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DALLAS STARS AT VEGAS GOLDEN KNIGHTS

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How adversity has set the table for the Stars to make history

By Mike Heika

April 27, 2024

One of my favorite guilty pleasures in life (along with early Bee Gees music) just happens to be the Michigan Panthers football team.

Watching the team as a part of the original USFL in 1983, I immediately fell in love with the “champagne and plum” uniforms with a hint of baby blue trim. It was also nice to have a taste of home in my first summer in Texas, and it didn’t hurt at all that Bobby Hebert and Anthony Carter led the Panthers to the first ever USFL championship. It was a glorious time.

Fast forward a few decades and the Panthers were on my television playing their first game in the new UFL. It was like the Brothers Gibb were in my backyard strumming out “I’ve Gotta Get a Message To You.” There was no chance I was turning away.

So as it happens, the Panthers messed around and lost the lead late in their season opener against the St. Louis Battlehawks. They couldn’t really get into great field goal position, but decided to let kicker Jake Bates try his hand at a 64-yard game-winner. The kickoff specialist at Arkansas had not attempted a field goal since high school, according to the broadcaster, so there was a lot of debate over the strategy to go for it. But, in his first attempt, the 24-year-old from Tomball blasted the kick through with ease.

Oh wait, St. Louis called timeout to freeze Bates.

No problem, he lined it up again, and he again made the kick with ease.

It was an awesome spectacle.

This is a long way of telling you that one of the reasons we are addicted to sports is because games often put people and teams in situations of sincere adversity and ask them to prevail. We love the mettle of the human mind. We love when all of the distractions fade away and an athlete can combine the incredible muscle memory born of a thousand practices with the serenity of Caine snatching the pebble to do something that is truly memorable.

And the Stars kind of need something like that right now.

The battle between Dallas and Vegas has been a chess match. The Stars had the best record in the West, while the Golden Knights are the defending Stanley Cup champions. Each team is battle-tested and smart. Each team has talent. But, so far, Vegas is getting the right plays at the right time. Mark Stone scored a minute into Game 1, furthering his villain status. Jack Eichel continues his ability to come up big when the opportunity presents itself. Jonathan Marchessault is vexing the Stars. Noah Hanifin is proving to be a really nice trade deadline pickup.

That's what Vegas does.

"I was thinking today that with some of their top players, I don't even notice them until all of a sudden they have a result," Stars forward [Tyler Seguin](#) said Thursday. "They get that one chance and they capitalize on it. We haven't capitalized on those one chances."

The Stars have had some big moments from [Jason Robertson](#). They have had big saves from [Jake Oettinger](#). But Vegas has had one more. If you look at scoring chances and top-grade opportunities, the Stars have had plenty. They just need to make them count.

"You're not going to get a ton against them, we've got to finish them," Stars coach Pete DeBoer said. "I thought their goalie made a few saves, but we had some looks we've just got to stick in the net. The puck was on the right guys' sticks a few times, but you've got to bear down."

This is a unique series. Dallas has the best forward depth it has had in years. That was a huge part of the offseason makeover, and now you have a team that can score with any line. Players like [Matt Duchene](#) and [Roope Hintz](#) and [Wyatt Johnston](#) went through scoring droughts this year, and it didn't matter because their teammates picked up the slack. If you needed [Mason Marchment](#) or [Evgenii Dadonov](#) or [Logan Stankoven](#) to chip in a goal, it usually came.

Now, they need it from the big guns. They need Hintz and Duchene and Seguin and [Joe Pavelski](#) to find the right touch at the right time. The Knights' big guys are doing it, so the Stars have no choice. And they have to do it when the pressure is on. They have to say that they want to kick a game-winning 64-yard field goal, doing so twice if needed.

This is also a weird challenge. The Stars thought they were fighting all year to get the top seed for a reason. They thought they would be happy to have home ice. Now, they have their backs to the wall, they are facing extreme pressure and they have to win one game just to save their season and create a smidge of breathing room. The hockey gods have definitely created some adversity.

