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Orlando Gets Hockey but not NHL Hockey

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When the announcement came a little over a week ago The Orlando Sentinel fell over itself like the lapdog it has become for the Orlando Magic and the DeVoss family. It was of course the major news that Orlando was about to get a hockey team in the International Hockey League, and the city was about to facilitate the process with another sweetheart contract with the family DeVoss for use of the O-Arena.

This is the same Orlando newspaper whose editorial writers and commentators regularly denounce welfare mothers and deadbeats who live off the taxpayers of the great American middle class. But if it is subsidy for sport to amuse the Orlando executive class and business elite, then welfare seems to be well within the lexicon of family values.

Let me say that I find this smarmy deference mildly amusing, and only minimally offensive. In addition I already have my deposit down on season tickets for the Orlando ice men.

But I am offended by this corporate entity which calls its product "the best newspaper in Florida," and serves as a PR rag for the major corporate elite of the City Beautiful, and tells us that the DeVoss family is contributing so much to Orlando by bringing this IHL franchise to Ice World.

The fact of the matter is that the DeVoss family is doing its very best to protect its major investment from any meaningful wintertime competition by bringing this second tier hockey team to town.

Since the Magic made their first basket five years ago, they have enjoyed a marvelous monopoly on the professional sports scene and totally dominated the local sports media. Uncritical acceptance by writers, broadcasters, and fans have given the Magic the best of all possible worlds. The Orlando Magic Money Machine has rolled on untouched and untouchable.

When in days goneby hockey was mentioned local reporters simply dismissed it as totally incomprehensible to normal Americans, and characterized Orlando as a place where hockey was alien. But then that was how Larry Guest once wrote about the NBA. Pat Williams of the Magic ridiculed the idea as too too absurd, and then pointed out that the O-Arena could not accommodate hockey on a regular basis without major remodeling. One wonders in fact why a modern arena that was build as an all-purpose facility

ever came into existence without hockey compatibility in the first place. Did Williams play a part in that development when he was pushing for a speeded up completion of the building to accommodate the Magic?

So the conventional wisdom was that Orlando was not hockey country. Then a few weeks ago all of this changed. Why? If you remember Rich DeVoss announced that he was interested in acquiring an IHL franchise for Orlando. And that he wanted to do it in a few days, but needed a quick commitment from Glenda and the gang on an Arena contract. What you may not remember is that same day, on the front page of the newspaper running alongside this story, was the news that Universal Studios wanted to acquire a National Hockey League team and move it to Orlando.

In addition to this being clear evidence of Disney envy on the part of Universal, it set off major alarm bells at Magic central. The Amway Pyramid shook and Father DeVoss sent down word that the time to act had come. No NHL team would ever be allowed to come into Magic territory and steal even the smallest part of the spotlight from the Shaqsters. Monopoly of the market, and especially of the media, for the winter sports dollar was just too lucrative to be allowed to end. And so the IHL solution was born.

It is really simple. Buy a minor league hockey team, get a four year deal on the O-arena and the NHL threat ends. Minor league hockey will not have the draw that an NHL franchise would and so would not steal any valuable air time or column inches from the Magic. If this turned out to be a money loser for the DeVoss family, no problem, it would serve as a nice tax write-off. If it happened to make money, well they could live with that too. The only real problem would be if the hockey team turned out to be too popular. But no doubt Pat Williams assured the DeVoss brain trust that the City Beautiful would never become Ice World.

And so The Orlando Sentinel editorial writers, along with well-known hockey buffs Brian Schmitz and Larry Guest, welcomed the announcement as if the DeVosses had just performed one of the great acts of charity and sportsmanship in history. Bob Vander Wiede cynically took his bows as the ink dried on the new arena contract with the city and a smiling Glenda Hood. Only Universal Studios, local hockey fans, and the taxpayers of Orlando are the true losers, and only the people at Universal really understand what hit them.

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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