



The President's Trophy Curse

May 20, 2024

Continuing my [occasional foray](#) into sports analytics, I look at the [President's Trophy curse](#). This ubiquitous observation (ubiquitous in hockey circles, which you really should be in) can be summed up as "the winner of the President's Trophy, awarded for the best record in the regular season, usually doesn't go on to win the Stanley Cup, as of course they should. Thus, winning the trophy is cursed."

It's true. The President's Trophy winner usually doesn't win The Cup. It's true and yet it's still really dumb.

Since 1986, the year the trophy was inaugurated, the President's Trophy winner has won The Cup eight times. That is out of 37 years. So that means 29 out of 37 years an inferior team (going by the regular season) wins the championship. Cursed!

Uh, no. The hockey playoffs have been 16 teams this whole time. If each of these teams had an equal chance of winning The Cup, that would be just over a 6% probability for each team in the playoffs each year. But the President's Trophy winner has sported an almost 22% chance of winning The Cup (8 over 37). That's more. A lot more. If the teams were equally probable to win The Cup, the President's Trophy winner would've won an expected 2.3 championships over time instead of the 8 that the trophy winner did win. 8 is substantially more than 2.3. I'm willing to die on that hill.

Basically, you want to win the President's Trophy.

Now for the requisite slight complications.

You could argue that "every team has an equal chance to win" is a better approximation post the hard salary cap (starting in 2006) than before it (it was never true, and isn't true now, it's just perhaps less untrue with today's hard cap induced parity). Since the hard cap, the President's Trophy winner has only won two Stanley Cups. That's just over 11% of the time. Not the edge it used to be, but still a lot better than just over 6%. And cutting the sample in approximately half is losing a lot of data. So, I don't think we can draw any conclusions about the post-cap era. But even if true, it's still just exactly what you'd expect with a hard cap. More parity. Closer (not all the way) to an equal chance for all (who make the playoffs at all). But still not equal. It's still better to have the best regular season record.

Two things I didn't do because I'm lazy and—as much as I love hockey—this isn't my day job.

One, check the teams with the second, third, fourth, etc., best records and check their historical frequency of winning The Cup. With a long enough sample I'd expect all the higher-ranked teams to have a higher-than-equal ($1/16$) chance, and I'd expect it to be declining in rank (so the second place team has less of a chance than the trophy winner, the third place team has less of a chance than the second place team, etc.). I'm too lazy to type in all data, and it would be a very small sample to cut so fine anyway. But if someone else does it, I'd like to see it!

Two, compare to other sports. That would be kind of interesting, though it isn't super simple to do.

But, neither of these two unexamined questions change the basic conclusion for hockey and the President's Trophy. You want to have the best regular season record if you want to win The Cup. But you still can't expect to win it most of the time. That's life with 16 teams (and maybe, maybe, a bit more so with a hard salary cap).

Oh, and if you think I wrote this because my team, The New York Rangers, won the President's Trophy this year, and are about to start round 3 of the playoffs, you would be correct. LGR!!!

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