

Pens streaking toward division title

PITTSBURGH (AP) — Don't look now, but the Pittsburgh Penguins are in the last place you'd expect them to be in mid-March: first place. Usually, by now, the Penguins have taken a hint from the flightless animal they're named after and have realized their season wasn't going to get off the ground. But these Penguins are birds of a different feather. With seven games to go, two against the team that's chasing them — the New York Rangers — the Penguins are breathing the rarefied air of first place. Never before in their 24-year history have they been in first place so late in the season. And the way they were talking after Sunday's 4-2 victory over the Rangers, their sixth in their last seven games in

Madison Square Garden, the Penguins have no intention of vacating their new penthouse suite. What a perfect gift for general manager Craig Patrick, the former Rangers' executive: to take over first place in the Patrick Division on St. Patrick's Day — and in the building where he once worked. "I think we're going to win our division, there's no doubt in my mind," said winger Kevin Stevens, who scored two goals. "The Rangers are not playing well and the roll we're on, it's not likely to make a difference, anyway." The Penguins are 6-0-1 in their last seven games and have won their last 13 at home, an important statistic if they win the Patrick Division and gain home-ice advantage in the playoffs.

Are these the same Penguins who have failed to make the playoffs seven of the last eight seasons? Not really. Since a six-player trade with Hartford on March 4 brought defenseman Ulf Samuelsson, talented veteran Ron Francis and Grant Jennings — giving them much-needed muscle and size on defense — the Penguins have made a dramatic turnaround. A team that often talked about playing defense but rarely played it, the Penguins have allowed just 17 goals in their last seven games after giving up 28 in their previous five. The team that lived to outscore other teams, thanks to Mario Lemieux and the now-disbanded Option Line, now is winning with . . . defense? "Winning the division is a matter of

pride for us," said Stevens, noting the Penguins haven't accumulated a single championship pennant in a quarter-century of play. "This team hasn't done anything," left winger Bob Errey said. The Penguins have participated in the playoffs only once (1989) since 1982, but could go 2-1 in their final seven and get in without help. Just two weeks ago, they were coming off an 0-4-1 road trip and staying out of fifth place — not possessing first place — was of more immediate concern. But since the trade enabled them to play the kind of defense Johnson has preached all season, the Penguins have been nearly unbeatable. The team whose season is usually over by mid-December is taking about playing into April . . . and, maybe, May.

Caratti ousts Connors; Graf, Seles advance

By STEVEN WINE
AP Sports Writer

KEY BISCAIYNE, Fla. — Jimmy Connors is still struggling with his return. One day after winning for the first time in 17 months, the 38-year-old Connors was eliminated from the second round of the International Players Championships. Cristiano Caratti of Italy, ranked No. 37, beat the eight-time Grand Slam champion 6-4, 6-3. Connors, trying to come back from wrist surgery last October, is 1-2 in matches this year. Steffi Graf and Monica Seles, battling for the No. 1 women's ranking, advanced to the quarterfinals. Seles won her final nine games as she beat Florencia Labat 7-5, 6-0.

Graf, who lost her top ranking to Seles last week, swept Marianne Werdel 6-0, 6-1. Graf has lost only seven games in her first three matches. The German will regain the No. 1 ranking if she wins the championship and Seles loses before the finals. Fourth-seeded Mary Joe Fernandez and No. 5 Zina Garrison also advanced with straight-set wins. In men's play, top seed Stefan Edberg beat Goran Prpic 6-4, 6-2. Fourth-seeded Guy Forget swept Jimmy Arias 6-1, 6-1, and No. 10 Michael Chang rallied to beat Henri Leconte, 4-6, 6-3, 6-3. Connors broke Caratti at love to close to 4-3 in their second set. But Connors made three unforced forehand errors and double-faulted to lose the next game, and Caratti then served out the match.



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