

## Leveling the Playing Field # 3

### How the Internet enhances my Hockey viewing experience

I have been feeling really relaxed and good the last few days, for two reasons. One is that the hockey season started and the Canucks are off to a great start, the other reason I can't really talk about here.

Just so you know from the start, hockey is my lambs-bread, the "manna from heaven," the one constant in my life. It seems that no matter where in the world I am living or travelling, what wars are raging in the world or in my mind, hockey is the sturdy oaken banister that is always there to enjoy.

My earliest childhood memories are watching hockey, seeing Daryl Sittler or Guy LaFleur blasting down the wing, hair flying, eyes raging. I went to a couple games a year in my youth and sat in the nosebleed seats and watched lousy teams no one wanted to see because the scalpers sold the tickets cheap.

Women may come and go in my life, but the Vancouver Canucks are always there for me. The Canucks started play in the NHL 2 months after I was born and I've been a fan ever since. Funny thing is, other sports are only marginally interesting to me (especially that throwy, throwy, catchy, catchy stand around and wait American football). Hockey is fast, elegant and rough.

As good as the game itself perhaps is the history and folklore of the game and players. Indeed when a team wins the Stanley Cup each player gets to do whatever he wants with it for 24 hours. A tradition over a hundred years old in which the Lord Stanley's Cup has partied heartier than the most robust frat-boy.

So, while reading this article, if you don't like hockey, replace the word "hockey" with something you like and the article will still maybe make some sense because this is after all, an article about the Internet and how it effects our society.

There are reasons (besides my personal preference) that this article is about hockey. The players, leagues and teams have embraced and used Internet technology in a much more pro-active and positive way than any other sport.

First there are a few reasons for hockey's Internet adventure:

### **Hockey is International — So is Internet**

Long before the Cold War ended, Canada was already thawing the situation by starting the Summit Series in 1972 (and subsequent Canada Cup tournaments) as an act of sports-diplomacy. It was also a chance to settle the debate of who is the mightiest hockey country on Earth. It made a lot more sense than stock-piling billions of dollars worth of munitions while forsaking education and social programs at the time.

In the early to mid eighties the league started to get more international with players being imported from Sweden & Finland, but in the later 80's players from the USSR & Czechoslovakia started defecting. Now the league is 58% Canadian, 15% American and the rest European (Czech leads the way with 50 players).

Turns out, hockey parents everywhere in the world want to follow their son's careers and that was a main reason why the NHL began broadcasting all games via Real Audio as soon as the technology was available. At most games now, there are several broadcast teams, home and away radio teams at minimum, sometimes national TV, often French broadcasters and now international networks, especially for the bigger games. Almost all of these broadcasts are simulcast by the NHL to anywhere in the world via a variety of streaming multi-media formats. Rather than messing around and talking about bringing the game to the rest of the world, the NHL did it. Now, other leagues are just starting to catch up and save face, plus they are trying to make money off the broadcasts.

On the same topic, a few years ago, hockey was about as alien to Florida as it was to Guam, yet every year, thousands of Canadians and N.E. U.S. spend the winters down in Florida, Arizona, etc. Guess where there are teams now?

It is kind of a sore spot to Canadians because in the last decade a few Canadian cities (Winnipeg & Quebec) lost their franchises to rich Americans who moved the teams to new locales. The Internet and Real Audio broadcasts helped soften the withdrawal symptoms the die-hard fans experienced when their teams

packed it in and headed south. The Canadian government hypes the Internet like a nation of AL Gore's and the people enjoy using Internet during those long cold winters.

**NHL's easy policy with copyright use** (compared with NBA especially)

NHL league and teams encourage user participation both in using the official NHL & independent team's sites as well as encouraging them to make fan websites. Conversely, the NBA has strictly regulated each team's site, all of which are under NBA corporate control whereas in NHL, each team owns the rights to do what they want with their sites and their logos etc.

The really foolish thing that the NBA did is sued fans over trademark infringement because they were using team logos on their fan page. This one guy who got really hosed by the NBA, even put up a big banner saying something like, "This site is in no way connected with NBA or Cleveland Cavaliers . . .) but they made him remove all NBA property from the site including logos and pictures of players. That doesn't leave you much content, does it?

On the contrary, there are dozens of sites many of which are better than the official team sites, which have pics, reviews, analysis, draft reports, history and all sorts of other stuff that the NBA wouldn't allow. In fact, the best writer's I've found on the topic of hockey aren't working for the newspapers, they are publishing on-line at sites like Trolley Tracks, Griper and The Forum.

Most everyday, I find a new hockey site which, under NBA guidelines, would warrant a lawyer. NHL is happy the fans around the world are giving so much time, creativity and energy into making cool Internet stuff to promote the sport and their fortunes.

**Our Millionaires aren't as whiney as other millionaires**

The players certainly don't mind fans making sites. An Internet search for the most minor of pro hockey players will result in dozens if not thousands of matches.

