

Book Review: An Inside Look at the Business of the National Hockey League

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POWER PLAYS: AN INSIDE LOOK AT THE BUSINESS OF THE NATIONAL HOCKEY LEAGUE

Gil Stein

[Secaucus, NJ: Carol Publishing Group 1997]

xv / 234 pages

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The jaded sports fan of the 1990s believes that sports are being run by a small group of super-rich owners who care only for themselves. This image of franchise owners includes fat-cat, cigar-smoking, white men who live in the lap of luxury, while the average fan has difficulty scraping together enough money for a ticket. Fans think that owners continually engage in backroom deals, power struggles and other actions that hurt the game that fans love, in an attempt to protect their own massive egos, and equally massive wallets. In *Power Plays*, Gil Stein proves that the fans are exactly right.

“Contrary to popular belief, hockey is not the ultimate spectator sport. That honor goes to the game *behind* the game of hockey, the one that is played by some of the richest and most powerful men in North America—the members of the National Hockey League board of governors.” (p. vii).

With that quote, Gil Stein begins his account of the off-ice history of the National Hockey League (NHL) over the last twenty-one years. Stein served as the first vice-president and general counsel of the NHL, and as its last president. (In 1993 the NHL changed the executive structure of the league by replacing the president with a commissioner). Before working for the league, Stein worked as an attorney in Philadelphia, and later was the general counsel for the Philadelphia Flyers.

Stein begins the book with his time at the Flyers. The introduction retells the story of Bob Kelly, a rookie on the Flyers in 1970. Like all organizations, the Flyers practice some form of rookie initiation. Yet for some reason, hockey teams feel it necessary to go above and beyond the call of duty when initiating a new player. The Flyers ran Kelly through such an elaborate ruse involving the police and a local judge that no one could have possibly suspected he was being set up. After the judge finally let Kelly in on the joke, the veterans accepted him as a part of the team. Stein uses the practical joke as a way of introducing the reader to the idea that things are not always as they seem.

As most casual hockey fans know, the Philadelphia Flyers of the early 1970s comprised one of the greatest and worst teams in the history of hockey. Despite their violent tendencies, the Flyers won back-to-back

Stanley Cup championships in the 1970s. But they also had been named the Broad Street Bullies (as Stein explains, the Flyers' home rink, the Spectrum, was located on Broad Street) for their extensive violence and frequent brawls. The Broad Street Bullies are remembered today as the meanest, dirtiest team in NHL history.

Stein skillfully describes the run-ins that the players had with the law as a result of their bullish mentality. He retells the stories behind the incidents, as well as the legal maneuvering that he and others were forced to do in order to represent his players. Stein defended the Broad Street Bullies through serious altercations with fans in Vancouver and New York. The cases involving athletes were treated the same way then as they are now: with a lot of attention to the celebrity of the parties involved and little attention to the facts. Stein gives an inside view to the path that he and other lawyers took the judges down in order to focus their attention on the facts of the case, which were often in favor of the players, as opposed to the publicity the cases were given.

Chapter 3 takes an in-depth look at the NHL Board of Governors. Stein does not classify the individual members into the haves and have-nots, but rather the haves and the *have-mores*. Stein recognizes the growing inequity between ownership of NHL teams by individuals versus those owned by corporations, and hints that the divergent goals of these two groups will create problems for Board of Governors in the future. At the end of the chapter, Stein admits that all of the men, and they are all men, who comprise the NHL Board of Governors are not to be pitied because they are all "super-wealthy men who enjoy the unique personal comportment of the rich and famous." (p. 60).

As any NHL fan knows, the last ten years marks a remarkable period of expansion for the league. Stein glances over the first four Plans of Expansion (although as Stein explains, the NHL considers there to really be five Plans of Expansion) before 1979. In 1989, the greed of the owners reached a boiling point, and the Sixth Plan of Expansion was created. The chapter discusses details of the process the Board went through not only to decide which city would be granted a franchise, but what criteria the Board would use to make a decision on expansion. As with most decisions, the long list of concerns gets narrowed down to a single criterion: Who will give us the most money?

Another issue that every major sports league has wrestled with in the last decade is labor relations. Stein explains the role that the much-maligned Alan Eagleson played in keeping labor peace in the NHL for many years. Without documented evidence, Stein asserts his belief that Eagleson and NHL president John Ziegler choreographed the negotia-

tions between the league and the players, even though these two key players had struck a compromise weeks in advance. We know now that the under-the-table style of Eagleson, lead to the betrayal of dozens of hockey players, and ultimately to Eagleson's demise. Stein, without pardoning Eagleson for his wrongdoing, recognizes Eagleson's accomplishments as head of the National Hockey League Players Association (NHLPA).

What made Eagleson such a great leader of the union, in Stein's eyes, was accentuated by the nastiness of Eagleson's successor, Bob Goodenow. Goodenow was a tough negotiator who treated the league as if they had just slashed him across the knees with a hockey stick. Goodenow's tactics not only earned him a derogatory nickname from the owners, but eventually lead to a strike in 1992, and a lockout in 1994.

The remaining chapters in the book reveal the stories and details of recent episodes in the history of the NHL. Stein recalls successful, as well as unsuccessful attempts to relocate franchises. Next, he goes back in time to discuss the "real story behind the WHA merger." Also included in the book are explanations of a change in sponsorship of the television program *Hockey Night in Canada*, as well as the brief referee strike in 1988.

As it currently stands, Gil Stein is not a member of the Hockey Hall of Fame. The final chapter in his book deals with the ordeal he went through in his attempt to get elected to the Hall. As always, Stein is up-front with the heretofore unknown details of the situation. Admitting that he could have handled things in a better way, Stein explains why he believes that he is not enshrined in the Hall. Without ruining the most personal of all the chapters of the book, it is unconscionable to think that someone who helped usher the chronically conservative NHL into the modern era of sports leagues, held the highest position in the league, and dedicated over twenty years to the game of hockey and the promotion of the NHL, is not recognized as an important person in the history of hockey.

A must read for any hockey fan, *Power Plays* is a refreshingly honest discussion and commentary on the internal politics of a major North American sports league. It confirms certain suspicions that fans have about the organization of the NHL, as well as the other professional leagues. Through it all, Stein maintains an optimistic outlook on what the future has in store for the game of hockey.

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