

Hope and heartbreak: Canadian hockey fans put faith in Oilers, Leafs to end three-decade Stanley Cup drought

Despite commissioner Bettman's claims, fans call for return to old 'one through eight seed' playoff format

April 20, 2023 – The NHL playoffs are underway, though fans in Toronto may wonder if their team got the correct start date, after a 7-3 thumping at the hands of the Tampa Bay Lightning in game one of their opening round matchup.

As three of Canada's teams – the Winnipeg Jets, Edmonton Oilers, and Toronto Maple Leafs – endeavour to end the nation's three-decade championship drought, two-thirds of hockey fans (64%) will be cheering for any of the three to lift the Stanley Cup.

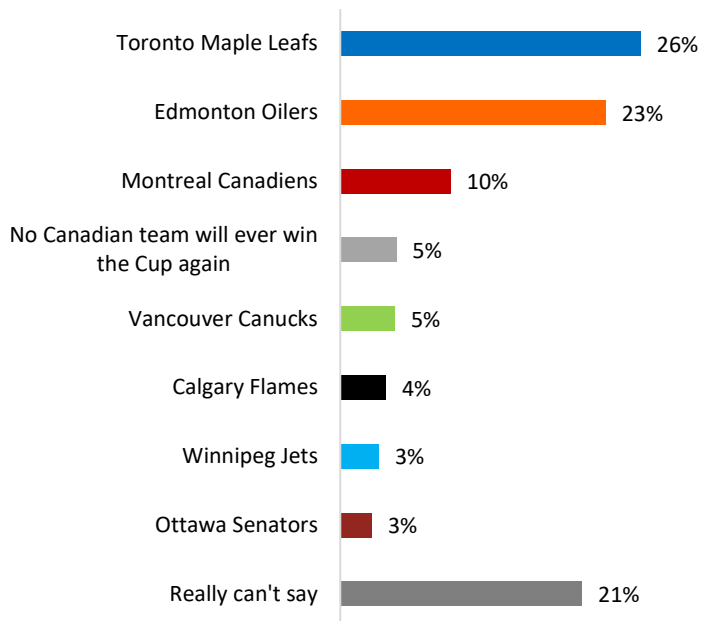
Indeed, a new study from the non-profit Angus Reid Institute finds that just one-in-ten hockey fans (9%) say they will only cheer for their own favourite team to win Canada's first Stanley Cup since 1993. The aforementioned 64 per cent say they are fans of all of Canada's teams and want them to succeed, while one-quarter say it depends which team. As one might imagine, Calgary Flames fans are less likely to support the Oilers than other options, and many Montreal Canadiens fans won't be donning their white and blue to support the rival Leafs.

Asked who they feel is Canada's best bet, regardless of fandom, one-quarter say Toronto – which finished with the league's fourth best record – has the best chance, while close to the same number (23%) say Connor McDavid and the Edmonton Oilers are the team to bring the Cup back to Canada. A meagre three per cent choose the Winnipeg Jets, though this jumps to 30 per cent among fans in Manitoba.

Attention paid to the NHL remains stable in Canada, as 36 per cent say they follow the league closely. That said, this proportion has dipped from 41 per cent in 2014 and 43 per cent in 2018. Issues with [the culture of hockey](#) have put a strain on some fans' willingness to engage with the sport in recent years, and another problem appears to be dismaying to some viewers – the playoff format.

These data suggest that fans [agree with Pittsburgh Penguins star Sidney Crosby](#) that the league should return to its old playoff matchups – which seed the teams in each conference one through eight – rather

Which team will win the Stanley Cup first? (Follow the NHL, n=1,167)



METHODOLOGY:

The Angus Reid Institute conducted an online survey from April 12 - 15, 2023 among a representative randomized sample of 1,626 Canadian adults who are members of [Angus Reid Forum](#). For comparison purposes only, a probability sample of this size would carry a margin of error of +/- 2 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. Discrepancies in or between totals are due to rounding. The survey was self-commissioned and paid for by ARI. Detailed tables are found at the end of this release.

