

Quest for the Cup begins

EASTERN CONFERENCE

IN ORDER OF PROJECTED FINISH



Newcomer Mike Knuble (22) will try to help the Washington Capitals win another Southeast Division title.

GETTY IMAGES PHOTO BY JIM MCISAAC

SOUTHEAST DIVISION

3. WASHINGTON CAPITALS

Key changes: Veteran forwards Brendan Morrison and Mike Knuble replace Sergei Fedorov and Viktor Kozlov, who returned to Russia.

On the hot seat: Starting goalie Jose Theodore lost his job to rookie Semyon Varlamov one game into the playoffs.

5. CAROLINA HURRICANES

Key changes: Aaron Ward and Andrew Alberts provide the beef on defense the Canes were missing last season.

On the hot seat: Captain Rod Brind'Amour has to prove, at 39, his declining performance last season was due to injury and not age.

7. TAMPA BAY LIGHTNING

Key changes: Veteran Mattias Ohlund and No. 2 draft pick Victor Hedman provide an instant makeover on the blue line.

On the hot seat: The franchise needs its co-owners to figure out which one owns the team, for the sake of stability.

10. FLORIDA PANTHERS

Key changes: Jay Bouwmeester became the latest star (Olli Jokinen, Roberto Luongo) to flee Florida.

On the hot seat: Stephen Weiss has yet to show the kind of production expected from a center picked fourth overall.

14. ATLANTA THRASHERS

Key changes: Maple Leafs refugees Pavel Kubina and Nikolai Antropov add a much-needed helping of size to a small team.

On the hot seat: General manager Don Waddell faces another tough contract negotiation with a franchise player, this time with Ilya Kovalchuk.



Defensemen Mattias Ohlund and Victor Hedman should shore up the Tampa Bay Lightning's blue line.

AP PHOTO BY JOHN AMIS

ATLANTIC DIVISION

2. PHILADELPHIA FLYERS



Pronger tailor-made for Philly.

Key changes: Chris Pronger is the new face of the franchise, and his rough-and-tumble (dirty?) persona will play well in Philly.

On the hot seat: The mercurial Ray Emery will have to keep the puck out of the net and his temper under control.

4. PITTSBURGH PENGUINS

Key changes: The Penguins lost some key players from their Cup team (defensemen Rob Scuderi and Hal Gill in particular).

On the hot seat: Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin are no strangers to pressure, but they'll face a new variety as they attempt to defend their title.

6. NEW JERSEY DEVILS

Key changes: Jacques Lemaire returns for a second stint in charge, ready to put the 'D' back in the Devils the same way he kept the Wild mild.

On the hot seat: With John Madden gone, someone will have to step up as the lockdown defensive center for the Devils' system to work properly.

8. N.Y. RANGERS

Key changes: If Marian Gaborik stays healthy, he'll be a star on Broadway, but that's a tremendous "if."

On the hot seat: John Tortorella wasn't able to get the most out of this team last spring, but he has more of his stamp on it now – and Henrik Lundqvist in net.

15. N.Y. ISLANDERS

Key changes: First overall pick John Tavares is only being asked to single-handedly revitalize hockey on Long Island.

On the hot seat: If Nassau County doesn't approve owner Charles Wang's Lighthouse project to redevelop the arena, these could be the Kansas City Islanders soon.



Marco Sturm is healthy again for the Boston Bruins.

GETTY IMAGES PHOTO BY DAVE SANDFORD

NORTHEAST DIVISION

1. BOSTON BRUINS

Key changes: Even without Aaron Ward, Phil Kessel and P.J. Axelsson, the Bruins still have the talent to be the top team in the conference.

On the hot seat: Marco Sturm, who missed most of last season with a knee injury, is expected to help provide the goals lost by Kessel's departure.

9. TORONTO MAPLE LEAFS

Key changes: Brian Burke's quest for size continues, with the defense completely retooled (Francois Beauchemin, Mike Komisarek).

On the hot seat: Vesa Toskala is the nominal starter in goal, but the Leafs hope high-priced Swedish free agent Jonas "The Monster" Gustavsson is the long-term solution.

11. OTTAWA SENATORS

Key changes: Dispatching the disgruntled Dany Heatley is addition by subtraction, but Milan Michalek and Jonathan Cheechoo will help the Sens.

On the hot seat: Former Blue Jackets goalie Pascal Leclaire is the latest to tend the uncomfortable Ottawa net (Patrick Lalime, Ray Emery, Martin Gerber, et al.)

12. BUFFALO SABRES

Key changes: When Mike Grier is your biggest addition – albeit a popular, heart-warming one – it's hard to sense any forward momentum.

On the hot seat: Thomas Vanek scored 40 goals but is making more than \$6 million, tough for a small-market team to swallow.

13. MONTREAL CANADIENS

Key changes: The complete forward makeover added a ton of skill (Scott Gomez, Brian Gionta, Mike Cammalleri) at the expense of size.

