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One in six fans plans to tune out NHL

By **MARIA MCCLINTOCK**, OTTAWA BUREAU

OTTAWA -- The NHL lockout isn't scoring with frustrated fans, with one in six saying they'll be switching to other entertainment when the game returns, a new national SES/Sun Media poll shows. And with the fate of the 2004-05 season hanging in the balance, the federal government is prepared to provide professional mediators in an effort to end the lockout, Labour Minister Joe Fontana told Sun Media yesterday.

"The time of no return is approaching very, very quickly and if both parties are thinking of the game, are thinking of the people that are affected ... perhaps that might be the motivating factor," said Fontana, a Montreal Canadiens fan.

"If they should call for mediation services, I'd be more than happy to provide it to them."

Of the 1,000 Canadians surveyed, 629 said they were hockey fans.

Viewership of the NHL on the tube will drop 16.4% nationally once the lockout ends, says the poll.

"What it's shown is that over the course of the lockout there's a certain part of the NHL fan base that has been exploring alternatives, and based on the poll that we completed last week, will be doing something else other than watching hockey," said SES president Nik Nanos.



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CAREERS
CLASSIFIEDS
COMMENT
CONTESTS
HOMES
LIFESTYLE
NEWS
OUTDOORS

✦ Backswing

✦ The Edge

✦ Mike Drew

✦ RV living

PHOTOS

SHOWBIZ

✦ Bars & clubs

✦ CDs & music

✦ Event guide

✦ Movie guide

✦ Dine out

SPORTS

✦ Flames

✦ Hitmen/CHL

✦ Stampeders/CFL

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Ontarians will harbour the biggest grudge, with 21.8% fewer expecting to watch the NHL. Atlantic Canadians are most forgiving with a drop in viewership of 10.1%, while 17.1% in fewer Western Canadians and 10.6% Quebecers saying they'll tune in to NHL hockey.

The poll of 1,000 Canadians was conducted between Jan. 28 and Feb. 2 and is accurate plus or minus 3.1% points, 19 times out of 20.



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