

The Stanley Cup Playoffs started this past week, and the Hornless Rhino admits ... being a hockey fan in Cleveland is a lonely business. Of course, Cleveland isn't the only place where hockey has a hard time attracting fans, but the sad thing about Cleveland is that it used to be very different here. Back in the day, hockey wasn't just big here in Northeast Ohio, it was huge.



The Stanley Cup playoffs began earlier this week, and true to form, one of the first night's games went [four overtimes](#) and didn't end until 3:30 a.m. EDT. It's that kind of stuff that makes the Stanley Cup the most grueling--and to me, the most compelling-- tournament in sports, even though I know that nobody reading this gives a damn.

Being a hockey fan in Cleveland is a lonely business. For example, the other day a friend of mine tossed me a copy of last week's *Sporting News*, which had a Stanley Cup preview in it. He said that he saved it for me because I'm the only hockey fan he knows. Of course, Cleveland isn't the only place where hockey has a hard time attracting fans, but the sad thing about Cleveland is that it used to be very different here.

Back in the day, hockey wasn't just big here in Northeast Ohio, it was huge. Cleveland Barons hockey was the reason Cleveland built the 10,000 seat [Cleveland Arena](#) in the midst of the Depression. The Barons were so popular that owner Al Sutphin could [thumb his nose](#) at the NHL when they asked the Barons to leave the AHL and become the NHL's seventh member.

The original Cleveland Barons weren't merely popular; they were also quite simply the greatest team in American Hockey League history. The team appeared in 14 Calder Cup finals from 1938 to 1966, and won [nine of them](#). Even though they've been out of the AHL for more than 35 years, that record of nine Calder Cups still hasn't been bested. The team won its last Calder Cup in 1964, and its popularity declined during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Ultimately, the Barons couldn't compete with the World Hockey Association's [Cleveland Crusaders](#), whose arrival prompted the Barons to move to Jacksonville midway through the 1972 season.

The man behind the maneuvers involving the AHL Barons and the Crusaders was none other than [Nick Mileti](#). At one time or another during the 1970s, Mileti owned just about every sports team in this town except for the Browns, and his fingerprints were all over hockey as

well. Mileti had a major stake in the original Barons, brought the Crusaders to Cleveland, and built the Richfield Coliseum.

The Crusaders had signed away some big name NHL stars, most notably former Bruins goalie Gerry Cheevers, and were actually fairly successful for their first couple of seasons. Then the team moved from the Arena to the Richfield Coliseum, and the fans just didn't come with them. Cleveland hosted the WHA All-Star game in 1976, but that still couldn't spark enough fan interest to keep the Crusaders around. They left for Minnesota after the 1975-1976 season.

Cleveland finally got its own NHL franchise in 1976. Unfortunately, that franchise was the answer to the trivia question, "whatever happened to the California Golden Seals?" The [Seals](#) were usually terrible, and are probably most renowned for the ridiculous [green and gold uniforms](#)

and white skates that one-time owner Charlie O. Finley put them in to mimic his Oakland A's. When owner Mel Swig moved them to Cleveland, he rechristened them as the

[Barons](#)

, probably hoping to resurrect a little of that team's AHL mojo.

It didn't turn out that way. The new Barons were horrible, nobody watched them, and they quickly started to go broke. By February 1977, they couldn't make payroll, and were [doing their bit](#) to add to Cleveland's growing reputation as a national laughingstock. The NHLPA actually had to loan the Barons money in order to enable them to limp through the 1976-77 season.

The Gund brothers then stepped up to buy the team. The Barons played in Cleveland for the 1977-1978 season, but the team continued to hemorrhage cash. The Gunds tried to negotiate a deal to keep the team in town, but it didn't come together. The Barons merged with the Minnesota North Stars and headed out of town shortly after the 1978 season ended.

The Gunds ultimately sold the North Stars, and the team moved to Dallas. The Gunds then got an expansion franchise, which became the San Jose Sharks. That team is largely responsible for starting the insidious teal and black color scheme epidemic which now infests all sports.

The 1976-78 Barons were Cleveland's swan song as far as the NHL was concerned. After an extended absence, hockey returned to the city in the 1990s with a succession of minor league clubs. First came the IHL's [Cleveland Lumberjacks](#), then yet another incarnation of the [Cleveland Barons](#)

. Both of these franchises went the way of the Dodo, but in another example of the triumph of hope over experience, Dan Gilbert is bringing a new AHL team, the

[Lake Erie Monsters](#)

, to town next season. Yes, that name is horrible, but it was almost much worse. How much worse? How about The Cleveland

[Fighting Walleye](#)

I'm not real optimistic about the prospects of another minor league hockey team in this town. With NFL, NBA and MLB franchises, Cleveland has every reason to think of itself as a major league city. I think that what most Cleveland fans feel toward these minor league teams (aside from a complete lack of interest) is resentment. They're a reminder that when it comes to pro hockey, our best days are far behind us, and that as far as the NHL is concerned, we aren't even on the radar screen.

Pretty far cry from the days when 10,000 hockey fans packed the Arena and Al Sutphin could thumb his nose at the NHL, isn't it?