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Websites

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- 646001 ESPN / Make-or-break day in CBA negotiations
- 646002 ESPN / You have got to be kidding me
- 646003 Wall Street Journal / Why There Is Urgency to End an NHL Lockout
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Optimism vanishes in NHL talks

By Helene Elliott

A series of bizarre turns in negotiations between the NHL and its players on Thursday extinguished the optimism generated during direct talks between players and owners early this week and put the league in position to lose a season for the second time since 2004.

Commissioner Gary Bettman was red-faced and angry, and NHL Players' Assn. Executive Director Donald Fehr swiftly switched from declaring the sides were "close if not on top of one another" on major issues to saying he would tell fans, "It looks like this is not going to be resolved in the immediate future."

A process buoyed on Tuesday by the entrance of four owners new to the negotiations began to fracture Wednesday, when those owners got what they deemed a lukewarm response after offering to increase the transitional "make-whole" payment by \$100 million. That was part of a package built around three positions on which the NHL won't budge: a 10-year collective bargaining agreement, a five-year cap on player contracts and compliance issues related to moving from the old labor deal to a new one.

"Term limits on player contracts is the hill we will die on," NHL Deputy Commissioner Bill Daly said.

Daly also said the league won't agree to buyouts or to players' new demand for limits on escrow payments because that money is outside the cap system and the agreed-upon 50-50 split of hockey-related revenue.

Fehr changed the meeting format on Thursday by asking to be included. Afterward, he sent the league a counteroffer that included limiting players' contracts to eight years and setting an eight-year term for the labor deal with an opt-out after six years.

The league, which had expected a yes-or-no response and not a new proposal, broke off the talks through a message Daly left on the voicemail of Steve Fehr, the NHLPA's special counsel. No new sessions are scheduled.

Donald Fehr, known for slow and deliberate negotiating tactics, suggested returning to federal mediation after a failed first attempt. Bettman said mediation "was of no value."

Fehr wouldn't identify the union's next step, but it has explored decertification, a strategy used by the NFL and NBA to apply pressure during labor talks by means of an antitrust lawsuit.

Bettman, who frequently became emotional during a news conference in New York, said the league had removed everything it had put on the table. That includes the "make whole" concept, leaving free agency at seven years, and a proposal that teams could re-sign their own players for seven years, similar to the NBA's Larry Bird clause.

"We are where we are, as horrible as it is," Bettman said.

Pittsburgh owner Ron Burkle, who participated in the talks this week, said the league "wanted to move quickly and decisively. We have all spent too much time without any real progress at the expense of our fans, our sponsors and the communities we serve. I hope that going backwards does not prevent a deal."

Winnipeg owner Mark Chipman, whose team made a spectacular debut last season after moving north from Atlanta, said he was optimistic as late as Wednesday that a resolution could be found.

"Regrettably, we have been unable to close the divide on some critical issues that we feel are essential to the immediate and long-term health of our game," he said. "While I sense there are some members of the players' association that understand our perspective on these issues, clearly there are many that don't."

The NHL has canceled games through Dec. 14 and is certain to soon announce additional cancellations. Bettman said he wants "a season with integrity," which means a minimum of 48 games, but has no "drop-dead" date for a settlement. The 1994-95 season, cut to 48 games by a lockout, started on Jan. 20.

LA Times: LOADED: 12.07.2012

645886 Anaheim Ducks

Latest setback in talks leaves Winnik, players disillusioned

By ERIC STEPHENS /

Ducks winger Dan Winnik, puzzled by the events of a bizarre day in the contentious labor battle between NHL owners and players, didn't want to wait and read about why the league rejected the latest proposal Thursday put forth by his union.

As Commissioner Gary Bettman ticked off the reasons a deal wasn't reached to end the lockout, Winnik and other players slipped into the back of a conference room full of reporters at a New York City hotel to hear it directly from the source.

Article Tab: The Ducks' Dan Winnik, center, is flanked by Winnipeg's Ron Hainsey, left, and Chicago's Chris Campoli, right, as they listen to NHL commissioner Gary Bettman addressing the media.

The Ducks' Dan Winnik, center, is flanked by Winnipeg's Ron Hainsey, left, and Chicago's Chris Campoli, right, as they listen to NHL commissioner Gary Bettman addressing the media.

MARY ALTAFER, AP

In short, Winnik was taken aback at the assertion from Bettman that the players' association doesn't want to reach an accord.

"They asked us to address their three main issues," said Winnik, who has been part of the NHLPA's negotiating committee from the beginning. "And that's what we thought we were doing today. We didn't know (that) by us not completely agreeing to what they want ... that's it."

"I should say we didn't think it would lead to that."

Bettman told assembled media that most elements of the owners' offer were now off the table. That included their willingness to add an additional \$100 million in deferred payments to players, up from \$211 million that had been put on the table.

Owners also offered to keep eligibility for free agency at 27 years of age and salary arbitration rights. But the NHLPA had to accept a 10-year deal — which both sides could opt out after eight — and limit players' contracts to a maximum of five years.

The union countered Thursday with an eight-year agreement and contracts to last no longer than eight years. But the NHL, after apparent progress was made over two days, had wanted a deal struck Wednesday night and was angered when one wasn't made then.

For now, it appears the only path to a new deal is if players are willing to accept the owners' terms.

"This is clearly their boldest move they've made," Winnik said. "And to think that if everything's off the table and everything that was done since June or the first time we met is all gone, it is insane to me."

"That's just insane to think that any progress we made is gone because we refused to accept those contracting rights."

The last-resort maneuver of union decertification might now pick up steam. It would allow individual players to bring lawsuits against the league and declare the lockout illegal under antitrust laws.

Asked whether decertification is more of an option now after the latest breakdown in talks, Winnik said: "You can make your own judgment on that."

A tempest of emotion was the order of the day and it wasn't limited to Winnik or his fellow players. Owners spoke out for the first time through league-allowed statements after staying quiet largely because of the threat of a \$1 million fine.

"While I sense there are some members of the players association that understand our perspective on these issues, clearly there are many that don't," Winnipeg Jets owner Mark Chipman said.

Said the Toronto Maple Leafs' Larry Tanenbaum: "I am very disappointed and disillusioned. Had I not experienced this process myself, I might not have believed it."

Until now, Winnik has been firm in his belief an agreement would be reached and there would be hockey played. Now the veteran is starting to seriously contemplate whether another NHL season will be canceled.

"Yeah, I think it kind of dims the light of optimism, for me at least," he said. "I guess that's what everyone's got to wonder now."

"This isn't enjoyable for anybody."

Orange County Register: LOADED: 12.07.2012

645887 Anaheim Ducks

NHL owners, players take a major step backward in talks

By ERIC STEPHENS /

Talks broke off again between the NHL and the players' association in spectacular fashion Thursday with league owners rejecting the union's latest proposal and pulling its offer off the table.

Commissioner Gary Bettman said that owners were "beside themselves" after what they considered was a tepid response to their latest attempt at ending a lockout that is now 82 days old and has wiped 422 games from the schedule.

Article Tab: Players (left to right) Ron Hainsey of Winnipeg, Manny Malhotra of Vancouver and Sidney Crosby of Pittsburgh listen as Don Fehr, executive director for the NHL Players Associations, speaks to reporters Thursday.

Players (left to right) Ron Hainsey of Winnipeg, Manny Malhotra of Vancouver and Sidney Crosby of Pittsburgh listen as Don Fehr, executive director for the NHL Players Associations, speaks to reporters Thursday.

MARY ALTAFFER, AP

The owners wanted a 10-year collective bargaining agreement — with a mutual option after eight years — and were willing to offer \$100 million more in deferred payments to players to get a deal done.

"The union's response was shockingly silent, so to speak, in terms of their reaction," an angry Bettman told reporters at a New York City hotel, adding he never had seen some of the owners so emotional.

Union head Donald Fehr said he received word of the owners' rejection to their offer by voicemail and was told there was no need to hold more talks Friday. Players and owners, without Bettman and Fehr at the table, had appeared to make progress during a marathon session Tuesday.

Fehr had said he thought the sides were close on major issues and outlined the union's offer of an eight-year deal and a willingness to hold previously unlimited players' contracts to a maximum of eight years. The NHL is dead set on a five-year term limit.

"It looks like this is not going to be resolved in the immediate future," Fehr said.

Bettman said he can't envision a season of fewer than 48 games, the amount that was played in the lockout-shortened 1994-95 season. He added that no date has been discussed on when a new deal had to be done to avoid canceling the season.

Some players, such as the Ducks' Ryan Getzlaf, suggested the commissioner has had a timeline in mind in terms of how long the players were to be locked out. Players have missed four paychecks.

"My magic date was Oct. 11 when we should have opened the season with a new collective bargaining agreement," Bettman said.

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645888 Boston Bruins

Bruins' Shawn Thornton keeping in shape

By Jason Mastrodonato,

Not playing hockey, or getting paid, isn't ideal, but Shawn Thornton has an advantage over many other players during this NHL lockout: He can continue doing what he does better than most — beat the snot out of people.

With the lockout in Day 82, and owners suspending talks in New York and rejecting the latest proposals from the NHLPA, the Bruins enforcer has had plenty of extra time to get to the gym. And box. And do jujitsu.

You know, normal Thornton stuff.

"I'm actually in pretty good shape right now," he said Thursday from a charity event hosted by Kevin Youkilis downtown. "Conditioning shouldn't be a problem. I enjoy it. That's the easy part.

"We skate every day. I'm still boxing, doing jujitsu, still lifting, doing all that stuff to stay at my optimal playing weight."

Thornton said, if necessary, he would go to New York to help the cause.

"Sidney [Crosby] is there," he said. "So that's good."

Thornton remains "cautiously optimistic" the NHL stalemate ends soon.

"I hope it's the now, not the never," he said. "Every day that goes by ticks away at the calendar and the clock. And we lose paychecks every day too. And [the owners] lose revenue and games played every day. So I hope the sense of urgency is finally kicking in on both sides."

Boston Globe LOADED: 12.07.2012

645889 Boston Bruins

Whenever B's return, Dougie Hamilton will be ready

By Steve Conroy

Despite the discouraging news from the NHL labor talks last night, it is hard for a hockey fan not to be thinking about, well, hockey at this time of year. And for Bruins fans, one of the most enticing things to think about is the expected arrival of Dougie Hamilton.

While the bad news is that he's not yet in Boston learning how to be a pro, the good news is that the 6-foot-5 defenseman has done nothing to alter anyone's opinion that he's the real deal.

After posting 17-55-72 totals and a plus-37 in 50 games for the Niagara Ice Dogs of the Ontario Hockey League last season, Hamilton is having similar output this year with 7-32-39 totals and a plus-23 (tops in all of Canadian junior hockey) in 30 games. On Monday, he is scheduled to attend Canada's world junior championship selection camp.

Not bad for a player coming to grips with having his dream of playing in the NHL temporarily deferred.

"Coming into the season, especially at the start, I thought I was going to be going to Boston and definitely didn't think I was going to be locked out this long," said Hamilton, who also saw his older brother Freddie, a forward, leave Niagara for the San Jose Sharks' AHL affiliate in Worcester. "Right now, it's just a matter of going through the roller coaster, seeing the good news and then the bad news. I'm trying not to think about it anymore, but it's always in the back of your head.

"For me now, I'm kind of set on going to the world juniors and getting geared up for that, unless something happens in the next week, which would be pretty exciting. But it would also be exciting to represent my country again."

Niagara coach Marty Williamson said Hamilton, the ninth overall selection in the 2011 draft, carried the disappointment of not joining the Bruins for a training camp in September with him for only a week or so, and then he was back to being the same player. While Hamilton has little more to prove as a player at the junior level, Williamson has been impressed with the way he has accepted a leadership role, especially when you consider that while both smart and articulate, he is not always the loudest guy in the room.

"I don't think it's 100 percent natural until he gets really, really comfortable," Williamson said. "When he was younger, he just concentrated on himself and his game, but he's really grown into this. And we challenged him with it. We drafted a defenseman in the first round this year and whether Dougie spent a week or a month with us — and it's turned out to be a little longer — we felt that he could really help this young guy off the ice with how he prepares so well.

"Dougie's one of those guys who can manage school, his personal life and hockey and does a great job. And that's what he's done. You'll see him at practice and he'll take these young guys aside and talk to them. That's something that he wouldn't have done last year and I don't think it's 100 percent comfortable for him, but he's really pushed himself and I think it's going to help him down the road."

While Peter Chiarelli is always mindful to say that Hamilton will not simply be given a spot whenever the team returns to the ice, it is clear that the Bruins general manager fully expects that to happen. The B's would also have no qualms about burning a season on Hamilton's entry-level deal on a shortened season — "Because I think he's ready to play," Chiarelli said.

There is a chance that, if there is a miraculous turnaround and a collective bargaining agreement is reached soon between NHL owners and players, Hamilton may still be allowed the opportunity to participate in the world juniors.

"That's an ongoing discussion I've been having with Hockey Canada," Chiarelli said. "I haven't made a decision yet."

But make no mistake, Hamilton will see the NHL this season — if there is a season. Claude Julien accompanied Chiarelli on a scouting trip to see Hamilton and other prospects in October and, like the GM, the coach liked what he saw.

"The thing I like about Dougie is he moves the puck well and he'll carry it, but he's not a Danny Boyle-type that will try to go end to end and behind the opposing net," Julien said in using a comparison with the Sharks' All-Star defenseman. "What he does well is he supports the play and because he supports the play, he's got a good gap. Offensively, he carries the puck up the ice, but he makes plays. He's not trying to go end to end. And that to

me is what brings his offensive game up to our liking right now. And he's 6-foot-5. It's not like he's 5-foot-10 and he can sneak around players. But he does have that great vision of moving the puck up the ice and even if he skates it up to the far blue line, he can make plays.

"Even if he doesn't carry the puck, he's right up there behind the forwards supporting the play so if the puck gets turned over, he's got a tight gap. It's something that's really impressive in that kid. From what I've been able to see, there's no laziness in his game."

For now, however, Hamilton's future remains on hold right along with that of the NHL.

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645890 Boston Bruins

No end to NHL lockout

By Stephen Harris

There was guarded optimism a resolution to the NHL lockout might be within reach after a marathon negotiating session in New York ended at 1 a.m. yesterday.

But by the end of the day, the situation looked quite possibly grimmer than at any point since the start of the lockout 83 days ago.

"There has been a development," NHL Players Association chief Donald Fehr said last night. "It's not a positive one."

After talks Tuesday and Wednesday, and even last evening, there was a sense that the sides were moving closer to a collective bargaining agreement.

But hopes for a deal were crushed after a CBA counter-proposal by the Players Association was summarily rejected by the league — which didn't even do so face to face, but instead opted for voice mail.

"What can I tell hockey fans?" Fehr said. "You can tell them that it looks like this is not going to be resolved in the immediate future. I hope that turns out to be wrong, but that's certainly what the message is that we have (last night)."

Speaking after Fehr, commissioner Gary Bettman said the NHL has not set a "drop-dead date" by which a deal must be done to save the 2012-13 season.

"I am disappointed beyond belief," Bettman said.

After a 5 p.m. meeting involving deputy commissioner Bill Daly, NHLPA leaders Donald and Steve Fehr, and a group of players, the union presented a new comprehensive CBA proposal which, it believed, addressed league concerns with earlier ideas.

"The players have gone a very, very long way," Donald Fehr said. "The players have done far and away the lion's share."

The league did not agree, however.

"They knew there was a major gulf between us and yet they came down here and told you we were close," Daly said about Fehr's remarks.

With the proposal quickly shot down by the league, the bubble of optimism that had developed this week was popped. No new talks are scheduled and it's anybody's guess how, or if, this impasse can be broken in time to salvage a partial season.

"I'm surprised," Pittsburgh Penguins star Sidney Crosby said. "We feel like we moved in their direction."

Earlier yesterday the only real visible news was a request by the players camp that the federal mediators, who spent two fruitless days last week trying to broker a deal, be brought back into the bargaining room. It's not known if the mediators' presence will be requested now.

There did appear some genuine progress made Tuesday and Wednesday, although many observers cautioned that the negotiations remained very tense and tenuous. Those concerns proved accurate, and the fear is it may be very difficult to secure an agreement that saves the season.

The league reportedly improved its proposal to players Wednesday, notably on the vital "make-whole" issue. Weeks back, that provision was a deal-killer, requiring the players to pay the cash necessary to ensure all current contracts are fully honored if the salary cap goes way down.

The league has since agreed to cover much of that cost, and Wednesday increased the sum it would provide from \$211 million to \$300 million — still short of the NHLPA's demand for \$389 million in "make-whole" funds. The NHL's proposal included a 10-year CBA term (with an opt-out clause for either side after eight years), left free agency and salary arbitration unchanged and also limits salary length to five years (longer for teams re-signing their own free agents).

Bettman said last night all the new elements offered by the owners are now off the table. The sport, in other words, took a giant step backward and the second lost season in nine years seems very possible.

Material from the Associated Press was used in this report.

Boston Herald LOADED: 12.07.2012

645891 Boston Bruins

NHL rejects players' latest offer

By Stephen Harris

There was guarded optimism a resolution to the NHL lockout might be in reach after a marathon negotiating session in New York City ended at 1 a.m. this morning.

But by the end of the day, the situation looked quite possibly grimmer than at any point since the start of the lockout 83 days ago.

"There has been a development," said NHL Players Association chief Don Fehr tonight. "It's not a positive one."

After talks Tuesday and yesterday, and even early this evening, there was a sense that the sides were moving closer to agreement.

"I think there's some hope," said veteran Boston player agent Neil Abbott late in the afternoon. "It sounds like there is. I have a feeling that the quote-unquote moderate owners have gotten a little bit more involved in this process. There's no reason I can see that we should not be able to get to a deal."

But hopes for a deal were crushed after a CBA counter-proposal by the Players Association was summarily rejected by the league — which didn't even do so face-to-face, but via a voicemail.

"What can I tell hockey fans?" said Fehr. "You can tell them that it looks like this is not going to be resolved in the immediate future. I hope that turns out to be wrong but that's certainly what the message is that we have."

Speaking after Fehr, NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman said the league has not set a "drop-dead date" by which a deal must be done to save the season.

After a 5 p.m. meeting involving NHL deputy commissioner Bill Daly and NHL Players Association leaders Don and Steve Fehr and a group of players, the PA presented a new comprehensive CBA proposal which, it believed, addressed league concerns with earlier ideas.

"The players have gone a very, very long way," said Fehr. "The players have done far and away the lion's share."

But soon after, with the proposal quickly shot down by the league, the bubble of optimism that had developed this week was popped. No new talks are scheduled and it's anybody's guess how, or if, this impasse can be broken in time to salvage a partial season.

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Boston Herald LOADED: 12.07.2012

645892 Buffalo Sabres

NHL, NHLPA talks come to crashing halt; league pulls everything off the table

John Vogl

To say National Hockey League labor negotiations crashed and burned Thursday night would be like saying the Titanic is running a little behind schedule. With an irate commissioner speaking in front of an incredulous group of players, the lockout-delayed 2012-13 season moved closer to being a never-played 2012-13 season.

Talks between the league and the NHL Players' Association imploded in shocking fashion in New York. At precisely the moment NHLPA Executive Director Donald Fehr was saying how close the sides were thanks a new proposal by the players, his brother — union special counsel Steve Fehr — received a voicemail from the league saying it was pulling its entire offer off the table and no negotiations would be held for the rest of the week.

"I am disappointed beyond belief that we are where we are," Commissioner Gary Bettman told reporters in New York. "We're going to have to take a deep breath and try and regroup."

The NHL has already canceled games through next Friday, and it is expected to eliminate at least the rest of December today. Since the sides are essentially back to Square One, it's possible the league could ax even more than that.

"It looks like this is not going to be resolved in the immediate future," Donald Fehr said in Manhattan. "It comes as a disappointment, obviously."

The sides have been far apart throughout the process, and that was never more evident than during Fehr's first news conference of the night.

A large union contingent, which included Buffalo Sabres goaltender Ryan Miller, offered its proposal to a pair of league representatives during a one-hour meeting that began at 5 p.m. Fehr, with players standing behind him in a Manhattan hotel, explained the benefits of the proposal at about 6:45 p.m. He was beyond confident.

"We hope and believe and expect that this should put us on the road for a quick end to this dispute," he said.

Before all the participants had even left the news conference, Steve Fehr retrieved his message. Shock and bewilderment filled the room.

"We feel like it should have been taken as a step toward ending this," Miller, who had just left to catch a flight home to California, told The Buffalo News via text message. "How many concessions can we make?"

League members were asking themselves the same thing.

"We kept negotiating against ourselves," Bettman said. "Anything that we put on the table this week is off the table."

The sides had resumed negotiations Tuesday with a new dynamic. Six owners met with 18 players as Bettman and Donald Fehr stayed on the sidelines. The first day of talks featured partnership and camaraderie.

"That sense of optimism, though, was something that almost inexplicably disappeared Wednesday afternoon when the four owners returned to the bargaining process," Bettman said. "We're at a loss to explain what happened, but things were not of the same tone as they had been on Tuesday."

The nearly nine hours of talks Wednesday featured arguments and offers that were widely off the mark. Owners were set to walk away before being persuaded to stay by the players.

"Negotiations were spirited and passionate at times but certainly not contentious," Miller said via text. "A lot of respect was paid to the owners for good reason."

The league closed Wednesday's meeting with a formal proposal. Their version of a collective bargaining agreement would be 10 years in length, feature a five-year limit on contracts (seven years if a team was re-signing its own player) and included a \$100 million increase in "make-whole" dollars, which would reimburse players for money they'd lose as the sides transitioned from an economic system that had players earning 57 percent of the revenues to a 50-50 split.

"[Thursday] we were expecting an answer, a yes or a no," Bettman said. "Our instructions from ownership was ... if the answer was no, there was no point in continuing discussions."

"The answer wasn't yes."

Rather than accept or decline the league's proposal, the union crafted a counteroffer that Deputy Commissioner Bill Daly said "cherry-picked" bits and pieces that the players liked. The parts the union liked were only available if it accepted the 10-year term and five-year limit on contract lengths.

"Those moves were contingent on the union specifically agreeing on other things," Bettman said. "This collective bargaining agreement is a total package."

The union's offer included the NHL concessions but asked for an eight-year term (with a opt-out clause after six years) and an eight-year limit on contracts.

"This is a package and everything fits together," said Bettman, who had several players filter into his news conference and stand in the back of the room. "Spinning us all into an emotional frenzy over maybe we're close and we're going to be playing hockey tomorrow is terribly unfair to our fans and this process."

Said Toronto owner Larry Tanenbaum: "I am very disappointed and disillusioned. Had I not experienced this process myself, I might not have believed it. Like all hockey fans, I am hopeful this situation can be resolved as soon as possible. I miss our game."

Buffalo News LOADED: 12.07.2012

645893 Buffalo Sabres

Fehr says NHL rejects union's proposal

John Vogl

Donald Fehr says the NHL has rejected the proposal put forth by the NHL Players' Association.

"We were advised in a voicemail message that the move that we made was unacceptable," Fehr told reporters in New York.

Fehr said the NHL has taken some of its offers off the table and will not negotiate tonight or Friday.

"I think this deal should be close if they are reasonable and acknowledge the concessions we have made," Sabres goaltender Ryan Miller said via text. "Can't help their reaction. We feel like it should have been taken as a step toward ending this. How many concessions can we make?"

Buffalo News LOADED: 12.07.2012

645894 Buffalo Sabres

NHLPA's Donald Fehr: 'Should be able to complete an agreement'

John Vogl

Donald Fehr says the end of the lockout should be in sight.

The NHL Players' Association has offered a "comprehensive proposal" to the NHL, Fehr said tonight, and the union executive director feels it should be enough to end the lockout.

"We think there is a complete agreement on dollars," Fehr told reporters in New York. "If that's the case, and we think it is .. should be able to complete an agreement."

The union met with league representatives from 5 to 6 p.m., and Deputy Commissioner Bill Daly and legal counsel Bob Batterman went back to the league's hotel to discuss the proposal. The union is awaiting the league's response.

Fehr said the union:

*Offered an eight-year collective bargaining agreement, with an opt-out clause after six;

*Offered a limit of eight years on contracts;

*Offered a contract variance in which the lowest salary of a multiyear deal must equal at least 25 percent of the highest year;

*Agreed to the NHL's make-whole proposal of \$300 million.

"We hope and believe and expect that this should put us on the road for a quick end to this dispute," Fehr said. "The players have gone a very, very long way. ... The players have done far and away the lions' share of the movement here."

Buffalo News LOADED: 12.07.2012

645895 Buffalo Sabres

NHLPA requests mediators rejoin negotiations

John Vogl

The NHL Players' Association is bringing union leader Donald Fehr back to the negotiating table, and he hopes he'll have company.

The union has requested that mediators return to the bargaining process, according to multiple reports. The NHL and the players met with members of the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service for two days last week, but the deal brokers were unable to find common ground for the dueling parties.

The league has not yet agreed to the request.

The mediators are located in Washington and would need to travel to New York, where players and owners have been meeting since Tuesday.

The sides are scheduled to resume negotiations today but have not yet done so. [UPDATE: The meeting began at 5 p.m.] The union reportedly is willing to talk today even without the mediators in attendance.

When talks resume, the leaders of the respective parties will be in attendance. Six owners and Deputy Commissioner Bill Daly met with up to 19 players and union special counsel Steve Fehr the past two days, with Commissioner Gary Bettman and Don Fehr on the sidelines. The players want Fehr back in the room, and Bettman will certainly join the owners.

TSN's Darren Dreger reports that two league negotiators, Toronto owner Larry Tanenbaum and Winnipeg owner Mark Chipman, have left New York.

Buffalo News LOADED: 12.07.2012

645896 Buffalo Sabres

Reports: NHL moves on 'make whole,' free agency; NHLPA wants Fehr back in room

John Vogl

More NHL negotiation details emerged overnight from New York, where players and owners met until 1 a.m. Among them, according to multiple reporters in Manhattan:

*The NHL has increased its contribution on the "make whole" provision to \$300 million, up from \$211 million. The NHLPA's previous request was \$383 million, putting the sides approximately in the middle. But the Canadian Press reports the dollar amount is tied to other pieces of the NHL's proposal, which could continue to make financial negotiations tricky despite the apparent closeness of the sides.

*The league wants a 10-year CBA, with TSN's Bob McKenzie reporting there would be an out clause after eight years.

(As I mentioned during negotiations, I find it interesting NHL wants 10-year CBA. The league is the one who opted to end last CBA after seven years. It must feel it's closed all loopholes.)

*The NHL has offered to retain the previous thresholds for free agency, keeping them at age 27 or seven years of service, down from their request of 28 and eight.

*The league, however, is steadfast in its desire to limit contracts to five years and permit only a yearly 5 percent variance on players' salaries. The NHL has offered to permit teams to give their own free agents a seven-year contract. The union is against term limits.

*According to ESPN.com, the NHL Players' Association wants a change in the negotiating format. For the past two days, six owners and up to 19 players have done the negotiating, with NHL Deputy Commissioner Bill Daly and union special counsel Steve Fehr also present. The players, according to ESPN sources, want to eliminate restrictions and allow Executive Director Donald Fehr (and by extension, Commissioner Gary Bettman) back to the table.

The sides will reconvene this afternoon.

*According to the Toronto Star and Sportsnet.ca, Sabres goaltender Ryan Miller "angrily vented" and "lost his temper briefly" as the negotiations grew more and more intense. The Star also reported that Bruins owner and Buffalo native Jeremy Jacobs almost led a walkout by the owners.

(It's an emotional negotiation impacting the livelihood and pocketbooks of competitive individuals, so of course there will be drama.)

"We had good, candid dialogue," Daly told reporters in New York at 1:30 a.m. "There continue to be critical open issues between the two parties."

Buffalo News LOADED: 12.07.2012

645897 Buffalo Sabres

Rochester Amerks try to focus, tune out any NHL lockout news

Kevin Oklobzija

The matchup: Amerks vs. Adirondack Phantoms (affiliate of the NHL's Philadelphia Flyers).

Time/place: 7:05 p.m. Friday/Blue Cross Arena at the Rochester Community War Memorial.

Tickets: \$16, \$19, \$21.

Toy drive begins: This is the first of three straight home games to benefit the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve Toys for Tots Drive. Bring a new, unwrapped toy and you will get \$5 off a lower-level ticket.

Records: The Amerks are 9-8-2-0 and are 12th in the Western Conference with 20 points. The Phantoms are 9-11-0-0 and were tied for 13th in the Eastern Conference with 18 points.

Season series: The teams have split two games, with two remaining. The Amerks won 6-2 in Glens Falls on Oct. 27. Adirondack won 2-1 here on Nov. 9.

Radio: WHTK-AM (1280).

Team website: amerks.com.

Not too long after the NHL lockout began, there was hope a deal could be reached in timely fashion.

Then doom and gloom set in.

Hope was again restored in early November — until the NHL owners ash-canned a proposal from the players' association in all of 10 minutes.

Now this week, after players and team owners met face to face for the past three days, there had been a belief that a shortened NHL season can be salvaged. But then that hope vanished again on Thursday.

And all the while, members of the Rochester Americans — like Marcus Foligno who will jump to the NHL if it starts or T.J. Brennan, Brayden McNabb and Luke Adam who hope to be early callups — must ignore it.

Good luck with that.

"You try to, but it's all over TSN; I think the podium is trending on Twitter," Foligno said, referring to a Twitter account (@NHLPodium) that popped up late Wednesday night.

"It's looking like it's getting better but you really can't get too positive until (NHL commissioner Gary) Bettman is standing behind the podium."

The distractions of this NHL lockout could in the long run be good for players in the American Hockey League. There will always be off-ice distractions; how they ignore them or tune them out will be important when it comes to game-night focus.

Amerks coach Ron Rolston is hoping a lot of those lessons have already been learned. His team hasn't been able to play a consistent 60-minute game yet, especially in the past month.

"I'm sure it's a distraction for everybody across the league," Rolston said after Thursday's practice, when the Amerks prepared for Friday's 7:05 p.m. home game against the Adirondack Phantoms.

"They've all had to deal with it three or four times already; everyone getting excited and then back to scratch."

The Amerks are in a funk, having lost three straight and seven of the past 10 (3-6-1-0). The loss of play-making center Cody Hodgson (broken hand) has been crippling to the five-on-five attack as well as the power play (5-for-34, 14.7 percent, during his nine-game absence).

But that doesn't explain the mental mistakes that lead to goals for the opposition. Like on Friday night in a 4-1 home loss to the Toronto Marlies, when two players went to cover the same point man and it left sniper Matt Frattin free in the left of the slot.

That was just moments after a Kevin Porter pass was intercepted in the neutral zone, and instead of a two-on-one short-handed fast break, the Amerks faced a three-on-two power play rush by the Marlies that led to the game's first goal.

"People talk about our first period on Friday against Toronto but it was really only a minute (the goals came 15 seconds apart)," Rolston said. "We need to put together a full 60-minute game and not have any lapses. Do your job for your 40-second shift."

The Amerks did a whole lot more of that on Saturday, when they lost 3-2 in overtime in Toronto. Foligno did a lot more of what he needs to do, too. He was much more rambunctious and, as a result, made more happen.

He assisted on both Amerk goals, had a fight and also a roughing minor.

"I just need to keep hitting, keep being nasty, keep being in guys' faces," the Amerks' leading scorer said. "That's what this team needs me to be."

Democrat and Chronicle LOADED: 12.07.2012

645898 Calgary Flames

Johnson: Hockey world dazed and confused as sport remains stuck in a boardroom

By George Johnson,

Well, that went rather well, wouldn't you say?

To think of all the passionate, gullible folks out there as late as Wednesday night, busily wondering about possible camp startup dates and number of games possible and hinting confidently with a knowing wink that they'd heard coaches had already been in touch with players — strictly on the QT, of course — telling them to be ready to hit the ice running.

And yet here we are.

Standing, dazed, in the middle of a patch of scorched ice.

Hockey, once more, finds itself caught in the crosshairs.

Of galloping greed. Of individual agenda taking precedence collective good.

NHLPA Svengali Donald Fehr went first in Thursday's little melodrama, assuming his best Little Lord Fauntleroy stance while extolling the players' chastity, pliability — and they had backed up a lot — before disingenuously claiming that after two days of what had seemed to be positive discourse everything was now in place for a deal to be struck (His immediate re-appearance at the Marriot Times Square 10 minutes later to feign shock and stunned indignation at the league's prompt cellphone dismissal of the terms was a nice, if thinly-transparent, touch).

Funny how, when Fehr was re-introduced to the negotiations Thursday, whatever goodness that had been built up over the preceding 48 hours melted like Margaret Hamilton being doused with a bucket of water. Even the moderate owners brought in to try to broker good faith got their backs up and bridled.

His arch-nemesis, the Bilbo Baggins-like Gary Bettman, arrived in short order, in a far more feisty mood, calling Fehr's earlier optimism "incomprehensible" and in a long-winded 45-minute tirade basically demanded Fehr's mouth be washed out with lye soap, claiming his side had relented on many key issues in order that three vital components to be considered sacrosanct.

Result? The league pulled its concessions off the table. More mudslinging. A larger chasm between the sides. The league accusing the PA of ever-shifting areas of concern. The PA accusing the league of intractability. Both claiming the other has no intention of cutting a deal.

Enough already.

No mas. No mas!

The owners are after a 10-year CBA deal (with either side opting out at eight), the players are demanding an eight-year deal (opting out at six). The owners want contracts at a five-year max, to protect themselves from self-flagellation, while the players won't hear of anything less than eight.

What's next? Well, the PA could consider decertification, which would disband the union leaving every player free to individually sue his contract's NHL owner. But that is messy in the extreme and would take months. As a negotiation ploy, far from foolproof.

More rounds of talks? Well, they're running perilously short of time to get in anything resembling a season and always wind further apart even as they seem to inch closer together.

Much of the scorn throughout this tawdry melodrama has been justly reserved for Bettman — and go on, loathe him to your heart's content — but it's time Fehr, the players' hired gun, comes in for a measure of scrutiny, too. His immense reputation was hired at not inconsiderable cost to get a deal done, to get them back playing. Off what we saw Thursday, he's failed miserably in that mandate. And if, as has been reported, he felt he could bluff a little longer to wedge out a little more, leading to the late collapse in negotiations, he misplayed his cards. Badly.

You hope to heavens he isn't arrogant enough to use his contentious, if successful, baseball model for hockey. That'd be like confusing London, Ont., with London, England. Still, that worry grows by the day.

The whole sordid mess was hours away when a large group of Calgary Flames gathered at Father David Bauer to get in a bit of game with the University of Calgary Dinos.

At that point in time, before the floorboards gave way, the cautious optimism of Tuesday-Wednesday had rubbed off.

"We've put our faith in the negotiating committee and the guys who are there," said Flames' player rep Matt Stajan. "Those guys have been doing it for us all week. They've done a great job. They know what they're doing."

"We're hoping to play hockey soon. That's for sure. In saying that, we want to make sure the deal's fair and we have people in New York who are going to do that for us.

"I think I've avoided being optimistic or pessimistic here. You can't guess or hope anymore. When a day gets done, it get done. We're all hopeful. We want to play."

Everybody pays lip-service to the contention of wanting to play. But their actions betray them.

"It's been pretty up and down," admitted captain Jarome Iginla. "You try not to get too high or too low, but it's hard to do. The whole time, all the way along, you're hoping that they find the deal. On both sides. I've been trying not to say too much about it because you get sick of reading it and you don't want to be part of it.

"But it sounds like they've been working away at it, and that's great.

"I've been hoping for three months we'd get back."

Iginla's reaction to the farcical events of later in the evening went mercifully unrecorded. But that wait he sounded so frustrated about looks about to be extended.

Used to be, hockey was about idols and moments caught and held in the imagination; about allegiance and shared experience. Now, it's about lawyers and dollar signs and the blame-game.

Used to be the bar is a place you went afterwards to discuss a game. Now it's where the guys who wield the power, who compromise our dreams, ply their trade.

Thursday's astonishing plot-twists in midtown Manhattan make you at long last wonder if there will, indeed, be any sort of hockey season in 2012-2013.

Or even if one would be worth it, under the circumstances.

We're almost beyond caring. Which, given how much, how passionately, we care about this game, says it all.

Calgary Herald: LOADED: 12.07.2012

645899 Calgary Flames

NHL: Calgary Flames players say there hope for resolution is starting to fade

By RANDY SPORTAK

Jarome Iginla isn't ashamed to admit he follows the news.

It goes against the usual athlete code of never reading the papers or watching the reports on TV.

(At least, that's what so many athletes claim.)

"I read it and I watch. I'd be lying if I said I didn't," Iginla said after skating Thursday afternoon with a handful of other locked-out NHLers and the University of Calgary Dinos.

"There's so many different points of view. It's a lot of ups and downs.

"I'll go home and hopefully find out more."

It wasn't an enjoyable evening.

Only a few hours after the seemingly always-optimistic Iginla said those words, players' association executive director Donald Fehr and NHL commissioner Gary Bettman publicly said negotiations are off.

First, though, Fehr, after an hour-long meeting with NHL deputy commissioner Bill Daly, said the sides were close to a settlement.

(It was a surprising statement since he, earlier in the day, asked the NHL to bring a mediator into the fray again, which didn't work last week.)

Then, the real craziness began. Fehr said Daly left a voicemail saying the league had rejected the latest proposal from the union.

Soon, Bettman and Daly addressed the media and said they had given the NHLPA a take-it-or-leave-it offer Wednesday and weren't going to negotiate off it, only to be given a counter-proposal.

In turn, Bettman said the league's proposal was off the table.

Even with harsh statements from a select few owners, it's hard to believe all hope is lost, but such theatre appears par for the course during this work stoppage.

Still, who can be sure what's going to happen?

In theory, the sides aren't that far off from coming to terms, even in what appears to be a fractured relationship.

But the possibility of the union looking at the process of decertification or disclaimer of interest looms larger, even though nobody can fully predict what will happen if they go that route.

Or, maybe one side will blink, change their tune and we'll see hockey in the next month.

The NHL's response smacks of wanting to test the resolve of the 700-strong skaters one last time.

Likewise, the NHLPA may be stalling while trying to grab hold of a few more dollars before finally coming to terms.

Or, we may as well get ready to see another lost season.

After Thursday's turn of events, the optimism which came from the talks with just the players and the owners had subsided.

Flames' association representative Matt Stajan politely declined to comment after the evening's turn of events, but earlier in the day said he wouldn't allow himself to become too excited a new CBA was coming soon.

"I've avoided being optimistic or pessimistic," Stajan said. "You can't guess or hope anymore. When a deal gets done, it's gonna get done. We're all hopeful. We all want to play. But there's a lot that goes into it."

And just think, Iginla and a bunch of other Flames decided to skate with the Dinos to increase their preparation for a potential season.

So much for those hopes.

"I've been hoping for three months we were going to get back at it, and it sounds like they've been working away at it, and that's great. Hopefully it gets a deal done," Iginla said.

"It was good to come out and do something different. We've been doing stuff pretty similar for three months, skating together and trying to stay in shape, so it was fun to have more bodies and different competition.

"It was fun to be out with UofC guys, and good to get closer to a game style."

After Thursday's turn of events, it appears game-action won't be happening for a long time, yet.

Calgary Sun: LOADED: 12.07.2012

645900 Carolina Hurricanes

NHL turns aside players' latest offer

By Chip Alexander –

AP NHL commissioner Gary Bettman speaks to reporters after an NHL Board of Governors meeting, Wednesday, Dec. 5, 2012 in New York. The league and the players' association have cleared their schedules with progress being made in collective bargaining talks.

For a few fleeting minutes Thursday night, it appeared the National Hockey League might soon be back on the ice.

Then, in a matter of minutes, the labor negotiations grew chilly again.

After lengthy and promising collective bargaining discussions Tuesday and Wednesday in New York involving NHL owners and players – both sides

used the word "candid" – the NHL Players Association made a proposal Thursday it believed could end the lockout and jump-start the 2012-13 season.

NHLPA executive director Donald Fehr told the media there was agreement with the league on some of the major CBA issues, leading many to wonder if the labor impasse was nearing an end.

But soon after Fehr left the media briefing, he was back in front of the microphone. NHL deputy commissioner Bill Daly, he said, had left a voicemail saying the proposal was "not acceptable."

Just like that, it was back to crisis mode. NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman later told reporters no drop-dead date had been set for canceling the season, but he said the league would need to play at least 48 games to maintain the integrity of a season.

The entire 2004-05 season was lost because of labor issues and haggling over a CBA. Bettman canceled the season in February 2005, but could make the call sooner this time if there is no CBA resolution in the next few weeks.

All in all, Thursday was a topsy-turvy day of optimism, anger and accusations. Bettman was clearly frustrated – and mad at Fehr, who he claimed had made misleading comments.

"A great deal of optimism almost inexplicably disappeared," Bettman said. "I am disappointed beyond belief."

Bettman said the "make whole" provision for honoring player contracts, a key component in the league proposal, now would be pulled from the table. The NHL had offered to take \$300 million from its share of hockey-related revenue (HRR) to "make whole" the contracts during the length of the CBA.

The league is seeking a 10-year CBA that has an opt-out after eight years. The union countered with an eight-year CBA with an opt-out after six years.

The league also proposed that new contracts be limited to five years in length; the union wanted eight years.

Daly said the league would not budge off the demand for a 10-year CBA or the five-year limits, which he called "a hill we will die on."

At Bettman's request, six owners and 18 players met Tuesday and Wednesday, with Bettman and Fehr out of the room. The Tuesday sessions, the owners agreed, were productive, informative and encouraging.

But the owners claimed the tone of the meetings changed Wednesday. The players, they said, focused on other issues and had other demands.

The players requested that Fehr rejoin the meetings Thursday. Bettman again stayed away and the meeting – with four owners in attendance – was brief.

"I must admit that I was shocked at how things have played out over the last 48 hours," Toronto Maple Leafs owner Larry Tanenbaum said. "The sessions on Tuesday felt cooperative with an air of goodwill. I was optimistic and conveyed my optimism to the board of governors at our Wednesday meeting.

"However, when we reconvened with the players on Wednesday afternoon, it was like someone had thrown a switch. ... I question whether the union is interested in making an agreement."

News Observer LOADED: 12.07.2012

645901 Chicago Blackhawks

NHL to players: Let's not make a deal

By Chris Kuc,

It was the most bizarre day of negotiations in a process that already has been nothing short of dizzying.

Even while NHLPA executive director Donald Fehr was holding a news conference in New York on Thursday saying he believed a deal with the NHL on a new collective bargaining agreement was close, the league was

leaving a voicemail to a key union negotiator saying it was rejecting the union's latest proposal and pulling parts of its offer off the table.

After the dust had settled, the only thing clear is that the owners lockout that reached its 82nd day Thursday continues with no end in sight and the possibility of a lost season looms larger.

"It looks like this is not going to be resolved in the immediate future," Fehr told reporters a few minutes after saying the sides had agreed on the most significant financial issues, including the league's Make Whole proposal to pay all contracts in full during a new CBA.

"We are clearly very close, if not on top of one another, in connection with most of the major issues. It comes as a disappointment, obviously."

NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman later said it was "almost incomprehensible" that Fehr believed the sides were so close and that it had expected the NHLPA to say "yes or no" to its latest offer and instead got a counteroffer it deemed unacceptable.

"We have moved dramatically and we are proposing a long-term system that will pay the players billions and billions over its term," Bettman said. "I am disappointed beyond belief that we are where we are (Thursday night)."

Even if the sides were close to agreeing on the key financial issues — which the league disputes — the NHL is not budging on its proposal of a five-year limit on player contracts and the desire for a 10-year CBA (with an escape clause after eight years). The union has proposed an eight-year CBA with an opt-out option after six years.

The NHLPA also has proposed a maximum of eight years to a player contract. Deputy Commissioner Bill Daly called the term limit on contracts, "the hill we will die on."

Thursday's developments came after two days of intense negotiations that included a group of players meeting six owners in an effort to end the stalemate that began Sept. 15 and has caused the cancellation of games through Dec. 14.

