

“New Arena Deal is Lemieux’s Legacy”

by Luke Bruss

Mario Lemieux’s life in Pittsburgh is starting to sound like a story that the great poet Homer could have written. Lemieux’s epic struggles with chronic back problems, cheap-shot artist defensemen, lackluster officiating, team bankruptcy, and most seriously Hodgkin’s disease and heart problems - all while being one of the best hockey players in NHL history - have made him an inspiration to millions all over North America. Now he is enduring yet another battle that could either solidify, or sink his hockey team's fate in Pittsburgh.

The outcome, which hinges on whether a Penguins-backed slots license application that includes a new multi-use arena for the Steel City, could depend on how a full-scale media battle plays out. It's an all-out scrum between those supporting differing sides of who should be awarded the lone Pittsburgh slots license. The bombastic Mark Madden, of WEAE radio, supports the Isle of Capri plan so much so that he has (half-jokingly) called for the assassination of public officials who oppose the Penguins’ partner.

As this article is being written, PCN-TV is airing a PA Gaming Control Board hearing on the Slots Community Impact. Dick Meister, Vice President of Construction and Design for the Isle of Capri / Pittsburgh First Initiative, said they plan to commence construction immediately following the awarding of the license, which would immediately create many new jobs. “Numerous retail sites are proposed.” he said. He also added that the new arena will bring in high-class, and big-name acts.

Majestic Star Casinos followed the Isle of Capri by using singer Smokey Robinson as a spokesman to the PGCB. “You can trust what he says on his promises to the community,” Robinson said of Don Barden, Barden Companies Chairman and CEO, the company behind the Majestic Star Casino proposal.

"There is a Plan B," Governor Ed Rendell said. "I'll have to talk to the mayor and the county executive. Maybe we'll just announce our Plan B publicly and see what they (the Penguins) say. It's very hard to negotiate a Plan B when they won't talk to us," he said in an interview with WTAE-TV.

The “Plan B” Rendell was referring to is a backup plan that could use taxpayer money to fund a new arena if the Isle of Capri is not awarded the sole Pittsburgh slots license. According to the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review “Plan B” has three points:

- The Penguins have to stay in town
- They must help pay for the facility
- The city's casino operator must pay the largest portion

“Even if Pittsburgh doesn’t get a new arena, taxpayers would absorb ‘significant cost’ to keep Mellon Arena in working order” the city-county Sports and Exhibition Authority said during an interview with the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review

Lemieux, who is just as skilled in wingtips and a suit as he was in skates and black and gold, bought the team out of bankruptcy in 1999; saving the team from such an ordeal for the second time. At the time, his ownership team was promised by those in power that Pittsburgh would get a new arena. Seven years have passed and time is running out on the Penguins lease with Mellon Arena. He has said that the team cannot remain viable and competitive until they are playing in a new arena. Any other businessman would have pulled out and given up years ago, especially in the light of unfulfilled promises of a new arena from our elected officials, but still, Lemieux persists.

The Penguins have teamed up with Isle of Capri casinos, who have promised to put \$290 million towards a new multi-purpose arena, which the team will lease and the city will own, just as they do with the

dilapidated dome known as the Mellon Arena. This promise is dependent upon the awarding of a slots license. One license will be given out to one applicant in the city of Pittsburgh. The Isle of Capri is the only group that has promised to put any money towards a new Pittsburgh arena.

The other main player in this debate is Harrah's casino from Las Vegas. According to an article on KDKA's website "Harrah's Entertainment unveiled plans for a \$512 million slot-machine parlor on the city's South Side that would be part of a \$1 billion retail, entertainment and residential development, next to an already thriving development." The article also notes that Pittsburgh Steelers legend, Franco Harris has joined the group as a partner in the deal.

Local officials have of course weighed in on the matter, fearing a backlash should the worst - the Penguins packing up and leaving town - come to pass. "From my view, the Penguins' is the most exciting proposal," said former mayor Tom Murphy (D) in an article by Andrew Conte of the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review. According to the same article, neither new mayor Bob O'Connor (D) nor Allegheny County Chief Executive Dan Onorato (D) have backed any proposal. Chief Executive Onorato did note that whoever gets the slots license should put money towards a new arena.

Media coverage is of course going to influence public opinion on this matter, which makes neutral reportage even more crucial. Some media outlets have stuck to the facts, while others have skewed the truth a bit. In the December 27, 2005 article "Wagner, developer back Pens' bid for new arena" by Rob Amen of the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review, the headline alone reeks of slant. The arena in question will not be the sole property of the Pittsburgh Penguins. The Pens won't even have a shred of ownership. The city will own the arena, just as they do now. The Penguins will lease the new arena, just as they lease Mellon Arena now. The new arena will not be solely a hockey arena, but leased out for other shows such as circuses, concerts, and other performances. Just as Mellon Arena is now. Deep into the article this is mentioned, but the headline is obviously misleading.

After everything Mario Lemieux has done for the city of Pittsburgh, both on and off the ice, the city at least owes him the truth. He has contributed and raised tens of millions of dollars to the local economy. Before he came to town there were but a handful of hockey rinks and related industries. Now new rinks and hockey programs have sprung up all over the region. He has also contributed millions of dollars to local charities and cancer research, and raised even more through The Mario Lemieux Foundation and the Austin Lemieux Neonatal Research Project.

Now, because of the "Lemieux era" there are ice rinks, learn-to-skate programs, amateur leagues and even a few local kids playing in the NHL, namely R.J. Umberger - a Plum Borough native and forward on the Philadelphia Flyers - and Pittsburgh's own Ryan Malone; a fan favorite forward on the Penguins.

Just like the hero in Homer's "the Odyssey," Mario Lemieux has also faced battle after battle which would make any other man give up all hope. Let's just hope the battles are over and the state gaming board makes the right call. The call, just like when the lights went out twice during a game against Toronto, earlier this season, for a new arena.