

NBC Sports Group Media Conference

Monday, January 11, 2021

Eddie Olczyk
Brian Boucher
Pierre McGuire
AJ Mleczko
Sam Flood

Press Conference

CHRIS McCLOSKEY: Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for joining us for our NBC Sports conference call to preview the 2021 NHL season.

In just a moment we'll be joined by some of our NHL game analysts, Eddie Olczyk, Brian Boucher, Pierre McGuire, AJ Mleczko, as well as NBC Sports executive producer Sam Flood.

NBC Sports begins its 16th season broadcasting the NHL on Wednesday with a triple-header on NBCSN. Coverage begins at 5:30 p.m. Eastern with the Flyers hosting the Penguins. That's followed by the Stanley Cup champion Lightning hosting the Blackhawks. We conclude the triple-header with the Avalanche hosting the Blues.

In all, NBC Sports will broadcast roughly 100 games from mid January to early May, then the Stanley Cup Playoffs in what will be a season unlike any other.

We'll begin the call now with some opening remarks. We'll begin with NBC Sports executive producer Sam Flood.

SAM FLOOD: Thanks for joining us. We're really excited to get this season going. As we all know it will be a different kind of season. It's been a different kind of year. 2021 has started as a different kind of year once again.

To make this season work, we're going to use multiple systems on how we produce games. In some cases the entire group will be on-site, traditional broadcast. Other games we will call from back here in the building. Other games we will have a truck on-site, the talent here. We're going to be moving things around, a lot of different structures and systems. We learned during the football



season that things change at a moment's notice and we have to be ready and we've got to adjust.

Just think about the number of play-by-play people we worked through on Sunday Night Football where one week Al Michaels can do a game, Mike Tirico had to slide in. This past divisional weekend, Mike Tirico called a game from his house in Michigan.

We're ready. We've tested out the systems and are ready to go.

You think about our opening games, we have Pittsburgh at Philly with Kenny Albert and Pierre, Chicago at Tampa with Forslund, Edzo, and Bouch, and St. Louis at Colorado with Brendan Burke and AJ. We're always going to put these groups together, we're not finalizing groups for the playoffs till later. We've got an incredibly deep group of play-by-play people. We'll let them build through the season.

But to project where people are going to be when the season ends, we don't know how this season is going to go. We're going to keep people mixed and matched so we're ready for anything when the time comes.

Our depth at the play-by-play, as I've said, is remarkable. We're not going to name a replacement for Doc Emrick, who has been the gold standard and the voice of hockey for years. His role at this company and for this sport has been remarkable and appreciated.

Part of what we're going to do with Doc, just so you're all aware, is he's going to stay a part of the family. Our opening tease on Wednesday night is going to be voiced by Doc Emrick. He's going to be having elements throughout the season, including -- I'm going to go off script and get McCloskey mad at me right now -- but including a documentary on Doc, a doc on Doc that will come out later in the season. He's still part of the family but he's not going to be calling games any more.

I'm really proud of the group of play-by-play folks that will be taking the reins and being leaders for us moving forward.

We have three new studio analysts coming on board: Mike Babcock, Ryan Callahan, and Dominic Moore. Dominic



Moore, he's going to get involved in the analytics, with the player and puck tracking. And all that is going on this year, we think he's going to be a really good add there. That math brain with a little Harvard work in there is going to make him the perfect person to help us dig deeper into the analytics, an area he's really interested in.

That's our big picture. In 2006, went to Pittsburgh to meet with a recently unemployed hockey coach. I am proud that we are able to employ him from that day forward. His employment started as a studio analyst, moved to the booth, became Doc Emrick's close friend, confidant, and teammate. Now he is ready to take over and be in that booth with new people as we go forward. Eddie Olczyk has become a great friend and a real important member of the NBC Sports talent team.

Edzo, I'll throw it over to you.

EDDIE OLCZYK: Excited we're within, quick math here, probably about some 57 or 58 hours, depending on where you are, till we drop the puck. Really looking forward to that. Great to be back with our great team. It all starts with the man you just heard from, our leader, Sam Flood. Sam, it's hard to believe, where has 15 years gone, but considering this last year for everybody, it probably seems about 30 years.

Really looking forward to it, just to echo what Sam said about Doc. We're going to miss him every day. But he has built and established an area that we strive to get to each and every night. It's going to be a team effort, as it always has been. He'll always be in our minds. He'll still be around, looking forward to seeing Doc hopefully sooner than later.

It's going to be an exciting year, coming off the bubble, the leadership that the commissioner, Mr. Bettman, Bill Daly, the Board of Governors, the Return to Play committee, the players association, everybody involved, all the medical professionals, to be able to pull off what we accomplished in the bubble in Toronto and Edmonton was something absolutely incredible. It's a little different. We had a pause there from March until July or August, whatever it was. Now we've had a little bit of a pause, now we're coming back for a 56-game schedule.

We've talked a lot about it over the years, but in a normal situation getting off to a good start is important, but as we saw with the St. Louis Blues a couple years ago, you can be dead last in the league and still win the Stanley Cup some five or six months later, as the Blues were in January.

