When thinking about the lockout and how time really is ticking away to save the season, I'm reminded – as a poker player – of what people say toward the end of a tournament or when everything is on the line, time is running out, and a player has to win that hand…….“one time!!!” Well, I think I've now officially reached my “one time!” point for the NHL lockout. So come one guys….ONE TIME!!

Since we're now already talking about poker, instead of a new “Holding Court” column this week, here's a copy of an article I originally posted to the Black Aces group on the DobberHockey forums. For all of you looking to fill your fantasy hockey void, you really should consider posting an article in Black Aces – it's where a number of DobberHockey writers got

their start, including yours truly. Enjoy!

All too often fantasy hockey players go through the motions and end up following the same unsuccessful routines year after year. Face it, we're all guilty of it to a degree. Whether it's failing to react or adjust when we should, trading too often or too infrequently, or even playing it too risky or too safe, at the end of each season all us GMs (or, I should say, the GMs who don't win) find ourselves vowing to change things next season, forgetting that we told ourselves the same thing pretty much every year in the past. The worst part is that subconsciously we might even realize we're falling into this trap and that we do need to change our ways, but somehow we continue with our bad habits again and again like a fantasy hockey version of Groundhog Day.

So how can GMs snap out of this problematic pattern? By shifting viewpoint and looking at fantasy hockey from a slightly different, but still comparable, perspective. There are likely many ways to do this, but I've found that a perfect tool is something that pretty much all fantasy hockey GMs know and understand - poker!

Most everyone these days has played poker or at least seen enough of it on TV to know the rules. It turns out that a poker tournament is a lot like a fantasy hockey season in that things start out even, but they change and fluctuate quite a bit before all is said and done. And in the end, although sometimes several people can get paid in poker or fantasy hockey money leagues, there is only one true winner. By taking a look at the way poker is played and the overall poker thought process, certain useful fantasy hockey lessons can come into sharper focus and can sink in better than they would by simply maintaining the same year in and year out "fantasy hockey only" perspective.

Poker Lesson #1 - Play your opponents, not your cards

All too often, poker players focus on the cards they hold and decide how to play poker hands only according to the value of their cards. Doing so will only let you win if you get the best cards and best luck, which is rare. A better strategy is to focus on your opponents and their tendencies, and generally play the opposite of how they play. If you're at a table with aggressive opponents who play almost every hand, don't try to match their style; instead, be patient and

wait for a good hand. On the flip side, if your opponents are passive, you can play more borderline hands and easily bluff them out of pots to accumulate chips without having to show down the best hand. The same "opposite" approach can pay dividends in fantasy hockey.

If your league is filled with GMs who like to take too many chances and draft high risk players and band-aid boys, then you will likely do well by being more conservative and assembling a team of consistent but not spectacular players. If, instead, everyone in your league is predictable and "by the book" (drafting based on previous season stats or going after "name" players well past their prime), then you want to be a bit more creative, focusing instead on per game scoring averages, trends from the previous season's playoffs and 2nd half, and players on the upswing of their careers. Sure, some of this might sound obvious, but all too often fantasy players end up simply mimicking what other GMs in their league do, when in truth the successful recipe is to take at least a somewhat different (perhaps even polar opposite) approach.

Poker Lesson #2 - Know when to fold, or to keep calling

Quite often in poker tournaments, you'll find yourself with a hand that is drawing to a straight or a flush where you know you're behind now, but if you catch the right card(s) you'll win big. They key is figuring out when you should fold your draw versus when you need to chase the draw all the way to the river. In poker, this all depends on percentages and what you stand to win versus what you could end up losing. The same is true in fantasy hockey with early season adds and drops. Deciding whether to add or drop a player based on how that player has performed for only a short part of the season needs to depend on what's yet to happen as much or more than what's happened already.

GMs fall into the trap of adding or dropping a player too quickly when they're blinded by short term stats that are clearly too good to be true, simply because they're afraid to miss out on the next phenom and be haunted by "what ifs". On the flip side, people can be too cautious and

stick with players they should get rid of, or resist picking up players who they should own. Stop and focus about what's yet to come before you act or choose not to act.

Poker Lesson #3 - Avoid focusing only on yourself

In poker, many people stop paying attention to hands once they fold. Likewise, in fantasy hockey, people focus on their own players but don't direct their attention to the rosters and transactions of their opponents. This is a huge mistake. In poker, there is information to be gained on nearly every hand, and only those who pay attention after they fold will see patterns and tendencies emerge and be able to learn valuable tidbits about their opponents. The same is true for fantasy hockey.

By knowing how another GM manages its roster, you can see what players the GM truly values so you won't get fooled in a trade offer (more on trades below). Also, in tight categories you can try to gain ground in categories by making reactive adjustments. Just as in poker where there is a temptation to relax and take a breather once you're out of a hand, you might feel like it's okay to detach and look only at your own fantasy hockey roster for a while. But it's the winners who are always aware not only of what they're doing, but of what's happening with all the other teams as well.

Poker Lesson #4 - It's who has the chips in the end that matters

In poker, people who accumulate a lot of chips early tend to shift into a "don't lose" coasting mentality (think "prevent defense" in football) and start to not focus on taking the necessary steps to continue to do well. Similarly, people who lose a lot of chips early will often mentally give up, either slowly bleeding their remaining chips away or going all-in recklessly. The same thing happens in fantasy hockey. People who jump out to a big leads by early December figure they're a lock to win.

As a result, they stop following things as closely or they stay with their current roster even after it become clear that the rest of the pack is catching up. At the other end of the spectrum, people near the bottom of the standings in early months will either check out or will make desperate moves that only end up hurting their teams even more. In fantasy hockey, like poker, patience pays off more often than not. Look at the season for what it is - the sum of a number of weeks and months where stats are not consistent. Stay focused and resist the urge to coast or to panic early on.

Poker Lesson #5 - Do I call the all-in bet?

Ah yes, the all-in bet - the big TV moment. An opponent pushes in all his/her chips and your decision whether to call or fold can mean huge rewards, or losses. In fantasy hockey, the all-in is the blockbuster trade offer. Do you "call" by agreeing to the deal, or "fold" by nixing the offer. In poker, when someone goes all-in against you and you're lucky enough to have an unbeatable hand you quickly call and shove in your chips. In fantasy hockey, you say yes to a deal where you're 100% sure to be getting the best of the trade.

Sadly, those situations are all too rare in poker and fantasy hockey alike. Instead, you're usually torn about what to do. Of course in poker the cards you hold matter when making this decision, as do the players involved in a fantasy hockey trade, but in both cases, the biggest key in determining how to respond usually is to think about what might be motivating your opponent to make this move, not so much the specific players/cards involved. Also, be sure to figure out how winning or losing will affect both you and the opponent. Just like in poker where you don't need as great cards to call an all-in bet when your opponent might be desperate, in fantasy hockey you likely can be more inclined to say yes to a deal from a rebuilding or frustrated owner.

Having read this, many of you might be thinking that you really didn't learn anything new. But chances are that although these concepts may have been things you've thought about and understood in the past, seeing them here in a slightly different perspective will help you be able to once and for all incorporate them into your strategy and improve your fantasy hockey results.

See you next week with a regular Holding Court column.

Previous Court Sessions from Rick Roos:

- **Can Malkin or Crosby Be Unseated in the Scoring Race?**
- **Will Shea Weber's Stats Suffer?**
- **Is Erik Karlsson A One-Seaon Wonder?**