Seven months of hard work has come down to an intense two-month postseason that will decide which team captain is presented with Lord Stanley's Cup after securing win number 16. The NHL playoffs are must-see TV on a nightly basis. The pace of the game picks up. The atmosphere in every arena is incredible. Every player, fan, and coach holds their breath with each puck thrown towards the net. The champions will have their names etched on one the rings of the Stanley Cup, forever immortalized with names of greats like Gretzky, Lemieux, Howe, and Orr.

No other sport's playoff is as fast-paced and exciting as the NHL's. Even the most casual fan will stay up and watch a 10 p.m. west coast playoff game despite having to be up at 6:30 for work. Unlikely heroes are crowned and the game's greatest either shine in the limelight or fall off the stage.

Just like every other year, this season's playoff matchups are full of intrigue. There may not have been a more highly anticipated playoff series over the last decade than the Pittsburgh-Philadelphia venom-filled matchup. This may be the final run for Hall of Fame goaltender Martin Brodeur. Will this year be the first real big speed bump for the Detroit Red Wings and their aging roster? Could 2012 be the year that the Vancouver Canucks finally get over the hump and win their first Stanley Cup in franchise history? Will the Boston Bruins, who have flown under the radar much of the season, repeat as Stanley Cup champion?

The playoffs begin on Wednesday night with games played every night, likely through April 26. The Stanley Cup playoffs will end sometime in June after a champ has been crowned.

Here's a look at the eight series of the first round of the 2012 Stanley Cup playoffs.

Eastern Conference

#1 New York Rangers v. #8 Ottawa Senators

(Season series: New York 1-2-1; Ottawa 3-1)

The Ottawa Senators were hanging around in the race for the Northeast Division title for the majority of the season, but ultimately fell short as injuries, specifically at the goaltender position, led to their fall to eighth in the Eastern Conference. The Rangers bobbed and weaved their way through some rough patches and had built enough of a lead to hold off the surging Pittsburgh Penguins through late March and the final week in April. The Rangers' 51 regular season wins put them in a three-way tie with Pittsburgh and Vancouver for the most wins in the NHL.

How the Rangers can win: The Rangers have to do what they do best – play defense and get good goaltending. The Senators are a very gifted offensive team but gave up 240 goals. Opportunities will come for the Rangers offensively and they have a huge advantage in net, but the Sens are a fast, deep team with good veteran leadership and role players.

How the Senators can win: Keep the pressure up. The Senators won't win 2-1 or 3-2 games very often against the Rangers. Their best hope for success is to try and fire 35 shots on Henrik Lundqvist and hope that Craig Anderson can play like he did in the 2010 playoffs with Colorado. Anderson, in the first round against San Jose, had a 2.62 goals against average, but saved 93.3% of the shots taken at him.

Deciding factor: Ottawa must win at home. The Rangers were 27-14 at home. The Senators

were just 20-21 on home ice. The Rangers ended the regular season tied for third in road wins with 24. If Ottawa doesn't protect home ice, this will be a quick series.

Prediction: Rangers in 6. Ottawa has too many holes on defense and in net to keep up with the Rangers. The Rangers got too complacent during the regular season with their big lead, but their real season begins with Game 1.

#2 Boston Bruins v. #7 Washington Capitals

(Season series: Boston 1-2-1; Washington 3-1)

The defending champion Boston Bruins methodically went about their season, winning seven of their final 10 to secure their second straight division title. The Washington Capitals, projected to sleepwalk through the Southeast Division again, had long stretches of uninspired play that required them to fight for their playoff lives for the majority of the season.

How the Bruins can win: Simply play their game. The Bruins, top to bottom, are still probably the most balanced, consistent team in the Eastern Conference. The Capitals are a turnover-prone team without a lot of leadership or heart. Scoring first, which the Bruins did in just 36 games this season, is crucial because the Bruins went 31-5 when they scored first and went 32-0 when they lead after two periods.

How the Capitals can win: Get extraordinary goaltending. The Capitals will get their offensive chances, there's too much talent for that not to happen. However, the other team will get plenty of chances too, and the Bruins have two better goaltenders than anyone the Capitals have. The Capitals will need to get big, momentum-saving (or changing) saves from relative unknown Braden Holtby.

Deciding factor: Goaltending. You have to have it in the playoffs. Braden Holtby is a complete wild card, somewhat like Semyon Varlamov during the Capitals' 2010 Eastern Conference final run. Holtby better be really good because Tim Thomas will elevate his game for the Bruins.

Prediction: Bruins in 5. Like the Rangers, their season begins now. They're too deep and too talented to get slowed down by a Capitals team that went just 16-25 on the road. There are too many weapons and too many leaders for the Capitals to pull an upset.

