

Wilson: No talk of solo sale

The Palace Sports CEO denies talking with Oren Koules about selling the Lightning just to him.

By DAMIAN CRISTODERO, Times Staff Writer
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CHICAGO -- One of the most dramatic accusations in the lawsuit that has splintered the investment group trying to buy the Lightning includes backstabbing and betrayal.

In the suit filed Monday, Jeff Sherrin and Doug MacLean allege Oren Koules "directly or indirectly" interfered with their relationship with Lightning owner Palace Sports & Entertainment to forge his own transaction with the company.

On Tuesday, Palace Sports' CEO, Tom Wilson, said those conversations never happened.

"No," he said by phone from his office in Auburn Hills, Mich. "I'm sure that will come out in court, but we've not had conversations with him about doing his own deal with the team."

Wilson said he still is trying to make sense of the tumult surrounding the now-dead \$200-million proposal that included the St. Pete Times Forum lease and 5 1/2 acres of nearby land in Tampa.

He also tried to allay "understandable" fan nervousness about the team's future.

Wilson said he still has "some degree of optimism" Absolute Hockey Enterprises' main players can resolve their differences and resurrect the purchase.

If they do not, he said, the team will not be shopped -- "we're not hiring a broker to see who might have interest in the Tampa Bay Lightning" -- but offers that "fall out of the sky" will be considered.

"And that's consistent to where we were five years ago," Wilson said. "Until this isn't our club, this is our club. We have certain standards we want to hold to. We want to win. We want to be as good as we can be. If we're still there, we're as committed as we were."

More intriguing, though, was talk of the alleged behind-the-back conversations.

Wilson said he understands speculation that Palace Sports would want to deal with Koules, a Hollywood producer and Absolute Hockey's largest investor.

"Logic would tell you that," Wilson said. "But we haven't had any conversations with Oren."

Tom Scarritt, attorney for Sherrin and MacLean, countered that, "Oren Koules told Doug MacLean that he knew that

Palace would do the deal with him, and that he was interested in talking to Doug about doing it with him. So, obviously, if Oren is saying Palace would do the deal with him, then he's having conversations with them."

Lightning players, who try to snap a 0-3-1 streak tonight at the United Center against the Blackhawks, said the whole thing is a blur.

"I don't really know what's going on. I don't want to know what's going on," defenseman Paul Ranger said. "We're concentrating on us. We want to get back on a winning streak."

Said center Chris Gratton: "Most players are just like, 'Tell me when it's over.'"

Still, he added, "I hope it gets worked out and they can keep this franchise going and in the area here, and keep going with the success that they had."

How long before there is an end point is anybody's guess.

"We still think there's a commitment to try to get the team," Wilson said. "I think Jeff is still interested. I think Doug is still interested. I think Oren is still interested. Usually when everyone wants the same sort of goal, you can overcome the differences."

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