

SPORTS SLANTS

By Ray Shank

In case you missed last week's column, here's how I picked the 16 NHL teams to finish this year:

East: 1. Montreal; 2. Boston; 3. Toronto; 4. N.Y. Rangers; 5. Buffalo; 6. Vancouver; 7. N.Y. Islanders; 8. Detroit.

West: 1. Philadelphia; 2. Chicago; 3. Minnesota; 4. Los Angeles; 5. Atlanta; 6. St. Louis; 7. Pittsburgh; 8. California.

I've already given my reasons (you might call them excuses) for the order of finish in the east, so this week I'll attempt to explain my picks in the west division.

Philadelphia Flyers started out like a house on fire, but appear to have slowed down a bit the last week or so. But they're a big, mean, powerful club, something like Boston Bruins were five years ago. Netminder Bernie Parent is off to a flying start (as of last Tuesday he had a 1.33 goals against average) and he'll get lots of offensive strength from guys like Bobby Clarke, Rick MacLeish Bill Flett and Bill Barber. Flyers gave Montreal a good run for their money in last year's Stanley Cup semi-finals and, to me, are the best team in the west this year.

My No. 2 pick, Chicago Black Hawks, may come as a surprise. The Hawks walked away with the west crown the first year they played in the west, but last year they wound up only eight points ahead of the Flyers, who tied for second with Minnesota. Don't forget that the Hawks lost two of their key players to the WHA after last season -- all-star defenceman Pat Stapleton and forward Ralph Backstrom. That, plus the fact that their second goalie, Gary Smith, is now with Vancouver Canucks, makes the Hawks weaker than last year. They have a fine young player in Dale Tallon, who was involved in the trade for Smith, but that's not enough to keep them at

the top.

As of last Tuesday Minnesota North Stars had yet to win a game, but their record wasn't all that bad, having tied four and lost three. The Stars have the second best GM in the league in Wren Blair (second to Sammy Pollock). Blair lured Gump Worsley out of retirement, who will share the puckblocking with Cesare Maniago. Minnesota added a useful player in the off-season by acquiring Fred Stanfield from the Bruins. The only thing against the North Stars is their age, but they are all talented and tough and should be good for third spot.

Los Angeles Kings were the most improved club in the league last year, under coach Bob Pulford and they should be even better this year. Pulford has the Kings believing they can make the playoffs and that's the best thing they've got going for them -- that plus fine forwards like Bob Berry, Juha Widing, Mike Corrigan and a fellow named Bob Murdoch acquired from the Canadiens. And goalie Rogatien Vachon is an established NHL netminder.

Many so-called experts are picking Atlanta Flames for seventh or as low as last place, but I don't buy that. The Flames, in their second season of play, have already shown

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