

Bill Rea ? Cup more important than gold

I know I'm going to make some people mad, but I support the decision of the National Hockey League (NHL) not to let players take part in the 2018 winter Olympics.

The fact that I realize I'm going to make people angry should demonstrate that I appreciated there are some very good arguments for letting them take part.

I can appreciate national pride as much as the next man. I don't think I was ever as moved to hear O Canada played live as I was the day I was at the Equestrian Park in Palgrave and Canada won the Pan Am show jumping gold. One of the most memorable moments of my youth came when I was 14 and I was sitting in my parents' bedroom watching the only TV in the house at the time and seeing Paul Henderson score that memorable winning goal against the Soviets. There have been many other such moments.

When it comes to hockey, Canada knew for years that the best players in the world came from this country, but the few at the very top were professionals, so they couldn't take part in the Olympics. But we always knew the countries in what was then known as the Eastern Bloc used full-time players who were officially listed as soldiers or something else, with the full approval of the people in charge in these lands.

So it was nice to see the playing fields leveled and countries like Canada being able to put their best in this major international competition. And if memory serves, there have been a few gold medals in hockey to show for it. I cheered on each and every one of those occasions. These represent great moments of which everyone in the country should be proud.

But is that what these players are really paid to do?

Most of these guys in the NHL are paid annual salaries that most of us have a hard time imagining, let alone dreaming of. I'm never going to see the money some of these guys make, even if my lottery luck changes dramatically.

And what are they paid to do? They are paid to work as hard as they can to help their respective teams win the Stanley Cup, not win gold medals at the Olympics, regardless of how desirable such medals might be.

I have read the statements issued by the NHL about this decision.

I'm told (and I stress it's the NHL doing the telling) that the league polled fans in both Canada and the United States, and found that 53 per cent of Canadian fans were against participation in the Olympics, and the number among American fans was 73 per cent.

Assuming those figures are accurate, they're pretty compelling.

And let us not forget who really plays the freight in professional sports. For the most part, it's the fans who pay out their hard-earned money to sit in the stands and watch the teams play. And in a lot of those cases, the prices they pay are pretty steep. The Leafs didn't make the playoffs in years, yet it was recently announced that ticket prices at the Air Canada Centre are due to go up.

If the majority don't want the players excusing themselves to take part in another tournament, then that should count for something. There is a problem with a break of a couple of weeks in the regular season. I consider myself sort of a casual Leafs fan. My wife usually watches the games on TV, and I'll usually watch some of the action, then excuse myself to go do something else. But the thought of pausing the season and races for playoff spots for a couple of weeks has always bothered me. For what it's worth, I think all-star breaks are pointless for roughly the same reason. Lets get on with the season!

It also bothers the team owners too, and I can understand that. They pay these guys to play in their arenas and help bring in paying customers, not to play in arenas on the other side of the world.

Naturally there are a lot of players who are not pleased with his decision, and I don't blame them. Who among us has never dreamed once or twice or constantly of representing our country at the Olympics? Hockey players are people too. But these guys are professionals who are well paid to do a job. Like all of us who are gainfully employed, they have obligations to the people who sign their paycheques.

Then there's the possibility of a player being injured during the Olympics. A key player for his NHL team could get hurt during the Games and be sidelined for the rest of the season. That could seriously damage the teams run for the playoffs, not to mention Stanley Cup hopes. And such injuries could impact the rest of that player's career. Yes, I know players get hurt all the time, and such an injury can take place in an NHL game just as easily as in the Olympics. But I think there's a difference in being injured doing the job you're paid to do, as opposed to taking part in an exhibition.

Assuming this decision on the part of the NHL stands, and I have a hard time imagining how it's going to change, it will be interesting to see how much attention the Olympic hockey tournament attracts, especially since the NHL games will go on as usual. I don't see how Canada will have much trouble finding a sufficient number of players to ice a team for the Games, and there will be a certain number of people who watch them, and why not? These are the Olympics. But there will be others who will watch the NHL matches, keeping an eye on where their team is in the standings, and mulling playoff possibilities in their heads.

Which side will represent the majority? We should know in about a year.

