

The Other All-Star Game

Let the NBA have Vegas—the NHL's event in Dallas was what an all-star game's all about

Like a high school class that had not had a homecoming game for three years, the stars of the NHL, past and present, gathered in Dallas on January 24 for the renewal of the NHL All-Star Game. With the 2005 game cancelled because of NHL labor strife and no game last year due to the Winter Olympics, the players seemed genuinely enthused and anxious to showcase their sport.

The all-star game this year was changed to a midweek affair with a salute to NHL legends on Monday night, a Young Stars and Skills competition on Tuesday night, and the main event on Wednesday night.

What these three days reinforced is that hockey, more than any other professional North American team sport, is a players' sport. It is the players who control the ethos of the game—not the owners (quick, name one NHL owner), not the officials, not any hockey pop culture icon, not the media (the ratings for the game ended up being dismal) and not the commissioner. Indeed, Commissioner Gary Bettman was booed upon being introduced in Dallas—a reception similar to the one given Texas Governor Rick Perry who, in a lame attempt to look hockey-like, dressed in a sleek, black, après-ski turtleneck (think “Banacek”) as he dropped the all-star game puck. It was as incongruous as seeing Mitt Romney in a bolo tie and cowboy boots.

The game itself featured several innovations, the first being almost unthinkable in hockey circles: a fashion debut. Next year all NHL teams will be going to sleeker, more form-fitting and sweat-wicking jerseys, which were introduced to the public at the all-star game. This is seemingly a positive development for the players and perhaps for the sport as well—until you visit the corn dog stand and picture the average hockey fan trying to squeeze into his new replica jersey. Perhaps the NHL's founders many decades ago

by Bob Latham

were wise beyond their years when they chose “sweaters” as the player's attire.

This sartorial splendor was not matched by any corresponding tonsorial splendor. To the contrary, ever since helmets in NHL games became mandatory, grooming issues have proliferated. While the all-star game itself was a helmeted affair, the pre-game festivities, the skills competition and practices were not, thus revealing that the “mullet” and the “Hanson brother”

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(“Slapshot”) are still acceptable ‘do's in the NHL. Indeed, if Steve Nash had stuck to the national sport of his native Canada, he might be the George Clooney of the league.

There was also a significant innovation in between-period entertainment. The NHL has always been challenged in this department because there are a limited number of things you can do on ice. Michael Jackson cannot pop up from beneath it. The diva du jour would have a difficult time walking across it in heels. And anything that is brought out between periods needs to be assembled, performed upon, and taken down in time to leave enough time for the Zamboni to resurface the ice. Thus, the American Airlines Center introduced (at least I hadn't seen it before) the “drop-down stage.” Between periods, a stage set was dropped down from the rafters, a band performed, and then the stag was hoisted back up. Perhaps the most dramatic use of the stage was during the tribute to NHL legends on Monday night, when the stage was lowered displaying all sixteen trophies that are awarded annually by the NHL.

That sort of tradition was thick throughout the three days, and the NHL stars, past and present, demonstrated a great respect for the game and acceptance of their role as ambassadors of the sport. Mr. Hockey himself, Gordie Howe, was conspicuous throughout the three days, both at the American Airlines Center and at the host hotel.

And when you think about the traditions of hockey, surely one of the names that pops into your mind first is . . . Cuba Gooding Jr.? It seemed like a strange choice of emcees for the salute to NHL legends event on Monday night, but he did a very creditable job and apparently is a huge hockey fan after rooming with a Canadian hockey player in college.

The selection of a sunbelt city as the venue for the game provided several additional opportunities—one being the ability to have outdoor festivities surrounding the event (including bands and a reunion of the 1998–1999 Stanley Cup-winning Dallas Stars). It also provided a chance to highlight the growth of hockey as a result of the NHL's expansion. In 1993 when the Minnesota North Stars morphed into the Dallas Stars, there were no high school hockey teams in the Dallas area. Now there are 70, and the inclusion of youth and high school players in the events of the three days brought due attention to this fact. These themes will no doubt be repeated when the NHL All-Star Game moves to Atlanta next year.

All all-star games are more spectacle than sport and this one was no exception, with the West winning 12-9. But the NHL would be well-served to harness and market around the respect the players have for the game and for each other, and their genuine willingness to be poster children for their sport. ■

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