Howard Dolgon: AHL Juggernaut

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HOWARD DOLGON: AHL JUGGERNAUT
By Maddy Perkins

He started off wanting to be a writer. He stumbled into a marketing career. And by chance, he wound up owning his own hockey franchise. Now, Howard Dolgon, owner and president of the AHL Syracuse Crunch may be setting the standard for small-market hockey success.

When Howard Dolgon graduated from Brooklyn College in 1978, he did what a lot of other kids in his class did: He drove out to California looking for a job. He was the sports editor of his college newspaper and had hoped to find some work in the field across the country. After six months of working unrelated jobs and “a lot of time on the beach,” he returned to New York. Dolgon got a job working with the Associated Press in their sports department. Things were falling into place.

Dolgon had been working with the AP for around two and a half years when an editor dropped an interesting opportunity into his lap. A small PR firm called Alan Taylor Communications was looking for someone to help promote a World Title boxing match featuring Sugar Ray Leonard and Thomas Kurtz.

“I took a leave of absence, took that job and worked at it. The assignment ended after three months but Alan kept me on full-time,” says Dolgon. “We ended up building a pretty big agency that specialized in sports.”

Dolgon had always been a huge hockey fan. Since 1972, he had shared blue seat season tickets at the Garden with his brother. After he had made partner at the firm, the American Hockey League was seeking sponsorship from one of the firm’s clients: a Canadian Whiskey brand called Black Velvet. In early 1993, Dolgon was asked to negotiate the deal and made a meeting with Bob Ohrablo, the marketing director of the AHL. They successfully negotiated the deal, and the Black Velvet sponsorship was executed. About eight months later, Ohrablo unexpectedly called up Dolgon.

“He says ‘I know you love hockey, I know you’re a big hockey guy.’ He told me there’s a group in Syracuse that’s trying to bring a team back to the market. They have a building. They’ve got a committee called ‘Ice the Future’,” Dolgon says. “But what they don’t have is an ownership group. Then he asked me, ‘Is this something you have ever thought about?’”

Dolgon says he hesitated for a second.

“What young kid who loves sports hasn’t thought about owning a team, right? So I said ‘Yeah. I’m interested,’” says Dolgon. “I’ve spent my professional career promoting other peoples’ products or sponsorships. Why couldn’t I own a team and have that as my own product that I could build and manage?”
After Dolgon hung up the phone, the process was underway. He went up to Syracuse with a close friend with a financial background and they met with county executives, venue owners and local influential business people. He started putting together a group with its sight set on getting an American Hockey League franchise set up in Syracuse.

In 1993, there were only fourteen teams in the AHL. The league existed mainly in small markets like Hershey, Rochester and Springfield, with a few Canadian teams in places like Cornwall and Prince Edward Island. Dolgon worried about finding a player supply and a National Hockey League team to affiliate with. The minor league hockey space was complicated—split between the AHL and the International Hockey League (IHL).

“The IHL catered towards older players while the AHL was trying to have more of a developmental model. But, you know, you had two teams competing for NHL affiliation,” Dolgon says. “It wasn’t like now where there’s one league and one team for each team. I had to begin the process of trying to find the right partner.”
He had heard that the Vancouver Canucks were affiliated with an AHL team in Hamilton that was “running on a shoestring budget.” The team, owned by New York Rangers veteran Pat Hickey, had been experiencing some trouble and its future was questionable. With this in mind, Dolgon reached out to George McPhee, Vancouver’s assistant general management at the time.

“He said, ‘Well, we’re trying to make it work in Hamilton.’ I said ‘Great.’” Dolgon let it go. “Months later, the Hamilton team went belly-up and the Canucks had to take up the franchise in order to play through the season.”

McPhee and Dolgon stayed in contact throughout the course of the Hamilton team’s difficult season. McPhee reached out to Dolgon asking to start negotiation. In May of 1994, Dolgon’s ownership group got approval from the American Hockey League to move to Syracuse.

The Syracuse Crunch were born.

**Pound-for-pound: the Frozen Dome Classic**

Fast forward to 2014. It’s been two decades since the Crunch first dropped the puck in Syracuse. The team, now affiliated with the Tampa Bay Lightning, has the longest independent ownership group led by Dolgon.

The Saturday after Thanksgiving would have otherwise been an average day in the city. The mercury hit a high of 46 degrees—exactly the average temperature. But on this day, 30,715 people packed into the Carrier Dome at Syracuse University to watch a small-market hockey game.
The crowd would be the largest ever to watch an indoor hockey game in the United States.

It wasn’t the first time Dolgon had pulled something like this off. In 2010, he set out to put on the first outdoor game in the AHL. Dolgon instructed his team to treat the outdoor game as a World Title fight, with one caveat: They would likely never do it again. An excess of 21,000 fans came out to the New York State Fairgrounds to watch the Crunch play. All of a sudden, the Crunch became buzzworthy in a city otherwise preoccupied with college sports.

