

On Frozen Pond

The NHL got it right when they thought outside the box and created the "Winter Classic"

While leading figures in the NFL and in Major League Baseball are being summoned before Congress over allegations of advanced technical (video spying) and chemical (steroids) wizardry, it almost went unnoticed that another major professional sport in America made a great leap forward by going backwards. I am referring to hockey, and more specifically the first outdoor NHL game ever played on United States soil or ice, when the Pittsburgh Penguins played at Ralph Wilson Stadium in Buffalo against the Buffalo Sabres in what was billed as the "NHL Winter Classic." And it was nothing short of that.

While a capacity crowd at a usual NHL game might be about 18,000 people, more than 71,000 turned out on New Year's Day in the snow to see a game that revealed once again that, despite its best efforts to kill the sport in a players lockout three years ago, the NHL more than any other professional sports league in America can boast players who are truly connected to the essence and roots of their sport.

This game was not some exhibition. It was a regular-season contest between teams in the same conference featuring the greatest talent in the NHL, Sydney Crosby. And even in this unusual setting, Crosby showed why he is the real deal and deserving at age 20 to be the youngest captain in the history of the NHL. He paused during pregame warm-ups to be interviewed on NBC in a fairly substantial snowfall.

Just after the opening whistle, Crosby set up the first goal of the game 21 seconds in when he, more than the other players on the ice at the time, realized that the puck would not travel in the snow at the same pace that it would travel in an indoor arena, and picked up a stalled puck to feed Colby Armstrong for the only goal Pittsburgh scored in regulation. Then he scored

by Bob Latham

the winning goal in a shootout. Crosby also brought the broadcast booth to its feet with a midair double puck-juggling move into the Sabres zone that came right off a Canadian pond. And 71,000 people, as well as the largest television audience the NHL has had in many years, were able to see it all.

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and the Sabres, the Penguins and the NHL—as well as the league's best player—nailed it with this event. What was most telling is that this game wasn't some gimmick that players begrudgingly participated in to bring publicity to the league on a day when football was king. Rather, every single one of the players on both the winning and losing sides, and indeed everyone connected to the event—coaches, broadcasters and the like—would willingly and enthusiastically go back and do it all over again. It was a magnificent spectacle of what hockey is about.

Could you picture the National Basketball Players Association agreeing to play a regular-season game on a concrete court in the Bronx? Could you picture Major League Baseball agreeing to play a regular-season game on a sandlot in Baltimore?

Indeed, the closest MLB comes to its roots is the annual Hall of Fame game in Cooperstown, New York, which is strictly an exhibition game. Even then, in 1999 when the Kansas City Royals played the Texas Rangers, Juan Gonzales refused to take part because his retro-uniform was too baggy and did

not show off his physique (even though the game was not being televised)!

Just last month, MLB announced that it would discontinue the Hall of Fame game due to scheduling problems. It is always a delicate balance for a sport to evolve while still keeping its history and traditions intact, but it would have been nice to see MLB go in the other direction and perhaps make the Hall of Fame game a regular-season affair.

Give the NFL credit: There are still games played in historic Lambeau Field in Green Bay, Wisconsin, that take football back to its glory days. Just this year the frozen tundra of Lambeau Field welcomed the NFC championship game and the Packers' playoff victory in the snow over the Seahawks.

The NHL's "Winter Classic" had all the tenacity of a regular-season hockey game while still incorporating some fantasy elements into the event. The playing of the Canadian national anthem and then "God Bless America" before the game, with the players lined up as snow came down on the proceedings, coupled with Irish tenor Ronan Tynan's rather lengthy preamble to "God Bless America," evoked memories of Little Richard doing the pregame honors in the movie "Mystery, Alaska."

The enthusiasm shown by the players, the showcasing of Sydney Crosby and the television ratings in spite of the fierce college football competition should ensure that we will see this event again. Given that NHL arenas are usually kept at a temperature of 62 degrees, the number of possible outdoor venues for a future game are numerous and it could be played in warm climate. There is no reason that it needs to be played in a snowstorm, though for my money that ought to be the case every year. ■

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