

The Gateway to the Stanley Cup

Notes on nothing game

by Alan Small

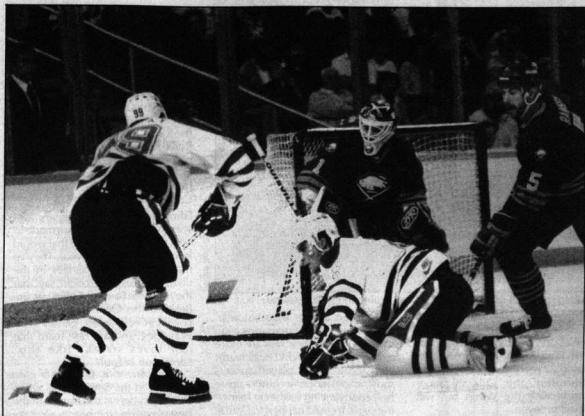
USUALLY WHEN THE OILERS BLOW A 5-2 lead the players are pretty quiet, but since this game was the last one before playoff time, the Oilers seemed relieved that the lengthy regular season was over.

IN CASE YOU'RE WONDERING — Oiler defenceman Kevin Lowe showed no ill effects from his broken wrist, which is encased in a lightweight cast so he can play. Matter of fact, the cast may have helped him score one of the five Oiler goals against the Kings.

"Usually those one-time shots go wide. The bottom of my wrist isn't strong enough," said Lowe of his ninth goal of the '87-'88 campaign. "The cast is just awkward."

Lowe did not feel any pain from his injured wrist but felt that it was "so sore and tired at the end of the game."

IT'S TIME TO FORGET ABOUT



Wayne Gretzky (left) and the Oilers are relieved the regular season is over.

photo Rob Gabraith

THE REGULAR SEASON will be one of the more prominent sentences to be used by players and coaches in the next two days before playoff time.

Oiler defenceman Charlie Huddy is one of many (all?) Oilers who will be looking forward to post-season

play.

"Everyone knows what it's (winning the Stanley Cup) like, and how much fun it is," said Huddy, the Oilers nominee for the Masterton Trophy. "we've got a team that's capable of going all the way."

It was an up-and-down night for

Huddy, the third star in Sunday's game against Los Angeles. Not only did he score his thirteenth goal of the season and score an assist on the first Oiler goal, but as he was clearing the puck on a King two-on-one, he chopped it high to the stick side of Grant Fuhr and into the

Oiler net. From an Oiler fan's standpoint, one could say that at least they got rid of those goals in the regular season this year.

NOT ONLY WAS THERE RELIEF AMONG the players but Oiler coach John Muckler also seemed glad that the 80-game regular season was over and done with.

"There are a lot of players looking forward to the playoffs," Muckler said of the tie with the Kings. "I'm just happy that the 80 games are completed and the players feel the same."

"It's hard to get the players motivated for nothing games like this."

But when asked about whether it's for a coach to get motivated Muckler was emphatic.

"Coaches are always motivated," Muckler said. "I've never met a coach that wasn't motivated."

Although the Oilers possessed the top home ice record in the NHL this season and were 4-1-3 against their first round opponent, the Winnipeg Jets, Muckler is wary of the Smythe Division's third place club.

"Winnipeg will be a tough series," said Muckler, who also said that LA will be more than a handful for the NHL's number one team, the Calgary Flames.

"Luc Robitaille is hotter than a firecracker," Muckler said. Robitaille was definitely that on Sunday as he scored three goals and one assist against the Oilers.

Predictions: Out on a limb

Randal Smathers

Smythe Division

Calgary Flames — They'll pound (whip, trounce, humiliate, stomp, crush, maim — pick an adjective) the Kings in four, then take the Battle of Alberta in a six-round TKO.

Edmonton Oilers — Edmonton has not settled into their familiar pre-playoff roll this spring. Grant Fuhr is their only chance.

Winnipeg Jets — The Jets prepared for the playoffs by going 1-8-2. Four games, then golf.

Los Angeles Kings — Those two wins against the Flames at the end of the year were like a boxer kicking Mike Tyson in the shins before a fight just to make sure he's awake and angry. Mission accomplished.

Norris Division

Detroit Red Wings — The team most likely to be upset. Only 500th their last 10 games, and missing their leader; they are just waiting to be beat.

St. Louis Blues — This team was a goal-scorer away from doing something in last year's post-season. Now they have Brett Hull. They'll take the Wings in six in the division finals, the Hawks in one less than that.

Chicago Black Hawks — General lack of discipline and drive always hurts this team. Last year's top playoff scorers for Chicago were Curt Fraser and Ed Olczyk, so they both got traded. They'll dive in five.

Toronto Maple Leafs — Save the Leafs jokes — they didn't make up the playoff format. They'll give Detroit a surprisingly tough first-round workout, and they'll last six or seven.

Adams Division

Montreal Canadiens — The Habs are generally favored to meet the Flames in the final, but they aren't so much better than the competition that they are upset-proof. The first round is an automatic win.

