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of the season, then go into their annual slump and lose something like 15 of their last 20 games? And just to add salt to their own wounds, they usually carry on their losing ways in the playoffs.

Last year, the Rangers had their usual end of the season slump and wound up third, five points behind Boston and 18 behind the Prince of Wales - winning Canadiens. They perked up in the quarter-finals by ousting the Bruins in five games, thanks mainly to a leg injury to Phil Esposito.

But, as those who know the Rangers figured, Emile Francis' Manhattan Blueshirts lost out in the semi-finals, dropping four out of five games to Chicago.

If the Rangers don't start winning soon, they'll find themselves mighty hard-pressed to make the playoffs come late March and April, when they usually get real sour. Maybe, though, the Rangers are doing an about-turn this year. They'll be stale the first month or two then will come out flying after New Year's.

The way they've been going lately, though, and if the trend of past years persists, Rangers would be lucky to finish higher than fifth and maybe as low as sixth.

One thing the Rangers have going for them is that Buffalo Sabres, who took fourth spot last year ahead of Toronto and Detroit, are now just a mediocre team without their star centre, Gilles Perreault. Perreault broke a leg in a game against New York Islanders 1 1/2 weeks ago and should be out most of the season

Prior to Perreault's injury, the Sabres were flying. They were tied for second place with Montreal and looked like definite play-off threats. The Rangers, meanwhile, were 3-4-1 and were just one point ahead of their seventh place cross-city rivals, the Islanders

The Islanders, by the way, beat the Rangers 3-2 two Saturdays ago. It was the first time the Islanders had beaten the Blueshirts

Word in this part of the country is that Ned Harkness, general manager of Detroit Red Wings, might be on his way out. It seems he and executive director Jim Bishop have had two or three tussles already this season and Harkness could very well get the gate.

Trouble is, Harkness isn't the only bad apple in the Detroit barrel. So is Bishop. My feeling is that if club owner Bruce Norris got rid of both of them, the Wings might suddenly become contenders.

Phil Esposito is off to his best start ever, with 13 goals and nine assists for 22

points in Boston's first nine games. At that rate, 'Super Wap' could wind up with close to 200 points and about 95 goals. Hope somebody slows him down soon ...

If any of you watched that Saturday game between Toronto and Boston (Oct. 27), you have to admit the Bruins really only have one line -- the Esposito line -- with Ken Hodge and Wayne Cashman. Oh yes, and Bobby Orr helps too ...

After one game a couple of weeks ago, when Canadiens' Yvan Cournoyer scored his seventh and eighth goals of the season, a Canadian Press story remarked that the 'Roadrunner' was ahead of Esposito's pace of two years ago when the latter scored 76 goals. The next night, Esposito scored three to give him 10 after seven games, to also put him away ahead of the 1971-72 season.

Just a word about Secretariat's big win at Woodbine in Toronto two Saturdays ago. 'Super Red', as they call the big chestnut horse, must be as popular as Elvis or The Beatles were in their day. After he won the Toronto race, his groom Eddie Sweat, cut off a chunk of red mane for a fan, Mrs. Maxine Robson. Another lady, standing by, also wanted a souvenir. "I'll take one of his road apples,"

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