

Fans loyal to PA hockey team

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In the wide world of sports, the Scranton/Wilkes-Barre area is pretty small, almost non-existent. Heck, even in the normal world, it's easy to forget the community most famous for its history than its forgettable present. The area's biggest claim to fame is current Syracuse basketball star, Gerry McNamara; Syracuse home games routinely draw thousands of people from Northeastern Pennsylvania.

However, there is a reason to take a closer look at the area in the world of sports. You have to look close, or you might drive right past it. There, in a hole visible from Interstate 81, is the Wachovia Arena at Casey Plaza. The building itself is nothing out of the ordinary. In fact, the Giant Center in Hershey is a much nicer facility. Wachovia Arena is an average, medium-size sports venue, but it is what's inside that makes the building special.

Beginning in October, the building became home to the Wilkes-Barre/Scranton Penguins, the American Hockey League affiliate of the Pittsburgh Penguins. Now, the hockey itself is not what is different. It's the same game that can be found in countless cities all over North America. What is different is the fans; the die-hard hockey fans who fill the arena on a nightly basis for a game that we are told is not popular in the United States. Tell that to Penguins fans, who sold out the Wachovia Arena for over 160 consecutive games (equivalent to four full seasons of home games).

When former Gov. Robert Casey, whom the plaza is named after, first proposed the idea of bringing a new arena and a new hockey team to the area, people were skeptical. But, when the Pens took the ice for their inaugural season in 1999,

it was quite obvious that the governor had it right; this area would support hockey. Quickly, businesses sprouted up around the arena and six years later, the fans are still filling the seats.

It is known throughout the AHL that WBS has the best fans in the league. Hardly a profanity can be heard anywhere in the building, as the fans create a family atmosphere. The fans are not violent, unlike places like Philadelphia and Binghamton, where assaults on visiting fans have become an all too common occurrence. But despite their squeaky clean image, the fans are very passionate and very loyal. And once playoffs come around, the fans kick it up a few notches; starting with a "white-out," where all the fans in attendance wear white. It is quite a sight to see a complete sea of white covering the entire building. The fans are so loud that it almost hurts your ears, and if you are any type of fan, you will be hoarse by the end of the game from joining in the cheering.

Another unique feature is the hat trick case. There have been several hat tricks at Wachovia Arena by the Pens and, as their custom; the fans throw their hats onto the ice. The hats are collected and a few are displayed in a case along with a plaque stating the date and which player scored the hat trick.

As a hockey fan, I can say I have never been with better fans at any game than I was when I was in Wilkes-Barre. I have been in arenas from Bridgeport to Binghamton, from Hartford to Hershey and everywhere in between, and nowhere have I been in the atmosphere that compares to Wilkes-Barre.

So, if you've got a free weekend and in the mood for some hockey, instead of taking the short drive over to the Giant Center, experience another venue, sitting less than two short hours away, with the best fans in the league.

Hockey's suicide season already taking its toll

By Alan Robinson
AP Sports Writer

(AP) - Imagine the teeth-gnashing if a labor dispute deprived Yankee Stadium of baseball for at least 17 months, or the wailing over no football at Green Bay's history-steeped Lambeau Field.

In puckthirsty cities like Detroit, which proudly dubs itself Hockeytown, such is the level of despair among fans whose loyalty looks less like sports obsession and more like family ties.

The Red Wings are to many what Motown once was to popular music - the heart, the soul, the raison d'être. Team captain Steve Yzerman's multistory image hovers over the city square where three Stanley Cups have been celebrated.

But Joe Louis Arena is dark now, all because of the first full-season shutdown of a major North American pro sports league. NHL commissioner Gary Bettman on Wednesday canceled what was left of a season that never started, plunging the league into an entirely new and unpredictable ice age.

"I'm ashamed by what we did," Los Angeles Kings president Tim Leiweke said, invoking unusually blunt criticism of owners and players alike. "Smart people should have solved this by today."

Rumors exist that a deal could still be made that would reverse the cancellation, but those appear to be nothing more than false hopes.

"A lot of that is, nobody's willing to deal with the reality that the season is over. There's no way to get it back," New York Rangers player representative Tom Poti said Friday. "I'd say there's zero chance of anything happening."

The emotional damage from the NHL's suicide season ranges beyond the hockey faithful, and the economic destruction touches more than millionaires such as the Rangers' Jaromir Jagr, the NHL's

highest-paid player last season at \$11 million; and billionaires such as Washington Capitals owner Ted Leonsis.

Thousands of NHL club employees' pay and work weeks were slashed when the lockout began months ago. The 500 to 1,000 seasonal workers at each arena, from popcorn poppers to Zamboni drivers, will miss up to 41 game paychecks, not counting the playoffs.

