

Ego measured in seconds

The receptive excitement as Mr. Alan Eagleson brought his NHL warriors home to the acclaim of election politicians and thousands of grateful countrymen confirms the deep need for a national focus. This is what the late Frank Underhill said we craved: To share great enterprises together.

If the late, acerbic historian were with us he might have more acidulous remarks about the role of Mr. Eagleson. Indeed, to one who returned with the team and knew surprise, as they did, at the scale of the welcome and affection, it was even more surprising to discover the day afterwards how much criticism there is for Mr. Eagleson, the man, who according to most major sportswriters, "made it all possible."

My own position as an "insider" with some administrative responsibilities for the USSR-Canada series keeps me from either a total, detailed defence of the bustling Toronto lawyer or any detached critique of his pell-mell personality and behaviour at home and abroad. But I feel free to say that I dispute hotly with those who accuse him of venality and selfishness. He's an impulsive man, utterly unable to sit still or keep quiet.

Mr. Eagleson desperately wanted to win, was determined to win — all out, no holds barred and it's no mean reflection on the coaches to say that it was the Eagleson spirit which infused the team and brought it back to victory. If winning was paramount — the response at home indicates it was — then Mr. Eagleson deserves due credit. He's probably more the archetypal Canadian than Mitchell Sharp or Maurice Strong.

My own tendency is to be more ironical about the series. For example, to note what a difference 34 seconds makes in the collective ego. For example, to underline that the Eagleson team brought home the unofficial, joint world championship by tying the Czech titlists of the IIHF, with four seconds grace.

The effects caused by this Moscow-Canada happening will ripple for months and months, particularly in the half-million households which have hockey-playing kids.

DOUGLAS FISHER



The principle of open competition between pro players and the Europeans has been reached and established. The wonders in entertainment of contrasting styles of play and strange unknown players have been savoured by millions who won't forget it, who will want more.

And this brings us back to Mr. Eagleson and his players' association. It's not in the business interests of the NHL to have National (i.e. Canadian) all-star teams tied up for weeks in an endeavour which devolves little to their individual clubs and complicates schedules, detracts from exhibition gates, and exposes the general league product to invidious comparisons.

Club teams against the Europeans . . . yes. The prospects are entrancing to owners. Against this interest of the owners, at least not parallel with it, are the wakened public enthusiasm in Canada for a national team of great quality and the understandable attraction of an all-star kind of competition to the players' association and Mr. Eagleson.

Just this scenario, with two likely protagonists, is complex enough. Throw in an angry, sour IIHF president, Bunny Ahearne, the Russians brooding over Canadian barbarism — the Canadian Amateur Hockey Association and its love-hate-cash ties with the NHL — now add the almost accepted writ in Ottawa that: (a) hockey is by far the most important sports activity in the country; (b) hockey at the international level is a necessary concern and a joint responsibility of the government and is to be encouraged.

Encores won't come easily no matter how strident the applause encouraging them.

But the permutations of putting together something like this again in the next few years are probably easier to find than matching the challenge which the venerable Charlie Hay, head of Hockey Canada, sees as clear-cut after this series. Improving Canadian hockey. The coaching, the practices, the conditioning, the individual skills which are part of the complete hockey player.

"It seems to me," said Mr. Hay just after the uproar of Czech satisfaction had subsided at Prague arena, "that we can't count on changes at the top in pro hockey. They won't happen or, even if they do, they will take a long time. We must start below with the boys in minor hockey. Aim better coaching and new methods at ages between 8 and 16. Maybe we should take some Russian ideas and try them out on a large scale."

Mr. Hay does not have these intentions merely because some drastic changes seem required to keep pace with the Europeans. He played goal in an Allan Cup final almost 50 years ago. At the heart of his long view is the belief that you can always learn to improve the game, that there is an ideal to be pursued in conditions, facilities and milieu which will provide better players and better games. How there should be a receptiveness to what he thinks should be done. And if new programs and more participation follow, the USSR-Sweden-Czechoslovakia progress of Team Canada will be worth even more than a short currency of intense national interest and fulfilment.