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It's a Free Country: The Demise of Major League Hockey in the West

For a time in the 1920s there were three professional ice hockey organizations that claimed major league status in North America. The oldest, the National Hockey League (NHL), operated in the eastern half of the continent. The Pacific Coast Hockey Association (PCHA) held franchises along the Pacific Coast. As a relative late-comer, the Western Canadian Hockey League, (WCHL) claimed the Canadian prairies as its domain. In 1924,

the two western organizations merged to become the Western Hockey League (WHL). Within two years, however, the WHL disbanded, leaving the NHL as the undisputed authority of professional hockey. Major league professional hockey would not return to the areas covered by these two defunct leagues until the late 1960s.

The above development was perhaps not surprising. As part of the entertainment industry, early professional hockey depended almost exclusively on gate receipts. Population and the distances between population centers in the western half of the continent made it a difficult proposition, even if the twenties were the “Golden Age of Sport.” Yet, the demise of major league hockey in the west presents an interesting case study in the collapse of a cartel. Despite the economic and logistic realities in the west, the NHL was pursuing a market expansion strategy at approximately the same time. Between the two groups, old relationships and new alliances made the collapse a dynamic and exciting affair as deals were made and broken.

Using newspaper sources and correspondence between the two leagues and within the NHL, this paper seeks to examine the collapse of the WHL. It explores the collapse in the context of the relationship between the two leagues. Both the WHL and the NHL participated in an inter-league agreement which provided for some measure of stability within professional hockey. For a brief moment in 1926, the disintegration of the WHL allowed for an unbridled free market in the buying and selling of players. Through the activities of several opportunistic individuals, new franchise entries into the NHL actually received some quality players; thus giving some of the clubs a solid foundation to build their business. This is significant as the success of these clubs would bolster the reputation of the NHL as the supreme authority in professional hockey.



NASSH President Don Morrow.