Little separates today's NHL teams

Now you know what I meant.

That's my delayed response to the many individuals who asked me how I thought the Red Wings would do in the playoffs or who I thought would meet in the Stanley Cup Finals.

Generally, I'm not big on predictions when it comes to professional sports because no one really knows what's going to happen on the ice, court on the field. And anybody who tells you that they do know is full of you know what. As the old – but true – cliché goes: “That's why they play the games.”

But this season I was even more averse to “making a pick” than usual. That's because in today's National Hockey League, very little separates each team.

During the regular season, the President's Trophy-winning Vancouver Canucks – The No. 1 seed in the Western Conference – was only 16 points better than the conference's No. 8 seed, the Los Angeles Kings.

Out East, the No. 1 seeded Rangers only had 17 more points than the No. 8 Ottawa Senators.

Now, as we all know, the Western Conference Finals will feature those No. 8-seeded Kings – who took out the Canucks in five games and so far have been the most dominant team in the playoffs with a 8-1 record - and the Phoenix Coyotes, the No. 3 seed on the strength of winning a dogfight in the Pacific Conference that saw the top three teams separated by only two points.

OK – let's get to the point.

If I would have told anyone that I thought Phoenix – which hadn't won a playoff series since 1987 when the franchise was known as the Winnipeg Jets – and Los Angeles – who last reached the conference finals in 1993 (when they went to the Stanley Cup Finals) – would meet to determine who would represent the Western Conference in the Stanley Cup Finals, they would have looked at me like I was crazy.

Heck, to be honest, not even I thought there was a chance that the Coyotes and the Kings would be the conference's last teams skating.

Things aren't quite so extreme in the Eastern Conference.

The sixth-seeded New Jersey Devils will meet the winner of the Rangers-Washington Capitals series in the Eastern Conference Finals.

While the Devils hadn't been to the conference finals since 2003, when they won their last Stanley Cup, it's never a real surprise when they go far in the playoffs. Martin Brodeur has backstopped them to three Cups in his career and he appears determined to make it four, despite just turning 40. The all-time wins leader is also playing better in the playoffs than he has since that last New Jersey Cup in 2003.

The Rangers have held serve so far as the east's No. 1 seed, but it hasn't been easy.

It took them seven games to dispatch the game Senators and lead the Capitals three games-to-two going into Wednesday night's Game 6 in Washington.

The Capitals are the No. 7 seed and, of course, beat the second-seeded and defending Stanley Cup champion Boston Bruins in seven games in the first round, thanks to Joel Ward's Game 7 overtime series-winning goal.

Now, there's always the assumption that parity is good for sports league. That if every team and its fans feel they can win the championship, there will be more interest, more people will buy tickets to attend games and more will watch on television and the the teams can make more money because the networks will be able to charge more for advertising.

So, is that the case with a Phoenix Coyotes-Los Angeles Kings Western Conference Finals?

Would it be the case with, say, a Stanley Cup Final of New Jersey vs. Phoenix or Los Angeles?

Is parity a good thing?

I'll let you answer that question and I'll give you another one.

Which series do you think NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman and the rest of the suits in the NHL offices in New York would rather see?

Or more succinctly, which team needs to reach the Stanley Cup Finals for there to be decent (by hockey standards anyway) television ratings?

If you said the Rangers, of course, you are correct.

In fact, a New York-Los Angeles final would be just fine as the league is concerned.

If Washington makes it through, the league and NBC Sports still have Alexander Ovechkin to hype. But it appears that the Capitals win more when he plays less.

That's interesting – and understandable - to hardcore hockey fans. Those who might tune by just because they've seen Ovechkin in one of his commercials might tune in to watch him play and then change the channel when he doesn't see the ice for 15 minutes or so.

How would the NHL brass feel about a New Jersey-Phoenix final?

They have Brodeur, arguably the greatest ever at his position, but unless their name is Patrick Roy, goalies don't do much for Q-Ratings.

Now, with the Coyotes, there is a story.

The story is that they're only in Phoenix because the NHL took over the franchise (the league has a tentative deal to sell the Coyotes to a group led by former San Jose Sharks CEO Greg Jamison) after the previous ownership lost so much money because – SURPRISE: There really wasn't enough interest in the (hockey) team locally (in the desert) to make it viable.

That's a story and it would also be compelling to talk about how the team persevered through all the ownership instability to advance for a chance to win the Stanley Cup.

It is compelling to die-hard hockey fans. Would it be compelling to a mass audience?

We may find out.

You got what you wanted, Commissioner Bettman.

Are you happy?