

Hockey

NHL, players nearing deadline to decide on 2018 Olympics

By LARRY LAGE
Associated Press

The NHL seems set up to enjoy hockey without labor-related headaches for at least two-plus seasons. That doesn't mean it's a drama-free league.

A decision must be made soon about whether the world's best hockey players will be at the Olympics in South Korea in 14 months. And there are financial issues bubbling up among the players, particularly when it comes to escrow and how they believe it has become a heavy tax on their salaries.

The collective bargaining agreement and the Olympics were tied together recently by the NHL itself. The league made an offer, asking if the Players' Association would eliminate its opt-out option in 2019 and extend the labor pact three years through the 2024-2025 season in exchange for participating in a sixth consecutive Olympics.

The union rejected the idea. The NHL, which has been stunted by three lockouts since 1993, provided a

public spin on why it would have been good for the game.

"Most importantly, it tells the world and our fans there's nine years of labor peace after this season which we thought would be a good thing even if there were things that we might want to change," NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman said at last week's board of governors meeting.

NHLPA executive director Don Fehr said the league didn't make a formal proposal, but floated it as an option.

"We took it seriously and ran it by the players and it's not something players are interested in at the moment," Fehr said. "Hopefully we will continue to try to resolve our issues, including the Olympics."

The Olympic-related problems revolve around travel expenses and insurance because the International Olympic Committee does not plan to pay those bills, as it has to get NHL players to the Winter Olympics since 1998. The IOC spent about \$14 million to cover travel and insurance



AP Photo/Fred Vuich

In this Oct. 27, 2016, file photo, Pittsburgh Penguins center Sidney Crosby (87) skates with the puck during an NHL hockey game against the New York Islanders, in Pittsburgh.

for NHL players for the 2014 Olympics in Russia. Even if interested parties come up with enough money for travel and insurance, there's no guarantee the league and union will agree to participate in the next Olympics in part because, according to Bettman, owners have a "negative sentiment" about it at this point.

Bettman has said a decision would need to be made by early January at the latest, giving the league

time to create a schedule for next season with or without a two-plus week break for the Olympics. One stakeholder is trying to stay out of the fray, acknowledging the highly anticipated decision isn't up to him or the governing body he leads.

"We will await the NHL and the NHLPA's decision and hope for a positive result," International Ice Hockey Federation President Rene Fasel said Tuesday.

As for the labor pact, an emerging issue for players involves an escrow system that ensures a 50-50 split of hockey-related revenues between the players and the owners. Players have 16 percent to 18 percent of their paychecks put in escrow each season. After calculations have been made following recent seasons, players have ended up losing about 13 percent of their pay by getting 3 to 5 percent of the escrow refunded from the league. That has happened in large part because the U.S. dollar is worth about 25 percent more than it was against Canadian currency five years ago. A \$5.2 billion broadcast deal with Rogers for national TV rights in Canada, for example, is worth a lot less than it was when that deal was done in 2013.

"This whole thing then morphed into a discussion of the escrow which I'm a little mystified with because this system as it works depends on the escrow," Bettman said. "The reason the cap is set where it is, and in fact player contracts are somewhat inflated beyond

what the systems calls for is, because there's an escrow to recapture that extra money. ... If you lowered the cap, then you would have less escrow. It's that simple."

Here are some other things of note around the NHL:

AGELESS WONDER

Jaromir Jagr is closing in on second place on the NHL career scoring list. The 44-year-old Florida Panthers wing has pulled within four points of Mark Messier, who had 1,887 points from 1979-2004. Wayne Gretzky set an NHL record with 2,857 points.

TURNING 100

The NHL will drop the puck for its centennial celebration on Jan. 1 in Toronto where the Maple Leafs will play the Detroit Red Wings outdoors. On that day, the league will begin to share which players made the list of the 100 greatest to play in the NHL, starting with 34 who played predominantly from 1917-1966. The other 66 players, who played over the last 50 years for the most part, will be announced Jan. 27 in Los Angeles during All-Star weekend.

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