Hockey's Brooklyn history

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In Brooklyn, when it comes to sports and heartbreak, thoughts turn to the Dodgers. What most people don’t realize is that a decade before the Dodgers moved to Los Angeles, it was the National Hockey League that toyed with and then abandoned the borough.

But the history of disappointment and broken promises in Brooklyn is about to end. And it’s a truth-is-stranger-than-fiction tale.

The first NHL team in New York City was not the Rangers, but the New York Americans. The team was owned by William “Big Bill” Dwyer, a bootlegger. With cash to burn, he bought a franchise from north of the border, the Hamilton Tigers (yet another story of abandonment and heartbreak), and brought them to New York City in 1924.

The team was one of the first tenants in the third incarnation of Madison Square Garden, located on 8th Avenue and 49th Street. The Americans’ debut pre-dated the Rangers by a season.

But the Americans were doomed from the start. Before the home opener, Dwyer was arrested on federal charges. The case was billed as the greatest liquor conspiracy in the history of prohibition enforcement. Then, the Garden’s ownership brought in the Rangers. The Rangers were not only owned by the Garden, they were better financed than the Americans.

And, of course, they weren’t hampered by an owner serving time in federal prison.

The record book tells the story. During the 16 seasons that the Rangers and the Americans shared the Garden ice, the Rangers played in six NHL finals and won three Stanley Cups. In contrast, the Americans only mustered three winning seasons.

In 1936, when Dwyer was finally hounded out of the league, the Americans’ player-coach Mervyn "Red" Dutton took over the team. Dutton recognized what Dwyer did not. When it comes to professional hockey, co-location doesn’t work.

Where some people saw perennial losers, Dutton saw a gruff but lovable lunch-bucket team. He wanted to put the team in a new environment that matched their image.

Just before the 1941-42 season, Dutton moved to Brooklyn and encouraged his players to do the same. The team began practicing at the Brooklyn Ice Palace on Atlantic and Bedford avenues, while Dutton looked for a location to build a new arena. And, although the team still played its games at the Garden, they wore jerseys that proudly proclaimed their future home: Brooklyn.

At the end of the Brooklyn Americans’ inaugural season, with World War II raging and players leaving to join the war effort, the Americans suspended operation. Before shutting down his team, Dutton extracted a promise from the NHL: At the end of the war, the Americans would once again be allowed to play in the NHL — and in Brooklyn.

In June 1946, with the war over, Dutton attended an NHL meeting and presented his plan to revive the franchise. The response was as cold as ice. There would be no Brooklyn franchise. The Rangers were opposed.

At that point, Dutton famously told the Board of Governors, "You can stick your franchise up your ass." With that, his 40-year involvement with the NHL came to an end, as did the dream of a Brooklyn NHL franchise.

A few years ago, when rumors began circulating that the Islanders might actually be lured to the Barclays Center in Brooklyn, I was skeptical. I thought that the then-borough president, the ever-optimistic Marty Markowitz, might believe that NHL hockey belonged in Brooklyn, but he didn’t know hockey or history. There was only one lesson to draw from Red Dutton’s legacy: not in my lifetime.

Well, I’m delighted to be proved wrong.

Tonight, NHL hockey returns to Brooklyn when the Islanders host the Philadelphia Flyers in the team’s first preseason game, and first home game at the Barclays Center. Red Dutton died in 1987. It took almost 75 years, but his legacy is finally being fulfilled.

Now, how do we change the team’s name to the Americans? Steven M. Cohen served as a consultant to the Brooklyn Historical Society in connection with their forthcoming exhibition Brooklyn Americans: Hockey’s Forgotten Promise.