This year with the 56-game schedule, everybody on the

same playing field, no exhibition games, everybody has had training camp. Again, everything will be dictated with the pandemic. At the end of the day you got to get off to a good start.

Some of the divisions that are set up because of the northern division, the all-Canadian division, it's going to be very interesting to see. Then the three divisions here in the States.

A lot to look forward to. Looking forward to doing games from wherever, wherever I'm assigned, looking forward to getting back with the best team in hockey.

I get the opportunity to be able to, a pretty good puck handler in his day when he would try to stop the puck as a goaltender in the National Hockey League, I will distribute the puck to my teammate Bouch. Brian Boucher.

BRIAN BOUCHER: Thanks, Edzo. I don't know that I was a good puck handler. I'll take your kind words.

I echo what you say about Doc. I'll miss Doc. This year it was a real honor for me to have the opportunity to work with him for the last two years. A guy that I respected immensely as a player. Every time I knew that Doc was in the building as a player for the game, I knew it was a big game. That speaks to who he is and what he means to the game of hockey. I'm just so grateful and thankful that I had the opportunity to spend time with him and work with him. Certainly was an honor. He's going to be missed.

Also, as Edzo said, last year the bubble was a unique situation, one that I hope we don't ever have to do again. But my personal experience from all of it was nothing but positive. From the company that I kept, including Edzo days on end, it was a lot of fun. Truthfully it was a great distraction for me personally to get away from whatever was going on in our lives to just focus in on hockey and cover the National Hockey League.

I commend the players 100% for what they were able to do in that bubble. I know the league gets a lot of credit from a health standpoint. But to ask these guys after four-plus months off to come back and play the way they played, commit the way they committed, bring a product that we were unsure about what it was going to be like, I think they deserve full marks for that.

Looking forward to this year, it's going to be unique once again, similar to lockout-shortened years that I was part of as a player, which created a challenge in and of itself. There will be challenges this year. How good of shape did players stay in? The teams that were out of it for nine months, the seven teams that didn't participate in the



bubble, how are they going to respond?

The thing that intrigues me the most with a short season is you get rid of part of the season that some players dread. I think it gets right to the nitty-gritty and gets right to it. We're going to have a 56-game sprint. I think that's going to create for a lot of intrigue. I'm excited about rivalries. I'm excited about the fact that teams are going to play each other eight, nine times. I think temperatures can rise in those situations. I think it makes for good drama. I'm looking forward to that.

The fact that the East is kind of like the old Patrick division. I think it's going to be a real difficult division. I'm looking forward to the battle of Alberta taking place quite often, also an original six between Montreal and Toronto. That's intriguing to me.

I feel like Central, you got Tampa and Dallas, a matchup of the Stanley Cup Final. That has some intrigue there. I think maybe the rivalries in that division maybe aren't quite as appealing as others because maybe Detroit and Chicago are not teams that we expect to be contending for a Stanley Cup. But nevertheless, when you play each other eight times a year, who knows how it can go.

I think the West may have the favorite in all the National Hockey League in Colorado. I think that should be a team to watch. Whether or not their goaltending is strong enough, but they certainly have the pieces in place. Had it not been for some injuries in the playoffs, maybe it would have been a different story for them.

I'm looking forward to this year. I cannot wait to start, get back to a normal routine, cover this great game, watch a team hoist the Stanley Cup in July once again.

Now I'll slide it over to Pierre McGuire.

PIERRE MCGUIRE: I'm going to go with Sam, Chris McCloskey, Eddie Olczyk, and Brian Boucher said about Doc Emrick. I had the privilege of doing four Olympic games with Doc starting way back in Torino. I also did the London summer Olympics with him doing water polo. You talk about going to work every day with a living legend, a hockey and sports icon, just an amazing thing. You have to pinch yourself to think about it.

I'll never forget when we started doing the NHL on NBC, Sam put together a really smart idea. It was all led by Doc Emrick. He's the one that had to change the most because we added an extra voice, we added inside the glass. Other than just the traditional Doc Emrick and John Davidson, they added another voice. Had it not been for the excellence of Doc Emrick, it never would have worked.

Now it's become standard operating procedure not just for hockey but almost every sport now has somebody at the playing field level. For that I think we all owe Doc Emrick a huge amount of respect and gratitude for those of us that make our living down there every single day.

In terms of the National Hockey League, this year, the sprint to the playoff that Brian was just talking about, I'm so excited to watch the Washington Capitals. With a new coach like Peter Laviolette. There's a reason why the Carolina Hurricanes won the Stanley Cup in 2006, after we had the nuclear winter. That's because he was the first coach that actually understood the redline being out, he drafted the ideology of the stretch pass. His team won the Cup because they played up-tempo, tackle-oriented hockey. I can't wait to see what he's going to do with that Washington team.

If you're Nick Backstrom, Evgeny Kuznetsov, Tom Wilson, or the great Alexander Ovechkin, you can't wait to play for this guy. The fact they added the leadership of Chara, the puck moving of Justin Schultz, and I think one of the underrated guys in the league in Trevor van Riemsdyk, they have all kinds of weapons there in Washington. I can't wait to watch them play.

