

Editorial ? Wanted: a Canadian Division

Remember the 2015-16 National Hockey League season?

Well, it isn't over yet, and won't be for a few weeks, but for most Canadians it has long been history.

After all, for the first time in four decades, not a single Canadian team made it into the playoffs, six other clubs joining the ever-woeful Toronto Maple Leafs in occupying the bottom rungs of the standings in the 30-team NHL.

Initially, the gloom among Canadian hockey fans was shared by the television broadcasters, CBC and Rogers' Sportsnet, but we suspect it may have reached even the NHL board of governors, thanks to the success of small-market teams in ousting all the teams in the biggest U.S. markets (among them New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia and Washington). As of this week, all that remained were San Jose, St. Louis, Pittsburgh and Snowbirds-lacking Tampa Bay, none of which could be termed a hockey hotbed.

For years now there have been rumblings about the possibility of adding a couple of new teams to round out the league to four eight-team divisions, perhaps with the top four in each division entering the playdowns.

However, we have a much more radical proposal in mind, which certainly ought to find favour with our telecasting community.

Under our proposal, the Eastern and Western Conferences would effectively disappear, the regular-season schedules would be expanded eight games (to 90 from the current 82) and Canadian fans would be guaranteed some post-season excitement.

Our recommendation to the NHL governors is the creation of a Canadian Division, with four western (Vancouver, Edmonton, Calgary and Winnipeg) and four eastern (Toronto, Ottawa, Montreal and Quebec City) teams.

The other three eight-team divisions might be Atlantic, Central and Western.

As already mentioned, our preferred schedule would see each team playing 90 games, or a little less than two more per month, with 42 of them against division rivals (three home games and three away from home against the seven opponents) plus 48 against the other 24 NHL teams, so that all 32 teams would have at least two meetings with every other club.

Some might argue that such a realignment would add too much to travel costs, particularly for the Canadian teams that would face flying across the country. However, in the computer age it should be possible to arrange the schedule so that the teams would make swings east and west rather than endlessly hopping about. Ideally, each team would have a four-game eastern or western swing three times in the season, along with similar swings to the U.S. cities.

As for the playoffs, elimination of the Conference setup would still mean 16 teams in the first round, but four of them would be from Canadian cities. The second round would be divisional finals and the third would pit the divisional winners against the winner of the nearest division (Canadian versus Atlantic and Central versus Western).

That certainly wouldn't guarantee a Canadian-U.S. Stanley Cup final, but it would mean that one of the eight Canadian teams would survive to the semi-finals.

In light of the 2015-16 debacle, we suspect the main criticism of such a realignment would be the likelihood that lousy Canadian teams would reach the playoffs while far better U.S. teams lost out because they had so much better opponents in their divisions.

Well, that might happen if all the Canadian teams do little or nothing to improve their rosters. But the opposite could well be the case, and even the Leafs seem to be learning from their mistakes by strengthening their coaching, scouting and farm systems.

And a bonus for the NHL governors would come from the obvious ability to charge more for Canadian television rights once the networks know there could be no repeat of this spring's disastrous playoff scene.