"When you have a traditional 1-8 matchup, the margins aren't as thin," DeBoer said when asked about the pressure. "You're essentially jumping from the regular season into a conference final or Stanley Cup Final. The margins are razor thin when you get two teams like that."

But that's why we love sports. That's why you have "Mr. October" and "Big Shot Bob,." That's why Roger "The Dodger" Staubach is a legend. The opportunity is there for someone on this roster to step up and create a story that will become legendary in Stars history. Adversity often reveals character, or at the very least, makes things very fun.

Just ask Jake Bates. Sometimes you need to line up a record game-winner just to see what you can do.

DallasStars.com

Stars recall Mavrik Bourque from Texas

FRISCO, Texas -- Dallas Stars General Manager **Jim Nill** announced today that the club has recalled forward **Mavrik Bourque** from the Texas Stars, Dallas' development affiliate in the American Hockey League (AHL).

Bourque was named the winner of the Les Cunningham Award as the American Hockey League's Most Valuable Player for the 2023-24 regular season. The 22-year-old led the league with 77 points (26-51—77) in 71 games, earning the John B. Sollenberger Trophy as the AHL's scoring champion. Bourque also paced the AHL and set a franchise record with 256 shots on goal, finished second with 51 assists and shared third with 20 power-play assists. Bourque is the first scoring champion to also win Most Valuable Player since Chicago's Kenny Agostino claimed both in 2016-17. Bourque has appeared in 147 games with the Texas Stars over three seasons and has recorded 129 points (47-82—129).

The Plessisville, Quebec native had two goals and four points (2-2—4) in Texas' 6-3 victory over Manitoba in Game 1 of the Central Division First Round on April 23. He has three goals and eight points (3-5—8) in 10 career AHL postseason contests.

Bourque made his NHL debut with Dallas on April 6 against the Chicago Blackhawks, logging two shots in 10:56 minutes of ice time.

The 5-foot-10, 191-pound forward was selected by Dallas in the first round (30th overall) of the 2020 NHL Draft.

Game Day Guide: Stars vs Golden Knights

By Stars Staff

April 26, 2024

Dallas Stars vs Vegas Golden Knights

First Round: [Game 3](#)

When: [Saturday, April 27 at 9:30 PM CT](#)

Where: [T-Mobile Arena](#)

TV: [TBS](#), [Bally Sports Southwest](#)

Radio: [The Ticket 96.7-FM, 1310-AM](#)

Live Stats: [NHL Game Center](#)

Watch Party: [Shark Club](#)

	Dallas Stars	Vegas Golden Knights
Record	0-2 (0-0 Away)	2-0 (0-0 Home)
Power Play	33.3% (1-for-3)	66.7% (2-for-3)
Penalty Kill	33.3% (1-for-3)	66.7% (2-for-3)

Five Points 5

- The Stars face the Golden Knights for Game 3 of their First Round series Saturday night at T-Mobile Arena. This marks the third time the clubs have met in the playoffs, following last season's Western Conference Final (L, 4-2) and the 2020 Western Conference Final (W, 4-2).
- The Stars have earned a 0-2 record in two games at American Airlines Center in the first round series against the Golden Knights with a 4-3 loss on Monday and a 3-1 loss on Wednesday night.
- Forward [Jason Robertson](#) has goals (2-0—2) in each of the first two games of the First Round series against Vegas. In the 2023 Western Conference final, Robertson led Stars skaters with five goals and six points (5-1—6) in six games against the Golden Knights.
- Defenseman [Miro Heiskanen](#) has recorded assists (0-2—2) in each of the first two games in the Star's First Round series against Vegas. He has earned nine points (1-8—9) in 14 career playoff games against the Golden Knights.
- In the regular season, the Stars went 0-1-2 in three games against the Golden Knights. Through the season series, the Stars went 0-for-8 (0.0%) on the power play and 9-for-10 (90.0%) on the penalty kill. Forwards [Roope Hintz](#) (1-1—2) and [Joe Pavelski](#) (1-1—2) each tallied a goal and an assist. Goaltender [Jake Oettinger](#) made all three starts against Vegas, posting a 3.21 goals-against average and a .885 save percentage.

