

Lightning takes N.H.L. by storm

Doug Brumley
Sports Editor

Expansion teams are not supposed to jump into a league and win right away. It takes years to cultivate and acquire the talent that will make an expansion team a winner. Right?

Well, of the two new expansion teams in the National Hockey League this year, the Ottawa Senators got that message loud and clear, but the Tampa Bay Lightning have turned a deaf ear to such talk.

The Lightning, who made headlines by giving female goaltender Manon Rheaume a tryout, have stayed in the headlines by holding their own against the more established teams in the league. Tampa Bay won nine of its first 20 games, putting them on a pace that would give them the most wins of any first year team in the N.H.L.'s history. Among those struck by the Lightning were the New York Rangers and the Detroit Red Wings, two of the league's top teams. Leading the attack for the Lightning is left winger Chris Kontos. Kontos was a nobody in the league when he was signed as a free agent by Tampa Bay, but he is now one of the top goal scorers in the league. Through 23 games, Kontos had recorded 19 goals, tying him for third on the list of goal scorers.

Recently, however, the Lightning have fallen like a bolt from high in the clouds, striking back down to earth. The squad has slumped, losing nine of their past ten contests.

This sounds more like the play of the Ottawa Senators who have skated off with a victory only three times this season. After 21 games, the team had a .071 winning percentage, and the team was on pace to become not only the worst expansion team in the N.H.L.'s history, but the second worst team in modern North America team sports history—behind the 1976 Tampa Bay Buccaneers of the National Football League, who went 0-14.

You might ask yourself "How can two expansion teams that entered the league in the same year, and even chose players from the same expansion draft pool, be at totally opposite ends of the spectrum?"

The answer lies in the location of the teams. Tampa Bay, being in Florida, is rather foreign to ice hockey, which has always been considered a northern sport. In order for the team to attract interest and sell tickets, the team had to win and win early. Ottawa, on the other hand, had the interest needed to fuel the franchise since there had already been a professional

hockey team in the area before. Because of Ottawa's interest in the team, the managers and owners gambled on the fact that the fans might have a little more patience with the squad during the first few years.

Knowing this information, the owners and general managers chose their players accordingly. Tampa Bay selected players who had a lot of experience in ice hockey, players that had won before and could bring veteran leadership to the team. The plan of the team's administration to pick players for the team's immediate success, with less emphasis on the distant future, has worked so far. The organization has gained plenty of media attention for its success and the fans are loving it.

The Senators organization, on the other hand, was looking further down the road, and selected younger, less experienced players. Ottawa is hoping to build a solid foundation with these prospects, with the idea of adding on over the next five to ten years in order to create a competitive club that could eventually challenge for the Stanley Cup.

So while the teams are at expansion extremes right now, it will be very interesting to see how they are doing several years down the road. The roles could very well be reversed.

In other hockey news:

Often a very successful or popular line—three players consisting of a center, right wing, and left wing—will be given a nickname by sportswriters and the public. If the name is really good, it will stick. There are three such lines in the league this year.

In Boston, the first scoring line of Joey Juneau, Adam Oates, and Dmitri Kvartalnov has been dubbed the Bonanza line, based on the popular television series. Juneau is "Little Joe", Oates is "Adam", and Kvartalnov is "Hoss." The three players are the top three Boston point scorers and have kept the Bruins within reach of the Montreal Canadiens in the Adams Division.

In Philadelphia, the crazy-eights line has been impressive. The combination of #88 Eric Lindros, #8 Mark Recchi, and #18 Brent Fedyk, combined for a total of 35 points—goals plus assists—in four games. In one game, the trio picked up 13 points, and followed that performance with a 12 point output. Currently, the line is missing two very big eights, rookie Eric Lindros, who is out of the line-up with a knee injury.

In Los Angeles, the first line has been tagged The "Wow" Line—the "Wow" standing for "without

Wayne." "The Great One," Wayne Gretzky, is out of the line-up with a back injury, but you wouldn't know it by the King's success so far this year. The "Wow" line consisting of Jari Kurri, Luc Robitaille, and Tomas Sandstrom has lead the Kings to the top of the Smythe Division, and has kept the squad on the heels of the league-leading Pittsburgh Penguins. Incidentally, the rumor is that Gretzky will start skating again in March and should be ready for the playoffs in April and May. It will be interesting to see whether the "Wow" line will be broken up to accommodate hockey's greatest player.

