With hockey finally back, we predict round one of Stanley Cup playoffs

Written By ROBERT BELARDI

If you think about it, it took a pandemic to bring the Stanley Cup finals back to Canada.

Under these circumstances, it's what no hockey fan in this country ever imagined.For hockey to be running at the beginning of August.

Around this time last year, King City's Alex Pietrangelo and Aurora's Robert Thomas were celebrating their time with beloved Lord Stanley. Now, the St. Louis Blues teammates, will be competing in the 24-team playoff bracket for another shot at the sports greatest prize.

In the Western Conference, the Blues will play the Colorado Avalanche, Vegas Golden Knights and Dallas Stars once to determine who gets the top seed in the west.

In the Eastern Conference, the Boston Bruins, Tampa Bay Lightning, Washington Capitals and the Philadelphia Flyers will do the same, to determine the top four seeds in the east.

While these eight teams anxiously await their unforeseen opponents, the rest of the 16 teams will be participating in their play-in series. The Citizen, broke down each Canadian matchup and predicted who will emerge from the best of five series.

Toronto Maple Leafs vs Columbus Blue Jackets:

The Columbus Blue Jackets had the Toronto Maple Leafs' number in their last matchup. Gustav Nyquist scored the overtime winner back in December in a 4-3 victory in Scotiabank arena.

This time, it's a whole different ball game. Maple Leafs head coach Sheldon Keefe has some history with Blue Jackets head coach John Tortorella. Keefe, was drafted by the Tampa Bay Lightning in 1999 and never found a place on the roster when Tortorella took over the team.

How the Leafs will do will depend on the play of their big-four; John Tavares, William Nylander, Auston Matthews and Mitch Marner.

But, that won't be all what the Leafs will need. The Buds, will need secondary scoring, outstanding goaltending from Frederick Andersen and arguably the x-factor in this one will be the special teams. The Leafs ranked 6th in the league in power play percentage, tallying 45 power play goals on 195 opportunities (23.1 per cent). That is much better, than Columbus (rank 27) at 16.4 per cent. Prediction: Leafs in 5.

Pittsburgh Penguins vs Montreal Canadiens:

The Montreal Canadiens will muddle with some of the league's top stars in this five-game bout.

The Habs, will be up against veterans Sidney Crosby, Evgeni Malkin, Kris Letang and newly-acquired Penguins forward Jason Zucker from the Minnesota Wild earlier this year.

Should the Penguins see Omaha, Nebraska native Jake Guentzel return to the lineup since suffering a season ending shoulder injury back in December, the Penguins will be looking to redeem themselves this year after being swept in last year's playoffs against the New York Islanders.

It will be a lot of work for Carey Price, Shea Weber, Max Domi and company. However, if the Habs upset the Penguins, this wouldn't be the first time. In 2010, the 8th seed Montreal Canadiens upset the President's trophy winning Washington Capitals in the first round before upsetting the Pittsburgh Penguins in the second round. The Habs made it to the Eastern Conference finals that year, before losing to the Philadelphia Flyers. Prediction: Penguins in 5.

Vancouver Canucks vs Minnesota Wild:

The Vancouver Canucks finished one point ahead of the Minnesota Wild in the standings this year. The Canucks ended the year off with 78 points to the Wild's 77.

It will be a thriller between two teams practically, evenly matched in points. The Canucks will have a very healthy lineup heading into the playoffs, with their goaltender Jacob Markstrom back in the mix.

J.T Miller (72 points) and Elias Pettersson (66 points) will be at the fore for the Canucks offence along with Bo Horvat, Brock Boeser and newly acquired forward from the Los Angeles Kings Tyler Toffoli.

The most interesting matchup, is both teams' defence cores. Rookie Quinn Huges has been on fire with 53 points this season while Alexander Edler and Tyler Myers will be tough to get by.

But, the Wild, have a defence core arguably as strong, if not stronger, with veteran Ryan Suter (47 points on the year), Jared Spurgeon, Matt Dumba and Jonas Brodin. Kevin Fiala has caught fire and with other veterans such as Eric Staal and Zach Parise, the Wild won't be a walk in the park. Prediction: Canucks in 5.

Edmonton Oilers vs Chicago Blackhawks:

It's the old versus the new.

The Oilers have arguably the greatest tandem in the NHL with Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl. Draisaitl, led the league with 110 points and is up for MVP while McDavid was second on the team with 97.

The two can lead the Oilers past a dynamic Chicago Blackhawks team. The former Stanley Cup champions, will be going up against the Oilers in their own house with Patrick Kane leading the way with captain Jonathan Toews, Dominik Kubalik and Alex De Brincat.

This round may not be in the Blackhawks' favour as the Oilers might be hungrier defending home territory. Prediction: Oilers in four.

Calgary Flames vs Winnipeg Jets:

In the all-Canadian matchup, the Winnipeg Jets and the Calgary Flames have had no shortage of drama this year.

The Flames, have dealt with plenty of inconsistencies since the beginning and the firing of former coach Bill Peters in November has surely left a sour taste in all of their mouths.

The Flames entered the playoffs with a 3-2 record in their last five games. Johnny Gaudreau, Sean Monahan and Matthew Tkachuk will have to be at the top of their game.

The Jets on the other hand, have had to deal with the absence of their number one defenceman Dustin Byfuglien. The 35-year-old took indefinite leave last September and is now an unrestricted free agent.

With the strength of the Jets offence with Kyle Connor, Blake Wheeler and Mark Scheifele leading the way, along with Vezina trophy finalist Connor Hellebuyck on the back end, the Jets should pull through. Prediction: Jets in four.

The Stanley Cup playoffs kick off this Saturday, August 1 with the New York Rangers taking on the Carolina Hurricanes at noon