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Hockey Night in Orlando: The End for the IHL

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Whenever I went off to see the Solar Bears of the International Hockey League in the O-rena, I liked to think of it as "Hockey Night in Orlando." With much fanfare and enthusiasm the Orlando Solar Bears opened play in the IHL six seasons ago. Two weeks ago they won the Turner Cup signifying the championship of the IHL. A few days later the IHL was out of business, and then two days ago the Solar Bears announced their exit from the scene.

The IHL has been in operation for over fifty years but somehow all that tradition didn't matter when the bottom line hit bottom. The league is gone and several franchises went off to the American Hockey League. Minor leagues come and go but it seemed that the IHL had greater stability than most. It didn't matter.

The Orlando Solar Bears had a short but very interesting history, particularly on the business side of the ice. Owned and operated by RDV Sports, who own and operate the Orlando Magic of the NBA, the Orlando Miracle of the WNBA, and the Grand Rapids Griffins of the IHL and now the AHL.

The origins of the franchise are found outside any great demand for minor league hockey in Orlando. The Bears were conceived in the wake of an announcement from Universal Studios that it was seeking an NHL franchise and would bring it into the Orlando market.

Within what seemed like only a few hours RDV sports announced that they had just been awarded an IHL expansion franchise and that they had already finalized an agreement with the city of Orlando to secure a hold on all the dates necessary for use of the O-rena. When that schedule was combined with the Magic's schedule there were no more dates available for any potential NHL franchise in the city. Universal's NHL dream was blocked successfully by RDV sports which wanted no wintertime competition for the Orlando professional sports dollar.

So Orlando had a hockey team. Not an NHL team but still it was hockey, and indeed it was good hockey. The Bears were competitive on the ice from the start, and at the box office they were initially a great success. The first year attendance averaged better than 10,000 per game, the crowds

were loud and enthusiastic, and when the playoffs came it was even better.

All, of course, was not good.

RDV sports was never fully committed to the franchise. Their ownership of Grand Rapids in the same league should have been questioned by the IHL and it was not. More significantly the reason for the Bears existence belied any commitment to hockey in Orlando. It was no surprise then that the Solar Bears were not intensely marketed. There is a suspicion among some that the on ice success of the Bears may not have been welcomed by some people at RDV sports.

For whatever reasons the Solar Bears received little coverage by the local media. Newspaper coverage was minimal. Television reports often did not go beyond the scores of the games. Coverage for the WNBA or the XFL and the Arena League teams are much more extensive. RDV Sports promotes the WNBA Miracle much more than they ever did the Solar Bears.

As to television, the Sunshine Network, the cable operation that covers the Magic and other professional franchises in the state of Florida did offer occasional television of regular season games. However when the playoffs began the Solar Bears were sent into primetime hibernation. It was all quite odd.

Without promotion and with minimal television coverage the Solar Bear fans also began to go into hibernation. Year after year the average attendance went into a slow but steady decline. This season the crowds were between and three and five thousand during the regular season, averaging just a shade over 5,000. Not until the Turner Cup finals was the 10,000 fan-barrier broken.

There will be those who will say that hockey in Florida is a bad idea to begin with and failure was inevitable. A similar story after all is underway in Miami with the Florida Panthers and in Tampa with the Lightning. However in both cities the current problems are not endemic to the location.

In Tampa the massive mismanagement of the franchise has created a losing team that never has improved and has probably lost the fans forever. A new building did not help

as it is a prime example of poor multi-purpose design. In the case of the Panthers losing seasons following major success has diminished interest, but better play on the ice should bring back the Miami fans, something the new Panther owners think will happen.

All in all the state of hockey in the State of Florida is not good. It is however not hopeless. The Panthers can be revived, and if Universal still wants to get into the NHL they can buy the Lightning, move them to Orlando, and put them in the same arena that the Magic find so inadequate to their needs.

Of course someone in the NHL had better realize that the gouging of the fans with excessive regular season ticket prices which then escalate in each succeeding playoff round, is not a formula for success.

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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