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Lacrosse

(continued)

that lacrosse is more than just a city in Wisconsin.

Hockey's fingerprints are all over indoor lacrosse, from the glass and boards that surround the playing surface, to the body checks the players throw and the penalties the officials dish out. Apropos, considering the Swarm are the newest member of the National Lacrosse League, which is collaborating with NHL franchises in nine of their 11 home markets.

The NHL has undergone numerous makeovers since its inception in 1987. Eighteen franchises have folded as the league struggled to appeal beyond the sport's traditional strongholds in Canada and the northeastern

United States.

However, a determined new commissioner with visions of a regional sports empire contends he has the formula for success, trading mom-and-pop entrepreneurs for big-league ownership. The results have been promising.

The Swarm join a league that has expanded westward, with teams in Calgary, Vancouver, California and Arizona. In 2000, the franchise entry fee was \$250,000. It is now \$3 million. Attendance has increased 29 percent in the past three years, with an average of 10,089 taking in indoor lacrosse games last season.

The 16-game regular season begins in January and runs through April, with the Swarm playing host to eight weekend matches at Xcel starting Jan. 21. If the NHL remains locked

out, the Swarm would have plenty of displaced fans to attract and seats to fill in the short term.

Wild management says the investment was three years in the making, not a knee-jerk reaction to hockey's long-awaited labor stoppage. The organization is counting on some crossover from hockey fans. But it is bullish that lacrosse, with its relatively modest ticket prices, rollicking style of play and lunch-bucket brigade of accessible players, will be able to stand on its own.

"It is possible, we think, to be profitable in our first year," said Matt Majka, senior vice president of business operations for Minnesota Sports and Entertainment, parent company of the Wild and Swarm.

"It will not be easy. We haven't achieved profitability yet with our season-ticket base or corporate sponsorships. But we can get there."

Normally, prices vary from \$10 to \$25, with season-ticket packages going for \$80; Wild tickets range from \$12 to \$80, with an average price of \$50.72. But the Swarm gave away 20,000 tickets for tonight's exhibition, including 15,000 requested by people who registered on the team Web site, www.mnswarm.com.

The team also is tapping into the emerging pool of lacrosse players in Minnesota. About 6,000 are registered with the state chapter of U.S. Lacrosse, the sport's governing body. The biggest growth is among high school boys and girls teams, which have increased from 21 in 1999 to 77 this year.

Majka said the team is nego-

tiating with local stations to televise at least a few of the home games. He hopes to build a season-ticket base of 2,000.

The game might resemble hockey on turf, but the strategy is mostly modeled on basketball.

There is frequent scoring (25 goals-per-game average), a shot clock (30 seconds) and fast breaks. And there is plenty of contact with players colliding on the open floor and scrumming along the boards.

"It's going to appeal to anybody who likes high-end, fast-paced sports with crashing and banging at every instance," Swarm general manager Marty O'Neill said. "There's no icing, no offsides, no second down and no timeout to get a relief pitcher."

Seventy-five percent of the league's players are Canadian, and the vast majority hold full-time jobs outside lacrosse. A leaguewide salary cap calls for rookies to earn \$6,300 per season; top veterans draw \$22,500.

They are firefighters and guidance counselors, teachers and fathers, who rush into cities for weekend games, share drinks with fans in the arenas afterwards and fly home in time to punch in Monday morning.

And that is part of the appeal for fans. The sport cuts across most demographics, from families looking for cheaper entertainment to 20-somethings looking for a good time on a Friday night.

The Colorado Mammoth have a season-ticket base of 8,000. Last year, they sold out six of eight games and averaged 17,400 fans at the Pepsi Center. E. Stanley Kroenke, who runs

SNAPSHOT LACROSSE

SAY WHAT?

A quick glossary of lacrosse terminology:

Cradling: A player flicking his stick back and forth to protect the ball in the pocket from defenders.

Hidden ball play: A player without the ball cradles his stick to draw defenders while a teammate with the ball passes or shoots.

Loose ball: Neither team has possession of a ball that is bouncing, rolling or rebounding off boards and glass.

Major penalties: Five minutes for spearing, checking from behind or fighting. If the team with the advantage scores two goals, the other team can replace the penalized player on the floor, but the penalized player remains in the box for the full term.

Minor penalties: Two minutes for holding, slashing, tripping or delay of game.

Penalty expires and player returns to the floor if the team with the advantage scores a goal.

Offensive screen: An attacking player impedes a defender or another attacker without possession of the ball.

Outlet pass: From the goaltender, this begins the transition from defense to offense.

Technical penalty: No time infraction for illegal screens, touching a ball in play or pushing.

DID YOU KNOW?

■ National Lacrosse League games average 25 goals per game.

■ About 75 percent of the league's players are Canadian.

■ Rookies earn \$6,300 per season; top veterans earn \$22,500.

Source: National Lacrosse League

the NHL's Avalanche and the NBA's Nuggets, owns the Mammoth.

Since Jim Jennings took over as commissioner in 2000, league revenues increased 400 percent to \$21.4 million in 2003, and five teams turned profits in the past two years. With regional cable TV contracts beaming lacrosse into 60 million homes last season, Jennings envisions a 16-team league.

"It would be very tempting to take a \$3 million check from a doctor or a lawyer, throw holy water on the building, and hope the entrepreneur can make it work. But our goal is to have ownership structures like those

in Minnesota and Denver," he said.

Marc Ganis, a sports-marketing consultant in Chicago, said lacrosse has the elements that appeal to an American audience. But he cautioned that the NLL needs to be realistic about whether it can take a niche sport and attract a broad audience.

"The biggest mistake would be for them to shoot for more than they can achieve and run out of money and fans and watch their grandiose plans turn to ashes," Ganis said.

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