

sports

Calling the shots on hockey

by Sam McCaig

Another sport, another lockout. Baseball has done it, hockey is on the verge of doing it, and basketball is waiting in the wings.

So if you're a sports fan, your remaining choices are the NFL or its more popular offspring, the O.J. Simpson case (I wasn't allowed to write this article without the obligatory Juice joke).

But back to hockey.

First of all, the impending lockout.

I am going to be upfront and tell you that I harbour an intense, innate dislike for Gary Bettman. I don't know why, but whenever I see him, I think: "weasel". I never understood the NHL's notion to import a head cheese from another sport (Bettman was a "big" man in NBA circles).

It's like saying, "There are no capable minds in hockey today, no one that can lead us to the promised revenue land. Please Gary, please guide us to the realm of salary caps, unlimited free agency, and well, just make our little product more pleasing to the American eye."

Now before you go off and call me a midget-hating xenophobe, I'll have you know that my favourite team is the New York Islanders and my second favourite player is Patty LaFontaine (who is a short American). Plus, my favourite player weaves his magic in Hollywood, which is where the USA is most likely to shine its spotlight on itself.

So don't think I'm anti-American or anything like that. I don't know, maybe I just don't like short, wimpy guys telling Gino Odjick what to do.

It really rusts my skate blades to think we've got to change our great game so that it is more saleable south of the border. Hockey is a game with much purity; also, you can't hide out there on the ice. So when people start talking about shoot-outs, eliminating fighting and overlooking Saskatoon for another team in southern California, it makes me wonder where the game will be in twenty years.

I could go on and on about how the lockout gets my goat, but there's 'funner' stuff to discuss. Just remember: the lockout stinks like Tim Hunt-

*It really
rusts my
skate
blades...*

er's hockey bag and the NHL should give the boot to Bettman and the "NBA showtime" attitude he represents.

Moving on, let's pretend that the puck will be dropped on October 1st.

This leads us to the next bit of bad news — Mario is hurting and has decided to take a year off to refuel. All the best to the big guy who has endured more than his share of hardship for the past few years.

On the bright side, this is a banner season for rookies in the NHL. Young stallions such as Paul Kariya (Anaheim), Peter Forsberg (Quebec), Radek Bonk (Ottawa), Ed Jovanovski (Florida), Kenny Jonsson

(Toronto) and Andrei Nikolishin (Hartford) will try and ease the pain of Lemieux's absence. It's a two-horse race for the Calder, with the mightiest of Mighty Ducks, Kariya, edging out wunderkid Forsberg.

Before I give you the exact order of how each team will finish in their respective division (along with the eventual winner of Lord Stanley's Cup), there's one last piece of business that must be discussed.

His name is Bob Probert. Don't you just get the feeling that even if he survives four years in Chicago and collects his \$6.6 million, he's on a John Kordic-path to self-destruction? As you may know, he had two accidents in two days over the summer. In the second, his blood-alcohol was .31. He had enough booze in his system to sponsor a Howe Hall smoker. The traces of cocaine aren't a good sign either. If there's ever been a (repeated) cry for help, this is it.

Let's hope that Chicago can find the self-help program that apparently never materialized in Detroit. Good luck, Bob.

And finally, my fearless predictions...

Atlantic Division

1. New York Rangers: Expect more big noises from the Big Apple.
2. New Jersey: A solid, solid team that needs a gamebreaker if they want to win it all.
3. Washington: A poor man's New Jersey without the goaltending (but with Dale Hunter).
4. Philadelphia: Lindros, Recchi and a reborn Hextall lead the Flyers into the playoffs.
5. New York Islanders: They added grit and character; a post-season

dance depends on the emergence of a goaltender.

6. Florida: They'll always play up to their potential; unfortunately, that won't be enough.

7. Tampa Bay: Not a good team in a pretty good division.

Northeast Division

1. Pittsburgh: Defence? They don't need no stinkin' defence!
2. Quebec: Wendel shows 'em how to win.
3. Buffalo: Patty will be in full effect.
4. Montreal: If anything happens to Roy, look out below.
5. Boston: If Cam can, Boston can. He's the B's knees.
6. Hartford: These guys might surprise you.
7. Ottawa: Dazed and confused.

Central Division

1. Detroit: If they don't win it this season, you won't recognize the Red Wings next year.
2. St. Louis: They're loading up.
3. Toronto: Dougie and Sundin - The Odd Couple.

4. Winnipeg: On their way from misery to happiness.

5. Chicago: Won't be pushed around.

6. Dallas: Somebody's got to finish last.

Pacific Division

1. Vancouver: Will translate last year's extended post-season into regular season success.
2. Calgary: Is Kidd the man?
3. Los Angeles: Gretzky miss the play-offs two years in a row? Not on this planet.
4. Edmonton: Peter Puck's young bucks? No such luck.
5. San Jose: Biding their time in the warm California waters.
6. Anaheim: Quick, name three guys who play for the Ducks. And there you have it.

In the play-offs, look for Detroit and St. Louis to face off in the west and the Rangers and the Nords to battle in the east. When the dust settles, Colonel Keenan will be smirking at his former Ranger troops.

You read it here first.

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Gazette Office, Room 312, 3rd floor, SUB (494-2507)
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