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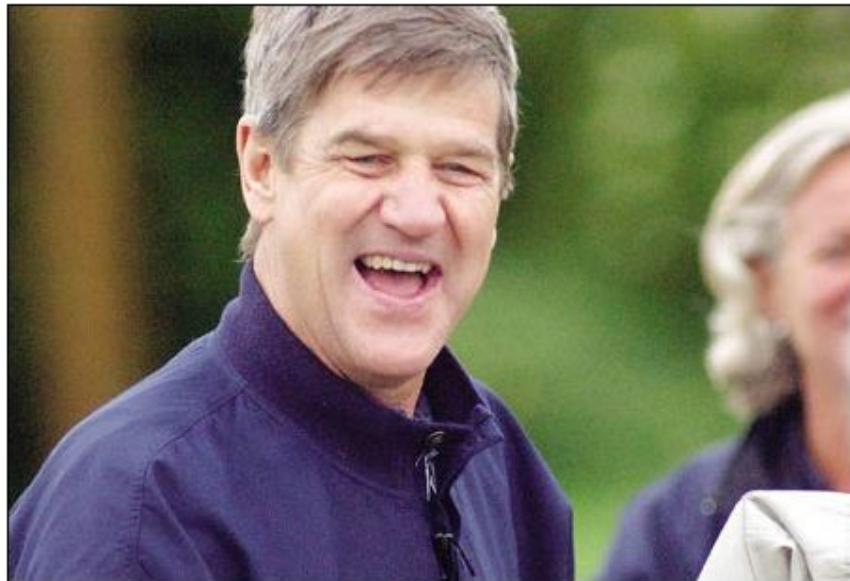
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Ski Conditions




Boston Bruins legend Bobby Orr was at the Wentworth-By-The-Sea Country Club on Monday morning, taking part in an annual fund-raising golf event for UNH athletics. Orr is good friends with UNH hockey coach Dick Umile.
 Photo by Deb Cram/dcram@seacoastonline.com

Thinking cap

By Mike Zhe
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R YE - They are the two greatest defensemen in the history of the Boston Bruins - even, many will argue, in all of hockey - but have opposing views when it comes to the future of the National Hockey League.

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Bobby Orr and Ray Bourque were the main attractions at Wentworth-By-The-Sea Country Club on Monday. The two were on hand to take part in an annual fund-raising event for the University of New Hampshire's Wildcat Athletics Council.

Bourque teed it up. The 56-year-old Orr, still recovering from knee replacement surgery, did not. But that was hardly the only difference between the two hockey legends.

With NHL owners clamoring for changes in a league where 19 of 30 teams lost money last year - the average being around \$18 million - observers agree that the financial structure of the NHL is about to change.

The current collective bargaining agreement between the NHL and its players' association is set to expire on Sept. 15. If no new agreement is reached, part or all of the 2004-05 season could be cancelled.

Orr, an eight-time Norris Trophy winner, is a frequent presence on the charity golf circuit. He is also an agent, representing players like Ottawa sniper Jason Spezza, and harbors optimism that the two sides can find common ground.

"I don't want to negotiate this in the paper," he cautioned, between posing for photos on the 18th tee, "but I refuse to believe there isn't going to be an agreement. It would hurt the game so much."

He likened a potential lockout to the baseball strike of 1994, one he feels that sport hasn't fully recovered from yet. The hockey situation, he thinks, has more give-and-take.

"I think there's enough there for a fair deal," Orr said. "I think there's going to be changes and I know the players understand that."

Bourque, only three years removed from his own playing days, took a dimmer view.

"I think a work stoppage right now is unavoidable," the five-time Norris Trophy winner said. "The owners really seem to be set on some type of a (salary) cap."

Bourque, 43, feels it could take months for significant negotiating progress to be made. Because both sides have entrenched themselves so deeply, he said, there's likely to be little movement on the big issues - a salary cap, arbitration, rookie salaries and free agency - until the deadline nears.

"Before things get seriously talked about, people have to suffer for a bit," said Bourque, who is expected to be summoned later this week by hockey's Hall of Fame.

It's players like former UNH standout Mark Mowers who stand to suffer the most.

The 30-year-old Mowers is coming off his finest pro season with the Detroit Red Wings. He played in 52 games for a team that won the President's Trophy for having the best record during the regular season.

A forward, he notched three goals and eight assists, and was invaluable on special teams - particularly during the middle of the season, when the Wings were decimated by injuries.

But because teams are reluctant to untie their purse strings until they know what the new financial climate of the league will be, players like him are finding themselves without contracts this spring.



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"It's bad timing for me, to have a breakthrough year like that there be the potential for there to be no season," said Mowers, who made a reported \$450,000 last year. "That's not good at all."

Mowers was on hand for Monday's fund-raiser, as was former star goalie Ty Conklin, hockey coach Dick Umile, football coaches Sean McDonnell and Bill Bowes, and several other notables. The day also included a silent auction.

Both Orr and Bourque claim ties to UNH. Bourque's daughter, Mel, is part of the school's women's lacrosse team, one that reached the NCAA tournament this spring.

Orr is good friends with Umile, and the legendary No. 4 counts Wildcats goalie A.J. Bucchino as one of his advisees. He also tossed a compliment toward the program's rabid fan base, which sells out the 6,500-seat Whittemore Center regularly.

"To me, it's one of the best college hockey crowds in the country," Orr said.

And with that, he may have finally hit on something nobody can dispute.

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