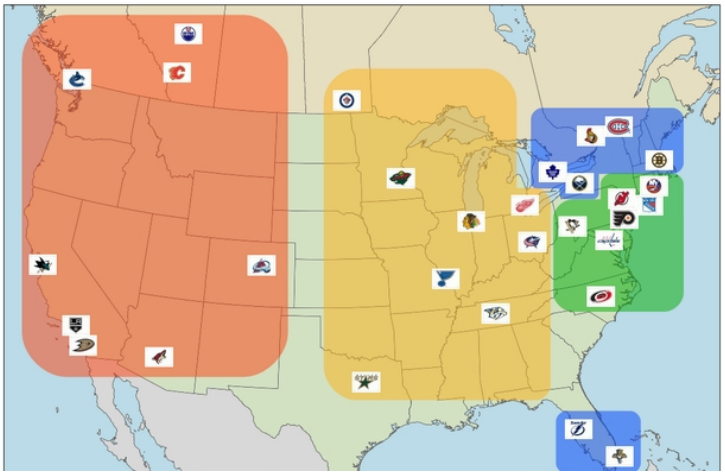

Fantasy League Expansion

My Twitter feed was abuzz recently when a respected media member casually dropped the suggestion that the NHL is prepared to announce expansion teams to Quebec City and Toronto upon resolution of the lockout.

Whether or not this particular scenario comes to pass, you have to think that the day is coming when the league will grow to 32 teams. As much as expansion has diluted the talent base of the league and contributed to the labour problems today by bringing in markets that are ill-suited for big league hockey, the lure of expansion dollars will eventually be too tempting to pass up. And, despite the league's insistence that they are in dire need of a financial reset, there remains a

long lineup of cities that want in.

Likewise, a well-run fantasy league will attract attention from poolies eager to join in the fun. In the five year existence of my GFHL, I've received interest from at least a dozen would-be owners. Since I've got a very stable group of owners (only two owners have left in those five years), existing teams rarely become available. But a couple years ago, we accommodated a couple of the guys on our waiting list by granting two expansion franchises, swelling the league from 12 to 14 teams.

I had planned for this eventuality when I began the league, so our expansion rules were already in place. I'll reprint the rules here, and then provide some explanation and some comments on what I learned in the process.

GFHL Expansion Rules:

14.1 In the event that a new owner wants to join the GFHL, approval by 75% of the league's owners is required.

14.2 Expansion teams will be awarded in pairs to maintain the head-to-head format.

14.3 When expansion occurs, an expansion draft will be conducted during the first two weeks of August by e-mail. A coin flip will determine which team picks first, and then teams will alternate.

14.4 Each existing franchise will be permitted to protect 8 F, 4 D and 2 G, with each new franchise selecting one player from each existing team. Protected lists must be submitted by August 1.

14.5 All players meeting the definition of a prospect are exempt from the expansion draft. The expansion franchises will not receive any prospects from the existing teams, and instead will select all their prospects through the entry draft.

14.6 Each existing team must make a minimum of 5 players available for the expansion draft. If, under the above rules, less than 5 players are left unprotected, the team owner must select some players to leave unprotected in order to meet the 5 player minimum.

14.7 The remainder of the new teams' rosters will be filled out through the entry draft, with additional picks added at the end of the draft as needed to reach the required roster size.

14.8 The expansion teams will receive the second and third overall picks in their first entry draft. The team that picked last in the expansion draft will be awarded the earlier pick in the draft.

14.9 Expansion owners should understand that they will likely not be a top contender for the first year or two, but will need to build and improve their team over time.

My thought process in drafting our expansion rules was to mimic the NHL as closely as possible. NHL expansion teams have their work cut out for them. They start off with a bunch of players plucked off the third and fourth lines of established teams, and add youth and star power through the draft. Building a successful expansion team doesn’t happen overnight; it takes years of hard work and patience.

While the rules above may seem restrictive, I knew that the managers in my league would be hesitant to approve an expansion if it was going to cost them a key roster piece. In fact, even with these restrictions, expansion was voted down the first time we considered it, before being approved the following year.

We’ve played two seasons since adding the Kings of Wellington and Skoal Bandits. As expected, both teams began their journey at the bottom of the league, with the Bandits finishing last and second last in their first two seasons, and the Kings finishing one spot above the Bandits each season.

However, it’s clear that brighter days are ahead for both teams, particularly the Kings, whose

owner won our Manager of the Year award last season. Check out the young talent the Kings have amassed in just two years and three drafts: Jordan Staal , Jordan Eberle , David Perron , Max Pacioretty , Blake Wheeler , Loui Eriksson , Brayden Schenn , Chris Kreider, Mikhail Grigorenko, Evgeni Kuznetsov, Duncan Keith , Victor Hedman , Adam Larsson , Justin Faulk , Joe Morrow , Semyon Varlamov, Josh Harding and Robin Lehner . This is not a team that will be languishing at the bottom of the standings for long; in fact, if this season is lost, I could see them challenging for a playoff spot when hockey finally resumes.

The Bandits are probably not as strong short-term, but with a prospects cupboard stacked by the likes of Tyler Seguin , Ryan Nugent-Hopkins , Mikael Granlund, Adam Henrique , Jaden Schwartz , Brandon Gormley and Ryan Murray, there is a ton of promise here as well. If this team can stay the course for another couple of years, it should be right in the thick of things.

So, overall, I would call the first round of GFHL expansion a success. The key is to find new owners who are in it for the long haul, and are willing to endure a few years at the bottom of the standings as they patiently build towards future success. With this approach, your league will have more Nashville Predators and less Columbus Blue Jackets.

Has your league undergone an expansion? What were your expansion rules, and how well did they work?