#3 Florida Panthers v. #6 New Jersey Devils

(Season series: Florida 2-1-1, New Jersey 2-2)

The Panthers could be the most unlikely NHL playoff team in recent memory. With a minus-24 goal differential, the Panthers benefitted from 18 overtime loss points to make the postseason. The Devils have spent the better part of the last two months trying to stay in sixth place in the conference just to get this matchup instead of playing Pittsburgh, Philly, or Boston.

How the Panthers can win: Stay composed. This is an extremely young team. Panthers head coach Peter DeBoer was fired from the Devils last season. Ex-Blackhawks GM Dale Tallon put this Panthers roster together, which features a handful of Blackhawk castoffs, including Kris Versteeg and Brian Campbell. Former Devils goaltender Scott Clemensen will be the starter with an injury to Jose Theodore and he likely has something to prove against Brodeur and the Devils.

How the Devils can win: Take care of business. This is a Panthers team that made the playoffs despite being six games under .500 for the season. The Devils led the league in penalty killing, successfully killing off 89.5% of their shorthanded situations. The Devils have a decided edge in net, even with the aging Martin Brodeur showing signs of wear during the regular season.

Deciding factor: Overtime success. The Panthers, as evidenced by the OTL column in the standings, went to OT a lot. The Panthers played 25 overtime games and the Devils played 22, winning 16. As the best team in the NHL in OT, the Devils have a big edge if there are multiple OT games in this series.

Prediction: Devils in 6. To be honest, it's a joke that the Panthers are a playoff team, let alone a division winner, thanks to the overtime loss point. The Devils are a much stronger team with more firepower and a goaltender motivated to make one final run.

#4 Pittsburgh Penguins v. #5 Philadelphia Flyers

(Season series: Philly 4-2; Pittsburgh 2-4)

These two teams hate each other. A line brawl following the end of the April 1 game between these two teams after a cheap shot cross to Flyers' forward Daniel Briere only fueled the fire of this series, which has been locked in for quite a while. The battle of Pennsylvania will be an all-out war and star players on both teams will be targeted all series long.

How the Penguins can win: Win the skill game. The Penguins played out of this world in February and March before tailing off and failing to catch the Rangers. Both teams have high amounts of talent, but the Penguins talent, namely Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin, has to be better than the Flyers' Claude Giroux and Daniel Briere. Philadelphia will be beaten by skill, not matching toughness or playing the grind game.

How the Flyers can win: Stay disciplined. This series is going to have its share of whacks to the back of the leg and cross checks between the shoulder and elbow pads. The Flyers were shorthanded a league-high 319 times this season. The Penguins penalty kill was third in the league while the Flyers were in the middle of the pack. They cannot give Pittsburgh too many

opportunities with the man advantage.

Deciding factor: Ilya Bryzgalov. This is why the Flyers signed him, to get them over the playoff hump. He must be good for the Flyers to win this series because everyone expects his counterpart, Marc-Andre Fleury, to be good. Bryzgalov has made a habit this season of letting in backbreaking, soft goals. That can't happen in this series.

Prediction: Penguins in 7. This will be a war of attrition that will come down to the final game. The Penguins had the best home record in the East and the Flyers had the second-best road record in the East. Must-see TV at its finest in this series, which could be real mean and nasty.

Western Conference

#1 Vancouver Canucks v. #8 Los Angeles Kings

(Season series: Vancouver 2-1-1, LA 2-2)

Here we go again for the Vancouver Canucks. Another Presidents' Trophy for the most points during the regular season and another number one seed. Entering the playoffs with a chip on their shoulder after losing in seven games to the Boston Bruins in the 2011 Stanley Cup final, the Canucks have plenty of motivation. The Los Angeles Kings failed to win the Pacific Division and lost on the final day of the regular season to San Jose to draw the Canucks in the first round.

How the Canucks can win: Score three goals per game. The Kings have struggled mightily to score all season long. The Canucks have the best depth of any team in the Western Conference and it will be on display in this series. Lucky for Vancouver, they were fighting for the Presidents' Trophy because they won their division by 21 points. Ask the Washington

Capitals how it goes when they coast through the month of March. The Canucks should be ready.

How the Kings can win: Find offense. Outside of goaltender Jonathan Quick doing what he's done all year, the Kings absolutely must find offense. The Kings and the lowly Minnesota Wild are the only two teams to score less than 200 goals this season. Unless the Kings plan on winning every game 1-0 or 2-0, someone has to step up.

Deciding factor: Jeff Carter and Mike Richards. Both players were brought over to the Kings at different times, but reunited in the hopes that they would spark the Kings' offense. It didn't really happen, but they get a shot at redemption now. If those two are good, the Kings could pull an upset. If they're invisible, the Kings might get swept.

Prediction: Canucks in 6. Jonathan Quick will steal a game or two, there's no doubt about that. Roberto Luongo is still a question mark in the playoffs despite last season's good numbers. The Canucks just have too many guys who can score timely goals. The Kings' star players struggle with goal scoring, let alone timely ones.

