

# Hockey fans prepared to forgive, forget after year off

BY ROY GREEN  
Staff Writer

For some NHL hockey fans, it's as if last year's non-season never happened.

A group of fans approached at a Newmarket watering hole on a scorching afternoon weren't even considering a boycott of the professional game and say they can't wait for the first puck to drop.



JASON MONGER

"I'm a Canadian; I love hockey," said Jason Monger of Barrie, as he and a few friends enjoyed some cool ones at The Hound Friday afternoon. "I wouldn't even consider not watching hockey. Last season, I was forced to watch junior hockey and as much as I love the game, it's not the same thing. I need to see a little Darcy Tucker."

The return of the NHL is good news from an economic sense, according to Cory Roach, also of Barrie.

"We (will be) saving a lot of money by staying home Saturday nights and watching the game on TV," he said. "It was awful last year when NFL football was over and the only thing left to watch was basketball."

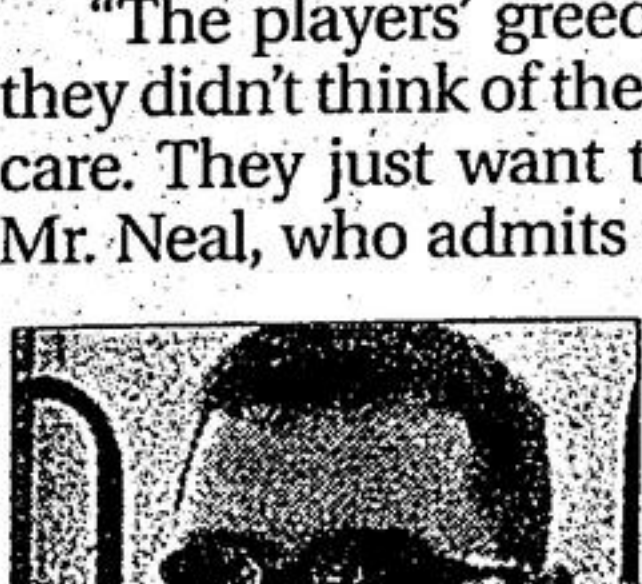


CORY ROACH

Ironically enough, it took an American to help explain why most Canadians will likely forgive and forget all the controversy and the loss of an entire NHL season.

"Hockey is in every Canadian's blood," said Nathan Neal, a Michigan resident. "They couldn't stop watching or going to hockey games if they wanted to."

"The players' greed overwhelmed them and they didn't think of the fans, but Canadians don't care. They just want to see the games," added Mr. Neal, who admits when it comes to hockey, he's "getting into it more."



WAYNE OLIFF

But even in Canada, there are those for whom the resumption of the puck wars doesn't mean a thing.

"I've never watched a full hockey game in my life. I couldn't care less," shrugged Wayne Olliff of River Drive Park in East Gwillimbury. "I prefer extreme games."

His companion, Chad West of Lindsay, agreed. "I never played and don't even know how to skate."

# NHLers anxious to get back on ice

'We'll have to work hard to win fans back'

BY MIKE HAYAKAWA  
AND JOHN CUDMORE  
Staff Writers

After Joe Bowen finished his weekly slo-pitch game Wednesday, he brought his teammates back to his Unionville house for a little celebrating, tentative as it was.

Not because they won.

They were toasting a tentative agreement reached that day between the NHL and its players' association. Ratification votes are expected next week.

"Maybe we'll break open the champagne," said the long-time voice of the Toronto Maple Leafs, who, like the players, sat out the entire 2004-05 season due to the lockout. "We're very excited."

"Hopefully no one will screw this up. If they don't take this one, then the next proposal might be worse. But you never know," he said.

He thinks clubs have time to get their marketing in gear.

"If they regroup now they can heal any wounds and sell tickets. You can't do it during the season. And beforehand, teams can get to companies before their budgets are locked up."

"Both sides realized some preparation time would be required," he said. "Anyone who has been in a strike situation knows it's not a lot of fun. You've got to bite the bullet."

**'The negative is that they missed a year, and over what?'**

Wes Jarvis  
ex-NHLer

Mr. Bowen's contract will be pushed back one year and he is ready to get back to work calling weekend games on Talk 640 Radio and mid-week games on The Sports Network and Sportnet television.

