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Sam Bunn

Seattle University

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Kraken Upset Caps Historic Hockey Weekend

Sam Bunn, Investigative Editor

The first round of playoff hockey shattered records within the first 24 hours. The Toronto Maple Leafs snapped a 19-year streak of postseason failure, defeating the Tampa Bay Lightning in a 4-2 series win. After the winningest season in National Hockey League (NHL) history, the Boston Bruins blew a 3-1 series lead to an upstart Florida Panthers team. But the Game 7 upset by the Seattle Kraken over the defending champion Colorado Avalanche was perhaps the biggest surprise.

Colorado came into the series a top-heavy team, built on star power. Reigning Norris Trophy winner Cale Makar, forward Mikko Rantanen and center Nathan MacKinnon formed the backbone of a first line that stood as arguably the strongest in hockey. But Colorado suffered heavily from the loss of key contributors going into the series—captain Gabriel Landeskog was unavailable with a knee injury, defenseman Josh Manson was hobbled by a lower-body issue and forward Valeri Nichushkin was unavailable after appearing in a police report following Game 2.

The Kraken were much the opposite as a team that lacked superstars but persisted on extreme depth. No Seattle players made The Athletic's Top 100 ranking aside from rookie center Matty Beniers who snuck in at the very bottom. However, the top eight teams in 2023 had an average of 0.7 wins above average with their bottom six players. Seattle blew that out of the water with a stunning 7.8. The Kraken weren't built to win games against players like Makar and MacKinnon. Instead, they would find their edge when the opposing team's top line left the ice.

But the real catalyst for the Seattle upset was the transcendent play of goaltender Phillipp Grubauer. Few expected Grubauer to be a factor in the series coming off an injury-hobbled 2022 where he was significantly below average and replaced for long stretches by journeyman Martin Jones. Facing his former team, Grubauer found a new level to his game, keeping the explosive Colorado attack in check.

Avs goaltender Alexandar Georgiev was no slouch on the other end of the ice, despite being left on an island at times by inconsistent defensive play from Colorado. In Game 2, a gorgeous leg save from the 27-year-old on a shot by Jordan Eberle kept the Avalanche in a game they would go on to win in overtime. Georgiev upped the ante during Game 4, eating 30 shots in just two periods and allowing a mere two goals. For fans looking for top-flight goaltender play, the series more than delivered.



Kennedi Finnes

A freshly painted mural outside of the Kraken team store.

Complaints about officiating ran rampant during the first round of the playoffs, with the series between the Kraken and Avalanche being a prime example. In Game 4, forward Jared McCann, Seattle's leading scorer, took a shot that was deflected up and out of play by Giorgiev. As he skated around the boards, the unsuspecting McCann was flattened by a brutal late hit from Makar, who received only a minor penalty for the infraction. McCann was unable to rise on his own and had to be helped off the ice by an athletic trainer. No timeline for his return has been announced.

With a 2-2 series score and Makar suspended for Game 5, the Kraken stuffed the zone against a relentless Avs attack. Eleven Kraken players registered a blocked shot, as veteran defenseman Jamie Oleksiak led the charge with five. Tye Kartye, called up from an AHL affiliate to replace McCann, notched a goal on his first shot, becoming the first NHL player to do so in a playoff game. Colorado threatened late with a shot deflecting off Oleksiak over the glove of Grubauer in the final two minutes, but the Kraken were able to shut the door and take a 3-2 victory.

Game 6 was dominated by the Avs' overwhelming star power. Colorado defenseman Devon Toews notched an assist on three of four Avalanche goals, forward Artturi Lehkonen scored twice and Makar made his presence felt on the back end with two assists and six takeaways. Even the normally reliable Seattle defense faltered, leaving Grubauer on the receiving end of 38 shots by the final whistle.

But Game 6 was marred by another controversial call. With 2:20 left in the second period, Seattle forward Jordan Eberle checked Andrew Cogliano from behind, knocking him into the boards headfirst. Cogliano suffered a fractured neck from the impact and is out indefinitely. Like Makar, Eberle was only assessed a minor penalty, with the decision widely criticized online.

In the series-deciding Game 7, Grubauer leveled up again. Against 35 shots from a red-hot Avalanche team, the goaltender allowed just one score and made several key saves. MacKinnon nearly pulled the Avalanche to a victory, scoring a one-timer in the second and having a second goal called back due to an offside penalty. On the other side of the ice, unheralded Seattle forward Oliver Bjorkstrand went nuclear, scoring both Kraken goals and barely missing several other shots.

The 2-1 victory cemented a new era of Emerald City sports. Over a century after the demise of the Seattle Metropolitans, the city has a young, exciting hockey franchise to throw support behind. With concerning peripheral metrics and uncertainty surrounding McCann, Seattle will again be underdogs in their upcoming series against the Dallas Stars.

If this series is any indication, the Kraken's Cinderella story might not end there.