

# Parity reigns in NHL playoffs

By KARL YU  
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The days of the dynasty in the National Hockey League are dead because parity is the name of the game. It certainly seems true in light of the start of the NHL playoffs.

In fact, all eight of the first-round series were tied at 1-1 after the first two games.

As the Game 3s started going into the books, the Western Conference's third seed, the Vancouver Canucks, found themselves in a 2-1 series deficit to the Los Angeles Kings, who finished sixth in the conference during the regular season.

Even though it took an own-goal from opposing defenseman Dan Boyle, the No. 8 Colorado Avalanche were up 2-1 against the best in the west, the San Jose Sharks.

The No. 5 Detroit Red Wings, who are favorites based on experience, were expected to "upset" the No. 4 Phoenix Coyotes. Instead, the "Desert Dogs" have given the defending Western Conference champions all they can handle and were also up 2-1.

Like the Canucks, the Eastern Conference's third seed, the Buffalo Sabres, were having a hard time of it against the No. 6 Boston Bruins, being down 2-1 after three games.

Nashville, the west's No. 7, has been impressive so far and they too held a 2-1 series lead against No. 2 Chicago.

The Philadelphia Flyers, who were literally a last-minute addition to the NHL postseason, are giving the East's No. 2, the New Jersey Devils, a devil of a time. The Flyers have a 3-1 series lead.

Moreover, seven games have gone into overtime during this postseason so far, one more than all of last year's first-round. In all, 16 playoff games went into overtime in the 2009 playoffs.



STEPPING UP: Brian Boucher and the underdog Philadelphia Flyers look to put the Devils to the sword. BRUCE BENNETT/GETTY IMAGES

**REASONS?**

There a number of possible reasons for what has transpired so far.

There is the salary cap, which prevents teams from stocking up on high-priced free agents and levels the playing field

when it comes to player signings.

There are also things that are happening in the individual series that are leading to the lower-seeded teams winning games.

In the case of the Kings and Canucks,

the Kings seemed to be scoring at will on the power play. After Monday's Game 3, the Kings had scored on 7 of 12 power play opportunities, good enough for an NHL playoff-best 58.3 percent.

The Sharks are chronic playoff

underachievers and have only made it past the second-round once in their 19-year existence.

Goalie Evgeni Nabokov, while a great in the regular season, hasn't been able to match that success in the playoffs. In the past two postseasons, Nabokov has had save percentages of worse than .890.

Sharks centre Joe Thornton has underachieved during his time in the NHL playoffs. Thornton hasn't scored more than three goals in any of his playoff campaigns, be it in San Jose or Boston.

Injuries are also playing a factor, as witnessed in the series between the Sabres and the Bruins. The Sabres are without the services of regular season leading goal scorer Thomas Vanek and have struggled to score against the Bruins.

There are also players that catch the proverbial lightning in the bottle in the postseason—case in point, Flyers goalie Brian Boucher. Some experts said that goaltending would be one of Philadelphia's weaknesses this postseason, but it's been quite the contrary.

Boucher has a respectable goals against average of 2.31 as of Tuesday and has stopped 68 of 75 shots on goal.

Ottawa Senators head coach Cory Clouston not only subscribes to the parity theory, he also thinks it's benefiting the league.

"That's what the league wants, parity and close games," Clouston told the Montreal Gazette.

"It just shows it doesn't really matter what happens during the regular season. There are going to be tight battles in the playoffs. It's a much different game in the playoffs."

It's no fun entering the postseason already knowing which team will win the championship. It's boring and lacks drama. And so far in the NHL playoffs it's been anything but boring.



Diego Milito: Inter Milan's Argentine striker was instrumental in dismantling Barcelona on Tuesday. ANDREAS SOLARO/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

# Inter Milan stuns road weary Barcelona

By RAHUL VAIDYANATH  
Epoch Times Staff

Inter Milan stopped the Barcelona Champions League train on Tuesday in Milan with a come-from-behind 3-1 victory.

"They gave everything," said Inter coach Jose Mourinho about his team's effort.

"We studied well, we prepared for the game well. We won and we deserve it."

Mourinho, who rose to prominence after winning the Champions League with FC Porto in 2004, has his team in good shape for the return leg on April 28 in Barcelona.

Barcelona took the lead in the 19th minute when Pedro converted a cut back pass from Maxwell.

But 10 minutes later, Dutch international Wesley Sneijder was left alone in the box to beat Victor

Valdes.

About three minutes into the second half, Brazilian fullback Maicon converted a Diego Milito pass and Inter was in front 2-1.

But 2-1 is not a comfortable lead in the two-leg knockout format. So, just after the hour mark, Milito headed in a third. Barcelona appealed for an offside but was denied.

Whether or not the match would proceed was under some doubt initially due to the volcanic ash that has grounded numerous flights in Europe. Barcelona had to endure a 14-hour bus ride to play the game.

Barcelona will need to do a lot better in the return match. Messi was frustrated and Barca's defense was exposed for three goals.

However, Mourinho knows that he's not in the final yet. "Experience tells us we still have a long way to go."

**BAYERN MUNICH WINS**

The Bundesliga leaders Bayern Munich got a 69th-minute goal from Dutch forward Arjen Robben to beat Lyon 1-0 on Wednesday.

The German club dominated the proceedings even after star winger Franck Ribery was shown a straight red card for a poorly-timed studs-first challenge in the 37th minute.

But French defender Jeremy Toulalan picked up two yellow cards in a span of three minutes to level the playing field at 10 men each.

Lyon did not generate many scoring chances. Their best effort was a long range left-footer from Kim Kallstrom.