The list of York Region players in the NHL when it last played included then Detroit Red Wings Steve Thomas and Curtis Joseph, Raffi Torres (Edmonton Oilers), Jeff O'Neill (Carolina Hurricanes) and Brad May (Vancouver Canucks).

Mr. Torres, a 23-year-old Markham native and left winger with Edmonton Oilers, was optimistic something would be worked out before the 2005-06 season.

"It's great. It's about time."

Now I can start focusing on the job at hand to do now," he said. "I'll just regroup and try to go out and have a big year."

The lost season stings.

"I came off a strong first year and I was looking forward to having a big second year to jumpstart my career," he said.

"Now I've got to look at myself when I first came into the NHL and have to prove myself again."

Leafs assistant coach Keith Acton was watching prospects for the NHL team work out in Toronto when he got the news.

"It's been a long process, but all of us in the business are thrilled," said the Stouffville resident, who has played or coached in the NHL for 25 years.

What about the fans?

"We all have to be diligent to rebuild (the game), because the (lockout) has not been the best thing for it. But we believe in our product and our game and we'll all have to work hard to get the fans back," he said.

Unionville's Anton Thun, a player agent for several NHL stars including Mike Ricci and Nick Boynton, said he would be surprised if the agreement isn't ratified.

"After all of the work that's been put into it — even if the players weren't convinced they want to play — I'd be dumbfounded if they didn't ratify it," he said from his Thornhill office.

Once the agreement is ratified, he anticipates working seven days a week, educating himself and his clients on the intricacies of the new collective bargaining agreement.

"What the media knows is just the tip of the iceberg. There's a lot more to it than what might be put out in public," he said.

Mr. Thun doesn't think either side stands to gain in the six-year pact since it includes earlier free agency, a 24-per-cent rollback of salaries and a salary cap.

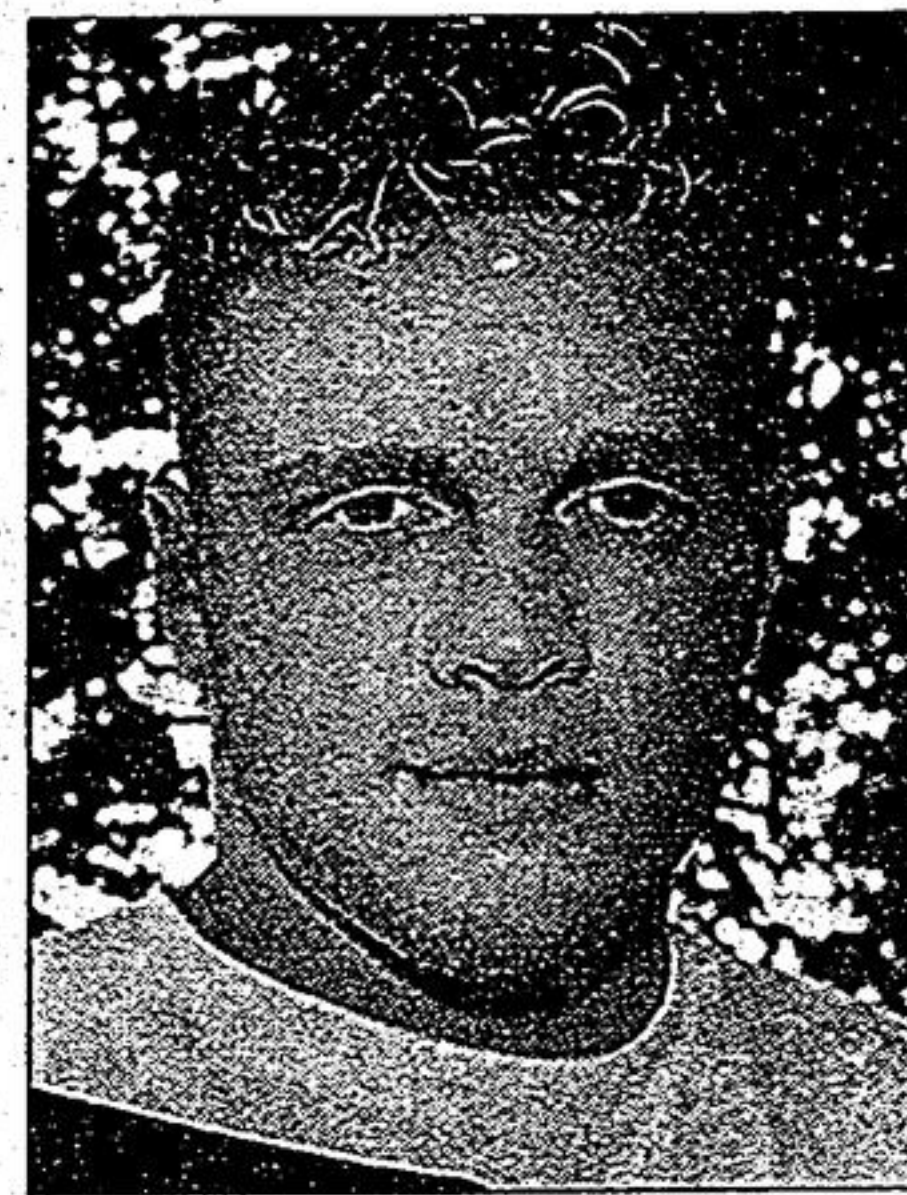
"It will have a significant impact on the players," he said.

