

THE PROS

by John Cairns

1972 was memorable for international hockey. It was then the European stars first faced N.H.L. competition. Team Canada and the Russian nationals engaged in an unforgettable eight game series that swept both countries with almost unprecedented excitement and patriotism. The games provided many of the most electrifying moments in hockey history.

Like most good things, however, international hockey is now simply being exploited. There are too many games and the top talent is no longer always involved. Most of the contests have become utterly meaningless. No more do Guy Lafleur, Bobrov Hill and Bobby Clarke join forces to battle the Yakushevs and the Tretiaks. Instead diluted European teams confront often starless Canadian professional squads. Even N.H.L. President John Ziegler has confessed that too many international games have been played, and that they must be more carefully scheduled.

How can something that was once so wonderful become such a problem? Some have admitted that the reason is greed. Harold Ballard of the Toronto Maple Leafs is one of three. He complained that, "The Czechs are only interested in the money. Their government sends them over here to collect the bucks. All they are is money grabbers." The same probably applies to North American hockey authorities. After all, it takes two to tango and international hockey does require two participating nations. The logic that the only thing better than a Canada-Russia game is

two such games is rapidly being disproven.

Even Canadian players are finding matches with the Europeans a bore. Alan Eagleson took the recent Super Series 78 seriously, but the N.H.L. teams were casual indeed. They resented the interruption in their league schedule and downplayed the importance of the games. Most of them used two goaltenders, and the Leafs temporarily replaced several stars and sent minor leaguers against the foreigners. Harold Ballard was extremely outspoken in defending this action. He declared that, "We're not going to bust our butts trying to pick theirs. These games are utterly stupid; a very foolish way to do business."

Spectators were also less than keen. Attendance for the series was generally disappointing. The fans at Maple Leaf Gardens were especially upset. They were disturbed by their team's attitude against the Czechs as well as by its repeatedly booing backup goalie Hal MacRae and minor-league defenseman Mike Pelyk. Eagleson was quick to sympathize. He insisted that, "In spite of Mr. Ballard's opposition the fans who pay a top price should have seen Palmateer, McDonald and Salming. Perhaps such games should be included in the N.H.L. standings. Our teams might still forget national prestige, but at least the players could be working toward a play-off bonus.

Just what did Super Series 78 prove? Has Canada once again embarrassed herself against world compe-

tition? It is a matter of opinion. Our side won half the decisions and at times looked vastly superior. We were better at face-offs, at forechecking, and most certainly at intimidation.

Anatori Tarasov, the former Soviet coach had some timely praise for the Canadian game. "I am impressed with your hockey," he said. "It is like a temperamental, pretty girl who you can't forget. We are fond of Canadian hockey. We like your appreciation for your game and we like your style of fire on ice. We like the way you produce players who establish new standards for the game."

Let's not forget, however, that the Europeans played Super Series on foreign ice and still they were far from helpless. They displayed fine conditioning, good passing, accurate shooting and excellent skating. As usual their goaltending was also strong. Not all of them further more, are as easily impressed as is Tarasov.


One Czech coach for instance, lamented that, "I'm disappointed with the Canadians because they have little teamwork. The players don't seem to cooperate with each other."

Ben Hatskin, W.H.A. board chairman, also made an interesting comment. Speaking about three Winnipeg Jet losses to the Soviets in Japan, he declared that, "The Russian team is too strong for just one team, and I don't care if they play the Montreal Canadiens or anyone... The N.H.L. teams are scared to play their (the Russian) national team because it could be any type of score that the Russians want."

The N.H.L. certainly wouldn't agree with such an appraisal and neither would many Canadian fans. Most of us, however, are simply concerned with seeing the best possible hockey. We can only hope that next season will see international games played more selectively, and analyzed by someone other than Howie Meeker.

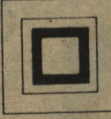
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