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than the more division-based version that has been utilized since 2014. Two-thirds of fans overall (67%) and three-quarters of those who follow the game most closely (76%) say that they prefer the old format. Overall, one-in-eight (12%) like the new version better, while one-in-five (21%) say it makes no difference to them.

More Key Findings:

- Interest in the playoffs is much higher in Alberta (40%), Manitoba (40%), and Ontario (38%), than provinces without a team to rally around, such as British Columbia (19%) and Quebec (21%).
- Three-in-ten (31%) of those who follow hockey say the players have never been better than they are now. Others say last decade was the peak for skill level (15%) or that the league's high point was in the 1980s (11%).
- As for the game itself, the 1980s and 1990s are looked upon with a certain amount of reverence by fans. An equal number say from an entertainment standpoint the NHL was best in the '80s (16%), '90s (15%) or is currently better than ever before (16%).

About ARI

*The **Angus Reid Institute (ARI)** was founded in October 2014 by pollster and sociologist, Dr. Angus Reid. ARI is a national, not-for-profit, non-partisan public opinion research foundation established to advance education by commissioning, conducting and disseminating to the public accessible and impartial statistical data, research and policy analysis on economics, political science, philanthropy, public administration, domestic and international affairs and other socio-economic issues of importance to Canada and its world.*

INDEX

- **Leafs, Oilers, Jets fans lead playoff interest**
- **Canada's Cup Curse: Which team will break it?**
- **Two-thirds say 'bring back old playoff format'**
- **Largest group among fans say the game has never been better**

Leafs, Oilers, Jets fans lead playoff interest

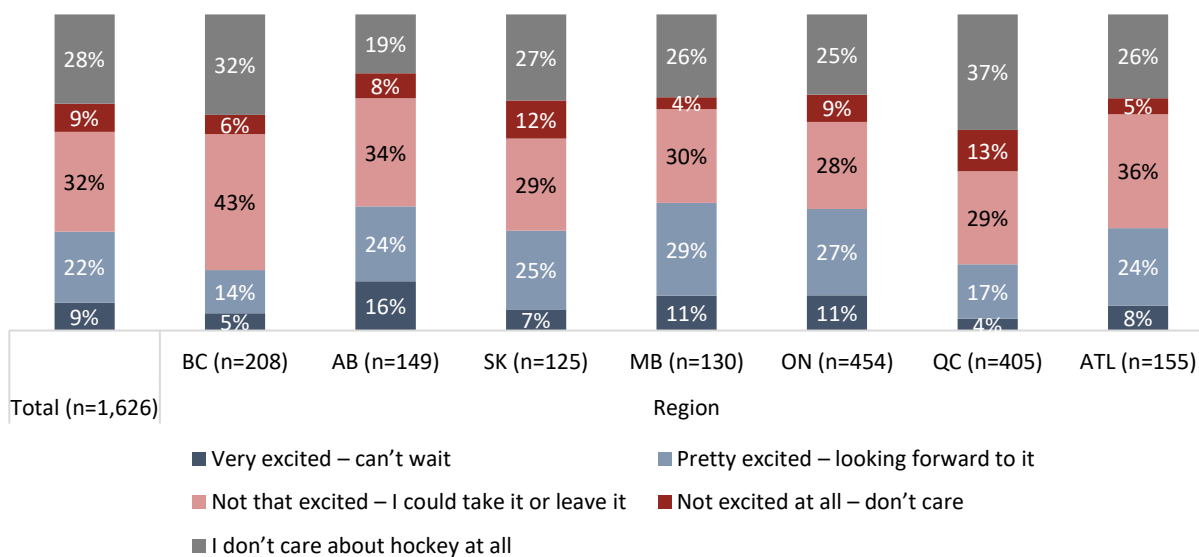
Canadian hockey fans had a wide array of experiences during the 2022/23 NHL regular season. Fans of the Toronto Maple Leafs watched with joy as their team recorded its fourth-best season in the franchise's 106-year history. Edmonton Oilers fans observed history as Connor McDavid became the first player since 1996 to surpass 150 points in a season. Meantime, the Winnipeg Jets elbowed their way past the Calgary Flames to secure the final wildcard playoff spot in the western conference, leaving Alberta's other franchise on the sidelines with Ottawa, Vancouver, and Montreal.

