

# The Man Who Would Be MR. SPORT

By Marc Edge

**He's Nelson Skalbania. Marathon runner. Former owner of Wayne Gretzky. Dabbler in art. He plays Monopoly with real buildings. And everything he owns is for sale. Now he's going after sports franchises. As many as he can get his hands on. One of them is the Calgary Flames.**

In his hometown Vancouver, Nelson Skalbania is known as a man who plays Monopoly with real buildings. At 43, he is playing a new game. It needs a name and he makes up the rules as he goes along, but the object apparently is to own a team in every pro sport.

So far, save a few setbacks, Skalbania is cleaning up the board, having acquired five franchises in the past year, three of them hockey teams. Last time round, as owner of the WHA's ill-fated Indianapolis Racers, he fared not nearly so well: After signing Wayne Gretzky, then 17, to a \$1.7-million personal services contract in 1978, he dealt the youngster to Edmonton owner Peter Pocklington to help stem the losses before folding the Racers.

Skalbania is rolling hot now. Intent on reviving the Flames, he

Contributing writer Marc Edge last wrote about Peter Pocklington in February.

projects a \$2-million profit with a club that last season *lost* the same amount.

Skalbania is the classic competitor, a man who snapped up a Toronto shopping mall for \$24 million and sold it less than a minute later for \$1 million more. Tall, lean and bearded, he runs 50 miles a week, once publicly wagered \$1,000 that he could whip his players in a two-mile race, settles debts at the backgammon board and plays racquetball with \$5,000 on the line (he has a permanent 4 P.M. court reservation at Vancouver's downtown YMCA because he donated funds to have it built).

With engineering degrees from the University of British Columbia and the California Institute of Technology, Skalbania has made his fortune investing in oil, submarine building, gas, forestry, mining, art galleries and real estate. He owns Canadian Gold, one of four private





*Calgary owner Nelson Skalbania with Wayne Gretzky, the star he once owned.*

Canadian breweries, and his company, Skalbania Enterprises, is listed on the Canadian Stock Exchange, with shares going for \$3 each. An intensely private man, he used to talk freely—sometimes too freely—to the media, and stories of his extravagance were commonplace on the sports and business pages. There's no telling what he owns at any given time because everything he owns is for sale. But over the years he has had homes in Maui and Puerto Vallarta and owned Monets, Renoirs and Picassos. He had a gold ceiling installed in the living room of his Vancouver apartment and wings about North America in a twin-engine DeHavilland; until he traded it to Peter Pocklington in a business deal, he owned the 1928 Phaeton convertible used in the film, *The Great Gatsby*.

Skalbania has had his fill of publicity, and last New Year's he resolved to keep his mouth shut. "You never got me," he said when reached at his unlisted phone number. "I've been talking too much lately." He became even more reclusive when news leaked of his \$500,000 out-of-court settlement with a Vancouver woman who claimed to be his defacto

wife for 11 years; then came tales that he had demolished his mansion because it didn't suit his "second" wife's tastes.

Whether he likes it or not, Skalbania has held center stage by gobbling up sports franchises. Skalbania first bought the New Westminster Bruins, a local junior A team, as a birthday present for his 20-year-old daughter, Rozanda. Then he added the Calgary Wranglers, another junior A club. But Skalbania had eyed Peter Pocklington's success in Edmonton too long not to hunger for something bigger.

Calgary businessmen had long coveted an NHL franchise, but the existing Calgary arena—the Corral—was too small to pay. Skalbania, gauging the market brilliantly, seized the Flames when they went up for sale, putting them in the 6,500-seat arena until a bigger rink was ready and slapping a \$21 price tag on every seat to make ends meet. The rink has been sold out ever since.

Branded "Nelson Skullduggery" by Calgarians, Skalbania was first regarded as a villain, an outsider whose reported \$16-million bid topped that of local investors by \$4

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million (Atlanta owner Tom Cousins, however, claims Skalbania made the only offer). Skalbania mollified critics by dealing off a 49 percent share to local interests, then pledging first-year profits to local amateur hockey organizations, including the Calgary-based Canadian Olympic Team. At the Flames' home opener, Skalbania, wearing a white Stetson, drew the loudest cheer. He was briefly a hero. Very briefly.

The aftermath of his dealings in Indianapolis soon returned to haunt him—the unpaid bills, the outraged season-ticket holders who sued him for the return of their money. His cashflow situation, it was said, did not match his reputation; indeed, he himself once admitted that his then \$34 million in assets was offset by some \$50 million in debts. When landing the Flames, claimed critics, he substituted interim financing and clever juggling for cash on hand.

Rozanda Skalbania says her father

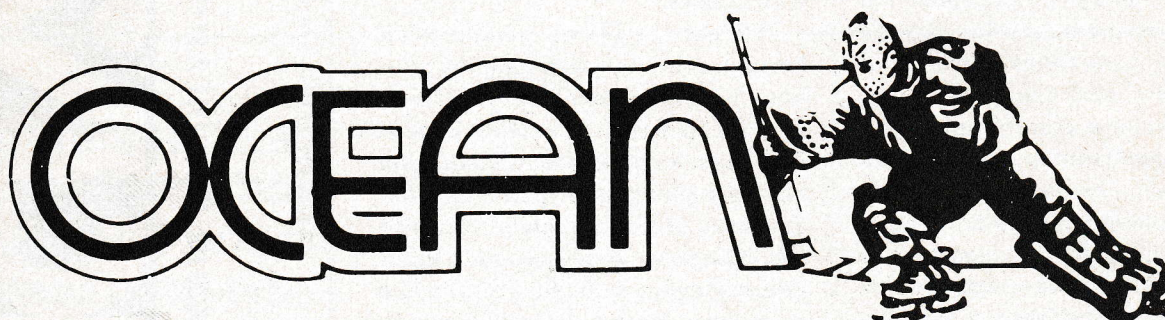
almost unloaded the Flames when he read the early-season bad press. "What's the use if this is going to happen?" he asked. Says Rozanda: "He feels he's doing them a favor and then this happens."

He may well be doing Calgary a favor, but he stands to make millions. He has already recouped some of his \$16-million investment by signing a \$3-million TV deal with a local brewery. At \$21 a seat, he'll generate \$5.5 million from paid attendance this season, and should earn back his original investment by the 1982-83 season.

Meanwhile, Skalbania has turned his attention to other sports. He went after baseball's Seattle Mariners but when that deal was rejected after an investigation by the commissioner's office, he settled for a minor-league franchise in Vancouver. Then he offered the NBA \$16 million for an expansion franchise, again using interim financing to raise capital by collecting \$50 de-

posits on conditional season-ticket pledges. The NBA turned him down.

But when Sam Berger put a share of his troubled Canadian Football League franchise—the Montreal Alouettes—up for sale, Skalbania bought 50 percent for some \$2 million. Skalbania had already spurned an opportunity to buy the CFL's British Columbia Lions, saying he had no interest in investing in Canadian football, so many observers believe he made his most recent purchase in hopes that the Montreal Alouettes will enter the NFL, an oft-heard and oft-denied rumor. Even if the Als stay in the CFL, they will nicely complement Skalbania's North American Soccer League franchise, the Calgary Boomers. Suitable name that, because when a high roller like Skalbania tosses the die, business keeps on booming.



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