Brian touched about Colorado. Absolutely overwhelming to watch the best power player in the league in Nathan MacKinnon. They have some young players coming along, Bowen Byram just had an unbelievable World Junior, he'll be part of their lineup. At some point they'll add Alex Newhook out of Boston College. What Joe Sakic has done in Colorado is off the charts.

I'm sure there's some people in Vegas that are going to say, Don't forget us. I don't think anybody will forget them. I think with Kelly McCrimmon, George McPhee, and Bill Foley, the new owner, has done out there has just been phenomenal. They're deep in goal. The addition of Pietrangelo will make them almost impossible to forecheck now because of the puck movement they have on the back end. So I can't wait to watch Vegas.

I think more than anything else, I wouldn't want to be in the Eastern Conference. Eddie and I both coached in it, Bouch played in it. You look, that's a murderous role. The Devils are very improved. Pittsburgh. Buffalo has improved. That Eastern Division is just going to be hellacious. I can't wait to get going.

Sam talked about it, so did Chris. Kenny and I will kick it off at 5:30 on Wednesday night out in Philly. Can't wait to get going with my good friend Kenny Albert.

AJ, let's go to our gold medal winner, AJ, take it away.

AJ MELCZKO: Thank you, Pierre. Thanks, everybody. I won't beat the subject of Doc too much. It's hard to fathom an NHL on NBC season without the great Doc Emrick. My very first broadcast partner ever back in 2006. I said it before, he's a better person, better human being than he is a broadcaster. Of course we all know what an incredible broadcaster he is, so that is saying a lot.

As far as the season, I'm just so excited hockey is back. If this pandemic has a silver lining for me, it's an appreciation for hockey, it's an appreciation for live sports. My kids who have been on and off the ice, in and out of the rinks or of course the NHL starting on Wednesday. I think this is something, no matter what form it takes, no matter what adjustments we have to make as fans, as broadcasters, obviously for the teams, the NHL, the NHLPA, I'm just so excited to see these guys back on the ice. I'm so excited to be able to call these games. When I'm not working, I'm so excited to be a fan and watch the incredible product that NHL hockey is.

I'm also thrilled to be back with the NBC team. It's a phenomenal team that Sam has put together. From the people you see and the people behind the scenes in the truck. I'm happy to be a part of it.

I think looking forward to the season, absolutely the matchups and the rivalries, that's the part that's so intriguing to me and speaks to me a little bit going back to my days playing for Team USA. Canada was our big rival. Leading up to the gold medal game in 1998, we played Canada 14 times before that gold medal game. I can tell you it certainly made that rivalry heated. The seven, eight, nine times these teams will play their rivals will be really fun to watch and certainly compelling.

I know we're going to be expecting some bumps along the way. There's predictable and unpredictable obstacles that will be in our way. Kudos to everybody for flexibility, for patience.

On that note, I was last, so I'm throwing it back to you, Chris.

CHRIS McCLOSKEY: Thank you, AJ.

We will now take questions from the press.

Q. I'll throw it out to the floor, do you think that Nathan MacKinnon has established himself as the best player in the NHL, in your opinion, with his playoff performance especially last year? Are the Avalanche in your mind the favorite this year because of him?

EDDIE OLCZYK: Yes, absolutely Nathan MacKinnon is the best player in the entire National Hockey League. He played in all three zones last year, he has for the last couple of seasons in my opinion. When you look at what Joe Sakic has done, Pierre had touched on it, you had a guy like Devon Toews from the New York Islanders, who in my conversations with their general manager, Lou Lamoriello, he spoke glowingly about this kid even before Devon got to the Island. He did not disappoint.

Now I will say this, he did not have a great end of the playoff for whatever reason. We know the Islanders are in a tight spot financially so they had to move Toews out because he was in for a big raise, they ended up with two second-rounders, which is a pretty big haul. This guy is a legit top-four defenseman. They moved a guy like Zadorov out and bring in a guy like Toews in. That is a huge add. By the way, they added a guy that has two Stanley Cups in Brandon Saad that can play up and down your lineup, he can play with MacKinnon or he can go and play with J.T. Compher around the third line and he can kill penalties with the best of them.

To me the Avalanche absolutely 110%, they are the favorite, should be the favorite. Again, the question is, do they have enough in goal to be able to get them over the top? That's my only question mark is, is the goaltending solid enough in Colorado for them to be able to take the next step?

Nathan MacKinnon to me over the course of the last year and a half, whether that's time-wise or hockey season, I get confused on trying to figure out what's what, but he has to me has gone to another level. What I look at as the complete hockey player. He has become just that over the course of the last year and a half.

PIERRE McGUIRE: Last year I did all of Colorado's games in the bubble in Edmonton. There's no question in my mind, he was the best 200-foot player in the game. He's one of the most passionate and dynamic leaders both on and off the ice. His level of excellence, how he pushes his teammates to get to the next level is phenomenal.

