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Hockey Fans and Magic Fans Compared

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The gentleman was in his early thirties and wore a black t-shirt with "House of Babes" printed across the front. On the back were three less than virginal looking cartoon bikini babes accentuated by interesting words like "nasty" and "feisty." He was sitting in the front row at the Orlando Arena. It was not a Magic game.

I searched in vain for anyone wearing a suit looking well pressed and armed with a cellular phone. My guess is that there was not a doctor or lawyer on the premises. Indeed there was not a single member of the Orlando establishment to be found.

Finally between periods out in the concession area I spotted two young men in suits, but they looked out of sync with their large shoulders, big necks, and long stringy wet-looking hair. Two farm boys from Canada who obviously had been scratched that night were in the stands instead of on the ice looking a lot like Barry Melrose.

The hockey crowd will never be mistaken for the basketball crowd. The contrast is striking and speaks to a very different in-house clientele for the Arena's two professional sports franchises. No doubt part of the difference can be explained by economics. Magic tickets at center-court run nearly three times higher than Solar Bear tickets at center-ice. But it is more than economics.

The Magic crowd is actually two crowds, as Greg Dawson pointed out earlier this season. Downstairs is the cellular phone, power tie, Armani suit, and local establishment crowd. Doctors, lawyers, bankers, middle-level managers, politicians, celebrities, Disney execs, and Amway slicks, make up the bulk of the lower bowl elite for whom the season tickets are a major tax write off or a significant gratuity. Every piece of clothing is tasteful and fashionable, every piece of hair is perfectly coiffed. These are Orlando's version of the beautiful people, in attendance to be seen, rather than to see.

In the upper bowl are those who own pieces of season tickets, have no power connections, but still represent the well-healed and/or yuppie pretenders of the American middle class. Fewer suits and more Magic paraphernalia are in evidence, and some would claim more interest and enthusiasm for the game itself. A great deal of coaching and refereeing goes on upstairs, and that

is punctuated by the mad scramble to catch a free t-shirt as it sails up from the court.

The hockey crowd is quite different. Most of it is in the lower bowl. There are always some people up top and they tend to be the young and very enthusiastic. They scream quite a lot, wear Solar Bear paraphernalia, and jump up and down holding unoriginal signs. Downstairs there is an interesting mix of people. Mostly they are middle age northern transplants, families with young children who look like they might have some acquaintance with the ice, and young working-class males and their girl-friends too many of whom look like they just stepped off the set of a daytime TV soap, or are on their way to a GAP rally.

The faces and accents in this crowd are midwest and northeast. They are a tribute to Orlando as the transplant capital of the Southeast. Boston, New York, New Jersey (any exit), Philly, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Chicago, and Detroit. Scattered through the crowd are Blackhawk, Red Wing, Bruin, and Ranger sweaters. These are a sign of previous loyalties and are a mark of status. They announce that you are someone who actually knows the difference between offside and an offside pass; someone who will not try to start the wave during a Solar Bear power play.

Given the fact that both the Magic and the Solar Bears are owned by the same pyramid, it is not surprising that game production is similar. The announcer is too loud, the immediate pregame pageantry is too long and too loud, the music is too loud and annoying. Why is this seen as something people want? Who besides those under twelve actually enjoy this noise? Two things make the Solar Bears' production more tolerable. Paul Porter is not at the hockey games, and music is not played during the action.

For hockey the "Sports Magic Team" becomes the "Ice Breakers" and they are simply annoying on ice. There are stoppages of play during the hockey game to run silly contests like "dance for your dinner," while at Magic games this brainless activity is confined to timeouts. And Shades couldn't carry Stuff's whoopi cushion.

At hockey games fans are not allowed to move up and down the aisles, and in and out of seats, except during a pause in the action. The Magic should give this one a try.

Best of all the Solar Bear crowd is not yet jaded by success,
ready to shout obscenities when someone on the home team
blunders. At hockey games they simply prefer mayhem.

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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