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The National Hockey League Strike

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
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For just over a week now something has been happening in sports that has never happened before. In the seventy-five year history of the National Hockey League there has never been a strike. Many thought there never would be.

It has long been assumed that the weakest union in sport was the NHL Players' Association. The conventional wisdom was that Canadian farm boys who grew up playing hockey on small ponds across Canada, dreaming of the Stanley Cup, were just happy to be playing the game. It was part of the Canadian dream, an essential ingredient in the Canadian ethos. They were incapable of thinking in terms of management and labor, us and them. This was hockey, not factory work.

If you ever had the pleasure of watching a Stanley Cup Final with a group of Canadians, you know that this sport cuts to the marrow of the Canadian bone.

Molson Canadian has an ad in NHL Hockey Programs showing a teenage boy wearing leather gloves, a hockey sweater, hat on backwards, leaning on a shovel. It is done in faded brown, like some old picture from the attic. At the top of the page is the title: "Canadian Wildlife-No. 18." Under it the caption reads: "The Sure-Footed Northern Rink Rat." In smaller letters an explanation follows: "The rink rat is identified by his colourful coat and his ability to move sure-footedly over ice. He is a social creature who enjoys the company of the female of the species: the french-fry consuming rinkette. Once a familiar sight across the hinterland, the rink rat is becoming increasingly endangered-threatened by the encroachment of automated ice cleaners."

In The Game of Our Lives, Canadian journalist Peter Gzowski recalls the central place hockey played in his life and that of his friends:

In the winters of my boyhood, my life centered on a hockey rink in Dickson Park...With the first frost, the workmen would begin to flood, so that well before Christmas we could skate, and each day after school and all day on weekends, until spring softened the ice, we would give our lives to our game....

The boys I played hockey with have gone on, the more successful of them, to run newspapers and depart-

ment stores, to become chemists and lawyers. But there is not one of them who would not have been a hockey player if he could have been. As we matured, we chose other heroes, and even in the days of our boyhood there may have been those among us who dreamed of other futures. But all of us dreamed of hockey glory.

It is precisely this sort of mythic power that seemed to guarantee that Canadians would never walk out on hockey, on the NHL, especially on the Stanley Cup Playoffs. The owners no doubt counted on this. Why has it happened?

It is clear that NHL players are no longer just simple Canadian farm boys. Many have been to college, all have come to understand something of the economics of modern sport.

For the first time the NHL Players' Association has leadership that is primarily interested in the players and the issues important to them. Former executive director Alan Eagleson, had been too cozy with management, and even represented general managers at the same time he headed the union. Now the Players' Association is led by Bob Goodenow, former Harvard Captain, Washington Caps draft choice and minor league player. Goodenow is now a lawyer, and has been working for the Players' Association for over a year. He is trusted implicitly by the players.

Then there are the issues. The collective bargaining agreement expired last September, and negotiations have gone nowhere. Three issues have clogged the table. 1) Free agency-the players want some, the owners do not. 2) Arbitration-currently league appointed arbitrators settle all disputes, and the players would like independent arbitrators. 3) The entry draft-the players want it reduced from 12 rounds to 6 to give incoming players more freedom and a salary more attuned to the market.

In the last days before the strike the owners introduced another issue. For the past 20 years revenue from trading cards has gone to the union. This currently amounts to some \$10 million, and now the owners are demanding it go to them. This is a phony issue, no doubt designed to obscure real issues and it has, as most of the major sports news outlets have sneeringly reported that this strike is about bubble gum cards. It is not, and never has been. It is about the balance of power between players and owners, nothing more, nothing less.

The strike has come at a particularly significant moment, just as the playoffs were about to begin. This gives the players maximum leverage because the owners depend almost totally on the playoffs for their profit margins, amounting to some \$100M in gross revenues. From the owners standpoint it is necessary to play hardball. The players have never gone on strike, their resolve has never been tested, the strength of the union is unknown. It is time to find out how strong the player commitment to the union really is, if it is in fact stronger than the power of the hockey mystique that calls the rink rat to the Stanley Cup. This could be a long one.

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