
THE WESTMOUNT ARENA FIRE

Disbanding the Redbands

BY JOHN GALES

A SPECIAL MEETING OF THE NEWLY ORGANIZED National Hockey League took place in early January of 1918. The purpose of the meeting was to address the potential withdrawal of the Montreal Wanderers hockey club, the famous “Red Bands,” Stanley Cup champions as recently as 1910. The focus of the meeting was on the lack of competitive status of the current Wanderers team and the destruction of the Westmount Arena due to fire, which occurred on the afternoon of January 2, 1918. The arena was home to both the Wanderers and the Montreal Canadiens. The arena fire is typically considered a key catalyst for the Wanderers’ disbandment. However, I contend that this is merely a simplistic account of the situation.

The story told herein is not written to determine the origin of the fire, which is in all likelihood lost in time. Only facts related to the financial and competitive prospects of the Montreal Wanderers are presented. This is a story almost a hundred years old, and gaps exist; hopefully, this paper fills some of the gaps. The demise of the Wanderers was due to various incidents, which are addressed in this paper: first, the Wanderers’ context at the time of the NHL’s formation, then certain events that occurred during the 1917/18 NHL season, and finally the fire and its aftermath. The goal is to allow the reader to decide whether the Wanderers’ withdrawal from the NHL was, as team owner Sam Lichtenhein said, for the benefit of the NHL or, rather, if it was for the benefit of the team itself.

Before the NHL

TO BEGIN THE TALE, IT IS NECESSARY TO LOOK AT THE context of the Wanderers at the time of the NHL’s formation. This starting point involves the competitive and financial status of the Wanderers, the state and legitimacy of the Toronto NHL franchise, and Quebec’s suspension from the league for the upcoming season. These were all seeds

that would have an impact on the Wanderers as they headed into the 1917/18 NHL season.

The Montreal Wanderers were formed in 1903 by James Strachan. By 1910, the club had secured the Stanley Cup championship four times and defended it on other occasions. In 1911, the team was sold to Sam Lichtenhein, an avid sports enthusiast who also owned a professional baseball team, the Montreal Royals of the International League. During the 1914/15 National Hockey Association (NHA) season, the Wanderers tied for first but lost in a playoff to their longtime rivals the Ottawa Senators. By this time, there had been numerous reports in the media describing Lichtenhein’s financial losses in professional sport, specifically his baseball franchise. War in Europe had been taking its toll financially and competitively on sporting teams, and the Wanderers were not immune. By the 1916/17 NHA season, the Wanderers finished last, with a combined record of five wins and 15 losses, including a five-game losing streak to start the season. As they entered the newly formed NHL, the Wanderers were not the competitive team they once were.

Perhaps the story of the Wanderers’ disbandment has been — and is — overshadowed by the young NHL’s constant legal battle with Eddie Livingstone, the owner of the NHA’s Toronto Blueshirts. The NHL was created with a temporary franchise in Toronto instead of Livingstone’s Blueshirts. The Toronto franchise employed former Blueshirt players and, due to manager Charles Querrie’s decision to wear blue uniforms (he had planned on wearing red, but decided on blue so as not to be confused with Montreal’s teams), the club was still referred to as the Blueshirts by the media. Important to our story, and related to the Wanderers, is the fact that player transfers and movements were largely blocked by Livingstone’s alleged involvement (argued by Querrie in the *Toronto Daily Star*) with the NHL team at the start of the 1917/18

NHL season, a specific case of which is covered later in this paper. Near the time of the Wanderers' collapse, Querie would obtain complete control of the temporary Toronto team, and player transfers between Toronto and other clubs would begin to occur. However, the legal battles between Livingstone and the league would only grow.

To permit the space for this "temporary" Toronto franchise, to balance the schedule with an even number of teams and to recover finances, Mike Quinn of the Quebec Bulldogs declared that his club would withdraw from the NHL and his players would be distributed amongst the league's other teams. Quebec's players, a solid core, were largely the same group that had won the Stanley Cup five years earlier. Quebec had split their matches (10–10) in the 1916/17 NHA season, finishing above the Wanderers in the standings. All four remaining teams (Toronto, Ottawa, Canadiens and Wanderers) would receive some of Quebec's players.

