

Who to watch in the NHL

The 1993-94 NHL season began last week with a whole new look. Gone are familiar names (at least to Canadians) such as Patrick Division and Wales Conference. These names were replaced by geographical titles, presumably to help Americans become more familiar with the teams and their locations.

Also, the league welcomed into the fold two new franchises, Anaheim and Florida (again, presumably to help the NHL sell the sport to Americans).

But in spite of these changes, along with the annual coaching and personnel moves, the battle for the Stanley Cup will be among some familiar teams. Here is a list of predictions for each team, with their chances of winning the Cup, in their predicted order of finish within their newly-named divisions.

EASTERN CONFERENCE

NORTHEAST DIVISION

Pittsburgh Penguins

As far as offensive potential goes, they are hockey's version of the Toronto Blue Jays. With Marty McSorley as a bodyguard for Mario Lemieux, these guys should again challenge for the Stanley Cup, provided they get any kind of goaltending from Barrasso and Wregget.



One big change for the Penguins this year is their new division. They have been realigned to what was formerly the Adams division—a division known for its defensive-minded teams. It should be interesting to see how this goal-scoring machine fares in this division. If Lemieux is healthy, this team should easily capture first place in the division, if not overall, and be a major contender for the Cup.

Boston Bruins

Fed up with Andy Moog's inability to take them to the Cup, Bruins GM Harry Sinden made an even swap with the Minnesota North Stars for John Casey, who almost single-handedly took Minnesota to the Cup finals a few years back. If Casey plays well and Cam Neely regains any of his old form and Joe Juneau plays like he did last year, watch out for the Bruins. They should finish second in this division and are a serious threat to win their first Stanley Cup in years.

Predicting tops and bottoms for the 93-94 season

Montreal Canadiens

Let's face facts. They have good defense, a great goaltender, and maybe the best coach in the league, but they had an easy ride in last year's playoffs. Thanks to the early elimination of major teams by other teams' hot goaltenders, Montreal avoided teams like Boston, Pittsburgh, and Chicago. Instead, they played Quebec, Buffalo, the New York Islanders and a tired, old, LA Kings team. They should finish third in their division this year, behind Pittsburgh and Boston, and are possible contenders for their second consecutive Stanley Cup. If Roy plays like he did last year, they will be tough, but the Canadiens are still far behind teams like Pittsburgh and Boston in talent.

Quebec Nordiques

Last year's most improved team should continue to improve this year, but they, like the rest of this division, must now face the powerful Penguins more often, making finishing any higher than fourth quite difficult. Although they are three times the team they were two years ago, Pierre Page's boys are still far away from the NHL's top prize.

Buffalo Sabres

Grant Fuhr is past his prime. Alexander Mogilny is a fine player, but he is no Lindros, Lemieux or Gretzky. In other words, neither of these players are the type who can lead a team to a Stanley Cup. This team will not contend this year and probably not even next year or the year after.

Hartford Whalers

This team will finish sixth, simply because Ottawa is in the same division. They haven't

done a whole lot in the off-season to improve this lousy team. They might rack up a few points against the expansion and second-year teams, but not much more. Stanley Cup? Not in this lifetime.

Ottawa Senators

With only ten wins last year and the probability of similar results this year, there will likely be steady traffic flowing between the nation's capital and Charlottetown, Ottawa's top farm club. They have a lot of new faces this year, but are still a second-year team and it will be awhile before they are competitive.

ATLANTIC DIVISION

New York Rangers

The Rangers are perennial disappointments, but new coach Mike Keenan, hired for his motivational abilities, should help the team overcome this. The Rangers always seem to have the talent, but they also seem to be jinxed. Nevertheless, with the Penguins out of the way they should make first in this division, and be strong contenders for the Cup this year, provided Messier can stay healthy and avoid suspensions.



Philadelphia Flyers

Like Quebec, the Flyers are an up-and-coming team, thanks mainly to Eric Lindros. Unfortunately, one player alone, no matter how good he is, cannot win Stanley Cups. Lindros needs a strong supporting cast to help him out. If Rod Brind'Amour has another fine year and goalie Tommy Soderstrom is steady, the Flyers should be strong in the division, perhaps as high as second place, but they are still not Stanley Cup material.

Washington Capitals

Similar to the Rangers, the Capitals have a tradition of performing reasonably well in the regular season, only to fold in the playoffs. The team should be competitive again this year, but aside from second-year player Peter Bondra, they have no one to take them very far. Goalie Don Beaupre's best years are behind him and there doesn't seem to be anyone around to take his place. They will not contend.