

I was too young to notice the last time the NHL was on lockout. When the 2004/2005 season was cancelled entirely because the NHL and NHL Players Association (NHLPA) could not come to terms on a new Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA), I had better things to do. I still had hockey to play on Thursdays and Saturdays; all the lockout meant was that there was no hockey *to watch*. It wasn't a big deal, but as a college student, and retired amateur hockey player, the loss of my favourite sport leaves a significant void.

For me, the question became, "What does one do without their favourite activity?" or more accurately, "What does an addicted hockey fan do without hockey?" Intending to find out, I took to the streets of Ottawa. *Irene's Pub* on Bank Street was my first stop.

I splashed into the warmth and the roar of the pub at about 6:00pm. It was Saturday night, a hockey night – or at least it should have been. I sifted my way past dining customers, and found a spot at the bar. The pub was noisy, and crowded, but not as full as it should have been. The "Open Stage" was over, and there wasn't another event until 9:30. With the entertainment heading home, the straggling patrons joined the crush of football fans at the bar.

The wall-mounted TV was showing the Toronto Argonaut vs. Saskatchewan Rough Riders game. The third quarter was just beginning and the talk was of Rickie Ray's offensive night. I listened enviously, and remembered when Senators defenseman, Erik Karlsson was the talk of the pub.

"Can I get you something?" asked the bartender.

Salt and pepper beard, kind eyes; my kind of bartender. I asked for a *Canadian*, and, as expected, he asked for my ID. When he brought me my beer, I figured now was the best time to ask for an interview. He agreed, but said he was too busy to at that moment. I sat and waited for the Argo's to put away the Rough Riders.

About fifteen minutes later, I called him over for my next beer.

"Go ahead and ask me one," he said as he slid my beer across the counter.

"Has the pub been less busy since the [NHL] lockout started?"

"Oh yeah," he began, "we've got a pretty big group tonight, but usually on Saturdays we've got hockey fans coming in to watch a game."

Just then, the bar erupted as Argonauts quarter back, Rickie Ray, made his fourth touchdown pass of the night. The bartender put his finger up, smiled, and left to service a spilt beer. When the bar settled, he returned.

"What do you guys usually put on TV now that there's no hockey?"

“Most people ask for football,” he explained, “but sometimes people ask for us to put on the 67’s game, but that’s not very often.”

The bar remained quiet for a while, as the Agro’s struggled to keep the lead in a close game.

“What brings the crowds to the pub, the bands or hockey?”

“The bands,” he said, “that’s what the pub really is, we’re a place for local musicians to come and play. Tons of people come to watch hockey, but the acts are the number one thing that bring people.”

The third quarter ended with the score 28-20 Argonauts. The bartender left me again to attend to patrons as their orders came in during the stoppage. He kept busy while the final quarter started, so I watch on – trying to enjoy myself. It was then I remembered that I really don’t like football. Sure the hits are big, but it’s too slow. I need the speed and skill that hockey requires; the split second decisions at full speed that can win or lose the game. I needed to watch some hockey.

About a week and a half after my interview at *Irene’s* I attended an Ottawa 67’s game. They were playing their division rivals the Kingston Frontenacs.

The smell of the ice lingered in the lobby of the Scotiabank Place just as the smell of chlorine does at a pool. It had been a long time since I had attended a live game; I got excited. I found my seat, and taking a look around noticed how barren it was. I had intended on finding someone to talk to before the game, but I decided to just sit back and get my fix first.

Kingston’s Centre, Ryan Kujawinski, opened the scoring just a minute-and-a-half in. Seven minutes later, 67’s Assistant Captain, Tyler Graovac tied the game on a terrific pass by Ottawa Senators first round draft pick, Cody Ceci. Through the first period, both teams traded chances evenly, and the score at the first intermission was 2-2.

While my focus had been narrowed by the first period, I hadn’t noticed the folks sitting in front of me. I grabbed my notebook, slid down a step, and introduced myself. The man introduced himself as Robert; he was there with his young grandson.

“Are you guys big hockey fans, and if so, what are you doing without the NHL?” I asked.

“We’re huge hockey fans,” he said as he looked at his grandson. “We’ve been to a few 67’s games before and had a good time, so this is what we’re doing without our Hockey Night in Canada. My grandson is learning to play at the Bell Sensplex as well, so he’s got plenty of hockey.”

“Have you guys attended a lot of games this year, and did you attend a lot before the lockout?”

“Lots!” the grandson shouted out with a smile.

“Yep,” continued Robert, “we used to go to Sens games more than we would [67’s] games – I think we went to maybe one [last year]. But Sens tickets are expensive, so even then we’d only go to four or five. It’s nice now because these [67’s] tickets cost under 20 bucks, so we can see a bunch of them.”

“Have you noticed an increase in attendance from any games you’ve seen in the past?”

“Um,” he looked around, “I’d say tonight would be about the same amount of people that came around to games last year. We went to the home opener this year, and there was a huge crowd. It was really fun, right?”

His grandson nodded eagerly.

“So you’d say attendance has increased?”

“Yeah, for the most part. There are some games where you get a bad turnout, but for the most part, yeah there’s been more people.”

I thanked them both for their time and went to grab some food before the next period started. When the puck dropped, Kingston set the tone, getting a few quick shots off before Ottawa could reply. After a lot of pressure, Kingston drew a penalty. With just 15 seconds left in the infraction, Kingston winger, Cody Alcock, buried one. By the end of the second period, Kingston had scored three goals to Ottawa’s one.

I wandered from my seat in search of another interview. As I descended the stairs, I spotted the gold and crimson of a Senators jersey. I introduced myself, and Allen agreed to do an interview. I started with the obvious,

“Are you a Sens fan?”

“Yeah, man! I love my Sens,” he replied.

“Have you been coming to 67’s games since you’ve lost your Sens?”

“Nope, this is my first game.”

“Are you enjoying this game as much as you would enjoy a Sens game?”

“No, not *as* much, but it’s good hockey; lot’s of hits and it’s quick. I’m liking seeing Cody Ceci though – he’s the Sens first from this draft, eh.”

“Are you impressed by his play?”

“Oh yeah! He’s gonna be a good player in a few years, that’s easy to see.”

“So if you haven’t been attending 67’s games, what have you been doing without hockey?”

“Playing, man. Last year I played in a beer league with a few buddies, and I’m doing the same again. It actually takes your mind off of it. Watching hockey always makes me want to play it, but it doesn’t work the other way around. I never play and then want to watch.”

I finished up the interview and left Allen to watch the rest of the game. The Frontenac’s continued their dominant play throughout the third and were rewarded with a 7-4 win. I left the arena with a smile; it felt good to watch some hockey.

I go back now to that night at *Irene’s Pub*; it was a vastly different experience. I was finishing my beer when the bartender came back to me. Football fans were leaving the bar; the Argo’s had finished the Rough Riders 31-26.

“Got anymore, or want another beer?”

“Yeah, I’ll have another. And I’ve got a few more questions.”

He slid me my beer, and started wiping down the counter.

“Are you a hockey fan?”

“Big one,” he said, “love the Canadiens.”

“What have you been doing since the lockout?”

“Honestly, I never was a big football fan, but without any hockey, and with all these guys watching football at the bar, I’ve started to get into it.”

I finished my notes, and sat quietly – thinking.

“Is that it?” he asked.

“Yeah, I think so. Thanks.”

I pulled out my phone, it was 7:15. The puck should have been dropped by now, but there would be no crowds in the Scotiabank Place tonight.