

The hypocrisy in Olympic hockey

By NICK MARTIN

A YEAR AGO, Charles Hay was the highly successful president of Gulf Oil Canada Ltd., and hardly a person in this country knew he was even alive.

Today he is the man responsible for restoring lost pride to a nation that has had its face rubbed in it once too many times.

As the head of Hockey Canada, the governing body in charge of our national hockey team, and with the full support of the federal government, Hay withdrew Canada from the 1970 World Hockey Tournament in protest against the shameless hypocrisy that Europe calls, with a straight face, amateur hockey.

Canada never wins

For years Canada has been humiliated on and off the ice by the Europeans. After each unsuccessful tournament would come a wave of nationwide protest against the conditions we had to face, but then the next year would find Canada once again returning to take a licking in Europe's bastardized version of our national game.

The last straw came at a time when it appeared that Canada was finally about to regain the top position in amateur hockey. In its meeting last summer, the International Ice Hockey Federation voted to allow Canada to ice nine professionals in this year's tournament, provided they had not played in the NHL this season. After years of being limited to amateurs not good enough for the NHL and over-the-hill ex-pros, Canada seemed to finally have the opportunity to field a team that was even remotely representative of our national ability.

That hope was dashed several weeks ago, when International Olympic Committee head Avery Brundage, in response to a Russian request, ruled that any amateur playing against a professional would be ineligible for the 1972 Olympics. The IIHF immediately reversed their earlier ruling, outlawing Canadian pros. Canada proposed that the Winnipeg and Montreal-based tournament be made an unofficial tournament, a world championship in everything but name. Most of the other teams involved, including Sweden, thought this was an excellent way to avoid Brundage's ruling, and were expected to approve Canada's proposal in a meeting the next day. That night, a secret meeting was held to which Canada was not invited. The next day, Canada's proposal was soundly and unexpectedly rejected. Canada withdrew from the tournament; by sheer coincidence, Sweden was named the new site for the series.

The start of the fall

Charles Hay's withdrawal was the culmination of a series of events that have been slowly building to a head for decades, a time in which Canada fell from the pinnacle of hockey success to perennial also-rans under the hypocritical European restrictions.

It is hard to believe that Canada used to send its Allan Cup champions as national representatives. Long gone are the days when a Senior A club could take on the rest of the world, as evidenced by the Galt Hornets' recent losing trip to Germany.

Yet it is not that long ago, only nine years in fact, that the Trail Smoke Eaters won our last world title, in Geneva, Switzerland. Only three members of that team, Seth Martin, Jackie McLeod, and Darryl Sly ever played in the NHL, none attaining anything more than fringe status.

Obviously European hockey has made great strides in its calibre in those nine years. Those strides, however, have been far shorter than most people generally believe. Although the Russians and Czechs have reached a high level of play, their margin of victory over our nationals has not been large when the severe handicaps applied to our team are considered.

Once, when being questioned about the roughness of hockey, Gordie Howe told an interviewer, "It's a man's game." Several European teams, however, find the game which we invented too rough for their tastes. As a result, our teams were forced suddenly every year to forget the training of a lifetime and play under completely alien rules.

European officiating is generally condemned as being incompetent, to use a euphemism. For several tournaments it threatened to become a tradition that Canada would have two goals disallowed every year against the Czechs, goals which the films would prove to be legitimate. One year Russia edged Canada for the title 2-1 on a goal which the films showed was a yard offside. Canadians did learn a handy trick from the Czechs: whenever the other team threatens to score, simply pull the net out of the ice and throw it in the corner.

European teams improved

It is easy to look back and see how we could have won under fairer conditions. The fact cannot be ignored, however, that the Russians and Czechs, and to a lesser extent the Swedes and even the Finns, have made vast improvements over the teams that our Senior A players used to thrash.

With this improvement in mind, and realizing that the European powers consider hockey supremacy a matter of tremendous national pride and prestige (witness the celebrations in the street when the Czechs beat Russia last year), Canada of necessity wishes to use the best players possible in order to best represent Canadian hockey and Canada itself.



Former pros like Billy Harris (centre) are outlawed by the new IIHF ruling.

We are not allowed to do this. Our best players are of course professionals, whose decadent capitalistic germs might somehow contaminate the simon pure Europeans who play hockey solely for love of the sport itself. It is here that the hypocrisy comes in.

In Russia there is a national league whose fervent crowd appeal and national interest has been compared favorably to that generated by the NHL. The best players are selected to play for the national team. At that point they are drafted into the army and made officers. Their duties include practicing hockey for up to eight hours a day, and giving up everything which might harm their performance (one player, Loktev, was suspended for a year for smoking).

Like all Russian soldiers, they are given beautiful apartments with all the scarce modern conveniences, and they and their families enjoy annual vacations at Black Sea resorts. The Czech situation is similar. These men are called amateurs.

Ulf Sterner of Sweden played professionally with the New York Rangers several years ago, returning home after achieving underwhelming success. He has never been officially released from his professional contract. Sterner now plays in Sweden's national league, with no other outside job. A Swedish newspaper recently estimated that Sterner is paid \$35,000 a year and the national goalie at least \$20,000. Sterner and his teammates are amateurs.