As such, interest in the NHL playoffs is varied across the country. In Alberta, Manitoba, and Ontario, two-in-five say they're excited to watch. One-in-three Canadians (32%) say they're on the fence now, but may be drawn in as the end-of-season tournament unfolds:

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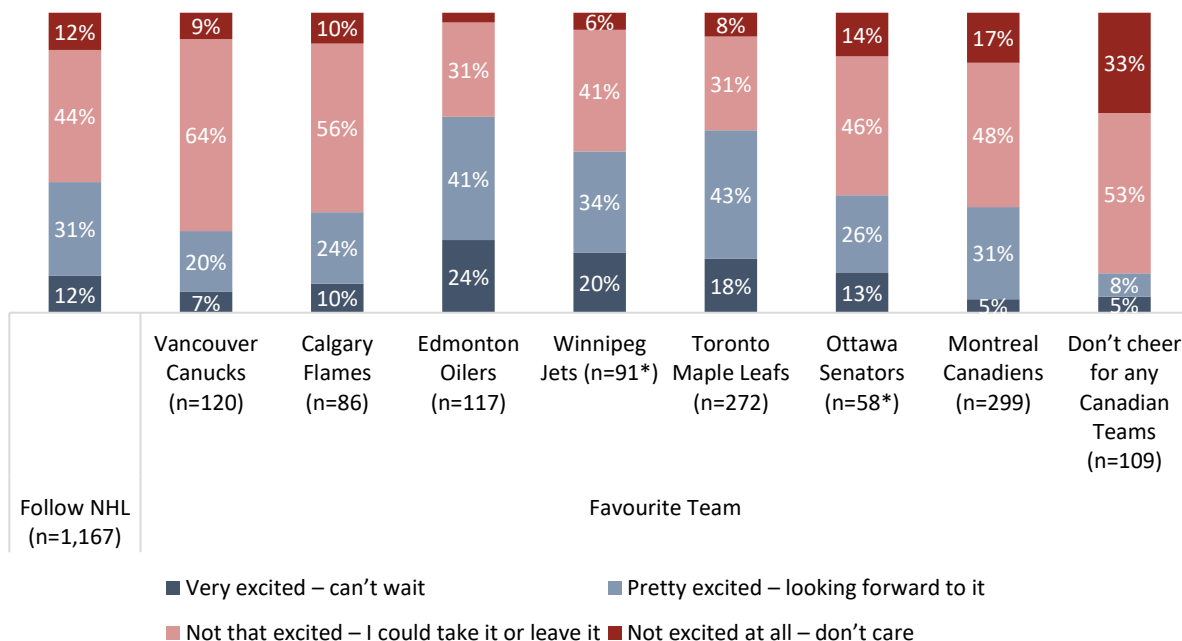
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How excited are you about this year's NHL playoffs?



Oilers fans lead the way in excitement, with two-thirds voicing anticipation for what is to come. For those whose favourite teams are navigating fairways and greens instead of blue lines and game plans, interest drops off precipitously:

How excited are you about this year's NHL playoffs?

