

# SPORTS

## NHL teams get set to finish the season and head to the playoffs



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Pittsburgh Penguins standout Sidney Crosby skates down the ice as he moves against the opposition. Crosby and the Pens look to make changes.

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As the 2005-06 National Hockey League season enters the home stretch, many teams are excited about the upcoming playoffs, while others are looking for ways to explain their disappointing season.

The combination of a year off due to labor negotiations and an off season filled with a record number of trades led to a completely different NHL this year. Many teams, who last season had some of the largest payrolls, such as St. Louis and Colorado, had to slash their rosters in order to fit under the new salary cap. This resulted in many of the smaller market teams improving considerably by picking up much of the talent.

Teams such as the Buffalo Sabres, who have not made the playoffs since 2001, and the New York Rangers, who are on an eight year drought, are finding the new NHL much friendlier. Both the Sabres and the Rangers are riding on the success of their young goaltenders, Ryan Miller and Henrik Lundqvist. Many rookies and younger players are discovering the new rule changes that the league put in place during the strike to be very

beneficial to their clubs. The elimination of the two-line pass as well as the tag up off-sides rule caters to younger players' speed and agility.

One team that has made a significant jump in the standings from last season is the Carolina Hurricanes. Much of the Hurricanes' success is due to the flurry of trades the team made before and during the season, for such players as goalie Martin Gerber and forwards Doug Weight and Mark Recchi.

The Nashville Predators are another team that took advantage of the labor strike to pick up players such as Paul Kariya and Steve Sullivan. They have turned a somewhat young and inexperienced team into a legitimate Stanley Cup contender.

Many traditional playoff teams such as St. Louis, Boston and Toronto are on the verge of missing the playoffs this year. The St. Louis Blues, who have not missed the playoffs in 27 years, are currently in last place in the Western Conference for the first time in their existence.

The hottest teams in the league right now are the Mighty Ducks of Anaheim and the Detroit Red Wings. The Ducks who were fighting for their playoff lives only a few weeks ago are now climbing their way up

the playoff tree thanks to the success of their star forward Teemu Selanne and goalie Jean-Sebastien Giguere. The Detroit Red Wings are right where they left off before the strike, on top of the Western Conference. The new salary cap has not hurt the Wings' quest for an 11th Stanley Cup title. Much of their success comes from their five gold winning Swedish players in this year's Olympic Games.

The biggest disappointments in this year's NHL are the Boston Bruins and the Pittsburgh Penguins. The Bruins went from first place in the Northeast division to last. Meanwhile, the Penguins are set to finish dead last even after picking up such big names as Ziggy Palffy, Mark Recchi, Sergei Gonchar, and John LeClair as well as having Mario Lemieux and top draft pick Sidney Crosby.

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**"The biggest disappointments in this year's NHL are the Boston Bruins and the Pittsburgh Penguins."**

## NCAA tournament finally reaches climax in the form of the Final Four

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The men have been separated from the boys, and only the teams that wanted it the most remain. A lot of people were saying this was going to be the year that all four top seeded teams would dominate their foes; but were they ever wrong. In what has been one of the most improbable and unpredictable tournaments, we have four teams left; two that have turned it into a big boy game, and two that rely on their perimeter offense. In order to get to the title game, some teams are going to overcome some big obstacles.

**Why Florida will win:** The Gators front court will dominate inside against the Patriots' big men. George Mason is much bigger. Joakim Noah is a beast. Noah is always ready to play, unlike Rudy Gay, Josh Boone, and Hilton Armstrong, who only show up when they are good and ready. Plus, nobody can stop him. Don't look for the Patriots to do anything historic here, because he's going to eat them up. Jai Lewis is horribly slow and Will Thomas might be able to run with him, but he is small and Noah will outperform him time after time. In other words, it's going to be a long night inside for those boys. The Gators aren't slouches on the defensive end either. I don't see them getting backed down in the lane.

**Why George Mason will win:** They definitely

have the momentum and fan support entering this game. Everyone loves an underdog and they will be going crazy for them in Indianapolis. All three of their guards shoot the 3-ball as well as anybody in the nation, while Florida only stars Lee Humphrey. All they have to do is stop them down low, and if they can do that, the rest of their offense will struggle. Their experience as a unit is also going to help them. This team knows how to play together, and that's one area Florida can't improve during practice.

**Florida will win:** One word: Noah. Nobody can stop him, and George Mason just doesn't have the parts. Midnight is going to strike on this Cinderella team. They are too awestruck and caught up in the media hype, and this is one area that they are not experienced in. Unfortunately, they have never seen national attention until this month, and that could prove disastrous.

**Why LSU will win:** Is there any front-court duo as dynamic as Glenn "Big Baby" Davis and Tyrus Thomas? A lot of people are comparing them to the former LSU dynamic duo of Shaq and Stanley Roberts. But the new kids are better than those guys. Success is measured in wins and losses, not how much you intimidate your opponent, not that these guys don't send players running from the key. They sure made J.J. think twice.

**Why UCLA will win:** The Bruins don't care much about being over matched physically, they

have faced that problem all March. Jordan Farmar and Arron Affalo have found a way to get it done all season, and if anyone can find a way to get around the dynamic duo, these are the guards to get it done. Ben Howland and his boys will not be intimidated by LSU.

**LSU advances:** Big Baby and Thomas are just too hungry; they already ate up LaMarcus Aldridge.

These guys also have the whole city of New Orleans to keep them motivated. There's just no way that UCLA can stop those guys. The head coach can make is boys bang, but they're going to get knocked out. Who's going to stop these two: Mbah a Moute, Alfred Aboya, Ryan Hollin, or Lorenzo Mata? Are you kidding me?

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