

Robert's Rant: The Excitement doesn't get any better than this

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OPINION

The Provincial government gave the a-ok for Ottawa and Toronto to play home games in their arenas. Canada gave the nod for hockey to return. For the first time in the NHL, Canadians will be witnessing an all-Canadian division.

One that was branded because of the coronavirus. If it's one positive that has come out from all of this is hockey will be here for the NHL's 56-game regular season schedule.

The season kicked off Wednesday, as it traditionally has, with the Montreal Canadiens taking on the Toronto Maple Leafs.

Both clubs have been quite busy this offseason. The Maple Leafs acquired more grit and depth, with veteran talents Joe Thornton and Wayne Simmonds. The Maple Leafs' defence, which has been heavily criticized in the past few seasons, got their hands on the former Calgary Flames' second-hand man T.J Brodie and snagged Zach Bogosian off of free agency.

The Habs played their part too, bringing in former Stanley Cup champion Corey Perry and a slew of other moves at the forward position with Tyler Toffoli, Josh Anderson and veteran Michael Frolik. Oh, and let's not forget Joel Edmundson on the back line and one of the best back-up goaltenders in the NHL in Jake Allen.

This is no discredit to other Canadian teams who have also made some roster changes. That would include the Canucks bringing in Braydon Holtby from the Washington Capitals. Even Jakob Markstrom to the Calgary Flames, perhaps.

In its totality, Canadian clubs have been assertive in the market this offseason. The last time any Canadian team made it somewhat far in the playoffs was in 2017, when the Ottawa Senators bowed out against the Pittsburgh Penguins in a gut-wrenching double overtime loss in the Eastern Conference finals.

Across all seven Canadian teams, there have been 48 free-agency signings and 13 trades involving at least one Canadian team in the transaction since the play-in series.

Alone, the Maple Leafs signed eight players off of free agency and were involved in two trades. The Habs signed four free agents and were involved in two trades, as well.

The Calgary Flames have been the busiest of the bunch this offseason, signing 11 free agents and the Ottawa Senators have been the most aggressive on the trade market with seven deals completed.

Nonetheless, the aggressiveness from all Canadian clubs has been outstanding. But specifically heading into this shortened NHL season, the Toronto Maple Leafs and the Montreal Canadiens look to lead the pack. Fitting for the two most historic teams in the country.

The Maple Leafs are well-adorned with star-studded talent and the Habs look like the team equipped with the most depth than any other roster.

And, if you ask any Maple Leafs fan what they want in this life, it's to see the beloved blue and white win the cup. If you ask any Montreal Canadiens fan, they'll tell you it's to see the 25th Stanley Cup banner raised in the Bell Centre.

Both clubs have everything to prove. Head coach Sheldon Keefe picked up from Mike Babcock and is slowly building his club to a

championship pedigree. Claude Julien showed last year Montreal's 12 place finish was simply an anomaly.

Sure, pundits are also currently predicting the Winnipeg Jets to have their say in this division and with Connor Hellebuyck backing them up between the pipes, it's a fair proposition. Then there's Patrick Laine trade rumors swirling around the NHL. But that doesn't matter. The Jets have everything to prove too since losing Dustin Byfuglien and other defensive machines like Jacob Trouba and Tyler Myers.

But the teams that are ready to make a push will be Toronto and Montreal. It took a pandemic for the Stanley Cup to be hoisted on home soil last year and it wasn't even a Canadian team lifting the illustrious trophy more than six-feet off of the ground.

Yes, players who are Canadian do bring the cup back home to show off to their hometowns. But it's been since the 1993 Montreal Canadiens that it hasn't had the chance to remain here. The trophy must be a tad homesick now and teams wouldn't want anything more than to give the fans in a city something to be happy about.