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WILD

RULE: With the Wild in the Playoffs, You Never Know What You're Going to Get



By [Heather Rule](#) - April 10, 2017

One of the best things about sports is that no one can predict them. "That's why they play the games," is the common saying after a surprising result.

It's no different with the NHL playoffs.

The Minnesota Wild enter the postseason for the fifth year in a row, though this is the first with head coach Bruce Boudreau behind their bench. They earned home-ice advantage in their first-round matchup against the St. Louis Blues. Former Wild coach Mike Yeo will be behind that bench.

A few scenarios could play out. The Wild could be in real trouble if they drop Game 1 in St. Paul, causing them to grip their sticks tighter in Game 2 while the Blues seize the momentum.

Goaltending is often the backbone of Stanley Cup-contending teams. Devan Dubynk could be the make-or-break factor for the Wild. He's struggled somewhat lately, looking awkward on some saves and giving up a few bad goals.

Or, Dubynk will return to his early-season form, steal a game or two and the Wild will coast to a series victory in five or six games. A win right away in the first game will go a very long way in terms of the confidence with this team. It shouldn't seem like a big deal, but the mental side of the game is pretty important in that Wild dressing room. At least, it would appear that way with the seasonal swoons.

There's the Yeo factor, too. He was fired from Minnesota last February and took an assistant coach job with St. Louis. When the Blues fired Ken Hitchcock, Yeo took over on Feb. 1 and the Blues hit a hot patch in that time. Yeo's family still lives in Minnesota, plus he'll face his former players. That not only makes for one of the good storylines of the playoffs, but it should also be an advantage for the Blues.

These two teams faced each other in the 2015 first round. The Wild won the series in six games before moving on to lose to the Blackhawks.

Devan Dubynk could be the make-or-break factor for the Wild.

Earlier this season, the Wild were rolling. They looked poised for a Central Division championship as one of the league's best teams. Even in February, the vibes around the fan base were very positive. A deep playoff run to the Stanley Cup Finals was not just some pipe dream.

That all changed once the delayed season swoon hit in March. The confidence turned to shaky, clinging hope where even a first-round series victory isn't the slam dunk some thought it would be.

The Wild have rebounded in April, which could be at just the right time. They ended the season with four straight victories after getting April-fooled by Nashville 3-0 on April 1. Then, they beat the NHL-basement-dwelling Colorado Avalanche 5-2, followed by a 5-3 victory over Carolina, a 4-3 (that was too close for comfort) win over the Avs, then a 3-1 win in Arizona in the regular-season finale on Saturday night.

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That's not exactly a heavyweight schedule to end the season, of course, going against teams that didn't make the playoffs. But it should have helped. It should have put the March slump in the rear view mirror as the Wild look ahead to the playoffs. Sure, everybody starts over with a 0-0 record when the puck drops on the first playoff series. There's still something to be said for how a team is playing just before they get there. The Wild needed the mental boost headed into the postseason to help them climb out of the hole they dug themselves when all those losses piled up in March.

They finished 49-25-8 with a franchise-record 106 points (three behind the Blackhawks). The 49 victories was another franchise-best. Four players scored 20-plus goals. Mikhael Granlund led the team with 69 points (26-43-69). Jason Zucker and Ryan Suter lead the NHL each with a plus-34 in the plus-minus category. Dubynk is still among the league leaders in save percentage at .923.

These are plenty of reasons why the Wild are capable of beating the Blues and potentially setting up a second-round series against the Blackhawks. You still just never know. That's why they play the games. It's not some bold prediction, but playoff hockey is exciting and surprising. An entertaining series is surely on the horizon.

Here's the first-round schedule for the Wild. Cue the annual gripes about the so-called late games at 8:30 p.m.

Playoff schedule: Minnesota Wild v. St. Louis Blues (all times Central)

- Game 1 – Wednesday, April 12, St. Louis at Minnesota, 8:30 p.m.
- Game 2 – Friday, April 14, St. Louis at Minnesota, 7 p.m.
- Game 3 – Sunday, April 16, Minnesota at St. Louis, 2 p.m.
- Game 4 – Wednesday, April 19, Minnesota at St. Louis, 8:30 p.m.
- Game 5 – Saturday, April 22, St. Louis at Minnesota, TBD (if necessary)
- Game 6 – Monday, April 24, Minnesota at St. Louis, TBD (if necessary)
- Game 7 – Wednesday, April 26, St. Louis at Minnesota, TBD (if necessary)

Source: nhl.com/wild

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