Olympic oath a farce

No one in Canada pretends that our present team is made up of pure amateurs. Every so-called amateur in Canada in any type of competitive league, from Junior B to Senior A to our nationals, receives expense money and some form of small salary. National team members freely admit they perjured themselves in taking the 1968 Olympic oath.

Our mistake is being honest enough to differentiate between the financially-aided "amateur" of modern sports, and the professional who plays hockey for a living. By Avery Brundage's standards a man who is paid a huge salary by private enterprise is a professional, but if that salary comes from a national government then a player's purity is intact. Canada asks only that everyone be subjected to the same standards.

Canada's withdrawal could precipitate major changes in the amateur hockey setup. IIHF chief Bunny Ahearne has been the subject of much criticism in recent weeks, some of which is unfair. Ahearne has 28 member nations to think about, members whose support he must have to stay in power. Certainly the Russians, Czechs, and Swedes would approve of nothing that would hurt their supremacy. Open hockey would benefit only two of the member nations, and so the hypocrisy continues. It is to the everlasting credit of the United States that they supported our stand by refusing to fill our vacancy in the tournament.

Most of the free European press, in particular the Swedes and Finns, have applauded the Canadian move, and have urged an end to amateur hypocrisy. Condemnation of their own national hockey governing bodies and of Ahearne has been bitter. Sentiment is strong in Europe for an open tournament, with each nation able to send any player it wishes. The Swedish press points out that this year's tournament, now to be held in Stockholm, will not make much money without hockey's biggest drawing card. They conveniently forget to point out that the Canadians are so "popular" with Swedish fans because the Swedish press treats Canadian players as warmly as the Hanoi Gazette would greet a visit from Lieutenant Calley.

Stockholm will still make more than it would have had the tourney remained in Canada. Yet next year, with the European press and their own citizens favouring Canada's using professionals, the Swedish

attitude could change. Indeed, it is generally agreed that the Swedes only supported the Russians this year in order to get the tournament if Canada withdrew.

Russians want to play NHL

For their part, the Russians and Czechs take tremendous pride in their advances, but know that only by playing the NHL can they truly prove themselves. Interviews with the Russian players have revealed that they are anxious to play NHL teams, but these same interviews also reveal that the Russian people are being led to believe that it is the NHL which is avoiding Russia.

The Russians avoided the confrontation this year by appealing to Brundage, but help from the 85-year-old sports fossil may not be coming much longer. Brundage has been openly defied by skiers displaying equipment advertising; the Olympics need skiing and hockey much more than they need Brundage. By 1972 a younger man may well be in charge, someone who recognizes that true amateurism is long dead, and only open sports are honest.

When that happens, Canada will be able to send an NHL team to the world tournament. Amid all the controversy, Canadians wonder what the outcome would be of an NHL-Russia game. Available evidence would point to an overwhelming NHL victory.

Although our teams have generally lost in recent world play, the scores were usually close. Many nationals have given a couple of years to the team, then turned pro. Of these, only Terry Clancy of the Leafs, Danny O'Shea of Minnesota, and Gerry Pinder of Chicago have cracked the NHL, none of whom can be considered even close to stardom. Obviously our nationals are nowhere near NHL calibre.

On Boxing Day, at Maple Leaf Gardens, Canada defeated Russia 3-2, with ex-pros Billy Harris and Brian Conacher dominating play. The Russian goalie appeared terrified of slapshots, rarely seen in Europe, and strong checking played havoc with the Russians' intricate passing plays. You have to wonder how the Russians would do against a Hull slapshot or a defence pair of Orr and Park. Only a week later, the Montreal Junior Canadiens, reinforced by several minor leaguers, handed the Russians their worst defeat in a decade, 9-3.

Forgotten in the furor are the men who carried our hopes through all the losing years, who gave so much for us. Men like Jackie McLeod, Fran Huck, Terry O'Malley and Morris Mott gave Canada many years of personal sacrifice, and were looking forward to this year's tournament. But national pride can only take so much.

Still not NHL calibre

Although we must be adamant in our own defence, we have to recognize the position of the Europeans. For decades they absorbed defeat from us. They finally reached and passed the Senior A level, and dominated world play. They knew they hadn't reached the NHL level yet. This was obvious when Canada's nine pros were limited to minor leaguers; after all, a professional is a professional. Europe felt it necessary to qualify the calibre of our professionals.

Probably the Europeans felt they had reached minor league level. The Russians' recent experience caused a quick re-evaluation, and the move to block Canada's use of pros. The Russians have to play the NHL eventually, and certainly want to. But they need more time to reach that competitive level, time which only Ahearne and the whole hypocritical setup of amateur hockey can provide. But because of Charles Hay, the pride of one nation, and the emerging consciences of other nations, Bunny Ahearne's empire is crumbling, and the Russians may very well find themselves forced to meet the NHL sooner than they wish to.