

NHL VS. THE VIRUS: WHICH WILL WIN?

Hockey is to many Canadians as breathing is to the average human, so it's not surprising that there is great joy across the land now that the National Hockey League has — hold your breath! — returned to a regular (or, more appropriately, irregular) season of league play.

It's a risk, of course, with the coronavirus still raging, and the NHL trying to make a go of it without the protective confines of a bubble, which was used so successfully last summer in two Canadian centres and resulted in the Tampa Bay Lightning winning the Stanley Cup.

It won't be so easy this year. While players, coaches, team executives and media members were last summer restricted to 'the bubble,' with little or no chance of the virus causing infections, there is no such protection this year. The NHL brass has divided the 31 teams into four divisions (each with a forgettable corporate name — the Scotiabank North, for example) and plans to play a 56-game schedule with normal travel between cities. Players will be coming and going from their homes, interacting with wives and children, and almost certainly leading to a number of cases of COVID-19. One player with the virus and not showing symptoms could, in theory, infect his entire team, creating logistical problems of gigantic proportions. Shortly after training camps began, in fact, COVID-19 outbreaks were reported with Dallas Stars and Caroline Hurricanes.

On the other hand, it might just work with just a few blips. The NHL has been in regular consultation with the National Football League, which played its 256 games within its planned 17-week window, on how to smoothly run a full schedule while a global pandemic continues to rage. It could work for the NHL. What it will take, though, is millions of dollars for regular testing and contact tracing, and total commitment from players and team officials. A goalie mask takes on a whole new meaning this year.

The NFL wasn't without its problems. Most teams had minor outbreaks, some more serious than others. The Denver Broncos played one game without a legitimate quarterback, and the Cleveland Browns played their second-last game with all their starting receivers on the sidelines. The NHL is almost certain to experience similar minor breakouts, so schedule flexibility will be important. Could a 56-game schedule be reduced to 48 games? Sure it could. Could the last day of the regular schedule, May 8, suddenly become May 21? Yes, if required.

With the COVID-19 vaccine starting to be distributed, there is hope that this global health disaster may fade away in 2021. Navigating the complicated period ahead for the NHL will be challenging, but not impossible.

- **Patti Dawn Swansson**, aka the River City Renegade: "It's going to be weird seeing **Zdeno Chara** in Washington Capitals garb this winter. It'll be kind of like **Pope Francis** holding mass in Wrangler jeans, Tony Lama snake skin boots and a Stetson instead of his robe and pointy hat."
- **Dwight Perry** of the Seattle Times: "Thanks to COVID-19, this Dec. 31 in Times Square will mark the first time in 113 years that there won't be any New Yorkers on hand to witness a ball getting dropped. In other words, no different than a Jets home game in 2020."
- [fark.com](#), after reports the Yankees were considering signing **Yasiel Puig**: "Yanks: Y'know, we haven't signed a full-blown head case since what ... **A-Rod? Rickey Henderson? Clemens?** We're due."
- Another one from [fark.com](#): "The NHL announced that each division will have sponsor names this year. NFL expected to follow suit, starting with the Waste Management NFC East."
- Comedy writer **Alex Kaseberg**: "The Chicago Bear lost to the Green Bay Packers 35-16. It was sad when Bears coach, **Matt Nagy**, called the NFL offices and asked them to find him 20 more points."
- **RJ Currie** of [sportsdeke.com](#): "**P.K. Subban** and **Lindsey Vonn** have called off their engagement. I doubt PK is the first hockey player to get cold feet."
- **Patti Dawn Swansson** again, on the Vonn-Subban split: "Hard to figure. After all, P.K. is one of the NHL's most notorious divers. And now he's not willing to take the plunge?"
- Headline in the Washington Post, after the Eagles pulled starting QB **Jalen Hurts** in the final quarter, cementing a win and playoff berth for WFT: "Tanks for everything."
- Eagles tackle **Lane Johnson**, to the **Pat McAfee Show**, on why he probably won't be watching the NFL wild-card games: "As a football player, it'd be like a cop coming home watching 'COPS'."
- **Jack Finarelli** of [SportsCurmudgeon.com](#), on rumours the moribund Lions might be looking to trade QB **Matthew Stafford**: "I do not know if (Detroit) fans should be thrilled about that or not, but I think **Matthew Stafford** should be elated."

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