Western Conference

#1 Vancouver leads #5 Nashville 2-1.

In what has easily been the best series of this round, the Canucks and Predators have played back-to-back double overtime games and the games have ended in 1-0, 2-1, and 3-2 scores. Pekka Rinne and Roberto Luongo have both been terrific in the series, a series which has seen stretches of domination from both teams. Nashville outshot the Canucks by almost 20 through regulation in Game Two, while the tables turned on Nashville in Game Three when they allowed 40 shots in regulation.

While the Canucks have only scored one more goal in the series than Nashville, they have easily appeared the more dangerous team. I predicted the Predators in 7 in my semifinal preview, but with just four goals in three games, I find myself wondering if they can score enough to win this series.

Their powerplay has been pathetic, going 0-for-12. Vancouver won on a very questionable powerplay thanks to a lame call on Predator defenseman Shea Weber. A savvy play by Kesler to lock the stick in under his arm because once it goes parallel to the ice, it looks like a hook. The hit at the beginning of the clip on Kevin Bieksa was a blown boarding call. So, now, the Weber play looks like a makeup call. The old “two wrongs don’t make a right” adage applies here.

Anyway, with Game Four in Nashville on Thursday night, Vancouver can vice grip the series or it can become a three-game war.

#2 San Jose leads #3 Detroit 3-0.

San Jose got the playoff choker label off their backs last year against Detroit and has carried the momentum over. As I said in last week's piece, home ice is critical because of the matchup advantage. San Jose exploited that to jump out to a 2-0 series lead and then won Game Three in overtime on the strength of a Devin Setoguchi hat trick.

In another series with every game decided by one goal and two of three going to overtime, the parity and comparability of the teams in the Western Conference is staggering. Both goaltenders have faced a lot of shots through three games and it is surprising that Antti Niemi has outshined Jimmy Howard. The depth of the Sharks is wreaking havoc on Detroit because the Sharks team speed is far superior to that of Detroit's.

Everything except the shots in Game One has been relatively even in this series. The faceoffs have been close, the shot totals have been close, and all the games have been close. This epitomizes how one little play can dramatically alter any playoff game. There may be no better tournament in sports right now than the NHL's Western Conference Playoffs.