Shootouts are making a difference in the game. Was that the original intent?

The shootout debate has been a crutch in NHL conversations for quite some time. The extra shots were brought in as a new way to break ties after overtime concluded just after the lockout in 2004-05. NHL executives determined that shootouts were exciting and that it will add an extra spark in regular season play.

Is that still the case?

NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman stated recently that “70% of our fans in the United States and Canada want a decision” instead of a tie after overtime play. Despite this report, there have not been any additional statistics released to back up his words.

While the excitement may remain in the fans, it is very apparent that shootouts are happening way too often in the regular season. Certain players are very close to 60 shot attempts in the shootout. That is an average of 10 attempts per season! Carolina’s Jussi Jokinen has 59 attempts (28 goals), Brad Richards of Dallas has 58 attempts (25 goals) and Blue Jacket Rick Nash has 57 attempts (22 goals). Having that many chances means one thing; teams are getting to the shootout way too often.

Here are the current Western Conference standings, and then the standings if shootouts did not exist:

Standings with Shootouts

1. Vancouver Canucks 50-17-9 109 points
2. Detroit Red Wings 44-22-9 97 points
3. San Jose Sharks 44-23-9 97 points
4. Phoenix Coyotes 41-25-11 93 points
5. Los Angeles Kings 43-26-6 92 points
6. Nashville Predators 41-25-10 92 points

7. Anaheim Ducks 42-28-5 89 points
8. Chicago Blackhawks 40-26-8 88 points

9. Calgary Flames 38-28-11 87 points
10. Dallas Stars 38-26-10 86 points
11. Minnesota Wild 35-32-8 78 points
12. St. Louis Blues 34-32-9 77 points
13. Columbus Blue Jackets 33-31-11 77 points
14. Colorado Avalanche 28-38-8 64 points
15. Edmonton Oilers 23-41-11 57 points

Standings without Shootouts

1. Vancouver Canucks 46-17-13 105 points
2. Detroit Red Wings 40-22-13 93 points
3. San Jose Sharks 39-23-14 92 points
4. Phoenix Coyotes 37-25-15 89 points
5. Nashville Predators 35-25-16 86 points
6. Anaheim Ducks 38-28-9 85 points
7. Chicago Blackhawks 35-26-13 83 points
8. Los Angeles Kings 34-26-15 83 points

9. Dallas Stars 33-26-15 81 points
10. Calgary Flames 29-28-20 78 points
11. Minnesota Wild 33-32-10 76 points
12. St. Louis Blues 30-32-13 73 points
13. Columbus Blue Jackets 29-31-15 73 points
14. Colorado Avalanche 23-38-13 59 points
15. Edmonton Oilers 21-41-13 55 points

As you can see, the standings are only shifted slightly, but for a team like Los Angeles, who has an outstanding 9-2 shootout record, shootouts make a huge difference. Without shootouts, their first-round matchup in the playoffs would be a much different caliber of team. Then you look at the Dallas Stars, who see a much better chance of making the playoffs when shootouts are not factored into the equation.

Obviously, this is not the most damage that shootouts have done to final standings. The best example came in 2007-08, when the Carolina Hurricanes were left out of the playoffs because of their poor shootout skills. With shootouts, the Hurricanes finished in 9th place, two points

behind the Boston Bruins who took the final playoff spot with 94 points. If shootouts were not brought into the NHL, the Hurricanes would have captured the Southeast Division title and played as the third seed in the Eastern Conference. This was due to the fact that the Washington Capitals had won four out of eight shootouts and that sky-rocketed them to the top of the Southeast Division. The Hurricanes had won just two of five shootouts and could not muster enough points to make the playoffs. Because of shootouts, the better team sat out the post-season.

Are shootouts exciting? Sure, to some fans. But the important thing that remains from shootouts is that they are affecting the standings. The NHL has started to realize that shootouts are not needed, changing the rulebook to start this season. Regulation and overtime wins, excluding shootouts, are now the first tiebreaker when determining the standings at the end of the regular season. This is a small victory for those opposed to shootouts.

But the war on shootouts is far from over. It will take a lot more small victories to get the talent show removed from regular season play.

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