If you're in to intense, edge-of-your-seat, exciting hockey, the 2012 NHL Playoffs have been pretty good. If you're in to cheap shots, overtime games, penalties and suspensions, then you're in love. Thus far, the playoffs have given no shortage of story lines to the media and many of them have been negative. Players have been taking liberties on their opponents, leading to a very high number of suspensions and a lot of criticism.

NHL Dean of Discipline Brendan Shanahan has, by all accounts, been very inconsistent with suspensions so far this season and that trend has continued into the playoffs. Nashville's Shea Weber was not suspended for his Game 1 incident of bashing Detroit's Henrik Zetterberg's head into the glass while Pittsburgh's Arron Asham received four games for a cheap shot cross check on Philadelphia's Brayden Schenn. With nobody quite sure what to expect from the most recent reckless hit, this hit by Phoenix's Raffi Torres on Chicago's Marian Hossa, Shanahan will have to send a message using a repeat offender in Torres, who just returned from a suspension for Game 3 of that series.

Suspension-worthy offenses have really put a damper on the playoffs. Normally, a playoff season with eight overtime games in the first week would be getting rave reviews. Instead, player safety is again at the forefront and some series could be decided by the punishments that have been doled out for illegal hits.

Now, to recap the eight series and what has gone on so far.

**New York Rangers 2 v. Ottawa 1**: This has been a tale of two series through three games. The Rangers dominated the first game, winning 4-2 and quelling some of the concerns about Ottawa's speed and the effect it would have on the Rangers. In Game 2, the most evenly-matched game of the series, the Sens came away with a 3-2 overtime victory in a game where the Rangers lost Ryan Callahan, one of their top players, early in the first period following a dust-up with Ottawa's Matt Carkner. In Game 3, the Senators completely dominated play, even without Captain Daniel Alfredsson. Henrik Lundqvist stole the show for the Rangers making 39 saves in a 1-0 win and temporarily hushing his playoff critics.

Game 4 will be Wednesday night, Game 5 on Saturday, and if necessary, Games 6 and 7 on Sunday and April 26 respectively.

**Boston 2 v. Washington 1:** This series has been the best representation of what fans expect to see with playoff hockey. So far, there have been three very well-played games with both goaltenders shining at various times. All three games have ended with a one-goal difference and one of them went to double overtime. Braden Holtby stole the show in Boston with two outstanding performances earning his team a road split. The Bruins won a seesaw battle in Game 3 on the road and look to take over the series in Game 4 with Washington's Nicklas Backstrom serving a mandatory one-game suspension for taking a match penalty at the tail end of Game 3. The Capitals, and in particular, Alexander Ovechkin, struggled much of the season when Backstrom was out with a concussion.

Game 4 will be Thursday night, Game 5 on Saturday, and, if necessary, Game 6 on Sunday and Game 7 on April 25.

**Florida 2 v. New Jersey 1:** In what was expected to be a low scoring series, the Panthers and Devils have combined for 18 goals in three games and both starting goaltenders, Jose Theodore for the Panthers and Martin Brodeur for the Devils, were replaced in Game 3. The Panthers have been viewed as a team who shouldn't even be in the playoffs and the Devils attempted to prove that by scoring three goals and unleashing an incredible 26 shots in the first period of Game 1. They hung on for the 3-2 win but have lost the last two in the series to face a 2-1 deficit, including blowing a 3-0 lead in Game 3.

Game 4 will be Thursday night, Game 5 on Saturday, and if necessary, Game 6 on April 24 and

Game 7 on April 26.

**Philadelphia 3 v. Pittsburgh 0**: Of all the playoff series I can remember, this one is the worst I have ever seen. Perhaps casual fans have enjoyed the complete lack of defense and ridiculous amount of cheap shots, but color me unimpressed. Neither team has played particularly well in this series, especially the Pittsburgh Penguins, who entered the playoffs are the odds-on favorite to represent the Eastern Conference in the Stanley Cup Finals. Thirty-two goals have been scored in the first three games of the series and the Penguins racked up three suspensions in Game 3, losing James Neal for a blindside, unnecessary hit on Sean Couturier, Arron Asham for the aforementioned cross check on Brayden Schenn, and Craig Adams for losing his mind on Scott Hartnell late in Game 3. This series, while exciting at times, has been a black eye for hockey because of how poorly and undisciplined it has been played.

Game 4 will be Wednesday night, and, if necessary, Games 5, 6, and 7 will be played Friday, Sunday, and April 24 respectively.

**Los Angeles 3 v. Vancouver 0**: In the clear shocker of the 2012 playoffs, the heavily-favored Vancouver Canucks are on the brink of elimination. The LA Kings, who fought like hell just to make the playoffs, have outworked, outplayed, and outcoached the Canucks in the first three games of the series. Kings goaltender Jonathan Quick is cementing his status as the likely Team USA starter in the 2014 Sochi Olympics while Roberto Luongo was replaced by Cory Schneider as the Game 3 starting goaltender. Luongo didn't play bad but Canucks coach Alain Vigneault was looking for any spark he could find. His team responded with a 1-0 loss in Game 3. Despite the 3-0 deficit, this series is far from over.

Game 4 will be Wednesday night, and, if necessary, Games 5, 6, and 7 will be played Sunday, April 24, and April 26 respectively.

**St. Louis 2 v. San Jose 1**: Like the Boston-Washington series, this has been one of the more evenly-matched, well-played series of the first round. After San Jose won Game 1 on the road in double overtime, the Blues have responded by winning Games 2 and 3 and doing so in impressive fashion. Except for the Sharks' late two-goal burst in Game 3, the Blues had allowed one goal in nearly 117 minutes of hockey. That was the recipe for success that got them to where they are. Five of the Blues' nine goals have been scored on the powerplay. The Sharks had the league's second-worst penalty kill and it's been evident so far.

Game 4 will be Thursday night, Game 5 on Saturday, and, if necessary, Game 6 on Monday and Game 7 on April 25.

**Phoenix 2 v. Chicago 1**: If you love overtime playoff hockey, this is the series for you. All three games played to date have gone to overtime, with Phoenix winning one at home and one at the United Center. Coyotes' fans held their collective breath in Game 2 as Andrew Shaw plowed into goaltender Mike Smith behind the net, receiving a 5-minute major, a game misconduct, and a three-game suspension. Smith stayed in the game and won Game 3 as well, despite being a game-time decision. This has been, arguably, the most exciting series and has been one of the best-played. With two contrasting styles going head-to-head on every shift, it makes for great viewing.

Game 4 will be Thursday night, Game 5 on Saturday, and, if necessary, Game 6 on Monday and Game 7 on April 25.

**Nashville 3 v. Detroit 1**: The Red Wings are on the brink of elimination because their home ice advantage was negated as the Predators won both games at Joe Louis Arena in impressive fashion. Neither team has eclipsed three goals in one game so far as this has been a tight-checking series between two Central Division rivals. Casual fans are starting to see what the media and well-informed hockey fans have known for a long time about Pekka Rinne. He's been terrific in the series, stopping 130 of 138 shots in four games, including 40 of 41 in Nashville's critical Game 4 victory. The Predators hold a commanding lead despite going 0-for-10 on the league's best powerplay at home in the first two games. They scored one powerplay goal in each game in Detroit.

Game 5 will be Friday night, and, if necessary, Game 6 on Sunday and Game 7 on April 24.