"It's extremely disappointing that we've made another offer to come so close and we're apparently not any closer than before," Hawks defenseman Steve Montador, a member of the union's negotiating committee, said via email. "(It's) saddening at this point."

It's expected the union will look further into decertification or filing a disclaimer of interest, which would take the process into the court system.

Bettman said he could not foresee the season being any fewer than 48 games so time is running out and the sides are not expected to meet in the next few days.

Chicago Tribune LOADED: 12.07.2012

645902 Chicago Blackhawks

Gary Bettman, Don Fehr to rejoin NHL labor talks

By Helene Elliott

NEW YORK—NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman and NHL Players' Assn. Executive Director Donald Fehr were poised to rejoin labor negotiations Thursday after moving aside to let their respective top lieutenants preside over the talks for two days.

The change comes at a critical juncture in the discussions, which produced some movement on each side on Tuesday and Wednesday. However, left unresolved were key issues such as the league's insistence on a five-year cap on contracts and a maximum 5% salary variance from year to year.

The NHL did throw in a new wrinkle by proposing that teams would be allowed to re-sign their own free agents for seven years, not five. The NBA has a similar free-agency provision.

NHL Deputy Commissioner Bill Daly and NHLPA Special Counsel Steve Fehr led each delegation on Tuesday and Wednesday with the participation of six owners and 18 players. The sides talked for about 20 hours over the two days, sometimes meeting among themselves and sometimes moving from one floor of a Manhattan hotel to another to gather with the opposite side.

The NHL agreed to increase its "make whole" payments to \$300 million from its previous offer of \$211 million, but the NHLPA had asked for \$393 million to ensure players would be paid the full value of their contracts as they make the transition from getting a 57% share of hockey-related revenue to 50%. The NHLPA was also proposing a five-year deal and was adamantly opposed to the 10-year term the league wants.

The NHL did agree to leave the conditions for free agency and salary arbitration as they were under the last collective bargaining agreement, which expired on Sept. 15.

Moderates such as Pittsburgh Penguins owner Ron Burkle, a California billionaire who made his fortune in the supermarket industry, helped keep the process moving Wednesday when the sides hit snags and emotions grew heated. Burkle and others such as Tampa Bay owner Jeff Vinik were brought in to ease communication, which had grown testy when hardliner Jeremy Jacobs of Boston took part in the negotiations. Burkle's influence was often felt and he is expected to remain a pivotal figure.

Pensions were also believed to be a point of contention, though it's likely that such issues can be resolved without much difficulty once the key points are agreed upon.

Bettman and Donald Fehr were frequently consulted during the two days they weren't actually in the negotiating rooms, but the dynamics of the talks are sure to change once they return. Does that mean a turn for the worse? Not necessarily. Both will have to be present once a deal is finally reached. But there are many potential pitfalls between where the sides stand now and the point where a deal is in sight. And any day, the league is sure to apply more pressure by canceling games beyond Dec. 14, the point it has already wiped the schedule clean.

The league and PA are meeting in private rooms at the New York hotel where they've met the last few days, beyond the reach of reporters. We'll try to provide some updates later.

Chicago Tribune LOADED: 12.07.2012

645903 Chicago Blackhawks

NHL owners express their disappointment

TRACEY MYERS

NHL owners have been quiet during this lockout, a league bylaw forbids them to, and stiff monetary penalties are possible if they do. But after being part of talks with players this past week in New York, four owners released statements regarding the now broken-down collective bargaining agreement negotiations.

Some statements were strong. Larry Tanenbaum, chairman of Maple Leaf Sports & Entertainment, stated, "I question whether the union is interested in making an agreement. I am very disappointed and disillusioned. Had I not experienced this process myself, I might not have believed it."

Here are the four owners' statements, per the NHL, in their entirety:

Ron Burkle, Co-Owner, Pittsburgh Penguins

"The idea to put players and owners together in the same room was a refreshing idea. Commissioner Bettman should be thanked for proposing it and the Fehrs should be thanked for agreeing to it.

The players came with a strong desire to get back to playing hockey. They were professional and did a good job of expressing their concerns and listening to ours. We wanted to move quickly and decisively. We have all spent too much time without any real progress at the expense of our fans, our sponsors and the communities we serve. It was time to make bold moves and get a deal. Many people think we got over our skis and they are probably right, but we wanted to do everything we could to get back to hockey now. We didn't hold back.

We made substantial movement on our end quickly, but unfortunately that was not met with the same level of movement from the other side. The players asked us to be patient and keep working with them. It's not what they do and they wanted us to know they were committed.

We understood and appreciate their situation. We came back with an aggressive commitment to pensions which we felt was well received. We

needed a response on key items that were important to us, but we were optimistic that we were down to very few issues. I believe a deal was within reach.

We were therefore surprised when the Fehrs made a unilateral and "non-negotiable" decision - which is their right, to end the player/owner process that has moved us farther in two days than we have moved at any time in the past months.

I want to thank the players involved for their hard work as we tried to reach a deal.

I hope that going backwards does not prevent a deal."

Mark Chipman, Chairman and Governor, Winnipeg Jets:

"I'd like to thank the NHL for giving me the opportunity to participate in this very important process.

I came here optimistic that we could find a solution. That sense of optimism grew after our first few sessions, including the small group discussions late last night.

Regrettably, we have been unable to close the divide on some critical issues that we feel are essential to the immediate and long-term health of our game.

While I sense there are some members of the players association that understand our perspective on these issues, clearly there are many that don't.

I am deeply disappointed that we were unable to bring this extremely unfortunate situation to a successful conclusion and I wish to apologize to our fans and sponsors for letting them down."

Larry Tanenbaum, Chairman of the Board, Maple Leaf Sports and Entertainment

"I was pleased to be asked to join the Player/Owner negotiation sessions. I had hoped that my perspective both as a businessman and as one of the owners of the Toronto Maple Leafs would be helpful to the process. Like all other teams, this work stoppage has hurt our fans, our employees and our business. Neither the owners nor the players will ever recover the losses incurred with this work stoppage.

I understand how important it is to have a strong league and 30 healthy teams. I must admit that I was shocked at how things have played out over the last 48 hours. The sessions on Tuesday felt cooperative with an air of goodwill. I was optimistic and conveyed my optimism to the Board of Governors at our Wednesday meeting. However, when we reconvened with the players on Wednesday afternoon, it was like someone had thrown a switch. The atmosphere had completely changed. Nevertheless, the owners tried to push forward and made a number of concessions and proposals, which were not well-received. I question whether the union is interested in making an agreement.

I am very disappointed and disillusioned. Had I not experienced this process myself, I might not have believed it. Like all hockey fans, I am hopeful this situation can be resolved as soon as possible. I miss our game."

Jeff Vinik, Chairman and Governor, Tampa Bay Lightning:

"After working this week with our players toward what we hoped would be a new agreement, owners presented a proposal we believed would benefit those great players, ownership, and, ultimately, our fans for many years to come. While trust was built and progress was made along the way, unfortunately, our proposal was rejected by the Union's leadership. My love for the game is only superseded by my commitment to our fans and I hold out hope we can soon join with our players and return the game back to its rightful place on the ice."

Comcast SportsNet.com LOADED: 12.07.2012

645904 Chicago Blackhawks

NHL rejects latest players' proposal

TRACEY MYERS

The optimism was short lived. According to the NHL, though, it was actually non-existent. And in a matter of minutes, the thought that hockey would convene soon evaporated into a mist of anger, frustration – and uncertainty.

The NHL succinctly rejected the NHLPA's latest proposal minutes after the players' association announced it in a press conference – and they did it via voicemail, no less. And judging from the very angry reaction from NHL commissioner Gary Bettman, things have definitely taken an ugly turn in negotiations.

"I'm disappointed beyond belief that we are where we are tonight," Bettman said in a press conference. "The characterization that I just heard that we were close reminds me the last time the union said we were close, and we were a billion dollars apart. Spinning us into an emotional frenzy over maybe we're close and we're going to be playing hockey tomorrow is terribly unfair to our fans and this process."

The "characterization" Bettman spoke of came about an hour before, when NHLPA executive director Donald Fehr held a press conference on his group's latest proposal. Fehr said the NHLPA and the league "had a complete agreement on dollars. We expect this to put us on a quick end to this dispute." The players' proposal, according to Fehr, was an eight-year CBA and player contracts maxed out at eight years.

But Bettman said it wasn't about the players coming up with a new proposal. He said it was about them saying "yes or no" to key elements that the owners wanted, and a yes leading to more talks. Those included a long CBA – the league wants 10 years – and the five-year term limit on player contracts, which deputy commissioner Bill Daly said "is the hill we will die on."

Following the PA's rejected proposal, Fehr said "this looks like it's not going to be resolved in the immediate future. We are clearly very close, if not on top of one another in connection with most of the major issues."

Again, it's looking like two sides speaking different languages. Fehr saying they're close, Bettman saying they're nowhere near being so. And after Thursday's events, Bettman said elements the league added, including the "make whole" provision, are now off the table.

Blackhawks forward Jamal Mayers, who was present for this week's talks in New York City, said "it's unfathomable that we moved as much as we did in an attempt to make the deal. And as close as we are, to find ourselves that far away or having the owners effectively walk away and taking everything off the table is unfortunate."

It was an ugly end to a week that started off positive in terms of talks. The owners and players, minus Bettman and Fehr, seemed to develop good banter and even progress toward a new CBA. But things apparently changed on Wednesday. And by Thursday players were meeting with NHL brass, and the four remaining owners who had talked through Wednesday were leaving town.

And in another twist, four of the owners who were involved in this week's talks issued statements regarding them. Owners to this point had been largely silent, as they faced big fines for talking.

Pittsburgh co-owner Ron Burkle said it seemed progress was being made in owner/player talks, and "therefore we were surprised when Fehr made a unilateral and "non-negotiable" decision -- which is their right -- to end the player/owner process that has moved us farther in two days than we have moved at any time in the past months. I want to thank the players involved for their hard work as we tried to reach a deal I hope that going backwards does not prevent a deal."

The optimism is gone for now. No more talks are currently planned. Bettman told NYC media that no drop-dead date to cancel the season has been set, but he also said he couldn't see the league playing anything less than a 48-game schedule.

There have been episodes in these negotiations that have been anything from interesting to bizarre. The latest events are just sad.

Comcast SportsNet.com LOADED: 12.07.2012

645905 Chicago Blackhawks

NHLPA hopes to give mediator a second shot

TRACEY MYERS

The day after a marathon session of talks with the NHL, the NHLPA has requested a federal mediator to join the collective bargaining agreement discussions again.

As the two sides reconvened on Thursday, the players' association asked that mediators once again be part of the negotiation process. The NHL has yet to agree to it.

The league and NHLPA agreed to use U.S. federal mediators during negotiation talks last week. It didn't last long: last Thursday, just two days into talks, mediators said the NHL and PA were still too far apart and that further talks (at that time) weren't going to be productive. But in a statement, NHLPA executive Donald Fehr said "the mediators indicated that they would stay in contact with the league and the NHLPA, and would call the parties back together when they thought the time was right."

Well, the mediators didn't call the parties. But apparently the players' association felt the time was right to bring mediation back into the fold.

Comcast SportsNet.com LOADED: 12.07.2012

645906 Columbus Blue Jackets

Bob Hunter commentary: No NHL? No problem for fans

By Bob Hunter

If the NHL weren't in the midst of a lockout that sounds like it might never end, part of last night might have been spent watching a hockey game. Maybe not — before the league and its players' association embarked on an inexplicable path to self-destruction, the Blue Jackets had an off day before playing in Anaheim, Calif., tonight — but that's not the point. As it was, it never even occurred to me that hockey wasn't being played.

As a free-agent TV viewer, a smorgasbord of sports events awaited me. There were three college basketball games with a fair amount of local interest — Cincinnati against Arkansas-Little Rock, Xavier against Vanderbilt and Ohio State's next opponent, Long Beach State, against Syracuse. There were two NBA games (New York-Miami and Dallas-Phoenix), a Big Ten women's game (Iowa State-Iowa), a golf tournament (the Australian Open), boxing, a college football awards show and the favorite of most American sports viewers, an NFL game between Oakland and Denver.

There were plenty of ways for me to get my sports fix without the NHL. There were enough offerings to indulge in channel surfing during timeouts and between plays with no shortage of places to land. No hockey simply meant sampling one of the other options. There was no hockey withdrawal, and I really like hockey. There was a time when sports work stoppages were acutely felt by the nation's fans. When the NFL players struck from Sept. 21 to Nov. 16, 1982, in effect shorting the season from 16 games for each team to nine, it hurt. Many of us live for the NFL, and Sundays weren't the same without it. We missed our football and we desperately wanted it back.

When Major League Baseball players struck on Aug. 12, 1994, wiping out the rest of the season and the World Series, it mattered. It was the first work stoppage that caused the cancellation of a postseason in a North American sports league, and it felt like a hard punch in the stomach. It was the first time since 1904 that the World Series hadn't been played, and it made fans sad and angry.

An NBA lockout from July 1, 1998, to Jan. 6, 1999, shortened the season from 82 to 50 games and frustrated many fans. The league enjoyed immense popularity — the '98 NBA Finals set a ratings record that still stands — and the league absorbed an attendance and ratings hit that took years to recover.

There have been other stoppages in other sports, but fans felt robbed in each of those because of the duration, the sense of loss and the lack of viable alternatives. This lockout will be remembered for the duration, and not so much for the other two.

When NHL commissioner Gary Bettman made his comment about the fans' loyalty when this whole thing started, a comment some interpreted as calling fans suckers for their loyalty after a work stoppage, it made me

wonder if he realized how much easier it is for them to do without his product than it used to be.

Cable sports offerings continue to explode. Even in 2004, when the NHL canceled its season, there was no football on Thursday nights in the NFL. The Big Ten Network launched in 2007. The NBC Sports Network was still the Outdoor Life Network. There was no ESPN3.

The hockey diehards will always suffer serious withdrawal. But teams in markets such as this one are dependent on the fans on the fringe, the ones who get on the bandwagon when the team is good and jump off when it's bad, the ones who are always trying to decide whether to spend entertainment dollars on a concert, a basketball or a hockey game, and make the same kinds of decisions when they kick back in front of their big screen TV.

For them, losing a season only means that they have to switch channels.

Columbus Dispatch LOADED: 12.07.2012

645907 Columbus Blue Jackets

Latest falling out frazzles nerves

By Shawn Mitchell

Three days of intense NHL labor negotiations came to a sudden and emotional end yesterday in New York, where the league emphatically rejected the latest offer from its players' union in a fashion that bordered on bizarre and left NHL commissioner Gary Bettman visibly shaken.

"I am disappointed beyond belief that we are where we are," Bettman said, casting doubt on whether any of the season can be saved. "Sometimes you feel like you're chasing your tail in this process."

After a brief meeting between the sides yesterday afternoon, league officials left the hotel where talks have taken place this week with the union's newest proposal. The offer was unexpected, Bettman said. The NHL was simply waiting for a yes or no answer on a proposal it offered on Wednesday.

As the league reviewed the offer, union executive director Donald Fehr — flanked by several players who participated in talks — addressed the media and said only a few issues remained to be resolved. "We think there is a complete agreement on dollars," Fehr said. "If that's the case, and we think it is, there wouldn't seem to be very much reason why we shouldn't be able to conclude an agreement in the near term."

But as Fehr was speaking, NHL deputy commissioner Bill Daly was leaving a voice mail for union special counsel Steve Fehr. The message: The offer was unacceptable, and there was no need for the union to stick around for further discussions.

"It comes as a disappointment, obviously," Donald Fehr said, after being told.

He declined to discuss the possibility of decertification or dissolution of the union, thought to be the union's final option to force an end to the lockout.

Later, Bettman, who had remained silent for most of the week, spoke to the media for 34 minutes. He berated the union's leadership for misleading fans, saying the positive gains from two days of marathon face-to-face negotiations between owners and players took an ugly turn on Wednesday.

"This is not the first time (Fehr) described things as close when they weren't," Bettman said. "I don't know why he did that. I find it almost incomprehensible that he did that."

Daly said the response of the players to an NHL proposal on Wednesday night was "quite frankly insulting" to the four owners who were participating in evening discussions.

But they agreed to stay, Daly said, if players agreed to the league's stance on core issues, including the length of a new collective-bargaining agreement and limits on player contract terms. Daly called the latter issue "the hill we will die on."

The NHL wants a 10-year agreement with the option to opt out after eight years. The players offered an eight-year deal with an opt out after six years.

The league wants a five-year limit on player contracts — seven if a team resigns a current player. The union proposed eight-year limits.

Fehr indicated that an agreement had been reached on player pensions, and the sides were close to agreeing on a system under which existing player contracts would be honored. But any gains made during the past three days were lost in the rancor.

"Anything we put on the table this week is off the table," said Bettman, about the time some players entered the room to hear his comments.

It was unclear when the sides will meet again. Another round of canceled games is expected to be announced as soon as today.

Bettman said there is no date for an agreement to be in place before the season would be canceled, but he said he can't imagine playing a season of fewer than 48 games. The NHL played 48 games in the lockout-shortened 1994-95 season that began on Jan. 20.

Toronto Maple Leafs owner Larry Tanenbaum, one of four owners to participate in talks on Wednesday, said he was "very disappointed and disillusioned" in a statement provided by the league.

"Had I not experienced this process myself, I might not have believed it," Tanenbaum said.

Columbus Dispatch LOADED: 12.07.2012

645908 Columbus Blue Jackets

Bob Hunter commentary: No NHL this season? No problem for fans

By Bob Hunter

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Maybe not — before the league and its players' association embarked on an inexplicable path to self-destruction, the Blue Jackets had an off day before playing in Anaheim, Calif., tonight — but that's not the point.

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645909 Dallas Stars

NHL negotiations end 'in flames' as sides get close then go separate ways

MIKE HEIKA

This was the toughest week of the 2012 Lockout for fans of the NHL.

What started as a fantastically optimistic week ended in flames on Thursday night (or at least, it seems like the week is ended in terms of negotiations).

At the behest of Commissioner Gary Bettman, the two sides changed the negotiating groups this week. Bettman and Union chief Donald Fehr stayed out of meetings, and key players met directly with key owners. Among them were Pittsburgh Penguins co-owner Ron Burkle and Pittsburgh Penguins center Sidney Crosby. The two helped bridge a lot of the gaps and brought the two sides together, and there was some talk that they had actually been planning this intervention for a while.

That happened on Tuesday, and there was much optimism heading into the Board of Governors meeting on Wednesday. While the BOG allowed a little realism to sneak into the negotiation, discussions continued on Wednesday night and Thursday, and it appeared that there really could be an agreement on the horizon.

That was bolstered on Thursday when Fehr came out and said after meetings that he was optimistic and things were close. However, minutes later, Bettman and Deputy Commissioner Bill Daly followed and said things were going horribly and that some of the things offered in the past two days were now off the table.

It was a chilling moment for all involved.

Basically, Bettman said the NHLPA counteroffer was not close to what the league was seeking, and that Fehr had no right to characterize the feeling as optimistic.

"I am disappointed beyond belief where we are tonight," Bettman said. "We are going to have to take a deep breath and regroup... We had put in place a process that we hoped would move it along. That happened on Tuesday. The sense reported to me was optimism hope. Players deserve better, fans deserve better and the game deserves better."

Daly said that owners are disappointed.

"We got a response that was insulting to our owners," Daly added. "They wanted to leave the room."

Among the key points of contention are the fact the players want their current contracts to be honored, so both sides are trying to negotiate a "make whole" provision that will allow the two sides to get down to a 50-50 split over time. But other key issues include contract length. The NHL proposed 5 year maximum length for a new signing and a seven-year maximum length for a team re-signing its own player (UFA, RFA or extension). The NHLPA suggested eight-year limits.

Daly said the contract limit was an argument the league was willing to fight, calling it "the hill we'll die on."

Fehr said the players offered "a clear outline to end this dispute," and seemed stunned that the NHL saw the two sides as so far apart. He said: "The players have gone a very, very long way. The players have done far and away the lion's share."

There still is time to get a deal done and save the season, but it sure looks bleak tonight. The problem is there is so much confusion. Either one side is playing the other or both sides really have no idea what the other is saying. Either way, it's not encouraging.

Dallas Morning News LOADED: 12.07.2012

645910 Dallas Stars

Stardate: Dec. 6, 2006 - Turco secures a second straight shutout vs. Coyotes

Mike Heika

A series of Stars games and moments that happened on a specific date. The following appeared in the Dec. 7, 2006 editions of The Dallas Morning News.

Marty Turco won't let the Stars lose right now.

With an injury-riddled lineup in front of him and a system that's pushing for 1-0 wins, Turco has helped the Stars rebound from a three-game losing streak with three straight wins and two consecutive shutouts.

Turco posted a 3-0 win over the Phoenix Coyotes on Wednesday at American Airlines Center, tying Ed Belfour for the franchise record in shutouts at 27 and closing in on Belfour's franchise-record 160 victories (Turco now has 151).

"They're asking him to be our best player, and he's responding to it," defenseman Stephane Robidas said. "He's been terrific."

Turco credited his team's defense against the Coyotes, and he had a good case. Though he faced 25 shots, many were harmless or from the perimeter. Dallas shut out the Coyotes for the third time this season in large part because it played a near perfect team game.

"The guys did such a great job in front of me, and there wasn't the sustained pressure on us because of the play of the guys in front of me," Turco said. "We have tightened up with some players out of the lineup. We know how important it is to protect home ice."

Dallas moved to 11-2 at home this season and 19-9-0 overall. Phoenix ended a three-game winning streak and falls to 10-16-0.

The win was huge for the Stars, who are in the middle of five games in eight nights while dealing with the biggest group of injuries they have seen in the last two seasons.

Mike Modano (hip/groin), Brenden Morrow (groin), Eric Lindros (foot), Antti Miettinen (lower body) and Steve Ott (ankle) all missed the game. Still, the return of Darryl Sydor and Trevor Daley from injury gave the Stars a healthy defense corps, and the team took advantage of that.

"They're great; they're unbelievable, they are so good defensively," Phoenix captain Shane Doan said. "Obviously, they got a couple of breaks, and Marty played great for them."

While Turco was spectacular in taking a 4-3 shootout win against Minnesota on Saturday and acrobatic in beating San Jose, 1-0, on Monday, he was more controlled and reserved against the Coyotes. The Stars took a 1-0 lead at the 2:03 mark on a 5-on-3 power play. Sergei Zubov scored through a Jere Lehtinen screen, and the Stars were able to play safe the rest of the way.

Lehtinen set up Mike Ribeiro for a goal late in the second period, and Philippe Boucher added an extra insurance marker with another 5-on-3 goal at the 17:30 mark of the third period.

Although Ribeiro had a goal and an assist, Zubov a goal and an assist and Lehtinen one of his best overall games of the season, the Stars won as a team. It was maybe the best sign that they can handle hardship.

"It was something we needed to do; we needed to step up," Robidas said. "Marty obviously has, and we had to step up to help him."

Consider it a team effort.

"Obviously, I worked on some things when I went out [a week ago], and I feel better about that. I feel like I'm more on my game," Turco said. "But this has always been about how we play as a team. That's the most important thing."

Dallas Morning News LOADED: 12.07.2012

645911 Detroit Red Wings

Winging It In Motown: Give credit to Sidney Crosby for diving headfirst into NHL labor talks

By Graham Hathway

The last two days of CBA negotiations in the NHL have been the most exciting so far in the entire process. We have reached a critical point as the calendar has turned to December, and the clock is ticking as we inch closer to the date that the season may be lost.

The issues are the same, but the key players have changed. Last week, after mediators failed to make any real headway, the suggestion was raised that Gary Bettman and Don Fehr remove themselves from the negotiations and the owners and players met face-to-face.

A group of six owners and 18 players (a number that has gone up and down at times) have spent the past 48 hours having open, candid discussions and all appearances are that progress is being made, even if a deal is not imminent.

Look, we all know that a deal is going to be signed at some point. It's not a given that we will see NHL hockey this year just yet, but there will come a time where both sides realize there is middle ground and strike a deal that (hopefully) brings prolonged labor peace.

When that happens, the natural reaction will be to bestow praise on those that made it happen. In the past two days, reports have emerged that a couple of Pittsburgh guys, Ron Burkle and Sidney Crosby, have been very influential in the room and cooled some of the hot tempers that exist in the room.

What this has done is led some people to anoint Burkle and Crosby as the "saviors" of the NHL, something that is going to make a lot of people very angry. There are some out there who will non-ironically spout things like "Sidney Crosby is the greatest player and person ever because he literally saved hockey from itself," leading them to be pelted with rotten fruit and beaver skins.

Personally, I'm glad that Crosby dove headfirst into negotiations. Whether people like it or not, he is a mega-star and one of the faces of the league. He has generated a lot of buzz for the NHL, and that has led to increased revenue. To disregard what he has to say would be a mistake because an unhappy superstar could lead to a decrease in the amount of money lining the owners' pockets.

But it would be a mistake to suggest that Sidney Crosby and his high school education are leading the charge against the owners, especially since you've got George Parros and Kevin Westgarth and their Princeton degrees sitting at the same table. He may be making suggestions regarding what he'd like to see in the new deal, but his voice is one of 18 in that room, many of whom have college educations.

That also doesn't take into account that whether they're in the room or not, Bettman and Fehr are still exerting influence over the negotiations. I don't think for a second that a deal is going to get done without their knowledge and input, especially Fehr because he is a professional who negotiates labor deals for a living while his constituents play a game.

The same goes with Bettman. Jeremy Jacobs may be the heavy-handed meanie who is driving this lockout, and Burkle may be the voice of reason within the room, but Bettman is the leader, and whether he's receiving marching orders from the 29 owners or providing the strategy himself, he's an integral part of this entire process, whether he's in the room or not.

But in the end, does it matter? Much like the so-called "PR War", the idea that one or two guys are the difference between there being NHL hockey this year or not is irrelevant. When you think about it deep down in your soul, do you really care whether it was Sidney Crosby that "saved" the season? Yes, it would mean he'd be featured even more than he is now, but if you're worried about the health of the NHL after yet another work stoppage, then shouldn't his face be used to bring fans back? And wouldn't you just be happy that the NHL was back, regardless of who made it happen?

The idea that any one person is responsible for a CBA being signed is short-sighted and wrong. The process is ongoing, and it's going to take contributions and engagement from 29 owners and 700+ players. That's the only way this deal gets done and we get our NHL back.

Detroit Free Press LOADED: 12.07.2012

645912 Detroit Red Wings

Red Wings' Danny Cleary fears season in danger after NHL talks fail

By Helene St. James

The labor dispute that has prevented the Red Wings from playing since mid-September shows no signs of ending after Thursday's talks ended in farce, anger and overwhelming disappointment.

Minutes after Players Association executive director Don Fehr spun a picture so bright it seemed a new collective bargaining agreement was near, NHL commissioner Gary Bettman tore that scenario thoroughly to pieces.

That's left Wings forward and player representative Danny Cleary worried the 2012-13 season may be lost.

"Am I afraid for season being in jeopardy? Yes," he said. "That's an understatement. Everybody should be."

"The immediate reaction from players is - I don't know if there's a word to describe the amount of disappointment."

That won't change immediately, as the NHL has told the PA there won't be any meetings today.

In a matter of one hour Thursday evening, events swung with momentum befitting a playoff game. Fehr held the first press conference, describing the sides as close on the big issues.

About 15 minutes after he finished, he came back and said the NHL had left a voicemail saying the offer was unacceptable. Half an hour later, Bettman volleyed with furious precision, saying, "I'm disappointed beyond belief," that the sides are still far apart, that all offers are off the table now and "the process is over."

In effect, this is what happened: The PA agreed to a transition payment, or "make whole" money, of \$300 million, and to the owners' proposal on pensions.

Owners proposed a contract limit of five years (seven to resign a team's own free agents) and a 5% limit on year-to-year salary variability. The PA is against that model, fearing it will devastate the middle-tier guys and create a significant discrepancy in salaries, similar to the NBA. The PA was offering eight-year term limits with 25% variance applied to contracts of seven years.

This is so contentious an issue that in a soundbite worthy of a presidential election year, deputy commissioner Bill Daly said five-to-seven year limits on player contracts is "the hill we will die on."

There was also disagreement as the owners want a 10-year CBA with an out-clause after eight years, while the PA is seeking an eight-year deal with an option to get out after six years.

Bettman described owners as having been conciliatory and giving. Cleary countered, saying, "we feel and we believe we have given them quite a lot, and we haven't received anything in return. It's sad, really."

The Players Association will consider leveling disbanding as its next move. That would free them to sue owners for damages triple their contracts. It worked recently as a negotiation ploy in labor disputes for the NFL and NBA players.

"Decertification will be looked at within days," Cleary said. "I'm not saying it's going to happen, but it's going to be addressed."

Bettman said there is no drop-dead date set for when the NHL will cancel the season. The last time around, in 2004-05, it didn't happen until mid-February, but it's highly unlikely the NHL would wait that long this time.

Detroit Free Press LOADED: 12.07.2012

645913 Detroit Red Wings

Moderates in NHL talks impasse must make a stand

Gregg Krupa

The ridiculous just became the disreputable.

For the second time in two weeks, the NHL owners and players appeared to make progress toward an agreement Tuesday and Wednesday. Then, after a brief session Thursday, not attended by owners or commissioner Gary Bettman, the players received a voice mail saying their most recent offer is "unacceptable."

A voice mail!

Let them all wallow in their infamy, and let us look forward.

What happened to move things along, before it all came crashing down, again? Bettman finally let some moderate owners, like Ron Burkle of the Penguins and Jeff Vinik of the Lightning, into the room, and the players exhibited a let's-make-a-deal thoughtfulness.

Sidney Crosby reportedly conspired with Burkle about some tactics to temper the disgust and foment discussions. Reasonable voices like Martin St. Louis, who earlier helped create a proposal that included a number of concessions to the owners, were suddenly in vogue.

Finally, at least for 24 hours, it was a different world.

Novel, eh?

Where was this sensible approach to life, money and hockey last summer? What if they had actually begun negotiating a week after the Kings won the Stanley Cup?

What if they had begun laying the foundation for serious negotiations in the summer of 2011?

Instead, what we have witnessed, and what the good intentions yielded, once again, is the owners' strategy of shock and awe. So much for owning an NHL team for the love of hockey and the opportunity to nurture a public trust.

Nonsense needs to stop

This absurdity, on both sides — although Bettman and the owners are considerably more responsible for this fiasco than the players and Donald Fehr — must cease.

Stopping it is ultimately more important than whether hockey is played this season.

Progressive members of both groups need to make a stand, both to get a deal done and, even after it is signed, to fix the financial model of the NHL.

Even if it means deserting their colleagues and becoming renegades, even if it means meeting in secret beginning next summer, five, eight or 10 years in advance of the start of the next negotiations, reformist elements must emerge, coalesce and begin a new process for labor relations and, perhaps, for operating the NHL.

It has come to that.

The rebels would be accused of treason.

Let the hardliners call it that, if they will. But there once was a guy named Talleyrand, the French statesman who betrayed the Roman Catholic priesthood, the Acien Regime, the French Revolution, Napoleon and the Restoration, all in about 30 years.

"Treason, Sire," Talleyrand said, "is a matter of dates."

In other words, what looks like betrayal today may look like heroism tomorrow.

Some candidates?

Burkle is one. Any owner who wears tennis shoes to bargaining sessions may well have the intestinal fortitude and the mischievous spirit required.

But there are others: Vinik, Larry Tannenbaum of the Maple Leafs and Mark Chipman of the Jets.

Iltch could make name

And let us consider a new man, just to push things a bit: Christopher Iltch.

At some point in his life, the emerging scion of the family will have to distinguish himself from his parents' enormous reputations, showing that he, too, is a sporting man with a love for the game and his own sense of duty toward the red winged-wheel and the city of Detroit.

What might otherwise take two decades for him to prove to Detroit sports fans, he could accomplish in a bolt of lightning.

Besides, when your family gets the state Senate — particularly this state Senate — to hand them the permission to garner \$13 million per year from a nearly bankrupt city, the citizens of Hockeytown deserve a strident effort on their behalf to make sure the damnable league in which they own a franchise is not ruining small businesses downtown every time a collective bargaining agreement expires.

On the players' side, Crosby is ideally suited.

As Ted Lindsay's life reveals, kids growing up in Canada dreaming about nothing but playing in the NHL also know that strengthening the game is a patriotic duty.

Crosby also has a great relationship with Burkle and the Penguins' other owner, Mario Lemieux, so he has some protection.

Besides, in case you have not noticed, the media in Canada will do all it can do to shield Crosby from criticism.

Regardless, if enough moderate players and owners perceive all of this as insanity, they ought to start meeting next summer, someplace off the beaten path.

Newfoundland is quintessentially such a place.

Hey, how about Danny Cleary's house?

With Nicklas Lidstrom retired and Henrik Zetterberg out of town, Cleary has provided a lot of leadership on the home front.

And he has a bit of a mischievous look about him sometimes, does he not?

Detroit News LOADED: 12.07.2012

645914 Detroit Red Wings

NHL owners, players sever talks as 'major gulf' remains

By Ira Podell

New York — The NHL and the players' association are further apart than ever before.

Union executive director Donald Fehr began the first of his two news conferences Thursday night by proclaiming he believed the sides had agreements on such issues as actual dollars, and then returned moments later to reveal the NHL rejected everything his side offered.

Hot-button topics such as the "make-whole" provision on existing contracts not only weren't settled, but are no longer being offered by the league.

Forget that owners were willing to pay up to \$300 million to cover the costs, and Commissioner Gary Bettman countered by saying the entire concept is off the table — along with everything else the league offered during the previous two days of talks.

"They knew there was a major gulf between us and yet they came down here and told you we were close," deputy commissioner Bill Daly said about Fehr's remarks.

When the NHL agreed to increase its make-whole offer of deferred payments from \$211 million to \$300 million it was part of a proposed package that required the union to agree on three nonnegotiable points. Instead, the players' association accepted the raise in funds, but then made counterproposals on the issues the league stated had no wiggle room.

That ended Thursday's long-awaited meeting after just an hour and sent the NHL negotiating team back to the league office.

"I am disappointed beyond belief," Bettman said.

The sides won't meet face-to-face again before Saturday at the earliest. While Bettman insisted that a drop-dead date to have a deal that would preserve a season with "integrity" hasn't been established — even internally — clearly there isn't a whole lot of time to work out an agreement.

"I'm surprised," Pittsburgh Penguins star Sidney Crosby said. "We feel like we moved in their direction."

The 2004-05 season was lost completely before the players' association accepted a deal that included a salary cap for the first time. While no major philosophical issues such as that exist in these negotiations, the sides still don't appear to be ready to come to an agreement.

"It looks like this is not going to be resolved in the immediate future," Fehr said.

As he was painting a positive picture as far as the closeness of the fighting sides, Daly was calling Fehr's brother, Steve — the union's special counsel — to say that the NHL was rejecting the players' counteroffer. Once the union was unwilling to accept the league's three main conditions, everything else didn't matter.

"Not only is it unusual, I would be hard-pressed to think of anything comparable in my experience," Steve Fehr said of the instant rejection.

The NHL wants to limit personal player contracts to five years, and has elevated the issue to the highest level of importance.

"It's the hill we will die on," said Daly, who added that the owners were "insulted" by the players' response to the owners' offer Wednesday night.

The union countered with an offer of an eight-year maximum length with the variable in salary being no greater than a 25 percent difference between the highest-paid year of the deal and the lowest.

Talks resumed Tuesday night with owners and players in the room, and Bettman and Donald Fehr on the outside. It sparked what seemed to be the most optimistic developments in the lockout that has now lasted 82 days.

But the tenor began to change Wednesday, and discourse erupted on a wild Thursday night that featured three news conferences in the span of an hour. The sides went from not wanting to say much of anything Wednesday to not being able to stop voicing their opinions Thursday.

When the players suggested Wednesday night that they wanted Donald Fehr to rejoin the process Thursday, the NHL informed them that his inclusion could be a "deal-breaker."

"We thought we were getting close. There was definitely movement toward each other," Winnipeg Jets defenseman Ron Hainsey said. "As confident as some of us players are in the issues, we cannot close deals. I'd love to think I could, we cannot."

Donald and Steve Fehr were in Thursday's session, as were Daly and lead league counsel Bob Battersman. None of the six owners who attended the meetings Tuesday and Wednesday were present, though some players were.

Steve Fehr and a number of players stood in the back of the room with arms folded as Bettman and Daly stood at the podium to present the league's position.

There were already signs the process was breaking down earlier Thursday when the union requested that federal mediators rejoin the discussions. A similar request was turned down by the league earlier this week. Mediators

previously were unsuccessful in creating a breakthrough after two days of discussions last week.

Without mediation, and the NHL's preference to keep Donald Fehr away from the table, the players became a bit miffed.

Negotiations resumed a little after 2 p.m. Wednesday and proceeded in fits and starts as the league and the players' association searched for an agreement. As they had the day before, talks went deep into the night, breaking two hours for dinner before finishing in the early morning hours.

One point of contention is the length of a new contract, with owners looking for a 10-year pact, and players wanting a shorter term — perhaps five years. The league also is seeking to limit the length of individual player contracts to five years.

Some hope emerged Tuesday in the first round of talks that kept Bettman on the outside along with Fehr, while six owners and about 18 players talked inside. The positive feeling carried over into Wednesday morning when various team executives said they heard good reports during an NHL board of governors meeting.

"Regrettably, we have been unable to close the divide on some critical issues that we feel are essential to the immediate and long-term health of our game," Winnipeg Jets chairman Mark Chipman said in a statement released by the NHL. "While I sense there are some members of the players association that understand our perspective on these issues, clearly there are many that don't."

The sides are trying to avoid another lost season. The NHL became the first North American professional sports league to cancel a full year because of a labor dispute back in 2005. The deal reached then was in place until this September, and the lockout was enacted on Sept. 16 after that agreement expired.

All games through Dec. 14, along with the New Year's Day Winter Classic and the All-Star game, have been wiped off the schedule so far.

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645915 Detroit Red Wings

Red Wings' Danny Cleary fears for season, game after 'really, really bad day,' decertification next?

Ansar Khan

Detroit Red Wings forward Danny Cleary described players as having a mixture of anger, disappointment and disbelief Thursday after NHL labor talks took a potentially devastating turn for the worse.

"Today was a really, really bad day," Cleary told M-Live.com. "Everybody's in disbelief. We came to them on a ton of areas, made good strides. It's still not good enough. Unbelievable."

Cleary believes the season is in serious jeopardy of being canceled and said the NHL Players Association might seriously contemplate disbanding.

"We'll probably look at decertification," Cleary said. "It'll be addressed pretty soon."

The union would need the approval of a majority of the players to decertify. It would mean the NHLPA no longer would be the bargaining agent for players, who would be free to sue the NHL in federal court for unfair business practices that were previously protected due to anti-trust exemptions. It would be a long, costly and chaotic process.

NHL commissioner Gary Bettman, in announcing the rejection of the union's proposal, said everything in the league's latest offer is off the table. No further talks are scheduled.

"We're not that far away for talks to be halted and everything taken off the table," Cleary said. "They didn't even talk to us after we gave them our last proposal."

"We came towards them in every area, and they moved further apart. There wasn't much negotiating going on."

NHLPA executive director Don Fehr said during his media briefing in New York that the players and owners had agreed on transition payments and the pension plan and weren't far apart on other issues.

The players proposed an eight-year term for the next collective bargaining agreement with an option to opt out after six years. The league wanted a 10-year CBA with an option to opt out after eight years.

The league was holding firm on a five-year maximum contract length – seven years for a team's own free agent (restricted or unrestricted) – and a five-percent variance on annual salaries of contracts.

Cleary, who is heavily involved in union matters, said the players wanted a 25-percent variance.

Cleary said the union is committed to fighting for the rights of future players. And he said players are committed to reaching an agreement to bring the game back on the ice for the fans.

"At some point you have to seriously consider the health of the game," Cleary said. "I'm worried about the fans and the game.

"It really (ticks) me off."

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645916 Detroit Red Wings

Owners who joined in NHL labor talks this week issue statements after the breakdown

Ansar Khan

The NHL on Thursday night released the following statements from owners Ron Burke (Pittsburgh), Mark Chipman (Winnipeg), Larry Tanenbaum (Toronto) and Jeff Vinik (Tampa Bay), the four who joined in the labor talks on Tuesday:

Statement from Ron Burkle

The idea to put players and owners together in the same room was a refreshing idea. Commissioner Bettman should be thanked for proposing it and the Fehrs should be thanked for agreeing to it.

The players came with a strong desire to get back to playing hockey. They were professional and did a good job of expressing their concerns and listening to ours.

We wanted to move quickly and decisively. We have all spent too much time without any real progress at the expense of our fans, our sponsor and the communities we serve. It was time to make bold moves and get a deal. Many people think we got over our skis and they are probably right, but we wanted to do everything we could to get back to hockey now. We didn't hold back.

We made substantial movement on our end quickly, but unfortunately that was not met with the same level of movement from the other side. The players asked us to be patient and keep working with them. It's not what they do and they wanted us to know they were committed. We understood and appreciated their situation. We came back with an aggressive commitment to pensions which we felt was well received. We needed a response on key items that were important to us, but we were optimistic that we were down to very few issues. I believe a deal was within reach.

We were therefore surprised when the Fehrs made a unilateral and "non-negotiable" decision – which is their right, to end the player/owner process that has moved us farther in two days than we moved at any time in the past months.

I want to thank the players involved for their hard work as we tried to reach a deal.

I hope that going backwards does not prevent a deal."

Statement from Mark Chipman

"I'd like to thank the NHL for giving me the opportunity to participate in this very important process.

I came here optimistic that we could find a solution. That sense of optimism grew after our first few sessions, including the small group discussions late last night.

Regrettably, we have been unable to close the divide on some critical issues that we feel are essential to the immediate and long-term health of our game.

While I sense there are some members of the players association that understand our perspective on these issues, clearly there are many that don't.

I am deeply disappointed that we were unable to bring this extremely unfortunate situation to a successful conclusion and I wish to apologize to our fans and sponsors for letting them down."

Statement from Larry Tanenbaum

"I was pleased to be asked to join the Player/Owner negotiation sessions. I had hoped that my perspective both as a businessman and as one of the owners of the Toronto Maple Leafs would be helpful to the process. Like all other teams, this work stoppage has hurt our fans, our employees and our business. Neither the owners nor the players will ever recover the losses incurred with this work stoppage.

I understand how important it is to have a strong league and 30 healthy teams. I must admit that I was shocked at how things have played out over the last 48 hours. The sessions on Tuesday felt cooperative with an air of goodwill. I was optimistic and conveyed my optimism to the Board of Governors at our Wednesday meeting. However, when we reconvened with the players on Wednesday afternoon, it was like someone had thrown a switch. The atmosphere had completely changed. Nevertheless, the owners tried to push forward and made a number of concessions and proposals, which were not well-received. I question whether the union is interested in making an agreement.

I am very disappointed and disillusioned. Had I not experienced this process myself, I might not have believed it. Like all hockey fans, I am hopeful this situation can be resolved as soon as possible. I miss our game."

Statement from Jeff Vinik

"After working this week with our players toward what we hoped would be a new agreement, owners presented a proposal we believed would benefit those great players, ownership, and, ultimately, our fans for many years to come. While trust was built and progress was made along the way, unfortunately, our proposal was rejected by the Union's leadership. My love for the game is only superseded by my commitment to our fans and I hold out hope we can soon join with our players and return the game back to its rightful place on the ice."

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645917 Detroit Red Wings

Gary Bettman 'disappointed beyond belief,' says owners 'beside themselves' after talks fail

Ansar Khan

After talks between the NHL and the players union broke off Thursday night, league commissioner Gary Bettman accused the NHLPA of not wanting to make a deal.

The league rejected the players' proposal, one the owners didn't even want to hear.

The NHL's offer is off the table, no further talks are scheduled, and no end is in sight to a lockout that began on Sept. 16.

"I am disappointed beyond belief that we are where we are tonight," Bettman said during his media briefing in New York, following three days of negotiations that ended acrimoniously. "Need to take a deep breath and try to regroup.

"Sometimes you feel like you're chasing your tail in this process."

Bettman says league has not set a drop-dead date for canceling season, not even internally. He said he can't imagine playing less than 48 games.

