

NHL PLAYOFFS

Semifinals feature 4 teams that have not faced each other all season

BY STEPHEN WHYNO

AP Hockey Writer

If the teams left in the NHL playoffs are sick and tired of facing the same opponents over and over, they are in luck in the semifinals.

After exclusively divisional play this season and through the first two rounds, the hockey playoffs are down to a final four of teams that haven't played each other all year. The New York Islanders face the Tampa Bay Lightning in one semifinal that's a rematch of the 2020 Eastern Conference final, while the Vegas Golden Knights play the Montreal Canadiens in a playoff series for the first time.

After so much familiarity from seeing the same teams over and over, the final two rounds with the Stanley Cup on the line bring every element of the unknown.

"It's such a different series in terms of the preparation," Vegas general manager Kelly McCrimmon said.

"Now with the Islanders and Tampa Bay, our own series with Montreal, it's brand new. Starting from scratch."

The league that has emphasized rivalries for decades limited play within four remade divisions for one season only because of the pandemic. It allowed all 31 teams to complete a condensed, 56-game schedule with 16 making the playoffs.

New York emerged from the East, Tampa Bay the Central, Vegas the West and Montreal the North. Players and coaches from these teams haven't thought much about each other all season, let alone scout or prepare for them.

"Different season for everyone," Canadiens coach Dominique Ducharme said. "Different style of play or different teams that you play often, but that's part of the challenge for everyone right now."

If Montreal-Vegas, which begins Monday night, goes the distance, the teams will face off more times during one playoff series than they have all-time in the regular season, because the Golden Knights began playing in 2017.

The Lightning and Islanders grinded out a six-game series nine months ago in the postseason bubble



Gerry Broome/AP

Tampa Bay Lightning right wing Nikita Kucherov (86) passes during Game 5 of a second-round playoff series against the Carolina Hurricanes in Raleigh, North Carolina, on Tuesday. Kucherov, the 2019 MVP who missed this year's regular season while recovering from hip surgery, is leading all scorers with 18 points so far in the playoffs as the Lightning attempt to defend their Stanley Cup title.

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— Ryan McDonagh, Tampa Bay Lightning defenseman

in Edmonton, Alberta, so there will be some familiarity when the puck drops Sunday afternoon in Tampa.

"It helps a little bit," Islanders coach Barry Trotz said. "Most of our players played in that series, so they understand when we're talking about certain trends or the way they play."

Tampa Bay won that series last fall before beating Dallas and hoisting the Stanley Cup. With the Lightning, Islanders and Golden Knights in the semifinals again, the NHL has three of the same teams in the final four for the first time since 1991 and 1992.

Vegas center Mattias Janmark

and Montreal winger Corey Perry are back in the third round after going on a run to the final with Dallas. Perry said watching games in other divisions helps get past the uncertainty.

"I think you look at our two teams and there's four lines on both sides, six D, and two great world-class goalies are going to go battle head-to-head," Perry said. "It's going to be fun."

The Lightning are having fun with 2019 MVP Nikita Kucherov back after missing the regular season recovering from hip surgery. Kucherov leads all scorers with 18 points through two rounds of the playoffs.

"He's a tremendous hockey player," Islanders GM Lou Lamoriello said.

The Islanders remember how tremendous Kucherov can be, and Tampa Bay now has captain Steven Stamkos playing too. But each team also knows there are some differences masked by not being on the ice together since September.

"Maybe you wish you had played them a little more recently, but at the end of the day, this is the situation we've been dealt," Lightning defenseman Ryan McDonagh said. "We knew if we got to this point we were going to have to face a team that we hadn't played in the regular season."

Vegas goes into the semis as the favorite. The Golden Knights are the No. 1 seed by virtue of finishing with the most points and are battle-tested after needing seven games to knock off Minnesota and gutting through a tough second-round series against Presidents' Trophy-winning Colorado.

Now to see if the franchise in its fourth year of existence can hold off a challenge from an organization with 24 Stanley Cup titles to get to the final.

"I've always believed that to win in the playoffs as you go along, you have to keep getting better," McCrimmon said. "It's hard to win. Nothing has been easy for us in either series that we've played. It's only going to get tougher as we move on here to the semifinals."



