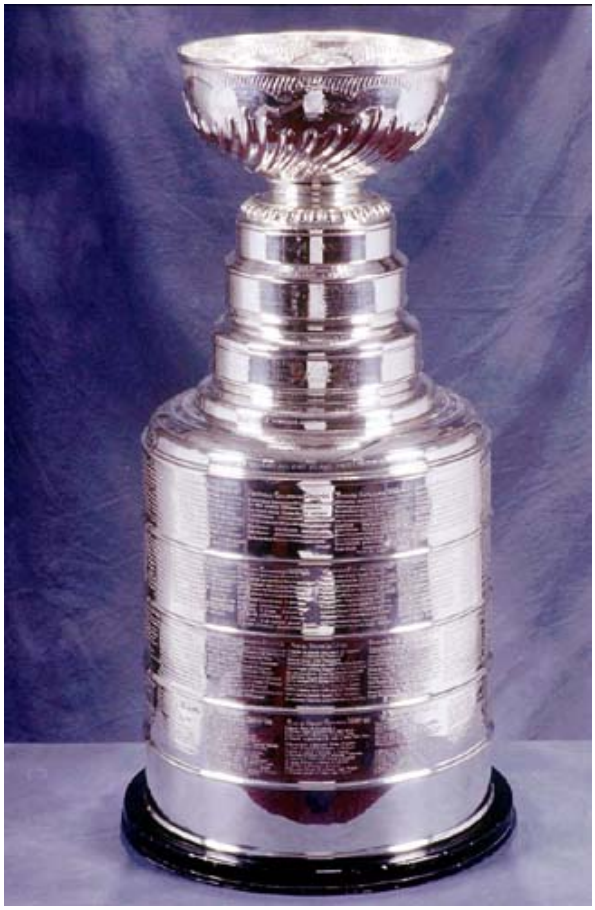

Game Seven. All the marbles. Win or go home. All of the other overused clichés to describe Game Sevens. Fact is, there are few better moments in all of sport than a Game Seven. In this case, Tampa Bay and Boston will play to see who gets to face the Vancouver Canucks in the Stanley Cup Finals. The same thing that makes March Madness great, the fact that every single game is win or go home for both teams, is being seen in the NHL Playoff Conference Finals for the first time since 2006.

Guy Boucher's gamble worked. He gave struggling goaltender Dwayne Roloson the night off in Game Five after being pulled twice in the series. Mike Smith played admirably in the loss, but the game gave Roloson a chance to re-energize and recharge. He played iffy in Game Six, but the team in front of him came to play with their backs against the wall. Now, they travel to Boston for the winner-take-all game on Friday night.

The Stanley Cup Finals will begin Wednesday in Vancouver regardless of who wins Game Seven of the Eastern Conference Final. Travel will be a big factor in the series with two exceptionally long plane trips whether to the Sunshine State or New England. But, more on that Tuesday in my Stanley Cup Final preview.

**#1 Vancouver defeats #2 San Jose 4-1.**

Vancouver was just too good. Quite simply, they dictated the pace of almost every game and their overall speed advantage was too much for San Jose's defense to handle. Couple that with Luongo playing well and San Jose being very undisciplined in the first two games of the series and you have a series result that is easy to believe.

In all actuality, San Jose had to be burnt out after their series with Detroit, much like I thought Vancouver would be after their collapse against Chicago. The difference being that San Jose's collapse came later in the playoffs and guys are simply wearing down late in the year. The NHL season is the definition of a grind. Eighty-two games and then realistically, somewhere between 25-30 in the playoffs to win the Stanley Cup. It takes 16 wins to secure a championship in the NHL. So far, Vancouver is 12-6, half of those losses coming in the opening round.

Heroes are made in the playoffs. This year's hero just happens to be an impending free agent. Bowling Green alum and Canucks defenseman Kevin Bieksa is not known for his scoring prowess. But his big offensive series against the Sharks, and overall excellent postseason, has likely earned him between $500,000-$750,000 more per season in his next contract than he would have gotten had he had a marginal playoff run. People expected the Sedins to be good, as well as Ryan Kesler and Roberto Luongo. It's those unexpected contributions that grab the headlines though. Bieksa has done that.

**Boston v. Tampa Bay Game 7 Preview**

Tampa Bay has been one of the best road teams of the NHL Playoffs, going 6-3 away from home. Boston dropped the first game of the series at home and has won their two home games since. Tim Thomas is going to be the key to Game Seven for the Bruins. At home in the playoffs, he is 6-3 with a 2.20 GAA and a .929 SV%. In this series, he has shown a lot of vulnerability and has had a very tough time giving the team a boost from key saves while shorthanded. Therefore, Tampa Bay's powerplay is the key to Game Seven for them. The Lightning are 10-for-38 on the powerplay on the road in the playoffs. They've drawn 38 PPs in nine road games. If that trend continues in to Friday night's game, their powerplay may decide the outcome. Conversely, Boston's PP is 5-for-61 in the playoffs.

Continuing with that same theme, Tampa Bay has allowed a phenomenal two powerplay goals in 50 shorthanded situations on the road in the playoffs. Generally, in Game Sevens, the referees tend to let a little more go in order to let the players decide the game. Depending on how this game is approached, and with the emphasis on Tampa's excellent special teams and Boston's terrible ones, it will be interesting to see how the game plays out.

**Atlanta Relocation Status**

Many news outlets, TSN at the front of the pack, are still reporting that the deal is not officially done to send Atlanta to Winnipeg. With each passing day, however, interest to keep the team in Atlanta seems to be waning. The chief investment groups in ATL seem to be taking a backseat to the proceedings. The closer we get to the 2011-2012 regular season, the more likely that Winnipeg would have to stay in Atlanta's spot in the Eastern Conference Southeast Division.

While it would create an inconvenient situation for the teams in the SE Division, once the schedule comes out, it would be a logistics nightmare to move around games. There may be contingency schedules in progress under different scenarios (ie, ATL to WPG and Nashville to the SE Division, and then Minnesota to the Central), but with so many hypotheticals, it is hard to ascertain what options the league has other than to make Winnipeg play in a division with Florida, Tampa, Carolina, and Washington.

Last year's schedule was released on May 28. I would expect a similar timeline, unless they are waiting for the ATL/WPG negotiations to finish, perhaps pushing them along to expedite the process.

Either way, the entire situation is like watching *Titanic* or any romantic comedy. The outcome is either a historical event that is no secret or a foregone conclusion. You just have to suffer through the drudgery before getting to the end. The sooner the financials are in place between True North, the WPG-based investors, and the NHL, the sooner the NHL can move on and try to make hockey work in a more traditional, but financially-strapped location.