

2023-24 Preseason Playoff Predictions

Dean Brown, longtime play-by-play broadcaster of the Ottawa Senators, recently said that the Senators have a playoff-caliber set of defensemen for the first time in years. This simple statement triggered two articles, with this being the second one.

I will predict which teams will make the 2023-24 playoffs using the logic that the team with the better top-end talent makes the playoffs.

Data Used to Make the Predictions

I will use the player data from the *2022-23 Productivity Rating Predictions* article. In mid-September, I got the current rosters of all teams, which helped me place most players on a team for the next season. If a player wasn't on that current roster list, I looked for him on CapFriendly.com.

Methodology

I calculated the strength of each team using the sum of the predicted PR of each team's top six defensemen and top nine forwards. I then created a formula that would approximate the result of a game between the two teams: the better team would win more often than the lesser team, and a really good team would win a lot more often against a really bad team.

I then played 100 seasons, recording which teams made the playoffs. Finally, I counted how many times each team made the playoffs in those 100 seasons.

2023-24 Eastern Conference

2023-24 Eastern Conference Predictions						
Team	Div	W	L	OTL	Pts	In
Florida	Atl	51.2	27.0	3.9	110.2	96%
NY Rangers	Met	48.6	28.9	4.5	106.2	92%
Ottawa	Atl	47.8	29.7	4.7	105.0	82%
Toronto	Atl	47.6	29.7	4.8	104.8	81%
Detroit	Atl	47.0	30.3	4.7	103.4	80%
Carolina	Met	44.4	32.3	5.4	99.6	67%
Boston	Atl	44.8	32.4	4.9	99.4	61%
New Jersey	Met	43.0	33.5	5.6	97.2	59%
Tampa Bay	Atl	43.1	33.6	5.3	96.8	49%
Pittsburgh	Met	41.5	34.9	5.6	94.2	43%
Columbus	Met	40.2	36.0	5.8	92.0	30%
Buffalo	Atl	40.9	35.7	5.4	92.6	26%
NY Islanders	Met	39.1	37.1	5.8	89.8	23%
Washington	Met	36.1	39.6	6.3	84.8	6%
Montreal	Atl	35.4	40.4	6.2	83.2	4%
Philadelphia	Met	29.0	46.9	6.1	70.2	1%

As I was writing this article, I stumbled across the playoff predictions of DataDrivenHockey while browsing Reddit. I liked how he presented his results and based my tables' row-

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shading on it. You'll see more on his predictions later. I'm not wild about some of his predictions, but he would disagree with some of mine, so we break even on that.

A Tale of Two Cities

Toronto and Carolina are case studies for the ages-old hockey adage that "you can't win without defense".

Toronto: You Can Win Without Defense

Basically, Toronto is trying to win without defense. On the blue line, their top three projected defensemen (Morgan Rielly, Jake McCabe, and John Klingberg) are below average, while their fourth through sixth defensemen (TJ Brodie, Timothy Liljegren, and Mark Giordano) are slightly above average.

Four of their top six projected forwards (Auston Matthews, Mitchell Marner, William Nylander, and John Tavares) are excellent: two PR-Elites, and two PR-Stars. Their #5 forward is Tyler Bertuzzi, who is above average for a #5 forward. Their #6 forward is Max Domi, who is below the league average, as are the "third line" forwards (David Kampf, Sam Lafferty, and Calle Jarnkrok).

Toronto's defensemen, as a group, rank 18th in the league. Their forwards rank 3rd. Toronto hopes to win games by a score of 5-4.

Carolina: You Can Not Win Without Defense

Carolina looks like they have turned that old adage into a religion. While their #1 defenseman (Jacob Slavin) is below average, their #2 through #6 defensemen (Brent Burns, Dmitry Orlov, Anthony DeAngelo, Brady Skjei and Brett Pesce) are all above average. The Hurricane's third pair of defensemen are better than 24 of the other teams' second pair.

The top six Hurricane forwards (Sebastian Aho, Andrei Svechnikov, Michael Bunting, Martin Necas, Jordan Staal, and Jesperi Kotkaniemi) all project to be below average. Their projected "third line" forwards (Seth Jarvis, Teuvo Teravainen, and Kieffer Bellows) are above average.

