Bhushan Predicts Canadian Victory

The Montreal Canadiens are poised to win the Stanley Cup after edging out the New York Islanders in Game Five of the Wales Conference finals to win the series 4-1. They now have a full week's rest before having to play for the Stanley Cup against either the Toronto Maple Leafs or the Los Angeles Kings, who are playing with fragments of the 1980s Edmonton Oilers All-Star powerhouse and whose greatest asset was being the Great One (with the help of lots of dough and a local boom player). The team that's won more Cups than any other in the league is on fire after sweeping aside the Buffalo Sabres, heating the Quebec Nordiques in six games, and losing only once in the best-of-seven series against the Islanders. The Islanders have obviously taken a plunge since the Mike Bossy glory days, but have done well better than most would have believed after the loss of Pierre Turgeon. Some isolated pockets of local wisdom hold high hopes for the likes of the Pittsburgh Penguins, but these predictions fall by the wayside as the Canadiens rose from a less-than-impressive season to win the Wales Conference.

Unlike Montreal's smooth ascent to the Wales throne, both Campbell Conference contenders have had tough roads to the final, and now they are engaged in a cross-continental duel that may well go a full seven games. Toronto has the better team, with top playoff scorer Doug Gilmour outperforming the Kings' Wayne Gretzky by two points in the playoffs. It'll be tough for a while, since the Kings aren't the obscure novelty they once were, but look for the Maple Leafs to squeeze by and return to Stanley Cup contention after a 26-year absence.

The Leafs have the advantage, and the season's final contests in this Canadian sport and national pastime may well be fought by the rivals of old, pitting fans in English and French Canada's biggest cities against each other as their favorites vie for hockey supremacy. This is one battle the Habs can count on winning.

Of course, talent also has something to do with this prediction. Canadiens goalie Patrick Roy is playing very well, arguably better than when he won the Conn Smythe trophy in 1986. Offensively, Brian Bellows, Vincent Damphousse, and Kirk Muller are a real threat, more so than the lead forwards of either Toronto or L.A. (Gretzky and Jari Kurri are still good, but all that smog has indeed dent ed their style -- they just don't have the magic they used to.)

Granted, the Canadiens' offense is not the smooth scoring machine the Oilers had in the '80s, but coupled with a sturdy defense, it gets the job done quite well. It looks like the Bruins' favorite tormentors will pull it off this year. Montreal in six games.

Column by Vipul Shulshan