John Locher/AP

Vegas Golden Knights defenseman Alex Pietrangolo, right, scores a goal against Colorado Avalanche goaltender Philipp Grubauer (31) during Game 6 of a second-round playoff series on Thursday in Las Vegas.

Boswell

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"I went into it with the desire to do well, but more to have just a good run at it, rather than going there to try to win the thing," Boswell said. "Obviously winning it is awesome, but it wasn't really an expectation that I had of myself."

Boswell said he did not think he was going to win until he actually crossed the finish line.

"Just because there's just so many unknown factors in gravel racing, with mechanicals, and (body) fueling, and flat tires and all that," he said. "There's a lot of unknowns, and it's all kind of new to me with a different format of bike racing. But I was fortunate to have a clean run at it, no mechanicals, and was able to eat and drink enough. I really just had a perfect day out there mechanically and physically. Everything had to just align to put myself in the position to sprint for the win against ten Dam."

After an 11-year road career, Boswell announced in late 2019 that he was retiring from the WorldTour to pursue gravel racing and to be a full-time rider liaison for Atlanta-based technology brand Wahoo Fitness, which makes indoor trainers and bike computers and sponsors five WorldTour teams.

Boswell was born in Bend with a marathon-running mother and a triathlete father who encouraged his love of cycling. A graduate of Bend's Summit High School, Boswell, at 21, moved to Nice, France, to join

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world-renowned Team Sky.

He raced seven years on the WorldTour, including five with Team Sky. In 2017 he finished fifth overall in the Tour of California. He competed four times in Grand Tour events, racing the Vuelta a Espana in 2015 and 2016 and the Giro d'Italia in 2016. In his first and only Tour de France, in 2018, he placed 79th overall in a field of 145 finishers.

Boswell suffered a concussion — the sixth of his career — in a violent crash at the Tirreno-Adriatico in Italy in March 2019 while racing with Team Katusha-Alpecin, and he underwent a long recovery process, sitting out the rest of the season while dealing with vision problems and constant headaches.

Part of the reason Boswell has turned to gravel racing is because he believes it to be safer than road racing. He did not want to face the prospect of another crash, another concussion. Sure, gravel racing is dangerous as well, but in his new career his income does not hinge on his results.



Andy Chastain/Wahoo Fitness

Former Bend resident Ian Boswell races in the Unbound Gravel 200 in Kansas on June 5.

Gravel riding and racing are surging in popularity in the United States. Unbound, the most high-profile race and formerly called the Dirty Kanza, is staged every spring near Emporia, Kansas, and was started in 2006 with 34 racers. This year, it hosted nearly 3,000 riders, including top cyclists from throughout the country.

Courses in gravel races vary from hard-packed dirt to softball-sized rocks, and distances usually range from 50 to 150 miles but can be even longer.

Boswell said he has lots of dirt and gravel roads to ride near his house in Peacham, where he lives with his wife,

Barbora Krejickova wins women's French Open title

PARIS — Thinking of her late coach the whole time, Barbora Krejickova went from unseeded player to Grand Slam champion at a French Open full of surprises. Krejickova beat 31st-seeded Anastasia Pavlyuchenkova 6-1, 2-6, 6-4 in the final at Roland Garros on Saturday to win the title in just her fifth major tournament as a singles player.

"It's big achievement that nobody really expected," said Krejickova, a 25-year-old from the Czech Republic, who never won a WTA title of any sort until last month. "Not even me."

When it ended with Pavlyuchenkova's backhand landing long on Krejickova's fourth match point, they met at the net for a hug. Then Krejickova blew kisses, her eyes squeezed shut, in tribute to her former coach, Jana Novotna, the 1998 Wimbledon champion who died of cancer at age 49 in 2017.

"Pretty much her last words were just enjoy and just try to win a Grand Slam. And, I mean, I know that, from somewhere, she's looking after me," Krejickova told the crowd at Court Philippe Chatrier, limited to 5,000 because of the coronavirus pandemic.

