Some consider it parity. Others consider it a changing of the guard. Some just have no idea what to think. The four teams left standing in the Western Conference don't feature many household names like Kane, Lidstrom, Sedin, or Thornton. The Eastern Conference semifinalists are yet to be determined but you won't hear Crosby or Malkin. Three teams full of well-known names have left their fates in the hands of a winner-take-all Game Seven.

Both the 2010 and 2011 Western Conference representatives in the Stanley Cup Finals, the Blackhawks and the Canucks, were sent home by teams who hadn't won a playoff series in over a decade. Furthermore, for the Blackhawks, they were eliminated by a team who had not won a playoff series since relocating from Winnipeg in 1996. The San Jose Sharks continued their long run of playoff disappointments by losing in five games to the St. Louis Blues. Questions surround the future of the aging Detroit Red Wings, specifically, surefire Hall of Fame defenseman Nicklas Lidstrom after being bounced in five by the Nashville Predators.

Out East, there is still plenty left to be determined as the reigning Stanley Cup champion Boston Bruins will host a Game Seven against the Washington Capitals on Wednesday night. The top-seeded New York Rangers will host Game Seven at Madison Square Garden on Thursday against the pesky Ottawa Senators while the Florida Panthers look to silence the critics in their Game Seven against the New Jersey Devils and Martin Brodeur. Only the Philadelphia Flyers have punched their ticket to the second round by sending the Pittsburgh Penguins packing after six games.

After suspensions galore, the playoffs have calmed down and have become more of what fans expect out of the postseason. Both the Bruins and Devils kept their seasons alive with Game Six overtime triumphs. The Coyotes beat the Blackhawks on the road in the only game of the series not to go to overtime in order to advance to the second round. Good hockey is being played once again and even the Penguins-Flyers series saw some defense being played in the final two games of the series.

If you like defense and goaltending, the Western Conference playoffs will be like sports porn to you. Four of the top six teams in goals against have advanced to the second round. The two lowest, St. Louis and Los Angeles, will square off in one series while Phoenix and Nashville, with two of the best goaltenders so far in the playoffs, will play in the other series. Here's a quick preview of each series.

**#2 St. Louis Blues v. #8 Los Angeles Kings**

The Blues and Kings each took care of business in impressive fashion, winning their respective series in five games. The two teams are very similar to each other in terms of their style of play and could make for an extremely low scoring series. Just like the San Jose series for the Blues, the big names are on the other bench. The Kings will be prone to frustration in the series as scoring chances won't come as easily as they did against Vancouver.

**How the Blues can win**: The Blues will have to neutralize Dustin Brown. The Canucks couldn't stop him and the Kings' captain had a great series. He is the emotional leader of the team and, arguably, their best forward. If the Blues slow him down, the snowball effect will also catch up to Mike Richards, Anze Kopitar, and others. St. Louis will also have to solve Jonathan Quick, who enters the semifinals allowing just eight goals in five games and leading all goalies in save percentage at .953.

**How the Kings can win:** Win board battles. The Blues are a Ken Hitchcock-coached team. They believe in playing physical and grinding out games. The Kings aren't the most physical bunch, but they are one of the most disciplined teams and hardest working in the neutral zone. A lot of this series will be played at center ice and along the boards. It's a change from the style that the Canucks play and the Kings will need to adjust quickly.

**Deciding factor:** Offense. Clearly. Whoever scores will win the series. It sounds like Captain Obvious talking, but the team that can find the back of the net will win. This series could feature a lot of 2-1, 1-0, 3-1 (empty netter) type games.

**Prediction:** Kings in 6. The Kings struggled to score during the season but have had success in the playoffs. The Blues took advantage of a lot of mistakes by the Sharks that the Kings will not make. The Blues have to score opportunistic goals. The Kings have the talent to create more offense.

**#3 Phoenix Coyotes v. #4 Nashville Predators**

The Coyotes were victorious in three-out-of-five overtime games in their series with the Blackhawks and rolled to a 4-0 shutout win on the road in Game Six. The Predators won three one-goal games of their own en route to sending the Red Wings to the golf course. These two teams have very few big name players and also love to play defensive styles and rely on two of the best goaltenders in the game.

**How the Coyotes can win:** Solve Pekka Rinne. The Coyotes were fortunate to face Corey Crawford in the first round because it gave them a decisive advantage in net. That advantage is gone in this series. The Coyotes relied on Smith a ton in the first three games of their previous series and likely won't get past the Preds without taking some of the pressure off of Smith by scoring goals.

**How the Predators can win**: Stay consistent. If the Predators play like they did against the Red Wings, this series will be over sooner rather than later. The Preds had the top powerplay in the league this season and struggled mightily against the Red Wings – yet they still won the series handily. They're a very good team and if they stay disciplined and keep doing what they've done, they're in good shape.

**Deciding factor:** Shane Doan. Shane Doan was invisible for the majority of the Blackhawks series As the Coyotes best all-around player and leader, he has to be good in this series. If Doan is good, the Coyotes can win. If he's invisible again, the Coyotes may have used all of their luck up against the Hawks.

**Prediction:** Predators in 6. Pekka Rinne is too good. The Coyotes really struggled to generate offense against the Hawks and capitalized on some bad goaltending. Rinne is light years ahead of Crawford and unless Phoenix can sustain offensive pressure, the Predators and Rinne will be moving on to the Western Conference Final with relative ease.

As mentioned above, the East is largely undecided at this point. With three series winners undetermined, here are the scenarios:

If Rangers, Bruins, Panthers win: Rangers-Flyers, Bruins-Panthers.

If Rangers, Bruins, Devils win: Rangers-Devils, Bruins-Flyers

If Rangers, Panthers, Capitals win: Rangers-Capitals, Panthers-Flyers

If Rangers, Capitals, Devils win: Rangers-Capitals, Flyers-Devils

If Senators, Bruins, Panthers win: Bruins-Senators, Panthers-Flyers

If Senators, Capitals, Panthers win: Panthers-Senators, Flyers-Capitals

If Senators, Bruins, Devils win: Bruins-Senators, Flyers-Devils

If Senators, Capitals, Devils win: Flyers-Senators, Capitals-Devils

So, needless to say, a lot will be determined by the three Game Sevens in the Eastern Conference. Because the teams re-seed, the highest seed will play the lowest seed, possibly allowing the fifth-seeded Flyers to get home ice advantage if all three lower-seeded teams are victorious.

The optimal situation for the networks, and likely the fans as well, is scenario #2 with the Rangers, Bruins, and Devils advancing. This would give two great rivalries, the Rangers and Devils, separated by just a few miles and the Bruins-Flyers, a storied rivalry dating back to the 1970s.

Stay tuned to the Hitting the Fan section of TheClevelandFan.com as I'll preview the Eastern Conference Semifinals there on Friday once the pairings have been decided.