The NHL was young, was still suffering the effects of the withdrawal of the Toronto-based 228th Battalion a season earlier, and was troubled by NHA ties. All teams had to post a bond at the start of the season guaranteeing that they would finish the schedule. Though the media questioned whether the weaker Wanderers should have suspended operations instead of Quebec, no such request was made at the time of entry, and as such the Wanderers were expected to play the 1917/18 NHL season.

The 1917/18 NHL Season

THE 1917/18 SEASON BEGAN WITH MUCH UNCERTAINTY for the Wanderers. Players were drained from the team's ranks for a number of reasons: the war in Europe, injuries and no-shows/holdouts. Possible trades seemed to be blocked on contingencies and interference. All of this led to the NHL calling a special meeting in early January of 1918 to address the potential withdrawal of the Wanderers.

With the war, players were becoming scarce due both to voluntary enlistment and conscription. If an athlete was conscripted, he needed an exemption, granted at a war tribunal, in order to play hockey. In 1917, Lester and Frank Patrick announced that the Pacific Coast Hockey Association, hockey's other major league at the time, would postpone play until after Christmas to allow the results of various tribunals to be decided. Two players on the Wanderers team would be up for tribunal: Odie Cleghorn and Harry Hyland. Cleghorn would be exempted, but this was based solely on business, and he was forbidden to play hockey. Hyland would also be granted an exemption, though not forbidden to play hockey. In light of Cleghorn's exemption, many doubted that he would risk playing. There were also rumours that Hyland would be retiring before the season started.

The Wanderers would receive some relief for player losses due to Quebec's aforementioned withdrawal and player dispersal, obtaining David Ritchie, Jack McDonald, George

Carey and Jack Marks. Ritchie was an offensive rushing defenceman who had scored 17 goals in 19 games in 1916/17, beating the Wanderers' own star, Sprague Cleghorn, who managed 16 goals the previous season. McDonald was a solid forward, though his contribution would not fill the loss of Odie Cleghorn. Marks had largely been used as a consistent substitute by Quebec the previous season. Carey was a promising young hockey player at the time, whose biography is largely unknown. Though history seems to have forgotten the likes of these players, each was considered at the time a solid performer. The earlier loss of Wanderers personnel seemed to be compensated for by the addition of the Quebec players. But key players such as Rusty Crawford, Joe Malone and Joe Hall — future Hall of Famers, all with viable years left in their careers — were assigned to other teams. At this point, things would worsen for the Wanderers.

The first practice of the Wanderers, widely considered a weak team by the media, consisted of three substitute players from the 1916/17 team. Due to the low turnout at practice, manager Art Ross, who would later go on to be the principal architect of the 1929, 1939 and 1941 Boston Bruin Stanley Cup champions, went to Quebec to round up the players who had not yet reported. George Carey refused to move out of Quebec, and he would not play again in the NHL until Quebec was readmitted in the 1919/20 season. The NHL records indicate that he was suspended for failing to report. David Ritchie initially failed to report to the team for practices. Shortly after acquisition, Jack Marks decided to practise in Toronto prior to the start of the season and publicly stated that he did not want to play for the Wanderers. In late November of 1917, about the time of the acquisition of the Quebec players, Sprague Cleghorn, the Wanderers' star defenceman, injured his ankle falling on ice while walking on St. Catherine Street in Montreal. The injury was at the time considered career-threatening, and he launched a \$10,000 lawsuit against the City of Montreal. Sprague would not play the 1917/18 NHL season.

For the next Wanderers' practice, Harry Hyland attended, providing some glimmer of hope for the team. David Ritchie would eventually show up prior to the beginning of the season. Ross, who had previously announced his intention to retire, would suit up for the Wanderers as a substitute defenceman to start the season.

