

Americans' appreciation of hockey cools



AP PHOTO
Buffalo Sabres forward Daniel Briere skates with the puck at the NHL Eastern Conference All-Star team workout in Dallas on Monday.

By **RAY McNULTY**
SCRIPPS HOWARD NEWS SERVICE

I grew up a hockey fan. Loved the game. Watched it, either on TV or at the arena, as much as possible. Played it whenever I could, even into my 40s.

COLUMN

But you know how many NHL games I've watched from the start to finish this season? One, and that was only because I was staying on Long Island while covering the baseball playoffs and my buddy had an extra ticket to a New York Islanders game.

Other than that? Occasionally, while flipping through the channels, I'll stop and catch a few minutes of a Florida Panthers game. Sometimes, I'll stay with it until the end of the period. Maybe, if it's late, I'll check back to see if there's overtime. Usually, though, hockey is just something I jump to during the commercials of the TV show I'm actually watching.

And, really, that's about it, unless, of course, ESPN Classic

happens to pull out one of the great games of yesteryear, when hockey was still one of our big four sports.

You know: football, baseball, basketball and hockey. Sadly, that was a long time ago.

Clearly, hockey no longer belongs on the Mount Rushmore of America's sports, having lost its prized place in the market to NASCAR and golf.

And lousy leadership, combined with foolish over-expansion and poor marketing, continues to erode interest in the NHL.

In the United States, hockey has become a niche sport — like tennis and lacrosse and soccer — with a cult-like following. The game's fans are fiercely loyal and intensely passionate.

But there aren't nearly enough of them.

Not anymore, anyway.

The NHL reached its peak in the 1980s, when there were real rivalries and genuine dynasties and a wonderful player named Wayne Gretzky, who became the face of the game. But the latter half of the 1990s saw the game deteriorate into something that resembled a mind-numbing, mid-

ice scrum. End-to-end skating and rink-wide passing were smothered by clutching and grabbing and that awful neutral-zone trap, a strategic success and an aesthetic disaster that kept both scoring and excitement to a minimum.

And the 2000s, which saw a full season lost to a labor dispute, have been worse.

Too many longtime hockey fans have turned away. Too few new ones have been spawned.

A new wave of young talent has hit the NHL — Sidney Crosby and Alex Ovechkin are a joy to watch — but only hard-core fans know it.

Worse, nobody south of Canada seems to care. Attendance is down, even in historically strong hockey towns. TV ratings are terrible. The league is going the wrong way.

Most of you probably didn't know that the NHL All-Star Game was played Wednesday night in Dallas. Most of you probably didn't watch it, especially with the game going up against "American Idol," which takes away the younger viewers the league needs. Heck, even if you cared enough to watch the game,

you probably couldn't find it.

Its not on network TV. It's not on ESPN. It's on something called "Versus," which used to be OLN, the old Outdoor Life Network, the one that televises the Tour de France.

That means the NHL, as a marketable TV product, has hit bottom.

And not even the new rules, devised to open up the game and create more scoring opportunities, have done enough to save the sport from America's indifference.

So it's time for drastic action.

Failing franchises need to be contracted. The league's new stars need to be relentlessly marketed. There needs to be an NHL Network, much like the NFL Network, except the games need to be offered to cable outlets for a minimal fee, at least until more people are drawn to the sport.

I grew up a hockey fan. I'd like to be one again.

Ray McNulty is sports columnist for Scripps Treasure Coast (Fla.) Newspapers, The Stuart News, Fort Pierce Tribune and Vero Beach Press Journal. Send comments to letters@thejournalnet.com

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