

HOCKEY

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day and part of today were squandered making sure everybody understood that the "final, final, final, final, final" offer passing from the owners back to the players was just that.

Now that the probable starting date has been pushed back to Jan. 20, you have to wonder whether Smith would want to revise the rest of what he said.

"You would be risking the product as far as what you pre-

sent to the fans," Smith said. "And you would be risking injuries because these players' timing would be off. We don't want our fans to pay to see 40 players skate around with pulled groins."

Unfortunately, as far as enlightened management is concerned, Smith is a majority of one. As long as the turnstiles start turning again and the TV dollars roll in, most owners care less who or what gets pulled.

Indeed, so many other factors already are conspiring to make

for a laughable season that watching out-of-shape hockey players gingerly make their way around the rink would be almost perfect. And at least it would make for balanced competition.

The most recent version of the schedule has teams keeping travel to a minimum and playing only in their own conferences in order to cram 50 regular-season games into 109 days. And according to most reasonable estimates, it will take about six weeks for teams to have a

full complement of players up and running at full speed.

What that means in the interim is that teams may have to choose between veterans, many of whom are out of shape and would be risking injuries, and minor leaguers, whose skills are wanting even if their conditioning is not.

The unbalanced schedule will mean followers of the Los Angeles Kings won't get to see the defending Stanley Cup champion Rangers and Mark Messier. And followers of the Rangers, in

turn, won't get to see Wayne Gretzky. Fans of the Chicago Blackhawks won't get to see their team play a final game in historic Boston Garden or the Montreal Forum, two shrines of the game that will close at the end of year. Fans of the Montreal Canadiens, meanwhile, will have to endure more games against the hapless Ottawa Senators than anyone should be forced to sit through.

Jim Litke is a sports writer for the Associated Press.

Oregon Daily Emerald

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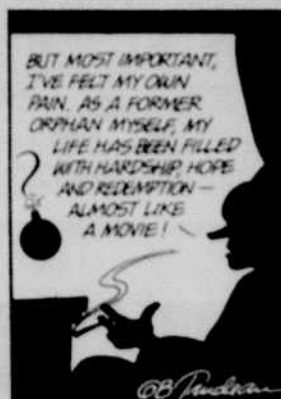
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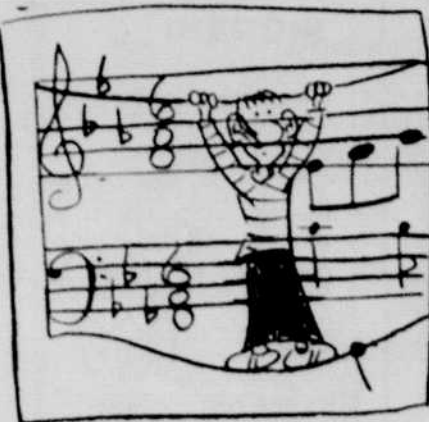
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