“By doing that, we gained a tremendous amount of credibility in the market place,” Dolgon says. “Now, we had that in our pocket.”

Given the success of the outdoor game, Dolgon, now began to revisit his “never again” caveat earlier this year. But outdoor games had already been done by other teams and thought it was best to avoid repeating. “You want to be unique,” Dolgon says. He noticed a hockey game had never been played at the Carrier Dome, the legendary home of the Syracuse Orange. Once planning the event was underway, Dolgon set his sights on shattering the AHL indoor attendance record of 20,672.

Initially, Dolgon had his sights set on shattering the AHL indoor record of 25,000+. It wasn’t until tickets for the Frozen Dome Classic started selling that he realized he could aim higher.

“We had never talked about the professional record because we didn’t know if that was really feasible in a market our size,” he says.

Dolgon began to think of ways to market the game. Like the outdoor game, he intended to treat it like a World Title fight. All all work would be done behind-the-scenes leading up to its announcement. In just about two weeks following, they rolled out a viral ad campaign. As interest mounted, the overall record previously set by their NHL affiliate—an attendance of 28,138 by the Lightning vs. the Philadelphia Flyers in an Eastern Conference playoff quarterfinal—didn’t seem too lofty.

“Once we knew that we were going to break the American League record, we introduced the overall record in a way that we thought was going to rally the community,” says Dolgon. “That’s when we came up with ‘pound-for-pound.’

Once the record was in reach, Dolgon wanted to put the city—and not just the Crunch—on the map. In 2013, the Orange set an on-campus attendance record in basketball against Duke University, drawing more than 35,000 fans into the Carrier Dome.

“I’ve made a statement that a few of you have maybe not have agreed with, but it’s really up for conversation,” he announced once the NHL record was within the team’s reach. “If we’re fortunate enough to break a professional record for attendance at (an indoor) hockey game, it would give this market two attendance
records in two major sports. In my opinion that would certainly put us in the conversation of being the best pound-for-pound sports city in America.”

Dolgon says the slogan helped drive the hype just ten days away from the game. He promoted the game on Canadian Radio. He went on Sirius XM. He got the attention of Stan Fischler of the Fischler Report. Mike ‘Doc’ Emrick brought up the game during a primetime “Rivalry Night” telecast on NBC.

“It became so much bigger. It became ‘OK, can this small market team set a record in professional hockey?’” Dolgon says. “And it wasn’t just the media asking, it was the fans asking. County executives wanted to know. Congressmen wanted to know where we were record-wise. It became a real rallying cry. It did make it much more than a hockey game.”

When the puck dropped on November 22, the atmosphere was electric. As expected, both AHL and NHL indoor attendance records were shattered. The Crunch beat Utica 2–1. The Monday following the victory, Dolgon took to Twitter to make the anticipated announcement, adding his now famous personal motto in a hashtag at the end: Conceive, Believe, Achieve.

The standard for small market success?

Dave Andrews has been the president of the American Hockey League for 21 years, as long as Howard Dolgon has been a part of it. He had never set foot in the Carrier Dome prior to that night. He had also never seen over 30,000 fans cheering on an AHL franchise. He was floored.

A video by J.D. Thomas shows the Syracuse Carrier Dome transform into a hockey arena for the Frozen Dome Classic.

“Not only with events like this, and the first outdoor game, but just generally speaking his franchise has set a great example of being able to be in a smaller market in our league with an older building and make it work,” Andrews told Syracuse.com. “He’s made it work by connecting in the community with his fans, he’s connected in the community with the political support that you need to do things like this, the community connection to come into the Carrier Dome in Syracuse and marry up the university with a community sports team. All of those things are not easy, but he’s willing to do the work to make it happen.”

Dolgon says the key to having small market success is constantly thinking forward—and well beyond just winning. The Crunch’s product, he says, has never been based on wins and losses, but creativity. He says that the key to small-market sports success is always remembering that. And the AHL as a League has accomplished a great deal in his time as an owner. If anything, he says the success of the event shows the future is bright for both the Crunch and hockey as a sport. Other small market teams can pull this off, too. And the Crunch isn’t stopping there.
“In Syracuse now, there are fans or companies that never did business with us, or maybe had a low degree of awareness of the Syracuse Crunch,” Dolgon says. “No more. Even not just hockey people. People know who we are now. Their opinion of us has to be pretty high based on what we’ve achieved. We’ve got to maximize the success going forward with it.”

As for what’s next?

“I think there’s another big event down the road,” he says. “If you asked me that question the week before the Dome game, I would have said ‘You know, this has been quite challenging. Let someone else have the next big challenge.’ But, I know my staff has risen twice to the occasion. They like achieving things that people don’t think we can do. So…I think there’s something big down the road. For sure.”