A reason for this is that hockey's millionaire players and billionaire owners (generally) aren't as big as the thick-headed and greedy

as in other leagues (of course there are plenty exceptions). In other words, most hockey guys really appreciate the support they get from their fans and even more appreciative of the fact that they aren't working at some factory or playing in some small minor town for \$350/wk like most of the guys they grew up with.

This relationship with the fans carries on with the community programs and the charities that the players run. Any hockey players making over a million has a foundation or charity to give back to the community. Indeed the NHL gives big money to Cancer research and players have their pet causes from MS to spinal research. In Canada the tax breaks make it is an easy choice for players to get involved (plus you figure the team would be a bit hesitant to trade a player who does so much good P.R., right?) So to support their side-projects, many hockey guys have become .com's themselves setting up on-line outposts to sell stuff or schedule of events or prop their restaurants.

Most every player has a least one fan site about him, some have hundreds. It is really the same as collecting all your hockey cards and autographs in a scrapbook except now it is on-line. Hockey players tend to be much more restrained and less arrest-prone than their NBA and NFL counterparts so there isn't much off-ice drama to be read, but if you want to find out Pavel Bure's favorite food, you likely can.

## **Stuff I do with Hockey on the Internet**

### **Game Cast**

With all the different multimedia features for hockey available of the Internet, you can even follow along the game with ESPN's Gamecast which is an interesting use of Java as well as useful since every play and statistics is posted in an Interactive Java applet which looks like a hockey rink.

Red dots on the ice for where a goal was scored from, blue dots for shots, playing minute time, shots taken and injury reports, # of saves by goalies. This stuff provides a great enhanced experience while you are watching on TV or listening on Real

Audio.

## **Fantasy Games**

Hockey is intuitive for fantasy games. Used to be buddies made a fantasy hockey or baseball pool or rottessaire league and managed the stats on paper and usually hired a secretary to calculate all the points because no one could trust each other. Things are easier now.

ESPN used another advanced Java application for the Live Draft in the Fantasy League which is one of the neatest apps I have seen on the Internet . It's also a great example of dynamic, database driven, interactive sites which will be some much more common in the next months/years.

Once you purchased a franchise and joined a division, you were put in a draft order and assigned a draft time at which you logged into your team page and joined the live draft. Each of the 10 teams had 90 seconds to select a player until you filled you roster with forwards, defensemen and goalies. You can put a guy a waivers if he is lagging, Injured reserve if hurt and negotiate trades with other teams.

The statistics are automatically calculated and entered into your league, which then sorts and organizes you in all sorts of ways. So you just have to figure out how to make your team win.

One of the interesting things about sports sites is that people pay money for this information and entertainment making sports sites one of two types of sites which successfully sell memberships. With all the thousands of .com business selling books, software and teddy bears, it's really sports and smut that makes the money. (this is a topic in a forthcoming article)

Besides the ESPN league, I also signed up for a free league from CNN/Si in which I compete amongst some office mates, my brother and friends up in B.C. and a few people I don't know. For new fans, it gives you guys to cheer for on various teams even if you don't know all the guys yet.

This free league operates more like a free market economy in which you have a salary cap and can make 5 trades a week. Players' values rise and fall depending on how many teams are

buying/selling him, like the stock market. A fine lesson for young economists and future General Managers. Unlike ESPN, which uses a realistic type draft, multiple teams can have the same players which makes for fun competition.

## **Listening**

Hockey really likes their broadcasters, so for decades, hockey was radio only but the broadcasters were so good, that people initially resisted watching on T.V. because the radio voice painted such a great picture. Teams honor and respect their broadcasters the same way some baseball teams do.

NHL carries on this tradition with Internet broadcasts which often include an NHL Internet-only team who are not only broadcasting but chatting with listeners, researching statistics and tailoring the broadcasts to Internet audience. The International scope of this makes it really intriguing but I also like hearing both home and away broadcasters for each game for different perspectives. Plus since we don't have a local NHL team here in WA, Internet is our only hope if you wanna hear a game.

Highlight video reels are available shortly after games of all goals, sweet plays, big saves and good fights. You can even pick and choose which you want to see and NHL.com will serve up your custom highlight review. No hassles.

During the week, NHL.com also hosts chats and audio interviews you can tune into and participate in just because they are decent folks. Not only that, they have hockey skill tutorials, Alumni/Where are they now profiles and much more.

There are a couple local Minor teams, the Tacoma Sabercats and the Seattle Thunderbirds who are experimenting with Internet broadcasts but neither of the teams have really jumped into the web and multimedia bandwagon though they both have websites and limited broadcasts.

## **Usenet/Newsgroup**

Last month, I yakked about using Newsgroups/Usenet to get MP3. Newsgroups are really for news and discussion and it is one of my favorite ways to enhance the hockey experience. I have to give a bit of background so you know why it makes me so happy.