His relationship with Mikko Rantanen and Gabriel Landeskog is phenomenal. What I like the most about Colorado is when they add the fight of a Nazem Kadri and they add a Stanley Cup-winning presence that Eddie just talked about with Brandon Saad. I can't say enough about Bowen Byram. We've been talking about Devon Toews, he a good player. Bowen Byram is going to take this league by storm. Before he got to the National Hockey League, we talked about, Pierre McGuire, on numerous Colorado broadcasts, we had tape of him playing. I think

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

the world is going to find out about him pretty quick.

In my opinion, I think Colorado is the best team in terms of being a favorite. Doesn't mean they'll win. The only thing that Eddie and Brian talked about is will they be deep enough in goal. I agree with Eddie on MacKinnon being right now the best player in the National Hockey League.

EDDIE OLCZYK: I just want to follow up with Pierre on Byram. There were a lot of people that talked about Byram before the draft was a comparison of Scott Niedermayer. When I watched him play or have watched him play over the course of the last year and a half, year-plus, couple years, when I saw him play the other day in the gold medal game, throughout the World Juniors, I could see a lot of Scott Niedermayer, but I also saw a lot of Duncan Keith.

If you want to see what a combination of Scott Niedermayer and Duncan Keith looks like, go watch a couple of shifts of Bowen Byram.

Look, you could just tell. He just looks like he's going to go to another level. You're right, Pierre mentioned Cale Makar, he'd probably be one of my favorites this year to win the Norris Trophy just because of the team he's playing on, the skill level, and everything else.

Expectations at least from me are through the roof. The people that talked about him being a cornerstone on the back end, to this point, again you got to get to the show, got to get to the NHL, got to do it at that level, but it's a little different when you're going into a situation where you can be one of the guys and not be the guy.

He can walk in there and know he's got some incredible guys to learn from. They can slowly move him in. But this kid is going to get plenty of opportunity. He's not going to disappoint. He looks like the real deal.

PIERRE McGUIRE: Something in the water in Cranbrook, B.C., same hometown as Scottie Niedermayer is where Bowen Byram is from.

Q. Sam, could you address Mike Milbury not being back. What do you think Mike Babcock brings to your studio group?

SAM FLOOD: It's an unfortunate situation. Mike is a friend. He's a unique talent, has given a lot to NBC and the NHL over the years. It was time to separate for a number of reasons.

As for Mike Babcock, when I first started doing the NHL in 2006, Pierre and I would go to Mike's office before the many Detroit games we would produce. We would sit in

that little office of his, have conversation about hockey and about life. He was a fascinating, insightful man. I think he'll be a great addition to the team.

I thank Pierre for creating a relationship and getting me into that office all those years ago. Those are the moments that reveal who you want to have on your team. Mike was a fascinating guy to spend time with. I think he'll be a good addition.

Q. AJ and Pierre, this is the second year in a row that the Islanders have basically returned their same roster. Do you think they can kind of build on what they did last year with that deep run or is that possibly a one-off?

AJ MELCZKO: I think the Islanders seem to keep surprising people. I don't think they're surprising themselves any more, which is great. They're building a sense of that culture that Barry Trotz and Lou Lamoriello have really built over the last few years.

The fact that they have that core back, that core that knows what's expected of them both in the locker room as leaders and on the ice, I think that the addition last year of J-G Pageau, he's that X factor that just brought so much to their lineup, in my opinion. It sort of closed a lot of the loops. Everyone talks about the center depth, which he brings, which I agree with. I also just think everything else he brings. He can play power play, he can kill penalties. He just fit right in in terms of the way that team is built. I think the fact that he had an extra training camp in July certainly helped him. Then this training camp now.

I think losing Johnny Boychuk, losing Devon Toews, those are tough losses on the back end. They've been able to fill in with a veteran like Andy Greene, who is one of the smartest defenseman.

Do I think they can take another deep run? Absolutely. Do I think that people, fans of Islanders or NHL fans, look at the great run they had last year. If you talk to people in the Islanders camp, they say, We're not happy, we didn't win the Cup. That's what they have their eyes on.

Barry and Lou built quite a good structure there, quite a good foundation. I think Ilya Sorokin will be great. People have been waiting -- Islanders fans have been waiting with baited breath for him to arrive on the island. He's here now. That's a very good goalie tandem for Barry.

PIERRE McGUIRE: I'll take it a step further. You lose a leader, a good person like Johnny Boychuk. You have to have internal replacements. I'm not saying Noah Dobson can be that internal leadership replacement, but Noah

Dobson can definitely help out at defense. Don't think for just a second that Ryan Pollock or Adam Pelech won't improve. I think they both will. That's going to be phenomenal to watch in terms of their development.

I got to tell you, the development more than anything else, for the Islanders internally, since Barry Trotz has been there for a lot of their players, I look at Brock Nelson, how complete a player he's become, how important he is. I look at Anthony Beauvillier, the fact they just got Mathew Barzal signed to a three-year extension. I'm fascinated. AJ teased them all the time. I'm fascinated to see what Kieffer Bellows can do with that group. They still have one of the most feared fourth lines, if you want to number your lines in the league, which is Jakub, Clutterbuck, and Martin just signing a four-year extension.