On the hot seat: GM Bob Gainey let a dozen free agents walk in an attempt to change a persistent culture of underachievement.

WESTERN CONFERENCE

IN ORDER OF PROJECTED FINISH

CENTRAL DIVISION

1. DETROIT RED WINGS

Key changes: Losing Marian Hossa as a free agent would cripple other teams. The Red Wings barely noticed.

On the hot seat: Finnish forward Ville Leino, who played in the AHL last season, is the Red Wings' latest stylish European import.

4. CHICAGO BLACKHAWKS

Key changes: The Blackhawks botched the routine re-signing of five restricted free agents, putting them in a salary-cap crunch and costing GM Dale Tallon his job.

On the hot seat: Marian Hossa signed a huge deal with the Hawks, then underwent shoulder surgery that will keep him out until at least November.

6. ST. LOUIS BLUES

Key changes: The surprising Blues largely stood pat, but having a fully healthy Erik Johnson back is like adding an impact defenseman.

On the hot seat: After posting 14 goals and 25 assists as a rookie, T.J. Oshie needs to take the next step this season.

9. NASHVILLE PREDATORS

Key changes: The Predators missed the playoffs last year, but they didn't really add anyone of note and have largely the same group back.

On the hot seat: Pekka Rinne played his way into the No. 1 goalie job.

11. COLUMBUS BLUE JACKETS

Key changes: Perennial Selke Trophy contender Sami Pahlsson is a big upgrade in a division full of skilled centers.

On the hot seat: Fredrik Modin has had two injury-riddled seasons, and the Jackets are still waiting for him to show the scoring touch he displayed with the Lightning.

PACIFIC DIVISION

2. SAN JOSE SHARKS

Key changes: Disgruntled winger Dany Heatley wanted out of Ottawa and landed with the Sharks.

On the hot seat: The center tandem of Joe Thornton and Patrick Marleau has piled up plenty of points – and very few playoff victories.

5. ANAHEIM DUCKS

Key changes: Longtime Canadiens captain Saku Koivu replaces Chris Pronger as the Ducks' veteran leader.

On the hot seat: Second-year defenseman Luca Sbisa arrives as part of the Pronger deal and will have to help fill that void on the Anaheim blue line.

12. DALLAS STARS

Key changes: Marc Crawford, who won a Stanley Cup in Colorado but was unable to get Vancouver over the hump, replaces Dave Tippett behind the bench.

On the hot seat: Marty Turco's reputation as one of the league's best goalies doesn't match his playoff resume.

13. LOS ANGELES KINGS

Key changes: Justin Williams arrived injured last season; now healthy, he'll help new arrival Ryan Smyth provide leadership for a young, but talented, team.

On the hot seat: Young defensemen Drew Doughty and Jack Johnson need to become impact players before the Kings can make the playoffs.

15. PHOENIX COYOTES

Key changes: In the midst of a protracted legal battle over the franchise, Dave Tippett was an inspired hire to replace Wayne Gretzky as coach.

On the hot seat: Gary Bettman, Jim Balsillie and the bankruptcy court need to come to some sort of agreement about the future of the team, and fast.

NORTHWEST DIVISION

3. VANCOUVER CANUCKS

Key changes: The departure of Mats Sundin and Mattias Ohlund headline the rebuilding, with the underrated Christian Ehrhoff leading the new arrivals.

On the hot seat: There's no question Roberto Luongo is one of the best, if not the best, goalies in the game. The Canucks can't waste time while he's in his prime.

7. MINNESOTA WILD

Key changes: Former Sharks assistant Todd Richards brings a new mentality to the bench as he replaces defense-minded Jacques Lemaire.

On the hot seat: With Marian Gaborik gone, free agent Martin Havlat will be the cornerstone of the Wild offense.

8. CALGARY FLAMES

Key changes: Providing the escape route for Jay Bouwmeester out of Florida solidifies the Flames' blue line for years to come.

On the hot seat: Brent Sutter left the Devils to return home and try to get the results out of the Flames that Mike Keenan couldn't.

10. EDMONTON OILERS

Key changes: Nikolai Khabibulin gives the Oilers the rock-solid goaltender they've missed since Dwayne Roloson got hot in the 2006 playoffs.

On the hot seat: Pat Quinn returns to the bench at the ripe age of 66. Can he still connect with today's players?

14. COLORADO AVALANCHE

Key changes: The rebuilding Avalanche dumped veterans and added a few players, but no one can replace the retired Joe Sakic.

On the hot seat: Former general manager Pierre Lacroix boot-ed his hand-picked replacement and turned to Greg Sherman to oversee the rebuilding process.



Dany Heatley, left, gets a fresh start in San Jose after wearing out his welcome with the Ottawa Senators.

GETTY IMAGES PHOTO BY CHRISTIAN PETERSEN

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