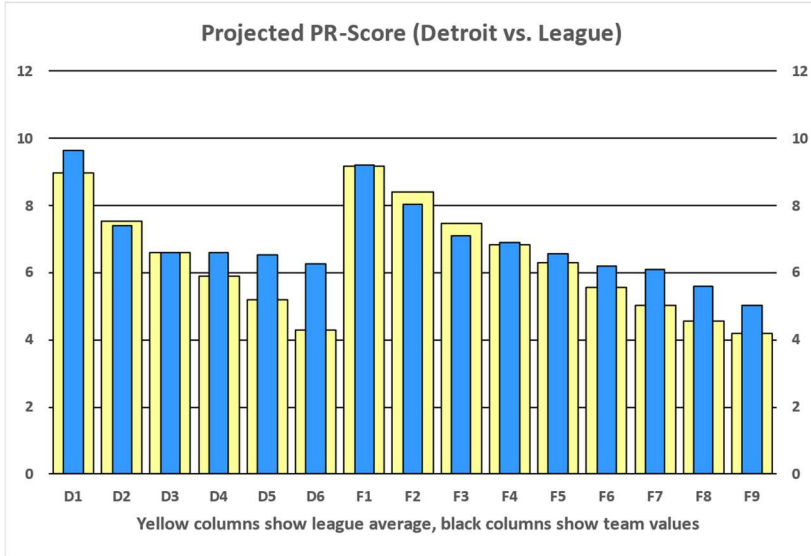
The Hurricane defensemen rank 2nd in the league and their forwards rank 24th. Carolina hopes to win games by a score of 2-1.

Detroit at 80%

Detroit's prediction might be a bit high. I have them at 80% to make the playoffs, while DDH has them at 27%. That's a big gap.

As I mentioned in my Methodology section, my predictions are based on each team's strength and 100 simulations of the 2023-24 season. Luckily for you, I have a chart that shows how a team's skaters compare to the league average for their position on a team (#4 defenseman or #7 forward, for example), which will shed light on why my predictions are bullish for the Red Wings.

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Detroit’s defensemen project to be very good. As a group, they are 5th best in the league. Detroit’s first three forwards are a little below average, but their projected second line and third line are strong and stronger. Detroit’s forwards rank 10th.

How does DDH give Detroit only a 27% chance of making the playoffs? Well, Detroit hasn’t made the playoffs for years now, so they don’t currently have a “tradition” of winning. While that logic means nothing to my process, it could mean a lot to somebody who is making their picks subjectively. I’m not saying that DDH made his predictions subjectively. I am saying when I compare the top fifteen players of Detroit and Pittsburgh (who I have at 43% and DDH has at 71%), Detroit’s players project to be better.

Detroit’s players are better than Pittsburgh’s? You might wonder if I know who plays for Pittsburgh. I can assure you I know about Crosby and Malkin and Karlsson and Letang.

I also know that fearsome foursome are all advanced in age for an NHL player. Pittsburgh has the oldest top fifteen skaters in the league, by a wide margin. Those four players are at the part of their career where they will begin to decline. Their projections for 2023-24 are based solely on their performance over the past two seasons and their current ages. Crosby is 36 and projects to be a PR-Star, Malkin is 37 and will be PR-First5, Karlsson is the baby of the group at 33 and projects to be PR-Elite while Letang is 36 and figures to be a PR-Star.

As to knowing who plays for Pittsburgh, I also know about the other eleven players that are used in the team projections. Penguin defensemen rank 11th in the league, their forwards rank 20th.

I think my predictions for both Detroit and Pittsburgh are reasonable.

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2023-24 Western Conference

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Edmonton	Pac	48.6	27.2	4.5	106.2	98%
Vegas	Pac	47.8	31.3	5.1	105.8	81%
Dallas	Cen	47.6	32.9	5.3	105.8	73%
Seattle	Cen	47.0	33.3	5.4	104.8	67%
Winnipeg	Pac	44.4	33.7	5.5	99.8	65%
Nashville	Pac	44.8	34.0	5.1	99.8	63%
Vancouver	Pac	43.0	33.6	5.9	97.8	61%
Calgary	Cen	43.1	34.7	5.8	97.8	57%
St. Louis	Pac	41.5	35.9	6.0	95.0	39%
Los Angeles	Cen	40.2	36.7	5.9	92.2	34%
Minnesota	Cen	40.9	36.8	6.2	94.2	32%
Arizona	Cen	39.1	37.6	6.1	90.4	30%
San Jose	Pac	36.1	45.1	6.6	85.4	0%
Chicago	Pac	35.4	51.0	7.3	85.4	0%
Anaheim	Cen	29.0	57.4	7.9	73.8	0%

It should be a dogfight for the wild-card spots in the West. Teams 5 through 9 are separated by just 10% in the predictions. At least one of those teams will probably not make the playoffs.

