

Lightning has more suitors

An original member of Absolute Hockey joins a local group weighing a bid. Another might join.

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TAMPA - Hollywood producer Oren Koules might have competition for ownership of the Lightning, and it might come from his former partners.

Doug MacLean and Jeff Sherrin, who sued Koules after their group, Absolute Hockey Enterprises, failed to buy the team, apparently are interested in joining some Tampa Bay businesspeople exploring if it is feasible to make a bid.

Tampa attorney Steve Burton, who was introduced as part of Absolute Hockey but said he never signed with it, said he and Sherrin have committed to the new group. Tom Scarritt, the attorney for MacLean and Sherrin, said he also is in.

MacLean said he will be in town this week for a meeting in which the group will discuss if there is enough interest to develop a proposal.

"We'll see," MacLean said Saturday of his participation. "I'm very excited talking to Steve, and we'll see where it goes."

"The way I see it," Burton said, "this is a bulldozer moving under its own inertia with a number of local people interested in stepping up and stopping some of this foolishness."

Burton was referring to Koules' attempt to buy the team.

That became possible last week when the producer of the Saw horror movies settled a lawsuit in which MacLean and Sherrin accused him of going behind their backs to arrange his own deal with Lightning owner Palace Sports & Entertainment.

The original \$200-million deal, which Palace Sports canceled on Nov. 14, two days after Absolute Hockey missed a scheduled \$5-million payment, was for the team, arena lease and 5 1/2 acres near the St. Pete Times Forum.

Koules' new group, OK Hockey, includes business partner Mark Berg and, it is believed, California banker Russell Belinsky.

Neither Koules nor Palace Sports CEO Tom Wilson was available for comment.

Burton said the day after the suit was settled and Koules announced his intention to buy the team, he received "a number of calls from local businesspeople who were asking me what they could do to help protect the community treasures known as the Tampa Bay Lightning and the St. Pete Times Forum."

Burton said those people, whom he declined to identify because the group is still forming, believe the team and community would benefit from local owners who would help ensure the Lightning stays in Tampa.

Scarritt, who said he is part-owner of the land across the street from the Times Forum that includes Andreychuk's restaurant, said the 2004-05 lockout proved the team is an economic engine.

Scarritt said during the 2004 Stanley Cup final, Andreychuk's then called Rivals was so crowded, "You couldn't get any more people in there with a shoehorn."

During the lockout, he said, a different story.

"So I've seen what happens down there businesswise if there is no Lightning," Scarritt said. "The Forum is very dependent upon revenues generated by Lightning fans as are the taxpayers. It would be disastrous to lose the Lightning."

"We're still trying to gauge the local interest in the team," he added. "But it's been very reassuring."

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