

New York Islanders

This team got hot late last year and in the playoffs, but they are really not that good. (Another example of Montreal's easy ride.) Goaltender Glenn Healy was the main reason for NYI's success, but Healy has been in the league for years and has never been that good before, and probably won't be again. Still, coach Al Arbour will keep this team working hard, but they are a far cry from the Islanders of the early eighties. No contention.

New Jersey Devils

They have a new coach in Jacques Lemaire who should help them defensively, but, like Hartford, most of their wins will come against San Jose, Tampa Bay and company. To put it plainly, they suck. Enough said.

Florida Panthers/ Tampa Bay

Lightning

The most interesting battle for these two teams will be against each other, both on and off the ice. Apparently there was a battle between these two teams as to who would be called "Florida". After all, reasoned Tampa GM Phil Esposito, the last time he checked, Miami was in Florida. It seems that last year when Tampa entered the league they wanted to be known as Florida's team, but were refused permission to be called the Florida Lightning. But when the big bucks from video giant Blockbuster Video's Wayne Huizenga came into play the Panthers got the name they wanted- and Phil Esposito and crew are furious.

Regardless of any childish off-ice battles, these two teams will fight each other for last place. No other challenges will exist because Lord Stanley is far away. Like most of the residents in Florida, these teams will be retired early.

WESTERN CONFERENCE

CENTRAL DIVISION

Chicago

Black Hawks

Chicago is the best team here, with the best goaltender. Chicago should win this division, but Ed Belfour has a tendency of not playing his best hockey in the playoffs. He was badly outplayed last year by St. Louis' Curtis Joseph. Still, Joseph's goaltending was the only reason Chicago faced an early exit as they clearly outplayed the Blues.

They will contend for the Cup this year, but their chances are below average, simply because of the teams ahead of them. (Pittsburgh, Boston etc. are far superior.)



Toronto Maple Leafs

They had a great team last year in spite of not having a cast of superstars. Aside from Doug Gilmour, who else did they have? Felix Potvin played well, but what will he do this year? He has gone from an eager-to-impress rookie trying to prove he could play at the NHL level to a contract-conscious millionaire trying to prove he is worth two million instead of one- a typical pro athlete. Nevertheless, GM Cliff Fletcher has a reputation of analyzing what is needed and getting it. With Maple Leaf Gardens virtually sold out for every game, he also knows he will have the bucks to play with. Like Chicago, the Leafs should be tough throughout the year and could contend come the annual spring marathon hockey fans know as the playoffs, but chances of adding another Cup to their collection are still below average.

Detroit Red Wings

These guys could be the hungriest team in the league, but may not have the means to satisfy this hunger. The goaltending is questionable (take last weekend's 10-3 loss to the Kings as an example). They will probably challenge the Leafs with some memorable battles as they have in the past, but are still not Stanley Cup material, despite having coach Scotty Bowman. Probert's fights should provide the most entertainment.

St. Louis Blues

This team has one of the strongest goalies in the league, who single-handedly beat Chicago in last year's playoffs. But, as Joseph found out as the playoffs wore on, maintaining this level of goaltending was impossible. This year, his goaltending may steal a few games, but it won't be enough. Brett Hull is one of the league's best snipers, but is purely a one-way player. These Blues will not contend for anything this year.

Winnipeg Jets

After Bob Essensa and Teemu Selanne, the rest of the cast includes such celebrated names as Zhamnov, Mironov, Tkachuk, and Olausson. Enough said.

Dallas Stars

They have moved from Bloomington, Minnesota to Dallas, Texas and have added goalie Andy Moog. But, in spite of all the changes, they are still the Minnesota North Stars. Forget it.

PACIFIC DIVISION

Calgary Flames

They should perform well in this weak division and could grab first place from Vancouver. Still, like most



teams in this division, they are not Stanley Cup material.

Vancouver Canucks

They have a fine goaltender in Kirk McLean and a great player in Pavel Bure, but they still lack the talent needed to be successful in April and May, as they proved last year. They will battle Calgary and LA all year, but will not get much farther than the second round of the playoffs.

Los Angeles Kings

Like baseball's Blue Jays they can fire more offence than most opponents care to deal with. Unfortunately, also like the Jays, they are also scored upon almost as often. Wayne Gretzky will be under lots of pressure and scrutiny as he tries to live up to his new big-bucks contract, given to him for ego, not skill (if he ever deserved this kind of contract it was years ago, not now). He will also be hard-pressed to fulfil his promise to bring a Stanley Cup to Bruce McNall, John Candy and the rest of the wealthy crowd who make up the LA audience. Even if the Great One scores a pile of points (he scored six last weekend against Detroit), the LA defence and goaltending is such a liability that it won't make any difference.

Edmonton Oilers

Hockey's version of the San Diego Padres. Glenn Sather and Peter Pocklington have teamed up to give away a load of talent over the past few years. While they have some fine prospects, they are years away from anything, let alone a Stanley Cup.

Anaheim Mighty Ducks

The name says it all. Giving new meaning to the term "Mickey Mouse operation", they may indeed be mighty, but how mighty can a duck be? The Disney people will put on a good, clean, family show as they do with all their ventures, (The Ducks' opener on The Pond featured an Ice Capades-like show, featuring characters from its movies). The Disney magic may make things entertaining to watch, but no amount of pixie dust will make this team a winner in the foreseeable future.

San Jose Sharks

They used to be able to blame their pathetic performances on their being an expansion team. But now they are entering their third year and San Jose fans will be expecting a little more from the Sharks. They have a new coach, but there is little he will be able to do if he doesn't have the troops. Another bad year and the Sharks will go from being called an expansion team to being labelled a lousy team. They will finish last, even behind the Ducks.

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