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WILD

# The Storm Has Not Passed for the Wild



By [Heather Rule](#) - March 27, 2017

It's almost a copy/paste situation. For the fifth straight year, the Minnesota Wild will play in the NHL playoffs. For the fifth straight year, the Minnesota Wild clinched a playoff spot in a bit of backing-in fashion. The Los Angeles Kings lost to the New York Rangers on Saturday, securing the Wild's place in the postseason.

Add it to the list of recent appearances. The Wild made the playoffs under former coach Mike Yeo in 2013, 2014, 2015, plus last season when he was fired in February and John Torchetti was named the interim coach. Over the past four years, they've lost in the first round, twice in the second round and then again in the first round of the playoffs.

The thing that's different about this season is the Wild didn't let themselves get down to the last couple games of the season to seal their fate, as has been the case in the past. Last year, they won six in a row before dropping the next four games near the end of the season. They also clinched when Colorado lost, grabbing the No. 8 seed.

That's the other difference; the Wild are second in the Central Division and should finish in the top half of the playoff picture rather than grab the last spot.

Bottom line: The Wild are in, despite how they got there.

Now the question becomes, how far can they go? Turning the page to the postseason doesn't just erase what's happened recently. It's true that the regular season points and games technically don't mean anything once the puck drops on that first-round series in April. Everybody has a best-of-seven series against a tough opponent. Pucks can bounce anybody's direction, and sometimes the seeds don't really matter.

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That's all fine and good, except the Wild have been in the middle of their delayed mid-season slump in March. They lost five in a row, stopped the bleeding with a win over San Jose last Tuesday, then promptly lost to Philadelphia, Vancouver and Detroit (in overtime). Those last three are all teams that won't see postseason action, which doesn't make the losses any easier to take.

The comments from coach Bruce Boudreau and the locker room have been just as much of a roller coaster as this team's tailspin. Boudreau has seemed angry, indifferent, frustrated, embarrassed and perhaps encouraged by a moral victory in Detroit.

By many accounts, the home game against the Canucks was absolutely dreadful. It was essentially a 4-0 game that ended up 4-2 with a couple late tallies for the Wild.

"It's got to be up to them," Boudreau said. "That was embarrassing. I'm embarrassed. To me, if I were the fans, I'd be booing even more. They pay good money for this, and to see an effort like that when

you don't win any battles... I've been here when we've been losing and I haven't said anything too negative about the team. I mean if you can't compete one-on-one, if you don't have the emotion to want to get out there and do the right things... if this was earlier in the year, changes would be made."

A new year, a new coach in Boudreau, and so many thought this year was going to be different. In many ways, that's been true when it's come to the offensive production, goaltending from Devan Dubnyk and the overall team record this season that included a franchise-record winning streak. But the more things change, the more they stay the same. The Wild have again proved that when they hit a slump, they go all out. Their top players haven't been scoring. Dubnyk's game has slipped with a few soft goals. This is where the mental side of the game becomes a factor. Getting out of a slump can be a true test of a team's mentality.

The Wild took 1-0 and 2-1 leads Sunday in Detroit before falling 3-2 in overtime. They played better than a couple of the recent games. That's still not good enough. Like it or not, the Wild have raised expectations. Beating three non-playoff teams this week shouldn't have been a problem. Instead, they ended up with just one "loser point" and a few moral-victory sentiments.

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Any kind of moral victory Sunday (which is ever-so-small, if at all) isn't necessarily going to snap them out of the funk. It didn't work after the San Jose game, when many thought they'd be able to build momentum.

The regular season is quickly coming to an end. There's time to have a few good practices and get a couple wins. But it will take some work. Going through the motions is no way to end a bad month of March.

So while the Wild can rest easy knowing they'll get a fifth consecutive chance at playoff success, they also have to know that whatever storm is plaguing them, it's not over yet. The season may reset in the first round, but it won't mean much if the Wild players can't find their confidence and goal scoring again.

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