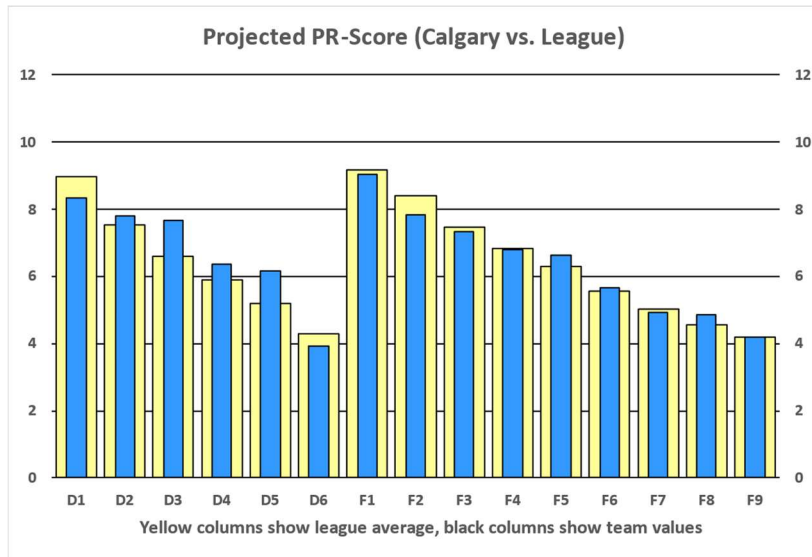
In my subjective opinion, Arizona's prediction is much too high. DDH has the Coyotes at 5%, and that feels more subjectively correct. The green-shaded teams have an advantage in that three teams have (almost) no chance of making the playoffs. I don't think that any team really has a 0% chance of making the playoffs, but that's me being a bit pedantic: one chance in 1,000 isn't really 0%, it just rounds to 0%.

Here is a thought experiment: how would Anaheim make the playoffs? Cam Fowler would have to play as well as his projection, the other five defensemen have to play a full PR-Category better than they their projections, and most of their forwards would have to play half a PR-Category better than their projections. While any one player can play better than projected, the chances that ten players on one team will all play better than projected are extremely slim. Extremely slim, but not zero.

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Calgary at 57%

I have Calgary's playoff chances at 57%. DDH has them as practically a lock to make the playoffs (98.6%). As it was for Detroit and Pittsburgh, my predictions are about the skaters.



Calgary's defensemen rank 12th in the league, the forwards rank 17th and their combined top fifteen players rank 13th. If they are a lock to make the playoffs, so are a dozen other better teams.

One mystery about DDH may have been solved. I'm betting DDH is a fan of the Flames, and am basically accusing him of a little home-cooking in his prediction stew. Why else would Calgary be rated as more likely to make the playoffs than Colorado and Toronto and New Jersey and Dallas?

Weaknesses of the Stapled to the Bench Prediction Process

My process ignores goalies. It is the biggest weakness in my process. Goalies are not included because the 2023-24 projections use Productivity Rating, and goalies cannot be measured by PR (they don't take faceoffs, they don't score, they don't hit, etc.)

My process ignores "fourth-line" forwards. In my defense, the fourth line adds little value to most teams. Detroit, Dallas, and Vancouver have the best sets of fourth-liners. Philadelphia and Calgary have by far the worst, with their projected fourth-line players all being PR-CallUp level players.

Rookies are excluded: they have no NHL data with which to make a prediction. I thought of this while watching some pre-season highlights of Connor Bedard.¹

My process ignores coaches. My one study of coaches indicates that Tortorella's teams usually have a big surge in productivity in his second full season with the team, so Philadelphia's playoff chances might be higher than 1%!

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Final Thoughts on My Prediction Process

I used a series of formulas to make these predictions. That doesn't make them more "correct" than any other set of predictions, I did that to remove as much of my personal subjectivity from my predictions as I could. I am an unabashed fan of the Ottawa Senators, and so I go out of my way to ensure that my discipleship doesn't impact my work.

In developing my player predicting formulas, which are the basis of the team projections, I used fifteen seasons' worth of data that showed how players usually progress, given their age and skill level (PR-Category). Tim Stutzle (OTT) projects as a 2023-24 PR-Elite not because he is a Senator, not because I like him, but because that is what would happen to any player of his age with a similar PR-Score in his previous season.

In developing the team-level playoff prediction process, I looked at all the team projections and reviewed my results with my in-house hockey expert (my son), who pointed out issues with two teams that led to changes in my process.

Summary

Making predictions is a chump's game.

If your predictions are sensible across the board, then they will be seen as low-effort and boring. They'll note that anybody could have made those predictions.

On the other hand, if your predictions contain a couple of unexpected results, then they will be assumed to be flawed. People will assume you are playing favourites, or that you picked names from a hat, or that you crave the attention that controversy will garner.

A third problem is that some people don't understand the odds. If Detroit misses the playoffs, that doesn't make my prediction for them wrong: I have them missing the playoffs 20% of the time. Detroit is more likely to make the playoffs than to not make the playoffs, and they are more likely to make the playoffs than Pittsburgh is.

If you want to bet on Pittsburgh making the playoffs, go for it. If you want to bet with me about Pittsburgh making the playoffs, forget it. Sports bets are for chumps, and my momma didn't raise no chumps.

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