On December 12, 1917, due to the lack of players and the no-shows at practice, Lichtenhein would declare in the news, "I must have players turned over to me by the other clubs, and must know definitely where I stand by Saturday night or I will withdraw the Wanderers." This demand, and others like it by Ross, did not sit well with the media. It was thought the Wanderers should be negotiating for other players rather than demanding them. The *Toronto Daily Star* reported that Frank Calder, president of the NHL, stipulated that Lichtenhein was "not a quitter." It was reported by the media that the Montreal Canadiens

subsequently loaned the Wanderers some players (if they could sign them), specifically Walter Mummery, Tommy Smith and a player known as Roy, who was likely Jimmy Roy. George Kennedy, owner of the Montreal Canadiens, was vocal on the situation, stating that if the Wanderers would pay the money they could get as many players as any other club, and that the time to quit was before the schedule was drawn up. Calder suggested that the Wanderers trade the rights to no-show Jack Marks for holdout Harry Mummery of the Toronto team. That trade did not happen; Querrie reported to the media that he would not consider a trade unless Harry actually showed up for practice.

The 1917/18 NHL season began with the Wanderers at home against Toronto. A small number of fans, 700 in total, were in attendance. With weak goaltending by Toronto (who alternated between Art Brooks and Sammy Hebert for the game), the Wanderers won 10–9. Harry Hyland scored five goals despite suffering an eye injury late in the game. David Ritchie scored two and assisted on two others. The victory would be dubbed by the Montreal *Gazette* as “lucky.” In later games, the Wanderers struggled in losing causes: 11–2 to the Canadiens, witnessed by only 1,000 spectators, then 6–3 and 9–2 against Ottawa. Art Ross suffered a back injury in the Wanderers’ third game, which was his last as a professional athlete. Marks finally reported to the Wanderers for their fourth game, providing some relief. Ross discussed with the media that the score did not reflect the tenor of the game, during which Ritchie, McDonald and Marks were standouts.

Toronto’s loss to the Wanderers made clear that Manager Querrie wanted a better goalie. New goalies who were proven in professional hockey were scarce. Not since Clint Benedict had come along had any true prospects emerged. One potential goalie from the old guard was Harry Holmes. In 1914, Holmes backstopped the original Blueshirts to the Stanley Cup title. Holmes was back in the east and had expressed interest in playing in the NHL. He had attended, though not participated in, Toronto practices prior to the season’s commencement. When Toronto tried to sign him, they were blocked by the Wanderers and, allegedly, by Eddie Livingstone. Two seasons before, the Wanderers had given the Pacific Coast Hockey Association the rights to star player Dr. Gordon Roberts for future considerations. It was revealed that the Wanderers had a working agreement for West Coast players in the east. Consequently, if Toronto wanted Holmes, they had to offer a player to the Wanderers. The Wanderers offered Holmes for Reg Noble. Contrary to belief, Holmes had no desire to play for the Wanderers. To complicate matters, it was alleged that Livingstone had merely leased his players to the current Toronto team and that no player transfers could occur without his permission. Querrie threatened to quit entirely unless he was given full control of the team by the Arena Company, which represented the NHL Toronto franchise. Eventually, Toronto did agree to a trade: Alf Skinner to the Wanderers for Holmes.

But this deal was contingent on the Canadiens and Senators also agreeing to player transfers to the Wanderers. Ottawa and the Canadiens had to give Rusty Crawford and Joe Malone, respectively, to the Wanderers. The condition was in part due to the Wanderers’ requesting Malone and Crawford earlier in the season. Given that Malone was currently tied for the scoring lead, it was unlikely that the Canadiens would want to part with him. From the Wanderers’ and Toronto’s perspective, though, Malone and Crawford were former Quebec players. The Senators and Canadiens, in essence, were not actually losing any players by giving them away. Crawford would eventually be released by Ottawa midway through the season.

A meeting was scheduled by the league for early January to discuss the Wanderers’ need for players and threats to withdraw from the circuit. At the time of the proposed meeting, Harry Hyland stood seventh in league scoring with six goals, and defenceman Ritchie was ninth in the league with five markers. Joe Malone was tied for first in goals with 12, which might explain the Canadiens’ reluctance to part with him. The Wanderers were a weaker team than their rivals; they sat in last place at the time the meeting was called, with a 1–3 record. The Canadiens were 3–1, while Toronto and Ottawa had both split their matches with 2–2 records.

