

# Ugly Scar on the Game of Scars

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If there's anything noteworthy at this second stage of the Stanley Cup Playoffs, it's that parity is right on the bubble, and what's happening to the game?

While the playoff tension mounts, there's an identifiable trend beginning to surface at a time when you'd be right in expecting the level of play to elevate, not degenerate. That would be the matter of "diving."

Which, applied to the state of Stompin' Tom Connor's "Good Ol' Hockey Game," means we've got problems, a slide toward what can only be termed as "almost irreversible."

Coming out of "The Lockout" Gary Bettman and his diligent crew of rule diddlers flogged a new-age attention to what had been slowing down the game. Namely, the sissy penalties of interference, slashing, hooking, and holding, and whaddaya know, calling those infractions worked.

Suddenly ham-handed, iron-fisted Gary B was a genius. Not only had he whipped the union into submission, but he was calling the shots on the ice. Euphoria reigned and the NHL sailed their scow toward safe harbour lights, right?

We were also told the regular season was the proper place to begin, and there would be a crackdown on the newest flashpoint of diving. Didn't happen, hasn't happened, and now, won't happen. Presently in the playoffs where the real hockey is played, it's considered a commonplace offense.

Confused? OK, you're familiar with the call where the tripper, slasher, elboweer, high sticker, gets two? Well, it was followed by the pretend embellisher getting two for "doin' the doo-doo." It was also referred to as the "Vince Carter," arms flailing, writhing and grimacing in agony and sinking to the ice with a reluctant trainer shuffling to the rescue.

If you read last week's column, the one on dictionary descriptions, the correct word applying to this sorry state is "embar-

rassment," closely followed by "disgust."

With the magic of slo-mo replay, viewers and arena audiences are able to see the "mirage" no-no in detail, which isn't afforded to the refs. Working in real-time, real speed, they don't have that luxury. But over the years I've often had the pleasure of conversing with officials, and one thing sticks out when it comes to their calls. They see more than we ever will.

Because being in the play, embedded within the action, they take account of nuances and clues even hi-def and slo-mo re-runs miss. In their proximity they can gauge intent and malice, pure ham acting with add-ons, and the all-important missing ingredient, the sounds of the perceived violence.

Within that instant info, when that arm comes down they have the discretion to send off the diver. Alone. Therein, lies the key to correcting the flaw.

Try explaining to the coach how you alone were sent to the penalty box on a fake attempt to have the opposing team penalized. Try explaining it twice. In an entire season.

And don't kid yourself, any referee worth his red armbands has the help of "profiling" the game's leading practitioners. So, why not use it?

For examples, refs Bill Friday, Ron Wicks, Bruce Hood, Art Skov, and Red Storey gained nightly respect from the players by setting the tone from the opening whistle. Problem is, since the advent of today's two-referee "turf" system, it has morphed into zone-officiating rather than game management.

There was a time hockey held a "tough" standard of conduct. That code is waning, now replaced by "dirty." The NHL hasn't stomped hard enough on divers, the emboldened cheats smearing the profession that pays them so well. By not calling them out, the divers' ranks grow. It's now OK to "fake one, for the team."

In my experience, the only ones who

admire diving as a tactic, or condone the nefarious advantage gained by diving, are "homer-fans," who never see the local heroes do anything wrong. Therefore, in my opinion any player who practices, condones, or supports the act of diving is guilty of dishonouring the game. Divers should be standing over there, huddling in the corner. Embarrassed, exposed, and excluded.

Seven years later, with many words written in on the subject, I'm now of the opinion little will be done about NHL "diving." Within professional ranks, regardless of the sport, it's reprehensible for an athlete to conduct business this way. It should be treated as such. It should be a source of humiliation for those involved. Well, it isn't.

Within all pro sports, the fear appears to be, tarring the diver tars the game. OK, then do it behind closed doors. The NHL looks at game film constantly, and incidents of diving, called or not called, can be referred to the league office for review. If necessary, in dealing with a second or third time offender, a league ordered conference call, along with the offender's GM and coach, can be held to relay the facts of life to the diver moving forward. The private, "proceed at your own peril" approach, will guarantee the diver, coach, and GM have been put on notice. No gray areas, no ambiguity, no misunderstanding. Play "dive free" or suffer the consequences of a public suspension. This blight on the game must be stopped. Mr. Bettman, so if you have another remedy, let's hear it. Don't sit there with "ego" on your face, like it's somehow beneath your concern.

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*"... a masterful storyteller who can bring to life the nostalgia, joy, fun and pain of hockey from the Golden Era forward. No one does it better!"*

*– from review by Kevin Cleghorn - Football Reporters of Canada – Thunder Bay, ON*