By the end of the 2008 season, players who are 27 years old can become unrestricted free agents, down from the current age of 31.

Syl Apps, a Unionville resident who played with the New York Rangers, Pittsburgh Penguins and Los Angeles Kings, agrees neither side won.



JOE BOWEN: Voice of the Leafs says teams will have time to market themselves if deal is ratified next week.



RAFFI TORRES: Edmonton Oiler forward has to prove himself again after lost season of hockey.

"I think both sides were happy just to get back. It's something that had to get done from both sides. There was probably a lot of give and take from both sides. I don't think any side could let this thing go past this season."

"I think a lot of decisions might have been made earlier if they had known this would have gone on for as long as it did," he said.

Now a fan who watches the odd game on TV since retiring from the NHL, Mr. Apps predicts markets in Canada won't be as adversely affected as those in the United States.

"I think the owners in the small U.S. centres will have a huge battle to get fans back in. It'll be a marketing drain. You have to bring the fans back. I think it won't be as bad in Canada, especially in Toronto. A lot of fans want to see the game get back. If you're a die-hard Leafs fan or a fan of a particular team or player, people will want to watch it. It's like if Tiger Woods makes it into the final round and has a chance to win a golf tournament, there's interest. People will watch it," he said.

"We're extremely excited since it looks like we'll be back to work in September," said NHL vice-president of operations Mike Murphy. "It's been a long year, more than a year since (NHL) hockey was last played."

"It's been a very difficult time for fans, players and everyone involved. It's like we pushed the pause button after the World Cup and haven't pushed it back on."

In fact, it has been business as usual for NHL officials such as Mr. Murphy, an Aurora resident. For the league never really sleeps. Not with rule changes to be designed and implemented,

on-ice officials to be scouted and trained and all manner of behind-the-scenes chores requiring attention.

"We want the game to come back with a totally refreshed game that everybody will enjoy," he said.

"The players got what they deserved in most cases. I think the middle to lower-end guys will take most of the hit. But minimum wage went up significantly and I think that's good."

The players may be taking an immediate hit in the bank account. But, points out Mr. Murphy, they'll be fine in the long run.

"It's like buying stock at \$10 per share and watching it rise to \$100 and then it drops to \$70. You still gained \$60."

Ex-Leaf Wes Jarvis likes the deal.

"I was a third or fourth-line player and I think those players have done well in this deal. Minimum salary is up, free agency will be younger and it's cut and dried. Players can take a team and teams can take a player," said the Newmarket resident, who played 237 games in the NHL.

"You'll no longer have the \$10-million player but average salaries are up. Hopefully this will keep 30 teams going and keep 700 jobs."

But there was a price paid. "If the business isn't going well, you have to re-adjust it. There's many businesses out there that have done that but not many have missed an entire year of work," he said.

"If I was still playing, I might view it differently, but I look at the positives. They really want a fool-proof system so the (general managers) can't hurt themselves. The negative is that they missed a year, and over what?"

— with files from Jim Mason

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