Wednesday marked the 20th anniversary of Gary Bettman as Commissioner of the National Hockey League. Bettman has had a lot of ups, a lot of downs, has been praised and vilified, perhaps more than any commissioner in professional sports, during those 20 years. Twenty years that include three lockouts, a labor stoppage with referees, and the proliferation of hockey to non-traditional U.S. markets like Phoenix, Tampa Bay, San Jose, Nashville, Atlanta, and Columbus. Bettman is not responsible for everything that has happened during his tenure, both the good and the bad, but right now, all he is known for is the lockout that threatens the entire 2012-13 season.

Earlier this week, the league announced the cancellation of games through December 30. The next round of cancellations could very well include the rest of the schedule. Negotiations, even those held with a federal mediator, seem to be at a standstill. Talks continue, possibly as a token gesture to fans, because the two sides still appear to be very far apart.

Commissioners in every sport are booed relentlessly whenever the fans are given the opportunity to voice their opinions. Bettman is no different. His reputation will probably be irreparably broken by this lockout, as two good Olympic tournaments and growing distaste for the NBA was taking the NHL to new heights. Rule changes that benefitted the fans, including the institution of shootouts, a tougher stance on obstruction penalties, and other measures to enhance goal scoring, now seem like a distant memory with NHL arenas dark into the holidays.

Fans that have chosen sides, and most have, will still be glad to see the players back, even if they put the majority of the blame on them. Bettman will not be welcomed back with open arms regardless of what side of the aisle a given fan was on. It's the nature of the beast and something that Bettman understands and, to be honest, probably thrives on. Whenever the league does begin playing again, a bond between player and fan will have to be repaired and Bettman, as the face of the league, will need to make it clear that the game is to be celebrated.

Over 20 years, fans have a lot to thank Bettman for, especially those in markets where hockey may not have been possible. Expansion would have been inevitable no matter whom the commissioner was, but the non-traditional hockey market expansion was one of Bettman's chief agendas. In some respects, he succeeded. In other respects, he failed miserably, though not all of the blame can be placed on him for situations like Atlanta or Phoenix.

It may seem ironic that the NHL is locked out as Bettman's reign turns 20. It's definitely not the way he wants it, but he also has a loyalty to the owners that must be kept, as escalating salaries and no major television deals hurt the bottom line. Three lockouts in 20 years are pretty unprecedented, and any and all criticism thrown in his direction is warranted. As the players keep playing overseas or continue to give their opinions via social media, everyone wants the same result. They want the NHL to be in action.

The top of every NHL fan's Christmas list is to see a resolution. Unfortunately, the only pucks they may see this holiday season are lumps of coal shaped like pucks.

A brief update on the Lake Erie Monsters, who continue to struggle mightily. The Monsters have lost four of five to start December, following a 1-0 loss to Hamilton on Tuesday night. They split last week's two-game set with the Charlotte Checkers, taking Thursday night's game 3-2 and losing 5-1 on Friday night.

Luckily for the Monsters, things are very tight in the Western Conference standings. Their 26 points put them in eighth place in the conference, but just three points separate them from fourth-place Houston.

The Monsters have played just nine home games this season and 16 on the road. Of Western Conference teams, only Milwaukee has played fewer home games with six. The Monsters open a five-game homestand with a matchup against the Rochester Americans on Thursday night. They'll host the Chicago Wolves on Saturday night.