Previously, all games were canceled through Dec. 14. The NHL could scrap the rest of the December schedule soon.

He called the week an emotional roller coaster.

Bettman said there was a lot of hope and optimism after Tuesday's face-to-face talks between six owners and 18 players, a meeting that did not involve him or NHL Players Association executive director Don Fehr. He said it disappeared "almost inexplicably" on Wednesday afternoon.

He said the four owners who hadn't previously sat in on the talks wanted to do something bold and did so by adding almost \$100 million to their "Make Whole" proposal.

He said the union's response was "shockingly silent" and that the owners were "beside themselves."

"Some of them I had never seen that emotional," Bettman said.

The offer was take-it-or-leave-it, not negotiable.

Bettman and Daly said they don't understand why Fehr, following the meeting, painted such a rosy picture to the media and said the sides were close.

"The characterization that we were close, that reminds me of the last time the union said we were close and we were \$1 billion apart," Bettman said. "It's not the first time (Fehr) said we're close when we weren't. ... I find it almost incomprehensible he did that."

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645918 Detroit Red Wings

NHL rejects players' proposal, talks break off in a bad way, no apparent end in sight to labor dispute

Ansar Khan

The ebbs and flows of NHL labor talks Thursday were nothing short of startling.

NHL owners have rejected the players latest proposal, one which, minutes earlier, an optimistic union chief Don Fehr declared "offered a clear outline to end this dispute."

Fehr told media covering the talks in New York: "We were advised in a voicemail message that the move that we made was unacceptable."

He said everything is off the table.

"It looks like this is not going to be resolved in the immediate future," Fehr said.

No further talks are scheduled.

Minutes before, Fehr said players and owners have agreed on transition payments and the pension plan and proposed an eight-year collective bargaining agreement with an option to opt out after six years.

After a one-hour meeting with the NHL, Fehr had told reporters he "hopes this puts us on the road to a quick resolution."

Fehr said the contracting issues that remain unresolved are the length of deals (NHL wants a five-year cap) and year-by-year salary variation (league wants no more than five percent difference).

NHL deputy commissioner Bill Daly left the meeting without commenting to reporters, as he headed back to his office to take the players proposal to commissioner Gary Bettman, who did not attend the meeting.

The six owners who had been having direct discussions with players the past two days also were not present. Instead, the league was represented by only Daly and attorney Bob Battersman.

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645919 Detroit Red Wings

NHL labor talks at precarious stage; length of CBA among issues as sides set to reconvene

Ansar Khan

The NHL and NHL Players Association have made progress on some issues in collective bargaining talks, but have yet to agree on the length of the labor deal, among other things, as negotiations are set to resume Thursday afternoon in New York.

By many accounts, talks are at a precarious stage, as fears of a breakdown persist.

NHL commissioner Gary Bettman and NHLPA executive director Don Fehr will return to the bargaining table after staying away the past two days, when a group of up to 18 players talked directly with six owners.

The sides have gone back and forth on many issues, including the length of the CBA. The league reportedly has proposed a 10-year deal with an opt-out clause after eight seasons. The union is said to want a shorter term, preferably five years.

Players said the pension plan also is a huge hurdle.

Various reports indicate the league has moved in the players' direction regarding unrestricted free agency (starting at age 27 or after seven seasons) and salary arbitration (after four years), agreeing to keep it the same as the previous CBA.

The NHL's latest offer also raises the money devoted to the "Make Whole" provision to \$300 million, up from \$211 million. The players previously asked for \$389 million to cover the full value of existing contracts.

The league remains firm on wanting a five-year term limit on contracts and a maximum five-percent variance on the year-to-year salaries in any contract. The owners did, however, agree to maximum seven-year contracts for teams signing their own unrestricted free agents.

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645920 Los Angeles Kings

THERE USED TO BE AN ARENA – McNICHOLS ARENA

Posted by Bob Miller

In 1976 the Kansas City Scouts moved to Denver, Colorado, and became the Colorado Rockies of the NHL. The Rockies played in McNichols Arena, completed in 1975 at a cost of \$16 million and it seated 16,061 for hockey.

The L.A. Kings' first game in McNichols Arena was on November 28, 1976, and the game ended in a 6-6 tie in front of only 5,697 fans. Tommy Williams and Lorne Stampler each scored two goals for the Kings who built a 6-3 lead. Denis Dupere had two of three unanswered goals for the Rockies to force the tie.

The radio-TV and press facilities at McNichols were not ideal to say the least. A makeshift pressbox was set up for writers at one end of the arena behind the goal. It was a terrible view of the play at the opposite end over 200 feet away. The television booth was located at center ice but it also had its flaws. Once we were seated the only way for my partner, Nick Nickson, to leave the booth for an interview was to crawl through an open window frame out into the crowd. He was fortunate there was no glass in the frame.

During the intermission I would go on camera to give out of town scores and comment on what went on in the period. To go on camera, either at the open of the telecast or between periods, we had to stand on folding chairs with the danger of collapsing. To prevent falling, I would hold on with one hand to a railing in front of us. It was not viewable on camera so I don't think viewers ever knew how precarious the situation was. Of course, they would have if we suddenly fell out camera view, which fortunately never happened.

The Rockies played six seasons in Denver and made the playoffs one time, losing in the first round. The Rockies then moved to New Jersey to become

the Devils, starting with the 1982-83 season. The NHL was absent in Denver from 1982 until 1995 when the Quebec Nordiques moved to Denver to become the Colorado Avalanche.

In their first season in Denver, 1995-96, the Avalanche won the Stanley Cup. Former L.A. King and U.S. Hockey Hall of Fame member Eddie Olczyk and I broadcast a playoff game for NHL Radio between the Avalanche and the Detroit Red Wings that season. When the Nordiques arrived in Denver at the start of the season very few people were familiar with the players, but by playoff time almost everyone in Denver was wearing an Avalanche jersey with a player's name on the back. I went into the gift shop at the hotel in which I was staying, and an elderly woman working there asked me in her faltering voice, 'Do you think the Avalanche can win the Stanley Cup?' I answered, 'Oh, I hope so, you've been waiting so long, what is it now, six months?'

During the pre-game warm-up for that playoff game all the lights went out on our side of the arena but not over the ice or the opposite stands. Olczyk and I started our broadcast on the telephone, passing it back and forth to make comments. That lasted through two periods before the lights returned on our side of the arena.

McNichols Arena was demolished on January 24, 2000, after the Avalanche moved into the new Pepsi Center in 1999. I don't believe any broadcasters were sorry to see McNichols fade into history.

LA Kings Insider: LOADED: 12.07.2012

645921 Edmonton Oilers

NHL becoming a laughing stock? "Hockey sucks," says American TV show TMZ

David Staples

Black people (and increasingly white people, too) don't like hockey, says TMZ

Locked out by its owners and hated on by even its hardest core fans, it looks like the National Hockey League is good for nothing except being an excellent punching bag these days.

T.I., a black rap artist, appeared on TMZ, a gossipy American TV show about celebrities, wearing an L.A. Kings hat on Wednesday. T.I. is known for such songs as Big Shit Poppin' and Swagga' Like Us.

When the TMZ host asked him why he was wearing the hat, T.I. admitted it was because the Kings colours matched the rest of his ensemble.

"I've never been to a hockey game," T.I. said. "I've never watched a full hockey game in my life."

This proves that hockey is a lot like the Republican party, TMZ said: it doesn't get the black vote.

"It turns out there's not many white hockey fans either," TMZ's announcer then said in the video report. "Why? 'Cause hockey sucks."

Not a great time for the NHL. Not at all.

It's become a laughing stock in popular culture.

But who is to blame for that?

The latest on the NHL CBA negotiations, from John Shannon of Sportsnet, is: "The vibe has gotten progressively worse since last night...one player source tells me "things are not going well right now."

Edmonton Journal: LOADED: 12.07.2012

645922 Edmonton Oilers

The NHL lockout and its consequences overseas — guest columnist Martin Lundén weighs in from Sweden

Bruce McCurdy

One of the coolest things about the Internet is that one gets to "meet" all sorts of people who share one's interest, no matter where they might live. Oftentimes their very location provides them with a different set of experiences, and their insights can provide a valuable perspective that one might not otherwise consider.

So it is with Martin Lundén, sometimes known around the Oilogosphere as "dohfOs". Martin is a die-hard Oiler fan, originally from Uppsala in central Sweden who currently resides to the south in Malmö. Martin has previously hosted the blog Swedish Oil, which is itself currently on hiatus largely thanks to this cursed lockout.

I recently asked Martin for his thoughts on the lockout's effects on the NHL brand in his country, and he responded with an essay that I thought well worth sharing with Cult of Hockey readers. Without further ado, (re-)introducing Martin Lundén:

The state of the NHL ... in Sweden

By Martin Lundén

These days are hard for most of us. We're all hoping for this lockout to come to an end, hopefully today, or tomorrow or the day after, well.. within this week! There's this Japanese saying – "hope is the last thing to die". I tend to think it can be applied to many of us crazed hockey bloggers.

My name is Martin Lundén, known to Oilers fans as "that dumb Swede on Twitter who stays awake all night" (to watch the Oilers lose game after game). My friends over here think it's a joke, but it's not, it's oh so real.

If you've read my texts before over at the Swedish Oil or follow me on Twitter, you'll know by now that I'm not one of these numbers guys. I'm more of an emotional type of writer going with my feelings, listening to people talking, watching stuff, reading an enormous amount of blogs on the Oilogosphere and eventually I post something that possibly could be of interest for others.

Like I said, I've grown used to staying up all night watching the Oil play. Now... well, I hate to admit it, but I've learned the rules of American Football – and trust me, it's not an easy task for a Swede. With this week being a very important one to the NHL enthusiasts or diehards like myself, I'd like to give you a hint on what's been going on in Sweden lately. And I'm not talking about us being a socialist country, I mean how Swedes in general look at what's going on with the NHL.

It's tricky to know where to start, but I might as well jump right in and say – most Swedes are pretty pissed at the NHL, and have been for years.

Why? might you ask. Well, for the simple fact that most hockey enthusiasts over here have their Swedish team that they support in the SEL and as soon as a player is a star of their team or they have finally been able to grow a real talent, what happens? The NHL happens. Every player's dream but also many SEL enthusiasts' worst nightmare. Their players jump the ship for the NHL and for what compensation? Not much, not nearly enough.

Let's put it this way, it's hard being a fan of a farm team or even a farm league, especially when you officially aren't one. And who gets the blame? The NHL, of course, and to some extent hockey in general for it being a industry over here that can be sat on by some Americans far far away.

Still, the NHL is well-liked among the diehard hockey fans. It's hard not to like the league itself: all the best players are playing there and it's good hockey, way better than we ever get to watch over here.

But there's a difference between the diehard hockey fans and the more casual hockey enthusiasts. In Canada, the hockey enthusiasts are pissed at the NHL for this ongoing lockout and it will take a while for them to get back to their seat and watch some hockey when the game finally commences. The diehards are also pissed for the very same reason, but they will be back for sure (and don't tell me you won't – no sane person would read a hockey-blog 80+ days into a lockout if they didn't long for the game to be back). So, where am I going with this?

Over here it's a different story. The NHL, or to some extent even hockey, isn't forced on you as it is in Canada. You have to find it yourself and choose to buy a special channel on TV or locate a streaming company that broadcasts NHL games. While I'm not worried about the diehards the general hockey enthusiasts are another story. If you lose your way it's no guarantee that you will ever look back.

I also know lockouts are pretty standard where you come from, the NHL has had a number of them in recent years and there have been a couple of

NBA and NFL ones as well that you've probably had to read everything about (even if you don't like basket- or football). For many Europeans this whole "lockout" thing is a mystery, we've seen some strikes over the last couple decades but compared to the amount of leagues we have over here it's a non-factor.

And with everything that's been going on people are really starting to lose interest – and sadly, that's an understatement – in the NHL. A good friend of mine is the editor of Pro Hockey (the biggest NHL magazine in all of Europe), and has been running a pure NHL blog on the second largest tabloid of Sweden. And as a reader of many blogs, let me tell you, he's a good writer and a splendid NHL reporter. A week ago he received word from the editor of that tabloid: "your blog will be shut down before the Christmas break, it's not generating enough hits any more". End of story: so long to the best NHL blog written in the Swedish language.

The thing is, NHL is not only hurting themselves. You remember the NHL talking about expanding and the whole reason the NHL started their seasons with a couple of games in Europe the last couple of years?

Well, this whole lockout hasn't made things better. The NHL needs to remember that this is not only affecting this season or just the NHL but hockey as whole, as a sport. The NHL is the leading market and when they can't keep things together, eventually the whole industry looks like a joke to the average Joe (or "Svensson" as we say over here). When you can't trust in a league or a sport to keep going, what are you supposed to think? Why would I be interested in following that? Why bother staying up late at night? The NHL is losing respect over here and that in a hurry.

In Sweden we have something that we call the Jerring prize, often called "the prize of the people", where the people of Sweden get to vote on the Swedish athlete or team that has made the best sport performance of the year. Normally there are fifteen nominees; this year they chose to go with fourteen and skip one. None of Lundqvist (winner of the Vezina Trophy), Landeskog (Calder) or Karlsson (Norris) were among the fourteen.

When I was a kid you had to have a NHL-team to support. My "luck" fell on the Oilers (thank you Martin Gélinas). Today my nephews hardly know what the NHL is. All of this, during a time when it's never been easier to communicate between different continents.

Edmonton Journal: LOADED: 12.07.2012

645923 Edmonton Oilers

Arrrgghh. I'm sick of the whole labour battle

Jim Matheson

Lemme get this straight. The NHL's second-in-command Bill Daly, normally a solid voice of reason, says term limits on contracts "are a hill to die on" in this nauseating labour battle that is now in day 83. Term limits on contracts? C'mon, Bill. You've got to kidding.

The NHLPA says they're fighting tooth and nail too on how long a player can be signed. Really?

The NHL wants five years, and only a five percent difference in salaries from year to year, but will go to seven years max if a team wants to sign its own free-agent. The Players Union wants eight years.

Are they both nuts? Arguing over that? How many of the 690 NHL players have a contract longer than the five years they so steadfastly say they will want unless a team opts to sign their own free-agent and they'll allow then a little wiggle room to go an extra two seasons. I bet you 600 of those 690 NHL players have contracts five years or less. So we're talking about three players a team with a contract longer than five years. And that's a deal-breaker?

Sam Gagner is starting his sixth NHL season. He would die for even a five-year contract. His three contracts add up to five years, total. A three-year entry deal, then a two-year contract, and he's currently on a one-year for \$3.25 million. He's a solid second-line NHL player. Ask Ryan Jones, who has never had a contract longer than two years, how he feels about term limits? He'd die for a three-year contract. Most NHLers would.

I get it that agents and GMs were smart enough to work around the salary cap by coming up with these 12 and 13-year deals for players that paid a

bundle at the start, but chump change at the end, but averaged out to a workable number. The Red Wings were one of the first to do it, tying up Henrik Zetterberg for 12 years and \$73 million, paying him a high for \$7.75 million in actual dollars but the average is only a shade over six. And they went 11 years, \$43.5 million for Johan Franzen, a \$5.5 million player for a long while in actual salary but his cap hit is \$3.95 million. Ritch Winter, here in Edmonton, did the Franzen deal and also did Marian Hossa's 12 year-\$63 million in Chicago. It goes from a high of \$7.9 million to \$1 million the last three years and a cap hit of \$5.275 million. In Vancouver, Roberto Luongo got 12 years, \$64 million, averaging out to a workable \$5.33 mil per season but paying him \$1 million at the end, when he's 40 and he may have trouble getting across the crease, never mind getting to the bank.

This summer we also had Ryan Suter and Zach Parise getting identical 13-year, \$98 million deals from Minnesotaowner Craig Leipold where they are paid until they are about 40. Nashville went and gave captain Shea Weber 14 years at \$110,000, and, of course, Sidney Crosby got \$104.4 million over 12 years in Pittsburgh, starting at \$12 million and going to \$3 million the last three years.

But, these are high-end players. Exceptions to the rule.

I'm with a reader Mike Farrah who says the NHL should just let teams sign players for however long they want but take exactly what their salary is every year as the cap hit. Don't average it out. The players wouldn't lose their rights to a long-term deal this way, and the teams would have to decide if they wanted to go that long on deals with players or just keep them shorter. In other words, pay Zetterberg \$7.75 million a year, which would be his cap hit. Leave it up to the Wings how long they want to pay that money for.

Edmonton Journal: LOADED: 12.07.2012

645924 Edmonton Oilers

Statements from NHL owners Ron Burkle, Mark Chipman, Jeff Vinik and Larry Tanenbaum following Thursday's truncated CBA talks

John MacKinnon

The following statements were issued Thursday by NHL owners Jeff Vinik of the Tampa Bay Lightning, Ron Burkle of the Pittsburgh Penguins, Mark Chipman of the Winnipeg Jets and Larry Tanenbaum of the Toronto Maple Leafs:

Ron Burkle, Co-Owner, Pittsburgh Penguins

The idea to put players and owners together in the same room was a refreshing idea. Commissioner Bettman should be thanked for proposing it and the Fehrs should be thanked for agreeing to it.

The players came with a strong desire to get back to playing hockey. They were professional and did a good job of expressing their concerns and listening to ours. We Wanted to move quickly and decisively. We have all spent too much time Without any real progress at the expense of our fans, our sponsors and the communities we serve. It was time to make bold moves and get a deal. Many people think We got over our skis and they are probably right, but We wanted to do everything we could to get back to hockey now. We didn't hold

We made substantial movement on our end quickly, but unfortunately that was not met with the same level of movement from the other side. The players asked us to be patient and keep working with them. It's not what they do and they Wanted us to know they were committed.

We understood and appreciate their situation. We came back with an aggressive commitment to pensions which we felt was well received. We needed a response on key items that were important to us, but We were optimistic that we were down to very few issues. I believe a deal was within reach.

We were therefore surprised when the Fehrs made a unilateral and "non-negotiable" decision – which is their right, to end the player/owner process that has moved us farther in two days than we have moved at any time in the past months.

I want to thank the players involved for their hard Work as We tried to reach a deal.

I hope that going backwards does not prevent a deal.

Mark Chipman, Chairman and Governor, Winnipeg Jets:

"I'd like to thank the NHL for giving me the opportunity to participate in this very important process.

I came here optimistic that we could find a solution. That sense of optimism grew after our first few sessions, including the small group discussions late last night.

Regrettably, we have been unable to close the divide on some critical issues that we feel are essential to the immediate and long-term health of our game.

While I sense there are some members of the players association that understand our perspective on these issues, clearly there are many that don't.

I am deeply disappointed that we were unable to bring this extremely unfortunate situation to a successful conclusion and I wish to apologize to our fans and sponsors for letting them down."

Larry Tanenbaum, Chairman of the Board, Maple Leaf Sports and Entertainment

"I was pleased to be asked to join the Player/Owner negotiation sessions. I had hoped that my perspective both as a businessman and as one of the owners of the Toronto Maple Leafs would be helpful to the process. Like all other teams, this work stoppage has hurt our fans, our employees and our business. Neither the owners nor the players will ever recover the losses incurred with this work stoppage.

I understand how important it is to have a strong league and 30 healthy teams. I must admit that I was shocked at how things have played out over the last 48 hours. The sessions on Tuesday felt cooperative with an air of goodwill. I was optimistic and conveyed my optimism to the Board of Governors at our Wednesday meeting. However, when we reconvened with the players on Wednesday afternoon, it was like someone had thrown a switch. The atmosphere had completely changed. Nevertheless, the owners tried to push forward and made a number of concessions and proposals, which were not well-received. I question whether the union is interested in making an agreement.

I am very disappointed and disillusioned. Had I not experienced this process myself, I might not have believed it. Like all hockey fans, I am hopeful this situation can be resolved as soon as possible. I miss our game."

Jeff Vinik, Chairman and Governor, Tampa Bay Lightning

"After working this week with our players toward what we hoped would be a new agreement, owners presented a proposal we believed would benefit those great players, ownership, and, ultimately, our fans for many years to come. While trust was built and progress was made along the way, unfortunately, our proposal was rejected by the Union's leadership. My love for the game is only superseded by my commitment to our fans and I hold out hope we can soon join with our players and return the game back to its rightful place on the ice."

Edmonton Journal: LOADED: 12.07.2012

645925 Edmonton Oilers

YouTube has everything but no picture of Pelss's suspension

Jim Matheson

Usually when there's a crime, it's caught on camera, whether it's a liquor store or a hockey rink.

But I'm still trying to find Kristians Pelss's stick to the face of Bakersfield defenceman Olivier Malta that got the Edmonton Oilers' prospect a whopping 21-game suspension. YouTube has everything, from all corners of the globe, but not this one. So how did the ECHL folks decide the Stockton Thunder winger deserved 21 games for this dastardly act when there was no film (at least that I saw) and it went unpenalized?

Not even a two-minute minor, never mind a major and a game banishment.

"What did the ref get?" sarcastically asked an observer, who is close to Pelss.

Very good question. The league officials could hardly go to the ref after the fact to look at his game report. Wasn't much to him, at the time. Reminds me of a crime scene on Law and Order where the cop says "move along, nothing to see here" and then the camera pans to a dead body in the street. Huh?

We don't mean to trivialize the damage to the former Quebec Major Hockey League player Malta, who was carried off on a stretcher and suffered a concussion, according to his coach Matt O'Dette. Malta got clubbed in the face, for sure, and was hurt badly. Was it worth 21 games? The league thought so; obviously they didn't take into account that the former Edmonton Oil Kings' winger Pelss is no thug. There's no long rap sheet as a pro because it's his first pro season. There's no long rap sheet as a junior player, either. One suspension. He has 15 PIMs in 13 games in Stockton after starting the season with Oklahoma City, where he was a bubble player, staying in a downtown hotel with Cameron Abney. He got into three AHL games. Now 18 games into his pro career, he's going to sit out 21. Tough to make an impression with the Oiler folks that way, but that's what happens when you make an impression on another guy's face.

"From what I understand Pelss was checked behind the net, fell and he hit the player with the heel of his stick on his nose. That's the hardest part, the heel of a stick. I don't know if he did it on purpose or not. Obviously they thought he did," said Oil Kings' GM Bob Green.

"Kristians is a good kid. He plays hard. He is physical and he battles, but he's never been cheap. This is out of character," said Green. "The optics must have been really bad because he doesn't have the game for this."

Edmonton Journal: LOADED: 12.07.2012

645926 Edmonton Oilers

Edmonton Oilers' Ryan Nugent-Hopkins's shoulder still being assessed

By Derek Van Diest ,Edmonton Sun

EDMONTON - Ryan Nugent-Hopkins has yet to make a commitment.

The Edmonton Oilers centre is back in town skating informally testing out his left shoulder.

He has yet to make a decision whether to accept Hockey Canada's invite to attend the World Junior selection camp taking place next week in Calgary.

"I've been doing pretty well," Nugent-Hopkins told Sportsnet on Thursday. "I've been getting checkups and doing some stuff around the rink and feeling good.

"The shoulder has been feeling good, it's just precautionary stuff, and we just want to be sure that it's 100% healthy and I'll make a decision from there."

Nugent-Hopkins was one of 37 players invited to take part in Team Canada's selection camp for the upcoming World Junior Championships in Ufa, Russia.

The camp gets underway on Tuesday, with the tournament commencing Boxing Day.

Nugent-Hopkins has been playing with the Oilers' American Hockey League affiliate in Oklahoma City during the lockout.

With the Oklahoma City Barons having a week off, the Oilers decided to bring the former first overall pick to town to check on his status.

Nugent-Hopkins separated his shoulder last season against the Chicago Blackhawks in December, falling into the boards.

He injured the same shoulder again later in the season.

"Right now I think I definitely want to make sure I'm healthy," Nugent-Hopkins said. "That's definitely the biggest thing."

If Nugent-Hopkins, 19, does decide to attend the World Junior camp, he would be the considered the brightest star in a star-studded squad, buoyed by the lockout.

Nugent-Hopkins would be the only player on the roster with a full year of NHL experience under his belt.

As a 17-year-old with the Red Deer Rebels, Nugent-Hopkins was cut from the Canadian entry.

"It's a tournament you grow up watching and you want to play in it, especially being from Canada, you watch it every Christmas," he said. "It's good to have the opportunity, so this would be my last chance."

Another factor would be the possibility of the lockout coming to an end.

If the NHL and its players association somehow miraculously come to an agreement before the tournament – an unlikely scenario at this point — Nugent-Hopkins will not be going to Russia.

Either way, Nugent-Hopkins does not expect to leave Team Canada officials hanging for long.

"By the weekend the decision will be made," he said. "I'll keep doing the checkups and the rehab and just see how I feel after that. It's just kind of waiting to see what happens."

Edmonton Sun: LOADED: 12.07.2012

645927 Minnesota Wild

Bettman spews venom at the NHLPA; Owners issue statements

Posted by: Michael Russo

To recap: Donald Fehr decides to strut in front of the cameras and essentially announce to the hockey world that the NHL lockout was all but over. This, mysteriously after the NHLPA requested mediation two hours earlier.

As Fehr's announcing the union's belief that they have completely agreed on dollars with the league, NHL Deputy Commissioner Bill Daly leaves a voicemail for Fehr's brother, Steve, telling him the latest NHLPA proposal is rejected and talks are off.

Ten minutes after Donald Fehr told the hockey world the lockout was almost over, Fehr returns to deliver the news as players were about to talk to the press.

In New York tonight, Commissioner Gary Bettman angrily marched into the Westin and lambasted the union in a 34-minute news conference. At the end, reportedly, some players and Steve Fehr were even in the room listening to Bettman intently.

As I mentioned last night, the two sides were at a delicate juncture. It is now completely off the rails.

Bettman said the NHL's "Make Whole" concept, so critical to this process, is off the table, as is anything the NHL proposed this week.

This got beyond ugly tonight.

Here are snippets of what was said, and I present them to you with full regards to my hard-working colleagues who are were at the scene in New York. This is not ideal to report to you what happened this way, but it's all I got as I'm 36,000 feet up in the sky.

Bettman called this process, an emotional rollercoaster, and made clear that yesterday's final NHL proposal to the NHLPA was essentially take it or leave it.

"We were waiting today for a yes or a no. Not for a negotiation session," Bettman said.

"The key for all of us, particularly the owners, was to have a long-term deal. That's what fans, game, players, partners deserve."

He said the four new owners of the group, who as I mentioned nearly stormed out yesterday, "wanted to push ahead and do something bold." That started with adding \$100 million to the Make Whole offer.

When they did that, the league said pensions were a critical issue. Owners were furious feeling the players moved the goal posts.

Bettman took issue with Fehr telling everybody the two sides were so close and playing with the heartstrings of fans.

"The characterization that we were close, that reminds me of the last time the union said we were close and we were \$1 billion apart," he said.

"I'm not sure spinning us into an emotional frenzy is terribly helpful," he added.

"They knew there was a major gulf between us and yet they came down here and told you we were close."

And, as I said on the previous blogs, "if we were so close why did we need mediation?"

Bettman said the league will take a deep breath and regroup, that "I am disappointed beyond belief we are where we are."

The deal is off the table. Daly said contract length (five years max, seven to re-sign your own players) is "the hill we will die on."

Bettman said there is no drop dead date, but indicated there had to be at least a 48-game season.

He says he's tormented by three lockouts under his watch and maybe having to cancel his second season, but he took a crack at the union, saying it's not easy to bargain when you have four executive directors in eight years.

He says the league is not worried about the union's threat to decertify.

"We are where we are as horrible as it is," Bettman said.

Back to me talking: I fear for the league now. Fans are disgusted, and tonight's news is frankly nauseating.

STATEMENTS FROM RON BURKLE, MARK CHIPMAN, LARRY TANENBAUM & JEFF VINIK

NEW YORK (December 6, 2012) -- Statements relative to their participation in the collective bargaining agreement negotiations this week were released tonight by Ron Burkle of the Pittsburgh Penguins, Mark Chipman of the Winnipeg Jets, Larry Tanenbaum of the Toronto Maple Leafs and Jeff Vinik of the Tampa Bay Lightning, governors of their respective teams:

Statement from Ron Burkle

The idea to put players and owners together in the same room was a refreshing idea. Commissioner Bettman should be thanked for proposing it and the Fehrs should be thanked for agreeing to it.

The players came with a strong desire to get back to playing hockey.

They were professional and did a good job of expressing their concerns and listening to ours.

We wanted to move quickly and decisively. We have all spent too much time without any real progress at the expense of our fans, our sponsor and the communities we serve. It was time to make bold moves and get a deal. Many people think we got over our skis and they are probably right, but we wanted to do everything we could to get back to hockey now. We didn't hold back.

We made substantial movement on our end quickly, but unfortunately that was not met with the same level of movement from the other side. The players asked us to be patient and keep working with them. It's not what they do and they wanted us to know they were committed. We understood and

appreciated their situation. We came back with an aggressive commitment to

pensions which we felt was well received. We needed a response on key items

that were important to us, but we were optimistic that we were down to very few issues. I believe a deal was within reach.

We were therefore surprised when the Fehrs made a unilateral and "non-negotiable" decision – which is their right, to end the player/owner process that has moved us farther in two days than we moved at any time in

the past months.

I want to thank the players involved for their hard work as we tried to reach a deal.

I hope that going backwards does not prevent a deal.

Statement from Mark Chipman

Mark Chipman, Chairman and Governor of the Winnipeg Jets Hockey Club, today

issued the following statement:

"I'd like to thank the NHL for giving me the opportunity to participate in this very important process.

I came here optimistic that we could find a solution. That sense of optimism grew after our first few sessions, including the small group discussions late last night.

Regrettably, we have been unable to close the divide on some critical issues that we feel are essential to the immediate and long-term health of our game.

While I sense there are some members of the players association that understand our perspective on these issues, clearly there are many that don't.

I am deeply disappointed that we were unable to bring this extremely unfortunate situation to a successful conclusion and I wish to apologize to our fans and sponsors for letting them down."

Statement from Larry Tanenbaum

"I was pleased to be asked to join the Player/Owner negotiation sessions. I had hoped that my perspective both as a businessman and as one

of the owners of the Toronto Maple Leafs would be helpful to the process. Like all other teams, this work stoppage has hurt our fans, our employees and our business. Neither the owners nor the players will ever recover the losses incurred with this work stoppage.

I understand how important it is to have a strong league and 30 healthy teams. I must admit that I was shocked at how things have played out over the last 48 hours. The sessions on Tuesday felt cooperative with an air of goodwill. I was optimistic and conveyed my optimism to the Board of Governors at our Wednesday meeting. However, when we reconvened with the players on Wednesday afternoon, it was like someone had thrown a switch. The atmosphere had completely changed. Nevertheless, the owners tried to push forward and made a number of concessions and proposals, which were not

well-received. I question whether the union is interested in making an agreement.

I am very disappointed and disillusioned. Had I not experienced this process myself, I might not have believed it. Like all hockey fans, I am hopeful this situation can be resolved as soon as possible. I miss our game."

Statement from Jeff Vinik

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"After working this week with our players toward what we hoped would be a new agreement, owners presented a proposal we believed would benefit

those great players, ownership, and, ultimately, our fans for many years to come. While trust was built and progress was made along the way, unfortunately, our proposal was rejected by the Union's leadership. My love for the game is only superseded by my commitment to our fans and I hold out hope we can soon join with our players and return the game back to its rightful place on the ice."

Star Tribune LOADED: 12.07.2012

645928 Minnesota Wild

Rejected: Talks are off again in a bizarre night in the NHL

Posted by: Michael Russo

So, mere minutes after Donald Fehr strutted up to a microphone to tell the world there was an agreement on dollars and it was just a matter of time before the lockout ended, the executive director proved he jumped the gun in a magnificent way.

With players at the podium ready to talk, Fehr returned to tell the media on the scene that he received a voicemail from the NHL that the offer was unacceptable and "It looks like this is not going to be resolved in the immediate future."

Talks have officially broken off, Fehr said. He said he would talk to his membership.

Said Steve Fehr, the NHLPA's General Counsel, in a Tim Panaccio tweet of the voicemail rejection minutes after a newser saying the thing was close: "Not only is it unusual, I would be hard pressed to think of anything comparable in my experience ..."

I'm on a plane right now. People around me are wondering why I'm laughing at my screen.

Maybe it's because the NHL has sadly turned into a laughingstock. Total gong show tonight.

I knew something was strange.

As you can see on my Twitter, I got a negative text before the presser from a source, I get up in the air and Fehr's saying it's done, I go to my email and the same source is saying he's jumping the gun. I was literally dizzy.

Regardless, I go to delta.com to literally see if there was a way I can return to Minneapolis right after I land, and just as I'm about to change my return, Fehr's back at the podium saying, no deal. Just a total mess.

And like I said, how do the players go from mediation a few hours ago to allegedly having a deal with the NHL, and announcing this before the NHL has a chance to review the proposal? Ridiculousness.

Let's wait til the next chapter. I'll be updating the blog after the league speaks. Like I said, I'm in the air, so there are plenty of reporters to follow on Twitter who are on the scene.

Star Tribune LOADED: 12.07.2012

645929 Minnesota Wild

NHLPA believes it has 'agreement in dollars' with NHL

Posted by: Michael Russo

The NHL Players' Association made a counterproposal to the NHL this evening in New York that Executive Director Donald Fehr said causes a "complete agreement in dollars" with the NHL.

He says if that's the case, an agreement should be reached in short order. The NHL has taken the counterproposal back to the league office for review. There is still no word for them.

"We will wait and see what they say and when they say it," Yahoo's Nick Cotsonika quoted Fehr as saying during his news conference. "We think there is a complete agreement on dollars. Wouldn't seem to be very much reason why we shouldn't be able to conclude."

What hasn't been agreed upon I understand from one email is that transition rules have not yet been agreed upon. Also contractual rights haven't been agreed upon yet.

So this is premature, but it seems like they're inching closer together.

If there is to be an agreement soon, the language would have to be drafted up followed by votes.

What is bizarre is that as recently as a few hours ago, the NHLPA requested to put mediation back into the process. The league refused, so everybody was naturally expecting doomsday.

Something changed.

Obviously, we have to see how the league interprets the offer, which Fehr says is eight years with an opt-out in six.

More soon, and I will keep updating the blog. I am on an aircraft right now, so trying to make sense of everything.

Star Tribune LOADED: 12.07.2012

645930 Minnesota Wild

Day 82: Latest "most critical 24 hours" of the NHL lockout

Posted by: Michael Russo

Every single day in the lockout has been the "most critical day of negotiations." Every stage of this lockout has been the most "critical 24-36 hours" of this lockout.

Until tomorrow, of course.

Well, Thursday, Dec. 6, 2012, is the most critical day and 24-36 hours of the fun that is the third NHL lockout in 18 years and second in eight. Until tomorrow.

The goal, of course, is to get tomorrow because today is so critical.

Things honestly are very close to going off the rails.

As I reported Wednesday night/Thursday morning, things didn't go nearly as well as it did Tuesday when league No. 2 and union 2 Bill Daly and Steve Fehr stood jointly in front of an NHLPA backdrop for the first time in this process and held a brief press scrum. The visual said it all: things were rosy. The words said it all, with Fehr calling it the "best day" in the process.

That's because owners and players talked generally without storming off in a huff.

Then came Wednesday when things were put down on paper and the real heavy lifting of making a deal begun.

There were some tense exchanges, some near blowups, and not just from the Jeremy Jacobs of the world. The Boston owner has become everybody's favorite target for blame, but the moderates got fed up and wanted to end things as well when the players weren't receptive enough to the league throwing more money on "Make Whole."

The owners angrily left the meeting. But the two sides decided to try to patch things up and keep working at it, which created some "positivity" among sources on both sides.

Then, things ended tensely again.

The reality is as close as the sides appear because they did have some agreements yesterday, those bargaining feel everything hangs by a thread.

First of all, the \$89 million extra thrown at "Make Whole" is based solely on a 10-year CBA because the league wants to end the cycle of lockouts. The union has always balked at that because Donald Fehr has convinced the players that they don't want to lock themselves into a long-term deal after making so many concessions.

The league also wants to end the long-term, back-diving contracts, so they want five-year max deals (seven to re-sign one's own free agent) and 5% max variance in salaries. This obviously wouldn't affect the vast majority of NHLers, but to the union, this restricts players' rights bigtime.

Now, the PA is insistent that Donald Fehr comes back in the room. That means Gary Bettman comes back in the room. And when that happens, things usually go toxic fast.

So we again are on murky ground, my fellow hockey fans.

My gut: this still gets done eventually. But as has been the trend of this whole process, it won't happen easy.

Both sides need to decide what issues are worth risking a full season for. Anyway, there's got to come a point where the 700 players deserve the right to vote for a proposal, one would think.

As of this moment the PA is talking internally. Then the two should meet again with different sets of rules, of course.

Star Tribune LOADED: 12.07.2012

645931 Minnesota Wild

All good feeling lost as NHL, union break off labor talks on wild Thursday

IRA PODELL , Associated Press

NEW YORK - Donald Fehr thought he and the hockey players he leads were close to a deal to save the season. The NHL said not so fast, and then took away everything that created all the optimism in the first place.

When the 82nd day of the lockout was over, it was hard not to think the sides were thrown back to the very start of the fight. The problem is this is not the summer or even October. It's December, and there isn't much time left to reach the elusive deal and get back on the ice.

Most of Thursday, NHL negotiators waited for the players' association to wrap up internal discussions and get back to them regarding a proposal the league made Wednesday night. Owners greatly increased the amount of dollars they were willing to pay on the "make-whole" provision to compensate players in transitioning to the new collective bargaining agreement.

But that price came with a cost: Three conditions the NHL required the players to agree to if they wanted the influx of funds. The league wasn't looking to negotiate on those points on Thursday. It wanted a yes or no answer.

When management didn't get it, negotiators got up after only an hour together and left.

Fehr didn't take that as a negative response when he stood in front of a large throng of reporters in a Manhattan hotel and proclaimed that

agreements had been all but reached on key issues, and a full deal could be reached in short order.

"If we can get a positive response and conclude this, hopefully it doesn't take long," Fehr said.

Then things took a wild and unprecedented turn.

While players were talking to reporters, they were told to return to the podium where they had flanked Fehr moments before. Word spread that Fehr was coming back to speak again, and when he did, the tone and the news were nowhere near as hopeful.

"There has been a development. It's not a positive one," he said. "We have been advised in a voice mail message that the moves the players made were not acceptable. There was no reason to stay around tonight or tomorrow, that they would be in touch. And that something — everything is off the table.

"We don't know what that means."

They would soon find out when NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman and deputy commissioner Bill Daly took Fehr's place at the podium and gave their side of the story. Three news conferences in the span of an hour turned the talk from whether there could be a deal in days to conversations questioning whether an agreement could be made at all.

"I find it almost incomprehensible he did that," the visibly angry Bettman said of Fehr's positive spin. "I am disappointed beyond belief that we are where we are. I need to take a deep breath and try to regroup."

Hot-button topics such as the "make-whole" provision on existing contracts not only weren't settled, but are no longer being offered by the league. Forget that owners were willing to pay up to \$300 million to cover the costs, now Bettman is saying the entire concept is off the table — along with everything else the league proposed during the previous two days of marathon talks.

When the NHL agreed to increase its offer of payments from \$211 million, it was part of a proposed package that required the union to agree to three nonnegotiable points. The players' association accepted the raise, but then made counterproposals on the issues the league stated had no wiggle room.

"We put 100 million dollars on the table and it was received with silence," Bettman said of the union's response to the offer Wednesday night.

The NHL wants to limit personal player contracts to five years, seven for a club's own player, and has elevated the issue to the highest level of importance.

"It's the hill we will die on," Daly said.

The union countered with an offer of an eight-year maximum length with the variable in salary being no greater than a 25 percent difference between the highest-paid year of the deal and the lowest.

The other NHL demands are a 10-year term on the new agreement, with a mutual opt-out option after eight years, and no compliance buyouts or caps on escrow in the transition phase to the new structure. The union presented an offer of an eight-year deal with a reopener after six.

"The take or give or bottom line on all this is it appears that the union is suggesting because we made substantial movements in certain areas that we're close to a deal," Bettman said. "Those moves were contingent on the union specifically agreeing on other things, which while the union may have moved toward, didn't agree to."

Bettman added that the six owners involved with the negotiations were taken aback by the players' reaction to what the NHL felt was a major concession. As soon as the players wanted to negotiate the corresponding demands, the NHL felt it had nothing left to talk about.

"They knew there was a major gulf between us and yet they came down here and told you we were close," Daly said.

Fehr vehemently disputed that assessment and stuck to his opinion that the sides really aren't far apart, saying they are "clearly very close if not on top of one another."

The sides won't meet again before Saturday at the earliest. While Bettman insisted that a drop-dead date for a deal that would preserve a season with "integrity" hasn't been established — even internally — clearly there isn't a lot of time to work out an agreement.

"I'm surprised. We feel like we moved in their direction," Pittsburgh Penguins star Sidney Crosby said.

The 2004-05 season was lost before the players' association accepted a deal that included a salary cap for the first time. While no major philosophical issues such as that exist now, the sides don't appear ready to come to an agreement.

"It looks like this is not going to be resolved in the immediate future," Fehr said.

A 48-game season was played in 1995 after a lockout stretched into January. Bettman said he wouldn't have a season shorter than that.

Union special counsel Steve Fehr was stunned by the NHL's quick rejection of the players' offer. He missed Daly's call that came during Donald Fehr's initial news conference.

"Not only is it unusual, I would be hard-pressed to think of anything comparable in my experience," he said of the instant rejection.

Talks resumed Tuesday night with owners and players in the room, and Bettman and Donald Fehr on the outside. It sparked what seemed to be the most optimistic developments in the lockout. But the tenor began to change Wednesday, and the discourse erupted Thursday.

"The sense of optimism almost inexplicably disappeared Wednesday afternoon after such a good day Tuesday," Bettman said.

When the players suggested Wednesday night that they wanted Donald Fehr to rejoin the negotiations Thursday, the NHL informed them that his inclusion could be a deal-breaker.

"We thought we were getting close. There was definitely movement toward each other," Winnipeg Jets defenseman Ron Hainsey said. "As confident as some of us players are in the issues, we cannot close deals. I'd love to think I could, we cannot."

Donald and Steve Fehr were in Thursday's session, as were Daly and lead league counsel Bob Battersman.

Steve Fehr and a number of players stood in the back of the room with arms folded as Bettman and Daly presented the league's position Thursday.

There were already signs the process was breaking down earlier when the union requested that federal mediators rejoin the discussions. Mediators previously were unsuccessful in creating a breakthrough after two days of discussions last week.

"What we got today, quite frankly and disappointingly, missed the mark," Daly said. "For the union to suggest somehow we are close, is cherry picking and it's unfortunate."

The owners who joined the process this week expressed their disappointment, too.

"Regrettably, we have been unable to close the divide on some critical issues that we feel are essential to the immediate and long-term health of our game," Winnipeg Jets chairman Mark Chipman said in a statement released by the NHL. "While I sense there are some members of the players' association that understand our perspective on these issues, clearly there are many that don't."

The sides are trying to avoid another lost season. The NHL became the first North American professional sports league to cancel a full year because of a labor dispute back in 2005. The deal reached then was in place until this September, and the lockout was enacted when it expired.

"While trust was built and progress was made along the way, unfortunately, our proposal was rejected by the union's leadership," Toronto Maple Leafs minority owner Larry Tanenbaum said in a statement. "My love for the game is only superseded by my commitment to our fans, and I hold out hope we can soon join with our players and return the game back to its rightful place on the ice."

All games through Dec. 14, along with the New Year's Day Winter Classic and the All-Star game, have been wiped off the schedule.

Star Tribune LOADED: 12.07.2012

645932 Montreal Canadiens

Habs rookie prospect leading Bulldogs

Josh Cooper

By Monte Stewart, The Canadian Press December 6, 2012

VANCOUVER — It has not taken Brendan Gallagher long to adjust to life as a first-year pro.

The Hamilton Bulldogs rookie is leading the AHL club in scoring as he waits for a chance to attend his third NHL training camp with the parent Montreal Canadiens.

