

Blues To Defend Title: NHL Announces Return To Play With 24-Team Playoff Format, Remainder Of Regular Season Cancelled

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The National Hockey League announced on Tuesday its Return To Play plan, which will cancel the remainder of the regular season and proceed immediately to a 24-team format for the Stanley Cup Playoffs, with an opening date yet to be determined.

The announcement, made by NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman, will allow the St. Louis Blues to defend their Stanley Cup championship from last season, their first in franchise history, won last June 12 with a 4-1 win over the Boston Bruins in game seven of the final.

Currently, small groups of six will be allowed to skate and train at team-run facilities as the league gradually returns to game action, which was suspended on March 12 due to concerns over the COVID-19 pandemic that has swept across the world. The Blues won what turned out to be their final regular season game the day before at Anaheim.

Normally, 16 teams would qualify for the playoffs - the top three teams in each of the four divisions, along with the top-two wild card teams in each conference. This year, the top 12 teams in both the Eastern and Western Conferences qualify for the playoff, based on the percentage of points won during the regular season. Because of the cancellation of the remainder of the regular season, the Blues were declared the champions of the Central Division with a record of 42-19-10 for 94 points, two points ahead of the second place Colorado Avalanche.

Other division champions declared were the Vegas Golden Knights in the Pacific Division, the Washington Capitals in the Metropolitan Division, and the Bruins in the Atlantic Division.

In this year's playoff format, the top four teams in each conference will play in a round-robin mini-tournament to determine their seedings for the playoffs. Pointwise, the Blues are the top team in the Western Conference, followed by Colorado, Vegas and the Dallas Stars. In the Eastern Conference, the top four teams are Boston, the Tampa Bay Lightning, Washington and the Philadelphia Flyers. Each tournament will use regular season overtime and shootout rules to determine the top four seeds in each conference.

The other seven teams, seeded fifth through 12th, will proceed to a best-of-five playoff series, which will begin on a date to be announced. In the Western Conference, those series will be the Chicago Blackhawks vs. Edmonton Oilers, Nashville Predators vs. Arizona Coyotes, Vancouver Canucks vs. Minnesota Wild and Calgary Flames vs. Winnipeg Jets.

In the Eastern Conference, the series will be the Montreal Canadiens vs. Pittsburgh Penguins, New York Rangers vs. Carolina Hurricanes, Florida Panthers vs. New York Islanders and Columbus Blue Jackets vs. Toronto Maple Leafs.

The seven teams who did not qualify for the playoffs - the Buffalo Sabres, New Jersey Devils, Anaheim Ducks, Los Angeles Kings, San Jose Sharks, Ottawa Senators and Detroit Red Wings - will go through to the NHL Draft Lottery to determine which team will have the number one pick in the NHL Draft.

All games will be played in hub cities, which will be determined by the league. Cities under consideration are Chicago, Columbus, Dallas, Edmonton, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Minneapolis-St. Paul, Pittsburgh, Toronto and Vancouver. St. Louis had been in the running to be a hub city, but has since been eliminated. The games will be played in empty arenas, without fans, and all teams are limited to a total of 50 people, including players, coaches, staff and front office.

After the seeding tournament and play-in series are complete, the first and second rounds will be played, but it hasn't yet been determined if the pairings will be by seedings or in a bracket format, nor has the length of the series been decided. The Conference Finals and Stanley Cup Final will remain a best-of-seven series, with the possibility that both the Conference and Stanley Cup Finals may be played in the competing teams' cities, but that has also yet to be determined.

"Obviously, these are extraordinary and unprecedented times," Bettman said in a story on the league's website, nhl.com. "Any plan for the resumption of play, by definition, cannot be perfect. And I am certain that, depending on which team you root for or which team you cover, you might find some element of this package that you might prefer to be done differently.

"But we believe we have constructed an overall plan that includes teams that, as a practical matter, might have had a chance of qualifying for the playoffs when the season was paused," Bettman continued. "And this plan will produce a worthy Stanley Cup champion who will have run the postseason gauntlet that is unique to the NHL."