

NHL

# Stanley Cup playoff race features turn-around teams

NICK BLAKE  
sports editor

The weather is getting warm, and when the puck drops for games on the east coast, the sun is still out. This can only mean one thing: It is time for playoff hockey.

The NHL regular season is quickly winding down, and with less than a week left in regular season play, teams are fighting to earn a spot in the Stanley Cup playoffs.

The Western Conference playoff race is already decided as eight teams have clinched playoff births, shutting the door on the bottom seven teams.

The Chicago Blackhawks currently hold the No. 1 seed in the West with 109 points and have clinched the Central division.

Four Western Conference teams that missed the playoffs last season have punched their ticket this year.

The Colorado Avalanche, Los Angeles Kings, Nashville Predators and Phoenix Coyotes all

missed the playoffs last season but will play in the postseason this year for a chance to hoist the Stanley Cup.

Phoenix finished in 13th place last season and after facing bankruptcy almost moved the franchise this season.

Now, they sit in fourth place going into the playoffs.

Colorado finished dead last in the West last season, missing the final playoff spot by over 20 points.

The Avalanche completed a turn-around season this year by clinching a playoff birth for the first time since 2008.

Four Western Conference teams that made the playoffs last year but will be missing out this year are the Anaheim Ducks, Calgary Flames, Columbus Blue Jackets and St. Louis Blues.

The Eastern Conference is yet to be decided, as three of the eight playoff spots are still up for grabs.

The Washington Capitals have clinched the No. 1 seed, the Southeast Division and the

overall best record in the NHL.

The rest of the conference is still a circulating mix, as the final games of the regular season will decide who is in and who is out.

The defending Stanley Cup champion Pittsburgh Penguins currently sit in fourth place and are two points behind the Atlantic Division leading and second place New Jersey Devils.

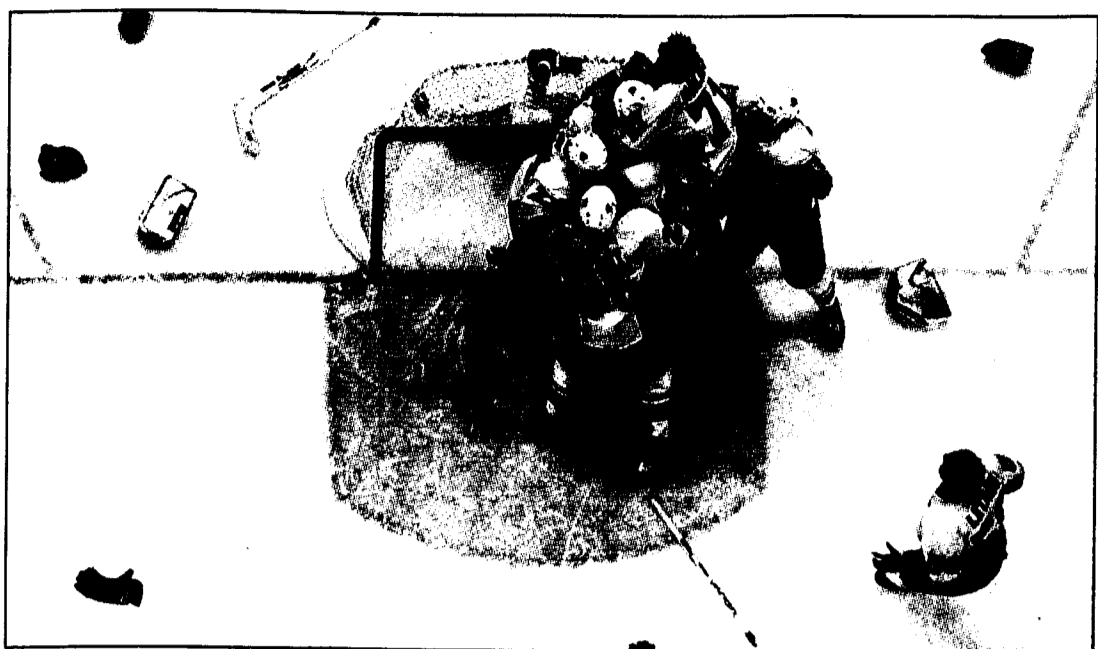
The Penguins have clinched a playoff spot for the third year in a row and could finish as high as second and win the Atlantic Division.

The Buffalo Sabres have clinched the Northeast Division and currently hold the third playoff position.

The Sabres are one point ahead of the Penguins and one point behind New Jersey. Buffalo will be making its first playoff appearance since 2007.

In order, the Montreal Canadiens, Philadelphia Flyers and Boston Bruins hold the final three playoff spots.

The New York Rangers are currently on the outside look-



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The Pittsburgh Penguins will begin their Stanley Cup title defense later this month in the NHL playoffs.

ing in, but are only one point behind the eighth place Bruins.

All four teams are separated by three points or less, so the final regular season games will be vital to the future of these teams.

As of right now, the only team that has no chance of making the playoffs that made the playoffs last year is the Carolina Hurricanes. The Hurricanes made it to the Eastern Conference finals last season,

but will fail to return this year.

The playoffs will begin later this month, and final dates will be decided at the conclusion of the regular season.

PGA TOUR



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Tiger Woods is tied for seventh after the first round of the Masters.

# Woods has early success at Masters

NICK BLAKE  
sports editor

After all of the questions surrounding Tiger Woods, about the future of his career and when he would play again, Woods hit the golf course for the first time in over 20 weeks.

The first round of the Masters Tournament began on Thursday in Augusta, Ga. and marked Woods' return to golf after the allegations surrounding his private life.

While many expected Woods to be rusty and a bit off his game, he had a solid first round and left himself in a good posi-

tion to make the cut.

Woods shot a 68 for the first round and is tied for seventh at four under par.

Woods had three birdies, three bogies and two eagles on the day.

It was the first time Woods made two eagles in a single round at the Masters in his career, and it was his best first round score.

"Why play if you don't think you're going to win," said Woods, according to ESPN. "If I don't think I can win, I won't enter the event."

What may be lost in all of the Woods coverage is the first

round play of 60-year old Tom Watson.

Watson shot an opening round 67 and sits at five under going to the second round.

Watson is the oldest player in the field and shocked the golf world by nearly winning the British Open last year at age 59.

Watson was two under par after a shot in the water on No. 13 but recovered with a wedge shot and was able to save par.

Watson then went on to birdie 15, 16 and 18 to finish his round.

Watson had his son Michael caddie for him, and that made the day even more special.

"What made the day so worthwhile was having my son Michael caddie for me," Watson said. "I wanted to shoot a good score for Michael."

Atop the leaderboard is Fred Couples, who shot a first round score of 66.

Couples' last major championship came 18 years ago at the Masters, and he has put himself in a position to win it again.

"I'm driving it very long and fairly straight, and I'm putting ridiculously well out there," Couples said. "Today I made a bunch of 6- and 7-footers on the front 9. That was just a huge boost."

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