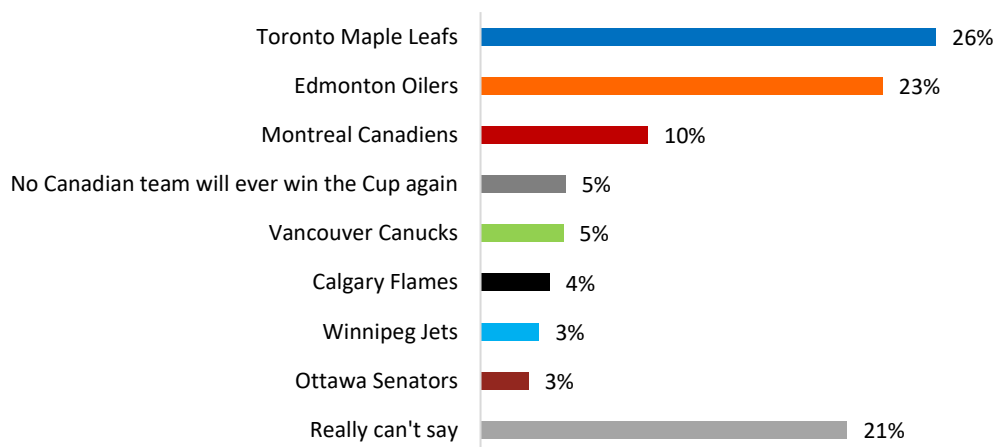


**Smaller sample size, interpret with caution*

Canada's Cup Curse: Which team will break it?

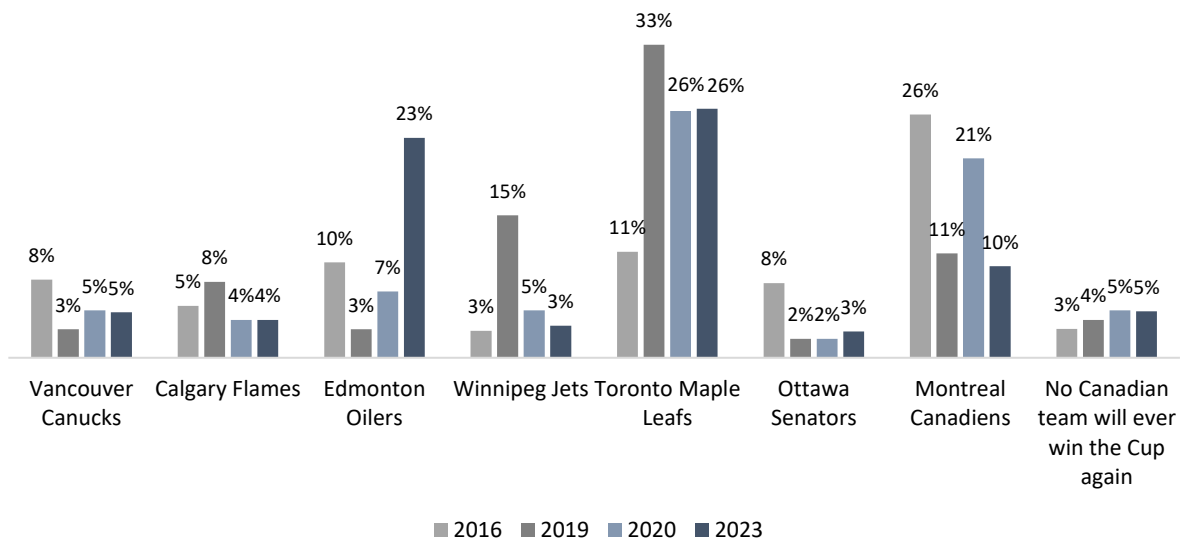
One-in-nine Canadians who participated in this study (11%) were not alive the last time a Canadian team won the Stanley Cup. Others were far too young to remember it. If a Canadian team is ever to break the now-30-year championship drought, hockey fans say it's most likely to be the Leafs or the Oilers. Five per cent say they don't believe a Canadian team will ever win the cup again – two per cent higher than those who believe in the underdog Winnipeg Jets.

