

Hockey

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
January 6, 2013

In my Florida neighborhood it was a quiet Saturday morning. In fact it was probably much the same across much of the United States. No one was in the streets celebrating. No one made comparisons to 1980 when the United States won the World Junior Hockey Championship in Ufa, a city of million or so in Central Russia.

Team USA did so by defeating Sweden 3-1 in a tight well-played hockey game. The win by the "twenty and under" U.S. players rested on excellent goal tending and strong defensive play, always a great combination on the ice. In fact the Swedish goal came as a result of one of the very few mistakes made by the U.S. when they turned over the puck in front of their own goal.

The U.S. team reached the gold medal game by a complete and total thrashing of Team Canada. The U.S. captain Jake McCabe put it best when he said, "They didn't know what hit them." The *Globe and Mail* report called the U.S. 5-1 victory "a romp." Indeed the *Globe and Mail* borrowed McCabe's characterization, noting that "every Canadian watching here in Ufa or back home in the dead of night didn't really know what hit them" If you are a hockey fan and you didn't see these two games you missed some exciting competition and quality play.

The bad news for Canadians was not over as Team Canada played the Bronze Medal game on Saturday and lost to Russia, 6-5 in overtime. The word that was used most by the Team Canada players and echoed in the *Globe and Mail* was "unacceptable." The two loses in the last two games of the tournament left Canada without a medal for the first time in fifteen years. There has been no gold for Canada at the World Juniors since 2009.

For the United States it was the third gold medal at the World Juniors tournament in the past ten years. The first came in 2004 and the next in 2010. Again in both of those cases only the most intense hockey fans in the U.S. noticed. For U.S. fans the victory will be savored, but the manner of the victory was even more impressive.

First, the domination of the Canadians in the semi-final game was sweet as the U.S. performance is always measured

against the Canadian standard. Second the manner in which the gold medal was won against the disciplined and extremely talented Swedish team, with strong defense, strong goal tending, and a display of poise and basic skills, shows just how far the U.S. team has advanced in international competition and how much they respect the fundamentals of the game.

For the Canadians the long flight home must have seemed something approaching an eternity. It will be a long time before Team Canada and Canadians will forget the back-to-back defeats at the hands of the U.S. and Russia. Nor will life be pleasant for the coach of Team Canada, Steve Spott, who will have to try to explain to the hockey crazed nation what went wrong in Ufa. It is not likely he can, and it is unlikely that he will be given a chance at redemption. Canadians do not take losses like this well. As in the U.S. where losses in international basketball or baseball cut deep into national pride, for Canadians this sort of performance will not soon be forgotten.

If there is any light on the Canadian horizon this weekend it may have come early this morning when a tentative agreement was reached between the NHL and its players that will end the lockout. I am assuming that for most Canadians and most hockey fans this is good news, although I am not entirely certain. It appears at the moment that at least part of the NHL season will be salvaged. The speculation over the past few weeks is that there would be a 48 game season if the lockout ended by January 11. It appears that deadline can be met, although details remain to be put into the CBA, and at this point those details are not known. Owners and players will need to vote on any agreement before hockey resumes.

So the 113 day lockout is apparently over. The ill-advised decision by the National Hockey League owners to try to break the Players Association and send Donald Fehr scurrying back to the world of baseball has failed miserably. By their actions the owners managed to solidify player support for Fehr and they may have failed to get much of anything out of the lockout.

As these things generally are, this lockout was about money. The owners concluded that despite the beating the players took in the last lockout, the players were still getting too much of the growing revenue pie. This is an

idea that seems popular these days and is what nearly drove the NFL to a lockout a year ago. So despite the fact that the NHL was experiencing seven straight years of record revenues the owners were ready to risk, although apparently not kill, the money machine.

Gary Bettman's tenure as NHL Commissioner has been less than charmed. Although the overall revenues have increased dramatically over twenty years, this is the third lockout under Bettman's leadership and the second in less than a decade. The 2004-5 season was cancelled as Bettman either led the league to that disaster, or folded under the pressure of owners determined to redefine the economics of hockey. To take the NHL down that road again this year seemed to be the act of a less than rationale human being.

One can only wonder if Gary Bettman or Steve Spott sits atop list as the most unpopular figure among Canadian hockey fans. My guess is that in the short run Spott may top the list, but over the long haul Bettman has greater staying power.

He also needs to go.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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