"Obviously, with the lockout, this season in Hamilton was a really good opportunity for me to come in," Gallagher said on the weekend while the Bulldogs visited the Abbotsford Heat for a pair of games, which the clubs split.

"The Montreal organization has been watching every time you're on the ice."

So far, he is holding up well to the scrutiny, producing six goals and five assists in 18 games.

He has thrived on a youth-laden Hamilton team that is languishing at the bottom of the AHL standings.

The Canadiens chose the 20-year-old Edmonton native in the fifth round (147th overall in 2010.) The former Vancouver Giant was among Montreal's final cuts in the fall of 2011, and appears well positioned to get a serious look once the NHL resumes play.

"The lockout's obviously different for everyone," he said. "As players, we're frustrated, the owners are frustrated and the fans are frustrated. It's really good for nobody.

"At the same time, I can't worry about it. The guys in the negotiation are doing everything they can to get hockey back.

"Eventually, there's going to be a deal in place, and everyone's going to be happy once again. ... I see this as a really good opportunity, which it is, and try to take advantage of it as best I can."

Gallagher has excelled while playing with a variety of linemates. He has also continued with a familiar crash-the-net style that enabled him to play four seasons in the WHL, starting at age 16, and earn a spot on Canada's world junior squad last Christmas.

Thus far, he has racked up 33 penalty minutes, while constantly trying to prove that his limited size — he's listed at five-foot-nine and 185 pounds — is not a detriment.

Some opponents, such as members of the Toronto Marlies who have played Hamilton eight times (exhibitions included), are already starting to develop "a hatred" for him they way they did in junior.

"You take a beating every game. ... Players are bigger, stronger, but at the same time, I've dealt with that my whole life," he said. "The game itself doesn't change that much."

But Gallagher has put on 10-12 pounds of added muscle under a program designed by his father Ian, who serves as the Giants strength and conditioning coach.

"It's something I felt I needed to do," said Gallagher. "At the same time, the most important thing for me is quickness.

"So I worked on my quickness more and made sure, if I was putting on extra weight, I remained just as quick."

He is also adjusting to change off the ice.

Using a recipe book provided by his mother, Gallagher takes turns at the stove with teammates Patrick Holland and Morgan Ellis when the team is not playing on the road.

Montreal Gazette LOADED: 12.07.2012

645933 Nashville Predators

Losers-buy-lunch helps Preds focus at practice

FRANKLIN — When you're a locked-out professional hockey player, there's an easy way to ensure the pace of practices is brisk and competitive.

Organize a three-on-three game and put lunch on the line.

That's what the Predators players at A-Game Sportsplex have done to try to increase the competitiveness of their lockout workouts.

"We had some good competitions going, and losers buy lunch. It kind of makes it more fun when something's on the line. We've had some good games and ribbing each other," goaltender Chris Mason said.

As collective bargaining talks between the NHL and the NHL Players' Association continued in New York, bringing hopes the season could start soon, Predators players seemed to push themselves a bit harder at A-Game on Thursday.

Along with lunch, the goal of preparing for the season boosted the collective mood.

"When talks pick up, guys get that sense of excitement and a little more urgency because the monotony of going every day with no results and no talking, it's really frustrating and tough to find that motivation," Mason said. "When things start moving in the right direction, you get that glimmer of hope that things might work out."

Players also shift their drills into a higher gear in order to help boost conditioning levels.

"We get back to doing more practice-type drills and stuff," defenseman Shea Weber said.

Spaling a rep: Forward Nick Spaling is the Predators' new assistant player rep to the NHL Players' Association.

Teammates nominated Spaling to replace defenseman Ryan Suter, who signed with the Minnesota Wild. Forward David Legwand is the team's player rep.

"A couple of guys voted me in, which was real nice of them," Spaling said. "I really appreciate it."

Critical of WHL: Forward Paul Gaustad, a proud alumnus of the Portland Winterhawks, had some pointed words about the Western Hockey League's punishment of the team last week.

Citing player-benefit violations over the past four seasons, the WHL fined the Winterhawks \$200,000, took away several draft picks and suspended coach/GM Mike Johnston for the rest of the regular season.

"I'm a little bit surprised by the suspensions that have come out and the fines," Gaustad said. "I think in my opinion it's overboard by a lot."

Vesey for U.S.: Predators prospect Jim Vesey was named to the 2013 U.S. National Junior Team preliminary roster for the world junior championships.

Training camp will be held in Tarrytown, N.Y., where the 27-man roster will be trimmed to 23. The world juniors begin Dec. 26 in Ufa, Russia.

Nashville selected Vesey in the third round (66th overall) of the 2012 draft.

Calendar party: The Predators Dancers and Ice Girls will release their 2013 calendar with a party on Friday at Fidelity Motors (1207 Fesslers Lane).

The \$20 admission includes the calendar as well as appetizers and drinks.

Proceeds from calendar sales benefit the Nashville Predators Foundation.

Open skate: The Predators will host an open skate at Bridgestone Arena from 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturday.

Tennessean LOADED: 12.07.2012

645934 New Jersey Devils

A 56-Game N.H.L. Schedule Is a Possibility

By KEN BELSON and JEFF Z. KLEIN

With the nearly three-month N.H.L. lockout lurching uncertainly toward a conclusion, fans can start to consider how much of the season can be saved. With the schedule through Dec. 14 canceled, and more games likely to be canceled later this week, the best hope may be for a 56-game schedule.

While salvaging about two-thirds of the regular season may be good for the players and fans, the loss of so many games has come at a steep cost to some owners. That's because many teams have been forced to repay their season-ticket holders and sponsors at a time when revenue is not coming in. In some cases, teams have extended contracts with sponsors at no extra cost, or repaid them with things like concert tickets, free parking and food and beverages.

Even then, not all teams are created equal. Only nine of the league's 30 teams share an arena with an N.B.A. team that serves as an anchor tenant. The Kings, for instance, share the Staples Center with the Lakers and Clippers, which means AEG, their owner, is "more likely to retain revenue certainty to support operations," Fitch Ratings said in a report issued Thursday.

Many other clubs, including in Newark, Columbus, Ohio, and San Jose, do not have N.B.A. teams as co-tenants. The owners of the Rangers and the Knicks, meanwhile, are in the middle of an overhaul of Madison Square Garden and need the hockey season to begin to help pay for that renovation.

Chad Lewis, the author of the report, said that while most arenas will be able to maintain revenue from sales of suites and club seats, sponsorship and advertising in the short term, "the pressure on renewal rates stemming from local economic conditions and, in some cases, recent on-ice performance could be exacerbated by labor uncertainty."

In other words, angry fans and sponsors may walk away once their current contracts expire, or they could ask for significant discounts if they decide to renew.

The league could also suffer further damage if an agreement with the players is not reached soon. Any season of less than 62 games entitles sponsors to pay a prorated percentage of the money they would normally have paid the league, according to a person who has been involved in major sponsorship deals with the league.

For example, a 56-game schedule would be 68 percent of an 82-game schedule, meaning sponsors need pay the N.H.L. 68 percent of what they otherwise would have paid; a 50-game schedule would entitle sponsors to pay 61 percent. The person requested not to be identified because he was not authorized to comment for the record.

The league and its owners realize that the window for even a truncated season is narrowing, one more reason to believe a deal with the players may be struck sooner rather than later.

New York Times LOADED: 12.07.2012

645935 New Jersey Devils

N.H.L. Owners and Players Expected to Resume Talks

By JEFF Z. KLEIN

The hard work of hammering out a settlement to the N.H.L. lockout resumed on its 82nd day Thursday morning, as players reconvened to consider the owners' latest counteroffer.

That the two sides were even talking at all was considered a good sign, after tension levels rose near the end of Wednesday night's nearly nine-hour bargaining session. Jeremy Jacobs, the hardline Bruins owner, threatened to walk out of the talks before being talked down by Deputy Commissioner Bill Daly. Ryan Miller, the Sabres goalie, denied reports that he got into a shouting match with Jacobs.

Yet despite that, and a terse closing statement from Jets defenseman Ron Hainsey that seemed to indicate frustration on the union side ("We had a series of candid discussions tonight, and we plan on meeting tomorrow."), the players and owners were expected to resume bargaining Thursday afternoon.

With the state of the talks at a critical juncture Thursday, the players' association has asked that federal mediators be brought back into the talks. The N.H.L. was not expected to respond until after the league met with players later Thursday afternoon.

Federal mediators presided over two days of fruitless negotiations on Nov. 28 and 29, the last bargaining sessions before talks resumed on Tuesday. The players asked that mediators be brought again earlier in the week, but the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service had no mediators available.

In another change from the two previous days of talks, Gary Bettman and Donald Fehr were expected to rejoin negotiations. They had been absent from the negotiating table on Tuesday and Wednesday.

The N.H.L. wants a deal soon, so that a schedule of more than 50 games can be played. There are serious financial ramifications to a shorter schedule.

Any season of less than 62 games entitles sponsors to pay a prorated percentage of the money they would normally have paid the league, according to a person who has been involved in major sponsorship deals with the league. For example, a 56-game schedule would be 68 percent of an 82-game schedule, meaning sponsors need pay the N.H.L. just 68 percent of what they otherwise would have paid; a 50-game schedule would entitle sponsors to pay just 61 percent.

The person requested not to be identified because he was not authorized to comment for the record.

Details of the owners' offer emerged Thursday morning. They have dropped long-standing demands to change rules regarding free agency and salary arbitration – important concessions to the union, which wanted those rules to remain unchanged.

The owners also increased their offer from \$211 million to \$300 million on the provision to "make whole" players' existing contracts under a lowered salary cap.

In exchange, owners want a 10-year collective bargaining agreement, significantly up from previous demands for a six-year deal. The owners also offered an opt-out clause after eight years.

The owners also demanded a five-year limit to individual contracts, with a provision allowing team to sign their own players to seven-year deals. Under the old agreement, contracts were unlimited in length.

The owners also stuck to their long-standing demand that within those contracts, the maximum year-to-year salary variance would be limited to 5 percent.

New York Times LOADED: 12.07.2012

645936 New Jersey Devils

NHL lockout update: Gary Bettman says 'make whole' payments are off the table, among other offers made by the owners

Charles Curtis

Welcome to "A Tale of Two Lockouts."

Soon after union head Donald Fehr addressed the media and painted a picture of an offer he and the NHLPA thought was "a complete agreement on dollars" -- which we found out minutes later was rejected by the owners - Gary Bettman came to the podium and gave a different story.

He explained there was a "great deal of optimism and hope," something he told the NHL's Board of Governors in their meeting on Wednesday. The new owners participating in meetings, he said, wanted to do "something bold" and added \$100 million on their offer. The union's response was silence, with owners "besides themselves. Some of them, I had never seen that emotional," he said.

From there, the players tried to get the owners back on board, as both sides discussed what was vital to them in the next CBA.

"Last night and today it was reiterated that we don't need movement on our key elements, we need our key elements," Bettman said, via a transcript on SNY's Rangers blog. "Today we were expecting an answer, a yes or a no, and our instructions were if it was a yes then we could move on and if it was

a no then it would be over. The answer wasn't yes and the take and give or bottom line is that the union is suggesting that since they made moves we are close to a deal."

Here's another bottom line: Bettman said what the owners had offered is now "off the table." That includes "make whole" payments which would give players money on the contracts they signed before the lockout while the new CBA gave them less revenue.

After Bettman spoke, four of the owners who attended meetings this week released statements, all of which were featured on NHL.com.

"We made substantial movement on our end quickly, but unfortunately that was not met with the same level of movement from the other side. The players asked us to be patient and keep working with them. It's not what they do and they wanted us to know they were committed," said Ron Burkle, co-owner of the Pittsburgh Penguins. "We understood and appreciate their situation. We came back with an aggressive commitment to pensions which we felt was well received. We needed a response on key items that were important to us, but we were optimistic that we were down to very few issues. I believe a deal was within reach."

He then wrote how surprised the owners were when "the Fehrs made a unilateral and 'non-negotiable' decision."

The Maple Leafs' Larry Tannenbaum pointed out after he attended the BoG meeting, when he returned to meet with players, "it was like someone had thrown a switch. The atmosphere had completely changed."

More details from this week could emerge, like this tweet from Chris Johnston of the Canadian Press: "Ron Hainsey says the NHL told players last night that bringing Don Fehr back into the room was potentially 'a deal-breaker.'"

So now what? Bettman mentioned taking a deep breath. That likely means both sides will regroup and head into next week trying to figure out what their next move should be.

But the commissioner spoke perhaps for everyone involved -- especially hopeful fans who were charged with optimism this week -- when he said, "I am disappointed beyond belief that we are where we are tonight."

Star Ledger LOADED: 12.07.2012

645937 New Jersey Devils

NHL lockout update: NHLPA presented another offer; NHL leaves voicemail saying 'moves were not acceptable'

Charles Curtis,

UPDATE: Gary Bettman spoke to the media, saying the "make whole" offer was off the table. Four NHL owners also released statements.

The talks between owners and players this week started with "positive feedback", followed by a day of "tense" negotiations.

Today could be likened to a roller coaster ride.

After Donald Fehr and players were in a meeting that included deputy commissioner Bill Daly, Fehr emerged and had this to say: "I think it's clear now, after the position the players took today that there doesn't seem to be very much room -- certainly not unbridgeable room -- and we think the position the players took today are a clear outline on how to end this dispute."

"We think there is a complete agreement on dollars," he continued later. "If that's the case ... it wouldn't seem to be very much reason why we shouldn't be able to conclude an agreement in the near term."

Then, just minutes later, Fehr returned to speak to the media with bad news.

"We were advised in a voicemail message that the moves the players made were not acceptable, there was no reason to stay around for meetings tonight or tomorrow that they would be in touch and that something ... is off the table."

Before that news was dropped, here's what Fehr said was among the terms proposed today:

- A CBA that would last eight years, with an "opt-out" after the sixth year.
- Pensions that would come from the players' share.
- Contracts would have a maximum length of eight years.
- The lowest year of a contract "must be at least 25 percent of the highest years."
- An agreement regarding "make whole" payments.

That last one was huge. But suffice it to say, the owners didn't like what they saw. According to reports, Gary Bettman and Bill Daly are on their way to speak to the media. Stay tuned.

Star Ledger LOADED: 12.07.2012

645938 New Jersey Devils

NHL lockout: Owners reject players' counter proposal for new CBA

Rich Chere/

It was the most stunning 15 minutes yet of the ongoing NHL lockout.

In an effort to prevent several days of intense negotiating from going to waste, the NHL Players' Association made a counter proposal today on a new collective bargaining agreement the union felt could end the 83-day lockout.

NHLPA executive director Don Fehr said he hoped the eight-year CBA plan with an opt-out after six years would put the negotiations "on the road to a quick solution."

He couldn't have been more wrong.

Within minutes of leaving the podium after his press conference in New York, Fehr returned to inform reporters that NHL deputy commissioner Bill Daly had left a voice mail message for NHLPA special counsel Steve Fehr saying the league had rejected the counter proposal.

"It looks like this is not going to be resolved in the immediate future," Fehr said.

In fact, negotiations seem to have broken down, with no plans for talks tomorrow.

"I wanted to do everything possible to get a deal," commissioner Gary Bettman said. "I am disappointed beyond belief we are where we are tonight. The owners tried to do everything possible to make a new collective bargaining agreement.

"This for me has been a tough week that has been an emotional roller coaster."

In their latest proposal, the owners want a 10-year deal with an opt-out after eight years. Deputy commissioner Bill Daly said the length of the CBA is vitally important. He also called term limits on contracts "the hill we will die on."

Bettman, who said owners pushed for an agreement on Wednesday night and put \$100 million on the table that was met with silence from the players, stressed that offers made by the league this week are no longer on the table.

"It doesn't sound good," said Shawn Horcoff, one of the players involved in the talks.

Fehr said there was already an agreement on "total dollars," including the owners' "make-whole" proposal. However, two points that clearly remain unresolved are the length of contracts and the percentage those contracts could be raised or cut. The union wants a 25 percent high-low range while the league has asked for five percent.

"The players have gone a very, very long way," Fehr said. "(The players) made the lion's share of movement."

Fehr also said an agreement was in place on a pension plan, which would be paid for by the players, but Bettman took exception to many of the union chief's comments and his optimistic tone.

"The last time the union said we were close we were a billion dollars apart," Bettman said. "Spinning an emotional frenzy is unfair to our fans and the process."

Heated talks to place Wednesday night into Thursday morning following the NHL's board of governors meeting in New York. The union then spent most of today with internal meetings to formulate the new plan.

Negotiations did not resume until the afternoon and lasted only one hour. Only Daly and Battersman (not Bettman) represented the league while 16 players, Don and (NHLPA special counsel) Steve Fehr represented the union.

Star Ledger LOADED: 12.07.2012

645939 New Jersey Devils

NHL lockout update: Players and owners will meet again today after details of 'tense' negotiations emerge

Charles Curtis,

Tuesday night's negotiations seemed to leave NHL, the NHLPA and the media with some smiles and sighs of relief that there was some traction.

Reportedly, last night's talks that lasted until about 1 a.m. were a lot tougher. But the good news is no one has walked away yet.

"I am told there were some very tense exchanges, some near blowups, but they patched that together and were still working with smaller groups," wrote the Star Tribune's Michael Russo.

After the NHL's Board of Governors meeting, the negotiations truly began. Ultimately, some details emerged, with a list of the owners' offer from The Star-Ledger's Rich Chere: "A 10-year CBA with an opt-out after eight years. Contract term limits of five years (seven years for a team's own players). The 'make-whole' money was increased from \$211 to \$300."

Staying the same from the last CBA would be the same age (27) for unrestricted free agency to begin and salary arbitration after four years.

ESPNNewYork's Katie Strang reported some concerns from the meetings: "Multiple sources told ESPNNewYork.com that there is some concern among the union's membership that the format may be an attempt to divide the players and isolate the constituency from its leadership," she wrote, also mentioning another source who said the NHLPA thought both sides should allow whomever they want in the room.

Yet we've arrived at Thursday and talks will still continue. It wasn't suddenly going to be an easy process after months of debate, anger and leaked information. "Things aren't on sturdy ground," Russo tweeted. "But a month ago, things would have blown up. Both sides kept at it yesterday [because] it's a critical juncture."

Star Ledger LOADED: 12.07.2012

645940 New Jersey Devils

NHL lockout: Talks to continue today after players hold internal meeting

Rich Chere/

Critical issues remain as the NHL and its players move closer to a new collective bargaining agreement via marathon negotiations held Wednesday in New York.

The NHL Players' Association will hold internal meetings this morning before negotiations with the league are expected to resume at approximately noon.

Deputy commissioner Bill Daly said early Thursday morning that there was "good, candid dialogue" but added critical issues remain unresolved.

After Wednesday's NHL board of governors meeting, the owners reportedly made a proposal with the following points:

A 10-year CBA with an opt-out after eight years.

Contract term limits of five years (seven years for a team's own players).

The "make-whole" money was increased from \$211 to \$300.

Unrestricted free agency would remain the same at age 27.

Salary arbitration would stay the same after four years pro.

According to various reports, the talks between a group of 19 players and six owners were tense at times. The union questioned whether the full value of existing contracts will be honored.

Star Ledger LOADED: 12.07.2012

645941 New Jersey Devils

NHL commissioner Gary Bettman rips players' union boss Don Fehr, says parties are not close to new collective bargaining agreement

By Pat Leonard

It will become known infamously in hockey circles as "the voicemail."

Early Thursday evening at a Manhattan hotel, at the same time NHL players' union boss Don Fehr preached optimism that the gap between owners and players was "certainly not unbridgeable," league deputy commissioner Bill Daly left a phone message for Fehr's brother, Steve, saying that the players' latest proposal was unacceptable, this week's meetings were over, and all new elements in the NHL's most recent offer were off the table.

Fehr, who already had conducted a 17-minute press conference, returned and held a second, somber one. League commissioner Gary Bettman and Daly then assembled their own 32-minute presser, and Bettman ripped Fehr, calling his claim the parties are close to agreeing to a new collective bargaining agreement "almost incomprehensible."

A cancelled season is most certainly a strong possibility, particularly considering Daly's characterization of the NHL's desire to limit player contract lengths to five years as "the hill we will die on."

Negotiations turned south on Wednesday when moderate owners led by Penguins co-owner Ron Burkle were startled by the union's lack of response to the newest league proposal, according to sources. Bettman said the owners were "beside themselves." Daly called the union response "insulting." That's why on Thursday, none of the six owners involved in this week's meetings even returned to meet with the union.

Only Daly and NHL attorney Bob Battersman accepted a union counterproposal before calling Steve Fehr with the bad news.

The backlash was so heavy that the league even released statements from four of the six owners involved this week, who are normally forbidden from speaking publicly.

"I hope that going backwards does not prevent a deal," Burkle said.

But it's not just disagreement that has stalled the talk – it's also the owners' resentment for Don Fehr.

The union's executive director and Bettman stayed out of the large group discussions on Tuesday and Wednesday, creating a new dynamic that bred cautious optimism. But Winnipeg Jets player rep Ron Hainsey said that once the parties closed toward agreement on some issues, the players sought to re-involve Fehr to do what they hired him to do – close.

"I was told that if you're going to do that, it's possibly a deal-breaker," Hainsey said.

That came after the league turned down a union request to involve mediators. "If we were so close, why would we need mediation?" Bettman scoffed.

"It looks like this is not going to be resolved in the near future," Don Fehr said, unquestionably his most accurate statement of the night.

New York Daily News LOADED: 12.07.2012

645942 New Jersey Devils

Moderate voices, like Penguins co-owner Ron Burkle, important to NHL labor discussions as lockout drags on

By Pat Leonard

The snag that hit NHL negotiations Wednesday was not just a result of hardline owners refusing to budge and players venting frustrations. Tension built because some of Tuesday's peacemakers among the ownership were startled by the resistance and lack of progress they encountered once the league began discussing specific proposals and issues with the union, according to sources.

None of those moderate voices of reason has become as important to this negotiation as Pittsburgh Penguins co-owner Ron Burkle, an approachable billionaire who flew to New York on Monday on the same plane as his team's captain, Sidney Crosby, and Crosby's agent, Pat Brisson, according to the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review.

Burkle, the son of a California grocery-store manager who first joined a union at the age of 13, according to an October article in the New Yorker, took charge recently of hockey's aimless negotiations with the help of Crosby, the face of the league, on the other side of the table. They teamed with other owners and players on Tuesday to build a solid foundation for bargaining.

The severe risk run on Wednesday, however, when the NHL did not receive the response it anticipated after making both financial and contractual concessions, was in alienating the owners welcomed into negotiations by the NHL for the first time on Tuesday — namely Burkle, the Winnipeg Jets' Mark Chipman and the Tampa Bay Lightning's Jeff Vinik. None of them had been in the room the past five months to see exactly why these meetings weren't generating more progress.

Jeremy Jacobs (Boston Bruins) and Murray Edwards (Calgary Flames), who have participated as members of the NHL's negotiating committee throughout the lockout, remained in this week's meetings. But they were not the changing variables creating cautious optimism Tuesday — the moderate voices were the difference, such as that of Burkle.

One person familiar with the Penguins co-owner said of Burkle: "He commands respect from people; his humility is disarming," and called him, "trustworthy."

Early Thursday, the league and union were in contact, but no one from the NHL arrived at the hotel for a face-to-face meeting with the union until 3:43 p.m., and the group included just two people: deputy commissioner Bill Daly and lawyer Bob Battersman.

The NHL's Wednesday proposal included several moves toward the union, according to details first reported by John Shannon and Michael Grange of SportsNet in Canada. The league proposed a 10-year agreement and a \$99 million increase of the money it would pay to "make whole" player contracts affected by a reset to a 50-50 revenue split, bringing the total "make whole" offer to \$300 million. (The players asked for a five-year agreement and \$393 million in their Nov. 21 proposal.)

The NHL backed off from changes to a player's eligibility for restricted free agency and for contract arbitration. The league also stood firm on reducing player contract terms from unlimited to a maximum of five years, but it threw in a wrinkle in which teams could sign their own free agents for up to seven years. (Still, it's difficult to envision players agreeing to such a drastic reduction in opportunity for long deals.)

Finally, the NHL held firm on its insistence that player annual salaries may vary no more than 5% from the deal's initial year, in an attempt to eliminate back-loaded contracts in which clubs front-load player contracts knowing they won't play out the full term. That creates cap space for the franchise on the back end.

The owners' move to \$300 million was surprising and significant but still does not completely compensate for player losses to the 50-50 split, which is likely what the union told the league. The 10-year term — or even a seven-year agreement with single-year escalators to 10 — should be reasonable to the union, which has said since the beginning of this debate that one of its priorities is to snap the league out of its interminable lockout cycle. But players' association executive director Don Fehr has said he does not want a deal longer than five years because of two reasons: it's

difficult to predict further into the future, and younger players should have the opportunity when they enter the league four or five years from now to negotiate their own deal.

New York Daily News LOADED: 12.07.2012

645943 New York Islanders

NHL rejects players' offer to break labor impasse

By STEVE ZIPAY

Any hopes for an end to the 82-day NHL lockout this weekend -- or soon -- were dashed Thursday night in a strange manner.

First, the NHLPA responded to a league proposal in a way that the union believed moved the sides close to an agreement in many areas. But the NHL quickly rejected the response via voicemail while union chief Donald Fehr was addressing the media in Manhattan. When he returned after finding out about the call, Fehr said, "It looks like this is not going to be resolved in the immediate future."

Moments later, at the same podium, an emotional commissioner Gary Bettman said, "I am disappointed beyond belief where we are tonight." He accused Fehr of misrepresenting how close the two sides were.

Three major issues have to be resolved: The league wants players to accept a five-year limit on player contracts, a 10-year collective-bargaining agreement with an eighth-year re-opener, and no buyouts and escrow limits. "We needed those three elements," Bettman said. "We needed a 'yes' or 'no.' This is a whole package."

Deputy commissioner Bill Daly called the five-year limit on contracts "a hill we will die on."

The union prefers a seven-year limit on free-agent contracts for players signing with the same team, an eight-year CBA with a six-year option, and some buyout and escrow flexibility.

The breakdown came after Tuesday's positive vibrations after a long players-owners-only meeting in Manhattan, followed by a testy session Wednesday.

"There was a great deal of optimism," Bettman said. "We reported that to the board of governors. That disappeared, almost inexplicably, Wednesday afternoon. The owners [six who were in the talks this week] were beside themselves."

Fehr had said the union "responded comprehensively to the various issues that had been the focus of discussions for last several days" and called it "a clear outline to end this particular dispute."

Bettman disagreed with that assessment, said the league's \$89 million that was added to \$211 million this week to guarantee existing contracts in the transition is "off the table," and added that the league is not interested in further assistance from federal mediators.

Newsday LOADED: LOADED: 12.07.2012

645944 New York Rangers

NHL owners Ron Burkle, Mark Chipman, Larry Tanenbaum, Jeff Vinik release statements as CBA talks break off

By Pat Leonard

The four NHL owners new to collective bargaining this week released statements through the league on Thursday evening after talks snapped off suddenly in Manhattan. This was noteworthy not only because some of these owners were those startled by Wednesday's negative turn of events, but also because they normally are forbidden from speaking publicly about negotiations under threat of hefty fines from the league:

STATEMENT FROM RON BURKLE, PITTSBURGH PENGUINS

"The idea to put players and owners together in the same room was a refreshing idea. Commissioner Bettman should be thanked for proposing it and the Fehrs should be thanked for agreeing to it.

"The players came with a strong desire to get back to playing hockey. They were professional and did a good job of expressing their concerns and listening to ours.

"We wanted to move quickly and decisively. We have all spent too much time without any real progress at the expense of our fans, our sponsor and the communities we serve. It was time to make bold moves and get a deal. Many people think we got over our skis and they are probably right, but we wanted to do everything we could to get back to hockey now. We didn't hold back.

"We made substantial movement on our end quickly, but unfortunately that was not met with the same level of movement from the other side. The players asked us to be patient and keep working with them. It's not what they do and they wanted us to know they were committed. We understood and appreciated their situation. We came back with an aggressive commitment to pensions which we felt was well received. We needed a response on key items that were important to us, but we were optimistic that we were down to very few issues. I believe a deal was within reach.

"We were therefore surprised when the Fehrs made a unilateral and 'non-negotiable' decision – which is their right, to end the player/owner process that has moved us farther in two days than we moved at any time in the past months.

"I want to thank the players involved for their hard work as we tried to reach a deal.

"I hope that going backwards does not prevent a deal.

STATEMENT FROM MARK CHIPMAN, WINNIPEG JETS

"I'd like to thank the NHL for giving me the opportunity to participate in this very important process.

"I came here optimistic that we could find a solution. That sense of optimism grew after our first few sessions, including the small group discussions late last night.

"Regrettably, we have been unable to close the divide on some critical issues that we feel are essential to the immediate and long-term health of our game.

"While I sense there are some members of the players association that understand our perspective on these issues, clearly there are many that don't.

"I am deeply disappointed that we were unable to bring this extremely unfortunate situation to a successful conclusion and I wish to apologize to our fans and sponsors for letting them down."

STATEMENT FROM LARRY TANENBAUM, TORONTO MAPLE LEAFS

"I was pleased to be asked to join the Player/Owner negotiation sessions. I had hoped that my perspective both as a businessman and as one of the owners of the Toronto Maple Leafs would be helpful to the process. Like all other teams, this work stoppage has hurt our fans, our employees and our business. Neither the owners nor the players will ever recover the losses incurred with this work stoppage.

"I understand how important it is to have a strong league and 30 healthy teams. I must admit that I was shocked at how things have played out over the last 48 hours. The sessions on Tuesday felt cooperative with an air of goodwill. I was optimistic and conveyed my optimism to the Board of Governors at our Wednesday meeting. However, when we reconvened with the players on Wednesday afternoon, it was like someone had thrown a switch. The atmosphere had completely changed. Nevertheless, the owners tried to push forward and made a number of concessions and proposals, which were not well-received. I question whether the union is interested in making an agreement.

"I am very disappointed and disillusioned. Had I not experienced this process myself, I might not have believed it. Like all hockey fans, I am hopeful this situation can be resolved as soon as possible. I miss our game."

STATEMENT FROM JEFF VINIK, TAMPA BAY LIGHTNING

"After working this week with our players toward what we hoped would be a new agreement, owners presented a proposal we believed would benefit

those great players, ownership, and, ultimately, our fans for many years to come. While trust was built and progress was made along the way, unfortunately, our proposal was rejected by the Union's leadership. My love for the game is only superseded by my commitment to our fans and I hold out hope we can soon join with our players and return the game back to its rightful place on the ice."

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645945 NHL

Duhatschek: Latest breakdown reminiscent of 2004

ERIC DUHATSCHEK

So here's a prediction based as much on the past as the present state of NHL labour relations:

The chances of salvaging any portion of the 2012-13 NHL season went from slim to virtually zero Thursday, a roller-coaster moment in the negotiations that closely resembled an almost-identical day eight years ago.

Can anyone remember how that played out?

On Dec. 10, 2004, NHL Players' Association executive director Bob Goodenow made a dramatic offer to end the lockout, proposing that players would immediately accept a 24-per-cent rollback on salaries – a move he asserted would save the NHL hundreds of millions of dollars.

Too many observers jumped the gun and declared it a season-saving moment, when it was anything but.

The NHL considered it a useful first step on the way to a hard salary cap, demanded further concessions and, ultimately, the two sides were unable to come to terms on a new collective bargaining agreement. The 2004-05 season was lost, and by the time they finally settled the bitter dispute, the union was broken and the league was declaring unconditional victory.

It was more of the same Thursday, a real case of déjà vu.

It started with some optimism from NHLPA executive director Donald Fehr that an agreement was at hand, characterizing the gap between the two sides as negligible. "We think there's a complete agreement on dollars."

The NHL didn't see it quite the same way and rejected the NHLPA's position out of hand.

How bad are things right now? One assertion from NHL deputy commissioner Bill Daly summed up the discord.

"This is the hill we will die on," Daly said, a reference to term limits on player contracts, which he says is one of three issues there will be no give on. (The others: A 10-year labour agreement, with an option for the NHLPA to reopen after eight; and the transition issues in going from one CBA to the next, in which the players are looking for escrow limits and compliance buyouts.)

The NHL left a gaping loophole in the last CBA, which permitted teams to sign players to contracts of indeterminate lengths, largely to circumvent the salary cap. Player agents and general managers eagerly moved in and front-loaded contracts for 10 years or more became de rigueur among the high-flying set.

Pittsburgh Penguins star Sidney Crosby just got one of them this past summer, a 12-year deal worth \$104.4-million (U.S.). The two newest members of the Minnesota Wild, Zach Parise and Ryan Suter, each received 13-year deals worth \$98-million.

The NHL is determined to put that genie back in the bottle and, currently, the best the players' association was prepared to do was limit player contracts to a maximum of eight seasons.

The league provided concessions on financial issues – the so-called "make-whole" provision – and gave ground on some other contract markers, including salary arbitration, free agency and entry-level, but according to Daly and NHL commissioner Gary Bettman, those were all part of a larger

package. If the union wouldn't agree to their demands, then the NHL's concessions were taken off the table.

According to Bettman's math, there are now 90 players on contracts that run six years or longer, compared to just one in 2006, when the last CBA took effect. Still, the most damaging contracts are the ones that run eight-years plus, of which there are just 22. And only 16 players out of about 750 are on contracts that run 10 years or longer (roughly just over 2 per cent of the workforce).

Is it worth losing a season over a CBA provision that affects so few – keeping in mind players who have these long-term commitments are usually the NHL's top earners and thus would make oodles of cash, even on short-term deals? It seems wholly unnecessary – and yet, the gap in 2004 seemed manageable at the 11th hour, too.

More worrisome than anything Thursday was how the rhetoric was stepped up after talks broke down.

According to Daly, the moderate owners trying to bridge the gap were "insulted" by the NHLPA's reluctance to offer anything tangible in return for the league upping its financial offer.

Bettman said he was "disappointed beyond belief that we are where we are."

The quaint notion that the NHL season would be up and running by Christmas just went up in smoke, and the thought that the union will start the decertification process went from a theoretical option to a real possibility.

All because the two sides cannot bridge a three-year gap on contract limits and a two-year divide on the length of the CBA.

It makes you think: These two sides really do deserve each other.

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645946 NHL

To understand this dispute, you have to follow the pride

KEN DRYDEN

The danger of the owners-players meeting this week wasn't that the players, in a board room, were meeting on the owners' turf. It was that some owners, unable to control old instincts, would start talking to the players like owners, and this negotiation, always about pride, would go off the rails again.

Apparently, that didn't happen. A human face at least temporarily has been put on the other side. Before each side becomes officially evil again, they might keep some things in mind as they work through the tough stuff to get to a deal.

First, this agreement was never going to happen fast. Nothing was going to get done before the labour pact expired Sept. 15. A negotiation is about issues but it's also about the relationship between its parties. If the issues this time didn't seem that difficult – the 2004 negotiation about a salary cap was far more fundamental – the relationship question was going to be tricky.

History matters. In 2004, the players lost. If one was to compare those negotiations to a season, the players had gone into the Stanley Cup final against the owners as the heavy favourites. Year after year the owners had chased after free agents pushing salary levels higher for every player and every team. The owners, despite NHL commissioner Gary Bettman's exhortations and ridicule of them in NHL governors' meetings, seemed powerless to stop themselves. The NHL Players' Association, led by Bob Goodenow, just said no to anything the owners proposed. They knew, eventually, the owners would give in.

But this time the owners changed the NHL's by-laws. A vote of three-quarters of the league's governors was needed to overturn any agreement Bettman made. Bettman, stung by years of frustration, now with the power he needed, was ready.

In real life, the season was cancelled, the players broke apart and the NHLPA self-destructed. In this imaginary Cup final, the players were

expected to win four straight. The series, instead, went to a seventh game. The owners blew them out, 8-0.

The players were humiliated. In recent years it's been suggested the players didn't lose, that the consequence of some of the new agreement's provisions, unanticipated at the time by both the NHL and NHLPA, is that the players' average salary increased substantially. But players, above all, are competitors. They know what a win feels like; they know what a loss feels like. They lost.

Out of one negotiation into the next, every winner needs to win more. Every loser needs to get even. Every breakdown makes the next one more likely. Reputations, for both winners and losers, get established. War stories get told and retold. For Bettman, there were the spoils of victory – a big boost in salary. For the losers, little by little reputations need to be rebuilt, self-images boosted, moments created where pride can be felt again.

So, 2004 set the table for 2012. Most of the present issues emerged out of the effects of the unanticipated consequences of 2004.

But beneath the issues, far more central to the present stalemate and far harder to resolve is the relationship. Last time, the owners won and the players lost. In Watergate, to help Woodward and Bernstein make sense of a confusing story, Deep Throat advised them to "follow the money." The owner-player dispute this time may seem to be about the money, but it's not. To understand it you have to "follow the pride."

There wasn't going to be an agreement before Sept. 15 because neither side was going to be willing to give up all that the other side needed to win before the contract expired. The money issues might be resolved. The relationship question couldn't be.

The players had to establish some equilibrium in their relationship with the owners. If they couldn't this time, they knew, led by someone as formidable as Donald Fehr, they would have little chance in the future.

Then games began to be cancelled. The public's reaction has come in spasms of urgency followed by periods of calm. Some fans have expressed anger, some disinterest (though passionately), some apathy. The owner-player gamble has been that none of this will last past the lockout.

The give-and-take through November was no surprise. Both sides needed to push the issues forward – a small agreement here; the closing of a gap there – as though they were the real matters to be resolved.

Instead it's given both sides the chance to do what they most need to do: to stand up to the other and test the resolve of the other. This can only happen over time, time running down, and time running out.

For Fehr, it's also been a chance to build up the pride of the players. He invited some of them into the negotiating sessions – to see him in action; to see Bettman and the owners in action. When Fehr put together two counterproposals, he involved the players.

When Bettman and the owners quickly rejected both, the players took it personally. They felt rejected, disrespected. Angry. Resentful. Proud. When veteran player Roman Hamrlik questioned the continuing lockout, his comments, instead of weakening the players, brought them closer.

For the players to win as many of the money issues as they need to win, Fehr knows, first he has to make this about pride.

Through this, Bettman and Fehr have known the last possible date for there to be enough of a season to be a season, and that date is later than it seems. The 2004-05 season wasn't finally cancelled until Feb. 16, 2005. Until that moment, there remained hope and scenarios by which a season could be played. The 1994-95 season – 48 games – didn't begin until Jan. 20, 1995 (and didn't end until May 3; the playoffs finishing June 24). Once they missed the scheduled start of the season and a few artificial deadlines (the date to play a full schedule of games; the Winter Classic), once they had accepted the consequences – not good or bad – of the fans' ultimate reaction, Bettman and Fehr knew there was only one date that matters, a final date – around mid-January, 2013.

There is time. But there's no time for mistake.

In its initial offer to the players, the owners proposed that their respective share of league revenues be reversed, that the players get 43 per cent not 57, and the owners 57 not 43. The owners overreached – to show they were tough; to show they were winners – and stirred the players' pride.

Now as time runs short, in any offer the players propose they can't make the same mistake. They can't raise the owners' pride.

It's hard to believe that Bettman doesn't see the damage being done.

It's hard to believe that Fehr doesn't see that standing up and fighting back, that pride without an agreement, won't hold for long.

It's hard to believe that both the owners and players are so tied up in the rightness of their own side and the wrongness of the other guys that they can't see the earth they're both scorching. It's hard to believe that both Bettman and Fehr, the owners and players, can't see that no season, no victory.

If up until now the back and forth between them is just a scenario that both Bettman and Fehr have had to play out, if both of them have things truly in hand for a signed agreement at the right moment and there is a season, sorry for all this fuss. Or as Gilda Radner's Emily Litella on Saturday Night Live would say, "Never mind."

But if this isn't just a scenario, if they think the issues that divide them are worthy of another cancelled year, if the season is truly at risk – they're wrong. The owners may own the teams. They may have the right to put on games or not. The players may have the right to play or not.

But neither of them has the right to mess up what other players and other owners have created, what players and fans of all sorts, everywhere, have created over so many years.

With the fans, what is lost is lost. And for the owners and players what is lost with the fans may prove far more than whatever else is won.

But this is now, what they do next is what matters. As things stand, the owners can still achieve an increased share of league revenues, the players a lesser decreased share. Both have stood up to the other; both have shown resolve. Both have been (mostly) respectful of the other. Neither has (often) said anything too stupid. In their terms and between themselves, both can still win.

And both – the owners and players; and all of us – can still win two bigger, more important prizes: a deal of the sort that makes a next lockout less likely. And, a season.

The owners and players, after being on opposite sides all these months, on this most important point at this most important time, are finally on the same side. They are in this together.

There will be a season because there can't not be a season.

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645947 NHL

NHLPA says league rejects latest offer, talks break off

Joanna Slater

The most promising effort to salvage the 2012-13 hockey season broke down in dramatic fashion Thursday night as both sides offered starkly different descriptions of what led to the failure.

Donald Fehr, the executive director of the NHL Players' Association, said that the league had rejected what he described as a comprehensive proposal containing significant concessions from their side.

"It comes as a disappointment, obviously," Fehr said. "We are clearly very close, if not on top of each other, on most of the major issues." But, "it looks like this is not going to be resolved in the immediate future."

Fehr spoke surrounded by a group of 14 players, including Pittsburgh Penguins captain Sidney Crosby, who have spent much of the past three days in on-and-off talks with owners.

Shortly afterward, NHL commissioner Gary Bettman, visibly upset, addressed the media. He rejected the notion that the sides were anywhere close to an agreement.

"I am disappointed beyond belief that we are where we are tonight," he said. "We're going to have to take a deep breath and regroup."

It's unclear when negotiations will resume, but the clock is ticking to rescue what remains of the season.

"When we get to the point when we can't play a season with integrity... then we'll be done," Bettman said.

He suggested it wouldn't make sense to put together a season of fewer than 48 games – the number played in the truncated season in 1994.

Bettman said that all offers made in the week's negotiations were now off the table.

Discussions had begun promisingly, Bettman said, with direct talks among owners and players.

The owners' group included four new to the bargaining process who are considered moderate voices: Ron Burkle of the Pittsburgh Penguins, Larry Tanenbaum of the Toronto Maple Leafs, Jeff Vinik of the Tampa Bay Lightning and Mark Chipman of the Winnipeg Jets.

Soon after the talks broke down, the NHL issued statements from each of the four individual owners whose presence at this week's meetings got the negotiating ball rolling again.

Tanenbaum, the chairman of Maple Leafs Sports and Entertainment Ltd., and governor of the league's most valuable franchise, had joined the discussion in part to give a voice to the league's big-market teams. Privately, some players believed that the league's agenda was being driven by the 10 or 12 small-market teams, losing money under the last collective agreement.

Tanenbaum said he was initially optimistic after the first day of negotiations and conveyed that sense to the NHL's board of governors during Wednesday's meeting.

"However, when we reconvened with the players on Wednesday afternoon, it was like someone had thrown a switch," Tanenbaum said. "The atmosphere had completely changed. Nevertheless, the owners tried to push forward and made a number of concessions and proposals, which were not well-received."

Tanenbaum went on to say he questioned "whether the union is interested in making an agreement" and concluded: "Had I not experienced this process myself, I might not have believed it."

Bettman said that the group of owners wanted to "do something bold" to move toward a deal. So they sweetened the league's offer on the so-called "make-whole" payments to ease the switch to a new revenue-sharing scheme. Bettman said the owners offered approximately \$100-million (U.S.) in new payments, putting the total at \$300-million, roughly the midpoint between the two sides' original offers.

In exchange, Bettman said, the owners expected the players to make concessions in three key areas – the length of the new agreement, transition issues related to the new system, and term limits on player contracts.

The last item, in particular, is "the hill we die on," said Bill Daly, deputy NHL commissioner. "For the union to say we're close is cherry-picking."

The league wants players to agree to a 10-year pact. The players, meanwhile, offered an eight-year time frame with the ability to opt out and renegotiate after six years.

Each side acknowledged, if quietly, that concessions had been made by the other side. But it appeared they could not find a way to bridge their differences, even with the current hockey season hanging in the balance.

