



March 6, 2006

**Hockey fans return to stadiums, but not to TV;
Gambling scandal could interfere with new CMO's goal
to grow viewership**

BY: RICH THOMASELLI

The national hockey League's on all-time attendance high, a sign that hard-core fans have returned after 2004-05 season labor lockout. But the casual fan is not back: TV ratings have fallen 21% on national partner NBC compared to ratings on ABC two years ago.

That's the dilemma faced by new NHL Chief Marketing Officer Michael LaBroad, named last week to oversee planning, advertising, promotions, creative services and fan development as the league fends off a potential gambling scandal. Most recently CMO at Bass Pro Shops, Mr. LaBroad spent 23 years at Anheuser-Busch Cos., including time as senior VP-chief marketing officer at Busch Entertainment-a stint he says will help him better market the league to families.

And get them back watching. Although Nielsen Media Research figures show the 21% drop, to be fair, NBC has had only four telecasts so far this season. On Comcast's OLN, the league's new cable partner, ratings are flat with that of ESPN2 two years ago, but are down more than 60% from games on ESPN in the 2003-04 season.

Interest is so low that one national TV writer quipped in a syndicated column that OLN no longer uses Nielsen ratings for games; it simply asks viewers to sign in to its guest book.

loyal fans

Mr. LaBroad said his initial thought to increase viewership is to tap into NHL players themselves in marketing campaigns. ``NHL players are people like you and me," he said. ``They're relatable and they're humble. We need to get them in front of the public more. It allows people to build a connection to the individual."

Ed Horne, president of NHL Enterprises, acknowledged that the NHL has a viewership problem, but said, ``Our objective this season was to bring back the fan that stuck

with us. They've come back, and it's been remarkable."

Mr. LaBroad may also have to confront a potential gambling scandal. Just days before the NHL took a two-week break to allow its players to compete in the Olympics last month, federal investigators said Phoenix Coyotes assistant coach and former NHL star Rick Tocchet spearheaded a nationwide sports-betting ring. Gamblers allegedly include actress Janet Jones, the wife of Coyotes head coach and NHL legend Wayne Gretzky, and at least a half-dozen former and current NHL players.

The league has been proactive in aiding the investigation, and has also hired former federal prosecutor Robert Cleary to conduct its own investigation. Commissioner Gary Bettman and his deputy commissioner `` have been very clear and very swift about this," said league spokeswoman Bernadette Mansur.