All-time regular-season record vs Vegas

6-7-4 Overall | 3-4-3 Home | 3-3-1 Road

All-time postseason record vs Vegas

1-1 Series | 6-6 Overall | 3-4 Home | 3-4 Road

Players To Watch 66

Captain [Jamie Benn](#) tallied an assist (0-1—1) in Game 2 against Vegas on Wednesday night, marking his 40th career postseason assists and surpassing **Brad Maxwell** (39) for sole possession of sixth place on the franchise's all-time list. Benn has appeared in the Stanley Cup Playoffs in

seven of his 15 NHL seasons, all with Dallas, earning a total of 64 points (24-40—64) in 85 postseason games. Among franchise leaders, Benn ranks seventh in postseason points and ranks 10th in goals (24), only one shy of tying **Joe Nieuwendyk** and teammate **Joe Pavelski** for eighth. Last season, Benn tallied 11 points (3-8—11) in 17 games during the Stars' run to the Western Conference Final, his second-longest postseason behind only the club's run to the Stanley Cup Final in 2020 (8-11—19, 27 GP).

First Round Schedule

Game 1 vs Vegas: L 4-3

Game 2 vs Vegas: L 3-1

Game 3 at Vegas: April 27, 9:30 PM

Game 4 at Vegas: April 29, TBD

Game 5 vs Vegas: May 1, TBD

Game 6 at Vegas: May 3, TBD

Game 7 vs Vegas: May 5, TBD

NHL.com

Hertl eager for home playoff debut with Golden Knights in Game 3

By Nicholas Cotsonika

April 26, 2024

LAS VEGAS -- [Tomas Hertl](#) can't wait.

For the first time as a member of the Vegas Golden Knights, the center will skate through the golden helmet at T-Mobile Arena in the Stanley Cup Playoffs, smoke rising, lights flashing, crowd roaring, "John Wick Mode" thumping from the loudspeakers.

The Golden Knights will host the Dallas Stars in Game 3 of the Western Conference First Round on Saturday (10:30 p.m. ET; SCRIPPS, MAX, truTV, TBS, BSSW, SN360, SN, TVAS), leading the best-of-7 series 2-0.

"When you score and the crowd gets into it, they're really, really loud here," Hertl said. "It'll be a lot of fun to play on the good side now."

Hertl used to be one of the bad guys around here, of course. He played for the San Jose Sharks from 2013-14 until the Golden Knights acquired him in a trade March 8.

Vegas and San Jose became rivals after the Golden Knights joined the NHL as an expansion team in 2017-18, meeting in the playoffs twice. Vegas won in six games in the second round in 2017-18. San Jose won in seven in the first round in 2018-19.

The last time he appeared in the playoffs at T-Mobile Arena, Hertl scored a short-handed goal 11:17 into the second overtime to give the Sharks a 2-1 win in Game 6 of the first round on April 21, 2019.

He took a pass at center ice and skated side by side with defenseman [Shea Theodore](#), with Golden Knights forward [Mark Stone](#) trailing. As Theodore stretched out his stick, Hertl fired from the top of the left circle.

A short-handed goal decided a multiple-overtime game for the first time in NHL history.

"I always try to get my stick on pucks and try to deflect as much as I can away from the net, and that one, it didn't [work]," Theodore said. "He's scored some big-time goals in his career, and it's good to have him on our side."

Hertl smiled at the memory.

"It's five years now," Hertl said. "It's a long time ago. It was a fun game for me, definitely. But hopefully now I can score some goals on the other side."

Hertl had 13 points (nine goals, four assists) in 13 playoff games for San Jose against Vegas, including four points (two goals, two assists) in six games at T-Mobile Arena.

He already has a goal for Vegas in the playoffs. He scored on the power play in a 4-3 win in Game 1 at American Airlines Center in Dallas on Monday, winning a face-off, deflecting a shot and banging in a rebound, giving the Golden Knights a 3-1 lead at 17:51 of the first period. "Well, I'm a big Tommy Hertl fan," said Pete DeBoer, who coached San Jose from 2015-20, coached Vegas from 2020-22 and is in his second season coaching Dallas. "Great, great kid. Great teammate. Great player.