Fehr said he felt the two sides had been closing in on a deal and had reached a complete agreement where monetary amounts were concerned. "The players have gone a very, very long way," he added.

Players echoed that sentiment. "It's a pretty disappointing day when you come to them with concessions in areas we haven't [found it] easy to make," and in response, the proposal is rejected, said Chris Campoli, a free agent who formerly played for the Montreal Canadiens.

The collapse of talks on Thursday stands in contrast to the positive vibe that prevailed on Tuesday and throughout much of Wednesday. On Thursday, the players spent the morning and afternoon in internal deliberations before a brief meeting with the NHL side.

The owners who took part in the process also said they were disheartened. "I believe a deal was within reach," said Burkle, the man who signed Crosby to a contract extension worth over \$100-million this summer.

Burkle said he was surprised by what he said was a unilateral decision to move beyond the player-owner format of negotiations that had worked well – in other words, to put Fehr back into the mix.

With a report from Eric Duhatschek

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645948 NHL

NHL lockout: It's up to Bettman and Fehr now: Cox

By Damien Cox

NEW YORK—If people keep leaving, it may come down to an arm wrestle between Gary Bettman and Donald Fehr.

Jonathan Toews and Craig Adams left town on Wednesday. Today, Larry Tanenbaum and Mark Chipman bolted, and so did David Backes, the power centre of the St. Louis Blues. As tensions rise and tempers grow short, and with Bettman and Fehr expected to be back in the thick of things for the next meeting, the identities of who's here and who isn't continues to be a changing dynamic.

This we know. The owners-players format appears to be done. Mediation, requested by the players and denied by the owners today, isn't an open.

It's got to come down to Bettman and Fehr now, and it's probably got to come down to making a deal or not making a deal, with both sides having already lost hundreds of millions of dollars over the past 82 days.

The length of the next CBA has become a major issue. It shouldn't be, as 10 years makes a lot of sense to give this sport a chance to grow without the threat of labour stoppages.

"I love 10 years. Hell, I'd take 12 years," said one player agent, who said he believes there's enough in the mix now to make a deal today.

Fehr, however, seems against the idea, arguing that so many players will have changed over the next five years that it's not fair to stick them with a deal they didn't negotiate.

Surely, that can't be the deal-breaker. But at this point, really, what should be?

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645949 NHL

Unplugged: How NHL lockout talks unravelled

Sean Fitz-Gerald

NEW YORK — The NHL Players' Association has requested reintroducing U.S. federal mediators to collective bargaining talks with the NHL.

The sides spent two unsuccessful days with mediators last week.

The league has yet to respond to the request but it is still expected to meet with the NHLPA later Thursday.

It appears the dynamic will change, with commissioner Gary Bettman and NHLPA executive director Donald Fehr expected to rejoin negotiations.

They excused themselves from talks on Tuesday and Wednesday in an effort to spur progress.

The sides have moved closer with their proposals in recent days, but hurdles remain in negotiations.

The lockout has resulted in the cancellation of 422 regular-season games through Dec. 14.

Read more ...

On television, he looked angry. The lectern seemed to shake as he spoke Thursday night, with National Hockey League commissioner Gary Bettman

capping a night of wonderful theatre with a long, impassioned speech that left hockey fans with the distinct impression they will be without the highest level of their sport this season.

Whether or not that is true remains to be seen. All we know is what was said, and here are some of the highlights from Bettman's remarks in New York City, as well as those from NHL deputy commissioner Bill Daly and from some of the owners:

Bettman, in his opening remarks:

"We're at a loss to explain what happened. But things were not of the same tone as they had been on Tuesday. Nevertheless, the owners decided to try and continue to do everything possible to make a new collective bargaining agreement. The key for all of us — particularly the owners, but everybody associated with the game — was to have a long-term agreement. That's what our fans deserve. That's what the game deserves. That's what the players deserve. And that's what all of our business partners deserve. And that's something we wanted to achieve, with a system that would work appropriately and would continue to enable us to have great competitive balance and grow the game. With that view in mind, the owners, particularly the four new ones that joined us ... they wanted to push ahead and do something bold. And so, what they did, among other things, was virtually put a new US\$100-million on the table on Wednesday night in the hopes that would help show that we wanted to get back and play, which we do, very much, as quickly as possible. The union's response was shockingly silent, so to speak, in terms of their reaction. It was almost no reaction. It was, 'thank you, we'll take the US\$100-million.' The owners were beside themselves. Some of them, I had never seen that emotional. And they said they don't know what happened, but this process is over — clearly, the union doesn't want to make a deal, and this was from the four new entrants in the process."

Bettman, later in his opening remarks:

"Once again, the owners said, 'we're going to make a bold move ... we're going to give up some of the things that were important to us — such as in the player contract area — but we're going to tell you the things that are vitally important to us, and that we need to have.' And that was in response to the union telling us that the pension plan, the defined benefit pension plan that they were seeking, was now the key element. Now, earlier in the negotiations, we were told that the 'make whole' was the key element: 'Fix the make whole, we'll have a deal.' Well, we addressed the 'make whole' and we didn't have a deal. Then, it was player contracting. And we made some dramatic moves on player contracting, and that turned out not to be the key to the negotiations. So, now it was the pension. And the owners, in light of what happened with the US\$100-million, said, 'you know what? We're going to tell you the three or four things that we need ... and we need you to give us those things the way we've asked for them, because we've given up a lot of other things.'"

Bettman, later in his opening remarks, responding to the notion the NHLPA suggesting the two sides were actually close to a deal:

"The characterization that I've just heard transmitted to us, that we were close, that reminds me of the last time the union said we were close — and we were a billion dollars apart. I'm not sure that spinning us all into an emotional frenzy over 'maybe we're close, and we're going to be playing hockey tomorrow,' isn't terribly unfair to our fans and it's terribly unfair to this process."

I keep hearing that we have some magic date. You know what my magic date was? It was Oct. 11, when we should have opened the season with a new collective bargaining agreement

Bettman, later in his opening remarks:

"We're going to have to take a deep breath and try to regroup ... Sometimes, you feel like you're chasing your tail in this process. But we so much wanted to play, we went even further than we should have. And when it didn't get the right response, I started hearing from the clubs, 'why is the make whole still on the table?' And I told the union that I was under increasing pressure to take it off, but that I wasn't going to do that because I wanted to do everything possible to try to keep this process going to get to a deal."

Statement from Larry Tanenbaum, chairman of Maple Leaf Sports & Entertainment:

"I am very disappointed and disillusioned. Had I not experienced this process myself, I might not have believed it. Like all hockey fans, I am

hopeful this situation can be resolved as soon as possible. I miss our game.”

Statement from Ron Burkle, co-owner of the Pittsburgh Penguins:

“I hope that going backwards does not prevent a deal.”

Mary Altaffer/The Associated Press

Statement from Mark Chipman, chairman of True North Sports & Entertainment, which owns the Winnipeg Jets:

“While I sense there are some members of the players association that understand our perspective on these issues, clearly there are many that don’t. I am deeply disappointed that we were unable to bring this extremely unfortunate situation to a successful conclusion and I wish to apologize to our fans and sponsors for letting them down.”

NHL deputy commissioner Bill Daly, in his opening remarks:

“In the spirit of wanting to do a deal, we walked away from unrestricted free agency, we walked away from salary arbitration, we’ve walked away from the entry level system — in the context of making sure the term limits on contracts was something that was vitally important to ownership, and we needed the players to recognize that.”

Daly, later in his remarks:

“We got a response that, quite frankly, was insulting to our owners [Wednesday] night. They wanted to leave the room. The players asked them to stay. They considered that, went back to the players and said, ‘we’ll stay, and we’ll re-engage if you agree to the three things that we say are important to us, which is the term of the CBA, term limits on player contracts — which is the hill we will die on — and the compliance issues.’ And what we got today, quite frankly and disappointingly, missed the mark in all three respects. So for the union to suggest that somehow we’re close, is cherry-picking, and it’s unfortunate.”

Question: Was the NHL aware the NHLPA believed the two sides were actually close to a deal?

Bettman: “Actually, it’s not the first time he’s said we’re close when we weren’t. I don’t know why he did that, especially when he knew the parameters that had been laid out [Wednesday] night, and what had evolved over the week. I find it almost incomprehensible that he did that.”

Question: What do you have on the table?

Bettman: “The facts are ... anything that we put on the table this week is off the table.”

I have a long-term responsibility to this game and to the fans of the game to make sure that we have a healthy product

Question: Is there a drop-dead date?

Bettman: “I keep hearing that we have some magic date. You know what my magic date was? It was Oct. 11, when we should have opened the season with a new collective bargaining agreement. And the fact of the matter is, we’ll get to a point, and at that point we’ll conclude we can’t have a season with integrity, and then we’ll have to make a tough decision. I am certainly hoping that we don’t get to that place. But when we do, we will be there.”

Question: Are you concerned if the NHLPA moves to decertify?

Bettman: “You know, a lot’s been written about decertification. For those of you who are actually writing about it, you also might want to look at what’s called ‘disclaimer,’ which is probably more likely. What would happen, if it happened? The board (of governors) was completely and thoroughly briefed by counsel on the subject on Wednesday. We don’t view it in the same way, in terms of its impact, as apparently the union may. I don’t know. We’ve never discussed it with the union. All we know is what you comment about it. It’s not something that we focus on, the same way you do.”

Question: Are you prepared to cancel more games at this point?

Bettman: “Well, at some point. We’ve been tied up for most of the week. Obviously, we’re cancelled through Dec. 14. As we get closer to the 14th, we’re going to have to take another look at the calendar.”

Question: If the NHL doesn’t get the three things it wants, are you prepared to cancel the season?

Bettman: “This is a package deal. Those things have been identified as vitally important. And my guess is, the things that we’re prepared to do in the absence of getting those things means the union won’t be prepared to make a deal.”

Question: How can you justify cancelling two full seasons in the span of eight years?

Bettman: “First of all, lockouts and strikes are something that has taken place in all sports. Baseball had eight consecutive work stoppages before they ushered in an era of labour peace. I believe the NBA’s had four work stoppages. Football has ... I’m not happy about this, but I’ve got to play the hand that I’m dealt. And my responsibility is the long-term health of this game and our franchises, and our league. And the fact of the matter is, I find it almost incomprehensible that the 82-game-save-the-season package wasn’t accepted ... Am I unhappy about the prospect? You bet I am. OK? It absolutely is something that torments me. But by the same token, I have a long-term responsibility to this game and to the fans of the game to make sure that we have a healthy product.”

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645950 NHL

NHL labour negotiations come crashing down in blink of an eye

Bruce Arthur

NEW YORK — The NHL labour situation has hit another roadblock.

The NHL Players’ Association says the league has rejected its latest proposal, one that union head Donald Fehr called “a clear outline” to end the dispute.

Fehr says he received a voicemail from the league saying that the moves the players made were not acceptable and that there was no reason to remain in New York for more talks.

The union head says this latest development suggests the labour dispute will “not be resolved in the immediate future.”

“What can we tell the hockey fans of Canada? You can tell them that it looks like this is not going to be resolved in the immediate future,” Fehr said. “I hope that turns out to be wrong. But that’s certainly the message that we have today.”

Read more...

The explosion took several strange and electric minutes, almost in slow motion. After two days of bargaining and several offers and counter-offers, National Hockey League Players’ Association executive director Don Fehr addressed the media and expressed significant optimism, all but saying that the major components of a new collective bargaining agreement with the league had been agreed to, and that while it was not done, they were in terrific shape. Dollars, pension, the big issues. If you were listening, you had to think a season was imminent.

But as Fehr spoke, NHL deputy commissioner Bill Daly called his counterpart Steve Fehr’s cell phone and, finding nobody to answer, left a voice mail informing the players that their offer was not acceptable, that everything that had been agreed to this week was off the table. After Fehr left the room, he decided to come back. The long-fizzling bomb had gone off.

It was a bizarre scene. Players began to give interviews, but were halted after a few minutes to line up again on the podium where they sat or stood, checking their phones. Steve Fehr returned to the room and whispered in the ear of Winnipeg Jets defenceman Ron Hainsey as everyone stood and watched. The room buzzed. Everyone waited.

Don Fehr came back, informed the media that the league had rejected their offer, and said, “It looks like this is not going to be resolved in the immediate future.”

“Previously we didn’t think we were nearly as far apart as the owners did, but I think it’s clear now after the positions the players took today that there doesn’t seem to be much room, certainly not unbridgeable room,” Fehr said.

Within the hour, NHL commissioner Gary Bettman and deputy Bill Daly arrived, and delivered an epic, blistering attack on Fehr. Bettman was openly emotional, and Daly was quietly angry, and the two of them blasted Fehr again and again.

"That reminds me of the last time the players the players said we were close, and we were a billion dollars apart," said Bettman who has never been this publicly emotional. "I don't know why he did that ... I find it almost incomprehensible that he did that ... I am disappointed beyond belief that we are where we are tonight, and we're going to have to take a deep breath and try to regroup.

"What you're witnessing is very tough bargaining," Bettman said. "We kept giving and giving and giving, we made five separate proposals, we kept negotiating against ourselves ... my concern is, and maybe the mistake was, is maybe we should stop negotiating. I am disappointed beyond belief that we are where we are tonight, and we're going to have to take a deep breath and try to regroup

"Maybe they thought we didn't have the resolve, which would be inconsistent with this ownership group."

Daly said the league had three unbreakable conditions to a deal: a five-year cap on contracts with only 5% variance between the highest and lowest yearly salaries (seven if you are re-signing with the same team), a 10-year CBA, and no limits on things like escrow, calling them "the hill we will die on." The players had offered eight-year maximums with 25% variance, and an eight-year CBA with an opt-out after six, and limits on escrow, and so-called compliance buyouts, which takes money off the cap. Some hill.

It was a farce. The owners have crushed them. They have gotten players to agree to a 50-50 split of revenues from 57-43, plus US\$300-million in payments to honour parts of existing contracts which would be rolled back, though US\$50-million of that is players paying their own pensions. They have pushed the length of the collective bargaining agreement, no matter what, and have put limits on contract lengths. They have held steady on arbitration, and age of unrestricted free agency. It is a rout. All that's left is finding out how much of a rout it is.

Still, they were not so far apart. The gap was steadily narrowing, and none of this was the kind of thing that should threaten a season. Bettman's righteous anger kept unspooling, but this felt like NHL and the Proskauer Rose LLP playbook.

This time they are coming for everything they can get. They are pushing the boot down on the PA's throat, which keeps trying to move under their feet.

And they are making it about Fehr, who has stubbornly refused to negotiate off their proposals.

On Wednesday night one owner banged on the door and tried to pull players out of the room, apparently in order to isolate them; Winnipeg defenceman Ron Hainsey said someone from the ownership side told players Wednesday night that bringing Fehr back into the room "could be a dealbreaker."

One player told Adrian Dater of The Denver Post that Fehr encouraged players not to take the deal offered during owner-player meetings Wednesday night, saying they could get more; if so, then Fehr was basically doing the job the players hired him to do. Clearly both sides are to blame for the breakdown of the process, but only one of them is trying to do anything other than win on what are clearly their own terms. The NHL talks about giving, but the league isn't the one that's going to be relatively poorer to start the next CBA.

But Bettman railed away, admitting some franchises were in jeopardy, and said he was worried more would be in jeopardy if the right deal wasn't made. He downplayed the threat of decertification, or disclaimer of interest in the union, which could open the antitrust Pandora's box. Moderate owners released statements blasting Fehr, including Toronto's Larry Tanenbaum, who said, "I question whether the union is interested in making an agreement." It was laughable.

Now, we see what happens. The players could crack, or the players could simply become angrier and more stubborn, even while faced with defeat, and drag things out. But this entire process has been a slow-ticking bomb, fuelled by Fehr's intransigence in the face of the NHL's demands.

The league's going to win, but not without cost. There will almost certainly be a season; the season isn't dead. But there's wreckage everywhere.

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645951 NHL

NHL lockout: League wastes no time rejecting NHLPA's latest offer

Canadian Press |

NEW YORK — The NHL labour situation has hit another roadblock.

The NHL Players' Association says the league has rejected its latest proposal, one that union head Donald Fehr called "a clear outline" to end the dispute.

Fehr says he received a voicemail from the league saying that the moves the players made were not acceptable and that there was no reason to remain in New York for more talks.

The union head says this latest development suggests the labour dispute will "not be resolved in the immediate future."

"What can we tell the hockey fans of Canada? You can tell them that it looks like this is not going to be resolved in the immediate future," Fehr said. "I hope that turns out to be wrong. But that's certainly the message that we have today."

The league has not commented on the proposal or the status of the talks.

Fehr says he doesn't know when the two sides will meet again.

"They indicated that they will get back to us, so I assume at some point in due time they will," he said.

He made the comments only a few minutes after detailing the players' proposal to the media.

He said the players "responded comprehensively" to the issues that had been the focus of meetings over the last couple of days.

Those issues included player pensions and transition payments.

Fehr says he believes the two sides are "clearly very close if not on top of one another in connection with most of the major issues."

He says the union presented an eight-year proposal with an option for opting out after Year 6.

The developments come after the two sides held bargaining sessions Tuesday and Wednesday that stretched well into the wee hours.

The sides returned to the table for about an hour Thursday night with a much smaller group than the one that met the previous two days.

Deputy commissioner Bill Daly and general counsel Bob Battersman represented the league while Fehr and special counsel Steve Fehr sat in for the union along with a group of players.

None of the six league owners who were part of marathon sessions Tuesday and Wednesday took part.

Four members of that group — Pittsburgh's Ron Burkle, Tampa's Jeff Vinik, Toronto's Larry Tanenbaum and Winnipeg's Mark Chipman — were considered moderates who travelled to New York in an effort to broker a deal.

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645952 NHL

NHL lockout: Players table new offer in attempt to save season

Chris Johnston,

NEW YORK — The NHL Players' Association has tabled a new proposal that it hopes will end the lockout.

NHLPA executive director Donald Fehr says the players have "responded comprehensively" to the issues that had been the focus of meetings over the last couple of days.

Those issues include player pensions and transition payments.

Fehr says he believes the gap between the two sides can be bridged and that the proposal the players presented is "a clear outline" to end the dispute.

He says the union presented an eight-year proposal with an option for opting out after Year 6.

The league has not commented on the proposal.

The news comes after the two sides held bargaining sessions Tuesday and Wednesday that stretched well into the wee hours.

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645953 NHL

NHLPA wants mediators to come back to the table

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The NHL Players' Association has requested reintroducing U.S. federal mediators to collective bargaining talks with the NHL.

The sides spent two unsuccessful days with mediators last week.

The league has yet to respond to the request but it is still expected to meet with the NHLPA later Thursday.

It appears the dynamic will change, with commissioner Gary Bettman and NHLPA executive director Donald Fehr expected to rejoin negotiations.

They excused themselves from talks on Tuesday and Wednesday in an effort to spur progress.

The sides have moved closer with their proposals in recent days, but hurdles remain in negotiations.

The lockout has resulted in the cancellation of 422 regular-season games through Dec. 14

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645954 NHL

NHL lockout is making life hard for Carrie Underwood and Mike Fisher

Nick Patch, Canadian Press

TORONTO — Carrie Underwood and her NHLer husband Mike Fisher don't see each other as much as they'd like, so she had him in mind when she scheduled her fall tour such that it would kick off right around the time Fisher was due to report for camp with the Nashville Predators.

Then, of course, the NHL lockout came along. Suddenly, Fisher was grounded in Tennessee while his 29-year-old wife played the arenas he was supposed to — including Ottawa's Scotiabank Place and Toronto's Air Canada Centre this weekend.

"I'm jealous," Underwood said with a laugh Wednesday while in Toronto, preparing for a gig in London, Ont.

"I'm like: 'Now you're home and I'm not and you're supposed to be running around — that's why I scheduled my tour for this time. But now you're home.'"

The five-time Grammy-winning country singer says Fisher can't join her on tour because he has an obligation to keep himself in shape in preparation for a potentially sudden solution to the lockout ("the places we stay, they don't always have the best fitness equipment," she explains).

And while Underwood has become pretty well-versed in the winter sport — particularly for someone who grew up in the hockey-free environs of Oklahoma — she mostly wants the NHL to return for Fisher's sake.

"I know he misses it," she said. "I will be happy when he gets back to work."

Meanwhile, Underwood has work to do herself supporting "Blown Away," the adventurous fourth album she released in May. The chart-topping disc, which has since been certified platinum in the U.S. and gold here in Canada, saw the former American Idol contestant taking some risks with slightly moodier material (in addition to her typically grand arena-country show-stoppers).

Underwood was recently cast as Maria von Trapp in an upcoming live TV broadcast version of "The Sound of Music," slated to air on NBC sometime in 2013.

In the meantime, she'll continue touring with what she says is her longest show ever, regularly coming in around 105 minutes. She then has nearly two months off following the final date of this leg of the tour on Dec. 22 before she hits the road again.

It would seem to create an ideal break for the holidays — but Underwood sighs that any such plans are once again at the mercy of the NHL.

"I have no idea," she said of her holiday plans. "It really depends on this dang hockey schedule. All of our plans hinge on that."

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645955 NHL

Canucks' Ryan Kesler, Kevin Bieksa surprise fans with Vancouver road hockey game

National Post Staff

Ryan Kesler traded in his stick for a referee's whistle in Vancouver on Wednesday, but not to worry — it was just for one night during the NHL lockout.

About fifty road hockey players laced up their skates under the Cambie Bridge on Wednesday in a game organized by the Canucks star, featuring an appearance by the fan-favourite "Green Men" and anthem singer Mark Donnelly. Kevin Bieksa played on one of the teams, and defenceman Jason Garrison joined Kesler as another referee.

"It's just something we wanted to do to have some fun," Bieksa said to the Vancouver Sun. "Every time we've been talking hockey lately it's been serious and [about] the CBA and all that, so we're just going back to our roots for a fun road hockey game. In the pouring rain."

In New York, the NHL and NHLPA held another marathon session Wednesday that stretched into Thursday morning and saw them exchange proposals across the bargaining table. Talks broke off just before 1 a.m. with the expectation that they would pick up again Thursday afternoon.

There was clearly tension in the air at the midtown Manhattan hotel as the league and union put on a push to close the remaining gaps in negotiations that have spanned more than five months.

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645956 NHL

NHL lockout talks between players and owners get heated

Chris Johnston,

NEW YORK — A tension-filled day of collective bargaining ended with the NHL and NHL Players' Association still needing to bridge "critical open issues."

The sides held another marathon session Wednesday that stretched into Thursday morning and saw them exchange proposals across the bargaining table. Talks broke off just before 1 a.m. with the expectation that they would pick up again Thursday afternoon.

There was clearly tension in the air at the midtown Manhattan hotel as the league and union put on a push to close the remaining gaps in negotiations that have spanned more than five months.

"We had ... a very candid discussion," said Winnipeg Jets defenceman Ron Hainsey.

At one point, Boston Bruins owner Jeremy Jacobs could be seen having an animated conversation with Daly outside the negotiating room. Players also wore pensive looks as they paced the halls and made telephone calls during breaks.

"There continue to be some critical open issues between the two parties and we understand the union should be getting back to us tomorrow on some of those issues," said deputy commissioner Bill Daly.

The optimism coming out of eight-plus hours of meetings on Tuesday quickly met cold, hard reality once offers started being exchanged. The group of owners and players held a series of quick sessions together that were interspersed with internal meetings as each considered what was on the table.

Details began trickling out about the offers early Thursday morning, including the league's willingness to up the amount of deferred transition money paid to the players to US\$300-million — which appeared to be the golden number in recent weeks as it sat directly between what had most recently been tabled by the NHL (\$211-million) and NHLPA (\$393-million).

However, sources indicated the league's offer of \$300-million was connected to the acceptance of other issues on the table. The sides must also agree on player contract rights pertaining to free agency, arbitration and the maximum length of deals — something the NHL is pushing for to eliminate long-term, back-diving deals.

Another issue that surfaced was the league's desire to see a 10-year term on the collective bargaining agreement. The NHLPA continues to favour a shorter contract.

Commissioner Gary Bettman and NHLPA executive director Donald Fehr kept themselves out of negotiation sessions for a second straight day. However, Bettman did provide a brief update to reporters after a two-hour gathering of the Board of Governors, saying he was "pleased" with how things were progressing.

That was about all he was willing to reveal.

"We are pleased with the process that is ongoing and out of respect for that process I don't have anything else to say and I'm not going to take any questions," said Bettman.

The two sides have cleared their schedules for the rest of the week after successfully getting an adjournment from Quebec Labour Board hearings that had been scheduled in Montreal for Thursday and Friday. That panel will only hear arguments about the legality of locking out members of the Canadiens if a deal can't be reached in the near future.

As long as we're talking, we're hopeful

There was a sense that remained a possibility following the first gathering of NHL owners since the lockout was enacted in September.

"We feel good about the information we got," said Columbus Blue Jackets president John Davidson.

Toronto Maple Leafs minority owner Larry Tanenbaum is one of six owners who became involved in the talks this week.

"As long as we're talking, we're hopeful," he said.

According to sources, the owners discussed a possible season that would span 50-plus games. There had been talk of a 60-game schedule in the event of a labour settlement, but the feeling among the group was that it would be too ambitious at this stage.

Progress appeared to be made during more than eight hours of meetings on Tuesday that ended with NHLPA special counsel Steve Fehr describing it as the best day yet in talks. It was difficult to carry that momentum through a second long day, especially with the league and union trading specific proposals and looking for compromise.

The NHL's third lockout in the last 20 years has already resulted in the cancellation of 422 regular-season games through Dec. 14, plus the Winter Classic and all-star game. It remains the only North American pro sports league to lose an entire year to a work stoppage after having the 2004-05 season wiped out.

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645957 NHL

Former NHLer Josh Holden happy with help in Swiss league during lockout

Michael Traikos

The other night, while the NHLPA was conducting a conference call with its members after a breakthrough bargaining session in New York City, Henrik Zetterberg sat on a bus more than 6,200 kilometres away with a phone held to his ear and relayed the news to his Swiss league teammates.

It sounded bad, said Zug forward Josh Holden. It sounded like the NHL lockout might finally come to an end.

For the rebuilding team, which became an instant championship contender soon after inheriting Zetterberg, Montreal Canadiens defenceman Raphael Diaz and NHL prospects Damien Brunner and Linus Omark, it could also mean the end.

"At the beginning of the year, we were actually not looking very good. And then we got Brunner, Diaz and Zetterberg and our team's really taken off," said Holden over the phone from the town of Zug, about a 30-minute drive from Zurich. "If we lose those guys, our team is definitely in trouble."

Then again, maybe some will stay. It probably will not be Zetterberg or Diaz, who have NHL contracts and make more money in North America than they can in Europe. But for bubble players such as Omark or the Swiss-born Brunner, it can be difficult to say goodbye after getting a taste of everything the league and the country has to offer.

That is what happened to Holden. The Calgary native and former 12th overall draft pick could never quite stick in the NHL, so he packed his bags for Finland one month before the 2004-05 lockout. The plan was to stay a year until the dust cleared. But then he was offered a contract to play in Switzerland and eight years later the 34-year-old has never looked back.

"We joke around about that all the time: don't tell your buddies," said Holden, who played a combined 60 games for the Vancouver Canucks, Carolina Hurricanes and Toronto Maple Leafs. "It's a hidden secret. You definitely don't want everyone knowing and coming over here and taking your job."

These days, it seems like the secret has gotten out. While NHLers are scattered all across Europe, Switzerland has become a popular destination for many NHL stars, including Rick Nash and Joe Thornton (Davos), Tyler Seguin and Patrick Kane (Biel), John Tavares (Bern), Jason Spezza (Rapperswil-Jona), Patrice Bergeron (Lugano) and Cory Schneider (Ambri-Piotta).

And why not? Unlike the KHL, the Swiss league offers very little in the way of travel and the style of hockey is wide open and non-physical.

Holden said Zug pays for his house, his two cars and his kids' schooling. In addition, he does not pay income taxes. That could be the reason why fringe NHLers such as Andy Wozniowski, Robbie Earl and Christian Dubé have also made Switzerland their adopted home.

"Having a family, having young kids, there's no way a family of five in Canada can travel to Italy and spend two weeks there. It's too expensive," said Holden. "But from here, we've driven to Venice, we've driven to Milan. It's literally a weekend trip. Stuff like that is worth it."

The chance to skate alongside Zetterberg, who has 27 points in 16 games, has made it even more worthwhile even if the influx of talent has resulted in less ice time. But Holden, twice the team's season scoring leader, finds it

difficult to complain with Zug having won its last five games and being only two points out of first place.

"For fans, it's pretty cool," he said. "You have some pretty good players here. People are talking about hockey all the time here."

The question is for how much longer.

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645958 NHL

NHL lockout 'scoop' appears almost pre-ordained

Cam Cole

National Hockey League commissioner Gary Bettman approached the podium. Canada's leading sports networks cut away to New York City. A hockey world held its breath with hope of news for a long-awaited breakthrough in a tortured collective bargaining process.

"We just completed a two-hour board of governors meeting, which was basically an update," Bettman said. "We are pleased with the process that is ongoing. And out of respect for that process, I don't have anything else to say. And I'm not going to take any questions."

He paused briefly.

"And," Bettman said sharply, "we'll see you later."

Read more ...

Hands up, if you'd ever heard of Steve Burton before the Boston-based WBZ-TV talking head quoted sources Monday night as saying an announcement ending the NHL lockout was imminent.

Me, either. But amid all the expressions of skepticism, disbelief, and downright mockery that greeted Burton's "scoop" — bear in mind, there had been barely a shred of evidence that the two sides in the CBA dispute were within a hundred miles of seeing eye-to-eye at that point — there was one nagging doubt.

Boston? Hmm, yes. Boston.

Home of NHL chairman of the board Jeremy Jacobs, whose lips move when Gary Bettman speaks. Nothing, according to the folklore, happens at the NHL governors level without the say-so of the Bruins' much vilified owner, who (if you believe his critics) has been driving the bus on the owners' lockout strategy and probably has had an end-date in mind all along.

So out of nowhere — or practically nowhere; there were those few sunny optimists who thought the fresh faces and voices from this week's owners-players palaver in New York had about a 10% chance of producing progress — Burton goes to air with his blockbuster, and the world laughs.

But (admittedly with benefit of hindsight) think about it: a high-level source, almost certainly a Boston source, for where else would a not-particularly-plugged-into-hockey sports anchor turn for information, says the 80-day impasse is about to end.

And within 24 hours, the entire complexion of the labour war softens. Owners arrive in New York acting chummy. Players troop into the meeting room, wondering if they're about to be snookered without their leader, Donald Fehr, along to identify the treacherous bits, only to find the other side is in the mood, perhaps not to get into bed on the spot, but at least for a little foreplay.

What caused the warming trend?

Hard-headed realization that they were abusing fans unnecessarily and might never get them back in some markets? Ha. Since when did they ever worry about the fans?

Dissension in the ranks, with moderates pressing the hawks to make a deal, given the relatively surmountable obstacles separating the two sides' positions? Unlikely. Bettman has been confoundingly successful at herding his cats.

The Pittsburgh axis of reason — player (Sidney Crosby), agent (Pat Brisson), part owner (Mario Lemieux) and majority moneybags (Ron Burkle) — hashing out the differences over beers for a couple of weeks and then bringing their discussions, along with an air of detente, to the meetings? Many seem to think so.

If the endgame, after months of nothing, began Tuesday, hockey's ultimate insider will have turned out to be a guy who's more into football and baseball.

The inclusion of Burkle, who has a reputation for deal-making, and other probable moderates such as Toronto's Larry Tanenbaum and Winnipeg's Mark Chipman and perhaps Tampa Bay's Jeff Vinik, appeared to be an olive branch that the players could finally reach for — albeit warily, still suspicious that it might yet be snatched away — without seeing the hated visage of Bettman across the table.

But who sent the owners' collaboration team into that room? Who hand-picked them? Who approved the roster? If Bettman, and the man whose hand is up the back of the commissioner's suit jacket operating his controls, hadn't been ready to parlay, the moderates would never have been unbound and ungagged.

Chris Young/The Canadian Press

In the end, the commish may be able to claim credit for the idea of pouring oil on the troubled waters — and Donald Fehr the other half — simply because they were willing to take their egos out of the equation for a while, though neither has been far away during breaks in the talks.

But Bettman didn't do any of it in a vacuum. He didn't lead the owners into this lockout kicking and screaming. He led them because that's where they wanted to go, and if it ends now, it will end because this was the time that was chosen by them — or by the most powerful among them, and the rest went along.

It's not as though a deal is going to be made today or tomorrow. The fine points, even if a broad agreement is reached, will take some time to hash out.

And there is this, too, from a Bruins fan: "@ViewFrom311 – Don't sell Jacobs short, he can still screw this up. #Burtonknew"

But if these meetings lead to a CBA, it almost doesn't matter whether Burton's prediction had the timing exactly right. The point is, the thaw started right on cue, exactly when his source said it would.

Whether it takes three days or a week to go through the fine print and give us a schedule — guaranteed to be too many games crammed into too few nights, extending too late into June — if the endgame, after months of nothing, began Tuesday, hockey's ultimate insider will have turned out to be a guy who's more into football and baseball.

Check out that Twitter hashtag, #Burtonknew, if you don't believe me.

All hail Steve Burton, hockey oracle. From Boston.

National Post LOADED 12.07.2012

645959 NHL

NHLPA says league rejects latest offer, talks break off

Joanna Slater

The most promising effort to salvage the 2012-13 hockey season broke down in dramatic fashion Thursday night as both sides offered starkly different descriptions of what led to the failure.

Donald Fehr, the executive director of the NHL Players' Association, said that the league had rejected what he described as a comprehensive proposal containing significant concessions from their side.

"It comes as a disappointment, obviously," Fehr said. "We are clearly very close, if not on top of each other, on most of the major issues." But, "it looks like this is not going to be resolved in the immediate future."

Fehr spoke surrounded by a group of 14 players, including Pittsburgh Penguins captain Sidney Crosby, who have spent much of the past three days in on-and-off talks with owners.

Shortly afterward, NHL commissioner Gary Bettman, visibly upset, addressed the media. He rejected the notion that the sides were anywhere close to an agreement.

"I am disappointed beyond belief that we are where we are tonight," he said. "We're going to have to take a deep breath and regroup."

It's unclear when negotiations will resume, but the clock is ticking to rescue what remains of the season.

"When we get to the point when we can't play a season with integrity... then we'll be done," Bettman said.

He suggested it wouldn't make sense to put together a season of fewer than 48 games – the number played in the truncated season in 1994.

Bettman said that all offers made in the week's negotiations were now off the table.

Discussions had begun promisingly, Bettman said, with direct talks among owners and players.

The owners' group included four new to the bargaining process who are considered moderate voices: Ron Burkle of the Pittsburgh Penguins, Larry Tanenbaum of the Toronto Maple Leafs, Jeff Vinik of the Tampa Bay Lightning and Mark Chipman of the Winnipeg Jets.

Soon after the talks broke down, the NHL issued statements from each of the four individual owners whose presence at this week's meetings got the negotiating ball rolling again.

Tanenbaum, the chairman of Maple Leafs Sports and Entertainment Ltd., and governor of the league's most valuable franchise, had joined the discussion in part to give a voice to the league's big-market teams. Privately, some players believed that the league's agenda was being driven by the 10 or 12 small-market teams, losing money under the last collective agreement.

Tanenbaum said he was initially optimistic after the first day of negotiations and conveyed that sense to the NHL's board of governors during Wednesday's meeting.

"However, when we reconvened with the players on Wednesday afternoon, it was like someone had thrown a switch," Tanenbaum said. "The atmosphere had completely changed. Nevertheless, the owners tried to push forward and made a number of concessions and proposals, which were not well-received."

Tanenbaum went on to say he questioned "whether the union is interested in making an agreement" and concluded: "Had I not experienced this process myself, I might not have believed it."

Bettman said that the group of owners wanted to "do something bold" to move toward a deal. So they sweetened the league's offer on the so-called "make-whole" payments to ease the switch to a new revenue-sharing scheme. Bettman said the owners offered approximately \$100-million (U.S.) in new payments, putting the total at \$300-million, roughly the midpoint between the two sides' original offers.

In exchange, Bettman said, the owners expected the players to make concessions in three key areas – the length of the new agreement, transition issues related to the new system, and term limits on player contracts.

The last item, in particular, is "the hill we die on," said Bill Daly, deputy NHL commissioner. "For the union to say we're close is cherry-picking."

The league wants players to agree to a 10-year pact. The players, meanwhile, offered an eight-year time frame with the ability to opt out and renegotiate after six years.

Each side acknowledged, if quietly, that concessions had been made by the other side. But it appeared they could not find a way to bridge their differences, even with the current hockey season hanging in the balance.

Fehr said he felt the two sides had been closing in on a deal and had reached a complete agreement where monetary amounts were concerned. "The players have gone a very, very long way," he added.

Players echoed that sentiment. "It's a pretty disappointing day when you come to them with concessions in areas we haven't [found it] easy to make," and in response, the proposal is rejected, said Chris Campoli, a free agent who formerly played for the Montreal Canadiens.

The collapse of talks on Thursday stands in contrast to the positive vibe that prevailed on Tuesday and throughout much of Wednesday. On Thursday, the players spent the morning and afternoon in internal deliberations before a brief meeting with the NHL side.

The owners who took part in the process also said they were disheartened. "I believe a deal was within reach," said Burkle, the man who signed Crosby to a contract extension worth over \$100-million this summer.

Burkle said he was surprised by what he said was a unilateral decision to move beyond the player-owner format of negotiations that had worked well – in other words, to put Fehr back into the mix.

With a report from Eric Duhatschek

Toronto Globe And Mail LOADED: 12.07.2012

645960 Ottawa Senators

Warren: Lockout standoff continues to amaze

By Ken Warren,

OTTAWA — Clearly, Ottawa Senators captain Daniel Alfredsson offered the word of the day in NHL circles — "flabbergasted" — even though he couldn't have imagined just how appropriate it would be at the time he said it.

The dictionary definition is to be "greatly shocked or amazed." It so aptly describes perhaps the most bizarre day yet in the lockout that has resorted back to nastiness between NHL owners and players.

Name-calling, leaks and spin returned. NHLPA executive director Donald Fehr returned to the stage in New York. Twice. In a span of 15 minutes. First, selling extreme optimism. And then, after his right hand man, Steven Fehr, listened to a voice mail from NHL second-in-command Bill Daly, he came back with a tone of renewed pessimism.

When NHL commissioner Gary Bettman took his turn to talk, the mood turned even darker.

The Cold War between the sides has returned.

All of that concluded a day which began with some guarded optimism from players around the NHL, including the gang of NHL players who joined the Carleton Ravens for a late morning practice.

Grant Clitsome, the Ottawa native who plays for the Winnipeg Jets, was thinking about the possibility he could be back in training camp as early as next week.

"You're that much more motivated and hopefully we can see the light at the end of the tunnel and we hope something gets resolved in the short-term," Clitsome said. "Guys are skating a little more, a little bit harder."

Alfredsson, a member of the NHLPA executive during the last lockout, was also smiling, believing that it was possible a deal was close.

"It is encouraging that we're talking and there's not a lot of leaking, either," he said, allowing that stern disagreements are understandable.

"There are two sides that think very differently on a lot of issues, so of course there are going to be some tense moments and that, I don't find, is anything unusual and that's part of the process."

He went on to say he would be "flabbergasted" if the NHL chose to cancel the season.

But the day was still young, wasn't it?

As we found out once again, the talks can turn on a dime. Or, in a New York minute. Thanks to social media, it doesn't take long to fuel the fire or the insults. Twitter was abuzz in the afternoon with concerns the latest proposals weren't acceptable. An unnamed NHL executive labelled Fehr as a "suicide bomber."

The evening press conferences ended with Bettman saying that a 48-game season was a bare minimum, which means that the season could be gone for good in either the first or second week of January. Oh, and one other

thing. A few NHL players were in the back of the room as Bettman spoke, their arms crossed.

What a dangerous game the owners and players are waging.

It's flabbergasting how far it has come.

Ottawa Citizen LOADED: 12.07.2012

645961 Ottawa Senators

Binghamton Senators on record roll under coach Luke Richardson

Don Brennan

It was their crackerjack PR department that discovered the Binghamton Senators have closed right in on the franchise record for most consecutive victories.

The team itself had no idea.

"What is the record?" rookie head coach Luke Richardson asked Thursday. "I think you can take some pride in accomplishments like that, but that (talk) hasn't even surfaced around here. We might just be in our own little cave down here."

In the cave that is the Broome County Veterans Memorial Arena, the B-Sens (12-4-1-0) can equal the run of success enjoyed in 2005-06 by winning No. 9 in a row when they host the Portland Pirates (10-9-1-0) Friday. In doing so, they'd have a shot at setting a new franchise mark by defeating the Norfolk Admirals (9-11-0-2) Saturday at "The Broome".

The American Hockey League record for most wins in a row is 28, set last season by those very Admirals.

"I'm not worried about that one, for sure," said of the 28-straight standard. "I'm worried about (Friday). Last time we played Portland, they really stretched the ice. They really skate well."

Still, no team in the AHL is playing better than the B-Sens right now. Backed by the exceptional goaltending of Robin Lehner and Ben Bishop, they've given up the third fewest goals in the league. Their defence has held up fine - despite the loss of Jared Cowen - and chipped in with 20 of the team's 57 goals. And with the B-Sens scoring 18 times in the last three games, the forwards are starting to produce.

"They're rolling along well and they're playing well, they seem to be enjoying coming to the rink," said Richardson. "I know we've had success and we're on a bit of a run, but around the dressing room that really hasn't been the buzz. The buzz is just the feeling they have. They just have a good feeling with each other. They really have a lot of fun. It just brings out the best in their game.

"When it's all said and done, I think when you pass something in history, everybody is always proud of that and excited about it."

With Mika Zibanejad (throat infection) and Andrew Petersson (lower body) still sidelined, Richardson has found balance up front. The combinations again this weekend will see Pat Cannone between Mike Hoffman and Jakob Silfverberg, Stephane Da Costa flanked by Cole Schneider and Shane Prince, Derek Grant in the middle of David Dziurzynski and Mark Stone, and Jean-Gabriel Pageau centring Corey Cowick and Hugh Jessiman.

"I don't really call it a third line, but if it is, they're the most dangerous one in the league, because they can score," he said of the Grant-Dziurzynski-Stone unit, which nightly draws the assignment of shutting down the other team's best players. "They're all skilled, and every time the puck is turned over they're dangerous."

On defence, the B-Sens will probably be without Mark Borowiecki, at least Friday. He has a strained neck after being jumped in the Syracuse game last weekend.

Richardson's pairings will include Patrick Wiercioch with Andre Benoit, then likely Tyler Eckford alongside Eric Gryba and Frederik Claesson teamed with Chris Wideman.

Just as Grant (seven goals) has been a "pleasant surprise" up front, Wiercioch has thrived in Cowen's absence on the backend.

Along with five goals and two assists, the lanky former second round pick leads the team with a plus-11 rating.

"Especially in certain situations, like power play and penalty killing, he's really come on this year," said Richardson.

Richardson plans to use Bishop in goal against Portland then play Lehner Saturday.

As for the general approach to the weekend, well, he just wants things to continue going as they are.

"At the beginning of the year we got off to a half decent start, then we had a two or three week period where it was up and down, we had a good game and a not so good game," said Richardson. "But we got on to a hard working routine here and the guys are enjoying it. They seem to be a really good group of guys. They really seem to be enjoying each other and working hard together.

"Things seem to be clicking well."

At a record pace, in fact.

Ottawa Sun LOADED: 12.07.2012

645962 Ottawa Senators

Ottawa Senators captain Daniel Alfredsson weighs in on Mika Zibanejad world junior situation

By Don Brennan

From where Daniel Alfredsson sits, he can see both sides of the fence.

But when pushed for an opinion, the Senators captain says he believes countryman Mika Zibanejad should be playing for Sweden at the world junior championship later this month in Russia.

That, of course, goes against the thinking of his boss.

Ottawa GM Bryan Murray has ruled that the 19-year-old Zibanejad will spend the Christmas season in Binghamton, where he continues to develop and learn the North American-style game as a first-year pro with the AHL's Senators.

