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# THE PRO GAME DIES:

## SPOKANE PRO HOCKEY DROWNS IN A SEA OF RED INK AND POLITICS

**T**he writing had been on the wall for some time. The Western Hockey League was squeezing out the Victoria's, Saskatoon's and Winnipeg's, opting in favor of moves to bigger markets like Portland, Los Angeles and San Francisco – and towards eventual

competition with the NHL. The granting of a franchise to San Diego for the 1965-66 season was yet another move intended to move the WHL a step closer to hockey's big time.

The league as Spokane had known it was virtually unraveling around the Comets. Calgary and Edmonton, both markets similar in size to Spokane, requested a "leave of absence" from the league following the 1962-63 season.

It was just a matter of time before Spokane was next on the chopping block. While behind-the-scenes negotiations were in high gear paving the way for the Comets move somewhere, someday, the team's principal owner, retired general Mel Smith, was telling the Spokesman Review on May 26th that "we haven't come close to any move yet, but when we make up our minds we'll move in a hurry."

If Spokane was to stay in the league it must have a bigger share of the attendance pool money, improve its season ticket base and get a better deal on Coliseum rental, parking and concessions. They got none of those so Smith quickly made good on the threat to move and the Comets were history.

On June 5th the announcement was made that the Comets would move to Denver. As the Invaders, they'd stay in the "Mile-High" city for one season, win the WHL championship and then move to Victoria, and finally Phoenix where they would stay until the WHL went out of business in 1974.

Denver, however, was not McBride's first choice, "Denver had a bad building," McBride said. McBride's first choice for a new home for the Comets was Long Beach, California. "I wanted to move to Long Beach," McBride said. The fit was potentially a good one considering the WHL had franchises in place in



**Crowds that used to flock to the Coliseum for Saturday night hockey, thinned considerably when Spokane pro teams like the Flyers and Comets had to play on week nights. The end result was the transfer the the franchise to Denver in May 1963.**

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The Comets escaped to Denver where they became, aptly named, the Invaders, and won the Western Hockey League championship. Their stay in the “Mile-High” city lasted just one season. Next stop was Victoria where they became the Maple Leafs until 1967 when the team moved to Phoenix and were known as the Roadrunners until the WHL disbanded in 1974

nearby Los Angeles and San Francisco.

“They built a new building in Long Beach. The city wanted a hockey team,” McBride said.

But nearby Los Angeles didn't.

Long Beach was 48 miles from Los Angeles, and the Blades had a no-compete clause for a 50 mile radius. “I had a sweetheart deal with the concessions and parking. All the deals I couldn't get here,” McBride said. “L.A. wouldn't let me move into Long Beach.”

The next – but perhaps not the best choice – was Denver. “So I went to Denver. That was a real college town. I went in and talked to the manager of the building. I told him I wanted 55 dates, preferably Saturdays. I never got one date that wasn't a Monday or Tuesday,” McBride said.

McBride eventually sold the team to Connie Smythe Jr., son of the famed owner of the Toronto Maple Leafs. Smythe wanted to own a team in the WHL, obviously thinking of the future and possible NHL expansion to the coast.

“I told him, you give me the right number and you got one. I also got it in American money. He got a pretty good deal. He got nine players out of it, which wasn't bad.”

Smythe also wound up with a WHL regular season champion too, but a big loser at the box office.

Looking back almost 40 years to the move, McBride – who still makes his home in Spokane in the spring and summer, and winters in Arizona – laments a bit about moving the Comets.

“We had a great time here. We were good citizens of the community. It was good.”

However, McBride says, “Spokane - contrary to a lot of people - is not a great sports town,” McBride believes “If you put a fence around it, (sports) would die. We had people who came from 100 miles around. 150 and 160 miles. Even today there are people who are six blocks from the Coliseum (or now the Arena) who have never been in the place.”

Losing pro hockey wasn't an overnight occurrence. “Our hand was forced,” McBride said. “We had to make the move.”

“We had bad travel,” said McBride. “We'd play on Friday in Vancouver, Saturday in Victoria and back here Sunday.”

“We didn't have the parking, the concessions. You couldn't deal with them (the city). We had no political muscle which was very critical.”

“Your seat was your only income,” McBride said. “It's tough to promote without concessions.”

“Winning was the best promotional tool,” said McBride. But the Comets only had one winning season, so there wasn't much else left other than to sell to the highest bidder.

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