"You've seen it. He's built for the playoffs. He's a big body that protects pucks, netfront presence. Great hand-eye. Great on face-offs. A lot to like. I mean, just a really, really good player, and he brings a different dimension to their group up the middle."

DeBoer said Vegas centers [Jack Eichel](#) (6-foot-2, 203 pounds), [Chandler Stephenson](#) (6-0, 209) and [William Karlsson](#) (6-0, 190) have good size, but their strengths are speed and making plays off the rush. Hertl (6-3, 215) is bigger and has another skill set.

"This guy's a possession, heavy, hard, netfront guy," DeBoer said. "It's a good balance for them." Hertl was recovering from knee surgery when the Golden Knights acquired him, and he came back for the final six regular-season games, with four points (two goals, two assists). In the first two games of the playoffs, he was the center on a line with Stephenson and Stone. Stone missed the last 26 regular-season games with a lacerated spleen. Considering Hertl and Stone are returning from injuries and playing together for the first time, they still have to get up to speed and develop chemistry, at least at even strength.

"We're going to have to be a little bit patient with that part of the game coming around," Vegas coach Bruce Cassidy said.

Hertl already feels at home, though.

His injury recovery helped his transition. After spending his entire NHL career in San Jose, he had time to get settled in Las Vegas. He and his wife, Aneta, have two young sons: Tobias, 3 1/2, and Theo, 1. They found a house and moved all their belongings.

As the Golden Knights skated laps slowly before practice Friday, Hertl and Stone were side by side, smiling and laughing.

"I don't have to think during the playoffs about where to live or stay," he said. "Family's here. I feel pretty comfortable. Guys welcome me really well. Organization did anything I needed. "I just play eight games for this team. At the same time, I feel like I play 30, 40 games, half a season, because I'm joking around with guys, just having a good time. It's easy to have a good time when you're up 2-0 in a playoff series, but it feels like I'm here a little bit longer than I have."

The Dallas Morning News

In a series with 'razor-thin margins,' where can Stars create distance from Vegas?

By Lia Assimakopoulos

April 26, 2024

The Stars started their playoff campaign 0-2 at home, sacrificing home-ice advantage to the eighth-seeded Vegas Golden Knights before hitting the road where they'll face the defending champions at T-Mobile Arena for the first time since they captured the Stanley Cup title in June.

It's a bleak picture from the outside, but when diving deep into the numbers from Games 1 and 2, there's plenty of opportunity for Dallas to gain some ground.

Stars coach Pete DeBoer said he's been encouraged by some areas of his team's game, especially in Game 2. On paper, the margins are razor thin in most categories, meaning a couple of bounces in Vegas' favor have been the difference between a 2-0 and 0-2 start.

As Dallas seeks to climb out of the hole it created on Saturday and Monday, here is a look at three areas where the Stars could have an advantage.

Shot and quality scoring-chance advantage

Expected goals is a controversial stat that many like to ignore because, at the end of the day, only the goals that go in count. However, it can provide some context not reflected in the final score.

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While Vegas has outscored Dallas 7-4 in the first two games of the series, the Stars have a 64.08 expected goals percentage so far in 5-on-5 situations, according to MoneyPuck, which leads all NHL playoff teams. For the only Western Conference team down 0-2 in a series, it's indicative of how competitive Dallas has been.

Related: What happened to the fun, high-scoring Stars? Dallas needs a playoff miracle now
It's because Dallas has dominated the quality scoring chances, totaling 22 high-danger chances compared to 15 for Vegas. They even lead in shots on goal with a 50-41 advantage.

Even though the Stars just had five shots in each of the last two periods of Game 2, they only gave up 15 total in Game 1. Shots and quality scoring chances are harder to come by in the playoffs. But Dallas is getting opportunities, and if that continues, at a certain point the team will start to capitalize.

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In addition to maintaining that offensive pressure, second-chance shots will be an area of focus, especially as Vegas goalie Logan Thompson started to show some holes in Game 2. Thompson ranks second-to-last among goalies right now in rebounds per save in the postseason (.085). Jake Oettinger, on the other hand, ranks fifth in the league (.051).