I mentioned that I am a Canucks fan. The Canucks have never been . . . how you say . . . a "strong" team. Always an underdog, cobbled together bunch of under-achievers and over-achievers. In hockey, they say "character players" which usually means, likable, hardworking players, not necessarily talented.

In the early nineties, I wandered off on a random journey which took me to Europe, Southern US, Utah, to Japan, home to B.C., back to Japan and then Micronesia islands.

During this time, the Canucks turned into a minor powerhouse and took the N.Y. Rangers to 7 games in the Stanley Cup finals. They won their division a few times, playoff runs etc. While I was living abroad (this was before the days of Internet) I had to get by day old new reports which devoted upwards of 10 seconds to hockey after sumo and cricket or a scant paragraph of hockey results in a newspaper. It was a real withdrawal especially when they made their cup run. When they lost Game 7, there was even a riot (with tear gas) so basically I missed the whole thing. So now when the boys back home are reminiscing about the cup run, I draw a blank and just drink more.

Now in these glory days of Informational skidding all o'er the world via fiber and copper, any Internet user has a plethora of hockey information to choose from and enjoy. Indeed, there are a couple of guys who post to the canucks newsgroup who are living in Korea and Hong Kong. While they don't have the convenience of seeing all the games via satellite dish like I do now, they can engage in witty discourse and discussion with other Canucks fans. I am happy that they don't have to endure the way I had to. The world really is getting better all the time. With the virtual community feeling and personal communication in the newsgroups and Real Audio broadcasts, it really doesn't matter where you live.

One of my best happenings in the canucks newsgroup was finding a guy who has seasons tickets and couldn't make it to all the games so he advertised a few sets at face value, so I ordered up a few sets. The best part of it is that they are front row, right behind the glass! The only people in front of me are wearing skates. Now before you think I am too easily excited, usually for tickets tike that you have to go through a scalper or "ticket broker" and pay a few hundred bucks (that is Canadian though). But

because of the instant communication via Usenet, I scored the sweet deal.

Since I read the newsgroup everyday, I had a sense of familiarity and community with the regular posters to the newsgroup. Thusly, I felt an element of "trust", such that I felt like I could invite most anyone from the newsgroup out for a beer and not fear decapitation. I sent my Dad to get the tickets just in case though ;-)

Since my ISP has a high-quality Usenet feed, I also get the clari. newsgroups which carry the AP & UPI wires which the newspapers receive so all box scores, statistics, breakdowns injury reports from a verifiable source as soon as they are released.

### **Statistics and research**

I don't care for numbers much, but numbers tell the story, especially when I was picking out my fantasy hockey teams. Fortunately there are some great fan made pages out there to find any factoid you could need.

A few noteworthy ones:

There is a site called Joy of Hockey which has a page for dang near each player in the NHL. The Hockey DB has stats for every player who played pro, minor, major junior , college hockey most anywhere in the world for like 70 years. A guy in Hawaii has an archive of all trophy and award winners since the beginning of the Stanley Cup.

Since the Canucks drafted the Sedin twins from Sweden, I found a great English page about their team MoDo. LCS Hockey over time has year by year coverage and recap of teams. The big corporate sites like ESPN, CNN/SI, The Hockey News etc. can give even more. Canoe's Slam Sports is another great all around hockey news site, mostly for Canadian based teams. Slam also creates the official WHL, AHL, QMJL sites too. NHLPA is the Player's Association official site and while it quite good, the web designer's overbuilt it somewhat so it moves as slow as Dana Murzyn.

I play hard and occasionally hurt myself, I can learn why I hurt at

hockyinjuries.com which is very well made and useful site which professional advice (with disclaimer) about injuries and a guide to buying and taking care of your equipment.

Hockeyfutures has analysis of all the Canucks draft picks with ratings, reviews and chances of getting into the big leagues and if so what role will they play. This helps me figure out who will be on the team in a few years and who we should trade now.

### **Official pages and promotions**

Most team's pages are quite good too, the Colorado Avalanche has one of the first Flash sites on the web (now under re-construction). I virtually toured the Montreal Canadiens dressing room, Atlanta's new Phillips Center and the ugly new logos for the Minnesota Wild and Columbus Blue Jackets.

I also found out from the Canucks site that if I am one of the first 5000 fans to GM Place tonight for the game against the Carolina Hurricanes, I get a free CD-Rom. Whoa. Didn't they used to give away pucks as souvenirs? Well since I want my CD-Rom, I have to go.

If you need a fix, visit <http://gigpig.olywa.net>, this will get you the goods.

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Daveo@olywa.net, who was born in Saskatoon Saskatchewan, plans to watch every goal the Canucks score this year in person or T.V. via his new satellite dish. Chicks who dig hockey are encouraged to visit and bring beer. During the week, he wears an OlyWa.Net jersey, on Sundays he wears a helmet & skates and is a "character player".