The Fire at the Westmount Arena and Aftermath

ON JANUARY 3, 1918, A MEETING WAS HELD IN MONTREAL to address the concerns of the playing state of the Wanderers and the destruction of the Westmount Arena in Montreal. On the afternoon of January 2, the Westmount Arena, home of the Wanderers and Canadiens as well as various city league teams, caught fire and was destroyed. The Wanderers would disband, and Montreal would not see a new arena in Westmount until 1924.

The Westmount Arena was built in 1898, and was an early hockey Mecca. More than 10 Stanley Cup finals/challenges, as well as hockey’s first all-star game, were played there. The arena, very modern for its time, consisted of a mixed construction: brick shell, steel framework and timber stands. The arena cost \$75,000, of which \$14,000 encompassed the cost of the steel. After construction, an industrial plant was built for artificial ice-making. The arena could seat 4,000 fans and was insured for \$50,000 (over \$600,000 in current dollars based on the Consumer Price Index). A marvellous photograph of the inside of the arena (pre-fire) was printed in Arthur Farrell’s *Hockey: Canada’s Royal Winter Game*.

Within 20 minutes of the start of the fire on the afternoon of January 2, 1918, the entire arena was ablaze. The building collapsed after 30 minutes from the effect of sheer heat to the steel work and loss of brick walls. In addition, the walls of the building were blown out from a subsequent boiler explosion. Before the fire, the arena had been satisfactorily inspected by the insurance underwriters. An



MCCORD MUSEUM N-1977.76.166



MCCORD MUSEUM N-1977.76.165

In 1918, Alfred Walter Roper, an amateur photographer, photographed the entire debris field of the arena. Six photographs of the Arena were subsequently donated by his family to the McCord Museum in Montreal in 1977 and represent one of the first complete sets of photos of a fire debris field. The silver-salts-on-glass photographs illustrate the time of year, the sheer size

of the facility, and its devastation. The top photo (N-1977.76.166) depicts the state of the buckled steel columns that supported the roof. The bottom picture (N-1977.76.165) illustrates the few remaining walls. Further details of the structure/fire itself are beyond the scope of this paper; however, they are ample within the newspaper reports of the time.

investigation was carried out to determine the cause and the origin of the fire. At the time, the cause was determined to be an electrical fault in the wiring of the building, although other causes were speculated (cigarettes, boiler malfunctions, etc.). The fire was said to have originated within the Wanderers' dressing room below some offices. No one was killed in the fire. According to the *Montreal Gazette*, the arena's superintendent, James McKeene, was initially alerted of the fire at dinnertime and was able to leave his north-end annex home to be at the scene. The fire spread across the street to houses on Wood Avenue (located west of the arena) and to the ice-making plant (located on the arena's east side). Subsequently, firefighters decided to salvage the surrounding buildings rather than attack the arena fire in a losing cause. The brigade eventually left the scene at 4 o'clock on January 2, with the building in complete ruins. The game that night between the Canadiens and Wanderers was postponed; much of the equipment was destroyed in the fire. Two photographs taken after the fire are reproduced herein.

The Wanderers and other teams would have to play elsewhere if they were to play at all. Almost instantly, the Wanderers announced their intention to withdraw from the NHL. Their players would be distributed to other teams and the league would be reduced to three teams.

The Wanderers had always been considered a team for the English-speaking community of Montreal; hence the location of Westmount. The Canadiens appealed to the French fans in the city. Both teams were offered the chance to play in the Jubilee Arena, located in east Montreal, after the fire. Immediately upon this, Lichtenhein announced that "If they [the fans] won't come to the Arena to see my team play they certainly won't go all the way to the Jubilee rink." Quebec offered its arena for the duration of the season. Considering that the majority of the Wanderers players (even some holdouts) had played in Quebec the previous season, this scenario would have produced a more competitive team, especially in front of home crowds. However, the Quebec club had withdrawn from the NHL prior to the season for various reasons, so this scenario may not have been desirable to Lichtenhein. Quebec would end up hosting a single game that season, between the Canadiens and Senators on February 27.