Robben gave the hosts the lead with a powerful left-footer that took a slight deflection off the head of teammate Thomas Muller. Muller celebrated after the goal with Robben pointing to his head.



ARJEN ROBBEN: The Bayern Munich winger winds up his powerful left foot against Lyon on Wednesday. OLIVER LANG/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Lyon will need a much better effort next Tuesday in France. But they won't be facing Ribery who will miss the return leg through

suspension for his red card. It is a bitter blow for the French winger who will not get to showcase his supreme talent to his countrymen.

# Slovakia to make first appearance in World Cup

By JURAJ SKOVAJSA  
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BRNO, Czech Republic—Before Slovakia and the Czech Republic were split in 1991, they played under one common flag as Czechoslovakia. Czechoslovakia finished as runner-up in two World Cups. In Italy in 1934, the hosts defeated Czechoslovakia 2-1 during extra time. In 1962, Brazil defeated Czechoslovakia 3-1.

And now, it is the first in Slovakia's modern history that they have qualified for the World Cup. Their journey to South Africa started on Sept. 6, 2008, in the third European qualification group where they defeated Northern Ireland 2-1. Other nations competing in this group were Poland, Czech Republic, Slovenia, and San Marino.

In 10 matches Slovakia won 7, lost 2, and drew 1. The impressive total of 22 points put them at the top of their group and automatically qualified them for the World Cup.

The secret of the qualification success is the coach's authority and experience, combined with a young and talented team.

Since Vladimir Weiss, 45, became coach of the national team in 2008, the Slovaks climbed from No. 67 in the FIFA rankings to No. 33 in March. Before national team coaching, he

was the coach of Slovak club FC Artmedia (Bratislava) Petržalka. He won two Slovak Master titles in 2004-05 and 2007-08, also getting his team into the UEFA Champions League main group stage.

**THE TEAM**

Goalkeeper Jan Mucha has been in goal for the last 13 matches for Slovakia. From 2005-2010, he played for Legia Warsaw and at the beginning of this year he signed a contract with Everton of the English Premier League.

All Slovak defenders play in well-known European clubs. Most notable is Martin Skrtel who has been playing with Liverpool since 2008. He has played 34 matches for the national team.

The captain of the national team is 22-year-old Marek Hamsik. He is in his third year with Napoli in Italy and is attracting a lot of interest from other big European teams. He has played 29 matches for Slovakia scoring eight goals.

The Slovak goal machine is 27-year-old Stanislav Sestak, who plays for German club VfL Bochum. With the national team, he has only scored eight times, so his motivation will be high in South Africa. He shone in the qualification match between Poland and Slovakia. In the match, he scored goals in the 85th and 86th



UNITED WE STAND: Slovakia's national soccer team plays their first World Cup match against New Zealand on June 15. SAMUEL KUBANI/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

minute and Slovakia won 2-1.

**EXPECTATIONS**

Two years ago, not many people expected Slovakia to qualify for the World Cup. But coach Weiss knows how to motivate his players and he also requires discipline, self-confidence, and hard work from his team.

"The atmosphere in team changed after Weiss's arrival. We really enjoy each match and we are prepared to fight for our country till the end," said Skrtel.

Weiss believes the Slovak team is not an outsider and is able to pull off the surprise. "We analyzed all our opponents. The first match will be hardest and all my energy is going into that. If we win, we will have a big chance to get to the best 16," said Weiss.

"We will go from match to match and at this moment the first match [New Zealand] is most important for

us. Finally, we will see at the championship if our qualities are able to defeat Paraguay, and if we can play at the same level as Italy," said the coach.

Players have a healthy self-confidence and Skrtel says, "I believe in our team spirit. I'm confident our team will play well and we can astonish at this tournament."

"To play for your country is the highest honour you can experience in football [soccer]," said Hamsik. "We will do our best in each match of the Cup."

Preparation will start at the middle of May after the European season wraps up.

On May 29, the Slovaks will play a friendly match against Cameroon in Klagenfurt, Austria and the week after they will play at home in Bratislava against Costa Rica.

It all leads up to their first World Cup match against New Zealand June 15.

# Button leads McLaren sweep at F1 Chinese Grand Prix

By JAMES FISH  
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Defending world champion Jenson Button became 2010's first two-time winner by finishing first in the rain at the Formula One Chinese Grand Prix in Shanghai, early last Sunday morning.

Button moved his McLaren to the front by being one of four drivers who elected to risk slicks in the intermittent rain, and took the lead when Mercedes driver Nico Rosberg slid wide in a corner on lap 19.

From then till the end, it was Jenson Button, driving smart and conserving his tires, keeping ahead of his hard-charging teammate Lewis Hamilton, who put on a great display of driving skill (and less impressive display of bad judgment) to cut through the field to finish second.

"This victory is very special and really means a lot," Button told SPEED-TV. "It was a tricky race out there and again we called it right and it means a lot."

"It is not just about being quick, it is about reading the conditions and, obviously, coming across the line just one second in front of Lewis, I think shows what a team effort this has been and what a great result for the whole team."

Hamilton came close to winning, but in the final laps neither driver had much tire left, and despite Button going off at the hairpin four laps from the end, Hamilton couldn't close the gap.

Anyone who claims that the lack of overtaking in F1 is not a product of too much dependence on aero downforce need only watch the 2010 Chinese Grand Prix to see what these drivers in these cars can do, with just a bit less grip. There were more passes in any two laps of this race than in the whole of most Grand Prix.

Button's second win gives him the lead in the World Drivers' Championship, 10 points ahead of Nico Rosberg. Felipe Massa dropped from first to sixth, with Alonso, Hamilton, and Vettel ahead of him.