



Hockey in primetime? On New Year's Day? During the end of the Rose Bowl? During the Fiesta Bowl? How could that possibly work?

Well, it did. The 2011 NHL Winter Classic drew the most viewers for a regular season game ever. Everything is broken down in this [Puck Daddy blog post](#) . Of note, Columbus was the tenth-highest NHL market in terms of viewers of the game. The ratings in the city of Pittsburgh jumped 81% from their ratings in the 2008 Winter Classic in Buffalo.

The game did not feature the wide-open style that some would expect from two supremely talented teams. The ice was slow, every pass had to be rocketed across the sticky ice, and a somewhat steady rain fell through the duration of the game. As a result, Washington won 3-1, with the game-winning goal being a misplayed puck by Penguins goaltender Marc-Andre Fleury.

In fairy tale fashion, Washington won the game for the HBO 24/7 cameras. The series started with the Capitals in the midst of a nine-game winning streak prompting a very NSFW [Bruce Boudreau tirade](#)

. The Penguins began the series with a 12-game winning streak and captain Sidney Crosby in the midst of a 25-game point streak.

As a hockey player myself, it was incredible to see hockey so well-represented in the HBO documentary. Make no mistake about it, on-ice discussions are as vulgar as they were on the show and the camaraderie displayed in both locker rooms is the honest truth. For those who have not watched it, HBO will show all four episodes on Saturday January 8, starting at 1:30.

But the overriding theme is this. The publicity, the Winter Classic's high ratings, and the ability to promote the sport's positives instead of its negatives are huge for the game. Usually, casual sports fans only hear about ugly injuries or love the game of hockey for fights. At its core, hockey is a very fast game with a level of skill that is unmatched in sport. Unlike the NFL, these players are battered and bruised multiple nights per week from October to April, and furthermore June if they are lucky.

As the 24/7 documentary showed, most of these players grew up playing on frozen ponds across the provinces of Canada, in Europe, or in US states like Minnesota, Michigan, and in the northeast. Games like this are an allusion to the bare-bones beginning of a hockey career. There are no refs on the open ice. There are no boards. There is not offsides. There are no icing whistles. The open pond is a chance to harden your skills by carrying the puck in below zero temperatures, with somebody's parents turning on the car headlights so the kids can play until after dark.

In this day and age of inflated contracts, drug scandals, commercialism, and everything else that is wrong with sports, the pond remains unchanged. Just like the basketball court at the local park. Just like the all-dirt infields of inner-city neighborhoods. Just like the open field with a father throwing deep post routes to his son. The Winter Classic may be a huge spectacle to television executives and advertisers. But, to those players, it's a reminder of a simpler time. A reminder of the core of what being a hockey player is. And for that, the game is indeed a classic.

In Blue Jackets news:

Mike Commodore was placed on waivers on Thursday. The likelihood is that he and his 3.75M/year contract will go unclaimed. Re-entry waivers, however, buy the player's contract down 50%. So there is hope that someone would take a chance on Commodore at a 50% discount, but that, too, seems unlikely. Commodore has requested a trade due to his dwindling playing time.

The ebbs and flows of the Blue Jackets season continue. After winning three straight to end 2010, the Jackets have lost their first two games of 2011. The team continues a west coast swing on Friday night in Anaheim.

Amazingly, as a .500 team (20-17-3), the Blue Jackets would finish the third-worst team in the Western Conference if the season ended today. Yet, they sit just four points out of the #4 seed in the West. Such is life in the Western Conference. They're also the last place team in the Central Division.

The Blue Jackets were 8-1-0 on the road as of November 24. Since then, they have gone 1-7-2 away from Columbus.

Scott Arniel continues to do what he can to send messages. He benched Rick Nash, Kristian Huselius, and Antoine Vermette for the final 14 minutes of last Sunday's game against Nashville.

In other NHL news:

The New Jersey Devils have scored 69 goals in 39 games. The record for fewest goals scored in a season is 133 by the 1953-54 Chicago Blackhawks. The Devils are on pace to score 145. The interesting thing about that? The 53-54 Blackhawks played just 70 games.

For comparison purposes, the most goals scored in a season is 446 by the 1983-84 Edmonton Oilers. That team featured some guy named Wayne Gretzky who had a hand in 205 of those goals.

Not necessarily NHL news, but in the USHL game between Sioux City and Sioux Falls, [this happened](#). A slapshot from the point rang off the post and the puck broke in half.

A minor league update on the Lake Erie Monsters:

The Monsters are racking up the frequent travelers' miles this month. The team will fly to Houston to play on 1/7, play the Texas Stars on 1/8, and then travel to Oklahoma City to play on 1/9. The team will return home before bussing to Hamilton on 1/12, bus from there to Rochester to play on 1/14, then bus to Hershey for 1/15, then bus back to Rochester for 1/16. Seven games in ten days in six cities. After that, they play four straight at home.

Upcoming schedules:

Columbus: 1/7: @ ANA, 1/8: @ LA, 1/11: v. PHX

Lake Erie: 1/7: @ Houston, 1/8: @ Texas, 1/9: @ Oklahoma City, 1/12: @ Hamilton