

Bill Rea ? We'll do fine without the NHL

I write this week of a group of men.

There are 25 of them, and I have heard of none of them, nor is there any of them who I have personally met. Indeed, when the list came out last week, the first thing I did was check their home towns, and nothing in Caledon caught my eye. I, therefore, have no local interest to offer, although there is the possibility that some of them have graced this area in their younger days. Of that possibility, I have not been informed, as of this writing.

I am referring to men's hockey team, which is soon going to be representing this country in the Olympics in PyeongChang, South Korea. The games will be going on this time next month.

As I indicated, these are all a bunch of names to me, although the fact is they must be fine hockey players. There is, after all, a very good reason why duffers like me don't make it to the Olympics.

Yet I predict that come the middle of February, most of us will be paying very close attention, as these guys seek Olympic glory. Will they be successful? Who am I to ask? If my ability to make predictions was any good, CNN would currently be dominated by the doings in the second Clinton administration.

But going in, I like our side's chances.

True, the NHL players will not be taking part in this tournament. That decision was announced almost a year ago. I concurred with it at the time (as if my approval mattered) and I still go along with it. These guys in the NHL are very well paid to try and bring the Stanley Cup to the cities where they work. Most of us would have to get very lucky in the lottery to see the kind of money these fellows make every year, so I can understand why the league might have a problem with some of the teams' members travelling to the other side of the world and risking injury in an endeavour that brings limited benefit to their employers.

Get used to it folks, Auston Matthews is not going to be playing for Team Canada. Our boys will have to seek Olympic gold without him. Actually, since he was born in California, Matthews would be playing for the team representing the U.S.A., if anyone.

The NHL guys are going to be staying close to home, doing the jobs they get paid to do. That's fine with me.

True, the Canadian team will not be benefitting from the top hockey talent this country has to offer. But is that not the case with the other countries that will be taking part in the Olympics? Hockey is played in many lands, and the NHL has scouts searching these lands for top talent. And the very best are usually induced to sell their services in a North American city for umpteen million dollars every year. So it's not Canada that's getting the short end here. There are very fine players from Russia, Sweden, the Czech Republic, etc. who are not going to be able to go to PyeongChang. Indeed there are splendid players from the United States who will not be taking part, and that includes Matthews.

The point is the top players in the world will not be taking part in the Olympics for any country, which would seem to level the field. It would be nice if only the best in the world were vying for Olympic glory, but in another sense, it's really not practical. Almost all of the best hockey players on this planet are in the NHL, and they have other obligations. And the point has already been made that they are very well paid to address those obligations. It is a pity, but it's also the way things are.

Besides, is it really that bad? While these guys might not be capturing the attention of the audience during Hockey Night in Canada, some of them have suited up for NHL matches, and you don't get to do that unless you're very, very good at playing the game. And some of the others might be looking at NHL careers in the days to come. The Olympics are a pretty good forum in which to make an impression of big-league scouts, wouldn't you say?

What it's going to boil down to is a group of fine young hockey players are going to be wearing Canada's colours in the coming Games, and no one really knows how well they will do. But the fact is these guys were good enough to make the team, and when it comes to hockey in this country, that is saying an enormous amount. They may not be vying for the Stanley Cup this year, but they are very, very good, and they might pull a few surprises on us and the rest of the world.

The Games are going to start in a couple of weeks, and I'm predicting here and now that they are going to hold our interest as things progress. They may or may not win gold. For all any of us know, they might be among the first teams to be eliminated. Isn't that what makes these events so interesting? We try to anticipate what's going to come.

Even if the Canadians are excused early, there will still be some quality games to entertain the true hockey fans out there. After all, Leaf fans have been watching the Stanley Cup final for 50 years, without a Leaf in sight.

And even if the worst-case scenario is realized, there will still take a couple of games for that to play out, and then there are always the Leafs. That's where Matthews will be playing. Let's all hope he stays healthy, and let's all hope the Leafs stop blowing third-period leads.

