

Written by Jeff Levine

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While Taylor Hall and Tyler Seguin may have headlined the 2010 NHL draft class, an emerging underlying story from over this past weekend is the performance by the dozens of US-born players who were selected in this year's draft and what it means for the popularity of hockey in the United States.

[ESPN reports that](#) , over the course of the draft, 59 Americans were selected from diverse states including Arizona, California, Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Missouri, Nevada, New Jersey and New York. Several highly rated players hailed from states such as Florida, Arizona and Nevada, proving that hockey is finally finding long-term support in non-traditional hockey markets.

Quality players across the nation are bridging the gap with hockey developmental programs in Canada and abroad, and NHL clubs have taken notice. "In the U.S. in general, there's so many new pockets where hockey has caught on, so now it's a whole new group of athletes, in California, Phoenix, places that weren't notoriously hockey places, producing some pretty good players now," [Jay Heinbuck](#) , the head of amateur scouting for the Penguins, said after the draft. As hockey's grassroots popularity seems to be on the rise in the US, nobody is happier about the increase of American talent than NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman.

The NHL Commissioner has long maintained that hockey's success hinges on developing a strong following within the US. In the 1990s, Bettman sought to cement his legacy as hockey's savior by spearheading the league's expansion into nontraditional hockey markets such as

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Arizona, Florida and other parts of the south. For years, these franchises struggled mightily, often lagging behind teams in traditional hockey markets in terms of fan support and team revenues. Several underperforming teams were forced to file for bankruptcy protection under Bettman's watch, leading some to question Bettman's NHL vision and whether he was the right man for the job.

While many people still second-guess Bettman's decisions concerning expansion and his approach to labor relations, his vision of a hockey-crazed United States is slowly coming to fruition. Youth hockey is steadily gaining in popularity, and the number of Americans taken at the NHL entry draft is also increasing. Now Bettman needs the league to cash in on this increasing popularity.

Bettman must now harness the league's expanding interest so that non-traditional hockey markets now support their local teams and find new partners to help pad the league's finances. In addition, the NHL must cooperatively work with its players to further cultivate the league's popularity and financial viability.

The NHL has been clawing back from irrelevance towards respectability ever since it lost an entire season to a labor dispute back in 2004 and arguably lost its spot as one of the nation's top sports. Since the lockout, the league has taken steps to emerge as a leaner, more fan friendlier sport. This past weekend's draft is more evidence that hockey is again on the rise and can be popular within the United States. However, Bettman must nurture this progress and avoid at all costs another lockout or labor-related fiasco when the league squares off the NHLPA to negotiate a new collective bargaining agreement in 2012.

If Bettman can strike a new accord with the players while preserving hockey's momentum and get on the same page with the union, the NHL could be poised for a new golden era both throughout North American and abroad.



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Hall and Seguin Get Press, But NHL Draft Illustrates Growing Popularity of Hockey in United States

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