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Comic Book Biz

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Stan Lee ready to drop the puck

Comicbook legend teams with NHL on Guardian Project

By [Josh Chetwynd](#)

Stan Lee has done just about everything in the comic industry from giving Spider-Man his web-spinning abilities to providing Wolverine with his slashing metal alloy claws.

So when the legendary comic creator says he hasn't done something before, it's pretty safe to assume it's a new frontier in the superhero world. Such will be the case when Lee and the National Hockey League formally unveil "The Guardian Project," a group of 30 superheroes, each based on an NHL franchise, at this month's NHL All-Star Game. It's a novel endeavor that may shape how sports leagues use comicbook-style entertainment vehicles to sell their product in the future.

The reason: These new NHL figures won't have a direct relationship to any of the athletes or action on the ice. Instead, the characters are based on team names and logos. The heroes will possess general traits attributed to clubs (like the rough-and-tumble Philadelphia Flyers character will emulate the team's tough-guy image) and feature backstories meant to appeal to local fans, but the sport itself will primarily be in the cheap seats when it comes to mapping out these superheroes' world.

While leagues have given comic treatment to their players in the past -- for example, Major League Baseball created a "superhuman" marketing campaign in 2002, featuring illustrated larger-than-life versions of its stars -- using comics tenuously tied to the actual sport is uncharted territory.

"You have to applaud this effort because the NHL is trying to break through all the clutter," says U. of Southern California sports business professor David Carter. "Then you ask, will it work? Will it drive fan attendance and loyalty, and will fans of the superheroes become avid fans (of hockey)? It might not be that much unlike the toy you find in the cereal box. It might be a subtle way to drive people toward the product."

The onus is on Lee to make it work after he made one rule clear at the outset of this project: no athletes. Before hooking up with the NHL, Lee was in serious talks six years ago with the National Football League to do a similar project. The NFL wanted its top players to receive superhero makeovers and even singled out one charismatic quarterback in discussions. Lee balked and the deal broke down. It turned out to be a good decision, as that quarterback was Michael Vick, who would spend 19 months in prison for his role in dog-fighting activities.

"With the kind of stories we wanted to do, we can't have real people," Lee explains. "We are giving characters their own superhero powers, and when you do that with real people, everything has to be checked and approved. People's managers and agents would all have to be involved."

Neither the NHL nor Lee is concerned that the target audience -- kids 9-14 years old -- will fail to see the link between hockey and the heroes.

"There are connective threads that bring them back to hockey, but in order for this to be optimally successful, it had to be broader than hockey. What are 14-year-old kids facing? If you are not authentic to them, it is limiting," says NHL exec vp of marketing Brian Jennings.

Beyond the marketing implications, the NHL's depth of involvement also makes the deal notable. The league and Lee have set up Guardian Media Entertainment (GME), a dedicated company with seven full-time employees.

"We went in looking for a standard licensing deal, but the NHL wanted to be partners and really grow this brand," says GME chief creative officer Adam Baratta. "You are blending the intellectual property of two brands -- Stan Lee and the NHL -- and are dealing with issues of who owns the IP and the blended mark. The NHL has probably done things here that no other league would do."

The gameplan is for the superheroes to initially roll out through comicbooks, an online presence, merchandising, Jumbotron interstitials at games and character images on television broadcasts. Those efforts will be followed by social media gaming and a novel explaining character backstories. GME also hopes to have a television cartoon on air by 2012 and eventually produce film projects.

If all goes well, will Lee branch out to different sports leagues? He may leave that task to other companies.

"I don't think we would voluntarily go after another project that involves sports," he says. "We are trying to make 30 new superheroes as popular as we can so that we end up with 30 new Iron Men or Spider-Men. I think the NHL is enough to keep us busy for the next little while."