Do not be surprised if you see the Quebec Nordiques, long known for their residence in the basement of the Adams division, make a

move for the penthouse. The Nordiques have flourished after acquiring center Mike Ricci, goaltender Ron Hextall, and offensive defensemen Kerry Huffman and Steve Duchesne from Philadelphia in the Eric Lindros deal. Hextall has lost only 6 decisions in goal and is finally playing like he did during his rookie year—exceptional. All-star Joe Sakic has been his usual amazing self, leading the team with 18 goals and 20 assists in 22 games. And finally the first round pick in the 1988 entry draft, right wing-moved-to-center Mats Sundin, has moved toward reaching his true potential as a power forward in the league. In this, his third season, Sundin has a point in each game—that's at least one goal or assist in each of 29 games.

The Nordiques are currently in third place in the Adams division, trailing Montreal and Boston. However, the schedule is extremely kind to the Nordiques this season, who will play the hapless expansion Ottawa Senators nine times, and the almost-as-bad Hartford Whalers seven times, thus making their ascent to the division's top spot that much easier.

So the Nordiques, who were the laughing stock of the league in the not-too-distant past, have finally received the talent necessary to make them a contender for the Stanley Cup.

St. Louis Blues' right wing Brett Hull leads all-star balloting with just over 149,000 votes. Boston defenseman Ray Bourque is currently second.

Home sweet renovated home

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Sports Editor

You've got to wonder if any of the Greensboro Monarchs have, over the course of the last two months, clicked their skates together and uttered the phrase, "There's no place like home."

Well, if they did, it didn't work...until now.

This Saturday night the Monarchs finally return home from the 19 game road trip that began this 1992-93 season. When the Monarchs pull into Greensboro, the team bus will have logged roughly 17,000 miles.

The extended road trip, which was necessary to allow the completion of renovations made to the Monarch's home facility, the Greensboro Coliseum, has taken its toll on the team. The trip started well, as the Monarchs lit up the East Coast Hockey League by winning their first five games. Then came the Halloween night game.

The air was tense in Raleigh that night as the Monarchs battled

the Ice Caps. And battle them they did. Two players were suspended and the Monarchs were placed on year-long probation as a result of the brawl that occurred that evening. The episode left the Monarchs with their first loss and a seat in the East Coast Hockey League's dog house.

That loss was the first of a seven game tail-spin that hit bottom when two players quit the team. The losing streak was broken at seven, but since then the Monarchs have continued to play less than impressive hockey. Their record of 7 wins and 11 losses has put them in the bottom of the E.C.H.L.'s East Division, in seventh place. And the losses have not been pretty. The Monarchs have scored a total of 64 goals against opponents, while those same opponents have netted 96 against the Monarchs.

Needless to say, the Monarchs are ready to come home. And this Saturday night, a sell-out crowd of 12,000 fans are expected to give them a warm welcome. According to Melissa Wallace, public relations director for the Monarchs, approximately 7,000 tickets had

been sold by Wednesday afternoon.

Remember that Halloween game? Well, the Monarchs do, and Saturday night's opponent will be those same Raleigh Ice Caps. And the Monarchs, and their fans, will be ready.

First one must understand that there are predominately two styles of hockey: the fast-skating, quick-passing style, and the rough-and-tumble, take-your-head-off style. Raleigh subscribes to the former. Greensboro to the latter. So on Halloween night, when the Monarchs got rough, the Ice Caps tried to fight back—by crying to the media. The Ice Caps dubbed the Monarchs as "bruisers," and the Monarchs retaliated with the "crybaby" label for the Ice Caps.

In honor of the Ice Caps, 6,000 cloth diapers will be handed out at the door before Saturday night's game, according to Wallace. The "crybaby" diapers will serve as rally towels for the Monarchs during the game.

Ticket prices for the game are \$4 for students with their I.D., \$6.50 and \$7.50.

Welcome home, guys.

Quote of the week

"You can't compare preseason to regular season. Preseason is just a way to screw fans out of money."

—Charles Barkley, Phoenix Suns star