

dribblin' around / paul danzer

A waste of a season

How stupid do they think we are?

Do the people running the sports show in this country really think that sports fans will get excited about 80-plus meaningless games through the miserable, rainy fall, or the long, cold winter?

Do they expect us to cheer rabidly when the only thing the home team is playing for is the right to play three games, rather than two, by the time the real season rolls around in April?

Evidently so.

Long and cold is a good way of describing the winter sports season. Look at the National Basketball Association. Each team suffers through 82 contests spanning from October through April with the "goal" of scoring big enough to secure a spot in the "second season."

There is something wrong, however, when teams are distinguished by futility rather than fertility. Who do you think looks at the box-scores and standings with the most interest around April Fools Day?

Clue number one: They're not looking at the number of wins their wimpy teams manage, because there are so few of them. Clue number two: Many of their employees have had "off years" and will likely have next year off.

If you guessed the brass and followers of such lucrative establishments as the Cleveland Cavaliers, Indiana Pacers, or Houston Rockets you are on the ball.

While 12 of the NBA's 23 franchises are still in the derby for the league's most coveted prize, these three are busy fighting it out for the second most valuable reward — the number one draft choice.

Only those few teams in danger of slipping into that narrow void between the playoffs and payout can take an early vacation.

But those members of the terrific 12 are busy tuning up for the playoffs, and those members of the pathetic three have the always challenging task of losing with dignity.

After all, the reward for a horrid finish this season could be Virginia's 7-4 dynamo center Ralph Sampson.

But if the playoff proliferation in the NBA is disgusting, it is downright sickening in the National Hockey League.

As a case in point, let's look at the New York Rangers.

Ever since I was growing up watching Peter Puck on the tube between periods in the Sunday afternoon hockey games, I have been a big Rangers fan. But who in their right mind really thinks the Rangers earned the right to play in the Stanley Cup playoffs with their mediocre play during the regular season?

Not me—but I was gloating last weekend.

At that point the Rangers, who slid through the regular season with a meaningless 35-35-10 record, had swept the Philadelphia Flyers 3-0 in the NHL's Patrick Division semifinals.

Philadelphia had flown to the top of the division during the NHL's 80-game regular season, finishing 26 points ahead of the fourth-place Rangers. Heading into the opening round of the post season tournament, the Flyers were one of the most feared squads on two blades.

One has to wonder how players can take regular seasons seriously. Many of them probably don't as long as they get their paychecks. And if the players don't take regular season games seriously, why should, or why do the fans?

After all, for six months the Flyers had toiled long and hard, terrorizing many opponents, including the Rangers, along the way to a regular season division crown. But what did they get for their efforts?

They earned themselves a chance to play the division's weakest team in a five game series. They had earned the right to play three of those five contests in the friendly confines of the Spectrum, a building they had enjoyed much success in during the season. A great deal. How could they lose three games to a team like the Rangers?

It was easier than most people thought it would be.

The Rangers, after all, had nothing to lose and everything to gain entering the playoffs. The Flyers, on the other hand, had enjoyed a prosperous winter and were ready for a short vacation when the Rangers came to town.

But the Rangers were starting fresh, they had gained a reprieve and were even with the division champs who they had trailed the entire year.

While the Rangers were busy earning the right to continue down the Garden path, the Flyers watched that long winter fade into a lonely spring as the New Yorkers leap-frogged over their regular season conquerors.

Ridiculous.

Don't get me wrong, I will gleefully twist that cap and cheer the Rangers as they venture on toward the Stanley Cup.

Herb Brooks has worked miracles before (remember the 1980 Olympics?), and if the Rangers' coach can bring the first Cup in 50-plus years to The Garden, it will be like New Year's Eve in Times Square—exciting.

It would also be like the Atlanta Hawks rolling past the 76ers and through the NBA playoffs to claim the crown — extremely irritating to the rest of the league.

But if that happens, maybe some of those people in towns like Philadelphia will begin to wonder what the value of the regular season is. Maybe they'll get mad enough to question the system which allows a whole season to go practically unnoticed.

Maybe some at least will realize what stupid suckers we all are for paying (through the nose, I might add) any attention to regular seasons.

Go Rangers.

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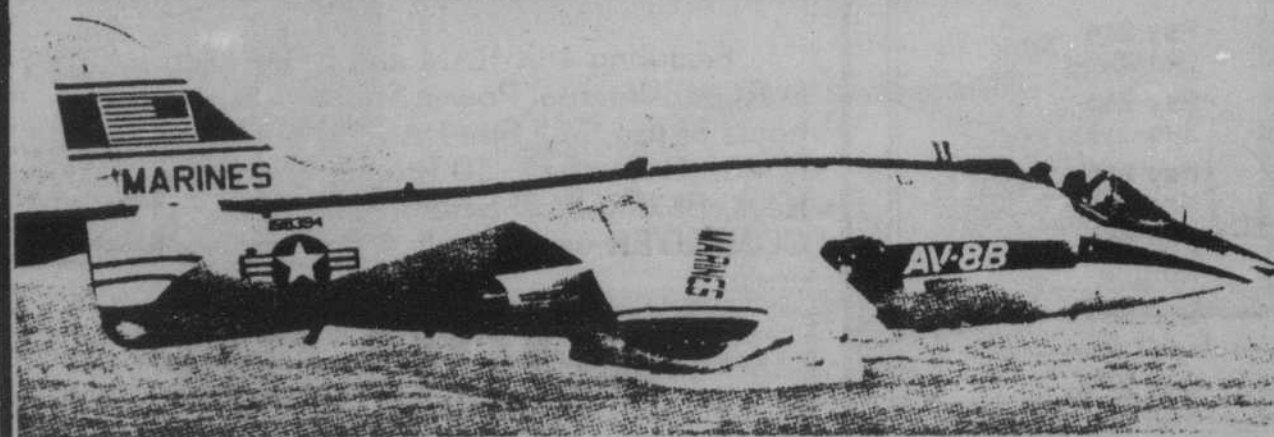
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