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## GOALTENDING BOOSTS HABS' FORTUNES

If goaltending quality were used to rate the Canadian teams in the National Hockey League, mark the Montreal Canadiens down as the presumptive champion of the North Division this summer.

As the seven teams approached the one-third mark of the 56-game regular season, with nary a postponement due to COVID-19 (as teams in the other three divisions had all suffered), a few things are becoming obvious.

Such as: It's a wide-open race for the top four playoff spots, with perhaps only Montreal and Toronto in safer positions than the others; on any given night ... any team can beat any other team; and pencil in Montreal's Marc Bergevin as the general manager who made the biggest splash in roster construction.

Thanks to Bergevin's moves in the off-season, his Canadiens appear to be neck-and-neck with the Maple Leafs as the North Division's No. 1 team, which brings great joy to fans of the Habs, without a Stanley Cup since 1993.

Strength in goal is the foundation of Montreal's good start (9-5-2), thanks to Bergevin's acquisition of Jake Allen from St Louis in the off-season. The Carey Price-Allen combo is the division's best, by far, and the envy of other teams. Toronto has the overworked Frederik Andersen in goal, backed up by Michael (Five Hole) Hutchinson or Jack Campbell. Winnipeg has the great Connor Hellebuyck and the unproven Laurent Brossoit. In Calgary, No. 1 guy Jacob Markstrom gives the Flames quality but the backup is the dreadful David Rittich. Up in Edmonton, coach Dave Tippett cannot fully depend on either Mikko Koskinen or Mike Smith. Vancouver's goaltending duo of the aging Braden Holtby and youthful Thatcher Demko is probably the division's second-best unit.

Just like quarterback in football or pitching in baseball, a hockey team's strength begins in goal. And the Habs have it.

Bergevin's off-season moves also resulted in the signing of free agent Tyler Toffoli from Vancouver (16 points in 16 games) and winger Josh Anderson from Columbus (for Max Domi and a draft pick), who had nine goals in Montreal's first 16 games, providing added life to a developing offence that also includes former first-rounder Nick Suzuki, Jonathan Drouin, Brendan Gallagher, Jesperi Kotkaniemi and Tomas Tatar. And on defence, stalwarts Shea Weber and Jeff Petry are backed by another Bergevin pickup, Joel Edmundson, and rookie Alexander Romanov, who is being given rookie-of-the-year consideration for his strong play.

Overall, the Habs are solid. Toronto is off to a great start and if its high-powered offence had Montreal's goaltending, the Leafs would romp. Defence wins championships, though, and Montreal has it.

- **Patti Dawn Swansson**, aka the River City Renegade: "The only thing that surprised me about the Buccaneers championship boat parade was seeing **Tom Brady** on one of the boats. I thought for sure he'd be walking on the water."
- Swansson again: "I understand why the NFL used faux fans, but **Patrick Mahomes** is demanding to know why Kansas City coach **Andy Reid** used cardboard cutouts instead of his regular offensive linemen."
- **Dwight Perry** of the Seattle Times: "Skateboarding has been added to the medal events for this year's Olympics, and break dancing will likewise be in the lineup at the 2024 Paris Games. Somehow not passing IOC muster: a motion to change the Olympic motto to 'Sicker, Hipper, Gnarlier.'"
- Blogger **Chad Piscasner**, on **Trevor Bauer's** new Dodger contract penciling out to \$10,000-plus per pitch this season: "Which could lead to this conversation on the mound: Manager: 'How do you feel, Trevor?' Bauer: 'I think I got about \$40,000 left in me, Skipper.'"
- Gambling Mad blogger **Norman Chad**, on Twitter: "If **Tom Brady** ran a stoplight, they would say the stoplight was wrong."
- Chad again: "Elected officials have term limits – it is time to apply them to **Tom Brady**."
- **David Staples** of the Edmonton Journal, on a suggestion for a catchy nickname for the line featuring **Jujhar Khaira** and linemates **Tyler Ennis** and **Josh Archibald**: "The Sweet Khaira Line."
- From **Dan Robson** in The Athletic, on what former NHL enforcer **Donald Brashear** tells players in pre-game chats now that he is refereeing beer league games in Quebec: "I have one rule: If you guys start fighting, I don't give out penalties. I jump in the fight."
- Comedy writer **Alex Kaseberg**: "Texas got so much snow, the Houston Texans traded **J.J. Watt** for 10 snow shovels, two sacks of salt and a snowblower to-be-named- later."
- **Dwight Perry** again "Those wild and crazy Houston Texans agreed to release star pass-rusher **J.J. Watt** — still under contract — instead of trying to get some return value in a trade. Veteran team watchers say you'd have to go back weeks — weeks — to find a Texans move this confounding."

- **RJ Currie** of [sportsdeke.com](http://sportsdeke.com): “The Indianapolis Colts acquired QB **Carson Wentz** from the Eagles for a third-round pick, a second-round pick and a thank you note from Wentz to be sent later.”  
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