"If it was my decision, he would play (in the WJC)," Alfredsson said Thursday at Carleton University, qualifying that he was speaking as a European. "I think it definitely would help Swedish hockey, raise their interest even more. I think he should go. But that's just my personal opinion. It's a great experience for him, and a chance for him to be a leader on a really good team. I think he could learn a lot.

"Having said that, I also understand Ottawa's side in the whole process, (wanting him) getting used to life over here."

Alfredsson, one of the best Swedes to ever lace up a pair of skates, never did get the chance to play in the WJC. However, he has represented his homeland 13 times in international tournaments, winning gold at the Olympics as well as two silvers and a couple of bronze medals at the world championships.

He has also captured a Swedish Elite League title playing for his hometown team, the Frolunda Indians.

Until it was brought to his attention, Alfredsson was unaware that Swedish junior team coach Roger Ronnberg erupted over the Senators' refusal earlier this week to loan him Zibanejad for the WJCs.

Ronnberg said "it's pretty damn sad that Canadians in Ottawa's management will sit and decide about the Swedish junior national team" and that "Europeans always have to be on our backs" in a "power struggle" with teams in the Senators' position.

"If Ottawa is more concerned about style of play and doesn't want to interrupt (what Zibanejad is learning now), I can understand that," said Alfredsson, who lost a bet on the Canada-Sweden 2009 WJC final in 2009 to Senators owner Eugene Melnyk and had to wear a Team Canada jersey in practice.

"But if you're a good player you can play on all surfaces and in all situations. I don't know if you lose that much momentum by going away for three weeks."

Alfredsson is not concerned with Zibanejad's ability to mesh into the North American way of life off the ice, either.

"I think it's different from person to person," he said. "I think Mika is a very mature kid. I don't think the lifestyle would be an issue for him. I think he's travelled a lot through his years so far. From what I'm led to believe, I think he has a Canadian girlfriend, so (adapting to) life over here is not an issue for him."

He's also not concerned that the incident will damage the relationship the Senators have with the Swedish Ice Hockey Federation, which has fed them so many players over the years.

"I think both sides are professional and know what both sides think," said Alfredsson, back to his perch on the fence. "(The Senators) know Swedish hockey and I think they were good with Mika, they knew it was best for him maybe to go back to Sweden, last year, instead of sending him to Binghamton."

"I'm sure some part of the decision (is based on the fact) he was home all last year, he played in familiar surroundings and now it's time to get ready for the NHL."

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645963 Ottawa Senators

Ottawa Senators captain Daniel Alfredsson expects deal soon to end NHL lockout, salvage season

By Bruce Garrioch

Daniel Alfredsson would be shocked if he doesn't get a chance to wear his No. 11 jersey around Scotiabank Place at some point this season.

The NHL lockout hit Day 82 Thursday, players have missed four paycheques while the league has lost more than \$1.2 billion in revenue. But talks this week have raised hopes the sides can hammer out a collective bargaining agreement to salvage some of the season.

"I believe I would be flabbergasted if they were to cancel the season," the Senators captain said after a skate with the Carleton Ravens at the Ice House Thursday. "I would find that hard to believe. Is there a chance? I think there is a chance they would cancel the season, but that would definitely surprise me and disappoint me."

Alfredsson, who turns 40 on Dec. 11, is convinced a CBA will eventually be in place and he'll be able to fulfill his promise to honour the final year of his contract at \$1 million.

At that salary, he's one of the lucky ones of the 683 NHLers signed to contracts. Alfredsson's last contract was front-loaded, so he's losing a paltry — by league standards — \$5,400 per day by not playing.

While many of the Ravens were missing from the skate at the school because it was the first day of exams, Alfredsson and the locked-out NHLers were continuing to fine-tune their skills in case they do go back to work.

With one eye on the negotiations between the NHL and the NHL Players' Association in New York, the players are trying to stay ready for a shortened training camp.

That being said, Alfredsson hasn't picked up his pace.

"Not as of now I'm not," said Alfredsson, who has had a chance to see what retirement would be like. "I'm still sticking to my routine and keeping myself in good enough shape that if something were to happen, then I need two or three weeks and I'll be fine."

"My life is pretty busy outside of hockey (with four kids) and that's where my main focus is still."

Alfredsson said before the two sides sat down together Thursday, he was pleased they held marathon negotiating sessions Tuesday and Wednesday.

But he isn't sure these talks are make or break.

"It could be," he said. "Obviously if you look at it getting the season in this year, it definitely could be. But I'm pretty sure both sides are aware of that and until we find out more about where we stand, I think everybody is probably a little bit cautiously optimistic."

He's not sure that if these talks do go bad, there would enough time left to make a deal to play a meaningful season.

"It's impossible to answer," said Alfredsson. "It all depends how big the gap is and how much progress has been made the last two days."

"The time frame? The last time around (the 2004-05 lockout) it was late January or early February when the season was cancelled. I don't know if it will be the same time this time around, but I'm sure the people that are running the negotiations have a much better idea of what date is the final date."

Ottawa Sun LOADED: 12.07.2012

645964 Philadelphia Flyers

No deal yet for NHL, just theatrics

Frank Seravalli

NEW YORK - Mere blocks from Broadway and the most famous stages in the world, hockey offered two riveting, Tony Award-deserving performances on Thursday night - separated by an intermission just long enough to resurface the ice.

First up was NHL players association executive director Donald Fehr, who used Jedi-like mind games to interrupt press conferences with players, re-approach the podium and erase all the optimism he spun 5 minutes earlier. After a voicemail from the NHL left on the phone of his brother Steve, his special counsel, Fehr said suddenly these 82-day labor negotiations went from "very close if not on top of one another" to "this looks like it's not going to be resolved in the immediate future."

After watching Fehr live on TV from his offices up the street, commissioner Gary Bettman marched down Sixth Avenue to respond.

Bettman may have delivered the most animated, fiery message of his 19-year reign of the league, immediately offering that the NHL had pulled every bit of its offer off the table. He wagged his finger, voiced his disappointment and said the possibility of losing a second season in 8 years "absolutely torments" him.

It was thrilling, even unprecedented theater. Both leaders were so clearly frustrated, with millions of people watching live around the world - especially in Canada.

But it was nothing more than a show - even if one with a bizarre script.

Clearly, there is a thought lingering that the NHL's season is now in peril, after such vicious tongue-lashings from both sides. The NHLPA claims that it has "done far and away the lion's share of the giving." The NHL is basically claiming that Fehr is not interested in making a deal.

Thursday undoubtedly did not help. No one, however, is willing to suggest that we are at the point in this process that a season has been lost. The NHL is expected to cancel more games on Friday, likely up until just before the New Year, which would push the total above 500 regular-season games.

If you want perspective on the lockout, step back from Thursday's circus and take a deep breath. It's what each side will do on Friday, since they won't be meeting.

Ignore the optics, focus on the facts.

Ignore the three newly involved owners in the process releasing their own statements through the league, saying they are "disappointed" and Donald Fehr is "disillusioned." Ignore the four players hanging in the back of a cramped room to watch Bettman's press conference.

Ignore the lies, like Bettman saying 48 games is as few as the league will play and then following it by saying he doesn't know what start date compromises the integrity of the game. Ignore the threat that the NHL

supposedly made to players, saying Fehr's continued involvement could be a "deal-breaker." Ignore the suggestion that the Fehr brothers magically missed a call from the league during their initial positive spin to the media.

The disappointment, frustration and emotion evident is all real - including the comments from owners like Ron Burkle, who has never made a public comment as co-owner of the Penguins, and from players involved like Sidney Crosby. But the progress made this week also is real.

For the first time, Bettman and Fehr officially announced that they had agreed on the economic principals of the deal. The owners chipped in on make-whole proposals, pushing it to \$300 million to try to honor players' signed deals. The players are funding their own pension plan - something they made an issue of out of the blue this week, then turtled on.

They agree on a host of contracting issues, including arbitration rights, free agency and entry-level setup.

Both sides even agree on the three key things they disagree on: the length of the actual new CBA, the limit of years on new player contracts, and the structure of contracts with regard to variance in salary among years for the benefit of a salary-cap hit.

The good news is that there is wiggle room from both sides.

Owners want a 10-year CBA. Players countered 8 years and an opt-out clause after 6.

Owners want a 5-year limit on new player contracts. Players countered with an 8-year limit.

Owners want a 5 percent limit on salary change year-to-year in a deal. Players countered with a 25 percent variance limit from the first year to the last year.

Think about it logically: Are players and owners both willing to let a \$3.3 billion industry flounder because of three things that seemingly impact so few people? Even with this big egos involved, no one is that crazy.

For players, they should want the longest CBA deal possible. For one, it means labor peace and the possibility that a rookie next year may enjoy a prosperous career without the threat of a lockout. Plus, they ultimately made out like such bandits in the last CBA that owners were willing to lock them out to change it. Their average salary rose from \$1.7 million to \$2.4 million.

Approximately 48 players (out of 700) have a deal longer than 6 years. That's just 6 percent of the membership. With deals capped at 5 years, there really can't be that much variance anyway.

Bettman said the entire economic offer, though, was a "package," meaning it depended on a "yes" to their contractual demands. He also said their entire offer was off the table.

Bettman can pull any offer off the table he desires. In fact, he might be instructed to, especially if those four moderate owners involved were indeed angered at the players' response to their good-faith offers. Still, the players don't even believe that statement.

"I don't know that in a negotiation anything is ever really off the table," player Chris Campoli said. "A door is never really completely closed. They need us as much as we need them."

Philadelphia Inquirer / Daily News LOADED: 12.07.2012

645965 Philadelphia Flyers

NHL labor talks fall apart again

Sam Carchidi,

About a half hour after Donald Fehr said the labor war between the NHL was almost over, it seemed to get bloodier Thursday night.

While Fehr, executive director of the NHL Players' Association, was painting a rosy picture during a news conference in New York and saying the sides had "a complete agreement on dollars," the NHLPA was receiving a voice mail from the league, telling it that the union's proposal was rejected.

The lockout lives. The NHL season stays dark. Fact is, the season may be headed toward its death if you listen to Gary Bettman, the NHL's beleaguered commissioner.

Speaking in a controlled but irate tone, Bettman said all of the NHL's "make whole" proposal of \$300 million - the money would go toward guaranteeing players' contracts - has come "off the table." He added that owners who attended some meetings this week told him "the process is over."

Bettman spoke after the NHL rejected a proposal from the players' union.

"It comes as a disappointment, obviously," Fehr said during the 82d night of the lockout. "The next move is to talk to the membership and figure out what we do from there."

Bettman said he was "disappointed beyond belief" and that "we'll take a deep breath and try to regroup."

According to Bettman, the union was "shockingly silent" when the league upped its "make whole" offer from \$211 million to \$300 million on Wednesday.

"The owners were beside themselves," he said. "Some of them, I've never seen so emotional. [They] told me the process is over."

Ten minutes before he was aware of the voice mail from NHL deputy commissioner Bill Daly that said the league had rejected the players' offer, Fehr said he believed a collective bargaining agreement would soon be signed.

Bettman later called that view "almost incomprehensible" and that it's "not the first time [Fehr] said we're close when we weren't." He added that the last time Fehr said the sides were close, "we were a billion dollars apart."

Fehr's positive spin at the news conference was odd because earlier in the day, the union said it wanted federal mediators to intervene again, hinting there were negotiating problems.

The NHL wants a 10-year CBA that includes a "escape clause" after eight years, while the players' union has proposed an eight-year deal, with an "opt out" after six years.

Another major issue: The maximum length of players' contracts and salary variability from year to year. The owners want a five-year maximum limit on player contracts, with a daily increase capped at five percent; the players have proposed an eight-year contract maximum, with higher increases.

Daly said the league's term limit on players' contracts was critical to the NHL, calling it "the hill we'll die on." He also said the union in the last few days had added a "capped escrow" into the negotiations.

Fehr said transition rules, such as amnesty and buyouts, also need to be ironed out.

Thursday's meeting lasted about an hour, and it included 16 players, Fehr and his brother, Steve, who is special counsel to the NHLPA; Daly; and NHL attorney Bob Battersman.

Winnipeg defenseman Ron Hainsey said the NHL told players on Wednesday that bringing Donald Fehr back into the room was potentially "a deal-breaker."

Bettman, who said the NHL has no interest in bringing the mediators back into negotiations, said there was "no magic date" for when the season would have to be canceled if a CBA isn't in place. He said anything less than a 48-game season would not work.

Philadelphia Inquirer / Daily News LOADED: 12.07.2012

645966 Philadelphia Flyers

NHL quickly rejects players' proposal

Sam Carchidi

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Bettman later called that view "almost incomprehensible" and that it's "not the first time (Fehr) said we're close when we weren't." He added that the last time Fehr said the sides were close, "we were a billion dollars apart."

Fehr's positive spin at the news conference was odd because earlier in the day, the union said it wanted federal mediators to intervene again, hinting there were negotiating problems.

The NHL wants a 10-year CBA that includes an "escape clause" after eight years, while the players' union has proposed an eight-year deal, with an "opt out" after six years.

Another major issue: The maximum length of players' contracts and salary variability from year to year. The owners want a five-year maximum limit on player contracts, with a daily increase capped at five percent; the players have proposed an eight-year contract maximum, with higher increases.

Daly said the league's term limit on players' contracts was critical to the NHL, calling it "the hill we'll die on." He also said the union in the last few days had added a "capped escrow" into the negotiations.

Fehr said transition rules, such as amnesty and buyouts, also need to be ironed out.

Thursday's meeting lasted about an hour, and it included 16 players, Fehr and his brother, Steve, who is special counsel to the NHLPA, Daly, and NHL attorney Bob Battersman.

Winnipeg defenseman Ron Hainsey said the NHL told players on Wednesday that bringing Donald Fehr back into the room was potentially "a deal-breaker."

The Denver Post quoted a source from "deep inside players side" as saying, "We were ready to play again. But Don came in (Wednesday) and told us we could get more and to hold out."

Bettman, who said the NHL has no interest in bringing the mediators back into negotiations, said there was "no magic date" for when the season would have to be canceled if a CBA wasn't in place. He said anything less than a 48-game season would not work.

"I hope that going backwards does not prevent a deal," said Ron Burkle, one of the Penguins' owners. He was one of six NHL owners at the bargaining table earlier this week.

Philadelphia Inquirer / Daily News LOADED: 12.07.2012

645967 Philadelphia Flyers

NHL deal close, but Gary Bettman, Donald Fehr lurking

By ROB PARENT

If not for Twitter, how would anyone following the "progress" of the NHL contract talks with its players union know when one person or another involved in the negotiations would be taking either a dinner or bathroom break?

Aside from on-the-spot reports from hotel rest rooms by journalists who normally specialize in the art of play-by-play, only a small amount of real news has leaked out the past two nights from the Westin Times Square, the hotel where rich men and poor men and women have only a closed meeting room door separating them.

Apparently, the dolts who decide how to run things every eight to 10 years or so, when the NHL tries to implode, figure that with a full two months of the season burned and counting, it's time to stop sniping at each other through the media and actually sit down and talk.

You know, between buffets.

Ah, but danger lurks around every mezzanine floor corner, since it's always possible that the progress made the past two days in these talks can be poisoned by a couple of shadowy figures — commissioner Gary Bettman and union leader Donald Fehr. The idea, apparently, is keeping hope alive by keeping them out of the bargaining ballroom.

Unless those two foaming-at-the-mouth figureheads figure out another way to screw it up, it appears Sidney Crosby — who every Philadelphia fan secretly admires as the best player in the world — has deemed it appropriate to act as a hammer in an honest attempt to bang out an agreement. Oh, and to find a creative way to mask the truth, which is the players are close to caving yet again.

So as the NHL lockout passed its 81st day, it started to become clear that at some point an agreement to "save the season" really can be reached. Maybe it didn't overnight, and maybe it won't by Friday. But the makings of a real deal are on the table (though not for the first time, if you ask a lot of insiders), and we may be mere weeks from kicking off a 56-game or so regular season.

Just like in 1995, when they went 48 games over the course of about three months before the playoffs, it'll be an intense 2013 winter-into-spring ride, with teams playing three to four games a week, and with more hamstrings snapping, ligaments crackling and groins a-poppin' than ever before.

It'll create a playoff that will be nothing more than a chaotic mess of injury-burdened teams fighting each other and fighting through exhaustion to see if they can survive four more rounds.

Sounds awful.

But it would be beautiful to watch. You know, until the next implosion comes along.

If they don't implode this week, that is.

This just in: Joe Blanton — two years, \$15 million from the Angels.

Read that again, then consider it a prime candidate for the Winter Meetings' Ridiculousness Award. But I'll still take Shane Victorino's heist in Boston (3 years, \$39 million) as the leader.

Hey, since time is clearly running out on a favorite hobby of mine, please allow me just one more time to write some of my favorite local sports phrases:

"Time's yours."

"Listen ..."

"Gotta do a better job."

"We look forward to the challenge of playing (insert winning team here)."

Ah, much better. Thanks.

Anyway, about Andy Reid ... His Redness told his adoring media public Wednesday that while he really is looking forward to the challenge of playing the Buccaneers, there is plenty for his Eagles to watch out for.

Listen, Reid said before declaring this about the Bucs: "They're a 6-6 football team, (a) good football team and we'll get a good week of

preparation in and get ourselves ready to play against a good football team.”

Really, what more do you need to know?

QUOTE OF THE WEEK: It's from newly named starting quarterback for the rest of the season Nick Foles, who looks more like an NFL quarterback every week, even if he still looks like a frat house plebe. But his sound is purely professional: "I think just staying true to who I am," Foles said when asked about the task of balancing his rookie status with his new leadership role. "In any position, don't try to be something you're not. I'm just going to be me."

Delaware County Times LOADED: 12.07.2012

645968 Philadelphia Flyers

NHL rejects union's offer as talks break down

Tim Panaccio

NEW YORK -- From optimistic elation to crushing defeat.

That's what happened within minutes Thursday night after NHLPA executive director Donald Fehr excitedly announced that the union had given the owners a new eight-year proposal and agreed to all the key monetary issues for a new CBA.

"The players have gone a very, very long way," Fehr said. "The players have done far and away the lion's share. ... We will wait and see what they say and when they say it."

He didn't have to wait long.

As he was speaking, NHL deputy commissioner Bill Daly left a voicemail message to Steve Fehr, the union's special counsel, rejecting the deal entirely.

Not even 20 minutes later, Donald Fehr retook the podium. This time, his facial expression was grim.

"There has been a development, it's not a positive one," he said. "We were advised in a voicemail message that the moves the players made were not acceptable, that there was no reason to stay around for meetings tonight or tomorrow, that they would be in touch, that ... something, everything, it's not clear, is off the table. We don't know what that means. We'll figure it out at some point, I suppose."

He's right. The NHL pulled its offer and has ended negotiations.

League commissioner Gary Bettman made it clear the union had to accept its 10-year deal in its entirety, as written.

The union countered with an eight-year term and an opt-out after Year 6.

The union also proposed player contract term lengths of no more than eight years. The NHL insisted it had to be five years so franchises could not be burdened with contracts that hurt them financially.

"That's the hill we'll die on," Bettman said Thursday on why the NHL won't budge on five-year contracts.

Incredibly, the union had gotten what it wanted on money with the league agreeing to \$300 million in "make whole" existing contracts. The league also let free agency stand at age 27 and allowed arbitration rights to remain.

Yeah, you could see how close they were.

Around 7:45 p.m., Bettman, looking visibly angry, almost livid, all but accused the union of sabotaging negotiations over the past two days by changing its priorities, asking for a mediator, and instead of giving a simple yes or no answer to their deal, offered a new one.

"A great deal of optimism," Bettman said had "almost inexplicably disappeared," on Wednesday when talks resumed after the Board of Governors meeting.

How? Because the union was changing its priorities, Bettman said.

When the owners offered to increase "make whole" to \$300 million, the union's response was "shockingly silent," Bettman said angrily.

"The owners were beside themselves; some of them I have never seen so emotional," Bettman said, adding that the union changed its "key element" from "make whole" to "contractual rights" to fix the "pension plan."

The owners said they would fix the pension issue "if" they got their "yes" on three issues:

"We have to have a system that works right. It's all part of the package," Bettman said.

The issues:

- Accept a 10-year CBA
- Accept five-year term lengths on player contracts (seven years on re-signing players)
- Accept five percent annual variance on salaries within those contracts.

"If their answer was 'no,' there was no point in continuing discussions," Bettman said.

In lieu of yes or no, the union countered with another offer, including a salary variance of 25 percent. The union's response infuriated the league and especially the moderate owners, such as Pittsburgh's Ron Burkle, Bettman said, who had brought the two sides closer together.

An aside: when the union presented its new offer, just Daly and Bob Battersman, from Proskauer Rose, were present to hear it. That angered the union as much as Donald Fehr asking for a mediator angered the league.

Daly, standing beside Bettman on Thursday night, said, "They knew there was a major gulf between us and yet they came down here and told you we were close."

Daly was angry that the union asked for the mediators to come back into the talks.

"I have no idea what we would need mediators for at this point in time," an angry Daly told CSNPhilly.com.

The league rejected that offer with Bettman adding, "If we were so close why did we need mediation?"

According to lead player rep Ron Hainsey, who has been at every negotiation, the union requested the federal mediators come back into the talks because the league wanted the players to close a deal Wednesday without Donald Fehr in the room.

Keep in mind, any deal would have to be put to a full player vote of membership.

"I can't envision a scenario without the help of mediation or our leaders where we could close a deal," Hainsey said.

So what's next? Donald Fehr would not commit on decertification or disclaimer of interest.

Bettman would not commit to announcing a "drop dead" date on cancelling the season but did say, "When we get to the point where we can't play the season with integrity, we'll be done. I can't imagine fewer than 48 games.

"I'm disappointed beyond belief. We're going to have to take a deep breath and try to regroup."

Several players, along with Steve Fehr, watched as Bettman railed on how the negotiations have fallen apart and why.

"It's a disappointing day," said player rep Chris Campoli. "The fact that we came and closed the gap on the money issues, as well as addressing the term-length CBA, ... we did exactly that.

"To get that reaction, taking things off the table, shutting it down, it's frustrating."

For a few short minutes, it seemed like hockey would be back in time for the holidays or by New Year's Day.

Then, things blew apart in stunning fashion.

"Not only is it unusual," Steve Fehr said of the turnaround, "I would be hard pressed to think of anything comparable in my experience certainly or anyone else's I am aware of."

Bettman, Fehr return as CBA talks reach critical point

Tim Panaccio

NEW YORK -- "The Big Four" go back in the room Thursday afternoon as collective bargaining talks resume at the Westin New York in Times Square.

The smaller player-owner sessions that have been meeting since Tuesday are done.

That would seem to indicate that a framework for a new CBA is there in rough form and needs more polishing. Or maybe not.

On Thursday, the union asked for the federal mediators to get back involved in the discussions.

That be interpreted several ways:

- a stall tactic to give the union more time to swallow things in this deal it doesn't want
- an acknowledgement on the union's part that they've reached an impasse on one or more issues and they need the mediators to bridge a gap
- a move to keep the talks going knowing that with NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman and NHLPA executive director Donald Fehr in the room together, the talks could fall apart on a few issues and the mediators would prevent that.

The mediators were reportedly in Washington, and it was uncertain when they could be in New York. Also, the league had yet to give its approval of reintroducing the feds to the process.

"We haven't agreed to anything yet," deputy commissioner Bill Daly told CSNPhilly.com. "Will wait to hear what the Union has to tell us, today. But I have no idea what we would need mediators for at this point in time."

So, Bettman and Daly will once again spar with Fehr and his brother, Steve, acting special counsel.

Daly said early Thursday morning that the league had given the union some things to consider when discussions resumed.

Judging from the look on some of the faces coming out of Wednesday's discussions, which didn't end until after 1 a.m. Thursday, it won't be easy.

The parties admit the talks have reached a critical point, yet since they plowed through disagreements it appears they understand they've come too far to let this fall apart now.

Both sides exchanged proposals and counter proposals on Wednesday. The union said it would consider a 10-year deal if the league gave back on other things.

It's come down to this: The league will increase its share of "make whole" to existing contracts to \$300 million – a significant move – in exchange for the union agreeing to a 10-year CBA and accepting a number of league demands on contractual rights, according to TSN and ESPN.

Of that total, \$50 million would be deducted and placed into player pension funds. That apparently irked some of the moderate owners on the short panel because the union made the pension issue a late "add on," according to some reports.

Recall that Bettman stated emphatically in November that the league's last offer of \$211 million to "make whole" was final.

The key concession the union must agree to, however, is five-year term limits for contracts with a 5 percent salary variance. Clubs could re-sign its own players for up to seven years.

Time to go, Mr. Commissioner

By Dejan Kovacevic

NEW YORK — My question for Gary Bettman was, in comparison to the mega-mess just made of the NHL's labor talks Thursday night, a fairly simple one.

Here it is verbatim: "Gary, how could any commissioner justify canceling two full seasons in a span of eight years in any major professional sport?"

You had to be an elementary school principal to truly grasp the glare shot across the media room at the Westin Times Square.

"First of all," Bettman began, "lockouts and strikes happen in all sports. Baseball had eight work stoppages in a row before they had labor peace. The NBA and NFL have had them, too."

That's when he tilted his head a bit, always a sign he's about to get testy, his left eye twitched, his left hand pointed and trembled, and he added: "I'm not happy about this. But I've got to play the hand that I'm dealt."

Wow.

Let's hit pause for a second.

This man had just presided over the complete collapse of three days of negotiating that involved all 30 franchise owners, 18 players and countless lawyers, amid make-or-break urgency.

This man had just watched all the owners who employ him bolt town in disgust all through the afternoon, including the Penguins' would-be cavalry of Mario Lemieux and Ron Burkle he'd personally invited to seal the deal here

This man had just moved a step closer to shutting down his sport at a rate unprecedented in history.

And this man, entrusted with more power than anyone in the equation, feels it's just the hand he's been dealt.

Plain old lousy luck.

You know, I can't say what will become of this NHL season. It's never looked as dark as it did here Thursday night, but things can change with a single phone call, text or email. The part of me that's loved hockey all my life wants to believe it will be back.

But I do feel wholly certain of this much: If there is a hockey season of any length or breadth, it will be very much in spite of the men running the sport.

Check that: The man running it.

Let me put it another way: Bettman needs to go.

Not soon, but right now.

That's not to let Fehr off the hook. His reputation as a man solely interested in the advance of labor, even at the expense of the athletes he serves, was never more glaring than Thursday. The owners made a fair offer, and sentiment was nearly universal that a deal would be achieved before the weekend. Be very sure it was Fehr that pulled the plug.

At the same time, it's just impossible to get past that the man running the sport also has done a bang-up job of ruining it.

It's not something one writes cavalierly and, trust me, I'm not. If it weren't for Bettman, the league might never have been built into a \$3.3 billion business, installed a salary cap, become vital in places like Tampa and Dallas, raised the Stanley Cup in Raleigh or Anaheim, brought Canadian markets back to health and the Jets back to Winnipeg, and taken on bold efforts such as Olympic participation and the Winter Classic.

Oh, and your Penguins would have skated off to Kansas City.

Give Bettman credit for that much. For the body of two decades, he's been a good commissioner.

But that's what makes this disastrous lockout — the third in his 19-year tenure, possibly the second to cost a full season — all the more damaging to his brand. He built all this up, only to tear it all down in one abysmal year.

Forget for a moment, if you can, the lockout's impact on Pittsburgh, where it's not only shut down a potentially great team but also costs the local

economy \$1.2 million per lost home game and many good folks in our region an honest paycheck.

Look, strictly from the NHL standpoint, at Los Angeles.

The Kings play in our nation's second-largest market, blessed with as much potential as any franchise to take hockey to the next level. The last time we saw the sport in action, Bettman was passing the Cup to team captain Dustin Brown, the team was applauded later that week by 50,000-plus at Dodger Stadium, then made the full-circuit of late-night TV.

And now, just like that, to far too many in that same public, the Kings are right back to being Arena Football.

Think about that. What an enormous lost opportunity.

Only Bettman was in position to avoid that and all the rest.

Yes, in theory, he does the owners' bidding. And yes, the owners had — and still have — legitimate concerns. But thanks to an edict pushed through in 2002 to grant himself far more power, the commissioner needs only eight teams' approval to take action — work stoppages included - well down from three-quarters.

Don't think Bettman could have found eight teams opposed to a lockout?

I'll start with Pittsburgh, Los Angeles, the \$1 billion Maple Leafs, the Rangers who are headquartered a block away from these meetings but conspicuously weren't invited, and four more are easy.

Even once the lockout train got rolling, Bettman bungled step after step. Facing a union clearly open to concessions, his initial approach this summer was a we-want-it-all that galvanized the players around Fehr and killed any chance for a quick deal. Strike two came when Bettman assembled 5-6 hard-line owners - led by the Bruins' Jeremy Jacobs - to keep going ballistic and further bury the process.

And here these past couple days, Bettman was a shameful no-show. That started with keeping himself out of the most successful meeting Tuesday — along with Fehr — and continued Thursday when he stayed out in the hall while deputy commissioner Bill Daly and counsel Bob Battersman met with Fehr and the union.

How humiliating that must have been.

His excuse?

"It was a simple yes-or-no approach on our part," Bettman offered unsolicited, as if to fend it off. "We didn't feel the need to match lines, so to speak."

How pathetic.

It'll be 20 years for Bettman in February, and that's too long. No matter the outcome of all this, it's time for change.

The owners should immediately consider John Collins, the league's sharp, young chief operating officer who came from the NFL and conceived the Winter Classic, struck the 10-year deal with NBC and softened the league's touch with social media and young fans. Word is, Collins is so upset with the lockout and what's become of his achievements that he's considering leaving the league.

Here's another chance for Bettman to be proactive. One can only hope, for the sake of all of us who love this magnificent game, that he doesn't blow this one, too.

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645971 Pittsburgh Penguins

Pens co-owner Burkle: 'I believe a deal was within reach'

By Rob Rossi

Penguins co-owner Ron Burkle, who was involved in this week's NHL labor negotiations, released the following statement regarding the lockout:

The idea to put players and owners together in the same room was a refreshing idea. Commissioner Bettman should be thanked for proposing it and the Fehrs should be thanked for agreeing to it.

The players came with a strong desire to get back to playing hockey.

They were professional and did a good job of expressing their concerns and listening to ours.

We wanted to move quickly and decisively. We have all spent too much time without any real progress at the expense of our fans, our sponsor and the communities we serve. It was time to make bold moves and get a deal.

Many people think we got over our skis and they are probably right, but we wanted to do everything we could to get back to hockey now. We didn't hold back.

We made substantial movement on our end quickly, but unfortunately that was not met with the same level of movement from the other side. The players asked us to be patient and keep working with them. It's not what they do and they wanted us to know they were committed. We understood and appreciated their situation. We came back with an aggressive commitment to pensions which we felt was well received. We needed a response on key items that were important to us, but we were optimistic that we were down to very few issues. I believe a deal was within reach.

We were therefore surprised when the Fehrs made a unilateral and "non-negotiable" decision — which is their right, to end the player/owner process that has moved us farther in two days than we moved at any time in the past months.

I want to thank the players involved for their hard work as we tried to reach a deal.

I hope that going backwards does not prevent a deal.

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645972 Pittsburgh Penguins

Crosby's, Pens' efforts to end lockout wasted

By Rob Rossi and Dejan Kovacevic

NEW YORK — Sidney Crosby would do it all again.

He would call Penguins majority co-owners Mario Lemieux and Ron Burkle today if he thought they could help end an NHL lockout that, after a Thursday night collapse, has no end in sight.

"I didn't expect this," Crosby told the Tribune-Review.

Three days of talks between the owners and union at the Westin Times Square began with a flourish but ended with an emphatic, emotional rejection of the players' final proposal by NHL commissioner Gary Bettman and the owners, most of whom were "as upset as I've ever seen them," Bettman said.

No new talks were scheduled, Bettman and union chief Donald Fehr said, though neither would pronounce the 2012-13 season as being in jeopardy.

More games, likely the rest of December, could be canceled before this weekend.

Part of a Penguins-led power play to save the season, Crosby said he never broke ranks with his Players' Association and that no fellow players said they took issue that he and Burkle flew together from Los Angeles to New York in advance of these talks.

"It was never brought up," Crosby said. "I have not done anything wrong. I don't see how anybody would have a reason to be mad."

The sudden breakdown caught Crosby off guard. His face soured even as he stood behind reporters during Fehr's news conference.

He called the initial talks Tuesday and Wednesday "great, productive," adding, "Ron carried a lot of the conversation. There was really good feedback — from both sides, from what I know."

Burkle, Lemieux's primary ownership partner since their group purchased the Penguins out of bankruptcy in 1999, rarely addresses the media out of his position, but he put out a news release of 306 words, the last 10 resonating most with Crosby's agent, Pat Brisson.

"I hope that going backwards does not prevent a deal," Burkle says.

Brisson said he thought the influence that comes with representing Crosby, being longtime friend to Lemieux, and his close ties with other owners of the Los Angeles Kings and Montreal Canadiens — like the Penguins, a moderate in this labor dispute — could jump-start talks that stalled Nov. 29 after two days of federally mediated bargaining.

Owners of the Penguins, Tampa Bay Lightning, Winnipeg Jets and Toronto Maple Leafs joined talks with players this week, and there was enough progress on Day 1 that union special counsel Steve Fehr said Tuesday, "This is our best day so far."

Brisson said his conversations with Burkle over the previous two days convinced him Thursday morning that a new labor contract would be finalized, at least in principle, by Friday.

"I was shocked — everybody was — to see it go this way," he said.

Crosby said he wanted to let "this sink in" before he started "seriously considering my other options," notably playing in Europe. His plan is to resume practicing with Penguins teammates at Southpointe next week, but signing with a club in Switzerland now looms as a possibility, he said.

Brisson said an expected next round of canceled games would not impact Crosby's decision. He also said Crosby will not represent Team Canada or any team at the Spengler Cup, a Swiss tournament held annually between Christmas and New Year's.

Crosby said signing with a Swiss club is not the message he wants to send to players, owners or fans.

"It's not the insurance or any concern about my head, or any other reason that I believe we're too close not to do a deal," he said. "Nothing has changed my mind on that, and I still do. But I'm going to play hockey somewhere this season. I want it to be in Pittsburgh. That's what this week was about for me."

The scene at the Westin became more dramatic throughout the day.

As of Wednesday night, according to Winnipeg Jets defenseman Ron Hainsey, the players "thought we had the makings of a deal" and invested Thursday morning toward a formal proposal to close it out.

According to Fehr, the union accepted the owners' wishes related to "all dollar values." But they balked at two items in particular:

- The owners, at the behest of Burkle, pushed for a 10-year term for the labor agreement in hopes of securing longstanding labor peace to rebuild confidence in the NHL brand among fans, sponsors and networks.

When the union resisted, it was amended to eight years, with a six-year opt-out clause for either side.

Fehr stuck by the original five years, insisting that "it's not fair to the next generation of players to not have their own say."

- The owners are demanding contract term limits of seven years for players staying with their current team, five years for free agents.

Fehr balks at them entirely, and he cited Crosby's 12-year, \$104.4 million contract as an example of one that was struck in a manner befitting both team and player.

The owners' response — delivered to Fehr via voicemail from deputy commissioner Bill Daly — was a resounding no. But the real response was evident hours earlier when owners began leaving for the airport, just a day after they had vowed to see the process through.

Daly pinpointed the contract term limits as "the hill we'll die on."

Fehr and Bettman conducted passionate news conferences, Fehr doing two — one before learning of Daly's voicemail in which he buoyantly predicted a "deal could be coming soon," then another after the rejection in which he called it "inexplicable" that the owners responded as they did.

Bettman was even more animated, visibly agitated and raising his voice in expressing exasperation with the union.

"I am disappointed beyond belief at where we are," Bettman said. "We're going to take a deep breath and look at where we are."

Bettman reiterated that there is no drop-dead date for the season to be canceled.

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645973 Pittsburgh Penguins

Owners dismiss union's new offer

By Dave Molinari

The NHL and the NHL Players' Association began to make significant progress toward a labor agreement when the two lead negotiators were removed from the talks Tuesday.

And it might not be entirely a coincidence that the negotiations broke down - - possibly putting the 2012-13 season in jeopardy -- when one of them, NHLPA executive director Donald Fehr, returned to the bargaining table Thursday.

Talks were suspended Thursday night, not long after Fehr conducted a news conference in which he suggested that a settlement that would get the league back in business was near, if not imminent.

"We are clearly very close [to], if not on top of, one another on the major issues," he told reporters at the site of the talks in New York.

"We think there is a complete agreement on dollars. There shouldn't be much reason why we can't get an agreement in the near-term."

Those upbeat words barely had begun to circulate when Steve Fehr, the NHLPA's special counsel, received a voicemail from NHL deputy commissioner Bill Daly, informing him that the offer the union put forth a short time earlier had been rejected.

Flatly and completely.

And that the NHL saw no point in conducting further negotiations, at least for the time being.

"It looks like this is not going to be resolved in the immediate future," Donald Fehr said.

NHL commissioner Gary Bettman suggested later that the league reacted so strongly and negatively to the NHLPA proposal because it had been expecting a yes-or-no response to its most recent offer, and instead got back a counterproposal built around cherry-picking items it liked.

"This is a package," Bettman said. "Everything fits together. When the union comes in and says, 'We'll take this and this' ... you're further apart."

Penguins center Sidney Crosby, a prominent figure during the most recent negotiations, said the NHLPA did not believe it had been given a take-it-or-leave-it offer, and felt it had made significant moves toward positions the NHL had staked out.

"I'm surprised [the negotiations broke down]," Crosby said. "We feel like we moved in their direction."

Crosby and Penguins co-owner Ron Burkle had been widely praised for the part they played in generating positive momentum for the negotiations earlier in the week, and it was a statement Burkle released through the league Thursday night that suggested Fehr's return to the talks had been a poison pill.

The statement read, in part:

"We made substantial movement on our end quickly, but unfortunately, that was not met with the same level of movement from the other side. The players asked us to be patient and keep working with them. It's not what they do [for a living], and they wanted us to know they were committed.

"We understood and appreciated their situation. We came back with an aggressive commitment to pensions which we felt was well-received. We needed a response on key items that were important to us, but we were optimistic that we were down to very few issues. I believe a deal was within reach.

"We were therefore surprised when the Fehrs made a unilateral and 'non-negotiable' decision -- which is their right -- to end the player/owner process that has moved us farther in two days than we moved at any time in the past months."

Donald Fehr and Bettman had been excluded from the talks Tuesday and Wednesday -- an idea Bettman put forth when talks bogged down last week -- while four new owners and about 20 players were added to the mix.

After a decidedly upbeat initial session Tuesday -- "We thought we were on to something good," Bettman said -- the good feelings seemed to fade the next day, when some of the more contentious issues were discussed.

Gloom seemed to set in as Thursday progressed, only to be briefly dispelled by Fehr's unabashedly optimistic news conference. That didn't last, however, and now the focus shifts to when the talks will start again.

And whether the season ever will.

The league has not set a drop-dead date for having a deal in place and anything that's been taken off the negotiating table obviously can be returned there in a moment's notice, but Bettman raised the possibility of the season being called off, as the 2004-05 one had been in a similar dispute.

The commissioner said he is "tormented" by thoughts of canceling another season and, after pointing out that the lockout-shortened season of 1994-95 consisted of 48 games, said, "I can't imagine wanting to play fewer than that.

"When we get to the point that we can't play a season with integrity ... then we'll be done."

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645974 Pittsburgh Penguins

Burkle releases statement after NHL talks break down

Staff

Ron Burkle, the intensely private Penguins co-owner, issued this statement through the NHL after labor negotiations with the NHL Players' Association broke off this evening:

"The idea to put players and owners together in the same room was a refreshing idea. Commissioner (Gary) Bettman should be thanked for proposing it and (Donald and Steve Fehr of the NHLPA should be thanked for agreeing to it.

"The players came with a strong desire to get back to playing hockey. They were professional and did a good job of expressing their concerns and listening to ours.

"We wanted to move quickly and decisively. We have all spent too much time without any real progress at the expense of our fans, our sponsor and the communities we serve. It was time to make bold moves and get a deal. Many people think we got over our skis and they are probably right, but we wanted to do everything we could to get back to hockey now. We didn't hold back.

"We made substantial movement on our end quickly, but unfortunately that was not met with the same level of movement from the other side. The players asked us to be patient and keep working with them. It's not what they do and they wanted us to know they were committed. We understood and appreciated their situation. We came back with an aggressive commitment to pensions which we felt was well received. We needed a response on key items that were important to us, but we were optimistic that we were down to very few issues. I believe a deal was within reach.

"We were therefore surprised when the Fehrs made a unilateral and 'non-negotiable' decision -- which is their right, to end the player/owner process that has moved us farther in two days than we moved at any time in the past months.

"I want to thank the players involved for their hard work as we tried to reach a deal.

"I hope that going backwards does not prevent a deal."

Post Gazette LOADED: 12.07.2012

645975 Pittsburgh Penguins

NHL lockout negotiations broken off

By Dave Molinari /

Negotiations for a deal to end the NHL lockout have broken off.

Not long after Donald Fehr, the head of the NHL Players' Association, told a press conference in New York that the sides had agreed on a number of key issues and were close to agreement on many others.

The league obviously didn't see it that way, and deputy commissioner Bill Daly sent a text message to Steve Fehr, the No. 2 man in the NHLPA less than an hour later saying that the league had rejected a proposal the players submitted earlier and that there was no need to meet again tonight or Friday.

"It looks like this is not going to be resolved in the immediate future," Donald Fehr told reporters assembled at the New York hotel where talks were held the past three days.

"We've been advised that something, everything is off the table. I don't know what that means. We'll figure that it out eventually, I guess."

Post Gazette LOADED: 12.07.2012

645976 St Louis Blues

Hockey Guy: NHL talks teeter on the brink

By Jeff Gordon

Negotiations between the NHL owners and players are nearing the make-or-break point.

After establishing some common ground in a new negotiating format — owners and players meeting without commissioner Gary Bettman or players association czar Donald Fehr in the room — the two sides returned to a more traditional format today. The tension was palpable.

Can the leaders on both sides keep the talks moving toward resolution? Or will negotiations reach still another impasse, threatening to finish off the rest of the season?

The experts tracking the talks note that the next several hours are critical. At this posting, the players association is holding internal discussions and the owners are awaiting word on when negotiations will resume.

Here is a sampling of their Twitter posts, with some consolations:

Bob McKenzie, TSN: "Many players here don't like what's on table -- 'what's in it for us' mantra -- but many others not here say this could be a workable deal . . . Talk to some owners/NHL people, sense is this blows up today. Talk to other owners who say no way we lose season over these differences."

Pierre LeBrun, ESPN.com: "Cannot stress enough how delicate things stand right now in this thing. Make or break day . . . On one hand, don't think they're far from agreement on principle issues. But on flip side, clearly a sense this thing is hanging by a thread."

John Shannon, SportsNet: "The vibe has gotten progressively worse since last night . . . one player source tells me 'things are not going well right now'."

Bob McKenzie, TSN: "I can tell you there's a hugely negative vibe emanating from both sides right now. Keeping this process on rails today will be challenging."

Doug MacLean, Sportsnet: "Just told already friction this a.m. between sides. After two days of reasonable progress both sides better give their heads a shake."

Nick Cotsonika, Yahoo! Sports: "Talks almost blew up last night when players association made pensions a priority, surprising and upsetting moderate owners."

Renaud Lavoie, RDS Montreal: "Talks went so bad in the afternoon yesterday, I've been told by two sources, owners were ready to stop this bargaining process."

Adam Proteau, The Hockey News: "Should hardliners wind up sinking NHL CBA talks again, let's hope they have the stones to publicly and proudly identify themselves as such."

Nick Cotsonika, Yahoo! Sports: "Owners continue to be frustrated that players association priorities are moving targets."

Daren Millard, Sportsnet: "Source tells me the NHLPA would like to move off the limited participation group and allow any/all to participate. Not negotiable."

