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The NHL's lost season

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
The NHL's lost season
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As demonstrated yesterday with the sad attempt to resurrect the hockey season, the differences between owners and players is greater than a few million dollars of salary cap or the personalities of Gary Bettman and Bob Goodenow. As usual the press oversimplified things and any number of people, including Wayne Gretzky and Mario Lemieux, fell for their lazy analysis. This is a war, not a collective bargaining process.

The end of the hockey season that didn't begin will now begin. This reality is much mourned in Canada and not much noticed in the United States. Here in Florida where there are two NHL teams, including the defending Stanley Cup Champion Tampa Bay Lightning, the news of the cancellation of the season attracted little notice outside the Miami and Tampa Bay areas. This is probably not good news for the future of the NHL especially in those newer markets in the Sunbelt where the commitment to hockey is shallow even where it is intense.

The absence of hockey in these markets affords people the opportunity to find other ways to spend disposable income and enjoy the beautiful winter months. Ken Dryden, former Canadians' goalie and now member of the Paul Martin government, said a few weeks ago that you never want to give a fan a chance to find out whether it is passion or habit that kept them coming to the games. In the Sunbelt this could prove particularly dangerous.

So why has this happened? Certainly even NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman, who is the walking definition of "disingenuous," and Bob Goodenow, head of the now fraying players association know the perils inherent in this development. These people do not have a death wish even if it looks to many fans that they do.

Looking at labor relations in sport over the past couple of decades, and particularly looking at the NFL and Major League Baseball perhaps the NHL could learn from these bits of history. Collective bargaining is a concept that comes out of a very different culture than that which has prevailed historically in sport. The notion that leagues and owners can NOT do whatever they want with their teams is a relatively new concept in sport.

Collective bargaining is based on two essential elements: a willingness to negotiate and a modicum of respect and trust among the parties to the negotiation. In professional sports negotiations these two elements have generally been lacking. Owners and their representatives have been adamant about their rights to control their property, both the franchises and the labor force.

Looking at the history of baseball there was fierce resistance to any suggestion of the rights of labor or the notion that players could control their own destinies. Players were ignored and when they tried to organize, were crushed. All of this changed with the coming of Marvin Miller as Executive Director of the MLBPA. Players were determined to force the owners to bargain collectively. The struggles were intense and at times bitter. There were numerous work stoppages, lockouts, and in the most insane moment of all the cancellation of the playoffs and World Series. Without a court intervention it might also have produced the loss of yet another season.

It seems to have taken this final trauma for two things to happen. First, the owners seem to have given up the idea of destroying the Players Association, and second all parties seem to have come to an understanding of the essentials of the collective bargaining process. This was not easy and it took decades of strife and then near disaster to finally succeed.

The hockey world might want to take a long hard look at this history. If they can learn anything from it they might be able to avoid the years of anguish and suffering, not to mention financial loss and the alienation of fans.

Or they could look at the history of the NFL and its labor relations. Here the story is both similar and different to that of baseball. Over the years the owners consistently triumphed over the players. When the owners finally crushed the players, the NFLPA decertified itself and changed tactics. Then the courts became the new playing field and the former players association gained some of what it wanted. The owners clearly won the battle, but not war. The NFLPA has not disappeared and continues to engage ownership in a collective bargaining process.

The lesson for hockey owners in this case is, even if you win, you never will achieve total dominance, and some form of a players association is likely to remain in place. The glory days of "laissez faire" capitalism are dead.

Both Major League Baseball and the National Football League suffered through periods of turmoil and struggle. These struggles had different outcomes but both resulted in the continuing need for collective bargaining between players and owners. There is no getting around it. There is no need to go through all this. To do so will prolong the agony, could permanently alienate some fans, and could do irreparable damage to franchises in weak markets.

As for the fans they must be patient and understand that this is a business which is also a sport and an entertainment. There is a considerable amount of money involved and an ongoing struggle as to who will control that money. Fans like to think that they can walk away and never come back and will show those greedy bastards on both sides a thing or two.

Those with a passion for the game will not. When the lockout ends these fans will come back, as baseball fans returned and football fans returned after every work stoppage. They won't be happy, but they'll get over it once the games begin, because for hockey fans, this is neither a business nor an entertainment. Hockey is a passion and an obsession.

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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