

## A Mile in my Shoes

By: Nick Mystrom

# Don't Forget Who You're Playing For.

I grew up in Anchorage, Alaska playing competitive youth hockey. I was positively giddy with any prospect of getting my pads on and getting on the ice. While I loved playing hockey, I have never had any interest in watching it. Apparently, there are millions and millions of people who agreed with me. Two years ago, the seventh game of the NHL Stanley Cup Finals was the 12<sup>th</sup> highest rated show that night on *cable*! The viewers were absolutely staying away in droves watching *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and *Punk'd*. Then came the lockout. Did ESPN, the national network who primarily covers the NHL panic? No. They simply went looking for new programming to take its place. So what did they come up with? Poker. And what happened? Well, what happened is the American public showed more interest in Phil Helmuth and Harold Lederer than Mario Lemuix and Steve Yzerman.

I think the problem with hockey was that there were no pretty goals anymore. It seemed like every hockey highlight was a bunch of guys standing around the goal hacking at the puck when, finally, the light came on and all the guys raised their arms. What happened to Gretzky weaving in and out of players through the neutral zone, hitting Messier on the tape and then getting the puck back for a one-timer? I don't know, but I haven't seen it since checkered Vans and parachute pants were sweeping the nations middle schools.

Then something happened: hockey got smart. They changed the game. The purists anguished and rolled over in their graves. The veterans started talking like their sport had become unrecognizable. But something else happened: the fans came back with their interest piqued. So what if a shootout to settle a tie trivializes the game, its fun as hell to watch. So what if limiting holding stifles defensive-minded players, the open ice condition it creates is worth paying for. So what if eliminating the two-line pass can be seen as a travesty, I want to see young Simon Crosby receive a forty footer that leads to a breakaway.

Similar to hockey purists who want to preserve the game rather than adapt to the fans desires and the changing times, proponents of the instant replay system in the NFL say that "the most important thing is to get the call right." To that I say: nonsense. The most (and only) important thing in any professional sport is to keep the consumer happy, just like any business. If there is a call that is missed, I say so what. Over the course of the season, ultimately, better teams will prevail over weaker teams. Quarterbacks throw interceptions, running backs fumble the ball, receivers drop the ball, and referees occasionally miss calls. Live with it and stop subjecting fans to six or seven minute "peep show" sessions as the referee reviews what seems to be every other play.

While we're at it, let's address another sport: men's tennis (especially on grass), is absurd. One huge serve, maybe a return, but never a long rally. The players are stronger than ever, the equipment is better than ever, so why not adapt the game? I propose raising the net four inches in men's tennis. Longer rallies, more precision, emphasis on true athleticism rather than a cannon serve. The women's game is slowly overtaking the men's game in popularity. Now, being a red-blooded American male, I know that some of this has to do with devastating beauties like Anna Kournikova and Maria Sharipova, but it also has something to do with the monumental points that are played.

Hell, let's make the goals bigger in soccer (I hate the word 'nil'), an NBA hoop 10'6", the pitchers' mound lower.....eventually, they'd all be better games for it.

I never thought I'd say it, but all sports should have a long hard look at hockey and what they have done to come back from the dead. If a sport is played in a stadium and no one is there to see it, is it really a sport at all?