

Growing the Game

An Interview with Gary Bettman,
Commissioner, National Hockey League



Commissioner Gary Bettman addressing the audience of an NHL event

EDITORS' NOTE Gary Bettman has served the National Hockey League as Commissioner since February 1993, and has guided the world's top professional hockey league through two decades of growth and advancement—on and off the ice. Bettman is a graduate of Cornell University and New York University School of Law.

ORGANIZATION BRIEF Headquartered in New York City, the National Hockey League (www.nhl.com; NHL) is a major professional ice hockey league of 30 franchised member clubs, of which seven are located in Canada and 23 in the United States.

How strong is the NHL today and are you surprised at how well this past season went?

We started the season later than we would have liked, but we had a season that was nothing short of phenomenal.

Our buildings played to nearly 98 percent of capacity in the regular season and 102 percent in the playoffs; we set television ratings records, including for the Stanley Cup Final; we had some teams with triple-digit increases in their local ratings; and we had large double-digit increases in fan engagement on NHL.com and for our digital products.

But all of this goes back to the fact that the game on the ice was competitive, exciting, and entertaining, and those elements combined to give us one of our strongest seasons ever.

Were you surprised by the level of fan engagement?

The emotional connection people have to this game is unlike that of any other sport and that is something we don't take for granted. It tends to explain why our fan base is so avid and why the game holds the position it does.

Has the fan base changed over the years and are you focused on broadening it?

The fan base is larger than it has ever been. Attendance 20 years ago was probably 11 or 12 million for the regular season and now it's over 20 million.

More people are watching the games on television than ever in our history; and more people are playing the game on all surfaces than at any point in our history.

When you look at the engagement either through digital platforms or video games, we're skewing younger and younger.

Is growth coming out of international markets as well as the U.S.?

We have never been stronger in the U.S. — and roughly 30 percent of our players come from outside of North America. So we are the most international of the four major North American sports leagues. This gives us a global reach to places where the game is well-known and followed, particularly when some of the best players in those countries choose to come and play at the highest level of hockey in the world, namely the NHL.

Add to that the fact that this is a sport where players have a history and tradition of representing their countries in international competition. We're embarking upon a season that will see Olympic participation. In terms of engagement, programming, and events, hockey tends to dominate the Winter Olympics. The eight teams most likely to medal will be largely populated by NHL players, which is why we will stop the season for several days so our players can participate on the international stage.

We're also looking forward to reestablishing the World Cup tournament on a regular basis and our players have historically participated in the World Championships, if their teams aren't in the playoffs.

So we understand the global nature of our game, of our player base, and of our fan base. To make it easier for our international fans to follow their favorite national players, we also provide language-specific content in Czech, Finnish, French, German, Russian, Slovak, and Swedish on NHL.com.

How critical is the investment in digital technology to building reach?

It has been huge for us because digital platforms, including social media, are an ever-present and increasingly important method of engagement and communication.

Where we have been historically challenged in traditional media, it gave us an opportunity to connect with our fans directly, giving them more of the content they want when they want it and on the devices of their choosing.

How have you been working to contribute to player safety?

It's essential for us to maintain a physical game. But over time, we have been able to analyze things that happen in the game that might not be necessary for us to maintain the physicality. By eliminating some of those hits and changing the culture of how the game is

played in that regard, we can make it safer and create an environment in which there are fewer unnecessary injuries. This focuses principally on how we have changed the rules in terms of hits to the head.

We were the first sports league, going back to the '90s, to create a working group to study concussions. We are the first league to have baseline testing; the first to have a protocol for diagnosis and return-to-play decisions; the first to create a department of player safety; and we are the first and only to document — on video — the reasons for our on-ice disciplinary decisions. We have enacted a number of rule changes to get those things out of the game that we don't think are necessary and can result in injury. We also continue to expend time, money, and resources on something that, from a medical standpoint, is still evolving.

How does the league focus its efforts on community engagement?

Professional sports have a unique opportunity and responsibility to set a good example. We have a long-time initiative called Hockey Fights Cancer that raises awareness and funds at the league and club levels.

The clubs do a lot, whether it is Ice Hockey in Harlem or the Ed Snider Youth Hockey Foundation in Philadelphia, which gives economically deprived inner-city youth an opportunity not to just learn the game but to gain life skills. This type of activity supports our core belief that "Hockey is for Everyone."

NHL Green makes sure our clubs recycle and that we're seeking alternative forms of energy. Our clubs also participate in Rock and Wrap It Up!, where we take prepared-but-unsold food from concessionaires after a game and provide hundreds of thousands of meals to people in shelters with that food.

What makes for an effective Commissioner?

The Commissioner in any sport is required to assume a leadership position, to set an agenda, and try to make sure the game is as healthy as it can be. He also needs to ensure that the sport is doing the right things for society and community as a whole. The integrity of the game is paramount.

Do you ever take time to truly appreciate the wins you have accomplished?

For me, it's all about the success of the game. It has to grow — it's not just about wins. It's about the game and the people connected to it. ●