**Which team will win the Stanley Cup first?
(Follow NHL, n=1,167)**



Perhaps it is best to take these data with caution, as the fan-favourite to break the Stanley Cup drought has failed to do so in the past three iterations of this study:

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The level of faith from fanbases varies widely. Four-in-five Oilers fans (82%) believe their team will be the first to win the Cup, compared to two-thirds of Leafs fans (64%). One-quarter or fewer of Canadiens (23%), Senators (24%), and Canucks (22%) fans say their team will accomplish this first:

Which teams' fans believe they're going to win the Cup first?									
Choice to win the Stanley Cup First	Follow NHL (n1,167)	Favourite Team							
		Canucks	Flames	Oilers	Jets	Maple Leafs	Sens	MTL	Don't cheer for any CNDN teams
Vancouver Canucks	5%	22%	6%	2%	1%	2%	9%	3%	2%
Calgary Flames	4%	3%	31%			1%	2%	2%	4%
Edmonton Oilers	23%	28%	24%	82%	19%	8%	13%	20%	16%
Winnipeg Jets	3%	1%	1%	2%	44%	1%	4%	2%	3%
Toronto Maple Leafs	26%	10%	9%	1%	6%	64%	12%	18%	10%
Ottawa Senators	3%	-	1%	2%	2%	2%	24%	2%	-
Montreal Canadiens	10%	9%	6%	3%	10%	4%	9%	23%	3%
No Canadian team will ever win the Cup	5%	5%	5%	4%	3%	3%	3%	5%	14%
Really can't say	21%	23%	17%	4%	16%	16%	25%	24%	49%

Two-thirds say 'bring back old playoff format'

After the annual general manager meetings in March, NHL commissioner Gary Bettman responded to critics of the league's playoff format – including some players – by saying that “it's working well”. Many on social media have anecdotally suggested that the format is unpopular. As far as the Canadian market goes, they're largely correct.

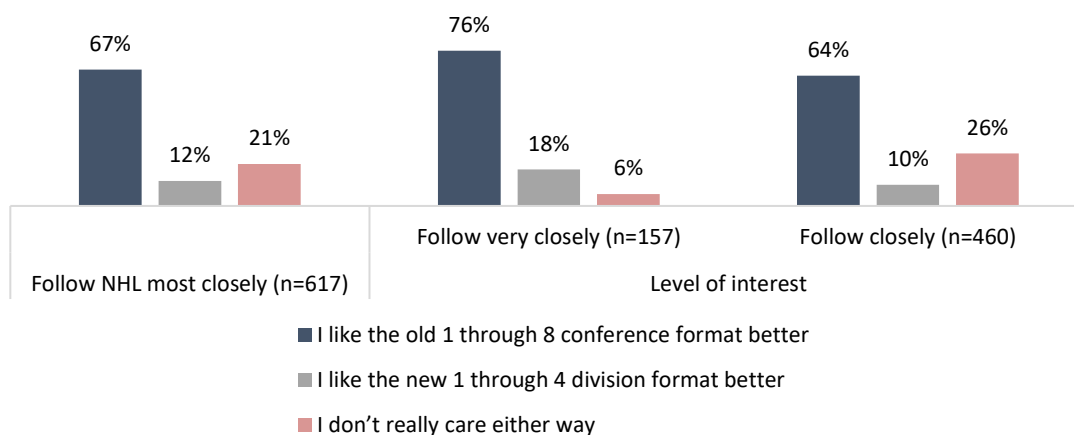
Overall, two-thirds of those who follow hockey most closely say that the one through eight playoff format is preferable to the current one, which focuses more on divisional matchups and has two teams in each

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conference qualify as a wild card. Bettman has suggested that the new format – which began in 2014 – creates better rivalries, while critics have noted that it often punishes teams in strong divisions by making them play each other too early in the playoffs and leads to repetitive matchups.

