

Fans won't turn away from NHL because of Tocchet affair



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Maybe the best thing would be for everyone to take a deep breath and put the gambling allegations against Rick Tocchet into perspective.

No doubt, they are very serious charges and a problem for the NHL by association. Tocchet, an assistant to [Phoenix Coyotes](#) coach Wayne Gretzky, played 18 NHL seasons, so he knew better than to get anywhere near that kind of situation.

And even if he is ultimately exonerated, he should be kept at a distance from the NHL for tainting and deeply embarrassing the league as it recovers from a year-long lockout and approaches an important international showcase like the Olympics.



Rick Tocchet should've known better than to get involved in gambling. (Getty Images)

Still, the explosive charges brought by the New Jersey police should not be creating another [Todd Bertuzzi](#) episode for the NHL -- the kind where the league suddenly loses its obscurity and becomes part of major media news cycles while getting raked over the coals.

That's what has happened over the past few days, thanks to a great deal of salacious and unsubstantiated innuendo that has been attached to the limited available facts of the case. It leads to speculation, and when it comes to the NHL, all speculation tends to focus on the how much damage the latest black eye will heap on the league's recovery effort.

Probably a lot less than most people assume.

Bertuzzi sparked ugly criticism about hockey from all corners for good reason when he slammed Colorado forward Steve Moore face first into the ice in March 2004. Hockey's detractors had legitimate putdowns when the NHL cancelled its season last year. This situation is different on many levels; police have indicated their investigation is limited to about a half-dozen people and, foremost, because there has been no evidence of any bets made on NHL games.

That's the critical issue here. Not how many rich hockey types bet big money on football, as Tocchet claims, and it tends to resonate with fans living in a culture where gambling is pervasive and nobody really gets worked up anymore about things like steroid use, sexual misconduct or violent behavior by athletes. The police probe will determine if Tocchet and company did anything illegal, but if there was no hockey betting or if it was contained within a small group, it won't hurt the NHL where it matters -- in the pocket book.

Obviously the league has to adjust some because one of its own was directly linked to criminal gambling activity and the names of others not charged were irresponsibly leaked and spread to the public. So far, the NHL has responded swiftly and appropriately, putting Tocchet on a leave of absence and hiring a respected prosecutor to investigate the case. Beyond that, it's a legal matter that has to wind its way through the justice system, the one that considers Tocchet innocent until proven guilty.

Naturally, it remains an attention-grabbing drama thanks to a seductive mix of high-profile personalities, purported illicit activity and big money. But none of it really matters to NHL fans, insist leading sports marketing experts.

David Carter, executive director of the USC Sports Business Institute,

POLL**Will the Rick Tocchet gambling scandal hurt the NHL?**

- It certainly won't help matters
- This is the final nail in the league's coffin
- If the lockout couldn't kill the sport nothing will

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says fans generally have been tolerant of missteps by leagues, teams and athletes in recent years, and hockey fans in particular, tend to be fiercely loyal to their game. He said that's a big reason the NHL returned so strongly and has already surpassed its most optimistic revenue projections.

"It's a smaller fan base than other league sports, but very tight, forgiving and just tickled to have their game back," said Carter. "Advertisers and sponsors will gauge how they feel. If they determine fans aren't bothered, there won't be any real impact on corporate American spending on the sport and that's the lynchpin for recovery.

"The NHL has proven it can be viable so there's not likely to be any economic fallout because of this."

Dean Bonham, head of Denver-based sports marketing firm Bonham Group, did several research studies for the NHL before and during the lockout, and believes the type of fans hockey attracts will not be dissuaded from continuing to support the game. He said they understand the NHL can't police the thousands of people associated with the game in some respect on a day-to-day basis.

"Hockey fans are the most sophisticated of all the sports leagues in the country," Bonham said. "Our research showed them to be well informed about the NHL's economic model and salary issues and with enlightened opinions about what should be done. We've seen research as it relates to lockouts and strikes in other sports where that was simply not the case."

Bonham added the level of return support for hockey was "unprecedented," and that fans were turning out in numbers much higher proportionately than other sports that have endured a labor disruption.

"It's not hard to conclude that they're loyal and clearly capable of making the distinction between individuals engaging in some alleged nefarious acts and any wrongdoing by the league," he said. "There will be very little impact from this."