Dallas has had only 14 second-chance shots this series, but Vegas has had even fewer at just seven. That's a difference where Dallas can find a goal or two each night.

"Some of it's going to have to come from the o-zone in attacking areas, getting shots through from the point, supporting pucks, coming around corners with it, battling around the net and trying to find a second or third opportunity," Stars forward Joe Pavelski said.

Rush chances

DeBoer and the Stars players all noted Friday how the rush has dried up and how challenging it's been for both teams to move through the neutral zone through the first two games.

There hasn't appeared to be much wiggle room in that area, which is why the Stars have relied on a dump-and-chase tactic more so than they did in the regular season. Vegas coach Bruce Cassidy said that's been a big part of their defensive strategy.

Related:What Golden Knights said after Game 2 win vs. Stars: 'Gave us all we could handle'
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"We're trying to limit their rush, so we have a certain game plan in that," he said. "It works in spots. Other times, they had some. They beat us up the ice a couple of times, had some good looks."

Even with Vegas' strong sticks and defensive ability, Dallas still has the series advantage in rush attempts.

Dallas has nine attempts — with Jason Robertson accounting for three alone — compared to just three total for Vegas, according to Natural Stat Trick. One of those chances did lead to the critical first-period goal by Jonathan Marchessault in Game 2 on a stunning setup from Jack Eichel.

Throughout the regular season, Dallas was the better team on the rush, generating 22 more chances than Vegas. While it likely won't be their primary focus given how well Vegas has shut it down, it's another area that only takes a few opportunities per game to turn into goals.

"They're not giving us a lot of clean rush, so it's being satisfied going forecheck," Pavelski said. "When the play's there, you've got to make it. It's been clogged up kind of both ways. There's not been a lot of odd-numbered rushes. That's what we've got to work through."

Special teams

The Stars want to win this series in 5-on-5 play, and DeBoer said he thinks it will come down to that, but in games where offensive opportunities are harder to come by, special teams is an area they need to capitalize on.

In the regular season, Dallas and Vegas ranked first and second, respectively, in fewest penalty minutes taken. They were separated by a single minute.

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But when they did find themselves on the man-advantage or penalty kill, the Stars were better in both.

Dallas ranked sixth in power-play percentage (24.2%) and eighth in penalty kill (82%) in the regular season while Vegas ranked 20th in power-play (20.2%) and 16th in penalty kill (79.3%).

In the playoffs, the Stars and Golden Knights have taken an even 10 penalty minutes each. Vegas is 2-for-3 on the power play, scoring both of its goals in Game 1, while the Stars are 1-for-3 after Robertson's power-play goal in Game 2.

In a series with margins as thin as this one, the Stars will need to capitalize on even the smaller areas. Drawing more penalties and finding the net on a man advantage should be an easier way for Dallas to generate some offense.

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"It comes down to someone sticking a puck in the net at the right time, a big save at the right time, the special teams battle," DeBoer said. "When you get two teams that are really evenly matched in a lot of areas, that's what decides it. We've got to get some guys to be those separators, so to speak, in those situations."

Sam's Story

Stars' weakness hurt them at home, now it's time for their top strength: road hockey ft. Jake Oettinger

By Sam Nestler
April 26, 2024

The Stars' top weaknesses hurt them at home in Game 1 and 2 of this first-round series against the Vegas Golden Knights: [untimely goals](#), slow starts, and their top guys not performing.

But now, the series shifts to Las Vegas, and the Stars will focus on utilizing one of their biggest strengths this season: road hockey.

Dallas is an excellent hockey club on the road. In fact, their 57 points earned on the road in the regular season was the most in the NHL.

"We've been the best road team in the league all year," Stars coach Pete DeBoer said. "We've got to go in there and win some road games."

This season, they went 26-10-5 and controlled just about every statistical category.

Dallas scored 142 goals and ranked second with 3.46 per game. They allowed only 108, good for third at 2.63 per game.

Their power play ranked sixth (26.4%), but 14th (21.6) at home. Same story with the penalty kill, which was sixth on the road (82.7%) and 11th at home (81.3%).

