



Lightning Anticipate New Offer

By CARTER GADDIS, The Tampa Tribune

Published: December 17, 2007

TAMPA - The on-again, off-again sale of the Tampa Bay Lightning is expected to be on again as soon as the end of this week, depending on the outcome of a meeting planned for Wednesday in Detroit between producer Oren Koules and officials of Palace Sports & Entertainment.

Lightning president Ron Campbell would not discuss details of what is expected to be a formal offer by Koules to purchase the team, the St. Pete Times Forum and 5 1/2 acres of adjoining land.

"They anticipate having a meeting this week to discuss an offer," Campbell said. "That's all I know, that they anticipate discussing an offer."

If the meeting Wednesday follows the expected course, a purchase agreement with Koules' OK Hockey could be in place by the end of the week. It is believed that Palace Sports would like to pursue the Koules offer to its conclusion, deal or no deal, before considering other potential suitors.

Koules' potential ownership group includes Mark Burg, co-founder with Koules of Evolution Entertainment Studios, and is believed to include California banker Russell Belinsky. It's not known whether Koules' group includes other parties.

What is known is that since the settlement a week ago of a lawsuit brought against Koules by his former Absolute Hockey Enterprises partners, the producer of the "Saw" movie franchise has made clear his intention to continue to pursue a deal that was originally announced in August.

As proven by the recent breakdown of Absolute Hockey's attempt to buy, merely having a purchase agreement in place does not guarantee that a deal will get done. Koules and former partners Doug MacLean and Jeff Sherrin held a splashy news conference to announce their agreement in August to spend about \$200 million for the franchise, but that deal fell through and Koules was sued by Sherrin and the other members of Absolute Hockey for allegedly trying to broker his own deal with Palace Sports.

Shortly after the Aug. 6 announcement, Koules increased his \$20 million investment to \$60 million and became the lead investor, although based on terms of the contract he would not have had any say in how the team and building would be run. Koules then withheld his portion of a \$5 million down payment that eventually led to the termination of the deal on Nov. 14 and

the eventual lawsuit, which was filed on Nov. 26 in Hillsborough County but has since been settled out of court.

Reporter Erik Erlendsson contributed to this report. Reporter Carter Gaddis can be reached at (813) 259-8291 or igaddis@tampatrib.com.

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