

Separate Groups Discussing Plans To Buy Lightning

By CARTER GADDIS, The Tampa Tribune

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ATLANTA - Two groups that splintered off Absolute Hockey Enterprises will take important steps today toward determining a potential new owner for the Tampa Bay Lightning, the St. Pete Times Forum and 5 1/2 acres of adjoining land.

Oren Koules, the movie and TV producer who was to have provided the bulk of the upfront money for Absolute Hockey's original \$200 million bid, is scheduled to meet today in the Detroit area with representatives from current owner Palace Sports & Entertainment.

It is believed Koules and his known OK Hockey partners, Mark Burg and California financier Russell Belinsky, are prepared to make a formal offer. A purchasing agreement - with its accompanying window of exclusive negotiation - could follow as soon as the end of the week.

In Tampa, local attorneys Tom Scarritt and Steve Burton, along with former Absolute Hockey members Doug MacLean and South Florida real estate developer Jeff Sherrin, have scheduled several rounds of meetings with potential investors, including some from the Tampa Bay area, to gauge whether there is enough interest among them to pursue a competing offer.

Scarritt would not reveal the names of the potential investors.

"The people that are coming don't want their names out there until the time is right," said Scarritt, who also said the meetings are scheduled to carry over to Thursday.

Palace Sports has agreed to allow the anti-Koules faction to show potential investors financial information related to the deal. Scarritt said the possibility that Koules' new group could be on the verge of making an offer and shutting out other potential suitors - at least during the window of exclusive negotiation - has not added a sense of urgency to the search for investors.

"What Koules does," Scarritt said, "really is not going to affect what we do."

It's not a surprise that Palace Sports would leave its options open in the wake of the disintegration of the Absolute Hockey bid, which was announced to much fanfare in August. The deal fell apart over money, and Koules was sued by his now-former partners.

NHL commissioner Gary Bettman mediated a settlement, clearing the way for Koules to pursue a deal independent of MacLean, Sherrin and Burton.

Yet, even though Koules appears to have the tacit blessing of the league and is apparently much further along in the process than the other group, Scarritt said his group would continue to seek investors as long as the team remained unsold.

"Absolutely, we are optimistic," Scarritt said. "We wouldn't be doing this if we weren't."

Reporter Erik Erlendsson

contributed to this report.

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