



A DESPERATE SPORT DESPERATELY SEEKING ITS SAVIOR

By Kerry Schmidt 07-31-2005

Before I get to the above story, yes, NFL camps open this week, but nothing of news yet, other than the normal stupidity that will take place with each team's top draft choice. At press time, only the 49'ers have signed their (and the overall) No. 1 pick, QB Alex Smith from Utah. If all clauses kick in, he'll only make about \$56 million.

Also at press time, the Saints are reportedly close to signing their top pick, Jammal Brown, offensive tackle.

Now since the overall top pick has signed, perhaps teams will fall into place. Usually, virtually every top pick holds out and misses part or all of training camp, an entirely idiotic ritual most teams go through. Then they always end up signing for the amount they figured weeks before. Go figure.

Now the real story.

Desperate Housewives, desperate Survivors, and a desperate sport desperately seeking a savior.

The NHL

After billionaire owners and millionaire players committed hari-kari by canceling the entire season last year, they have come to terms with their brain-dead ways and will play again this year. I wonder if anyone will notice.

Now remember, ESPN had the TV contract for the NHL and did not renew the rights, so the league has no TV outlet. Even when it was on ESPN, their ratings were lower than a worm's belly. The replacement stuff scored higher. Even the "US Open of Competitive Eating" rated higher!

So how can a league that has the popularity of a child molester and a few drunken Canadians resurrect itself to at least a level where one third of people even know what NHL stands for?

They are pinning their entire hopes and dreams/expectations on a 17-year old phenom. The NHL has heaped upon Sidney Crosby the job of saving a sport that put booth of their collective feet into a grave.

Listen to some of the collective hype the NHL mongers are heaping on this kid.

"The next Gretzky." "ESPN The Magazine" calls him "hockey's LeBron James."

ESPN called last Friday's draft "The Sidney Crosby Sweepstakes."

The Pittsburgh Penguins will (have used) the top draft to take him. Some soothsayers are saying he needs to be in New York or LA, so he can get the huge exposure he needs to return the NHL to its greatness. Wait, the NHL once had greatness?

Many are looking for Crosby to be the ambassador to non fans, to pack arenas the way James did.

One report said "He needs to transform the image of the league the way Magic Johnson and Larry Bird did for the NBA in the 80's."

Pressure?! It gets "better."



OFF THE WALL SPORTS

NBA commissioner David Stern, who mentored the NHL's commish. Gary Bettman, said "Crosby and the NHL will rise or fall on the budding superstar's ability to play out the role set out for him and lead his team to the Stanley Cup."

No pressure there.

The Penguins' GM, Craig Patrick, carried a four leaf clover into St. Patrick's Cathedral to "seek divine intervention" to win the right to draft a kid from tiny Cole Harbour, Nova Scotia, who is not even old enough to need a razor.

Canadian TV is already calling his entry into the league "The Crosby Show."

Before the season starts, a Canadian publishing company is rushing out a biography of the kid. It's title? "Sidney Crosby: Taking the Game by Storm."

17 and you already have your biography written!

As Gretzky was called "The Great One," the media has bestowed the moniker of "The Next One" on the kid.

He has power agent Pat Brisson of the giant firm, IMG, who has set up his own web site and they are already selling jerseys. His number will be 87, the year he was born.

He also has a \$2.5 million, 5-year deal with Reebok along with other endorsement deals with Gatorade and Canadian telecom Telus.

Reebok is already launching a signature Crosby line of hockey gear and apparel, which, says chief marketing officer Dennis Baldwin, "will turn him into a global icon." Crosby already will join Alan Iverson, rapper Nelly and Peyton Manning in the Reebok's "I Am What I Am" brand campaign. Pretty lofty company for a fuzzy faced youngster.

Brisson says, "There are another 10 companies knocking on the door," but he adds that "he doesn't want to be a walking billboard. He will look at quality over quantity."

So what about this walking, breathing divine being himself?

By all accounts, he is modest, humble and definitely not engrossed in himself or all the hoopla surrounding him.

"I'm not trying to be the next Wayne Gretzky or Mario Lemieux," he told USA TODAY.

"I put pressure on myself to do my best and perform to my potential. That's all I can do."

Last year, he also took the time to learn to speak French. "I just thought it would be nice and courteous to learn to speak French where everybody speaks French."

Marketing experts predict he could be one of the few hockey players to break through on Madison Avenue. One advertising executive, Bob Dorfman, says of his name, "I'll take a name that is not difficult to pronounce any day."

The kid is good looking, soft spoken and, if stats are any indicator, he is pretty damn good.

In the Canadian League, the highest junior competition just below the NHL, he lead the league in scoring the last two years, with 66 goals and 168 points in just 62 games.

He once scored a goal from behind the net by literally picking the puck up like in lacrosse on his stick and, one handed, reached around and put it in the net.

"The Great One" himself said, "(he) is the best prospect since Lemieux," and added, "he could challenge (Gretzky's own) records."

WHEW!



OFF THE WALL SPORTS

Obviously, only the future will tell. Yet it is most ironic that all those billionaire owners, who so intentionally tried to ruin themselves, now turn to a 17-year old to save them from themselves.

The load thrust upon this young man is enormous. Atlas may have shrugged, but I certainly wish Sidney Crosby the best.