

The NHL's Identity Crisis

While the National Hockey League lacks marketable superstars—unlike its professional sports peers—a handful of leading players have potential to glow



Photograph by Getty Images

Can you name the National Hockey League's leading scorer this season? How about the most recent winner of the league's Most Valuable Player award?

Despite being one of the "Big Four" North American pro sports leagues, the NHL has just three players on this year's Power 100: Chicago's Jonathan Toews (No. 69), Vancouver's Daniel Sedin (No. 76), and Boston's Tim Thomas (No. 86). The NHL's representation in the Power 100 is so low that it trails every other sport except action sports and boxing. By comparison, the National Football League has 26 players on the list, followed by the National Basketball Association, with 20, and Major League Baseball, with 16.

The cold reality is that hockey has an identity crisis. Unlike its Big Four counterparts, the NHL lacks a core group of marketable superstars. Of the 39 athletes who made a repeat appearance on each of the last three Power 100s, not one plays hockey.

As for the NHLers on the last Power 100, Pittsburgh's "Golden Child" Sidney Crosby has missed the better part of two years due to concussions; Washington's Alex Ovechkin is in the midst of back-to-back mediocre seasons, by his standards; and Chicago's Patrick Kane still is shedding perceptions that he's volatile off the ice. Even if both Crosby and Ovechkin were playing at their highest levels, it wouldn't resonate much with marketers or consumers. The NHL's two biggest stars register a low 7 percent total "Awareness," an *E-Poll Market Research* measurement that averages name and face recognition. The most recognizable pro players? Kobe Bryant, with a 57 percent Awareness score, Peyton Manning (46 percent), and Derek Jeter (45 percent).

Even Without Celebrities, Hockey Grows

The NHL is succeeding despite this situation. The league generated a record \$2.9 billion in revenue last season, a 7.4 percent increase from 2010, and expects to set records for both sales and attendance this season. The jump is attributed to new sponsorship deals—including 25 companies represented at the Jan. 25 All-Star Game—and growth within the league’s merchandising and licensing divisions. “More national business partners than ever are activating NHL-themed ads,” league spokesman Frank Brown wrote in an e-mail. “THEY are the [ones] who assess who our most-marketable players are and there is no shortage of candidates for major campaigns that these companies are eager to undertake.”

In addition, this NHL season begins a new, 10-year, \$2 billion TV rights agreement with NBC Sports. At an average of \$200 million annually, the deal far exceeds the previous NHL television record of \$120 million per year that ESPN (DIS) paid from 1999 to 2004. The NHL’s last deal with Versus was for \$77 million annually, plus a revenue-sharing pact with NBC (CMCSA).

“The NHL has done a great job in the last few years of engaging their core and finding ways to reach casual fans, especially through digital and social media and their ever-growing relationship with NBC,” said Chris Russo, chief executive officer of Big Lead Sports, an independent sports web. “However, the next step will be to find even more ways to involve the individual personalities of players.”

With Crosby out indefinitely and Ovechkin failing to live up to expectations, this is a suitable time for the NHL to reassess who its most marketable player might be. It could be the Rangers’ Brad Richards, the league’s highest-paid player in its biggest market, regularly drawing crowds to New York’s Madison Square Garden. Or perhaps it is Steven Stamkos, the young Tampa Bay Lightning star who leads the league in scoring and graces the cover of EA Sports’ *NHL 12* video game. Or Anaheim’s Corey Perry, the league’s 2010-11 MVP. Maybe it’s Toews, Sedin, or Thomas, the three hockey players that cracked the Power 100.

With the league’s collective bargaining agreement set to expire in September—and another work stoppage possible—the NHL can’t afford to lose more goodwill among fans, especially without a marketing savior.

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