They were a better team in every facet, simple as that.

"I don't have an explanation for that, but I'm glad those are the numbers, and I'm glad we're going on the road," DeBoer said with a smile.

Jake Oettinger's splits are even more jarring.

At American Airlines Center in 2023-24, Oettinger went 17-8-2 with a .898 save percentage and a 2.78 goals-against average. He went 18-6-2 with a .912 save percentage and a 2.67 goals-against average. That is a big difference.

If you remember from previous seasons, Oettinger loves to play the villain.

He thrived as a college goalie at Boston University and loved to play in the other team's barn, enemy territory.

There is no atmosphere like a college hockey game, and as a goaltender on the road in Hockey East, it can be a tall task.

Those moments not only made Oettinger better, but he also enjoyed them the most.

The booing and taunting included.

"I heard them last game," Oettinger said of the Minnesota Wild fans booing him in the 2023 playoffs. "It's awesome. It's what it's all about. This is such a great crowd here, the fans are unbelievable. It fuels you. That's what you want, that's what you sign up for. It's great."

Tyler Seguin said this on Thursday about Stars fans booing Mark Stone in Games 1 and 2 in Dallas: "Sometimes when you get booed, it gets you going," he said. "I didn't really enjoy our fans booing Mark Stone. That gets you going. When I used to get booed in Winnipeg for whatever reason, I would have my best nights."

Maybe there is something there...

When the Stars went into Minnesota last spring for Game 4 trailing the Wild 2-1 in the series, Oettinger took his game to another level. The Minnesota native made 34 saves on 36 shots (.941 save percentage) in a 3-2 win.

Then, he went back home and earned a shutout before stopping 24 of 25 (.958 save percentage) in the Game 6 win that sent Dallas to the second round.

And don't even get me started on what Oettinger did against the Calgary Flames to give a massively overmatched Stars team a chance in the first round, especially in Game 7 of the 2022 playoffs...

But here is where it gets interesting. After Game 6 against Minnesota, Oettinger really struggled on the road in 2023.

Dallas went 2-4 on the road in the next two series against the Seattle Kraken and Golden Knights. And outside of Game 5 against Vegas, Oettinger was seeing a lot of save percentage numbers in the 700s and 800s.

While that sounds like an issue, it could pay off for Dallas.

If we noticed his dip in play, the 25-year-old goaltender certainly noticed it too. Knowing his competitive nature, it's probably at the front of his mind.

And when Oettinger had a bad game or is coming off a loss, he has been truly special.

I expect him to be dominant in Game 3 from Sin City, where the Stars will be essentially fighting for their playoff lives. Going down 3-0 to the Golden Knights for the second straight season sounds like a deficit they will not be able to overcome.

Not against this team.

"When you have a traditional 1-8 matchup, the margins aren't as thin," DeBoer said. "You're essentially jumping from the regular season into a conference final or Stanley Cup Final [against Vegas]. The margins are razor thin when you get two teams like that."

NOTES:

- Mason Marchment and Radek Faksa are labeled day-to-day with injuries. DeBoer said he is 'optimistic' about the two forwards, who each left Game 2 in the third period and did not return.
- The lines were all shuffled at practice on Friday but DeBoer said not to look too much into them, with multiple players not participating and others skating ahead of time.
- Game 3 puck drops at 9:30 CT on Saturday . Thursday and Friday will be the only two-day break in the series
- **Remember to have fun Stars fans**

Stars Thoughts

Stars Recall Mavrik Bourque While Hoping to Forget Games 1 and 2

By Robert Tiffin

April 26, 2024

The Stars have been here before. Or at least, somewhere equally dreadful.

While we've been bemoaning how Dallas was "just one goal" short of sending both of their recent losses into overtime, you might already have forgotten that Dallas accomplished that feat against Vegas in the Western Conference Finals just last year, when Games 1 & 2 both went to overtime. Game 1 of the Western Conference Final last year saw Dallas claw back, with Jamie Benn scoring a 6-on-5 goal with two minutes left in the third period to send things to overtime, after which Stars decided that defensive zone coverage was really more of a suggestion, leaving Jake Oettinger set to "spin cycle" as Brett Howden and Mark Stone [played around](#) in the offensive zone before stuffing the puck past a completely twisted-up Jake Oettinger for the 4-3 win just over a minute into overtime of Game 1.

