

What's in a name?

More than a little animal attraction

Changing trends in NHL: Colorado, Carolina have recipe for natural disaster

By Chris Jones

November 18, 1998

The Nashville Predators, the National Hockey League's newest franchise, now find themselves pitted against the San Jose Sharks, Phoenix Coyotes, and Florida Panthers.

Sense a trend?

As well as southern homes, many of the NHL's recent additions share similar monikers. When searching for a handle, "teams just start looking for an animal with teeth," says a sarcastic Naseem Javed, president of ABC Namebank.

Javed, who has been christening companies and products for 20 years, calls the naming of teams after disagreeable wildlife a "cop-out." Along with hockey's members of the animal kingdom, he cites football's Jaguars and Panthers and basketball's Raptors and Grizzlies as examples.

"All they are looking for is the raw animal power thing," Javed says. "The animals they go for are violent animals, not intelligent or cunning animals. I'm not suggesting they be named after a clever monkey, but I don't like all the blood and gore."

Surprisingly, it seems the lords of hockey are listening to Javed's complaints. A second trend could be emerging: the naming of teams after more abstract mascots, such as acts of nature or states of mind. Take the Tampa Bay Lightning, Carolina Hurricanes, or Colorado Avalanche for instance. And in 2000-2001, the NHL will be welcoming the Minnesota Wild into the fold.

The rise of ethereal handles, as well as names that serve as both adjectives and nouns, is intentional. The NHL must approve all names and logos, and the league has been hinting to new franchises that a little diversity is a good thing.

"You want to create as distinctive an identity as you can," explains David Haney, the NHL's director of creative services. "We really urge teams to find things that are going to generate interest at a local level, without having to go to the animal default."

"It helps distinguish the individual team, and distinguish it as an NHL team," he continues. "We'd have a tough time with Tigers, for example. There's just too many Tigers out there."

The league, aside from looking for creative names with a distinctly local identity, also polices taste.

"I think you have to be very careful with names that espouse negative connotations, ethnic things, the obvious stuff," says Haney. "You wouldn't do the New Jersey Disgruntled Postal Workers."

"And the violent as opposed to aggressive names we have to be very careful with. The Bloodthirsty Ducks as opposed to the Mighty Ducks, say."

Though Wild is by far the most avant-garde of the new noms de puck, some of their fellow inductees during the latest round of expansion have also chosen less traditional (and acceptably aggressive) names.

The Atlanta Thrashers, who begin play next season, are only the second league club named after a bird. The Columbus Blue Jackets, who will join the league during the 2000-2001 season, are the first NHL squad to be named after a bug.

But the Predators, though not named after a specific animal, opted for a more mainstream mascot -- a sabre-toothed tiger.

Team president Jack Diller defends the choice. "The name and logo are appropriate given how we want our team to get out there and play," he says.

The club settled on their mascot after searching for something of significance to Nashville and yet somehow related to ice. A nine-inch tiger fang dating from the last glacial period -- talk about teeth -- was found in Nashville during a foundation excavation in 1971.

"We knew that was the icon we wanted," says Diller.

The resulting logo -- a metallic sabre-toothed tiger's head that looks a bit like a post-apocalyptic hood ornament -- was passed around the club's offices, and staff were asked to come up with possible names.

The results well illustrate the twin trends of animals and the abstract.

Before the team became the Predators, they risked being dubbed the Nashville Ice Tigers, Tigers, or Saber Cats. But the Fury, Attack, Power and Rage were other possibilities raised during in-house brainstorming sessions.

Ultimately, the name Predators was selected in a public vote. Fury took second place.

"It all came together very nicely," says Diller. "But frankly, you get to a point in these things where there is no right or wrong. It just comes down to taste and style."

And for Javed, "Predators" is lacking both.

"I guess the question is are there better names?," asks Javed. "Yes, there are far better names."

However, there is another question emerging along with more abstract names, which, by the way, Javed likes.

How do you create a logo for a team dubbed the Wild? With an evil-eyed spruce tree perhaps, or a frenzied rocky outcropping?

"It's a big challenge to create the identity," admits Haney.

The best Minnesota has done so far is green stylized writing that looks somewhat jagged -- as though it were scratched out by a vicious animal.

Even if the names have changed, it seems the ethos remains the same.