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## NHL Expansion: Miami and Disneyland - The Woes of the Lightning

Richard C. Crepeau  
University of Central Florida, [richard.crepeau@ucf.edu](mailto:richard.crepeau@ucf.edu)

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## SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE

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Three weeks ago the National Hockey League announced at the their winter meetings in Anaheim that they were expanding again, this time adding teams in Miami and Disneyland, While the addition of the Wayne Huizenga's Blockbuster video money is an important coup for the league, it pales next to the addition of the Disney Company as a franchise owner.

Talk about raising your profile and adding credibility, this is most certainly it. Last June Bruce McNall complained that the NHL was in danger of developing a Mickey Mouse image, but this is not what he had in mind. Now McNall will have Mickey as his nearest franchise neighbor. McNall and the Kings will be compensated for territorial infringement to the tune of \$25M. The biggest problem with expansion will be finding enough players to stock the teams at a credible level. Although the Tampa Bay Lightning are doing well, the talent pool is shallow, as the other two recent expansion teams had a dismal combined record of 8-50-4 at the time of the announcement.

Also at the winter meetings the league hired Gary Bettman as the new commissioner. Bettman has been a general counsel in the NBA where he was in charge of labor relations with the players and referees, the architect of the NBA salary cap, and involved in marketing strategy. Bettman will receive a million dollars a year during his five year contract, and if he can bring the NHL anywhere near the success of the NBA he will have earned the money a thousand times over.

Bettman's priorities in his new job will be a collective bargaining agreement with the players, who ought to be overjoyed with the addition of 50 new jobs for the second consecutive year, and a new television contract that will give the league national market exposure in the United States. With falling revenues for several NHL teams there has been much talk of a salary cap.

This latest expansion has been greeted with considerable amazement, not because Blockbuster is adding to its sports empire, but because Michael Eisner is taking the Disney company into the world of professional sports. But according to New York Times writer Calvin Sims there should be no surprise, because for the Disney people this is about much more than Lord Stanley's Cup. It is about sport as business. About merchandising, about building good will in the community for the corporation, who might be looking for reciprocal favors. In the case of Disneyland that would involve their \$3B expansion plans, and the issue of how much the city will finance of the \$1B of public works for the project. Coincidentally the arrival of a hockey team will save Anaheim a \$1M payment it would be required to make to the owners of the new \$103M arena if there were no team.

The arrival of the hockey team opens up cross-promotional opportunities as well as substantial new merchandising markets for Disney. This is also part of a national trend in which media outlets are accumulating sports franchises. The model here is clearly the Turner Empire, not to mention the Tribune Company and Paramount Communications.

Note also that this is good news for Orlando where as you may recall Disney is a major corporate and community player. Eisner's decision to go into hockey in Anaheim can only bode well for the future possibility that Disney East might become the site of major league baseball. We know that Major League Baseball has been drooling over this possibility for several years, and now that Disney has taken the plunge into sport franchise ownership, this would seem a logical next step. This possibility must send a chill through the St. Pete Suncoast Dome.

As for hockey on the ice, I want to make a few remarks about the Tampa Bay Lightning. This expansion franchise has been more than anyone expected. It is obvious that Phil Esposito has put together one of the best expansion hockey teams in history, and the encouraging thing is that it is a relatively young team. The

unfortunate thing is that this is a hockey team without a decent place to play.

A few weeks ago I went over to the Expo Hall and it was barely worth the trip. I saw the Lightning win, or should I say I partially saw the Lightning win. For twenty-eight dollars and fifty cents I had a seat from which approximately 20% of the ice surface could not be seen. What is worse, as I looked around the building it was apparent that there were precious few seats, expect perhaps on the ends of the rink, that would have been much better.

This does not bode well for the Lightning, as many people will decide after one or two trips to the Expo barn, that you can see the action better on television rather than in the building. This is an unbelievable thing to say about a hockey match, and is very bad news for the Lightning.

What is worse is that the Lightning have not broken ground for a new arena. It could be another two to four seasons before they are out of this barn and into an arena. There must be considerable doubt in the minds of ownership if they can survive that long. The Lightning now are drawing a little over ten thousand fans when they sellout, and there are an alarming number of no-shows. It seems to me that the future of the Lightning in Tampa Bay is in doubt.

The good news is that this could be an opportunity for Orlando. But for that to happen drastic changes will be needed in the O-rena, and the Magic death grip on the building must be released. Also needed is an local entrepreneur with an interest in hockey, like a Ron Dowdy.

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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