

THE PROS

by John Cairns

Hockey is underway. The N.H.L. schedule opened on October 12, and it's time to consider the possibilities. Along with verbal analysis, I've numerically ranked each squad, allowing ten points for the goaltending, ten for the defense, and ten for the forwards.

The strength again lies in Montreal. Ken Dryden will continue to provide the league's best goaltending (10) behind super defensemen Guy Lapointe, Serge Savard and Larry Robinson(10). The team's forwards are also completely top notch(10). As North America's only flawless team, Montreal will remain atop the league.

Los Angeles should retain second in their division. Rogie Vachon is a sterling goalie(8), while Bob Murdoch and Gary Sargent anchor an ample defense(6). With Marcel Dionne leading, the offense is also adequate(6).

Ted Lindsey and Bobby Kromm will pull Detroit into third. Ed Geacomin and Ron Low will be superlative in goal(7) with Terry Harper, Greg Joly, and Steve Durmand tightening the defense(6). Talented Dale McCourt will inspire better scoring from the likes of Nick Libett and Danny Grant(6).

Despite the production of Syl Apps, Pierre Larouche and Jean Pronovost(7), the Penguins will flounder. Dave Burrows and Ron Stackhouse are their only proven defensemen(5), while Dennis Herron, Gord Laxton and Duc Wilson make mistakes in goal(5).

Washington will again be last. The goaltending is uncertain(3), the offense feeble(2), and the defense weak despite Robert Picard(3).

Boston is the best bet in the Adams Division. Gerry Cheevers, Gilles Gilbert, and Ron Grahame provide depth in goal (8), and Brad Park leads an established defense(8). With Ratelle, Sheppard and McNab, there is also plenty of scoring punch(8).

Reputed hockey genius, Roger Neilson, will coach

Toronto to second. The powerful Leaf offense again features Sittler and McDonald(8). Alexander, Salming, and Turnbull remain as star defensemen(8) and a more experienced Palmateer should show improvement in goal(7).

Buffalo will manage only a wild-card play-off spot. As usual, the goaltending will be lacking(5), and the defense inconsistent(6). Perreault, Gare, Robert and Martin, however, will score regularly(8).

Cleveland is doomed for the basement. Gilles Meloche and Gary Edwards are quality netminders(7), but the defense is poor(3), and the offense weak(4).

In the Patrick Division the Islanders will lead. With Goran Hogasta helping Glenn Resch and Billy Smith, the goaltending almost equals Montreal's (9). The Potrins lead a capable defense(8) while Harris, Trotter and Gilles spearhead a consistent group of forwards(8).

In Philadelphia, Wayne Stephenson and Bernie Parent will remain shaky in goal(6). Barber, Clarke MacLeish and Leach will continue to score(9), but the defense may slip to mediocrity(6).

Atlanta looks good for third. Dan Bouchard and Phil Myre are still solid in goal(8), and Tom Lysiak, Tim Ecclestone, Curt Bennett, and Eric Vail can all score(7). On defense, however, there are only no-names(4).

John Ferguson's mistreatment of Rod Gilbert casts doubt on the Ranger's chances. They've signed their top five draft picks, and Hardy Aastrom will strengthen the net-minding (7), but the defense is sad(3), and the offense inconsistent(4). Their problems will continue.

Minnesota is strongest in the weak Smythe Division. With Tim Young, Ken-Erik Andersson, Steve Jenson, and Glen Sharpley, the forwards are talented, though obscure(7). Skilful Pete LoPresti will stop the shots(7), and even the defense is reasonably solid(6). Not surprisingly only the North Stars had an undefeated pre-season.

St. Louis has no terribly weak link, and should manage second. Belanger, Grant, Stanowski, and Johnston are adequate puck stoppers(6). The Plagers, Dick Redmond, and Rod Seiling are respected defensemen(6), while Bob MacMillan, Garry Unger, Red Berenson and Jim Roberts can find the net(6).

Chicago still has Tony Esposito in goal(7), but despite Phil Russell and Dale Tallon, the defense is weak(4). To make matters worse, none of the forwards can score(3).

Vancouver will miss the basement only because Colorado is worse. Old Cesare Maniago is their best goalie(4), and Harold Snepsts has the most promise on defense(5).

With Derek Sanderson a question mark, the offense will also remain weak(3).

Hockey talent is scarce in Colorado. Doug Favell and Michel Plasse are lacking in goal(3), while rookie Barry Beck and John VanBoxmeer lead an otherwise pathetic defense(4). Offensively there isn't even anyone worth mentioning(2).

Here then are the teams ranked from best to worst: Montreal(30), New York Islanders(25), Boston(24), Toronto(23), Philadelphia(21), Los Angeles(20), Minnesota(20), Buffalo(19), Atlanta(19), Detroit(19), St. Louis(18), Pittsburgh(17), New York Rangers(14), Chicago(14), Cleveland(14), Vancouver(12), Colorado(9), Washington(8). Next week we'll consider the W.H.A.

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