I think they can go on a prolonged run. They won't be a ton of fun to play against. Whether they go on a prolonged run or not, they're not going to be a fun team to play against.

Q. Sam, what are you going to pull from last year during the bubble in terms of production elements that you are going to try to utilize this year in broadcast? How are you going to lean on the regional sports networks, both NBC and non-NBC, to help with some of the operations for these games?

SAM FLOOD: As you know, travel is troubling now. You got to be really careful about how many people you send on the road.

The non-exclusive games, a lot of them will be the regionals across all different networks that will be supplying host feed. We'll supplement that with a camera and some other elements. There will be a lot of games that way simply because we can't get the folks out on the road to all these games. You've got to be really smart about how we deploy our assets.

We learned during the playoffs last year, the two bubbles, how we could call off tube, how we could do things differently. The lessons learned there were the reasons we were confident to a huge rating in a wild card game on Saturday night, we were willing to have Mike Tirico call an important game from his home. We did the same thing with Doc Emrick calling a Stanley Cup game from his home.

All season long we've been looking at ways to keep our team out of harm's way, keep them safe, keep them COVID free. Until the vaccine is fully rolled out, we have to constantly be ready to adapt and adjust.

The Tirico situation came up midday on Wednesday. That night we were shipping additional equipment to Mike's home to make us ready to produce that game. Rehearsed it Friday, did it Saturday. Couldn't be prouder of our technical team that does an incredible job of making all these different systems work.

This year the one big add for the NHL, what the league is doing, is the player and puck tracking. We look forward to incorporating that into our telecasts. Steve Greenberg, one of our talented producers, is hard at work figuring out the best ways to take that information and amplify it and make sense of it, enhance our telecasts.

We're all in. We're looking forward to getting ready to hit curve balls, pucks that float in the air, pucks that dart and hit the top of the twine. Every single shot is going to be deflected, get ready like Bouch was back in the day, let the puck hit them if it hit the stick at the wrong time.

Q. Sam, could you provide the background or the story on how you approached Mike Babcock, what his initial reaction was to the prospect of being on air?

SAM FLOOD: Mike reached out to us through representation during the playoffs last year. Originally we were going to bring him in during the playoffs. Because of COVID protocols, how tight we had the building sealed up, we decided to wait until this year. We let it rest for a while, then started a dialogue again. We quickly came to an agreement. Mike will be in, ready to go.

Again, I almost go back to when we hired Pierre. I knew Pierre for a long time. I met him and had seen his hockey IQ. Sometimes those away-from-the-game conversations, non-formal settings, give you insights into who you want to have on your team. NASCAR, we hired Jeff Burton, someone I got to know a little bit, realized how he would be a unique talent. That's part of the process, is the way you meet and view people and make those decisions.

Q. Eddie, you played and broadcast for bad teams and Cup teams, know the difference. The Sabres, another GM change. In general, a team and an organization gets into that spiral of losing as a disease, how tough is it to get out of it? What do you have to do to finally snap out of it?

EDDIE OLCZYK: Well, there's a lot there. But you have a foundation of incredible ownership there with the Pegulas. You have a guy that is I think worked himself into being as elite as a player as there is in the National Hockey League in Jack Eichel. Now it's the surrounding cast, the supporting cast. You have Taylor Hall.

You're right, there have been a lot of changes in management, in the direction, trying to figure this thing out. But it's tough.

Look, the division that they're in, it is brutal. It is a tough division. You're going to need a little luck on your side, but you're also going to need your best players to be just that. You're going to need some guys to step up and do what they're able to do.

A guy like Eric Staal is coming in. He's been around the block a few times, can bring a little bit of depth. I'm sure he can help a guy like Jack Eichel. At the end of the day it's going to be a big ask.

Do I expect them to make the playoffs? No, I don't. But in a shortened season, in a season where you get on a run, I mentioned earlier how important the first 20 games are, we've seen them over the course of the last couple of years go on some nice runs, go on a heater, be able to put in 18 of 20 points in a 10-game stretch. You're going to probably need more than one of those.

Is it possible to be able to do that in the division they're in? I don't know if anybody is going to be able to do it because that's how close it's going to be.

The psyche of the team, the psyche of the fan base certainly plays into it. I think they're certainly in the right direction. Get some stability up top, let KA do his thing as the general manager, figure this thing out because we've seen what's happened there with the football team. They've got it going. Yeah, they've had some tough years. The Bills Mafia is probably pretty excited right about now. I'm sure everybody is hoping the Sabres can follow suit. So hopefully sooner than later.

Q. Sam, after Mike Babcock was fired by Toronto, there were accusations of psychological abuse by some of his former players. His reputation took a hit. He hasn't really addressed these issues publicly since then. Is this something you discussed with him before hiring him? Might this be something you have to discuss on the air?

SAM FLOOD: We've had a full process of conversations, as we do with anyone we bring in onto the team.

