

Affiliation Change Would Benefit New York Rangers

Written by Matthew Coller
Tuesday, 25 May 2010 01:12

Since it was reported that the Rangers are likely changing their AHL affiliation to the Rochester Americans for the 2011-'12 season, I've received a lot of feedback requesting more details. The source for the original story could only tell Biz of Hockey that the move was in the works, however, the move appears sensible.

In July 2007, Madison Square Garden, who owns the New York Rangers and Hartford Wolfpack, made the company Northland AEG LLC responsible for day-to-day operations which include marketing, sponsorship and ticket sales. Of course, the Rangers are still responsible for on-ice decisions such as coaching and player movement. The problem? The team averages close to 4,300 fans per game in an arena which holds around 15,000.

Usually when a company owns a team, they own the arena. So, assuming MSG owns the Civic Center in Hartford, it seems that using the same arena that books such major musical acts as Justin Bieber and Black Eyed Peas to book 40 dates that draw 4,300 doesn't make sense financially.

Also, paying a company to handle the selling of tickets when the team doesn't draw doesn't make much sense either. If the Rangers moved to Rochester, owners Curt Styres and Lewis Staats would handle such things at presumably no additional cost. Attendance would then become their problem. It was reported earlier this season that to break even, the Americans had to draw more than 5,000 per game. If the same was true for the Wolfpack, the Rangers were losing money that they wouldn't lose with Rochester (or any other separately owned affiliate).

Things might get fishy when negotiating the handling of veteran players. Last season, the Americans expected their parent club to foot the bill for veteran players such as former New York Islander Mike York. The Panthers elected not to do so though Americans ownership claimed there was a verbal agreement. Whether the Rangers would be willing to pay for veterans will likely be a point of contention in negotiations.

The Rangers can offer higher attendance for the Americans, who have seen their numbers drop from near 7,500 in 2007 to less than 4,500 this season. The attendance drop is thought to be much due to the departure of the Buffalo Sabres as a parent club. The Americans can offer a lot less liability.

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Some have questioned if the location of Hartford could keep the Rangers from Rochester. Yes, costs of travel do add up, but this is very rarely a deal breaker. The Buffalo Sabres, for example, moved their AHL club from Rochester, NY (45 minutes from Buffalo) to Portland, Maine and recently signed an extension. Rochester is around six hours away. If a team elected to call up a player around morning skate time (10 a.m. or so) the player would be in New York City well before the puck dropped.

The Rochester Americans did not return phone calls concerning the possible switch.

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