

Charlotte Checkers

by: Michael Earle

photo courtesy of: www.GoCheckers.com



What I don't know about the Charlotte Checkers could fill a truck. What I don't know about hockey could fill several trucks. I learned the rules of hockey by grafting the basic gameplay of NHL 95 (sega genesis) onto the rules that I remembered from youth soccer. It's close enough, and there are off-sides penalties, so I figured it was a pretty straight crossover. As an understanding of the game, it seemed to serve for the purposes of gaming in the college dorms of LSU.

Now, I have friends who love hockey. These are friends who schedule their lives around a playoff game. Serious reschedulings. "No I'm not coming to your rehearsal dinner and while we're at it what time do you plan to be saying 'I do' because I may need to bail early on that too because the Kings are in the playoffs" kinds of reschedulings. I appreciate hockey. I don't venerate it like I do baseball, but I know and respect its power. It's elegant and violent like all the best supervillains, it's fast paced and hard-nosed in a same-but-different-and-better way as football, and... like I said.... it has soccer rules. So it's probably crazy that I write this article as someone who's never even seen live hockey in his life. But man this year do I want to.

I've been to the Checkers website, you see. When I caught this assignment, I went immediately to the fast friend of the minimally informed, research. And it seems that they're building a team you could love in a hometown. Maybe I don't get the fine distinctions on the Hurricanes site between those who have AHL contracts and ECHL contracts or one or two-way contracts. But we've got a few young guys who are already veterans on the books, and even a NC native toeing the ice (do they toe ice? I know they zamboni it. Zamboni. Say it.). But some of these numbers are downright impressive for some guys with just a few years under their belts.

Now, I'll admit: hockey's been playing catch-up pretty much since the Checkers came to Charlotte in 1956. As a region, it's been building steam first as a curiosity, then as a

slow-growth pastime for the northern transplants who have come here from places like Buffalo (who have "real" hockey teams in their own right), and most recently as an up-and-coming new sports franchise for the sports-starved Carolinas. Since the checkers made the jump to the American Hockey League from the East Coast Hockey League, we've seen a marked increase in the level of play going down on the ice over at PNC. Now, we're trading up and down players with the NHL affiliate Hurricanes pretty regularly, and the starpower and harder play on the ice is starting to attract a lot of attention.

It's not just the quality of the game that's bringing them out, though. There's the quality of the experience as well. As I said before, I've never seen live hockey in my life. But it calls to me from the facebook posts of my friends in the fall as they stumble into cabs after a Thursday night beer special at the Checkers game... the fun party nature that you see in the stands at a hockey rink- more raucous and beer-soaked and food-besotted than your staid baseball crowd of today, bundled up like a herd of arctic explorers eating chemically balanced food product similar to nacho cheese, all in a darker environment than most anyone watches sports in outside of Wrestling or early 80's public access Roller Derby- it all has a tantalizing air. I want that sports experience, the fast pace of the game and the roar of the chorus in the crowd, hurling abuse and support in equal measure from the stands- it calls to mind the Roman Colosseum. On Ice.

So they don't play at Bojangles Coliseum anymore, what can you do? Take some public transpo down to PNC and check out the practices, which are mostly open to the public. Who lets you watch them practice? Then again, if I had to be freezing out on the ice all summer for development camp, I'd have kind of a laissez faire attitude about the audience as well. If you wanna freeze while you watch em practice slap shots, go ahead.

Season Tickets on sale now. Schedule announces in early September.