Q. Brian, can you address Matt Niskanen retiring from the Flyers, what that can mean to them? Could I get each of your picks of who the four playoff teams will be from the East Division.

BRIAN BOUCHER: Yeah, I think it's a hit on their back end. I think it's a hit in their locker room from a leadership

standpoint. I know it's only one year for Niskanen with the Flyers, but I think he's a well-respected guy in that room, a quiet guy, but reliable. You really can count on him on a daily basis. He was predictable I think. I think in some cases in the locker room it's great to have guys that you know what you're getting from them on a daily basis. I think that's going to be a launch for them.

Provorov really seems to gel well with him. Provorov's game seemed to get back on track. Provorov is at a point in his career where he may not need anybody now. He's one of those guys that you can set him free, he will be okay. From a pairing standpoint, whoever ends up playing with Provorov, I think he's going to carry whoever his partner is.

There's no doubt when you have a young goaltender back there, you need a veteran defense. I think Niskanen brought that to their team. Erik Gustafsson comes onboard. Is that a replacement for Niskanen? I don't think so. I think they're different types of players.

I think the Flyers made good strides last year. They finally won a playoff round for the first time since 2012. I think that's important.

You mention about the Buffalo Sabres, what does it take? Sometimes you need to have a little success to kind of get the momentum going in the right direction. I think they're well on their way.

You're asking me to predict the top four in the east. The east ends up being the toughest division for me to predict. I think you could argue there could be six teams in the mix. I don't know that I can say that for any other division.

I guess we have to answer your question with regards to picking the top four. I'm trying to delay in saying that because it's hard (laughter).

I'm not going to say in any particular order, but I am going to go with Philly, Pitt, Islanders, Washington. That's the toughest division. You really could have six in there. To me that's the hardest division to handicap. I'd rather you said the west where I could have given you three teams and forget the rest.

Q. Sam, I want to ask about the process behind Mike Milbury being let go. Talk about the process of him being benched for one game, he's stepped down for the remainder of the playoffs, now to cut ties, that would be super helpful.

SAM FLOOD: I think it's pretty simple. As I said before, it was an unfortunate situation. He's a friend. He's been a

unique talent, done a lot of great things through the years. Sometimes you have to separate. Sometimes you have to make tough decisions.

I'm not going to take you into the details of that process.

Q. No details?

SAM FLOOD: No.

Q. Obviously the Sharks had a tough season last year. If things don't go well again this year, would it be time in your opinion to start a rebuild? How difficult might that be, given some of the long-term contracts that the team already has?

PIERRE McGUIRE: I think they've already started on a rebuild, if you want to know the truth. They're counting on some young guys to step in there and perform. Whether it's Mario (indiscernible) on defense, how much tread is left on the tire with Marc-Edouard Vlasic, Fred Burns, will Erik Karlsson be 100%. There's tons of questions that they have to answer internally.

Not bringing Joe Thornton back, I think that opens up a lot of leadership potential for Tomas Hertl or for Timo Meier.

I think Doug Wilson is very well aware of what he's got in the roster. It's not one of the better rosters in the league. I think he knows that. But I think internally they're trying to get things done.

A lot of the leadership is going to have to come from Logan Couture. When you don't have Joe Pavelski there, Joe Thornton there any more, things have changed internally significantly. They've had to make some tough decisions.

They brought in a player, I don't know whether he'll be on their opening night roster or not, John Leonard out of the University of Massachusetts, he's a good player. Whether he creates NHL success early on, I don't know.

They have to have a huge bounce back season from Kevin Labanc. He did not have a great year last year. There's lots of guys they have internally that I think they can count on. I think Doug has already started on trying to get that things fixed internally.

Q. Sam, about Mike Babcock, Brendan Shanahan said his coaching tactics were not appropriate from some of the allegations. Did you have any concern with those things that came out as you were considering this hire to bring him on in?

SAM FLOOD: We looked at everything.

Q. Could Eddie and Brian the Rangers and Devils, what you expect from them this year, talk about their goaltending situations with goaltenders moving on.

BRIAN BOUCHER: The Devils I think are going to be an intriguing team to watch. Some good young talent there. I was looking forward to seeing the tandem of Mackenzie Blackwood and Corey Crawford. That's not going to be the case. Who they fill that backup position with, I think it remains to be seen.

I think Mackenzie Blackwood is a guy that will be a number one goaltender in this league and will be a good one. I've seen enough of him to feel confident in saying that. I know that he hasn't had a very good team in front of him. Sometimes that can be good and bad.

You get a lot of work, bombarded on a nightly basis, but the expectation to win is not there. I don't know that the expectation for this team to win is there just yet. I feel still like they are kind of regrouping.

They're young. Jack Hughes I think had time to get stronger in the weight room. I think this off-season for him will benefit him big-time. I expect a bounce back year from him.

Look, they're in a tough division. I think they're going to take their lumps, but they're also going to learn a lot about themselves which will bode well for them going down the road.