And the minimum-wage-plus-tips workers at countless hockey-dependent restaurants such as Pittsburgh's Ruddy Duck, Boston's Halftime Pizza - and yes, Detroit's Hockeytown Cafe - had their very livelihoods blindsided.

"I'm sick when we go around to the restaurants," Columbus Blue Jackets president Doug MacLean said. "Some of the managers get mad at me: When are you playing? When are you playing? I don't blame them. It's devastating for them."

In St. Paul, Minn., where the city's honeymoon with the expansion Minnesota Wild is going strong after four years, officials estimate a loss of \$369,000 in sales tax income during the months the team would have been playing.

Joe Kasel, who owns the Eagle Street Grille across the street from St. Paul's Xcel Energy Center, said he has laid off 28 employees since the lockout began. "We do what we can to get through it. It's all we can do," Kasel said between waiting and bussing tables, serving drinks and handling checks - all part of his now 80-hour work week.

At 242, a bar down the street, no amount of effort could keep the business going. The owners have taped a note on the entrance: "242 will be closed, indefinitely, due to 'cost uncertainty' and high player salaries."

At a Sports Authority store in suburban Philadelphia, hockey merchandise sales have dropped to near zero.

"I bet we haven't sold a hockey

shirt in two months," store manager Joe Tarantino said. "They're not playing. Why are you going to buy a shirt and wear it for nothing?"

Hockey's labor mess dates to the last player-owner negotiations in 1995, when the league agreed to a deal that put little restraint on player salaries. By last season, the average salary was \$1.8 million - about \$500,000 more than the average salary in the flourishing NFL.

"It's crazy," Islanders general manager Mike Milbury said. "Twenty years ago when I played, we didn't have in the dressing room catalogs of 'Christie's Great Estates of the World.' I mean, these (players) are wealthy people, millionaires."

The only surprise of the five-month lockout came in its final days, when each side made a major concession.

The league backed off its demand for "cost certainty," or tying players' salaries to revenue. The union, in turn, accepted the idea of a salary cap, something chief Bob Goodenow vowed never to do.

But the two sides never closed the gap between the \$42.5 million per team cap offered by the league and the union's \$49 million proposal.

Now, both sides are wondering if a sport whose U.S. TV ratings more closely resembled those of the WNBA and professional poker than the NFL or NBA will ever regain its casual fans.

"The game's just suffered an absolute blow it'll never recover from," Carolina Hurricanes center Rod Brind'Amour said. "They're totally underestimating the damage that's been done. I'm just really disappointed and, to be honest with you, I'm embarrassed to be a player in the NHL."

Teams are scrambling to mend fences with their season-ticket holders long before play resumes, offering free concert and game tickets, big discounts

on souvenirs and other amenities to those who don't cancel their seats.

Bettman, now under more pressure than ever to hit a home run for the owners, is all but promising the league will play a full 2005-06 schedule. But if a deal isn't reached by next fall, the NHL can play only by declaring an impasse, allowing it to employ replacement players - a strategy that flopped in baseball and football's past labor battles.

Seeking such a declaration is a risky gambit at best, especially since two Canadian provinces with NHL teams forbid replacement workers.

"There are so many uncertainties," New Jersey Devils center John Madden said. "Are fans going to come in and watch replacement players? Are fans going to cross the line? Is any of this stuff going to happen? It's all unknown, and it's not good news."

Mario Lemieux, who has a unique perspective as the game's best-known player and also the Pittsburgh Penguins' owner, said both sides got hockey into this mess - and both sides must pay as a result.

"The game is going to suffer for a couple of years and it's going to take time to win back our fans and rebuild the business," he said. "And the players are going to have to share in that."

At Detroit's Hockeytown Cafe, the small lunch crowd grew quiet for the NHL's season-ending announcement. Waiters in Red Wings jerseys watched with somber faces. A manager shook her head.

Even these hockey-obsessed fans will need to be wooed back after such a deep freeze, admitted Red Wings general manager Ken Holland.

"Eventually, when we get a deal and back on the ice, I think it's going to take a lot of work on our part to try to reconnect," Holland said. "There's going to have to be a healing process I think between everybody."

Students team up for intramural sports

By Addeline Hiebert
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Looking for some on-campus, weeknight excitement? Penn State Harrisburg's intramural basketball and volleyball games are currently going on in the CUB, and that should satisfy the thirst.

Tuesdays and Thursdays belong to basketball, where students are welcome to become spectators at two games, one at 9:00 and one at 10:00 pm, each evening. Mondays and Thursdays, two simultaneous volleyball matches begin at 9:00, with two more beginning at 10:00 pm.

