

An absolute mess for fans

Acrimony among prospective Lightning owners is too familiar.

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On one side, there is a would-be seller who lacks passion.

On the other, there is a want-to-be buyer who lacks cash.

Trapped in the middle, just like in the old days, there is a hockey team skating toward a future clouded by uncertainty and doubt.

Golly. Does this feel vaguely, horribly familiar to anyone else?

After the world's longest test drive, after fans had spent five months debating anticipation vs. apprehension, the proposed sale of the Tampa Bay Lightning has collapsed. If you are trying to figure out what it means, remember this: In the life of a professional sports franchise, uncertainty is never a good thing.

In the end, the Absolute Hockey Group turned out to be an absolute mess. It was a scandalous disintegration, with members accusing each other of betrayal in the way of a \$50-million lawsuit. For those who follow the Lightning, it read like a page out of a history the franchise would just as soon forget, of a legacy of Kokusai Green and Art Williams and the Maloofs and the Duke of Manchester. The only thing that would have made it perfect is if the lawsuit had arrived blurry because of a bad fax machine.

How smarmy is this? According to the lawsuit, Hollywood producer Oren Koules is accused of shopping around information obtained from his partners for his own benefit. The suggestion is that Koules, whose share of the purchase price had risen from minority share to the majority, wanted to cut his own deal.

"We have information that leads us to believe that he has had numerous conversations with the owners of the Lightning and that he continues to do so," said Tom Scarritt, attorney for real estate developer Jeff Sherrin, a member of AHG. "That's in direct violation of the agreement he signed with his partners."

So is Koules trying to cut his own deal?

"We don't surmise what his conversations are about," Scarritt said. "But our lawsuit is designed to find that out."

What the Lightning - and its fans - thinks of this will largely depend on what it thought of Doug MacLean and his group from the start. If you were concerned about MacLean because of his record as coach and general manager of the Columbus Blue Jackets, if you had heard too much about his legendary temper, if the lingering negotiations and the secret partners made you doubt his finances, this probably isn't the worst thing in the world.

As for me, I'm disappointed. It feels as if an opportunity has been lost.

I like MacLean. I find him to be an engaging, insightful man, and I was looking forward to watching a Lightning owner who was passionate about the game. It was only seven weeks ago when I sat with MacLean and Koules in a luxury suite at the Lightning's opener, watching the two of them interact, watching them pull for a hockey team that seemed big enough for them both. At the time, they said the right things. At the time, they seemed like perfect partners.

A few weeks later, and we are left to wonder: When producing the series, did Koules watch *Saw* too many times?

Whatever you feel about the sale falling through, there are some truths at work here.

One: If an owner cannot afford to buy a team, he cannot afford to own one.

Two: If an owner cannot get along with his partner when a \$5-million payment is due, he isn't going to get along with him when a \$7-million goaltender is available.

Three: If this breakup was inevitable, it is better that it happen now rather than later.

For now, however, everyone loses. A sale does not implode this loudly without all parties getting some of the mess on their shoes.

MacLean? Even if he could regather his forces, who is going to believe in him now? For all of his charm, MacLean wanted to barter his expertise to turn a small investment into a big slice of the team. Frankly, Phil Esposito did it better.

Koules? He's from Hollywood; he knows all about being cast as the bad guy. It's easy to speculate that Koules resented paying most of the money while others made most of the decisions, because no one wants to be a human ATM. But Koules knew the deal when he signed it. And for a prospective owner, trust is a vital issue. For Koules, that's going to be a tough sale.

Bill Davidson? Wasn't this Dollar Bill's hand-picked group? If you remember when the sale was announced, Palace Entertainment CEO Tom Wilson suggested that Davidson wouldn't have sold to just anyone. Why, then, would Davidson agree to have backdoor conversations with Koules?

Is Davidson really that desperate to sell? And if so, what happens now? Does he cut his price? Does he try to make the franchise more profitable by moving salaries? Does he put up a real estate sign that says: Owner Motivated to Sell?

Oh, and while we're talking about money, what's this about Sherrin asking for \$50-million in lost profits? Is the Lightning telling prospective team buyers the same thing it tells prospective ticket buyers?

For the Lightning, it adds up to an unnerving time. When it comes to spending, no one knows if the old owner is willing or if any new ones will be able.

Worst of all, no one knows who to trust. If anyone.

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