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LIFE SHOWBIZ COLUMNISTS EDITORIAL

Tue, February 8, 2005

**NHL could lose 16% of fans
SES/SUN MEDIA POLL FINDS FOLKS HEADING FOR
EXIT**By **MARIA MCCLINTOCK**, OTTAWA BUREAU

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 2004-5 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. When the fans were asked how much NHL hockey they'd be watching when the lockout ends, 16.4% nationally said they'd be looking for something else to do.

'EXPLORING ALTERNATIVES'

"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.

"They're giving up on the NHL. From a strictly

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Toronto's Other Voice

business point of view, can the league sustain a potential loss of 16% of its market?"

Ontarians will harbour the biggest grudge, with 21.8% seeking alternatives. Atlantic Canadians are most forgiving at 10.1%, while 17.1% in Western Canada and 10.6% in Quebec say they'll switch.

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.

Fontana said both sides in the NHL dispute should heed the results of the poll and not underestimate the fans' anger.

"There's no doubt, if you look back at what happened in baseball ... is that when there was a disruption, the fans never did come back to baseball, he said.

While the labour minister is keen to help mediate a settlement, Liberal MP and NHL Hall of Famer Ken Dryden said he doubts he could play a role. "It's been something that we've thought about occasionally, but I think the problem that the parties have is that they are so philosophically widely separated that I'm not sure where the conversation begins," Dryden said.

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