**EDITORIAL**

**NHL Players Should Go Back**

**June 13, 2005**

A deal between the National Hockey League and the players’ union appears to be, if not imminent, close. Those oft-quoted “sources close to the negotiations” suggest a deal may be made this month.

Here’s a suggestion to the players: Tell your leaders you want to get back on the ice. Pronto. Whatever tentative settlement your negotiators come up with, vote yes.

If a new NHL season doesn’t face off this autumn, players will end up settling for even less than the offer that’s apparently on the table now – and that’s already degraded from what was offered before the lights when out on the 2004-05 season.

The damage done to fan support for professional hockey by the current lockout goes even beyond what happened to Major League Baseball after its players struck in the 1994-95 season. It took baseball, by the most conservative estimates, three years to recover fan support and attendance from that strike. Hockey on its best day, never had the national support – the hardwired passion – that baseball enjoys in the U.S.

The NHL has lost its ESPN deal, which not only strips the league of $60 million (all figures US) in TV revenues, but significantly reduces its exposure in the U.S. market. If Canadian ratings in a new hockey season are down, expect CBC and TSN to want to renegotiate their contract.

Fan support has been eroded by fans’ widely held belief that players thumbed their noses at them. If the players were to settle tomorrow, it would already be for far less than they were offered by the league governors in March. This is an aborted season that didn’t have to happen.

Players have to share responsibility for the financial implosion of the league – along with the owners who though they could build a U.S. hockey nation south of the frostbelt and who agreed to players’ demands. But look what happened to salaries: A stunning increase of 252 per cent over 10 years and an average salary now of $1.8 million per player.

When the deal happens, salary and bonus packages are going to be a lot smaller than they were. The Maple Leafs, for example, will be spending 40 per cent less on player salaries than they did in 2003-04.

It’s hardly going to mean the poorhouse for pros. Emerging stars will still start at about $850,000 (still US) a year. That’s a big cut but it’s more money than most people will see over two decades of work.

The impact on the league – even on the game – may be huge. Some European or Russian players may stay home and a bandied-about European “super league” could draw top players there.

The sport – team makeup, rules, even nets and equipment – may be quite different when play resumes. Let’s hope there are some fans left to watch it when it does.

* *Written by Robert Howard*

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**LETTERS TO THE EDITOR**

**Bulldogs deserve new arena**

*Re: ‘Dogs threaten to bolt Copps,’ (June 9)*

When I read The Spectator’s front page story that the Bulldogs may vacate Copps Coliseum and build their own rink, I jumped out of my Muskoka chair, spilled my beer and did a spirited jig for a couple of minutes.

As a longtime fan and supporter of the Hamilton Bulldogs through thick and thin, this was long-awaited good news.

Venture down to the recently revamped Blue Cross Arena in Rochester, home of the Rochester Americans or to the gorgeous new John Labatt Centre in London and then come back to Copps Coliseum for a Bulldogs game if you want an eye-opener.

Both facilities have bright concession stands, lots of luxury boxes, restaurants, capacities of 10,000 and low ceilings which give both rinks much more atmosphere than curtained-off cavernous Copps.

The Copps’ sound system is 1970’s awful and the whole place feels and looks stale. The concession stands and concourse are like something out of 1968 Czechoslovakia.

I say build it and they will come and good riddance to an arena that was an overbuilt white elephant from day one.

One request though, build it downtown and not in Burlington. The Burlington Bulldogs?

Don’t even think about it.

*Written by Brad McIntosh, Caledonia and published in The Hamilton Spectator on June 14, 2005*

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**Don’t give any more gifts to the Bulldogs**

*Re: ‘Try bold vision to save Copps,’ (June 10, editorial) and ‘No more excuses city … ante up or lose Dogs,’ (June 10)*

When the Bulldogs first arrived in 1996 through to the “Stay Dogs Stay” campaign in 2001, Copps Coliseum was controlled by the city. The city gained revenues from the Bulldogs’ rent, a share of concessions, signage around the building, control of the corporate suites (except Bulldogs’ games) and other events.

The Bulldogs were able to use remaining “inventory” (rink boards, ice, etc.) for their revenue gains.

Today we are looking at a different scenario. The city no longer controls the resources it once did.

The Bulldogs negotiated a deal (to keep them in town) that allows them to receive most of what the city used to get. This includes concession revenue, corporate suite revenue (from other events), all signage rights (spare the outside) plus a reduced rent.

Now it appears that the Bulldogs are playing their trump card – make it better or we move. Incapable of making a decision to allow naming rights to Copps has left the city without much to call on to offset the costly repairs. Meanwhile, the Bulldogs continue to be unaccountable for their administrative use of increased revenue streams.

What are they doing with all that money?

The Bulldogs are a privately run business that sells entertainment to Hamilton; they should be in control of how they provide for their customers. But not as a gift from the city.

They should pay for their needs, just as any other privately run business does. They chose their profession to entertain, now let them operate accordingly. Loosen the naming rights provisions, but don’t give it up without compensation and restrictions.

Asking the city to take responsibility for the current condition of Copps is unfair.

The city cannot provide for something that no longer shows a profit. The Bulldogs took all that.

*Written by Dan Rodrigues, Hamilton and published in the Hamilton Spectator on June 14, 2005*

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