It was really disheartening, but the Stars managed to top it in Game 2, when they fought hard all night to even the series, only for Ryan Suter to do, [uh, this](#) to allow Vegas to force overtime. And once again, Vegas didn't need more than two minutes in the extra frame to win it. Bam-bam, a 2-0 series deficit.

That's where Dallas stands now, albeit without home ice awaiting them in Games 3 and 4. And you know about *that* Game 3, or at least about the main part. But it was perhaps worse than you remember, if that's even possible. Because, did you remember that before Jamie Benn went banana sandwich on Mark Stone, Jack Eichel and Jonathan Marchessault carved up Dallas less than two minutes into Game 3 to go up 1-0?

That context is important, I think, because *that's* when Jamie Benn jumped Stone. After two straight games of Dallas immediately caving in overtime, one of which they never should have allowed to happen, and after yet another too-easy Vegas goal less than two minutes into a must-win Game 3, Benn took matters into his own hands.

I believe that if Dallas doesn't surrender that quick opening goal, Benn never goes after Stone. And then, maybe Game 3 goes Dallas's way, and maybe the series ends differently.

It's a fool's errand trying to un-butterfly the effects of that goal, of course. I'm not here to wish upon formerly suspended Stars. But the playoffs are an incredibly emotional experience, most of all for the veteran players who know how rare these opportunities are. Making it to the dance with a legitimately great team does not happen more than a couple of times in a player's career, and that's if he's lucky enough for it to happen at all.

Benn, and Pavelski, and everyone else on the roster who knows playoff heartbreak like an ex who lives next door need to find another gear before desperation and despair take over. They cannot afford to let Vegas do what they've been doing to Dallas for over a year now, and that means Peter DeBoer & Co. will need to have used these two days off to come up with a new plan.

Mavrik Bourque may be part of that plan, although it's fair to wonder whether his recall is simply injury insurance for the players missing from practice, particularly Faksa and Marchment. Seguin missed practice too, but given that he finished the game on Wednesday, it seems more likely that he's just being rested as much as possible. And, I mean, that's what the coach said, too, so don't take my word for it. (But also, you had better always take my word for it, or else I will cancel your membership to this online web site, which is, I believe, A Thing That You Can Do, Right?)

Game 3 isn't going to be about "being more physical" or "being less reckless" or anything like that, because it's always about both of those things, and many more. Instead, Dallas is only going to win Game 3 if they get some supernatural performances from key players, or if they take care of details more effectively than Vegas. That's really what it comes down to.

Through the last 120 minutes, Vegas's maddeningly simple game has turned Dallas into the chasing team even before they start trailing, as Dallas has done for most of the series. Any game plan adjustments need to be tailored towards efficiency and disruption, not aggression and risk-aversion. Vegas is patient, more than happy to let you try to break their stranglehold on the low slot before turning the puck over and heading north before Dallas can get into a solid defensive structure. Dallas may well have to concede a bit of transition play in order to be more deliberate in the neutral zone, preventing Vegas from counterattacking so quickly.

They've been stretching the zone for most of the series (remember Jamie Benn's breakaway in Game 1), and that's perfectly fine. But I wouldn't be shocked if the Stars are leaning a bit more towards their own blue line as a whole in an effort to mutually clog the neutral zone until one of their forward lines can pick it apart.

Craig Ludwig mentioned one of Razor's better analogies on *Spits and Suds* Thursday: the Stars have been trying to climb through a barbed-wire fence while wearing a wool sweater. The only way to do that successfully is with a ton of patience, and perhaps by looking for a different route through the fence than you'd take without the sweater.

I'm overtaxing the metaphor here, but you get the point. Dallas has thrived this year by overwhelming other teams with their quick transition play and repeated low-to-high scoring chance generation. Vegas has slowed them down in transition and maintained a tight defensive structure that have largely neutralized both of those tactics.

