

The NHL's Reach

An Interview with Gary Bettman,
Commissioner, National Hockey League

EDITORS' NOTE Gary Bettman has served the National Hockey League as Commissioner since February 1993, and has guided the world's top professional hockey league through more than two decades of growth and advancement – on and off the ice. Bettman is a graduate of Cornell University and New York University School of Law.



ORGANIZATION BRIEF Headquartered in New York City and Toronto, the National Hockey League (nhl.com; NHL) is a major professional ice hockey league of 30 franchised member clubs, of which seven are located in Canada and 23 in the United States.

How strong has the business been?

The game, as it's being played, has never been more exciting and more entertaining – which is where everything starts. As a result, all of the metrics attendant to the business of the game are not only strong, but they're up and, for the most part, at record levels.

This is a function of our fans and our players, and finally having the right building blocks in place so not only is the league stable, but it's poised to continue its growth. That's something that we are working very hard at and are confident we can achieve.

This sport has extremely loyal fans. How do you broaden that base? Is it hard to transfer this game to other constituencies?

There is no one typical hockey fan. We have lots of fans. We're one of the four major sports in North America. Historically, one of the measures that gets compared is national television ratings, and for a whole host of reasons, separate and apart from our fan base, we were not given the same opportunity and exposure on national TV.

Our most recent deal with NBC Sports and the NBC Sports Network gives us the platforms and exposures that have been transformational and have elevated the game.

The coverage that we get, the promotions and scheduling we get, and for the first time in our history, all of the playoff games being on national television is something

we have never had before to this extent. It has created part of the growth and heightened the recognition that we have most recently received.

Is the level at which the game is being played different than in the past?

It has probably never been as fast, as skillful, or as competitive. Our competitive balance is not only the best we have ever had, but it may be the best in all of sports. When you look at our regular-season races to

see who makes the playoffs, virtually every team is in it almost to the end. The playoffs, as evidenced this year, are phenomenally unpredictable and, as a result, entertaining.

Is this more about the level of talented players or realignment?

It's the system we have, which has enabled us to give every team an opportunity to be competitive; the scheduling and realignment we have done; and the rules of the game. Over the past few years, we have been mindful about making the game as open, fast, and entertaining as possible while creating as safe an environment as possible for the players.

Is it important that you limit things like outdoor games to maintain the anticipation surrounding the sport?

The outdoor games, and big events we put on, have increased the numbers and are part of our strategy to engage NHL fans in participating in more NHL activities, and to encourage more casual fans to take a look.

The outdoor games have been a phenomenon. They're exciting and like the ultimate reality television show in their unpredictability.

Last year, we did six and they were all sold out. We have had over 350,000 people at the games, and our fans and teams are saying they can't get enough of them.

As a practical matter, the logistics of putting on any of those games is sufficiently daunting that six took us to our limits, but we will continue to do them going forward.

Player safety is a great concern. Is there only so much you can do in that regard?

It is a physical game and we have been leaders on player safety, particularly as it relates to concussions, among all of the sports. Physical

contact will inevitably lead to some injuries, but we're doing what we can do to be prudent, responsible, and protective.

How critical has social media been for reaching fans?

NHL fans tend, as a group, to be more affluent, better educated, and more tech-savvy than fans of any other sport. Also, because we have historically been underserved by traditional media, the digital space has enabled us to connect with the most avid fans in all of sports in ways that we could never do before, and that has made for a better fan experience for NHL fans.

How do you define your role?

There is an unpredictable element to any business that is putting on 1,300-plus events per year. We're constantly in the public eye, we have more than 800 players, and we have tens of thousands of people that work either at the league level, the club level, or at the arenas, so there is always an element of unpredictability.

I have always felt that with all the various constituents that are served by the game, we have to chart a course toward what is in the best interests of the game. I have always done that and perhaps, at times, not in the most popular of ways. I believe that the support that I've had from ownership has enabled me to be comfortable in that, when I believe we're doing the right thing, the owners will stick by me.

How critical is the community outreach and do you work together in that regard?

We all do our own things. We also have league-wide initiatives, the player's association has initiatives, the individual clubs have initiatives in their own markets, and the individual players have initiatives. What is great about this sport and the people in it, is that there is a sense of community and commitment, there is a sense of giving back, and of being a role model, and all of those efforts are worthwhile. Additionally, we focus on things like diversity and inclusiveness, Hockey Fights Cancer, and the environment; we were given an award by the Green Sports Alliance for the work we have done there.

Sport is a great vehicle for getting out important social messages. I have been proud of the efforts that everybody associated with the game at all levels have made. ●