

# More Honky Than Hockey

**Just because they won a playoff round doesn't mean the Predators have finally becoming a burgeoning hockey market**



BY KEN CAMPBELL

**E**very spring, the swallows return to Capistrano and right around the same time a team in a non-traditional hockey market makes a breakthrough and tries to convince us it should be taken seriously. Welcome to the second round of the playoffs, Nashville Predators. In case you were wondering, this is a best-of-seven, too. If you win, you get to move onto something called the conference final.

Hey, it's wonderful the Preds' playoff guide will finally have a bigger spine than *Great Moments in Atlanta Thrashers History*. It's even better people have taken to flying Predators flags on their cars and are hanging blue and gold ribbons all over the place. Shea Weber for the Norris, Pekka Rinne for the Vezina and David Poile for executive of the year are all well-deserved and a clear indication the Preds have an outstanding on-ice product.

But are we really to believe Nashville has become a hockey city? Really? Is that because they suddenly refer to themselves as "Hockeytonk"? If that's the case, why was it that four days after they posted their first-ever series victory there were still about 1,000 tickets remaining for Game 3 of the second round?

When I look at what the Predators have accomplished this spring in terms of energizing their fan base, I harken back to 2006 when I walked up to the ticket booth at the RBC Center in Raleigh and could have bought two tickets 30 minutes before a Stanley Cup final game. I remember during that playoffs, goalie Cam Ward walked into a jam-packed Quizno's near the rink at lunch hour, placed his order and walked out without being recognized. In 2004, about an hour after the Tampa Bay Lightning had won the Cup there was absolutely no evidence downtown that anything special had transpired. Not long after the Anaheim Ducks won their Cup in 2007, the parking lot of the Honda Center was largely empty, with the exception of one guy playing "My Favorite Things" on a saxophone.

I don't suspect Nashville will end up being any different. This spike in interest, I'm sorry to report, is a short-term product of a team having some success and capturing imaginations, nothing more. Like other non-traditional market teams, the Predators have a small and devoted fan base. And like Carolina, Tampa Bay and Anaheim before them, people who aren't part of it will go back to

doing other things and the team will continue to have trouble selling tickets. The fact is, as an organization, the Predators have done almost everything right in their 13 years. They've taken a responsible approach to franchise building, cultivated their own stars by drafting and developing better than almost anyone, made wise personnel moves and been a very fan-friendly organization. Their game presentation is among the best in the league.

And still it has taken 13 years to get where they are. And where is that exactly? Well, the Preds attracted 16,142 fans a game this season, which put them 21st in attendance. Which means there were an average of 1,000 tickets left over for every home game, not including the thousands of giveaways and discounted tickets that every southern U.S. market counts as bums in the seats.

And while I'm making enemies in Nashville, we might as well get another misconception out of the way.

The fact the Predators finally won a playoff round does not necessarily validate the Nashville's steady-as-she-goes approach to franchise building. While it's admirable they've had the same GM, coach and hockey department since Day 1, does it escape everyone it took them 12 tries to win a round? That's five more years than it took Philadelphia to win a Stanley Cup and four more than it took the New York Islanders to capture their first title.

It's true that most successful organizations have the common thread of front office

continuity. But who would you rather be; the Preds, who have won one playoff round and have had one coach and one GM since 1998-99 or the Penguins, who have won a Cup and been to the conference final three times with seven coaches and two GMs in the same time span? Or the Flyers, who have four trips to the conference final, one Stanley Cup final and six 100-point seasons under six coaches and two GMs in that duration?

Having the steady hand of Poile and Barry Trotz has probably served the small-budget Predators best, but who's to say their rise wouldn't have been accelerated if they had decided to shake up their hockey department? Poile and Trotz have done very good jobs, but to take that evidence and ascertain waiting 12 years for results is undoubtedly the only way to go would be silly.

Just as it would be to assume the joy created by one playoff run has turned Nashville into a legitimate hockey market. **THN**

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