

Disparities in the NHL Schedule

In one week, the Edmonton Oilers, a hockey team in the Western Conference, will play five games in three different time zones (Eastern, Central, and Mountain). That same week, the Philadelphia Flyers, an Eastern Conference team, will play all four games in the Eastern time zone including two away games. After the lockout in 2004-2005 that cancelled the entire season, the schedule was changed to highlight intra-divisional play with each team playing the other teams in their division eight times each per season. Currently, each Western Conference team plays 10 games against the Eastern Conference each season and vice versa. The current NHL schedule has created a large disparity between the two conferences regarding time travel and as a result has caused a great debate.

A majority of the Eastern Conference organizations believe that the current NHL schedule is appropriate for the league at this time both economically and logistically. It costs teams less money to travel they are situated closer together than the Western Conference teams, cutting down on their flying time. A focus on intradivisional play means that the majority of the Eastern Conference travels can be done by bus or a short flight. For example, the Buffalo Sabres, a team in the Eastern Conference, is 90 minutes or closer to 10 of the other 14 teams in their conference allowing them to travel by bus and reduce costs (Gleason). This reduced inter-conference play allows Eastern Conference teams to do a lot less traveling than their Western Conference counterparts.

Less travel allows these players to not be so weary from the road and provides them more opportunities for rest. Games in the same time zone typically allow the players to

travel home that night after the game and obtain a normal amount of sleep. The general manager for the New Jersey Devils, an Eastern Conference team supports the current schedule because his team can travel by bus for 39% of the team's away games allowing reduced costs and less wear and tear on his players (Hornby). The other Eastern Conference general managers except the Toronto Maple Leafs GM hold this belief.

The NHL schedule before the lockout had Eastern Conference teams flying to Western Canada from which they wouldn't return home until seven in the morning due to the time zone changes. Some teams still face this type of situation, but the current format has reduced the number of times each season these teams fly out to cities in the Western Conference. "I think you have better hockey now through six or seven months because there's less fatigue. If you eliminate some of the division games to go out west, your product ends up suffering," Washington Capitals head coach Glen Hanlon told *The Washington Times* (Fay). Hanlon also told CanWest News Service that after the Capitals make their one road trip to Western Canada in the early part of the 2006-2007 season, they don't have to leave the Eastern time zone again (MacIntyre). More rest allows players to perform at a higher level improving the quality of game play, which many believe is a benefit of the new NHL schedule.

While the current schedule does help reduce travel costs and increase performance levels, the primary hope of the current schedule was to foster divisional rivalries. Rivalries improve the game by adding an emotional dimension, which riles up the players and the team's fans helping to generate ticket sales and interest in the team. As the saying goes, familiarity breeds contempt so the NHL believes the current schedule is on the right track to encourage rivalries. When there were only six teams in the league,

known as the Original Six, they played all of their games against one other. This repetition did lead to intense and bitter rivalries between the Detroit Red Wings and the Toronto Maple Leafs as well as between the Boston Bruins and Montreal Canadiens. While the current schedule didn't immediately create rivalries, it may be creating some. In late November of 2006, the Washington Capitals played the Atlanta Thrashers in their fourth game of eight this season as they both play in the Southeast division. The game became emotionally charged with 176 penalty minutes including 10 fighting majors given out after fights erupted ("Game summary"). The fans seemed to enjoy the fight as the Capitals next home game had an increase in attendance by 3000. It will take more years of the current schedule before one can determine if it was effective in creating division rivalries.

All of the NHL organizations agree that rivalries are important for the development and continued success of the game in Canada and the United States. The rivalry that developed between the Colorado Avalanche and Detroit Red Wings in the mid-1990s took headlines in the paper and garnered time on TV highlight shows, which generated interest in the sport as a result. The debate is about which schedule best generates rivalries while keeping the playing field level amongst all 30 teams.

