

Flint's hockey story turns another page: What lies ahead?

LEN HOYES

OPINION



Another chapter in Flint's professional hockey history is under way.

The next month or so may decide if it's a long chapter or short. Without proper support from many agencies, it could be the finale.

It also could be a pleasant chapter because the new ownership of the Flint Spirits has sprung from the grass roots. That's the old Yankee ingenuity, the stuff which made this country great without resorting to the government trough.

The previous chapter lasted less than five months under the stewardship of Laraine and Carl Lamb.

Some call it Lambs being led to slaughter by the International Hockey League.

Some think of it as the first step toward returning Flint to respectability.

When the final results are in, the birth of the Spirits will be judged better in its proper context. As an election-night analyst might

say, it's too soon to call.

Instead of being dismissed as failures, the Lambs should be credited for trying when all else seemed lost. Perhaps they were naive in over-estimating the hockey climate in Flint. Others have done the same.

The Lambs' venture obviously was under-financed. Otherwise it would remain viable. Other IHL franchises have similar problems but none reached the brink of extinction as did the Spirits last weekend.

Laraine Lamb said the race against time to put a team on the ice overshadowed a chance to secure other investors.

Her point is valid. But anyone could have foreseen problems when only one of six October games drew more than 1,900 fans to IMA Sports Arena.

A call for help should have come sooner. The earliest rumors of problems came in mid-December but even then the official line was optimistic.

With a break-even estimate of 2,100-2,200 per game, 23 of 28 home games have been money-losers. Average attendance is 1,749, not that far away from being in the black.

TUE FEB 4 1986

Now another group is preparing to take control when its corporate structure is finalized. It's the seventh group to operate a Flint franchise in 17 seasons, including two which reorganized within themselves.

The group headed by Bob Perani, former star goalie for the Flint Generals, has a rugged task in merely getting airborne.

Without knowing particulars, I'm sure it's committed to absorbing some liabilities. A weak schedule of only three home games during February is another obstacle.

Then there's always the problem of a last-place team playing its final 10 home games in a six-week period.

The picture isn't all bleak.

Importantly, Perani's group is headed

by successful businessmen whose only aim is to keep the Spirits in Flint. Some valuable ideas have emerged and more will be forthcoming.

They have a good administrator on hand in Doug McKay. He earned a reputation as a tight-fisted general manager in Kalamazoo and Muskegon and fulfills the need of a struggling franchise if given the authority.

For another thing, the new owners have lists of a solid group of program advertisers and season ticket holders which were unavailable to the Lambs last August.

Those are important building blocks. They need only a few more to succeed.

With that in mind, they're having a get-acquainted sale.

Admission prices for Wednesday's game against Milwaukee have been reduced to \$4 for all seats. Season ticket holders can bring a friend for free.

Who could pass up a bargain like that?