

The New York Times

JANUARY 30, 2012

Blue Jackets Awarded All-Star Game as Fans' Frustration Grows

By MELISSA HOPPERT

From the hometown fans cheering wildly for the Senators' representatives (and heartily booing the Maple Leafs') to the awestruck players videotaping the performance of the Toronto-born rapper Drake, Canada's capital city of Ottawa provided a nearly perfect backdrop for this past weekend's All-Star festivities.

So it might have come as a surprise to some when N.H.L. Commissioner Gary Bettman announced Saturday that the struggling Blue Jackets would host next year's All-Star Game on Jan. 27 in Ohio's capital, Columbus. The announcement coincided with about 250 fans protesting Blue Jackets management outside Nationwide Arena in the wake of the team's dismal play.

The Blue Jackets (13-30-6) entered the All-Star break with the N.H.L.'s worst record and had only one representative in Ottawa, the rookie forward Ryan Johansen. Three weeks ago, Coach Scott Arniel was fired and replaced on an interim basis by the assistant Todd Richards.

"I think that we have a lot of passionate season-ticket holders who have been there since Day 1, but I think there's a lot of people that are getting frustrated because we're not showing a winning product," Blue Jackets forward R.J. Umberger said. "If it ever happens, where we win consistently, the place would be sold out every night here, I have no doubt about it."

The Blue Jackets were founded as an expansion team in 2000 and qualified for the Stanley Cup playoffs in 2009. They hosted the 2007 N.H.L. entry draft, drawing a capacity crowd on the first day.

"We held the draft there not too many years ago, and the city and the Blue Jackets organization was terrific in terms of hosting all the events and making us feel at home," Bettman told the NHL Network on Saturday. "The facilities are there, the fan support is there, they have a terrific organization, the arena's great, all the factors that you need to build the event are in place in Columbus for us."

Umberger, who played from 2000 to 2003 at nearby Ohio State, whose hockey team recently reached No. 2 in the rankings, said that the city had embraced the sport with open arms.

"I think hockey is growing in Columbus a lot more," Umberger said. "If the Blue Jackets become a playoff team, it's going to get to a whole new standard in Columbus. I think that hockey is trickling down through all the kids and everything. It should be a city that's known for its hockey now, not just football."

The 2013 All-Star weekend is expected to generate an estimated \$12 million in visitor spending, the Greater Columbus Sports Commission said. The construction of Nationwide Arena, which holds 18,500 for hockey and features a glass atrium and exposed brick, spurred the development of the surrounding area. Now known

as the Arena District, the area includes bars, restaurants and a theater and is nestled between two other Columbus destinations, the Short North and German Village neighborhoods.

"The Columbus Blue Jackets are one of the nation's best examples of sports acting as a major economic catalyst," Columbus Mayor Michael B. Coleman said in a statement. "When Nationwide Arena was built in 2000, it was the centerpiece of Columbus' Arena District, which has revitalized our downtown and our city."

Despite the Blue Jackets' recent woes, Umberger has not given up on the team or its fans.

"When we made the playoffs that one year, you could feel the buzz around the town, and the city was incredible," said Umberger, who scored the first playoff goal in team history. "The Arena District was hopping, and it was so much fun."

"It's been a hard time to get back to the playoffs for the Blue Jackets, so it seems like a distant memory. But I hope to someday score a lot more for the Blue Jackets in the playoffs." ■