

Written by Jeff Levine
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Although a potential labor conflict is still over two years away, the upcoming NHL season feels like to many a make or break year. At some point during the 2010-11 season, the hockey world will get its first look at Donald Fehr 2.0, as the seminal sports labor leader shifts from his short-lived retirement from the MLBPA into a new role with the NHLPA. Fehr's leadership is expected to morph the NHLPA from a punching bag into a formidable bargaining force.

Fehr, 62, should be a bridge leader for hockey's fledgling union. As an unpaid union advisor, Fehr has already assisted the NHLPA with its new executive director search as well as revamped the union's constitution. However, his most significant impacts surely lie ahead.

Many within the hockey world are holding their collective breath in anticipation of how Fehr, once installed, will interact with NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman. While some believe Fehr will adopt a more militant approach that former union chief Bob Goodenow successfully exploited during the late 1990s, it is more likely that Fehr will take a moderate viewpoint when interacting with whom many refer to as the most powerful person in hockey.

While Fehr will not always adopt an adversarial nature when dealing with the league, there are more than a few contentious issues to be bargained over. The league's most important issue is probably tinkering with the salary cap. League executives will most likely negotiate with the union to reduce the percentage of hockey-related revenue, currently at fifty-seven percent, which is allocated toward paying player salary. Fehr will not give up any percentages without league concessions.

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Players will also want to address financial topics as well. A major sore spot is most likely the escrow concept. Players, who under the current CBA, deposit eighteen percent of their earnings into a league-mandated escrow account, will want to renegotiate the current escrow system. Of course there are other issues. The players want to address NHL involvement with the Sochi Olympics, long-term contracts, and whether the league and its players can change their relationship from one of being adversarial to one of partnership. There are other issues but, because hockey's financial landscape is at times precarious, these financial issues will probably be the most fiercely negotiated.

Although the current CBA does not expire for another two years, the NHL and its stakeholders cannot afford another lockout. Both sides must strike a cooperative tone and negotiate an accord that fine-tunes the new NHL financial model. The new CBA should also include additional mechanisms to help correct the financial woes that many southern US franchises are still experiencing within this troubled economy. Now that the NHL has, over the last five years laid a new foundation, both Fehr and Bettman must work together to ensure that this foundation and the momentum of the new NHL is not lost to another lockout. As the season starts on Thursday, it is only a matter of time until these labor events begin to unfold.



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