

# NHL, Players Association Ratify CBA Extension To 2025-2026 Season, Blues Set To Defend Title

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The National Hockey League and the NHL Players Association on Friday announced an extension of the current Collective Bargaining Agreement to the 2025-26 season was ratified by both sides, along with the Return To Play agreement, paving the way for the start of the long-delayed Stanley Cup Playoffs on August 1.

The defending champion St. Louis Blues are scheduled to begin their quest for a second consecutive title on August 2, when they'll play the Colorado Avalanche in the opening game of the Western Conference Round Robin to determine their final seeding in the playoffs. When the season was interrupted on March 12 because of the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Blues had the best record in the conference, earning the number one seed in the round robin.

All playoff games will be played in two hub cities for safety reasons. The Eastern Conference games will be played at Scotiabank Arena in Toronto, while the Western Conference games will be played at Rogers Place in Edmonton. Both the conference finals and 2020 Stanley Cup Final will be played in Edmonton.

After the Blues play Colorado, they will play the Vegas Golden Knights on August 6, then wind up the round robin against the Dallas Stars August 9. The winner of the round robin in both conferences will be the top seed in the conference rounds of the playoffs.

A total of 12 teams made the playoffs from each conference, and the number five through 12 seeds will play each other in a best-of-five series to determine the other qualifiers. In the Western Conference, the host Oilers will play the Chicago Blackhawks, the Nashville Predators will face the Arizona Coyotes, it'll be the Vancouver Canucks will go against the Minnesota Wild, and the Calgary Flames will take on the Winnipeg Jets.

The top four teams in the Eastern Conference are the Boston Bruins, whom the Blues defeated in last year's Stanley Cup Final, Tampa Bay Lightning, Washington Capitals and Philadelphia Flyers. In the four qualifying series, the Pittsburgh Penguins will play the Montreal Canadiens, the Carolina Hurricanes will meet the New York Rangers, the New York Islanders will go against the Florida Panthers and the host Maple Leafs will play the Columbus Blue Jackets.

The round robin games will use regular season rules, with five-minute three-on-three overtime periods and a shootout if necessary to determine the winners, while the qualifying series will be played under playoff rules, with full 20-minute sudden death overtime periods and no shootouts. The remaining playoff rounds will be the traditional best-of-seven series.

Face-off times and television coverage have yet to be announced, but all teams will be stationed in Secure Zones, with hotels, restaurants, practice facilities and the arenas, including the two host teams. Games will be played without fans in attendance, and only needed personnel will be allowed in the arenas.

The ratification of the CBA also allows the return of NHL players to the Olympics in 2022 in Beijing, China and 2026 in Milan-Cortina, Italy, subject to the approval of the International Olympic Committee and the International Ice Hockey Federation.

The Stanley Cup Final is scheduled to go as late as Oct. 4, with the NHL Entry Draft scheduled for Oct. 9-10. The 2020-21 regular season is currently set to begin in December.