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SKIP THE PLAYOFFS; JUST GIVE THE CUP TO TAMPA

There are TV obligations, and arenas are rented, and charter flights have been booked, but other than those incidentals, is there really any reason to play hockey for two months before handing the Stanley Cup in June to the Tampa Bay Lightning?

This one is the most obvious in years. This is Ali vs. Chuck Wepner; Jordan playing one-on-one against a high schooler; Tiger in the year 2000; a fly swatter vs. a drowsy fly. If this year's Stanley Cup playoffs were an animal, the Humane Society would step in.

Tampa Bay won 62 of 82 games this year, losing only 16 in regulation time. Sixty-two wins ties the all-time one-season record, set in 1995-96 by the Detroit Red Wings, who — drum roll, please, did *not* go on to win the Stanley Cup, getting upset in the Western final by Colorado Avalanche. But that was more than 20 years ago. Can't happen again, can it?

Coach Jon Cooper is getting huge chops for coach of the year, but Billy the Boozer down at the local bar would look good behind the bench if he could throw out forwards the likes of scoring champ Nikita Kucherov (128 points), Steven Stamkos, Brayden Point and Tyler Johnson, a crew of defenders whose top four (or five) — Victor Hedman, Ryan McDonough, Mikhail Sergachev, Braydon Coburn and Anton Stralman — is undoubtedly the best set of blueliners in the league. And if somehow the other team breaks through, 39-game winner Andrei Vasilevskiy is there to protect the net. The Lightning's goal differential was plus-103, 41 better than runner-up Calgary. Tampa Bay's plus-60 was tops last year and Washington's plus 81 was best in 2016-17. Their 128 points were a whopping 21 points ahead of the runner-up Flames and Bruins.

Of course, in an era where the Cubs have won a World Series and LeBron has missed the playoffs, there are no guarantees in sport. Strange things happens. Pucks takes funny bounces. A flu bug goes around a locker room. Somebody breaks an arm or pulls a groin.

But c'mon, this one's a slam dunk. When lightning strikes in nature, it can lay waste to the countryside. When the Lightning strike in this year's playoffs, they'll be laying waste to at least four opponents along the way.

- Comedy writer **Alex Kaseberg**, on actor **Jussie Smollett**'s big week: "He had his 16 charges of staging a hate crime dropped. And today he was accepted to UCLA on a women's soccer scholarship."
- **Norman Chad** of the Washington Post, on increasingly unruly fans at sporting events: "If Vatican City were in New Jersey, the Pope likely would get heckled during Easter Mass."
- Washington Post reader **Rich Tucker**: "If a Duke player falls in the forest, is there a referee there to call a foul on the trees?"
- Comedy writer **Brad Dickson**: "After watching the NCAA Tournament games last night I Googled 'Iowa high school girls basketball' just to see some people who are proficient at making free throws when the pressure's on."
- **Brad Rock** of the Deseret News: "A study in the U.K. says people are the happiest at ages 16 and 70. That pretty much covers both ends of **Vince Carter**'s career."
- Kaseberg again: "In its first season, the Alliance of American Football has shut down. They're not allowed to tackle, throw or catch. It's like being a member of the Oakland Raiders."
- **RJ Currie** of sportsdeke.com: "How about **Johnny Manziel**: washed out in the NFL, banned by the CFL, and now his new AAF league has folded. What's next, **Johnny Nerfball**?"
- Currie again: Sports Illustrated posted five swimsuits GIFs titled 'Why We Love **Genie Bouchard**.' Revealing? Let's just say she shows a lot more there than she does on a tennis court."
- Headline at Fark.com: "**Richie Incognito** pleads guilty to disorderly conduct at funeral home, says it was because he was not a mourning person."
- **Dwight Perry** of the Seattle Times: "Bengals RB **Mark Walton** has been arrested three times in three months — the latest on weapons, marijuana and reckless-driving charges — but is somehow still with the team. Haven't these guys ever heard of three-and-out?"
- Fans of the NHL's lowly Devils and Rangers, chanting in unison at New Jersey's home finale: "We both suck!"
- Another one from Perry: "Toyota tinkers have created a robot that rarely misses free throws or three-point shots. **Steph Curry** immediately filed suit for copyright infringement."
- Veteran Utah Jazz PA announcer **Dan Roberts**, to the Deseret News, on why working an NCAA regional didn't make him nervous: "If I can say Antetokounmpo 15 times in a game, I can say your guys' names."
- Comedian **Argus Hamilton**, after Tennessee CB **Kenneth George Jr.** was arrested for punching a Miami Beach police officer during spring break: "He faces suspension from school, jail time and being the first draft choice of the Cincinnati Bengals."

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