"All of this that just happened, these two weeks, is pretty much because she is just looking after me from up there," Krejickova said, lifting her left hand toward the sky. "It was amazing that I had a chance to meet her and that she was such an inspiration for me. I just really miss her. But I hope she's happy right now. I'm extremely happy."

Krejickova is the third unseeded women's champion since 2017 at Roland Garros. There were zero from 1968 through 2016.

She now will try to become the first woman since Mary Pierce in 2000 to win the French Open singles and doubles titles in the same year. Krejickova and partner Katerina Siniakova already own two Grand Slam doubles titles and reached Sunday's final of that event.

— Associated Press



Thibault Camus/AP

Stefanos Tsitsipas plays a return to Pablo Carreno Busta during their fourth-round match of the French Open in Paris on June 6.

French Open

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There's also this milestone within reach for Djokovic, something Federer and Nadal haven't done: He can join Rod Laver and Roy Emerson as the only men in tennis history to win each of the four major tournaments at least twice.

There were two first-time Grand Slam finalists in the women's title match Saturday afternoon in Paris, and unseeded Barbora Krejickova beat No. 31 Anastasia Pavlyuchenkova 6-1, 2-6, 6-4 for the trophy.

Speaking at around midnight as Friday turned to Saturday after his 3-6, 6-3, 7-6 (4), 6-2 triumph dropped Nadal's record at Roland Garros to 105-3 — two of those defeats were against Djokovic — the No. 1 seed in the men's draw said he would take some time to catch his breath before thinking about what to do against Tsitsipas.

"I'm not the freshest guy right now, obviously. But (the) good thing is that I have a day and a half to rejuvenate and try to regroup," Djokovic said.

"Right now, it's all about resting and hopefully being able to be fit to compete in the best-of-five with a guy who is in a great shape."

Djokovic has won five of their previous seven encounters, although Tsitsipas did push him to five sets before losing in the semifinals of the 2020 French Open.

"I know it's going to be another tough one," Djokovic said. "I'm hoping I can recharge my batteries as much as I can because I'm going to need some power and energy for that one."

He's the fourth-oldest finalist at Roland Garros in the Open era, which dates to 1968; the 22-year-old Tsitsipas is the youngest since Nadal won the title in 2008.

The age gap between Djokovic and Tsitsipas is the largest for a French Open men's final since Mats Wilander, 17, defeated Guillermo Vilas, 29, in 1982.

"I'm looking forward (to) leaving my entire body on the court," Tsitsipas said.

There has been steady progress toward this moment by Tsitsipas, who leads the men's tour in total match wins (39) and clay-court victories (22) this season.

His 6-3, 6-3, 4-6, 4-6, 6-3 victory over Alexander Zverev at Court Philippe Chatrier on Friday represented the Greek's first win in four career major semifinals, including three appearances in a row in that round.

The result also left Tsitsipas choking back tears during the on-court interview.

"I'm obviously just blessed to have the opportunity to play against the best and test myself, something that I've always dreamed and wished to happen one day," Tsitsipas said. "I'm able to be here and really going for it. I love that."

Tour, which is incredibly helpful. I also don't have the pressure and expectations of having to win because it's my job and career."

As an athlete liaison for Wahoo, Boswell hosts a popular bi-monthly podcast called Breakfast with Boz and he often gets pulled into other projects, such as videos for new product launches.

"I use my prior experience as a professional athlete to make things easier and relatable to athletes," Boswell said.

Boswell said he plans to race about five or six gravel events per year. His next race will be the Migration Gravel Race, a four-day stage race in Kenya, June 23-26. The race conflicts with the Oregon Trail Gravel Grinder, set for June 23-27 on dirt and gravel roads throughout Central Oregon, so Boswell will not be returning to Bend to race on his old home roads. But he said he could not pass up a chance to race in Africa.

"The level and depth of the field in gravel races is rising," Boswell said. "There's so many people out there. There's the people who are racing to win, and there's other people out there riding for the experience, having as many tough moments and struggles as the people at the front. Their stories are just as compelling, which is the cool thing about these events. You're on the start line with so many people of so many different abilities but everyone is riding the same course at the same time."

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