Darren Dreger, TSN: "A few of the owners pushed hard yesterday to boost Make Whole provision to \$300 million to close deal. It wasn't received well which infuriated owners."

Bob McKenzie, TSN: "Players Association doesn't like five-year term limits on contracts or 10-year term of CBA or fact that Make Whole bump to \$300M is tied to accepting 10-year CBA . . . I know players association doesn't like 10-year CBA -- eight if opt-out exercised -- but I personally think long term may be only 'hook' to try to win back fans."

Bruce Garrioch, Ottawa Sun: "Players do not like 10-year term of the CBA and don't want contract term limits of five and seven years. Moves on arbitration and free agency were big."

Damien Cox, Toronto Star: "Good, tough negotiating by the players association has got them more in 'make whole' than I ever thought they'd get. Have held ground on free agency, arbitration."

Nick Cotsonika, Yahoo! Sports: "Players have gotten owners to back off on a lot of things. Danger is ticking off guys who came to make a deal."

Bruce Garrioch, Ottawa Sun: "'I would be flabbergasted if they cancelled the season.' Sens captain Daniel Alfredsson."

Chris Botta, Sports Business Journal: "As CBA talks drag to a conclusion, owners and players must know fewer fans care. Empty seats all over the NHL in 2013."

Bruce Garrioch, Ottawa Sun: "The general feeling: The two sides have come too far not to make a deal. Negotiations have to lead to a close . . . Even if talks break off. Both sides settle down till next week. Speak with constituents and then do deal."

St Louis Post Dispatch LOADED: 12.07.2012

645977 Tampa Bay Lightning

NHL making progress in marathon meetings but still no deal

By ERIK ERLÉNSSON

Burning the midnight oil was not enough to thaw hockey's deep freeze quite yet.

For the second consecutive day, representatives from the National Hockey League and the NHL Player's Association held marathon meetings in the hopes of settling the now 82-day long lockout that has already canceled games through Dec. 14.

After going to nearly midnight on Tuesday, the two sides went for nearly nine hours on Wednesday in meetings that carried over into early Thursday before wrapping up just before 1 a.m. Between Tuesday and Wednesday, the two sides have been in discussions for almost 17 hours with more work to be done.

More talks are planned for Thursday, though they are not expected to resume until after 12 p.m. The NHLPA is expected to hold internal meetings that will start in the morning before getting back to the table.

Tampa Bay Lightning owner Jeff Vinik was among a group of six team owners that have been a part of the league's representation, which also includes owners from Winnipeg, Calgary, Toronto, Boston and Pittsburgh but has not included NHL commissioner Gary Bettman, which was by design.

The NHLPA, which has not had union chief Don Fehr in the negotiating room also by design, started the day with 19 players involved in the talks including Tampa Bay all-star Marty St. Louis and B.J. Crombeen.

Though progress has reportedly been made as the two sides try to hammer out an agreement in hopes of being able to play a shortened season, nothing appears imminent. In fact, there still remains a chance everything could blow up which could threaten to see the rest of the season lost. The Minneapolis Star-Tribune even reported that things nearly fell apart around 11 p.m. as tensions heated up.

As the meeting broke up, defenseman Ron Hainsey of the Winnipeg Jets addressed the assembled media at the Westin Times Square in New York and gave a brief statement without taking questions, stating, "We had a series of candid discussions tonight; we will meet again (Thursday)" as he walked away.

NHL Deputy Commissioner Bill Daly also addressed the media following Wednesday's discussions without taking questions.

"We had good candid, dialogue. A lot of issues," he said. "There continue to be some critical open issues between the two parties and we understand the union should be getting back to us tomorrow on some of those issues."

Earlier in the day, Lightning players said it was too early in the process to hang on to any sense of optimism that something would soon be worked out.

"Until there's a deal there's not a deal," said Lightning winger Ryan Malone after a group of nine players concluded workouts at the Ice Sports Forum. "So until that happens we just keep carrying on as usual and see what happens. It's not worth getting too excited about something you can't control anymore."

Veteran defenseman Sami Salo said he learned long ago not to get caught up in any of the highs and lows involved during negotiations.

"I don't have any high expectations as it's been a roller coaster ride the whole lock out," Salo said. "So I think players are preparing themselves and know not to expect too much out of these meetings until we really get something concrete."

Tampa Tribune LOADED: 12.07.2012

645978 Tampa Bay Lightning

NHL angrily breaks off labor talks

By Damian Cristodero,

All NHL owners wanted from players Thursday was a yes or no concerning the league's latest offer.

Instead, the players association wanted to negotiate, commissioner Gary Bettman said. And with that, the league angrily broke off talks on a collective bargaining agreement.

Bettman and deputy commissioner Bill Daly spewed venom during a news conference as the 83-day lockout of players hit its nadir with the season in more peril than ever. Daly called the union's actions "insulting to our owners." Bettman said, "Anything we put on the table this week is off. . . . I am disappointed beyond belief we are where we are. We're going to have to take a deep breath and try to regroup."

If that doesn't happen quickly, the league — which already has canceled games through Dec. 14, the Jan. 1 Winter Classic and the All-Star Game — will cancel more of the season.

With no new negotiations scheduled, grim union head Donald Fehr conceded, "This looks like it's not going to be resolved in the near future."

It went south quickly, considering the goodwill that came out of two days of meetings at a New York hotel between six owners, including the Lightning's Jeff Vinik, and as many as 18 players, including Tampa Bay's Marty St. Louis and B.J. Crombeen.

Owners increased to \$300 million from \$211 million money in the "make-whole" provision that partially guarantees current player contracts when the players' share of revenue is slashed to 50 percent from 57 percent. Owners also agreed to retain rules for rookie contracts (three years), unrestricted

free agency (27 years old or seven years in the league) and salary arbitration.

Fehr, about 30 minutes before Bettman spoke Thursday, even indicated a deal was close. But Bettman said that was "incomprehensible" because players had to agree to three issues "vitally important to the owners."

- A deal of 10 years with a reopen option after eight.
- A five-year contract limit, though teams could sign their own free agents for seven. "A hill we're willing to die on," Daly said.
- No amnesty buyouts next season of unwanted contracts and no limits on player escrow payments. "Money outside the system," Daly said, and non-starters.

The union proposed an eight-year deal with a reopen for players after six years and maximum eight-year contracts. It also raised concerns about the pension plan.

"We were expecting an answer, yes or no," Bettman said. "If the answer is no, there is no point continuing the discussions. (Thursday) wasn't intended to be a negotiating session. ... Spinning us all into an emotional frenzy over 'Maybe we're close to a deal' ... is terribly unfair to our fans and unfair to the process."

Where do things go from here? The union could pursue decertification; antitrust laws prohibit employers from locking out nonunion workers. The league must consider a drop-dead date to cancel the season; Bettman said that had not been determined.

"I hold out hope we can join with our players and return the game back to its rightful place on the ice," Vinik said in a statement.

"I'm very discouraged," St. Louis said. "We try to engage them and keep negotiating, but unless you say yes to what they want, there is no deal."

"Time to take off, maybe go on a vacation."

Tampa Bay Times LOADED: 12.07.2012

645979 Tampa Bay Lightning

Statements from four owners, including Tampa Bay's Jeff Vinik, on breakdown of negotiations

Posted by Damian Cristodero

The NHL released statements from the four owners at Thursday's negotiations, including Tampa Bay's Jeff Vinik:

STATEMENTS FROM RON BURKLE, MARK CHIPMAN, LARRY TANENBAUM & JEFF VINIK

NEW YORK (December 6, 2012) -- Statements relative to their participation in the collective bargaining agreement negotiations this week were released tonight by Ron Burkle of the Pittsburgh Penguins, Mark Chipman of the Winnipeg Jets, Larry Tanenbaum of the Toronto Maple Leafs and Jeff Vinik of the Tampa Bay Lightning, governors of their respective teams:

Statement from Ron Burkle

The idea to put players and owners together in the same room was a refreshing idea. Commissioner Bettman should be thanked for proposing it and the Fehrs should be thanked for agreeing to it.

The players came with a strong desire to get back to playing hockey. They were professional and did a good job of expressing their concerns and listening to ours.

We wanted to move quickly and decisively. We have all spent too much

time without any real progress at the expense of our fans, our sponsor and the communities we serve. It was time to make bold moves and get a deal. Many people think we got over our skis and they are probably right, but we wanted to do everything we could to get back to hockey now. We didn't hold back.

We made substantial movement on our end quickly, but unfortunately that was not met with the same level of movement from the other side. The players asked us to be patient and keep working with them. It's not what they do and they wanted us to know they were committed. We understood and

appreciated their situation. We came back with an aggressive commitment to

pensions which we felt was well received. We needed a response on key items

that were important to us, but we were optimistic that we were down to very few issues. I believe a deal was within reach.

We were therefore surprised when the Fehrs made a unilateral and "non-negotiable" decision – which is their right, to end the player/owner process that has moved us farther in two days than we moved at any time in the past months.

I want to thank the players involved for their hard work as we tried to reach a deal.

I hope that going backwards does not prevent a deal.

Statement from Mark Chipman

Mark Chipman, Chairman and Governor of the Winnipeg Jets Hockey Club, today

issued the following statement:

"I'd like to thank the NHL for giving me the opportunity to participate in this very important process.

I came here optimistic that we could find a solution. That sense of optimism grew after our first few sessions, including the small group discussions late last night.

Regrettably, we have been unable to close the divide on some critical issues that we feel are essential to the immediate and long-term health of our game.

While I sense there are some members of the players association that understand our perspective on these issues, clearly there are many that don't.

I am deeply disappointed that we were unable to bring this extremely unfortunate situation to a successful conclusion and I wish to apologize to our fans and sponsors for letting them down."

Statement from Larry Tanenbaum

"I was pleased to be asked to join the Player/Owner negotiation sessions. I had hoped that my perspective both as a businessman and as one

of the owners of the Toronto Maple Leafs would be helpful to the process. Like all other teams, this work stoppage has hurt our fans, our employees and our business. Neither the owners nor the players will ever recover the

losses incurred with this work stoppage.

I understand how important it is to have a strong league and 30 healthy teams. I must admit that I was shocked at how things have played out over the last 48 hours. The sessions on Tuesday felt cooperative with an air of goodwill. I was optimistic and conveyed my optimism to the Board of Governors at our Wednesday meeting. However, when we reconvened with the players on Wednesday afternoon, it was like someone had thrown a switch. The atmosphere had completely changed. Nevertheless, the owners tried to push forward and made a number of concessions and proposals, which were not well-received. I question whether the union is interested in making an agreement.

I am very disappointed and disillusioned. Had I not experienced this process myself, I might not have believed it. Like all hockey fans, I am hopeful this situation can be resolved as soon as possible. I miss our game."

Statement from Jeff Vinik

Tampa Bay Lightning Chairman and Governor Jeff Vinik today issued the following statement today:

"After working this week with our players toward what we hoped would be a new agreement, owners presented a proposal we believed would benefit those great players, ownership, and, ultimately, our fans for many years to come. While trust was built and progress was made along the way, unfortunately, our proposal was rejected by the Union's leadership. My love for the game is only superseded by my commitment to our fans and I hold out hope we can soon join with our players and return the game back to its rightful place on the ice."

Tampa Bay Times LOADED: 12.07.2012

645980 Tampa Bay Lightning

NHL angrily breaks off CBA negotiations, plunging the season into jeopardy

Posted by Damian Cristodero

Talks between the NHL and Players Association on a new collective bargaining agreement were angrily broken off Thursday night by the league with deputy commissioner Bill Daly saying the union's response to the league's latest proposal was "insulting to our owners."

In response, commissioner Gary Bettman said everything that had been on the table after two days of face-to-face meetings between players and owners at a New York hotel was now off the table, including the "make-whole" provision which the league had increased to \$300 million from \$211 million.

In response, union head Donald Fehr said, "This looks like it's not going to be resolved in the near future."

"I can tell you I'm very discouraged," said Lightning wing Marty St. Louis, who attended the negotiations. "We try to engage them and keep negotiating but unless we say yes to what they want there is no deal. Put it this way. I won't be skating any time soon. We were making progress and then you get an ultimatum. Tough to take. Time to take some time off, maybe go on vacation. That's where I'm at."

Lightning owner Jeff Vinik also was at the negotiations and released this statement:

"After working this week with our players toward what we hoped would be a new agreement, owners presented a proposal we believed would benefit those great players, ownership, and, ultimately, our fans for many years to come. While trust was built and progress was made along the way, unfortunately, our proposal was rejected by the Union's leadership. My love for the game is only superseded by my commitment to our fans and I hold out hope we can soon join with our players and return the game back to its rightful place on the ice."

In the league's view, the problem was the union's response to what the league had offered on Wednesday, which in addition to the "make-whole" provision, included backing off on changes to some player contract issues and salary arbitration. But Bettman said that was contingent on the union agreeing to three things that were vitally important to the owners:

Term limits on contracts (five years max except for when signing one's own free agents which would have a seven-year limit).

The length of the CBA (10 years with an eight-year provision to reopen).

Compliance issues (no limits on escrow and no buyout of players outside the cap system).

Games already have been canceled through Dec. 14. The Jan. 1 Winter Classic also is canceled as is the All-Star Game.

Tampa Bay Times LOADED: 12.07.2012

645981 Tampa Bay Lightning

In latest offer to players, NHL increases money allotted to guarantee current contracts

Posted by Damian Cristodero

By the time the second day of face-to-face negotiations between owners and players to end the 82-day NHL lockout were finished, it was about 1 a.m. Thursday in New York, and at one point union counsel Steve Fehr shared pizza with reporters. But nine hours of intense negotiations have pushed ahead the process for a new collective bargaining agreement.

Both sides generally were tight-lipped about what was discussed, but a few details trickled out.

Canada's TSN reported that the NHL's current offer -- a 10-year deal with an opt-out clause for either side after eight -- included \$300 million to guarantee current contracts, up from \$211 million. That is important for players who likely will see a salary rollback as their share of revenues goes from 57 to 50 percent. That offer includes \$50 million for pension funding.

The league also reiterated its wish for a five-year limit on contracts, except for a team signs its own free agents. The limit, then, would be seven years. The league also wants a five percent salary variance year-to-year within a contract.

Owners also reportedly have backed off changing rules for unrestricted free agency (27 years old or seven years in the league) and salary arbitration.

Negotiations are expected to continue Thursday, though it was unclear if commissioner Gary Bettman and union head Donald Fehr would be among the participants in the room. The pair has been excluded from face-to-face negotiations as up to six owners, including the Lightning's Jeff Vinik, and up to 18 players, including Tampa Bay's Marty St. Louis and B.J. Crombeen, have hashed out the issues.

ESPN reported the union wants no more restrictions on who can attend negotiating sessions. That means Bettman and Donald Fehr, whose testy relationship some believe might have hindered negotiations, might return to the action. If so, it will be interesting to see how they affect negotiations.

It is believed the league wants to begin playing around the Christmas holidays. NHL deputy commissioner Bill Daly said it will take about 10 days for games to start after an agreement is reached.

Tampa Bay Times LOADED: 12.07.2012

Arena survey ruffles feathers in Markham

Chris Johnston

Staff Reporter

NEW YORK, N.Y.—The NHL labour talks have hit another roadblock — and this one appears to be massive.

Markham taxpayers are furious about a survey the city approved to be sent out to assess public support of the controversial arena project.

After two optimistic days that suggested a deal could be imminent, negotiations between the league and the NHL Players' Association broke off dramatically Thursday.

After months of debate, discussion and numerous public meetings on the controversial NHL-size arena project in Markham, a select number of residents received an email survey this week on the \$325-million project masked as a "consumer goods" questionnaire.

The NHLPA presented a new offer to the league Thursday afternoon, a proposal that union head Donald Fehr called "a clear outline" to end the dispute.

The survey, administered by AskingCanadians, asked three general questions on the 20,000-seat arena project that has consumed much of the city's time since the financial framework was approved in April.

Fehr said he believed the two sides are "clearly very close if not on top of one another in connection with most of the major issues."

According to one Markham resident who took the survey, the three questions simply asked if they knew about the arena project; if there was support for an arena that would not increase taxes; and if residents would still support the project if it was funded through a mixture of public-private funds.

The league flatly rejected the offer, saying the two sides aren't close despite what Fehr says.

The city refused the Star's requests to see the survey nor would they confirm the questions. The polling company Delvinia refused to comment on the survey.

"I don't know why he did that," an angry Gary Bettman told a news conference.

But residents who have been closely following the \$325-million project say the general survey questions are overly simplistic and gave no background on the complex funding model of the project. The financial framework proposes Markham borrow \$325 million, with a private sector partner paying back half the amount over 20 years. The city would raise the other half through development fees on builders and ticket surcharges on arena guests.

The NHL commissioner said any new offers the league made this week are now off the table.

Councillors say they never signed off on the survey, and only found out about it when residents asked them about it.

"The take or give or bottom line on all this is: it appears that the union is suggesting because we made substantial movements in certain areas that we're close to a deal," said Bettman. "But those moves were contingent on the union specifically agreeing on other things, which while the union may have moved toward, didn't agree to."

"We were not consulted," said councillor Don Hamilton. "I have asked who authorized (the survey) and no one has been willing to step up and take responsibility."

During talks this week, the league said it was willing to increase the amount of deferred transition money paid to the players to \$300 million — which sat directly between what had most recently been tabled by the NHL (\$211 million) and NHLPA (\$393 million).

Hamilton has petitioned council to do a comprehensive poll of the public to gauge public sentiments on the project earlier this year, but said he has constantly been rebuffed.

Another issue that surfaced was the league's desire to see a 10-year term on the collective bargaining agreement. The union's offer Thursday was for eight years with an option for opting out after Year 6.

Markham resident Mike Gannon, who is against the use of taxpayer's money for the arena, said his wife received an email invitation to participate in the survey, because she is on the surveyor's email list.

"I'm disappointed beyond belief that we are where we are tonight," said Bettman.

"The way it was worded, if you are not familiar with the project, you would have answered positively to the questions right away," said Gannon's wife, Claude. "Obviously, the person who wrote it was looking for a positive response," she said.

Fehr's comments took an equally negative tone.

Gannon then emailed the city to get more details on the survey.

"What can we tell the hockey fans of Canada? You can tell them that it looks like this is not going to be resolved in the immediate future," Fehr said after telling the media that the league had left the union a voicemail rejecting the latest offer. "I hope that turns out to be wrong. But that's certainly the message that we have today."

"Delvinia offered their services to the City of Markham at no charge to test their online AskingCanadians polling technology," said Don Taylor, manager of executive operations for the city in an email response to Gannon. "Markham's proposed arena was selected as a subject for this test," he said.

There are no new talks scheduled.

Gannon said that still doesn't shed light on who wrote the questions, and who commissioned the survey. He also questions how the information will eventually be used.

"We're going to take a deep breath and look back at where we are and what needs to be accomplished," said Bettman.

When contacted by the Star, Taylor referred all questions to city spokesman Dennis Flaherty said he was unable to provide any clarification on the matter.

In their latest offer, Fehr said the players "responded comprehensively" to the issues that had been the focus of this week's meetings.

Council voted overwhelmingly in April to approve financial framework behind the arena. But in the past few months, support for the project among councillors and the public has waned.

But NHL deputy commissioner Bill Daly said the offer "missed the mark."

Toronto Star LOADED: 12.07.2012

"We'll stay and re-engage if you agree to the three things that we say are important to us, which is the term of the CBA, term limits of player contracts, which is the hill we will die on, and compliance issues," said Daly. "And what we got today, quite frankly and disappointingly, missed the mark on all three respects. So for the union to suggest somehow we are close, is cherry picking and it's unfortunate."

The latest developments came after the two sides held bargaining sessions Tuesday and Wednesday that stretched into the wee hours.

The sides returned to the table for about an hour Thursday night with a much smaller group than the one that met the previous two days.

Daly and general counsel Bob Batterman represented the league while Fehr and special counsel Steve Fehr sat in for the union along with a group of players.

None of the six league owners who were part of marathon sessions Tuesday and Wednesday took part.

Four members of that group — Pittsburgh's Ron Burkle, Tampa's Jeff Vinik, Toronto's Larry Tanenbaum and Winnipeg's Mark Chipman — were considered moderates who travelled to New York in an effort to broker a deal.

"We needed a response on key items that were important to us, but we were optimistic that we were down to very few issues. I believe a deal was within reach," Burkle said in a statement. "We were therefore surprised when the Fehrs made a unilateral and 'non-negotiable' decision — which is their right — to end the player/owner process that has moved us farther in two days than we moved at any time in the past months."

Thursday was the 82nd day of the lockout.

Toronto Star LOADED: 12.07.2012

645984 Toronto Maple Leafs

NHL Lockout: A brief look at the league's modern history of labour strife

Alex Ballingall

The NHL's modern history is riddled with labour trouble, particularly since Gary Bettman took the helm as league commissioner in 1993.

Here's a brief look at the past two decades of bargaining turmoil:

The only league-wide strike in NHL history was called on April Fool's Day, 1992, after the players overwhelmingly rejected the owners' proposed collective bargaining agreement in a 560-4 vote.

Key grievances were the reform of the league's free agency system, and player opposition to the league's proposed redistribution of trading card revenue, worth more than \$16 million (all figures U.S.). That money had gone to the NHL Players' Association for the previous two decades.

A week into the dispute, fears spiked that the post-season would be lost when the players rejected the owners' final offer. Wayne Gretzky even speculated that "hockey might never be the same."

But the strike ended three days later, on April 10, 1992, after a U.S. government mediator intervened and the two sides reached an agreement.

The players got to keep their trading card money, while the free agency system was tweaked and the regular season was expanded to 84 games.

The first lockout of the Bettman era lasted from Oct. 1, 1994 to Jan. 11, 1995, leading to the cancellation of 468 games before play resumed on Jan. 20.

The big issue was the owners' desire to help smaller market franchises compete against NHL juggernauts like the Maple Leafs and the New York Rangers by imposing a system that would fine teams if they exceeded a player salary limit. The resulting money would be used to subsidize smaller clubs.

The players opposed this, arguing it would serve as an unfair salary cap.

There were also disagreements on limits of free agency and salary arbitration.

In the end, an agreement was reached which took the suggested salary cap system off the table, but imposed wage limits for rookie players and increased the time a player must be in the league before he is eligible for unrestricted free agency.

In 2005, there was no Stanley Cup champion for the first time since 1919, when the hockey season was cancelled because of a flu epidemic.

Like the lockout a decade earlier, this dispute came down to disagreements over a salary cap. Bettman and the owners wanted to tie player earnings to league revenues to bring "cost certainty" to the league, while the NHLPA argued for a "luxury tax" system akin to that seen in Major League Baseball.

Hopes for a solution sprang forth six months into the lockout — which began on Sept. 16, 2004 — when rumours of an agreed-upon salary cap swirled as the two sides held a lengthy negotiating session. But on Feb. 16, Bettman cancelled the entire season.

An agreement was reached on July 13, 2005. Most significantly, it included the owners' hard-fought salary cap, starting at \$39 million per team for the 2005-06 season. It would be recalculated each year to guarantee players at least 54 per cent of NHL revenues.

That agreement expired on Sept. 15, 2012. The current lockout started the following day.

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645985 Toronto Maple Leafs

Maple Leafs owner Larry Tanenbaum's optimism about NHL talks shrivels

By Rob Longley

NEW YORK - When six NHL owners were conscripted by commissioner Gary Bettman to meet with players this week, it was seen as a potential breakthrough toward cracking the stubborn lockout.

After a day it looked like a good move as the billionaires felt they had given enough to the millionaires to get things moving.

So when it all broke down on Thursday night at least one owner questioned the willingness of the NHL Players' Association to make an agreement at all.

"I understand how important it is to have a strong league and 30 healthy teams," Maple Leafs co-owner Larry Tanenbaum said in a statement.

"I must admit that I was shocked at how things have played out over the last 48 hours. The sessions on Tuesday felt co-operative with an air of goodwill ... However, when we reconvened with the players on Wednesday afternoon, it was like someone had thrown a switch. The atmosphere had completely changed. Nevertheless, the owners tried to push forward and made a number of concessions and proposals, which were not well-received.

"I question whether the union is interested in making an agreement."

Tanenbaum was believed to be influential in the positive dialogue that took place on Tuesday and when asked about it by QMI Agency on Wednesday, was optimistic the groundwork had been laid for a deal.

"I had hoped that my perspective, both as a businessman and one of the owners would be helpful to the process," Tanenbaum said in the statement.

"Like all other teams, this work stoppage has hurt our fans, our employees and our business. Neither the owners nor the players will ever recover the losses incurred with this work stoppage."

Toronto Sun LOADED: 12.07.2012

645986 Vancouver Canucks

Post-lockout Canucks: Ex-Hab Higgins played centre, willing to fill in for Kesler

Ben Kuzma

VANCOUVER — The faithful have flocked to UBC on a more regular basis than opposing sides have met during the protracted and increasingly bitter NHL lockout. And when one true believer asked Chris Higgins for an autograph Thursday, it was scribbled on a Montreal Canadiens card that showed the versatile forward in a No. 21 jersey.

The position description read: left winger. It should have read: left winger/centre.

While Guy Carbonneau and Doug Jarvis were dependable centres who also wore No. 21 for the Canadiens, it's also where Higgins spent significant time in his first two seasons in Montreal. That could be of great value to the Vancouver Canucks should the season somehow be salvaged. As much as the Presidents' Trophy winners hope second-line centre Ryan Kesler will recover from offseason left shoulder and wrist surgeries to play

next month, there are no guarantees he'll be up to speed and those minutes must be distributed individually or collectively.

Jordan Schroeder was a recent healthy scratch by the Chicago Wolves and although Maxim Lapierre and Manny Malhotra are other options, they're probably better served in the bottom-six mix. It's why the Canucks have kicked the trade tires on a third-line centre in an eventual Roberto Luongo trade — hello Tyler Bozak — and why they had rumoured interest in 2010 first-round Florida Panthers prospect Nick Bjugstad. With Cody Hodgson traded and Samme Pahlsson back in Sweden, the riddle in the middle needs solving. Higgins is a temporary answer.

"It's was kind of an on-and-off thing and my first couple of years [in Montreal] I played more centre," he recalled. "I'm obviously more comfortable playing the wing. Playing centre as not a long-term thing, I know I can play the position and I know I can play it well. I could definitely fill in and I'm all for it if it's what's needed. It would take a little bit of a learning process, but I could pick it up pretty quickly."

The down side for the 29-year-old Higgins is an eagerness to prove his projected worth in the final year of a \$1.9 million US contract is tempered by a tiring waiting game. His cycle of two weeks in Vancouver and one in New York to visit family is gratifying, but the CBA process is grating. He entered the league at age 22 and with unrestricted free agency remaining intact, seven years of service allows him to explore the market next summer as contract leverage. Then again, Higgins took less to stay here, just like some of his peers. So with the league seeking a five-year limit on contracts — and seven years for re-signing restricted or unrestricted free agents — he pointed to several long-term deals handed out before the lockout like candy. Players have proposed an eight-year contract limit and a resolution with their pension plan has been presented.

"It seems a little hypocritical that just a couple of months ago that was fine and dandy," added Higgins. "Now, it's a huge sticking point for them [owners]. Our guys have taken a little less on their deals and we've built a pretty good team. It's obviously a personal decision, but it shouldn't be dictated by the length of contract. And pensions are huge. It's a physical game and we're paying our price now to be paid later."

Before CBA doom and gloom set in Thursday afternoon with the league taking its additional concessions off the table, Higgins was in favour of the game returning on Christmas Day.

"I'd be for it this year, considering we've missed so much of the season," said Higgins, who played in the 2002 world junior tournament for Team USA on Christmas Day, a 3-1 win over the host Czech Republic at Pardubice. "That was a crazy experience."

An eventual lockout resolution would be followed by a one-week training camp and no preseason games to fit in a condensed and shortened schedule. That will present problems.

"Probably injuries to find that line of getting in shape and pushing it too hard," said Higgins. "You have that normally with a regular start, but now there's pressure to push a little harder than you can."

Higgins has always kept his profession in perspective. His dad is a firefighter and his younger brother a policeman. And when Superstorm Sandy struck the east coast on Oct. 29, the storm surge flooded streets and subways and cut power. It was a stark reminder that the lockout pales by comparison.

"My parents lost power for nine days and I was sleeping in three pairs of sweat pants," said Higgins, a native of Smithtown, N.Y. "I stayed at grandma's house for a few days because she had power."

It was yet another reminder of how fortunate Higgins is to be paid for playing a game instead of the risks his dad and brother accept.

"Don't worry, they remind me every day," he chuckled. "And it doesn't take a storm like Sandy to remind me, either."

Vancouver Province: LOADED: 12.07.2012

645987 Vancouver Canucks

Higgins the answer to riddle in the middle?

By Ben Kuzma,

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Vancouver Province: LOADED: 12.07.2012

645988 Vancouver Canucks

NHL lockout: All that hope now gone up in smoke

By Jason Botchford,

It's been a week in the NHL that outpaced the 2012 playoffs in emotion, mood swings and even entertainment.

When talks disintegrated late Thursday, it left more people slack-jawed than anything the L.A. Kings did on their run to the Stanley Cup.

Moments after Don Fehr used the words "agreed to" in a New York presser when outlining several issues, suggesting the sides were within days of an agreement, a voice mail he got from Bill Daly self-destructed the whole procedure like a scene out of Mission: Impossible.

Somewhere, Vince McMahon was smiling. But NHL fans sure weren't.

The ebb and flow of this negotiation, as it inches toward its conclusion, took positive vibes and twisted them into stomach knots with more turns than a Spanish soap opera. It climaxed when Gary Bettman melodramatically proclaimed everything that had been offered this week was off the table.

Suddenly, all those Kumbaya feelings that there could be an agreement this week turned into a pipe dream.

The house of cards collapsed under the weight of two key issues, the length of the next CBA and player-contract term limits. There were none under the expired CBA, a loophole general managers exploited to get salary-cap advantages on deals that ranged from six to 13 years. The NHL wanted a five and seven-year cap. Five when signing unrestricted free agents, and seven when signing your own players.

While teams reaped cap benefits with the so-called back-diving deals, in return, players got security. And lots of money. It's not something they were ready to just hand over with all the other concessions they will need to make to get a deal done. As Bettman pointed out, in 2004 there was one contract six years or longer. Now, there are 90, which is about 13 per cent of players. That's a windfall.

Why would the players would be willing to go to the wall on an issue which impacts 12 per cent of its membership?

"It's what guys want, they want that security and what (the owners) want would limit that," said Jason Garrison, whom the Canucks signed to a six-year deal this past summer as an unrestricted free agent.

"For me, I wanted to be somewhere for a long time. I wanted to build a foundation. The more time you have, I think, with one team, the more successful you can be in developing your game over time.

"When you are somewhere for a long time, you build chemistry with the team. It becomes your family. That's what a team is all about, building that, and going out there and doing it for each other."

But it's more than that. Players believe five-year limits will have a trickle-down effect which will negatively impact the middle class.

If, on an open market, Shea Weber is limited to five years at, let's say, \$37.5 million, what is Garrison worth? Three-quarters? Half? Potentially less than the \$27.6 million he got.

Bettman and Daly told reporters in New York this is an issue the owners were willing to "die on the hill" for. Curious, and borderline comical, because if they are getting 50 per cent of the revenue, they will get that 50 per cent of the revenue whether P.K. Subban's next deal is four years or eight.

But five-year limits promises to reinvent free agency. It would make comparables more appropriate, obvious and accessible. Ryan Suter has a

13-year deal with a \$7.5-million average. You can't compare it to much. But give him a five-year deal worth \$37.5 million and we're in business. Is Matt Carle getting anywhere near his six-year, \$33 million deal? How about Dennis Wideman and his five-year \$26.25 million deal?

Contract limits will help insulate teams from their own mistakes. But how many layers of insulation do they need? They have a salary cap. They have a cap on entry-level contracts. They have restricted free agency.

And in many cases, having a term limit is not even in a team's best interest. After drafting and developing a superstar, a Sidney Crosby or a Jonathan Quick or even an Alex Ovechkin, it becomes important for the culture and the fan base to secure that player for a long period time. It builds continuity. It builds trust.

If mistakes are made, like Mike Richards or Jeff Carter or even Roberto Luongo, they are not crippling.

If Scott Gomez can be traded, who can't be?

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645989 Washington Capitals

Hershey Bears play AHL showcase at Verizon Center, keeping Capitals fans entertained for one night during NHL lockout

By Katie Carrera,

At first glance, nothing at Verizon Center seemed all that different from so many past December nights. Fans rocking their red jerseys streamed into the building, hugged their friends and high-fived the Washington Capitals mascot while making their way to their seats.

Scattered among the red sweaters, though, were plenty of fans waving foam bear claws. Brown T-shirts commemorated 11 Calder Cup victories and Boyd Kane jerseys were as frequent a sight as those adorned by Alex Ovechkin's familiar No. 8. And if you listened closely, you'd hear talk not about stats or standings but forlorn remarks about how this might be the only professional hockey game to see in Washington for quite some time.

The Capitals hosted the American Hockey League showcase on Thursday night, pitting their affiliate, the Hershey Bears, against the Norfolk Admirals, the Anaheim Ducks' farm team. While the Bears' 2-1 victory was announced as a sellout earlier in the week, it appeared only two-thirds of a capacity crowd of 18,506 was present.

The regular season game was scheduled months in advance, long before the NHL lockout stretched into its 82nd day and made a matchup between AHL teams a refuge for hockey-starved Washington fans.

Bruce and Susan Baicar of Crownsville have been season ticket holders for 13 years. They've visited Hershey, Pa., multiple times to take in Bears games and would have looked forward to seeing Capitals prospects play on Thursday even if it was played in the midst of an NHL season.

But their excitement to take in a Bears game couldn't mask their disappointment that it may be the only game they see at Verizon Center for some time.

"It makes it hurt a little bit more because this is where we want to be," said Bruce Baicar, 68. "We love the sport, we've been to the Winter Classic, games back at the old Cap Centre, all these things. We're going to miss it all this year. We just want it back."

These days they primarily get their hockey fix from watching their grandson, Nick, play for Arundel High School. "We're not very optimistic about having a season," added Susan Baicar, 70. "We were for awhile but not so much anymore."

Ingo Burghardt, 44, of Fairfax and Jen Golbeck, 35, of Silver Spring both play hockey in a recreational league at Kettler Capitals Iceplex in Arlington and, while they were glad to take in the Bears game, they acknowledged it's tough to attend without thinking about the lockout.

"It almost makes it worse," Burghardt said. "It's a reminder about the lockout and I'd rather put it out of my mind. It's hockey but it's not Caps hockey."

Said Golbeck: "I can't bear the thought of a winter without hockey, so I hope that they'll figure it out. Even half a season would be better than a bleak winter with nothing."

Fans weren't the only ones with a bittersweet feeling upon their return to Chinatown. Bears goaltender Braden Holtby and defenseman Dmitry Orlov will join the Capitals whenever the lockout ends but in the meantime were forced to adjust to starting another season in the AHL despite advancing past that point in their development.

Holtby's start on Thursday night was his first at Verizon Center since Game 6 of the Eastern Conference semifinals against the New York Rangers on May 6. It's been a long-delayed 2012-13 debut.

"It's great to be back to see the training staff and everyone involved with the team especially. I get pretty close to those guys and it's good to see them again," Holtby said. "It's definitely different without seeing the familiar faces in the locker room. That kind of makes this place what it is, the people around. It's good to be back but it's definitely a little weird."

As the Bears and Admirals played, NHL and NHLPA officials announced there was a significant setback in labor negotiations during their third consecutive day of meetings in New York. There are no future bargaining sessions scheduled and with another round of cancellations likely to occur in the coming days, it appears as though the long offseason for area fans will continue.

For one winter evening, though, they had an opportunity to reunite with fellow fans and remember what it's like to scream when their team scores.

"It's nice to be back, even if it's only for one night," said Iris Salcewicz, 53, of Fairfax. "I'm hoping we see hockey sometime this season, but I don't think so. I think it will be next year."

More Capitals and NHL coverage: Hamilton: End the lockout, please
Hamilton: Live Q&A transcript Chimera is even-keeled about talks Bog:
Behind the scenes at Ovechkin Nike shoot

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645990 Washington Capitals

Note to NHL: I miss hockey, so end the lockout and save the season

By Tracee Hamilton,

I miss the Capitals. I want them back, selfishly, because they are fun to be around, fun to cover as a writer and fun to watch. If you'd told me 30 years ago I'd miss hockey, I'd have laughed myself silly. Living on the mean streets of Detroit and Washington changes a woman.

I want the Capitals back for the sake of their fans, who were Rocking the Red when every other team in town was in the dumps, when many couldn't have picked the Nats' colors out of a palette, when the Wizards wore (shudder) teal, when the Redskins coach thought his team wore maroon and black.

I want the Capitals back for Washington, which needs all its teams to be a big sports town. D.C. doesn't have the fanaticism of New York or Chicago or Boston, but the Caps have been the ones who've put the nation's capital on the sports map until very recently. Now the Nationals are a playoff team, Robert Griffin III is leading the league in jersey sales, D.C. United returned to the playoffs and the Wizards — hey, they beat the Heat! The Caps need to elbow their way back into the mix.

Of course, now we hear that the gulf between the two sides is widening after talks broke off again on Thursday.

One worry for many teams, including the Caps, is that there may be fewer fans once this is over. Caps season ticket holders were already angry over price increases before the lockout entered its 82nd day Thursday. We won't really know the extent of their pique unless the season can be salvaged and then not until Game 2 of the shortened season. Everyone will want to be at Game 1.

The NHL is in a strange position among sports leagues in that it has almost no bargaining leverage. Many players can leave the country and play hockey at a high level and get paid for it, though perhaps not as much as

they make here. Still, NFL and MLB players don't have the luxury of optional employment.

What hurts the players is the impact on their career contributions. Even if the lockout ends this month, Alex Ovechkin will have lost nearly one and a half seasons and those earnings to labor issues. All the money in the world won't buy back young legs.

The NHL also doesn't have a TV contract that holds a candle to those of the NFL, MLB and NBA. The NHL has a core group of fans who will never, ever give up hockey, but it stands to lose the casual fan, and it has more need of the casual fan than most. It's a niche sport that's becoming niche-ier by the minute.

Like season ticket holders, the casual Caps fan is also tested by ticket prices. The last time I purchased single game tickets, I nearly fainted at the cost. The seats weren't in the last row of Verizon Center, behind a goal. They were in the second-to-last row of Verizon Center, behind a goal. Thank goodness; it would be awful to be in that last row.

Games have been canceled through Dec. 14. If the season picked up shortly after that, it would be roughly 52 games. The shortest was 48 games, in 1994-95. It seems unlikely this season could be shorter than that and still be taken seriously.

We are rapidly approaching the point at which that asterisk becomes so large it blots out everything around it. Like our holiday gifts, it's time to wrap it up.

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645991 Washington Capitals

Jason Chimera maintains even-keeled outlook to NHL labor negotiations

By Katie Carrera

Veteran winger Jason Chimera has grown accustomed to the back-and-forth nature of the NHL's labor negotiations. He knows better than to get too excited or discouraged, no matter what the latest round of talks seem to suggest.

Even after two days of meetings between owners and players this week in New York spurred optimism, Chimera is trying to keep an even-keeled perspective.

"I don't get too up anymore. I rode the roller coaster for a long time and kind of just said I don't want to anymore," Chimera said Thursday morning following a workout with fellow locked-out Caps players. "There's some good dialogue, which is good. I think it's always good when we talk. I think that's always one of those things, once you talk, you keep talking."

Chimera took over as the Capitals' NHL Players' Association representative, after Brooks Laich decided he no longer wanted the position. It seemed like a logical fit. He's a veteran player who experienced one lockout already, made staying up to date on the negotiation process a priority, and he held the same role during his time in Columbus.

Even with Chimera's involvement with the NHLPA, details of the discussions that occurred between a small group of players and owners Tuesday and Wednesday were tough to come by. He was able to get some information from his former teammate Manny Malhotra and friend Shane Doan, who were part of the select group of players involved in talks, but believed it was a good sign that specific aspects of proposals weren't readily available.

"They just said they've had some good discussions and they're going to keep on working at it," Chimera said. "I'm hoping some good things will come. I thought we were close before when we made that offer, so hopefully maybe we're that much closer."

"I'd rather them just come out and say we've got camp in a week," Chimera continued. "I think it's good to keep it tight-lipped. That's what we pay those guys to do: to make a deal. And for the players that are there, most of the guys have been in there for the whole time, so they know what they're doing, too."

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645992 Washington Capitals

Braden Holtby's back in Washington, with Hershey Bears

By Katie Carrera

For the first time in nearly seven months there will be hockey played at Verizon Center Thursday night.

The NHL lockout, which is in its 82nd day, continues to keep the Washington Capitals off the ice. But for one night there will be a refuge for area hockey fans in the form of the AHL Showcase.

The Capitals' minor league affiliate, the Hershey Bears, will take on the Norfolk Admirals, farm team of the Anaheim Ducks, at 7 p.m. in front of a sold-out crowd of 18,506. Capitals season ticket holders were given the option to purchase tickets first, according to Monumental Sports and Entertainment spokesman Kurt Kehl, who added that more than 11,000 of the tickets sold for the AHL contest were bought by non-season ticket holders.

Playing in front of a crowd that large may be a new experience for some of the Bears, but it's a familiar place for goaltender Braden Holtby and defenseman Dmitry Orlov. Both Holtby and Orlov are expected to join the Capitals whenever the lockout ends, and Thursday night they'll make their long-delayed 2012-13 debut on F Street.

"It's great to be back to see the training staff and everyone involved with the team especially. I get pretty close to those guys and it's good to see them again," Holtby said at Kettler Capitals Iceplex following the Bears' morning skate. "It's definitely different without seeing the familiar faces in the locker room. That kind of makes this place what it is, the people around. It's good to be back, but it's definitely a little weird."

Holtby will get the start for Hershey Thursday night, marking his first appearance in a Verizon Center net since Game 6 of the Eastern Conference semifinals against the Rangers on May 6.

"It brings back memories, obviously, of last year," Holtby said of returning to the Capitals' practice facility in Arlington. "The last time I was in here was obviously a sad day that we were out, but there was a lot of great times at the end of last year. I think we're all ready to get back and make more of those memories."

Back in October, as the AHL season was about to start, Holtby said he considered himself lucky to have a place to play while the labor negotiations continued. He reiterated that Thursday morning, saying that he doesn't believe time in Hershey has impacted his development in any negative way and that it wasn't difficult for him to adjust mentally to returning to the AHL after staking his claim to the Capitals' No. 1 goaltender position last spring.

"I think it was more that there wouldn't be any NHL; just in general as a fan, a player, that's what you live your life based around," Holtby said when asked what's been the toughest adjustment for him mentally. "That's the hardest part to take, not being back in Hershey. I'm very thankful to be here, to get to play. We have a great group of guys here and it's been great, but definitely I would like to get the NHL back going for fans, everyone involved."

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645993 Washington Capitals

NHL lockout 2012: Capitals' Braden Holtby taking AHL stint in stride

By Stephen Whyno

Braden Holtby was the toast of not only the Washington Capitals but the NHL because of his breakout performance during last year's playoffs. His play sparked talk about his being a franchise goaltender and possibly even a candidate to make Canada's 2014 Olympics roster.

That's a lot of hype for a 23-year-old with a grand total of 35 NHL games to his name. Nothing like a lockout to bring everything back to zero, as Holtby

was sent to the Caps' American Hockey League affiliate, the Hershey Bears, because he was still eligible to go down to the minors.

"We were a little worried about his mindset coming back to Hershey," associate goaltending coach Olie Kolzig said. "But he's been so focused and dialed-in and it just seems there's another level of maturity to him this season."

Holtby, who has a 2.71 goals-against average and .917 save percentage entering Thursday's action, by all accounts has handled the move back to the AHL as well as possible. But what remains to be seen is how this stint back in Hershey affects his long-term development for when the lockout ends and the Caps need him again.

"I think it's important that he continue the momentum that he gained from last year," Bears coach Mark French said. "I think a young guy needs to continue to play. So I think his ability to come down and play the amount he's played for us certainly keeps the momentum going, keeps his development going through the lockout."