According to Bud Smitley, coordinator of recreation, athletics and fitness, the basketball program alone consists of 8 teams and 85-100 players. The teams are self-organized; each team

has a captain and teams register at the beginning of the season at a captains' meeting. Players without a team may also come to this meeting to be assigned to a team. Smitley believes that the intramural program promotes leadership, teamwork and fitness, and is a good way to relieve stress. "The intramural program gives students who may not be on an intercollegiate level an opportunity to play a sport they enjoy," said Smitley.

The Naturals and the Birdmen opened up the basketball season on Tuesday, Jan. 25. The regular season will conclude Wednesday, March 16, and a single elimination tournament will begin on Wednesday, March 22. Other teams competing are Those Guys, Liban Forces, Bucks, Bulldogs, M-Twizzie Ballers, and Da Hustle.

The regular volleyball season will conclude for the 12 co-ed teams, Monday, March 21, and the top 8 will begin playoffs Thursday, March 24.

Adam Smith, of the basketball team Da Hustle, looks forward to competing against teams Bucks and Bulldogs. "Those should be a good match up," said Smith. So far, Da Hustle is undefeated. In their first game, they defeated the Naturals, 70-27. In their second game, they defeated the Liban Forces 54-28. "Our team definitely has a height advantage," said Smith. Da Hustle will face the Bulldogs on Tuesday, Feb. 22 at 9:00 pm and the Bucks Wednesday, Feb. 23, at 10:00 pm.

Smith is an active participant of PSH's intramural program. He played for the Brewers softball team during the 2004 year, for the Roids football team fall of 2004, and is currently playing for the Brew Crew volleyball team as well as Da Hustle. Smith enjoys meeting people from other teams as well as working off energy. "[The intramural program] gives college kids something to do on a weekday without leaving campus," said Smith.

Coming up after spring break, students have an opportunity to form teams for co-ed one pitch softball and co-ed table tennis. Team rosters for softball are due at the captains' meeting on March 23. Each team must have at least 2 members of each gender on the field and on the line-up in order to play without penalty. Teams may consist of undergraduate or graduate students, faculty, staff or alumni. The entry deadline for table tennis is April 6.

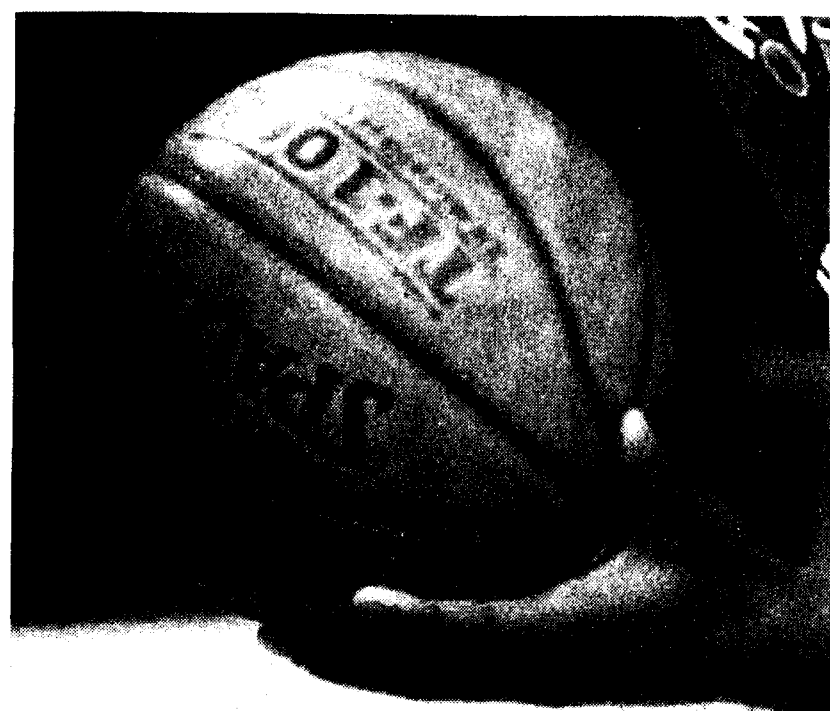
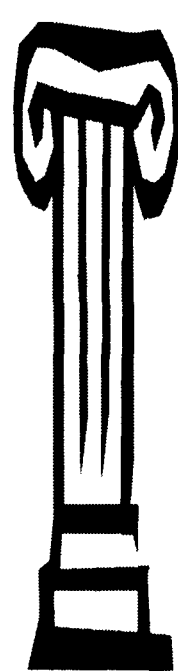
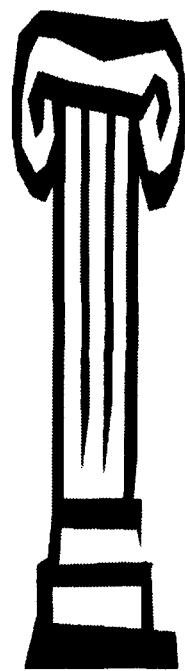


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