

2013 NHL All Star Game: Columbus May Be Better Prepared Than Many Expect

By **Matt Wagner** - NHL Contributor

Columbus isn't a city with a great reputation around the NHL, but as one native writes, the Blue Jackets organization and the entire area might be better prepared to host the 2013 All-Star Game than you think.

Like any major decision by the NHL, the weekend news that the 2013 All Star Game has been awarded to the Columbus Blue Jackets brought immediate and diverse reactions.

While many were quick to get on board with the idea, highlighting the franchise's previous hosting of the 2007 NHL Entry Draft and the good reputation of the Columbus fans, reaction from other circles was not so positive. More than a few tossed jokes about the All Star Game being a chance to avoid "too many hometown players" or concerns that this could be similar to the 2008 All Star Game in Atlanta—a bone thrown to a struggling franchise, and a city that would not truly embrace the event.

(For that matter, many who attended the 2008 game also complained about a lack of "non-hockey" options for entertainment and socializing, and that concern has been voiced as well.)

Fortunately, it appears that both the Blue Jackets organization and the City of Columbus have anticipated these concerns.

While it is unclear at this point exactly how the team will be constructed for the 2012-13 season, the promise of team majority owner John P. McConnell to make "extreme" changes in pursuit of a "consistently competitive" team could provide a pool of talent for All-Star selection. That's easier said than done, but some pieces are already in place.

Former NCAA star Cam Atkinson, currently tied for the AHL scoring lead, will likely be a part of the big club next season, an obvious rookie selection. Ryan Johansen participated as a rookie this year in Ottawa, and Rick Nash will almost certainly be a team captain in 2013.

The City of Columbus has been an active participant in both preparing the bid for the game and helping the franchise resolve several off-ice issues related to their arena lease. With a new deal in place that takes financial burdens off the club and anchors

the franchise to Columbus through 2039, the All-Star festivities are an ideal way to help celebrate the new relationship between the city and its hockey club, bringing an anticipated \$12 million dollars in visitor spending.

Concerns over the city's ability to provide sufficient creature comforts have been addressed over the past several years. Since the 2007 draft, the city has added several new luxury hotels, including a 500 room Hilton within walking distance of Nationwide Arena. The Arena District's continually expanding selection of theatres, bars, restaurants and shopping help provide off ice entertainment as well.

The city's Greater Columbus Sports Commission has been working to plan events for visiting VIPs and traveling fans at unique Columbus destinations. The nationally recognized Columbus Zoo, the Greater Columbus Convention Center, the COSI science museum, the historic North Market, and both the Short North and German Village districts are just a sampling.

When asked, GCSC Marketing and Communications manager Bruce Wimbish was aware of concerns, but feels confident in meeting them.

"We have been working on preparing to bring an All Star Game to Columbus since the Blue Jackets' second season in the NHL," Wimbish said. "We feel a large sense of pride from the NHL because they see the impact their franchise in Columbus has had on the entire city, and how much they want to see them succeed here."

Geographically speaking, the city is a unique position. Eastern cities have hosted the game for four straight years, but as a Western Conference city in the Eastern time zone, Columbus affords the NHL the chance to give the game to a Western team while still taking advantage of the TV-friendliness of their time zone.

Columbus is relatively convenient for most traveling fans and media, aside from those traveling from the Pacific Northwest of the West Coast. It's an airline hub for several large

carriers, including American Airlines and Southwest Airlines, providing the opportunity for cheap flights, and its location on both Interstates 70 and 71 allow for easy travel from Pittsburgh, Detroit, Chicago and Nashville.

The city is much more prepared than an outsider might expect, and the timing does seem right for Columbus to host this game. From the NHL's standpoint, it can be seen as a tactical move to help appease ownership, who were major proponents of the stalled realignment plan. Off the ice, there's no hiding the fact that the game could help some season ticket holders remain season ticket holders after a whiplash 2011-12 season that's forced public protests of team performance.

Despite the Blue Jackets' lack of playoff success over their 11 year history, fans have filled Nationwide Arena to 89 percent capacity over that time period. While apathy among those fans is now at an all-time high, and many may have been unwilling to open their wallets without evidence of on-ice progress, the promise of guaranteed seats to the All-Star festivities might convince some to hang on a bit longer.

In their rare times under the league-wide spotlight in the past, the Blue Jackets and their fans have answered the call.

They sold out their only two playoff appearances within minutes, and TV ratings in the Columbus market for previous All-Star Games and non-Blue Jackets NHL events, such as at the Stanley Cup Finals, have historically been strong compared to other United States NHL markets. The 2013 All-Star Weekend will provide a focal point of anticipation during what appears likely to be an offseason of renewed upheaval.

For the city of Columbus, the fans of the Blue Jackets, and the CBJ organization, this is a chance to show that the expansion franchise is the "hidden gem" characterized by Gary Bettman, and perhaps to shrug off a bit of the "football town" label provided by Ohio State University. It's likely to be quite a show.

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