Boston Bruins — This team improved all year long. Look for a nasty, brutish, and short end to the



Buffalo year; say four straight. Look for Boston to rock smug Montreal in the second round, four games to two.

Buffalo Sabres — Boston will embarrass (o) Tom. He'll watch the clincher from the bench. Buffalo is badly out-muscle here.

Hartford Whalers — Hartford has been disorganized and listless all year. More of the same for about five games.

Patrick Division

New York Islanders — The team that came out on top of the tightest six team divisional race will come out on top of the tightest four team playoff race, in consecutive seven-game wars.

Washington Capitals — Letting Bob Mason go will kill this team. Clint "Choke" Malarchuk and Pete "Panicle" Peeters are not. I repeat not, money goalies.

Philadelphia Flyers — Their big chance is the big guy in net. Hextall will stonewall the Caps anaemic offense, but won't be able to beat Lafontaine & Co. Any series with the Flyers in it will go seven games.

New Jersey Devils — The kids are happy; they've won their Stanley Cup by just getting here.

Final Four — St. Louis vs. Calgary; Boston vs. NY Islanders

Predicting the playoffs this far in advance is like spitting into a shotglass with a hurricane headwind, but here goes. Calgary will beat St. Louis in five, as they have more everything, everywhere, all the time. Boston and New York are the same team in two different uniforms. Should be a classic, but I'll pick the Bruins because they will have had one less tough series by this point, and the playoffs, because they're so long, tend to be decided by who can lace 'em up by this time. That leaves Calgary and Boston — a final that will make last year's look like figure skating practise. Pick the Bruins Gord Kluzak for the Conn Smythe after he personally puts every Flame forward through a supposedly immovable object (the boards, the glass, Joe Nieuwendyk) at least once in the final round.

Ajay Bhardwaj

Smythe Division

Calgary vs. Los Angeles Mike Bullard is hurting and the Kings have the Flames' number. But that's still not enough to stop the top team in the NHL regular season. Too much Looob, too much Nieuwendyk for the Kings. The Flames must want it badly, especially since they came so close two years ago. The Kings will have to come up with a royal effort to get this series.

Calgary in four.

Edmonton vs. Winnipeg

Tough series. The Oilers should win in consecutive games, but the games will be close. Gretzky, Messier, Anderson, and Fuhr are all great come playoff time. Dale Haw-

erchuk and Daniel Berthiaume will have to play their series of a lifetime. You have to love Dan Maloney, he means business, both when he played and now as a coach.

Oilers in four.

The Leafs have pulled first round upsets before. Don't count them out.

Norris Division

Detroit vs. Toronto

A case of one good team without a superstar who makes them contenders against a team which has no business being in the playoffs. Jacques Demers felt that with Zere-man, his team had a shot at the Cup. Without him they're still a good club with a lot of pride and the "master motivator" in Demers. The Leafs, who snuck into the playoffs for the second consecutive season, have pulled first round upsets before. Don't count them out in this physical series that will go the distance. Bester is hot and Wregget is a playoff guy.

Toronto in seven.

St. Louis vs. Chicago

Pick the better of two mediocre teams. The Black Hawks have Denis Savard and Rick Vaive (who is a proven performer in the playoffs). Doug Gilmour has been hurt this year and Bernie Federko is no longer the force he once was. Both can still do a lot of damage, however. If it comes down to goaltending, I'd rather go to war with Darren Pang than with Greg Millen.

Chicago in six.

Adams Division

Montreal vs. Hartford

Hartford has been on a roll lately. But Kevin Dineen, Ron Francis, and Mike Liut are not enough. Neil Sheehey will be up to his old tricks except this time he'll try to get Stephane Richer off his game. It won't work, unfortunately for the Whalers, because they're facing a team destined to be in the Cup final, at least.

Boston vs. Buffalo

Could this finally be the year the Bruins end their playoff drought against the Canadiens? Is Andy Moog enough to get the Bruins to Lord Stanley's Cup? Only in Harry Sinden's wildest dreams. The Bruins were lousy in the stretch drive. Buffalo is young and enthusiastic. Bruins' coach O'Reilly is the difference here.

Bruins in six.

Patrick Division

Islanders vs. New Jersey

Pat Lafontaine, Mikko Makela, and Kelly Hrudey vs. Kirk Muller, Pat Verbeek, and Sean Burke. Burke is hot right now and that spells trouble for the Long Islanders. This may seem to be an upset, but these two teams finished only six points apart.

Devils bedevil Isles in six.

Philadelphia vs. Washington

Pretty even. Neither team scores much, so goaltending will determine it. Ron Hextall has proven that he can play a lot of games so fatigue won't be a factor with him. Clint Malarchuk and Pete Peeters came close to the Jennings trophy this year.

Flyers — in seven.

The Flames will finish the Leafs quickly in a top-sided semi-final. The Canadiens will have a tougher time either the Flyers or the Caps. The Flames will then take revenge on the Canadiens, winning it the Cup in the 7th and decisive game.