

Lockout comes before shootout in Hamilton's four-on-four tournament

It may look like hockey, but it's the same political game we're all sick of

Sometimes more means less.

At least it will if the underlying message of last weekend's National Hockey League Players' Association's four-on-four tournament in Hamilton is true.

You see, under a thin veneer of charity, fanfare, celebrities and fast-paced hockey excitement, the NHLPA sent a message that was lost on many drooling, hockey-starved fans.

It said: "We can run our own game, we don't need owners to market us. We can survive the lockout, they can't."

So while the fans in Hamilton received more hockey excitement than any all-star game could provide, the players proved they are capable of successfully holding out. The National Hockey League season could indeed be a long way off.

But to their credit, the players did a respectable job of maintaining their roles as philanthropists. "It's just for fun," St. Louis Blues sniper Brett Hull said. "It's a good opportunity for us to raise some money for charity. The only thing I take seriously are the real games."

It's funny how much his tone has changed since Nov. 2 when he told *The Hockey News*. "[The owners] are testing our solidarity. Until they figure out how strong we are, there will be very little talking."

Hmmm.

What better way to display solidarity than to host a who's-who four-on-four mega-tournament featuring the NHL's best in a fast-paced shootout.

Perhaps the truest testimony to

the NHLPA's intentions over the weekend were evidenced in the political spectres lurking behind the scenes. In the bowels of Copps Coliseum, NHLPA Executive Director and figurehead of the players movement, Bob Goodenow, silently surveyed. Once the press caught wind of Goodenow, he vanished, leaving Los Angeles Kings enforcer Marty McSorley to step in and take care of things as he once did in a different way for his teammates. Now McSorley fights with words instead of fists.

Unsurprisingly, McSorley took



a tough stance on the issue. "[The owners] have disrupted our game to exploit it. It's too disruptive to continue, they want as much as they possibly can. We're not opposed to anything but the lockout," he said.

Montreal Canadiens goaltender Patrick Roy was hesitant about discussing the labor situation, but spelled out the implications of the tournament. "We've proved that we can make games on our own," he said. "The sponsors of this are going through the players and not the owners."

L.A. Kings defenseman Rob Blake was one of few to identify the weekend's entertainment as it really was. "It's an opportunity for

us to show how united we are. It shows our ability to stick together, and get a lot of guys together and inform them about things."

But despite the display of solidarity, in the locker-rooms there was an underlying current of discontent and anxiety. Doug Gilmour, playing his last game on North American soil before leaving to play in Switzerland, was clearly frustrated by the ongoing negotiations. "Right now we're talking about a lot more than we thought when we came out," Gilmour said.

And a restless Scott Stevens, relegated to playing showcase hockey rather than his usual bone-crunching style, was barely audible as he attempted to explain his frustration in a broken murmur: "I'm antsy to play, someone from each side is always making a move — it's a no-brainer."

The common thread which linked each player — perhaps their truest claim to solidarity — lay in their bitter frustration and confusion at having not only their living but their lifestyle put on hold indefinitely. The unvoiced question ringing through the dressing rooms was "what comes next?"

"The bottom line is that we're locked out," Habs centre Kirk Muller said. "We're anxious to play games. Our main goal is to get back into the league."

The 54 NHLers who participated in the three-day tournament put on a brilliant display of speed and skill. The fans ate it up, loving every minute. Unfortunately, the fans have no voice in the bigwigs'



Rob Moore/Gazette

DEAR GOD, BODY CONTACT! Trevor Linden (16) of the Vancouver Canucks and Ray Bourque (77) of the Boston Bruins tangle during the NHLPA's four-on-four tournament in Hamilton. The non-contact tournament awarded penalty shots for all infractions.

argument and the enthusiasm of the fans can't counter the pessimism of the players.

"I don't know what the plans

for the future are," a grim Ray Bourque said. "There's always hope — but nobody has their hopes up."