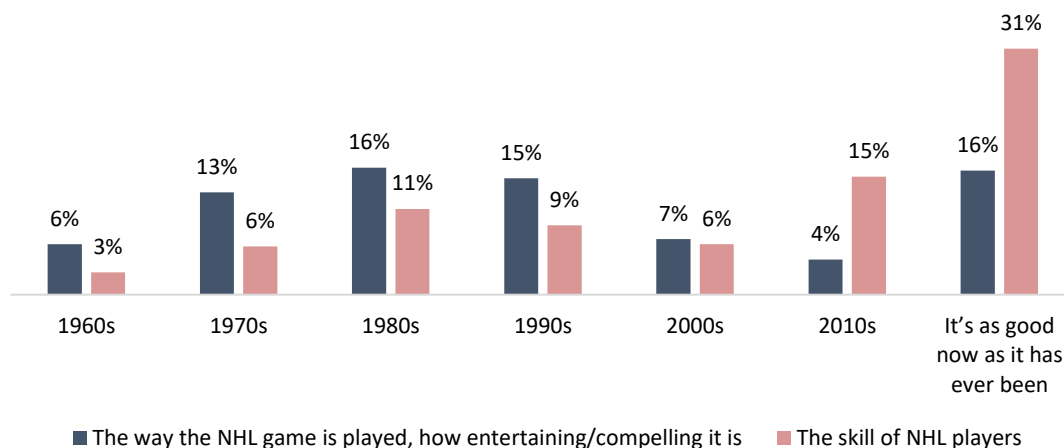
As a fan, which playoff format do you prefer?



Largest group among fans say the game has never been better

Goalscoring continues to rise in the NHL, up to its highest average mark since the 1993/94 season. It is perhaps for this reason, and at the cost of many goaltenders' save percentages, that Canadians appear bullish about the league. Three-in-ten say that the players are as good as they have ever been (31%), while 16 per cent say the game itself is at a high watermark. On the latter measure, a fondness for prior decades is clear, with similar numbers saying that the best time for hockey was the '70s (13%), '80s (16%) or '90s (15%):

**When you think about each of the following, in which decade would you say it was at its best?
(Follow NHL, n=1,167)**



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Older fans are more likely to revere decades past. Among those who are 65 years of age or older, one-quarter say the 1970s was the best era of the NHL. Meanwhile, younger people are more likely to say that recent decades represented the best the league had to offer:

When you think about each of the following, in which decade would you say it was at its best? (The way the NHL game is played, how entertaining/compelling it is)						
	Follow NHL (n=1,167)	Age				
		18-34 (n=298)	35-44 (n=236)	45-54 (n=149)	55-64 (n=210)	65+ (n=273)
It's as good now as ever	16%	18%	14%	17%	11%	18%
1960s	6%	4%	1%	2%	5%	17%
1970s	13%	2%	6%	2%	26%	27%
1980s	16%	8%	12%	32%	25%	13%
1990s	15%	13%	28%	22%	11%	5%
2000s	7%	17%	8%	4%	3%	1%
2010s	4%	11%	5%	3%	2%	0%
Really not sure	22%	28%	27%	17%	18%	18%

More agreement is evident when it comes to the skill level of NHL players. The top choice for all age groups is the current group of players, though younger fans are more likely to say that the 2010s were superior with the likes of Alex Ovechkin and Sidney Crosby in their prime, while 45- to 54-year-olds are more likely to say the heyday of Wayne Gretzky, Mike Bossy, Mario Lemieux and others was the pinnacle – the 1980s.

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When you think about each of the following, in which decade would you say it was at its best? (The skill level of NHL players)						
	Follow NHL (n=1,167)	Age				
		18-34 (n=298)	35-44 (n=236)	45-54 (n=149)	55-64 (n=210)	65+ (n=273)
It's as good now as ever	31%	32%	30%	36%	24%	34%
1960s	3%	2%	1%	1%	3%	5%
1970s	6%	3%	3%	4%	11%	9%
1980s	11%	4%	9%	22%	18%	8%
1990s	9%	7%	16%	12%	7%	4%
2000s	6%	9%	7%	4%	7%	4%
2010s	15%	21%	13%	7%	15%	15%
Really not sure	19%	20%	20%	13%	16%	20%

For detailed results by age, gender, region, education, and other demographics, [click here](#).

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