

WHAT MAKES FOR SUCCESSFUL AHL ALL-STAR CLASSIC AND WHEN COULD LEHIGH VALLEY HOST AGAIN?

In a way, Lehigh Valley Phantoms owners Jim and Rob Brooks have already succeeded.

They have brought the 2017 AHL All-Star Classic to the Lehigh Valley and are just hours away from hosting one of the league's premier events at their team's home, the PPL Center.

But being one of the American Hockey League's biggest events, how will the league judge whether the actual weekend is successful or not?

"I rate it based on what it feels like when I'm around the fans," David Andrews, president and CEO of the AHL, said. "Like on game night you try to make sure you're down walking the concourse and listening to people, what they're saying.

"Watching the event from wherever I'm sitting, you can tell if the fans are having a great time, they're engaged and they feel as though this is something really special. And I'm happy to say I don't think I've ever come away from it where I didn't have that feeling where fans thought it was really fun."

He stressed it's not just about the bottom line.

Andrews, in his 23rd season as president and CEO, described the 2015 AHL All-Star Game at Utica Memorial Auditorium in New York as one of the best he's ever seen. The game's attendance was only 3,835 but it nearly filled the building. Only 25 seats were empty in the 3,860-seat arena. That made for a great atmosphere and, in turn, enjoyment for both the fans and players.

The atmosphere at the PPL Center has the potential to be even better. It's expected that the Phantoms will have a crowd of more than half the size of Utica's turnout but it's unclear if they'll reach capacity. A sellout at the PPL Center is considered 8,420 with the ability to hold more with standing-room only tickets.

Aside from attendance, another way to create a positive atmosphere and continue to build excitement is to improve on the format of the event. For the second year in a row, the AHL has changed the way Monday's All-Star Challenge will work. Instead of a major change like last year, this year they made just a few tweaks.

All four of the AHL's divisions will have one team each participate in a round-robin tournament. Each team will be made up of 10 skaters and two goaltenders. The tournament consists of six, 10-minute games with teams playing entirely at 3-on-3. At the end of the tournament, the two teams with the best records will face each other in a six-minute game at 3-on-3 to decide the champion.

The skills competition on Sunday will stay the same with the Eastern Conference up against the Western Conference in seven skills events. Here, the glass along the boards on both sides of the ice will

be removed, allowing more fan access and autographs throughout the event. Glass along the benches and behind the nets will remain.

Even if things are successful, it will likely be a while before the Phantoms have the opportunity to host the game in the future. It's absolutely possible, it's just going to be a few years.

"It's kind of surprising if you look at geographically where we've been, we haven't been back out west since we were in Grand Rapids, which was quite a while ago," Andrews said. "It seems as though the appetite for hosting has been more in the region we've been in and it's been a lot of New York state and Pennsylvania over the years."

But Andrews sees that changing. He believes the AHL All-Star Classic is heading to a Western Conference team, possibly somewhere in the mid-West, next year and California within the next two years. Out of the 30 total games the AHL has held, it's been further west than Ohio just twice – once in Winnipeg and once in Michigan.

The area to most recently host another game heading is St. John's, Newfoundland. It was 12 years between games when they hosted again in 2014. After a 35-year absence, the game has been held annually, beginning in the 1994-95 season with Andrews' effort. Since then, 12 years is the shortest amount of time between hosting AHL All-Star Games.

Andrews left open the possibility of the game returning to the Lehigh Valley at some point as long as the appetite for the event is there in the area and the league is confident in the market hosting.

While the Lehigh Valley could host again, it's likely to be at least a decade before the AHL All-Star Classic would return.