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The NHL lockout

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
The NHL lockout
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One of the most exciting times in the sports calendar comes when baseball is into playoffs and moving toward the World Series, the NFL and college football are beginning to hit stride and pick up the levels of excitement, and then as with frosting on the cake the NHL and the NBA open their seasons. Mid-October carries a special excitement when all these sports are going at once.

Although many will feign not to notice, this week the National Hockey League, as it normally would, did not open its season. Although it is clearly the lesser of all the majors, hockey still carries considerable weight in some parts of North America and with many fans who have loved this marvelous game from their childhood and carried their devotion to hockey into their adult lives.

For me hockey played at its highest level or played by youngsters on a pond has that marvelous combination of beauty, power and grace that make all sport a wonder of human achievement. When anything happens to damage the sport, it damages it at all levels, and indeed it damages all sport collectively.

It is with some considerable sorrow that I watch this latest labor/management struggle play itself out in hockey. Some will argue that this lockout is only of concern to Canadians. This ignores the fact that in the National Hockey League only six of the thirty teams are located north of the border. It also ignores the fact that the growth of youth hockey across the United States over the past three decades has been impressive, especially in those Sunbelt cities that are now the home of indoor rinks in considerable numbers.

It is precisely in these locations that the lockout by the NHL could have its biggest long-term impact. This is true, not because hockey is so important in these locations, but precisely because it is not. Still trying to establish a hockey culture these locations across the Sunbelt cannot afford to have hockey at the highest levels disappear for any length of time. Hockey is just beginning to capture a following among the young through the visibility of the NHL teams in places like Tampa and

Phoenix. If these teams disappear for a season, the loose grip hockey has in these locations could be lost.

In Canada itself the lockout will operate with different dynamics. Here, as with baseball in the United States, lifelong fans will feel betrayed by the NHL, especially the players who will be seen, no matter what the realities, as the cause of the troubles. This dynamic operated in every baseball strike or lockout for the past three decades, and it operated in the lockout of a decade ago. In fact fans don't distinguish between strikes and lockouts. They are viewed as the same and viewed for the most part as the responsibility of the players.

Canadians who grew up playing hockey are like those Americans who grew up playing baseball. In one sense they will always view it as a kid's game. They played it as kids, dreamed about playing it at the highest level, and have never totally released that dream. Nostalgia blinds the fan who in one set of memories sees this kid's game and wonders how it can be that someone would demand millions to play a game as one's life work. Players then are seen as ungrateful millionaires who ought to come and work at a "real job" and see what it means to earn a paycheck.

Also in Canada the absence of NHL hockey will be felt in a very different way. There will still be plenty of hockey from the children's games, to the juniors, to the various minor leagues. Canadians will never be without hockey on their sport's menu. The lockout experience for Canadians will be different because unlike south of the border, this is the national pastime that is gone. This is the national pastime that is tied to local loyalties and rituals. "Hockey Night in Canada" on the CBC has been part of the national consciousness and part of Canadian life for decades, first as a national radio experience and now as a national television experience. Multiple generations have experienced it as part of being Canadian.

There is a sense of disbelief among diehard fans that anyone could be so dense and crude as to tamper with the national pastime. Indeed, I still can't believe that human avarice and pride was so gross as to cause the cancellation of a World Series. Ultimately you get over this, and rationally you know that sport is big business and entertainment, but still it is part of the heritage of a people and a national treasure that no one should be allowed to violate.

As for the issues involved it is money. Owners claim they are losing money and that salaries are too high. Somehow they blame

the players for this and expect the players to solve the problem. Unable to control their own spending and maintain a rational business sense, these brilliant businessmen are now demanding that the players save them from themselves.

From the outside it is also clear that salaries have outdistanced television revenues and ratings and that it is likely that income is not matching outgo. The question is by how much. The answer centers on the final calculations of profit and loss, assets and debits, and these always vary according to whom is doing the counting.

If a settlement is to be reached each side must be willing to trust and verify, and each must commit themselves to the workings of the collective bargaining process. So far there is little evidence that either side is even close to do doing so. So we will wait to see if there is a hockey season and how much damage all of this will ultimately do to a sport whose hold on the fans may not be as firm as some believe. Let's hope the NHL is better at calculus than it is at math.

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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