

JUDD'S JOURNAL

Teams struggle to the death



Among the more abundant features of the Okanagan Valley is one which is very obvious to even a less than trained sports eye.

There are a lot of hockey teams out here.

You can understand my appreciation of this fact if you bear in mind that for the last three years I covered, and travelled with, a team that had to venture as far as 800 miles, round-trip, for some games. It was never less than 200 at any time.

In fact, at one point the Flin Flon Bombers had to travel to Winnipeg, to take part in the Provincial Junior "A" title match. A distance of more than 650 miles... one way.

Understandably, you can appreciate my pleasant enthusiasm.

TOO MANY TEAMS?

The sad fact is, that Kelowna has about one team too many. Whether it's the Wings or the Buckeroos I haven't really decided but if, by chance, you asked the average fan in Kelowna the same question he probably wouldn't know either.

Cases have proved time and again, that two hockey clubs can't exist in the same community, at least not for very long. In some cases, the two clubs can't be a professional team and a junior team. Seldom, if ever, can it be two junior clubs.

The only exception, to my mind, is the Saskatoon Blades and the J's of the SJHL. Both can exist simply for the reason that the Blades use the J's for a feeder team, could care less how they do in the SJHL, and offset any deficits incurred by the latter so as to insure themselves of a farm club they can stock when times are good.

The Buckeroos plan on feeding the Wings like I plan on moving to the North Pole!

ONE WILL DIE

The two teams will co-exist only until one or the other dies, leaving the remainder to rule junior hockeydom, such as it is, in Kelowna.

Nobody should be surprised to learn that both clubs could go the way of the Dodo bird in a battle like this.

Both the Wings and the Buckeroos are competing, more or less, for the same junior hockey dollars in their South Okanagan city. The Buckeroos, though some may argue are playing in a vastly inferior league, have less bills to pay come the end of each season.

For one thing they do less travelling since they occupy, along with the remaining 12 teams of the BCJHL, a relatively small loop between Revelstoke in the

East and Cowichan on the Island.

The Wings, though they benefit from the recent re-alignment of the Western Hockey League divisions, will find themselves in such exotic, far-off places as Winnipeg, Brandon, Saskatoon, and, pack the earmuffs for this one, Prince Albert, Sask.

TRAVELLING EXPENSES

Weigh the difference in travelling expenses and you'll find the Bucks need paper money to survive and the Wings need pure gold.

Where is this gold going to come from? In order to break even, the Wings reckon they'll need an average of 1700 fans per game. From what I'm told, they haven't yet come within 700 of that average.

On the other hand, the Buckeroos are losing past support as more of their fans turn to the Tier I extravaganza. Anyone who thinks they are seeing a better brand of hockey must also think there's a difference between a winning Tier II club and a 5 and 26 Tier I club.

The Wings have been so bad that it's only in recent weeks they've pulled the long haul from their 1 and 25 record. If you think it's tough having to watch them at home you can imagine who's bothering when they're on the road.

PRESSURE

It won't take long before other clubs are pressuring the Wings to hit the road because they're reducing returns at their own gates.

In the meantime, the Buckeroos, who've always been in or around contention in their league, suffer the same slings and arrows of the fan's dispassion.

Even in Prince Albert, where the Tier II Raiders sold out the arena (5500) nightly, they knew enough to dissolve their existing franchise before assuming the responsibility of a Tier I Club.

The difference here also lies in the fact that people in that part of the country will show up to watch hockey if the teams played in rubber boots.

SOUL SEARCHING

There may have to be a little bit of soul searching when the Wing's first full season concludes.

The players who wonder if they should waste their time with a team that the scouts will obviously pan.

The fans who will wonder if bad Tier I beats good Tier II.

Mostly, though, will be the owners, wondering if they can manage another season taking them deeper into the red.