As far as the New York Rangers is concerned, this team I feel like they could be a sleeper team. I know no Lundqvist is a big story, but this is a heck of a tandem with Georgiev-Shesterkin. Their back end surprising last year, guys like Adam Fox stepping up, doing a heck of a job, DeAngelo had a fantastic year. Kakko, a guy like Jack Hughes, I feel that one year in the league, then going into the bubble, having that experience, I think the time off that he's had, he can also raise his game. Alexis Lafreniere coming in, expectations are high for a kid like that. I'm sure he's anxious to get going. It's been a longer process probably than he ever wanted. Again, for him, this is an opportunity for him to hit the weight room, get stronger, maybe be better prepared than you would have been had camp started in September.

I know it's going to look different with no Henrik Lundqvist, but I think this team is starting to trend in the right direction. I know I said the teams that I said in the top four. I really feel like you could interchange five and six and put whoever you want in there. I'm not saying the Devils, I'm saying the Rangers is one of those teams. Those teams

could provide excitement this year.

EDDIE OLCZYK: Jeff Gordon, the general manager of the Rangers, has done an amazing job stockpiling, finally the Rangers being able to hold onto picks, acquire picks, bring in some young players. You look at the depth that they have. They have flexibility now.

The one thing I think moving forward for the Rangers is everybody is looking for center icemen, right? If you can get a 1-2 punch there with Zibanejad, whomever, I still think they're a little thin at the center ice position. Once they either get it from within or with the assets that they have, the ability and flexibility to be able to make a move, when the time is right, there's no doubt in my mind that the Rangers will be finding themselves another center iceman.

All of a sudden now you have an incredible 1-2 punch in the middle with Lafreniere there. You got the Breadman there already. Kakko hopefully taking the next step. Chris Cryder signed up for the next seven, eight years, whatever it is. I think that will be an intriguing thing to watch for me out of all of it.

Bouch touched on the young goaltenders, Georgiev-Shesterkin. They like both of those guys, they really do. They're going to miss Henrik Lundqvist, but at the end of the day to me I look at the Rangers and they're on the come. They are moving in the right direction.

I think at least for me, having worn many sweaters, I'm not sure if that's a good thing or the bad thing in the National Hockey League in my playing days, I wore that sweater, probably won a Stanley Cup in '94, I would be looking for them to add at the center ice position at the appropriate time.

One last thing on New Jersey. I don't think there's any doubt that Blackwood is a guy that you're looking to build around in the franchise. Had the perfect guy there in Corey Crawford, but in respect to Crawford, just taking a leave of absence, then eventually retiring, that's a big loss.

To me, I would certainly be wanting to add a veteran guy there to help Blackwood in a 56-game schedule. Look, can he play 35 or 40 games? Absolutely, 100%. But what is best for the development of young goaltender and the franchise? That will be interesting to see what Tommy Fitzgerald, the general manager, does there in New Jersey.

A loss by losing Crawford because of retirement, but an opportunity here for Blackwood to be the guy and be the guy every night, get a little bit of help there if they decide to go in that direction of a more veteran or established guy to

come in and play 15, 20 games.

Q. Jonesy brought up an interesting point in terms of the intensity of the season, how condensed the season is going to be. A lot of bad blood. This is going to be like 1990s hockey. In your individual opinions, what is your vision of how intense the style of play will be? Do you think the Flyers have the kind of physical makeup to survive it?

EDDIE OLCZYK: Jonesy, is that Keith Jones, the former 34-year track announcer at Parks Racetrack, or is this the talented Keith Jones and former Philadelphia Flyer (laughter)?

Q. Keith Jones (laughter).

EDDIE OLCZYK: I will say this, then bump it to AJ after this.

With a shortened season, again hoping we can play 56 games, getting off to that good start and not chasing the game, having depth, that's something that Alain Vigneault, all of his teams in my opinion, whether he was in Vancouver, New York, now in Philly, he always has had the ability, his teams in my opinion, to overachieve. He'd always get his teams, not necessarily individuals, but certainly the individuals make the team, he gets his team to another level. He did that.

I wouldn't say he's a four-line coach, but he understands. I think it's going to be even more important. I think the Flyers have done a good job of the depth up front. They're hard to play against. They need some young guys to continue to take that next step. As long as AV isn't challenging any off-sides at the start of the season, I think the Flyers will be A-OK.

AJ, take it away.

AJ MELCZKO: I think you look at the rivalries, you look at the intensity in the shorter season, there's an argument that it's more of a sprint than a marathon. But I think there's also the idea that you're playing more nights. There's less breaks, more back-to-back. There is that physical beat-down that these players will take. The depth of all of these teams becomes super important, the style of play.

I think Philly, what they showed through the second half of the season, I don't want to say that because it was cut short in March, but near the pause, then into the playoffs in August, they were a hard team to play to use your words Eddie. They were physical.

What impressed me the most about Philly in February, March, fast forward to August, was their ability to play any style, to play against whatever the teams threw at them, they were able to adjust. Part of that is the way they're made up, part of their depth. It has a lot to do with their grittiness, no pun intended with their mascot.

The way they play, they've got a chip on their shoulder, they're proving people wrong. I imagine the way they're built right now, it will continue to benefit them through this 56-game season and through this Eastern Division battle they have.

