The NHL makes fantasy hockey possible. But does fantasy hockey make the NHL possible?

Commissioner Gary Bettman has a vision for his NHL. To take what hockey has in Canada and northeastern United States and make the sport relevant in all of North America. To compete on equal footing with the NFL, NBA, and MLBA. By adding teams to the sunbelt region from Florida to California and everywhere in between, while attempting to land a lucrative national television contract.

The southern teams have had a lot of success as well with Tampa Bay, Anaheim, Dallas, and Carolina all winning the Stanley Cup. As Bettman was awarding the Cup in Anaheim to

thunderous applause I remember him stating "looks like hockey is alive and well in California!" While Carolina was in their two appearances in the Stanley Cup Final their fans were tailgating at the arena during every game day - all day and into the night the way they do for Nascar and football.

While this makes it clear that there are hockey fans in southern cities and all across North America they are fairweather fans. Where are these fans when times are tough for their team?

In the northern or "traditional" hockey markets, the fans are much more abundant, if not more committed. Fans in those markets are diehard fans of their team but, more significantly, are fans of hockey. So how can the NHL breed fans of "hockey" and not just casual fans who only follow their local team?

The answer is simple: fantasy hockey.

If you are reading this piece, chances are you belong to a hockey pool. Even if your fantasy team is horrible and is enduring a rebuild or coming off of an awful season you still check the boxscores daily and you have a vested interest in the NHL.

The best example I have ever seen for this is my father. A long time Leaf fan would watch if the Leafs were doing well. If not, then his interest was zero. Two years ago he joined my fantasy hockey league. Since then he has joined two more and plays weekly free pools on CBC and other sites. Now he watches a game almost every night. Now he watches a game on TV while simultaneously following boxscores on his laptop. Now he owns a jersey and shares season tickets. Now he is a "hockey" fan - more than just a Leaf fan.

All because of fantasy hockey.

The most successful pro sport league in North America is the NFL. The main reason why is gambling. Fans love to be in NFL pools and suicide pools etc. Because of this, the NFL enjoys major national broadcasting revenues. Fans love to watch games even if their home team is not playing, because they want to see how their fantasy squad or their picks are doing.

While the NHL makes fantasy hockey possible, fantasy hockey can fulfill Bettman's vision of the NHL. How can the NHL leverage fantasy hockey to be even close to as successful as the NFL? If this is the formula, how would you suggest the NHL executes? What would you do to grow fantasy hockey?