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Hockey and the Rest: Inclusions and Exclusions in Canadian Sport

For many Canadians and non-Canadians, sport in Canada means ice hockey. Hockey is everywhere in Canada. It exists as a game that many children play, for decades Hockey Night in Canada was the most popular show on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, and back in 2004 there were ten hockey players among the CBC's top 100 Canadians, including two among the top ten.[1] As a signifier of Canadianness, hockey sticks and pucks and jerseys are a convenient shortform for the nation. They help differentiate Canadians from the American neighbours to the south, and they help affirm that a person or institution is *not* American – no matter that hockey is of course a major sport also in the United States.

Canadians are fairly docile colonials, but cricket, the quintessential colonial game, faded as the decades passed in Canada, supplanted by baseball. Although baseball has been wildly popular in Canada for over a hundred years, it is not considered a marker of Canada (similarly, Canadians tend to neglect the rich tradition of ice hockey in the United States and elsewhere in the world). The point of such posturing is to prove that Canada is different from the colonial mother and the neo-colonial neighbour. That is why during any election, party leaders are careful to be photographed wearing a hockey jersey – to show themselves as true Canadians. More indicatively, Canadian celebrities that have enjoyed fame and fortune in the United States and who reside there often don hockey jerseys when they make appearances back up north.

In terms of literary culture, as Angie Abdou and Jamie Dopp write, "[a] quick survey of Canadian sport fiction, drama, and poetry illustrates that hockey tends to eclipse other sports in our nation's literature" (2023, 3). "Eclipse" is *le mot juste* because as a sporting and broader cultural obsession hockey overshadows almost everything in Canada. More Canadians will know Wayne Gretzky than Margaret Atwood; more Canadians will know Sydney Crosby than Michael Ondaatje. Indeed, Ondaatje himself

1 One was former CBC commentator Don Cherry, who played one game in the professional National Hockey League. For the full list, see https://www.craigmarlatt.com/school/cpw4u1/improving_quality_of_life_greatest_canadian.pdf, 07.09.2023. For Don Cherry's colourful and checkered career in and around hockey, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Don_Cherry#Playing_career, 07.09.2023.

acknowledges hockey as a cultural behemoth when he notes: "We make good horror movies. We tend to be known for our hockey players" (1995, xiv). When popular sport goes toe to toe against even popular culture, sport often wins, and when sport competes for attention in Canadian headlines, hockey often dominates as a lead item, even if that item is merely the unveiling of a new team uniform.

Canadian cultural insecurities are well documented, not least because we live in the shadow of the thriving American culture to the south and the venerable cultures from the United Kingdom and France. In 1955, the Massey Commission set out to bolster Canadian culture and the federal government was later willing to provide the funding for that bolstering. However, as Jonathan Vance writes in *A History of Canadian Culture*, when the money started to flow, "many community centres had mysteriously transformed into hockey rinks" (2009, 359). The cultural spell of hockey saps resources from other cultural options.

The story of hockey used to be a saccharine celebration of the game. The standard Canadian tale was that hockey players were feisty on the ice but good lads off the ice. Hockey was thought to be inclusive because anyone could play, as long as they had a few dollars to buy skates and the occasional stick. The most famous rags-to-riches hockey tale is that of Gordie Howe (1928–2016), who was born into poverty in the prairies, acquired a pair of skates and through talent and hard work became one of the greatest professional players ever. It is hard to imagine that story featuring golf or equestrian, as it would lack the symbolic zest of hockey. Though rower Ned Hanlan (1855–1908) was Canada's greatest athlete, speedskater and cyclist Clara Hughes (b. 1972) piled up Olympic medals aplenty, and Ryder Hesjedal (b. 1980) won the Giro d'Italia, none is as anywhere near famous as the hockey player Howe because in Canada their sports lack hockey's mythical quality.

To think of hockey as a Canadian game of the people requires forgetting. Organized hockey is now an extremely expensive sport and "the days of young men from working-class families in rural Canada going on to succeed in the National Hockey League are over" (Gruneau 2016, 223). Can we continue to pretend that a game that can cost talented youngsters' parents $20 000 and more to play is a game of the people? Aside from financial costs, high-level hockey is saddled with other problems.[2] In Stephen Smith's fine *Puckstruck: Distracted, Delighted and Distressed by Canada's Hockey Obsession*, he queries "why we revere a game that bleeds and breaks us and our children, interferes with their education, stokes everybody's anger" (2014, 14), and promotes a jingoistic nationalism. Though professional hockey has long been tainted by violence, more recently the game and culture of high-level hockey has been tainted by increasing awareness of individual and institutional sexual abuse, racism, and sexism. Today, any engagement with hockey culture requires a critical eye.

2 To be clear, most hockey is not overly expensive to play and is free of violence and abuse; however, the form of the game Canadians worship has been professional hockey.