While every team can find faults with the current schedule, the majority of the Eastern Conference teams support today's format primarily because over 90% of their games will be in the same time zone. On the other hand, teams in the Western Conference don't receive much help financially from the increase in divisional play because teams are a lot more spread out causing greater travel between four different time zones. Most Western Conference teams would support a new schedule that would allow each team to play every other team in the league at least once per season. This

proposed schedule would allow fans to see budding superstars like Washington Capital's Alexander Ovechkin or the Pittsburgh Penguins' Sidney Crosby. Currently, teams in the Western Conference get to see them play once every three years at home. In October 2006, Crosby and Ovechkin had the number one and number three top selling jerseys respectively in the NHL according to *Sports Business Daily*. It's a shame for fans when ten Western Conference teams won't play Crosby's team or Ovechkin's team every year with the current schedule.

The proposed format will make it fairer in terms of travel if the Eastern Conference teams had to go outside their time zone more often. Only two teams in the Western Conference reside in the Eastern time zone, and thus are affected the most by the time change in traveling to play intra-conference teams. The Detroit Red Wings are one of those two teams and they play 78% of their away games outside of their home time zone, whereas an Eastern Conference team will play at most 12% of their away games outside the Eastern time zone. The disparity between the two traveling schedules creates an unfair advantage for Eastern Conference teams.

The proposed schedule would generate more excitement among fans and increase ticket sales. Fans get bored watching their team take on the same teams, especially when they play three or four straight games against these teams. For example, the Detroit Red Wings are in the Central Division of the Western Conference, which is believed to be the weakest division in the entire NHL. As a result, the Red Wings typically destroy teams like the Chicago Blackhawks and Columbus Blue Jackets. Wings fans get tired of seeing the same overmatched teams as opponents and look forward to games against stronger teams. As a result, attendance at games against their Central Division opponents is not as high as when the team plays opponents outside the

division. In fact, a poll of 3200 fans by NHLFA found that 46% believed the current format was a bad idea with only 31% of fans liking the schedule as it is today (Pollak). 23% of those polled had no opinion on the current schedule. These division games were supposed to provide more compelling TV broadcasts, but it has yet to be the case. Last season, the Colorado Avalanche opened their season with 14 games against the same three teams in the first 26 games (Tychkowski, "Saturation point"). The eight games against each team in the division haven't stirred up much contempt for one another and have yet to really generate a full-blown rivalry. In NHL history, bitter rivalries were bred in the playoffs and not during the regular season.

The proposed schedule would allow for Original Six match ups to occur every season. While the rivalries certainly aren't what they used to be between teams like Detroit and Toronto, fans and players appreciate the history of these Original Six teams and enjoy when they play one another. Detroit and Toronto are only three and a half hours away from one another, yet they will only play two times every three years. "To have a great opportunity to play Toronto more, a great Original Six rivalry, along with Montreal and Boston, would be great," Detroit Red Wings veteran and Toronto native Kris Draper said. "With the history of the game and the history of these organizations, they should be playing each other a lot more" (Tychkowski, "It's the Original nix"). For the first time in the history of the league, Detroit and Toronto did not play last year and that rubs Original Six teams the wrong way. In addition, all but one of the Original Six teams is in the top half of the league in terms of attendance at away games. Two of them draw the most fans at 97.1% and 95.4% arena seating capacity ("NHL attendance leaders"). A schedule where Original Six teams were able to play one another at least once a season would definitely be an improvement in the NHL schedule.

Adding elements of the proposed schedule could strengthen the opposing position (Eastern Conference teams), which believes that the current schedule is the right one and the NHL should stick with it. For example, reducing intradivisional play to six games from the current eight games would allow for more inter-conference games to occur while still emphasizing divisional games. To help reconcile these differences, one could reduce the number of pre-season games and add to the regular season to make sure that intra-conference play is not decreased. Even with the current format, Eastern Conference teams have to make a trip or two west to play their 10 games against Western Conference opponents. By adding a couple more games in the Western Conference, it will extend their trip(s) a few extra days but won't cost the team much extra money in travel expenses. A compromise between the two positions is both possible and necessary in order to try to level the playing field as much as possible so the best team truly wins.

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