You don't want to completely abandon your game just because things aren't going great, but it's now or never for DeBoer and the Stars. You don't make it to the top seed in the Western Conference without being able to make changes when necessary, so now is the time for DeBoer to prove his detractors wrong and adapt, adapt, adapt. It's high time Vegas remembered the flaws that kept

them in the Wild Card spots down the stretch, and Dallas is in just the right position to help them recall each and every reason why Vegas isn't as good as they've looked so far.

It's a dour place to be in, as a fan. You hate the idea that the same dumb team ruins your hopes two years in a row, especially after you've spent six months watching your team come out on top more than just about any other hockey team in the world. It feels unfair, and you want to blame someone. The refs, the league, the announcers, or your own players and their coaches. Fan Rage comes out in surprising ways this time of year, and never more so than when your team has everything to lose. It feels downright *wasteful* for a team this good to be in a spot this bad.

But Dallas isn't done yet. Better teams than Vegas have blown 2-0 leads, and goodness knows the Texas Rangers set a precedent last fall for laying eggs at home only to vanquish a hated rival just when the series looked lost. Hope is out there, if you want to look for it. But no one will blame you for keeping your eyes closed, given what we've had to watch so far.

Knights in familiar territory with chance to all but bury Stars

By Danny Webster

April 26, 2024

It's starting to feel like *deja vu*.

The Golden Knights head into Game 3 against the Dallas Stars for the second year in a row with a chance to put a stranglehold on the playoff series.

The situations are a bit different. Last season, the Knights took a 2-0 lead heading to Dallas in the Western Conference Final.

This time, the Knights return home for the next two games — starting with Game 3 on Saturday at T-Mobile Arena — with full momentum and a raucous home crowd on the way.

"I think for us, being able to take two there off the start is huge," left wing Brett Howden said. "Now, we don't want to look too far ahead. We just want to take it one day at a time. That's all we thought of while we were down there."

It's not like either team has dominated in this series.

The Knights have just made plays at the right time.

They benefited from a three-goal first period in Game 1 and kept the Stars to one goal in the final 40 minutes. Then the Knights relied on their defense after an aggressive start from Dallas in Game 2 and played a patient game that paid off in a 3-1 win.

It's almost similar to last postseason.

The Knights escaped with the first two wins of the conference final with consecutive overtime victories that each ended in less than two minutes.

It was an even series despite the result, but the Knights found themselves up 3-0 after Game 3 at American Airlines Center before losing the next two and closing it out in Game 6.

They find themselves with another opportunity to win the first three games and put the top-seeded Stars on the brink of elimination.

"I think we have players that rise up in those situations," coach Bruce Cassidy said. "We saw it last year through four different series. I thought we got progressively better. When they're this close, it could easily swing the other way."

The challenge for the Knights becomes bottling the emotion that comes with playing in front of the home crowd.

T-Mobile Arena was voted the toughest place to play for opposing teams in this year's NHL Players' Association poll.

It's more daunting in the playoffs. The Knights at 31-15 at home since their inception.

The Knights had a strong defensive effort in Game 2. Dallas had a 30-16 edge in scoring chances at five-on-five, but 17 came in the final two periods. It was the same with high-danger chances — a 12-9 edge for the Stars, but seven total in the last 40 minutes. That defense-first mentality will need to be maintained heading into a charged-up environment. “Puck management, the risk vs. reward plays, those can’t change at home just because you’re in front of the crowd and you want to sort of make prettier plays,” Cassidy said. “If they’re there, you make them. If not, don’t.

“That’s what typically happens to home teams. You feel a little better, you’re at home, and you’re going to want to make plays than just make the ones that are necessary and the ones that are available.”

The Knights channeled that emotion well last postseason by going 9-3 at home. The fact remains they are the eighth seed. Opportunities to put a top seed away in emphatic fashion don’t come around often. Even if it does feel like *deja vu* right now.

“I think going into this game, we don’t want to overthink everything,” Howden said. “We want to keep doing what we’re doing because when we’re playing to our structure and we’re playing how we know we can play, confidently and aggressively at the right times, I feel like we’re pretty hard to beat.”

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