In a stormy meeting with league directors, Lichtenhein threatened to disband his team if the other owners did not sell high-calibre players to him. This demand was refused. At one point, Toronto representative G. B. Claxton ordered Lichtenhein to leave, declaring that he would not be dictated to by the owner of the Wanderers. Lichtenhein then announced his intention to withdraw. On January 7, Lichtenhein released his combined hockey and baseball losses, amounting to \$180,000 (over \$2 million in current dollars), to the media. At first, the NHL rejected his withdrawal, but upon the Wanderers not showing up for their scheduled game against Toronto on January 5, the league promptly revised the schedule for the three remaining teams.

The Toronto media suggested that the games between the Wanderers and other teams, especially the loss incurred earlier by Toronto, should not count in the standings. Toronto had been in a race for first place with the Canadiens in the first half of the season. Frank Calder declared that the previous games had been played and, on the merits of play, counted. For the scheduled and postponed Wanderers games against Toronto and the Canadiens (respectively), both teams were given a win and one goal in the standings as forfeits. The rotation of games at this point was that the Wanderers had played Ottawa twice, and against the Canadiens and Toronto only once. There was a cancelled game between the Wanderers and Toronto that was supposed to have been played on January 5, but the Wanderers and the judge of play were absent. The Toronto team iced its players and scored a goal. This was in part to underscore that they indeed lived up to their responsibility to play the game as scheduled.

Every Wanderers player was dispersed to another NHL team. Harry Holmes would join Toronto and participate in the aforementioned game. Toronto sought David Ritchie, but Ottawa instead obtained his rights. Ritchie would later join Toronto for the next season. Since Ottawa's Jack Darragh had staged a brief retirement, Harry Hyland was brought in as a potential replacement. Hyland himself would retire after the season. Bert Lindsay, the Wanderers' goalie, would also join Toronto the next season, replacing Harry Holmes, who went to play for Seattle on the West Coast. Jack Marks would sign with Toronto on January 22. Jack McDonald would score nine goals in eight games to finish the season with the Canadiens. Sprague and Odie Cleghorn would both return to the NHL the next season to continue strong careers. Art Ross would go on to manage the NHL's Hamilton Tigers before taking on the expansion Boston Bruins in 1924.

Although the media speculated a revival of the Wanderers, a second Montreal team would not appear until a replacement arena was constructed in Westmount, that being the Montreal Forum. While the Forum is typically associated with the Canadiens today, it was originally intended for a new Montreal hockey team, dubbed "Maroons" by the media. The Maroons were founded in 1924 by James Strachan, the original owner of the Montreal Wanderers. As reported by Holzman and Neiforth, Strachan had intended to secure the Wanderers name, but could not obtain the rights from Lichtenhein. The Maroons would win two Stanley Cups, but like other clubs in the NHL, would collapse during the Great Depression, leaving Montreal with only one professional team: the Canadiens.

In March of 1918, Sam Lichtenhein folded the Montreal Royals of baseball's International League, completing his withdrawal from professional hockey and baseball entirely. His legacy, outlined in his *Montreal Gazette* obituary by D. MacDonald, was surrounded by the unlucky occurrences of fires to his businesses and sports enterprises: besides the Westmount Arena fire, his baseball grounds caught on fire

twice (in 1914 and 1916), and his father's business in Chicago was destroyed by the great fire in 1872.

Key Insights

THE EXACT CAUSE FOR THE DISBANDMENT OF THE Montreal Wanderers is debatable, but it is clear that the destruction of the arena was not the sole reason for the withdrawal. Finances, competitiveness, the war in Europe, injuries and internal struggles all contributed to the demise of the once-great franchise. Ultimately, Lichtenhein said that the Wanderers' withdrawal would be based on the league's benefit rather than the team's. Hopefully, the reader can now decide whether this statement was true.

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