

Ray McNulty: Bobby Orr is optimistic about the NHL's future

By Ray McNulty

Posted October 30, 2008 at 11:48 p.m.

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TEQUESTA — The man isn't exactly an impartial observer when it comes to hockey.

He has a stake in the game.

As a Hall of Famer.

And as an agent.

Still, he's Bobby Orr -- the best defenseman ever to lace up a pair of skates and the greatest hockey player I've ever seen -- so I wanted to know what he thinks about today's NHL.

"I like a lot of the game," Orr was saying earlier this week at Tequesta Country Club, not far from his Jupiter Hills home. "I just wish they'd let guys compete harder.

"There are too many penalties called, too many games decided by special teams. To me, penalties should be treated like instant replay: If the infraction isn't conclusive, don't call it.

"Hockey is a tough game."

Lately, it has been a tough sell, too, especially in South Florida.

The Florida Panthers are the market's forgotten franchise, lost amid the recent successes of the Miami Heat and Florida Marlins and the longtime loyalty to the Miami Dolphins. Truth is, most folks in Florida, particularly this part of the state, aren't aware that another NHL season is underway.

Nor do they care.

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Not with the NFL and college football seasons in high gear. Not with baseball's postseason having just ended with the Tampa Bay Rays getting to the World Series.

But even when the football season is done, when the only competition is the NBA and NASCAR and pre-Masters golf, hockey remains an afterthought.

Much of the blame for that goes to the NHL brass, which has handcuffed the game with a terrible TV contract and an unforgivable failure to smartly promote its product.

Earlier this month, in fact, the NHL opened the 2008-09 season with four games in Europe -- two each in Prague and Stockholm. And while those games surely helped the league's marketing efforts across the pond, they did nothing for the game here.

In the U.S.

Particularly in Florida.

Orr, however, is optimistic about the league's future, even in Florida. He is impressed with the talents and athleticism of today's players. He said he attends as many games as he can and likes much of what he sees on the ice.

"I see a lot of games here," said Orr, 60, whose Boston-based agency represents players from both the Panthers and Tampa Bay Lightning. "I still believe the Panthers can be a hell of a franchise.

"They've got a beautiful rink in Sunrise. They've made a lot of changes to the team. They've got some good young players and a good coach. And there are a lot of people from up north down here.

"A lot of them are hockey fans."

Or were.

But the hockey audience in Florida -- all across America, really -- has been shrinking for years.

Have you been to a Panthers game? Unless they're playing against the New York Rangers, Sidney Crosby or Alex Ovechkin, you don't need to buy tickets in advance. Or pay face value for them.

"When certain teams come in," Orr said, "the crowds are up."

Most of the time, though, you can just drive down and find someone looking to dump tickets.

It won't take long.

Published 10/25/2010 at 6:19 p.m. 58 comments

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36-Hour

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88°
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BROWSE

27

28

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But Orr believes that will change if the Panthers, who joined the NHL as an expansion team in 1993-94 and played their way to the Stanley Cup Finals in their third season, win big again.

"People showed up in '96," Orr said. But, as usually happens in South Florida, fans stopped coming when the team started losing.

They stopped watching on TV, too. And most haven't returned.

"Hockey has always been difficult for TV because of the speed of the game," Orr said. "H-D should help, but if we can get them in the building . . ."

He grinned.

He knows there's no better sport to watch live, where you can see, hear and feel the action on the ice.

Because hockey is a tough game.

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