Once these teams, once the top four teams make the playoffs, it's anyone's game at that point. Of course, we talked about it a lot on this call, that Eastern Division is going to be really, really tough. But I think Philly, they're built for longevity this season.

BRIAN BOUCHER: I want to make one point. I don't think anybody should have this idea that the Flyers are going to revert back to the Broad Street Bullies because they're playing the New York Rangers eight times a year. If that's the expectation from fans, it might be misguided.

But the one thing that I will say is that you'll see what guys are made of in situations when the temperature rises in games. I'm not saying about dropping the gloves, I'm talking about competing, winning battles, having the inside push, the inner push to understand that these games, these 56 games, mean a lot more than maybe an 82-game season because there is no chance for that poor start.

When I look at their line, their lineup, I see the makeup of certain players that can play with that grit and that intensity. They've got a fourth line, maybe it's not the deepest line with the Islanders, but there's some character on that fourth line with Watton and Aube-Kubel, Rocco. On the back end Hague is a guy that plays a stiff game. Bronson can play it at times, too.

I don't think fans should get the idea that all of a sudden this is going to revert back to the '70s and teams dropping the gloves on a nightly basis. I think it's going to be about finding that inner compete, and I think the Flyers have some quality veterans in that room that can help in that regard.

But there's also a point, some of these guys have a lot to prove. I think Vigneault is challenging Voracek right now after a disappointing second round last year. I think Giroux is always being challenged in the city of Philadelphia as a captain. Does he have enough gas in the tank to lead this team?

I think it's going to make for good drama, but I don't think it's going to be a situation where it reverts back to the old days where you see gloves all over the ice.

PIERRE MCGUIRE: On the Flyers, they have something that a lot of teams would really like to have: stabilizing presence in the crease, Carter Hart is as good as any goalie as there is out. He'll prove that this year. The more reps he's gotten, the more comfortable he's gotten, he's never been shy on the big stage. I think that will help them in a very difficult Eastern Division that we've spoken of.

The other thing is where does Nolan Patrick fit? After missing all last year, can he come back and play? He's only 22 years of age. If he can do it, that takes a lot of pressure off whether it's Jakub Voracek as we heard before. Guys aren't getting any younger. That will be interesting to watch.

I like what Brian just said. You don't see a lot of the fighting stuff in the NHL any more. Those days are long gone. Grinder, character guys, guys that aren't afraid to take risks to make plays, they're important players. The Flyers have a lot of those guys. I think the Flyers proved a lot last year. I think they will prove a lot this year.

The one thing, every time I watch them play, Bouch would know from having been a goalie in Philly, Carter is good and he's only getting better.

EDDIE OLCZYK: I do believe that with how tight everything is going to be, you're going to have to pick your spots when you're going to have to send a message or to intimidate or whatever. It's always going to be a part of our game. That's what makes it so awesome.

I believe there will be a little bit more than people believe just from the fact you're going to be playing these same teams twice in 24 hours or every other day. The way the schedule is, it's very similar to baseball, where you're going into a city, you're going to shack up. All you can do is go to the rink, go to the hotel, that's it.

You know what, somebody puts one high and hard around somebody's chin, within reason, in good taste, within the rules of the game, you get the opportunity to come right back in 24 hours or 48 hours and either settle the score or send a message.

Look, it is going to be intense, it really is. That's why I think we have the possibility of maybe a little bit more physical play, maybe a little bit more fisticuffs. That's fine. That's what makes our game so great. You got to pick your spots because points are going to be a premium.

Try to do a little quick math here. Looking at the teams in the Eastern Conference, a pretty good chance we better brush up on tiebreakers at the end of the year. You're going to be within one, two points of maybe first and fifth. That's how close it's going to be.

Could you argue the winner of that division or even the top two teams, I'm speaking out loud now, the top two leading point-getters in an Eastern Division, they might be the lowest of any top two in the rest of the league just from the aspect of the parity, how good these teams are.

You could see when Washington and Philly play, they're going to go .500. Look, maybe somebody gets an extra point here or there. You know where I'm going. It is going to be so close with those teams that we all expect to be battling for the top four spots in that conference.

I'm actually jacked up. I know when that happens, there happens to be gloves and sticks and helmets on the ice, linesmen are right in the middle of it, our friend Doc Emrick will be smiling ear to ear wanting to chime in and tell one of his great stories from back in the day.

I'm looking forward to seeing it. I think the temperature is going to rise as we continue on in the season. That's what separates our game from a lot of games, especially when you're playing 56 games.

We've touched on it, but can't enforce it enough, it is really, really important. If you play the first 20 games and you're six, seven games under .500, as I mentioned a little bit earlier, you're going to have to go on a run like the St. Louis Blues did a couple years ago and eventually win the Stanley Cup.

CHRIS McCLOSKEY: Thank you. That will end our call for today. Great call. Thank you for joining us. The season begins on Wednesday of the a triple-header on NBCSN. Coverage begins at 5:30 with Penguins-Flyers. Thank you, everyone, for joining.

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