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Playoffs in the "New" NHL

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
Playoffs in the "New" NHL
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This is for all those out there who have been watching something other than the Stanley Cup Playoffs. Whether you have been mesmerized by American Idol, following the fortunes of the NBA, or been caught up in the new baseball season, the time has come to abandon these minor matters and focus on the Stanley Cup Finals. The new NHL has arrived. What is really new are not just the rules, but the fact that the same rules applied by the referees in the regular season are being followed in the playoffs.

If you haven't seen the new National Hockey League you are in for a major surprise and treat. If you are among those who prefer international or Olympic hockey to that of the NHL, you will love the new rules. If you are among those who prefer college hockey to that of the NHL, you will love the new rules. If you are among those who saw hockey in terms of the old Rodney Dangerfield line, "I went to a fight the other night and a hockey game broke out," you will not recognize the new NHL.

From the beginning of the season the new NHL has been in evidence. The elimination of the red line as applied to the offside pass has served to open up the offense. The effect has been to reduce the number of stoppages of play and create more passing opportunities for breakaways and two-on-one situations.

More importantly, the strict enforcement of "hooking" and "interference" has meant a much faster and offensive minded game. The strict enforcement of "boarding" and "cross-checking" and "tripping" has aided and abetted the free flow of the game.

A simple matter of strict rules enforcement and the elimination of the off-sides pass have combined to make this a free-flowing end-to-end game which even with the smaller North American rinks has given the new NHL more of a European look. The premium now is on skating and passing, and speed is of the essence. For defensive play this has meant adjustments and new strategies and a need for better skaters and stick-handlers.

For those who believe that hockey of this kind will become too soft, think again. The higher speeds have led to harder checks and the slam and bang that so many like in hockey have been enhanced in the new NHL. It is simple physics: Speed plus mass

equals harder hits. There is nothing soft about the new NHL. Hockey remains a collision sport.

The final four teams in the playoffs, Buffalo, Carolina, Anaheim, and Edmonton, were all teams with a surplus of speed and exceptional skating and passing abilities. The two conference final series featured the best hockey I have seen in the NHL since the glory days of the Gretzky-led Edmonton Oilers that dominated the 1980s and led the NHL out of the dark days of thug hockey.

In both conference finals you could sit and watch two teams move with incredible speed and fabulous passing up and down the ice. At times there would be no whistles to stop play for four to five minutes. It was in many ways excruciating to watch if you were pulling for one team or the other, as scoring chances kept coming, fortunes kept swinging back and forth, and when the whistle finally stopped play you, almost as much as the players, let out a sigh of relief that the building tension had been released.

It should also be noted that skill levels in this game have increased dramatically. Many of the kinds of passes and stick handling that one only saw from the very top players is now on display by a majority of those on the ice. The stickhandling skills, the ability to reach behind for a pass, taking a puck out of the air with the stick, now seem almost commonplace. The seemingly impossible pass, the contortions of the body to produce shots where there are none, and the obvious vision of the ice and the play, once the province of players at Gretzky's level, are now seen several times each game.

The two remaining teams playing the best of seven series for the Stanley Cup typify the new NHL and will put great hockey on display. The Carolina Hurricanes have tremendous speed and passing abilities. I have seen them several times over the course of the season and have watched them dominate games against the previous Stanley Cup winner, the Tampa Bay Lightning. They will have home ice and that will work to their advantage, as they have been much more effective in Raleigh than on the road.

The Edmonton Oilers, the more improbable finalist of the two teams as they barely made the playoffs, have been playing the best hockey of the playoff season. One key has been a very hot goalie in Dwayne Roloson, who was acquired just before the trading deadline from Minnesota. The other key has been their

speed and their ability to wear down their opponents. Whether they can do that to the Carolina Hurricanes remains to be seen.

In fact everything remains to be seen.

So I urge you not to miss this opportunity to see great hockey and reacquaint yourself with the National Hockey League. You probably won't recognize the game being played there as NHL hockey. What you will recognize is great hockey, and once again you will see the beauty, power, speed, grace, and skill of this marvelous sport.

See you on the blue line.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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