Holtby's momentum last spring was something special. Not only did he put up 1.95 goals-against average and .935 save percentage in the Stanley Cup Playoffs but his fiancée, Brandi, gave birth to the couple's first son, Benjamin Hunter.

He was able to enjoy the spotlight, if even for a few weeks. He said it wasn't a hard transition to go back to Hershey, where he played most of last season, but acknowledged it doesn't mean the lockout has been easy.

"I think it was more that there wouldn't be any NHL in general. I mean as a fan, a player, it's what you live your life based around, basically. So that's the hardest part to take," Holtby said. "I'm very thankful to be here to get to play."

The Capitals are thankful for that, too. Just having him be able to see live shooters and experience game situations is a positive, as some NHL goalies just wait around for the lockout to end. Kolzig said there's no negative aspect to his being with the Bears.

"I still got to work on technical things and whatnot," Holtby said. "The main thing, though, is just being able to stay in shape, playing games. Keeping my mind sharp and when it gets going it'll be an advantage."

Given the uncertainty of collective bargaining talks, no one knows when the NHL season will get going. So Holtby continued his minor league stint Thursday night at the AHL Showcase at Verizon Center, the place where his legend grew last spring.

It was a welcome back of sorts for Holtby, but teammates wouldn't know that the young goaltender was a rising star by the way he's approaching this season.

"He's doing great. He came back just like another guy," veteran goaltender Dany Sabourin said. "Not 'Hey, look what I did last year.' He came back, it was a brand new season."

It would've been understandable had Holtby been at least bummed by the situation. But until late in the 2010-11 season when he was sent back to Hershey when Semyon Varlamov and Michal Neuvirth were healthy, this wasn't a demotion.

This was what Kolzig called a "trickle-down" effect that's also forcing prospect Philipp Grubauer to develop in the ECHL with the Reading Royals instead of with Hershey. And Holtby understood the situation enough to make the best of it.

"So he took it as a bonus. He could've come down with the wrong attitude, but he came down with the exact opposite," Kolzig said. "He's starting to become more of a leader on and off the ice. And not in an arrogant way, 'Look what I did last year, I shouldn't be down here.' He's been great, great with his teammates and he gives the guys an opportunity to win almost every single night."

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645994 Washington Capitals

Chimera laboring as Capitals' representative

Brian McNally

Capitals forward Jason Chimera is still playing the waiting game. He has spent much of the fall at home in Alexandria save for a five-game stint in the Czech Republic as the NHL lockout continues. He quickly returned because being away from his young family became a bit much.

"I drag my family around enough that I'm not going to drag them to Europe, too," Chimera said when reporters caught up with him at Kettler Iceplex on Thursday. "So it was one of those things. My wife said to stick it out, but it was more me wanting to come home."

Chimera took over as the team's NHL Players' Association representative with Troy Brouwer as the alternate. Brooks Laich, the former NHLPA rep, didn't want the gig anymore, and he had left to play in Switzerland in late September anyway. Chimera, who held that role when he played with the Columbus Blue Jackets, has done his best to keep his teammates advised of the latest developments. But things are moving so quickly during the lockout negotiations in New York this week that it's hard for anyone to keep up.

"I don't get too up anymore. I rode the roller coaster for a long time and kind of just said I don't want to anymore," Chimera said.

Chimera received some details from former teammate Manny Malhotra and friend Shane Doan, who were attending the meetings in New York this week. He also indirectly referenced the kerfuffle caused by veteran Caps defenseman Roman Hamrlik's negative comments about the NHLPA leadership a few weeks back. That led to some blowback from Brouwer and star winger Alex Ovechkin, who read them while playing in the Kontinental Hockey League in Moscow.

"[The NHLPA is] not putting a muzzle on guys, either. We let guys talk in the media, and some guys speak their word, which is fine," Chimera said. "I think everyone has a right to their own opinion. It's America. It's free speech. But, yeah, if you let it open to everybody, I think it's tough to keep 700 guys quiet, that's for sure."

Washington Examiner LOADED: 12.07.2012

645995 Winnipeg Jets

Players not surprised

By: Ed Tait

If the NHL lockout -- now in its 83rd day -- has taught the stars of the game anything, it's this:

Regardless of the spin and PR games, of the hyperbole, the rumours, innuendo and unfortunate insults, nobody should get too jacked up or too depressed until signatures are slapped on a deal by both sides, whenever that might be. And while that's an easy approach to take in theory, in the interim it is now being severely tested -- as will be the players' collective resolve -- given the developments Thursday night when the NHL's latest offer was summarily yanked from the table.

Unfortunately for everyone involved in the game, the two sides seemed as far apart as ever, the 2012-13 season never seemed more in jeopardy and the two sides more galvanized than ever.

"Plain and simple these owners think they can break us apart. GOOD LUCK!," said Scottie Upshall of the Florida Panthers via his Twitter account. "We're stronger than we've ever been and behind Fehr 100%. There's no pressure yet on the owners to lose this year, that's why they still treat us like cattle. They'll need a partner come January."

Added Marty St. Louis of the Tampa Bay Lightning: "I won't be skating any time soon," he told The Tampa Tribune. "We were making progress I guess and then you get an ultimatum. Tough to take."

Over the course of a few hours Thursday players' spirits went from cautiously optimistic to concerned, back to cynical and, in many cases, bitter disappointment. But for all the Scottie Upshalls out there, there were also some reasoned reactions. Said Jim Slater of the Winnipeg Jets in a text to The Free Press late Thursday:

"Was a weird couple of hours. Not sure what happened, but we need to continue to try and resolve the issues at hand. I still believe there is a deal

to be had. It's been a long, bumpy road but this is a time where we need to keep going in hopes of recapturing the season."

"I think it would be awful to lose a season," said Andrew Ladd, one of the eight to nine Jets, including Slater, and local NHLers who continue to skate at MTS Iceplex. "I think it would be stupid. We don't need to do that. When we finally have a deal, that's when I'll be optimistic."

Thursday began with the two sides still throwing around ideas into the wee hours, but deteriorated rapidly to the point that some of the six owners that helped bring so much optimism to the process -- including Mark Chipman of the Jets -- were on airplanes back home by mid afternoon. Chipman later issued a statement in which he questioned whether some players understand the owners' perspective and also apologized to fans and sponsors "for letting them down."

But for as much momentum as the early week brought the process, by late Thursday the stone was rolling back down the hill and the vitriol spewed by both sides indicated just how much work still needs to be done to get a deal. How that can get done now is another matter for the next few days. Jets player rep Ron Hainsey, one of the NHLPA's big-wigs, told reporters in New York that late Wednesday when players indicated to the league they wanted their leadership back in room to close the deal, the league responded that having NHLPA executive director Don Fehr back in room could be a "deal breaker."

One NHL executive referred to Fehr as a "suicide bomber" to Adrian Dater of The Denver Post.

More from Dater, via an unnamed player: "We were ready to play again. But Don came in (Wednesday) and told us we could get more and to hold out."

Meanwhile, more and more players must be reconsidering their playing options.

Winnipegger Ryan Reaves of the St. Louis Blues said late Thursday his Plan B will be put into place ASAP -- he's leaving today to join the Orlando Solar Bears of the ECHL. He'll stay there until there is a resolution.

"All this is going to happen from time to time during negotiations," said Reaves late Thursday. "But it's so public with us. You take any company and start watching their union meetings and talking about their CBA and it could be a lot the same if it was blown up to the proportions this is. This happens because it's hockey."

"But I still don't think we're at the point where the season gets written off."

Among the sticking points still being debated were the NHL's wish for the new collective bargaining agreement to be 10 years in length, with an opt-out clause for either side after eight years.

Ladd was asked after Thursday's skate at the Iceplex why the players are against in a deal of that length and his answer offered a hint as to why there remains so much distrust between the two sides.

"The owners like a 10-year deal because it's good for the owners, first and foremost," he said. "Ten years is a long deal and to look that far into the future and predict the economics, you just can't do. That's part of it and in five or six years there will be a new group of players coming in and they should have the opportunity to negotiate their own deal, too."

The owners did move on some issues, including leaving the unrestricted free agency eligibility and salary arbitration rules as the same as the previous agreement while bumping up their offer in the "make-whole" provision. But then yanked the deal, saying it was part of a package.

Asked if the two sides shouldn't have kept the dialogue going until a deal was reached, Ladd -- speaking before Thursday's breakdown in talks -- offered up a thought that foreshadowed what would happen hours later.

"That's easier said than done," he said. "It's easy to put that pressure on the guys there. But at times you have to take a step back and realize where you're at in the negotiation and if it's not the deal you want, then you've got to wait."

"I don't know their deadline in terms of their drop-dead date. But our standpoint all along is we're not going to take a deal that we don't think is fair."

Winnipeg Free Press LOADED 12.07.2012

645996 Winnipeg Jets

Jets' Ron Hainsey perplexed by NHL response

By Ken Wiebe

WINNIPEG - Ron Hainsey was among those left shaking his head after what many are calling the most bizarre day of the NHL lockout.

Late Thursday afternoon, the Winnipeg Jets team representative and member of the NHLPA bargaining committee was flanking executive director Don Fehr and believing the end of this ordeal might actually be near.

Roughly an hour later, he was standing at the back of the room when NHL commissioner Gary Bettman countered by telling reporters that the deal was never close and announced the league was pulling everything that was brought forth in negotiations this week right off the table.

"Yeah, there's a little confusion about what took place," Hainsey said Thursday night in a telephone interview from New York City. "The response (by the NHL) was very strange. I really don't know what to think. It's kind of perplexing.

"We thought it was going pretty good. It really felt like we were close to getting this game back on the ice, if we could polish it off. I really felt that way for the first time in a while."

Hainsey was among those who were encouraged by the two days of marathon sessions that went deep into the night and included some fresh voices in the room, including Jets chairman and co-owner Mark Chipman.

"We talked at length in there," said Hainsey. "It was good, candid conversation, from the whole group, including (Chipman)."

However, when Hainsey informed the NHL on Wednesday night that Fehr would be reentering the negotiations on Thursday with the intent of trying to close the deal, he was told that might be "a deal breaker" and the tone of discussions quickly went sour.

"When we said that we said we thought we were close and were ready to bring our leadership back to close it out, the feeling changed," said Hainsey. "That's just what happened. I thought we were close to getting going."

Apparently not, or at least not yet.

CHRISTMAS GAMES OK

If the NHL and its players somehow mend the fences torn down this week and come to an agreement soon, there's been talk of going against tradition and staging games on Christmas Day.

That's just fine with players we talked to.

"It doesn't bother me," Winnipeg Jets captain Andrew Ladd said. "It's done in basketball, and they don't have a problem with it. If it's only this year it's something everyone can deal with."

Unlike the NBA or NFL, the NHL never schedules games Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, allowing players and coaches time with their families.

Winnipegger Ryan Reaves of the St. Louis Blues says he'd trade presents for pucks, any day.

"Not a big deal," Reaves said. "I like hockey more than Christmas."

Winnipeg Sun LOADED 12.07.2012

645997 Winnipeg Jets

Deal to end NHL lockout is broken

By Paul Friesen

That was quite a day on the NHL labour front, wasn't it?

What began with fans and even players here in Winnipeg optimistic the lockout lockdown was loosening ended with bitter discord as talks in New York broke down.

And now the two sides aren't even speaking the same language anymore, raising the real possibility of another entire season ending up in the dumpster.

Players union boss Don Fehr's end-of-the-day claim the two sides were closer than ever, with agreement on the No. 1 issue — money — seemed to echo what Jets forward Bryan Little was saying in the morning.

"We're holding out and waiting to see what happens in the next 72 hours," Little said. "Hopefully it's all good news. Some of the guys are pretty excited. There's definitely optimism. From what I hear it's been mainly positive."

Jets captain Andrew Ladd wasn't disagreeing.

"It would be awful to lose a season," Ladd said. "We don't need to do that. We're close enough here to find some common ground and get a deal done. But that takes some continuing give and take."

Ladd added a word of caution, though, and perhaps that should have been our clue about what was to come.

"This whole process keeps telling you to be cautious about what to expect," he said. "When we finally have a deal, that's when I'll be optimistic."

Sure enough, all hell broke loose in Manhattan later, erasing all the momentum generated by the players/owners meetings, sans Fehr and NHL boss Gary Bettman, Tuesday and Wednesday.

"We thought we were onto something good," Bettman said in New York, crediting the new group of owners, which included the Jets Mark Chipman, with making real progress. "Particularly the four new ones... wanted to push ahead and do something bold."

So, Bettman says, they threw another \$100 million onto the table.

And the players, apparently, were supposed to fall down on their knees, be thankful and sign on the dotted line.

"The union's response was shockingly silent," the commish said. "The owners were beside themselves. Some I have never seen that emotional."

At that point, those owners said it was over.

But, again according to Bettman, the owners made "another bold move," this time on contracting issues (free agency, arbitration rights), which had been a line in the sand for the players.

The union then came back, we're told, and said the pension was their main concern.

Eventually, the whole thing fell apart, although Fehr emerged early in the evening to say the two sides were close.

If you believe Bettman, Fehr is simply "cherry-picking" items from the NHL's last offer, while ignoring other parts of what is "a package deal."

"It's not the first time he said we're close when we're not," Bettman said in New York. "I find it almost incomprehensible that he did that."

By night time, the four owners, including Chipman, were releasing statements that ranged from apologies to their fans and sponsors (Chipman) to a questioning of Fehr's intentions (Ron Burkle, Pittsburgh, and Larry Tanenbaum, Toronto).

I don't know if Fehr's presence derailed things, but the owners just don't like him. Jets player rep Ron Hainsey reportedly said someone from NHL ownership said bringing Fehr back in "could be a deal-breaker."

Right now, this deal seems broken, all right.

Remember, though, there's still more than a month to go before hopes of a 48-game season go down the drain, at least based on the timeline from the 2004-05 lockout.

As for the vitriol from both sides, Ladd says even that isn't the end of the world.

"Even negotiating contracts, there's always ups and downs and emotions involved," Ladd said. "At the end of the day both sides know it's a business, and we've been through that before. No hard feelings."

I'm not so sure about that.

MARK CHIPMAN STATEMENT

"I'd like to thank the NHL for giving me the opportunity to participate in this very important process.

I came here optimistic that we could find a solution. That sense of optimism grew after our first few sessions, including the small group discussions late last night.

Regrettably, we have been unable to close the divide on some critical issues that we feel are essential to the immediate and long-term health of our game.

While I sense there are some members of the players association that understand our perspective on these issues, clearly there are many that don't.

I am deeply disappointed that we were unable to bring this extremely unfortunate situation to a successful conclusion and I wish to apologize to our fans and sponsors for letting them down."

Winnipeg Sun LOADED 12.07.2012

645998 Winnipeg Jets

Winnipeg Jets' Mark Chipman regrets break off of talks

By Paul Friesen

Winnipeg Jets co-owner Mark Chipman, fresh off an unsuccessful attempt to break the stalemate between NHL players and owners, expressed his frustration in a statement, Thursday night.

Chipman was one of four moderate owners who joined the labour talks in New York this week.

The group met with players, minus NHL commissioner Gary Bettman and union head Don Fehr, and seemed to make considerable progress toward ending the lockout.

"I came here optimistic that we could find a solution," Chipman said in his statement. "That sense of optimism grew after our first few sessions, including the small group discussions late (Wednesday) night."

That all came crashing down Thursday, when talks broke off, with no solution in sight.

"Regrettably, we have been unable to close the divide on some critical issues that we feel are essential to the immediate and long-term health of our game," Chipman continued. "While I sense there are some members of the players association that understand our perspective on these issues, clearly there are many that don't.

"I am deeply disappointed that were unable to bring this extremely unfortunate situation to a successful conclusion and I wish to apologize to our fans and sponsors for letting them down."

Earlier, Bettman shot down Fehr's assessment the two sides were close to a deal.

"It's not the first time he said we're close when we're not," Bettman said in New York. "I find it almost incomprehensible that he did that."

It now appears the two sides will only get further apart, with more games likely to be canceled this week.

"Anything we put on the table this week is off the table," Bettman said. "At some point you have to draw a line in the sand."

Bettman also said it's doubtful the league would consider anything less than a 48-game season, although he says there is no drop-dead date for canceling this season.

There are no further talks scheduled.

Statement from Jets governor Mark Chipman

Mark Chipman, Chairman and Governor of the Winnipeg Jets Hockey Club, today issued the following statement:

"I'd like to thank the NHL for giving me the opportunity to participate in this very important process.

I came here optimistic that we could find a solution. That sense of optimism grew after our first few sessions, including the small group discussions late last night.

Regrettably, we have been unable to close the divide on some critical issues that we feel are essential to the immediate and long-term health of our game.

While I sense there are some members of the players association that understand our perspective on these issues, clearly there are many that don't.

I am deeply disappointed that we were unable to bring this extremely unfortunate situation to a successful conclusion and I wish to apologize to our fans and sponsors for letting them down."

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645999 Winnipeg Jets

Winnipeg Jets optimistic NHL might play games this year

By Paul Friesen

The toughest thing for locked out members of the Winnipeg Jets today is keeping an even keel in light of the heated negotiations going on in New York.

Hearing that CBA talks went past midnight last night and continued this morning, with progress on a couple of fronts, has some players fired up they may be in action by Christmas.

"All the guys are pretty excited about the progress that's been made," Bryan Little said, Thursday. "We're holding out and waiting to see what happens in the next 72 hours. Hopefully it's all good news. Some of the guys are pretty excited. There's definitely optimism."

Some of that optimism is more guarded.

"Having the progress makes everybody a little more optimistic," Jets captain Andrew Ladd said. "But this whole process keeps telling you to be cautious about what to expect. But when we finally have a deal, that's when I'll be optimistic."

The progress made in the last two days came after meetings between players and owners without union head Don Fehr and NHL commissioner Gary Bettman.

But Ladd says so far the owners haven't made an offer that's worthy of a players' vote.

"There's still things we have to work out and feel comfortable with before they take the deal to the players," he said.

Reports indicate the owners want a 10-year term, while the players prefer something half as long.

"The owners like a 10-year deal because it's a good deal for the owners," Ladd said. "Ten years is a long deal. To look that far into the future and predict the economics, you just can't do.

"In five or six years there's going to have a new group of players coming in that should have the opportunity to negotiate their own deal, too."

That said, Ladd is convinced the two sides have bridged enough of the gap that a deal is there to be made.

"It would be awful to lose a season. We don't need to do that. We're close enough here to find some common ground and get a deal done. But that takes some continuing give and take."

Winnipeg Sun LOADED 12.07.2012

646000 Websites

ESPN / Labor talks bring high drama

By Scott Burnside

NEW YORK -- In terms of theater, you hardly could have asked for more.

If theater was what you were after, of course.

There were the head of the NHL Players' Association, Donald Fehr, and some of the game's most respected players explaining to the media how they believed they were scant inches from a deal that would save at least some portion of the 2012-13 season.

"We think there is a complete agreement on dollars," Fehr proclaimed. And if that's the case, there is no reason there shouldn't be a deal "in the near future."

You could almost hear the jaws of the collected media drop.

Really? After all the negative vibes from the previous 24 hours?

Exit Fehr. Players such as Sidney Crosby, Shane Doan, Martin St. Louis, Brad Richards and Shawn Horcoff waited awkwardly.

Hmm. Interesting development.

Re-enter Fehr.

Remember all that close stuff? Never mind.

During Donald Fehr's initial news conference, deputy commissioner Bill Daly left a voice mail message on special counsel Steve Fehr's cellphone saying that not only had the league rejected the players' latest proposal, but it also had pulled elements of the owners' latest proposal off the table and there was no need to meet Thursday evening or Friday.

Oops. Guess they weren't so close after all.

Exit the Fehr brothers and the suddenly grim-faced players.

Enter Gary Bettman and Daly.

Never have we seen the commissioner so visibly agitated as he was in describing the egregious acts he insisted the union had perpetrated on the owners in the previous 48 hours.

At times he struggled to find the words to describe his anguish at how things had gone off the rails after such a promising start to the week.

Dramatic?

At one point, Daly asserted that the league's insistence on capping contract lengths at five years was "the hill we will die on," evoking Images of Teddy Roosevelt charging up San Juan Hill or any John Wayne war movie.

You couldn't beat Thursday's happenings for drama.

But as for anything approaching the end to this most nonsensical of labor disputes, well, that's where Thursday was yet another crushing blow for anyone who cares a whit about the game.

Perhaps most frustrating for hockey fans and presumably sponsors (who must have watched Thursday's little set piece unfold and wondered quietly why they ever signed up for this gong show of a league) is that the two sides' mistrust of each other has led them to a point where their languages sound similar yet are wildly distinct.

A source with the union insisted the NHLPA had no idea the owners would react so negatively to its proposal, although Bettman said the league and owners made it very clear they needed the players to agree to a series of conditions for talks to continue.

"That's not the first time he's said we're close when we weren't," Bettman said of Donald Fehr.

"I find it almost incomprehensible that he did that."

When the players didn't agree to the league's demands for a five-year limit on contracts, a 10-year term for a new collective bargaining agreement and no buyouts or caps on escrow as part of the transition to a new CBA, but instead offered variations on those conditions, the owners walked away -- as they had promised they would.

The scary part for anyone who thought this week was a make-or-break week for getting at least a portion of the season in the books is that both sides seem to truly believe they have given and then given some more.

Both sides appear to honestly believe they have been the ones to be the catalyst to change, that they are the ones who have made a deal possible, if not imminent.

"The players have done far and away the lion's share of the moving," Donald Fehr insisted.

Bettman said the owners were "beside themselves" when the players didn't respond with enthusiasm to their move to improve the make-whole pot to \$300 million.

"Some of them I had never seen that emotional. They said they don't know what happened but this process is over. Clearly the union doesn't want to make a deal," Bettman said.

And naturally, both sides believe the other side is the sole reason we are not talking about when training camps might start.

How deep is the mistrust?

Winnipeg Jets defenseman Ron Hainsey said that when the players told the owners they wanted to bring Donald Fehr back into the process to help close a potential deal after several owners-players-only meetings earlier in the week, they were told by someone from the owners' side that was a potential "deal-breaker."

Daly denied that happened, and Hainsey would not say who warned the players off having Donald Fehr return to the table.

It's almost impossible, in the wake of the mushroom cloud that the talks became Thursday evening, to imagine what happens next. Both sides seem uncertain of what happens next.

"We both said we don't know where we go from here. We don't have any ideas with respect to next steps," Daly said.

The owners' offer of \$300 million in make-whole money, money that would go to guaranteeing existing contracts, is off the table. There were conditions to the money, but it still represented a significant move from the league's initial \$211 million offer.

"Anything that we put on the table this week is off the table," Bettman said.

Bettman was asked several times about the potential for the season to be canceled but would not be pinned down beyond saying he couldn't imagine playing fewer than 48 games, the number the two sides settled on during the 1994-95 lockout-shortened season.

That would suggest games would have to start within the next month.

One imagines there will be even more drama between these two sides before that happens.

"The fact of the matter is we will get to a point, and at that point, we will conclude we can't have a season with integrity, and then we'll have to make a tough decision. I am certainly hoping we don't get to that place, but when we do, we'll be there," Bettman said.

Oh, the drama.

ESPN LOADED: 12.07.2012

646001 Websites

ESPN / Make-or-break day in CBA negotiations

By Scott Burnside

NEW YORK -- Before our eyes, we watch the art of the deal ... or the art of the implosion.

Which will it be?

As one source close to the negotiations aimed at ending the almost-three-month NHL lockout told ESPN.com Thursday morning, it's close.

"Close but precarious," the source said.

Precarious, indeed.

After two days of marathon discussions, talks have reached a critical juncture, and sources on both sides of the negotiation indicate a precipitous

decline in optimism since Tuesday evening, when it looked like moderate voices were going to lead to a deal in the near future.

And while we have been saying for some time that this moment or that moment is crucial to saving at least part of the 2012-13 season, it now appears that we truly are at crunch time.

Talks grew contentious as Wednesday passed into Thursday, and it seems clear that the outcome of Thursday's talks -- if they occur at all -- could determine the season.

At the end of Wednesday, the NHL made what appeared to be a major move toward the middle, upping its offer to guarantee existing contracts from \$211 million to \$300 million. But the pool of money comes with some conditions, including a 10-year length to a new CBA and a five-year cap on contract lengths -- both conditions the players oppose. Some of that make-whole money comes from player pensions, which is also a concern to the players.

So now what?

The players were meeting Thursday morning to determine their response to the owners' proposal and to assess whether the move on make-whole money is really a move or just something dressed up to look like a significant move.

The question is whether NHLPA executive director Donald Fehr sees the movement as a sign of weakness, a sign that NHL commissioner Gary Bettman has lost the support of his group and a fissure to exploit.

If that's the case, Fehr's history suggests he will push forward, ask for more or delay the response, hoping the owners will sweeten the deal, move off the contracting issues or add even more to the make-whole pot. (The players asked for \$383 million in make-whole money two weeks ago.)

But where is the edge of the negotiating envelope?

And what's on the other side?

Sources on both sides of the talks believe that these days in New York, days that have featured long bargaining sessions without Fehr or Bettman in the room, are the edge of that envelope.

On the other side is oblivion, another lost season.

On this side, though, a deal, a portion of a season, a chance at redemption.

Logic, which was in such short supply before hope of a deal was renewed this week, suggests that this has to be about more than two personalities exerting themselves on the process. It has to be about more than the opposing forces of Bettman and Fehr. The deal to be made is bigger than those two men, both of whom are expected back at the table if the two sides resume talks Thursday afternoon.

A negotiation like this is like a train. There are a lot of personalities involved, a lot of constituents to take into account. As such, it takes a lot to get both sides going in the right direction. Conversely, when things go sideways, as they threatened to Wednesday night with both sides believing the other side was not serious about taking the final step toward a deal, it takes a lot to stop it.

If the players don't like the conditions on the larger make-whole money, then doesn't logic suggest that they go back on the total and hope the league moves off the conditions? Isn't that what negotiations are about?

In the end, the players will have to decide whether the owners' last offer was a sign of weakness or simply a move to get a deal done, the right thing to do at the right moment in time and something to which the players can respond in keeping the train on the tracks.

With the envelope pushed to the breaking point, wouldn't it be nice to see both sides do the right thing for a change?

Nothing less than the balance of the hockey season depends on that happening, and happening today.

ESPN LOADED: 12.07.2012

646002 Websites

ESPN / You have got to be kidding me

By Pierre LeBrun

NEW YORK -- What should have been a fairly doable mathematical adjustment this past summer has transformed into perhaps the most ridiculous labor impasse in the history of pro sports.

Honestly, I can't wrap my head around this one.

Are the owners and players really going to let the season get canned over the differences that remain in the two offers?

I would make the argument that the players are crazy to take that kind of financial hit rather than accept what the league and owners offered Wednesday night.

Similarly, the owners are out of their minds if they don't see elements in the NHLPA's counteroffer that they can live with to get hockey back this season.

Are we really going to drop the ax on an entire season because the owners are THAT adamant about five-year term limits for player contracts? And are the players THAT opposed to five-year contract term limits that they will let an entire season's worth of salary go down the drain?

It's pure madness in my opinion. All of it. Both sides.

NHLPA executive director Don Fehr has done a masterful job throughout this lockout of telling his players to stay patient and wait because the deal would get better. And when owners upped their "make-whole" provision from \$211 million to \$300 million Wednesday night -- something the league said it would never do -- Fehr was proved right.

Thing is, you can't wait and wait and wait forever, and believe the offer will always improve. You have to know when the time is right to cut a deal.

To that end, NHL commissioner Gary Bettman promptly pulled the "make-whole" offer off the table Thursday night, as well as other concessions on player contracting rights. The league had been willing to not touch unrestricted free-agent eligibility, the entry-level system and salary arbitration. Now that's out the window as well.

You know exactly what Fehr will tell his players. That those things aren't really off the table, that it's just a negotiating tactic.

Perhaps. Or maybe Fehr just managed to infuriate the most player-friendly owner in the league, Ron Burkle, a man who has won labor awards for his work in his private business life but somehow finally found a place where his negotiating expertise was unable to penetrate. Yes, the Pittsburgh Penguins' owner absolutely wanted to explode Wednesday night.

Conversely, I question Bettman's decision to halt talks Thursday night. Why not respond to the NHLPA's counteroffer Thursday night by saying it's still not good enough but, hey, let's meet again Friday and keep plugging away?

Well, I've got one theory on that. Given reports that players were having intense, sometimes heated debate internally Thursday as they decided how to proceed, it might very well be that the NHL and the owners smell blood. They might believe the players are finally cracking and that by pulling this week's new elements off the table, they'll get those players who are questioning union leadership to nullify Fehr and make a deal with the league.

Who knows, maybe their calculation is right about that. But as one player told ESPN.com on Thursday night after the theatrics were done, why wouldn't the league submit a full formal offer? That's the only way players would have a chance to vote on it membership-wide, he figured.

Again, good point.

In the end, once again the drama has overtaken the facts on this night.

I don't believe the two sides are that far apart at all.

One NHL governor told ESPN.com that they were shown both offers from the league and NHLPA in the board of governors meeting.

"I looked at them both and wondered how this thing isn't done already," he said.

And those were previous offers. Not the ones from the past 24 hours that showed more movement from both sides.

What we need now is for both sides to exhale and get back to the table no later than Monday.

For the millionth time, there is a deal here. Stop the politics and get it done.

ESPN LOADED: 12.07.2012

646003 Websites

Wall Street Journal / Why There Is Urgency to End an NHL Lockout

Staff

Ending the nearly three-month National Hockey League lockout gained urgency throughout the week as a group of owners and players, including Pittsburgh Penguins star Sidney Crosby (pictured), dedicated the better part of three days to the cause of hammering out a deal in midtown Manhattan.

The league already has canceled games through Dec. 14, as well as the New Year's Day Winter Classic and the All-Star game scheduled for February. Without a new deal, more cancellations are expected within days, and the potential cancellation of the entire season for the second time since 2005 might not be far off.

After a few days of progress, negotiations hit another wall on Thursday as the league rejected the players' latest offer for a labor deal, and negotiations were broken off at least until the weekend.

Still, if history is a guide, the point of no return doesn't arrive for another two months. In 2005 NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman canceled the season on Feb. 16, a mere nine weeks before the usual start of the playoffs. There is widespread agreement that if the two sides can reach a deal, the season could start within two weeks. Free agency already happened. Some 300 players have been playing in European leagues, and most of the others have been skating regularly, eliminating the need for preseason games.

But a growing number of teams are owners or operators of their arenas. As arena operators relying on revenue from events other than hockey games to support their investments, owners want as much lead time as possible to fill open dates with alternate events, such as concerts and family shows.

So the sooner New York Rangers owner Jim Dolan knows the Rangers and Pittsburgh Penguins won't be playing at Madison Square Garden on Jan. 31 for instance, the sooner he can find someone else to rent out the so-called World's Most Famous Arena.

—Matthew Futterman

The Lions Look More Lion-esque in Green Bay

When the Detroit Lions travel to Green Bay this Sunday, they will be looking to break the second-longest active road losing streak in the NFL. The Lions have lost 20 in a row in Green Bay, according to footballgeography.com. Their last win came in 1991, the season before Brett Favre joined the Packers. The Lions also hold the longest active streak, unable to beat the Redskins on the road in 21 straight games. And they haven't won in San Francisco (12 games) since Gerald Ford was president in 1975.

—Michael Salfino

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YAHOO SPORTS / Lockout theater: CBA talks between NHL and NHLPA fall apart in dramatic fashion

Nicholas J. Cotsonika

NEW YORK – It was theater, a tragicomedy, at a Times Square hotel a block off Broadway. First on stage was Don Fehr, with the players behind him like a chorus line. As the executive director of the NHL Players' Association told the audience how the union had given the NHL a "clear outline" to end the lockout – knowing full well the proposal had not met the owners' explicit conditions – his brother's iPhone rang.

NHLPA boss Don Fehr's first press conference was quickly followed by a second one. (Reuters) Steve Fehr, the NHLPA's special counsel, tried to

answer but had to let it go to voicemail. He checked it after the uplifting press conference, as the players gave hopeful interviews to reporters, and heard the news: the owners not only had rejected the players' proposal, but had pulled key elements of their own proposal off the table.

Surprised?

"No comment," Steve Fehr said.

Disappointed?

"Obviously, you'd like to make a deal," he said with a laugh. "But this is a very up-and-down process."

Very.

The players were hushed and herded back on stage in silence. Steve Fehr checked his phone and whispered something into the ear of Winnipeg Jets defenseman Ron Hainsey. Then Don Fehr reemerged and informed the audience that "it looks like this is not going to be resolved in the near future," even though "we are clearly very close, if not on top of one another."

For the finale, it was NHL commissioner Gary Bettman and deputy commissioner Bill Daly, blaming Fehr for "spinning us all into an emotional frenzy that maybe we're close and we're going to be playing hockey tomorrow" – deflecting attention from the fact the owners were driving the sides farther apart.

"Actually, it's not the first time he's said we're close when we weren't," Bettman said. "I don't know why he did that, especially when he knew the parameters that had been laid out last night and what had evolved over the week. I find it almost incomprehensible that he did that."

"We went in great detail as to how they didn't meet those parameters, and we both said, 'We don't know where we go from here. We don't have any ideas with respect to next steps,'" Daly said. "They knew there was a major gulf between us, and yet they came down here and told you that we're close and we could have a deal."

We can only hope that this (bleep) show was for show, that it was all part of a brutal negotiation full of slick strategy and stupid stunts.

We don't know if Bettman is bluffing or really means it this time, whether this will get the union to crack and the players to turn on Fehr, the way they turned on his predecessors. We don't know if Fehr is being brilliant or badly misreading the situation, whether he will get a better deal for the players or make this worse for them. And we won't know until this ends – possibly after the union dissolves, antitrust cases are filed, another season is wasted and a growing game shrinks.

But we do know this: There was a chance for someone to be a hero this week, for the season to be saved like a damsel in distress, and while some auditioned for the role – like Pittsburgh Penguins' co-owner Ron Burkle and captain Sidney Crosby – both of the leads were villains again.

*NHL commissioner Gary Bettman appeared shocked and dismayed at Fehr's comments. (Reuters) Look at the players' latest proposal on the surface, and Fehr is right. The sides are clearly very close – or should be. As he said: "After the positions the players took today, there doesn't seem to be very much room [between the sides], certainly not unbridgeable room."

The players accepted the owners' offer of \$300 million in "make-whole" money or transition payments, which are intended to cushion the blow to existing contracts as the players' percentage of revenue drops from 57 to 50. The players were at \$393 million, and now Fehr said: "We think there is a complete agreement on dollars."

The players bent on contracting issues. They accepted a term limit on individual contracts, proposing a maximum of eight years. They accepted a limit on back-diving, cap-circumventing contracts, using existing rules while requiring the lowest year be at least 25 percent of the highest year.

The players bent on the length of the collective bargaining agreement. They proposed eight years with an opt-out after six, when they never wanted to go longer than five years before – and the league had proposed six- and seven-year deals before this week.

What the sides needed to do now, Fehr said, was talk about transition rules.

After giving up so much – most notably in the percentage of revenue – they had given up even more. After complaining they were getting nothing in return, they claimed one small victory: a pension plan, funded by their own

money. This was a reasonable offer. This was progress – or should have been. Even if the owners said no, they should have wanted to keep negotiating.

"As players," said Phoenix Coyotes captain Shane Doan, "we want to play."

Still, this wasn't going to fly, and Fehr knew it.

The sides tried a new approach this week, officially at Bettman's suggestion. No Bettman and no Don Fehr in the main room. It turned out to be just Daly and Steve Fehr with six owners – including four fresh faces – and a group of almost 20 players. The idea Tuesday was to talk big picture and find out what both sides really needed. Things went well. There was hope on both sides. The optimism carried into the NHL's board of governors meeting Wednesday.

Then the optimism "almost inexplicably disappeared," in Bettman's words, when the sides talked specifics after the board meeting. The owners offered the \$300 million in "make-whole" money, up from \$211 million. The players said their priority was now a pension plan, when that was not their priority in the past.

"The union's response was shockingly silent," Bettman said. "There was almost no direct reaction. It was, 'Thank you. We'll take the hundred million dollars.' The owners were beside themselves. Some of them I had never seen that emotional. And they said they don't know what happened, but, 'This process is over. Clearly the union doesn't want to make a deal.'"

The league was disappointed in the players' response to the NHL's three line-in-the-sand demands. (Reuters) The players wanted to keep talking, and cooler heads prevailed. The owners made another offer. They agreed to the pension plan, and they backed off some contracting demands, leaving arbitration rights and free agency eligibility as they were under the old CBA.

But as part of that, they drew three lines in the sand: The owners had to have individual contracts limited to five years, with teams allowed to re-sign their own players for seven. Daly called it "the hill we will die on." They had to have a 10-year CBA with an opt-out after Year 8. And they could not accept transition mechanisms like compliance buyouts and escrow caps that would pay players outside the system.

"We got a response that quite frankly was insulting to our owners," Daly said. "They wanted to leave the room. The players asked them to stay. They considered that. They went back to the players and said, 'We'll stay, and we'll reengage if you agree to the three things that we say are important to us.'"

"We needed to have those key elements; we don't need movement to those key elements," Bettman said. "We needed those key elements because that was as far as we could go in light of everything else we had put on the table."

The players demanded restrictions be lifted so Fehr could rejoin negotiations Thursday, despite the progress that had been made. They asked for federal mediators to become involved, even though mediation failed last week and the sides were supposedly close.

The owners sent Daly and league lawyer Bob Battersman to hear the players' response. They were looking for a "yes" or a "no." They got a proposal instead. After an hour-long meeting, after going over where the players had fallen short, Daly and Battersman left.

Then Fehr took the stage.

"What we got today quite frankly and disappointingly missed the mark on all three respects," Daly said. "So for the union to suggest that somehow we're close is cherry picking, and it's unfortunate."

The owners are dictating. The players are cherry picking. The clock is ticking.

*This drama appears to be approaching its climax.

Whether or not the NHL has made its best offer might be a tipping point in the negotiations. (Reuters) Fehr has been playing rope-a-dope from the beginning, frustrating the owners with his moving targets – from revenue sharing to honoring contracts to pensions – and ignoring the owners' deadlines and ultimatums. It has been effective. The owners' attempts to discredit him and pin him down have failed. The players have seemed united. Bettman has made his best offer multiple times, only to make it better. Little by little, the owners have kept backing off.

Obviously Fehr feels the owners' last best offer still hasn't come. The drop-dead date, though undefined, seems to be about a month away. In 1994-95, the sides reached an agreement Jan. 11 and played a 48-game season. Bettman said he couldn't imagine wanting to play fewer games than that this time, though he waited until Feb. 16 to cancel the 2004-05 season.

Are the owners really going to die on the hill of contract term limits? Are they really going to scuttle a season because the players want the CBA to be two years shorter, or because they want compliance buyouts and escrow caps? Have the owners really taken the entire "make-whole" concept off the table, along with everything new they proposed this week, if that will help get a deal done? That seems asinine.

But what if this really was the owners' last best offer? What if Fehr angered players who wanted to vote on the owners' proposal and the owners sense weakness? What if he ticked off the moderate owners who came to make a deal and aligned them with the hardliners? What if this backfires?

The owners are barred from speaking publicly by their own bylaws, but the four fresh faces released statements Thursday night. Burkle: "I hope that going backwards does not prevent a deal." The Toronto Maple Leafs' Larry Tanenbaum: "I question whether the union is interested in making an agreement."

Obviously the owners aren't afraid of the union's nuclear option – dissolving the union via a disclaimer of interest or decertification. Bettman said the board of governors was briefed on the possibility Wednesday and the lawyers don't feel it would have the impact others do. The league feels the union wouldn't win in court, the players wouldn't have the guts to try it, or both.

"It's easy to say, 'Well, just keep negotiating. Keep offering more and more and more and more,'" Bettman said. "At some point, you have to be in a position to say, 'This is what we need. This is what we need as a league. This is what we need as a game. This is what our 30 clubs need to be competitive and healthy.' And if you don't have that, you have to make the tough judgment and the tough calls."

The bottom line remains the same: The owners are backing off demands; the players are making concessions. The sides are close enough to make a deal. They should be playing hockey. But Bettman and Fehr are too busy playing other games, and we're still waiting to see who will blink.

It isn't curtains for the season, not yet, but this act got old long ago.

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YAHOO SPORTS / NHL's latest CBA talks between players and owners spark hope for a hockey season

Nicholas J. Cotsonika

NEW YORK – There is hope for the hockey season.

A deal is in sight.

A month ago, a week ago, talks might have broken off had Buffalo Sabres goaltender Ryan Miller lost his temper, had Boston Bruins owner Jeremy Jacobs threatened to leave, the way they reportedly did here. But now there are people pushing for a deal on both sides, headlined by Pittsburgh Penguins owner Ron Burkle and captain Sidney Crosby, with NHL commissioner Gary Bettman and NHLPA executive director Don Fehr not directly involved. There has been significant movement – just not enough yet.

The NHL proposed more make-whole/transition money, to ease the players' drop from 57 percent of hockey-related revenue to 50. The league is now reportedly at \$300 million – about the midpoint between its previous proposal (\$211 million) and the union's (\$393 million).

The league bent on some contracting rights, keeping arbitration and free-agency eligibility the same. But the league reportedly continued to insist that contracts not vary by more than five percent from year to year, to stop back-diving, cap-circumventing deals, instead of adopting a union proposal that would recapture a team's salary cap advantage if a player retired before his contract ran out. The league continued to insist on a five-year

contract limit, while allowing teams to re-sign their own players for seven years.

The league also reportedly proposed a 10-year collective bargaining agreement, with an opt-out after eight years. The players had been proposing a five-year deal.

"There continue to be some critical open issues between the two parties," deputy commissioner Bill Daly said in a brief update, "and we understand the union should be getting back to us tomorrow (Thursday) on some of those issues."

About all Winnipeg Jets defenseman Ron Hainsey would say was that the sides had "very candid discussion" and would keep at it.

They've got to get a deal done. It would be ridiculous for them not to now – more ridiculous than it would have been already, anyway. The union was touting a difference of \$182 million. That has been cut in half. The league still wants to take some of the players' contracting rights, but not as many as before. The league wants a deal as long as 10 years, and that locks up the players' concessions for as much as a decade, but when no one wants another lockout anytime soon, a decade of labor peace sounds pretty good.

That doesn't mean they're going to get a deal done immediately, though, or that this is going to be easy. Get Bettman and Fehr out of the room? Lock up the owners and players until they compromise? Well, they got Bettman and Fehr out of the room, and they met for hours and hours, and they made progress because of it. But it isn't that simple.

Bettman and Fehr are no longer across the table from each other, but they're still in the building, still very much involved, still directing their troops each time they come back to caucus. For all the heart-to-heart idealism, there is still plenty of cold-blooded strategy in the equation. And if Fehr and Bettman return to the room, things could bog down again.

There was a positive vibe after Tuesday's meetings, and there was a positive vibe after the NHL's board of governors met Wednesday at Proskauer Rose, the league's law firm. The board discussed a possible schedule of 50-60 games.

Jeremy Jacobs of the Boston Bruins, Larry Tanenbaum of the Toronto Maple Leafs and Bill ... "We're going to continue to talk up until we get a deal," said the Toronto Maple Leafs' Larry Tanenbaum, one of six owners involved in talks with a group of players. "That's all I'm going to say."

Asked if there was more clarity on where the sides stood, he said: "Absolutely."

But remember: Tuesday's talks were about the big picture. Wednesday's talks were about the specifics, and the devil is always in the details. Fehr warned the players to temper their optimism. The league would love the players to get caught up in the momentum, but Fehr is smart enough to slow them down. They don't want to rush this to play in the short term and make a mistake for the long term. They were expected to hold a conference call Thursday before resuming talks.

They've got to get a deal done. We should have a season. But there is more haggling to be done first, and it's too early to speculate when that season will start or how long it will be, let alone when Roberto Luongo will be traded and who will be best positioned for the sprint to the playoffs.

It was 1:30 a.m. ET when some NHL executives left the Manhattan hotel where the meetings were held. As one of them said, it wasn't late. It was early.

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