

Spirits winning the box-office game

□ Spirits shoot for division lead, D2.

By LEN HOYES
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Mission Impossible has become Mission Possible. The Flint Spirits are profitable.

Officials are predicting a modest finish in the black for the 1986-87 season in the International Hockey League.

"It's not like we hit the Lotto and are instant millionaires. But we are cautiously optimistic about making a slight profit for the year," said Bob Perani, president of the two-year-old franchise.

The Spirits' situation is significant in the aftermath of an announcement Tuesday that owners of the Fort Wayne Komets fran-



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chise have petitioned for protection under Chapter 11 of the U.S. Bankruptcy Code.

Their situation also is significant because Flint hockey franchises have been money losers for at least six consecutive seasons, causing two changes of ownership and one shift of the franchise to Saginaw.

The IHL released attendance figures for

October and November, showing the Spirits with the lowest average (2,265) among all nine teams. Figures range as high as 4,384 for the Indianapolis Checkers. Fort Wayne ranked No. 3 with 3,472.

Counting games in December, the Spirits are drawing an average of 2,350. Attend-

ance traditionally increases after Christmas.

"Attendance is gradually creeping up and we are paying our bills," Perani said. "We have a few outstanding bills which are normal business procedures."

"We are current with our league obligations and have the resources to see us through a light home schedule during January and February."

The Spirits have played 17 home games, more than any other team, but have only five dates in January and five in February at IMA Sports Arena.

Their schedule situation is virtually the same as last season when a money shortage forced the previous owners to seek a buyer

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in January. Perani's group, which includes 19 investors, rescued the franchise barely two hours before it would have folded on Jan. 31.

Perani said, "We knew the schedule situation so we have prepared for it by using sound business principles. I have been called a tightwad for some decisions but they were made to survive."

"Our prime idea was to put a quality product on the ice to see if the public support was there. It is and we're happy. We always would like more fans but the interest is growing."

IHL Commissioner Bud Poile confirmed that the Spirits are current with league obligations.

"They have paid their monthly dues and their franchise fee was here right on time," Poile said. "The Flint group is approaching hockey as a business. They have Perani and (C.J.) Shelley watching the finances and are allowing Rick Dudley to manage the team."

"Flint has a very encouraging situation"

Included in payments already made by the Spirits is \$12,500 as part of the franchise fee. Perani's group assumed a \$62,500 obligation when it took control of the team, agreeing to pay in five annual installments.

At their present average of 2,350, the Spirits will draw 96,350 compared to 72,658 last season. The increase is 32.6 percent for 17 games.

Ironically, the 96,350 figure is less than 3,000 below the total attendance for the Flint Generals in 1983-84 when losses were announced between \$170,000 and \$180,000. In 1984-85, the Generals' final year in Flint, they announced attendance of 105,543 but claimed losses of \$120,000.

The Spirits obviously are tending to business.