#2 St. Louis Blues v. #7 San Jose Sharks

(Season series: St. Louis 4-0; SJ 0-4)

The St. Louis Blues gave up a hair above two goals per game this season. They dominated teams on home ice, going 30-11. The Sharks battled through injuries and young, inexperienced depth to get into the playoffs. Considering that the Sharks have been in the playoffs for about three weeks already, fighting every night for one of those coveted eight spots, one has to wonder how much they have left in the tank.

How the Blues can win: Capitalize on mistakes. The Sharks are a turnover-prone team with the second-worst penalty kill in the NHL. The Blues are going to have to cash in on their opportunities and put pressure on the Sharks to have to play catch-up against their defensive style of play.

How the Sharks can win: Score on the powerplay. The Blues aren't going to be winning games 4-3 or 5-2 in this series. Goals will be at a premium. The Sharks had the league's second best powerplay at 21.1%. The Blues gave up only 104 goals during 5-on-5 play this season, so the Sharks can't rely on even strength scoring.

Deciding factor: Inexperience. Both rosters are full of guys without much playoff experience. The big names for the Sharks, like Dan Boyle and Joe Thornton, have been here before. Most of the defensemen for the Blues will be in uncharted territory. Whichever team keeps their emotions in check and plays smart hockey will win the series.

Prediction: Blues in 5. That team will be the Blues. As seen by the regular season series, the Blues match up very well with the Sharks. The Sharks have more talent, but also commit more mistakes and have stretches of games where they aren't committed to their systems. As for the Blues, you don't allow just 165 goals in an entire 82-game season without buying in to what the coach wants.

#3 Phoenix Coyotes v. #6 Chicago Blackhawks

(Season series: Phoenix 3-1; Chicago 1-2-1)

This is one of the more interesting series. The Coyotes got it done down the stretch, going from the ninth or tenth spot in the West to winning the Pacific Division's four-horse race. Without an owner and under a cloud of uncertainty for yet another postseason, the Coyotes want to avoid another first round exit. The Blackhawks navigated through injuries and shaky goaltending to get to where they are.

How the Coyotes can win: Goaltending. Corey Crawford and Ray Emery for the Blackhawks are very flawed goaltenders capable of giving up soft, dispiriting goals. Mike Smith has played out of his mind for a while now and will have to continue to do that against a very talented Blackhawks bunch. The Coyotes can find timely offense if they aren't playing from behind. The Coyotes were 33-10 when scoring first and 31-1 when leading after two periods.

How the Blackhawks can win: Play better at 5-on-5. The Blackhawks scored the third most 5-on-5 goals in the NHL with 172. They also gave up the fourth most with 170, below teams like Columbus and Edmonton. 5-on-5 will be crucial in this series because both teams were near the bottom of the league in times shorthanded.

Deciding factor: Jonathan Toews. Toews has missed the last month with a concussion sustained in a car accident. If Toews is healthy enough to play, this series develops a whole new dynamic. If he isn't, the Coyotes get a watered-down Blackhawks team that may not be able to overcome goaltending deficiencies.

Prediction: Coyotes in 7. The Coyotes should finally get over the hump and make it to the second round. Even if Jonathan Toews plays, his effectiveness is questionable. Goaltending is the name of the game in the playoffs and Chicago's might be the weakest of any team.

#4 Nashville Predators v. #5 Detroit Red Wings

(Season series: Nashville 3-3; Detroit 3-3)

Just like the East, the 4 v. 5 matchup out West comes from within the same division with two teams who are very familiar with each other. For about the last three years running, the Predators are the underdog that nobody wanted to face in the first round. This year's team is no different, except that they're a slight favorite over the Red Wings. The Predators are one of two

teams in the Western Conference that was over .500 on the road this season (22-19).

How the Predators can win: Make it hurt. The Predators have had a playoff reputation of being a very difficult team to play because they grind it out along the boards and in the corners. The Red Wings don't want to do that. If Nashville can establish a forecheck and punish the Red Wings' defensemen, they'll be in for a very long series.

How the Red Wings can win: Speed in transition. The Predators like to forecheck and get dirty. They can rely on Shea Weber and Ryan Suter to negate the opposition's speed through the neutral zone. If the Red Wings can get up and down the ice quickly, the Predators might have to back off the physical play. That would greatly benefit some of Detroit's older, injury-prone guys.

Deciding factor: The Predators offense. While Pekka Rinne is a world-class goaltender, the Red Wings can't be held down for long offensively. There's too much talent. The Predators need to be able to score goals to win this series.

Prediction: Predators in 7. The physical play of the Predators should start to slow down the Red Wings the longer this series goes. Nashville had the league's best powerplay at 21.6% while Detroit's was surprisingly mediocre at 16.1%. If Detroit doesn't score on the powerplay, goals could be hard to come by.

Do yourself a favor and watch some of the 2012 Stanley Cup playoffs. The emotion and ferocity that the players perform with is something special to watch and very few, if any, games disappoint from an entertainment standpoint.