Until the 1990s, academia generally ignored sports, deeming it too trivial a topic for serious studies. The first major work on hockey in Canada, Richard Gruneau and David Whitson's *Hockey Night in Canada*, was "written partly out of frustration with the ambivalence of Canadian academics towards hockey" (1993, 4). More recent academic and popular examinations of sport in Canada attempt to uncover forgotten or ignored aspects of sport, including within hockey. An examination of sport in Canada must also consider exclusion, even within the supposedly inclusive game of hockey. Though girls and women have been playing hockey for over a hundred years, their role in the game's traditions have been ignored in a stridently masculine sporting culture. Even as pundits proclaimed "hockey is Canada", the hockey most Canadians saw on television or covered in the newspapers was white and male. Nancy Theberge argued that the female role at the rink was to "watch their brothers', sons' and husbands' games, staff the concession stands and take tickets" (2002, 292).

The recorded history of Canadian hockey has been a history of partial erasure – most obviously of non-white players, of women, of non-professional hockey, and, indeed, of sports played in Canada that are *not* hockey. The hockey "stories that are shared are most often about men's professional hockey. Other stories such as those of local community games, or the experiences of girls, women, or non-white players, are often absent from our histories of hockey in Canada" (Adams 2020, 9). The hockey story most Canadians are familiar with is by no means the whole story.

Another historical erasure is that of hockey as a historical entity (despite the obsession with records and legendary games and players of the past). To some extent, tradition and conventions are crucial to any sport. A hockey game from 1930 will be much like a hockey game from 2023 and a time-travelling skater can join in easily. However, it is not ahistorical, and we forget that conventions come into being over time. To provide a literary example, in Paul Quarrington's comic novel *King Leary* a simpleton hockey player finds himself listening to an academic discussing "the *origins* of hockey" and reflects, "I never knew that hockey originated. I figured it was just always there, like the moon" (1987, 8). For the eponymous King Leary and many fans alike, hockey is assumed to be a natural phenomenon, with natural rather than evolved traditions. Especially in ethnic, class and gender terms, there is a general cultural amnesia to hockey culture. It may seem natural that hockey is a hypermasculine game and the 'whitest' of the major professional sports. But as Andrew C. Holman and Stephen Hardy remind us, in the early years of the 20th century, hockey became less "race-, class-, language-, or gender-exclusive" (2018, 196) – yet "even as hockey became more inclusive on the ice, it was becoming culturally coded in the popular mind as a rough, northern winter game played, possessed, and driven by white, male, English Canadians" (196). "Others" are ignored or relegated.

M. Ann Hall states at the beginning of *The Girl and the Game: A History of Women's Sport in Canada* that "when women actively participate in the symbols, practices, and institutions of sport, what they do there is often not considered 'real' sport, nor in some cases are they viewed as real women" (2016, xvi). Two aspects are crucial here.

In addition to the reminder that one can do sports in many ways (by wearing a team jacket or getting a tattoo; by training regularly; by continuing the tradition of hazing or by joining a team), Hall raises the thorny question of authenticity. What counts as a sport? Who decides what 'real hockey' is?

Carly Adams neatly captures the tension between seemingly ahistorical hockey and general Canadian history. She provides a timeline that interweaves events crucial to the rise and sport and Canada and key events in Canada's history. In 1793, "Slavery is abolished in Upper Canada" (2020, V) hinting at the oft-told story of Canada as kinder, more benign part of North America. A few years later, in 1807, "the Montreal Curling Club is formed" (V) – a matter of exclusion, since in the 19th century, only the moneyed, anglophone inhabitants of Montreal had access to athletic clubs. In 1875, "The first indoor men's hockey game is played at Montreal's Victoria Skating Rink" (V); 1876 "The Indian Act is passed" (V). What is taken as the official start of Canada's national winter sport is in conversation with an Act that aimed at assimilation and regulation of disparate peoples into mainstream white Canadian culture. In 1877, "Hockey rules are published in the *Montreal Gazette* newspaper" (V) – an invitation for anybody to play the game, a public proclamation that necessarily implies inclusion. In 1880, "the MLC [Montreal Lacrosse Club] prohibits Indigenous athletes" (V) from playing lacrosse, that is, a game and sport taken from Indigenous Peoples, refined or made more scientific, and somehow Canadianized.[3]

Canadianizing a sport is a matter of essentialism, of deciding the story we would like to tell about ourselves, and no sport has been essentialized more than hockey. Snowshoeing was once a candidate for a national sporting activity, but that has faded; Nordic skiing requires the snow that is a keystone of Canadian identity but these "intimate acts that connect individuals to the snow and ice […] are not seen as being distinctly Canadian, as a way in which this country is defined, both at home and abroad" (Robinson 1998, 1). Those sports are excluded from the mythical national story.

Focusing on exclusions, whitewashing and sins of the past is a necessary corrective to history, especially to popular hockey histories and stories. Similarly, it is common to lament that sport seems to have shifted from participating to spectating, from playing to paying, and that participatory and local traditions of the past have faded entirely from our lives. Still, one should not forget advances. The very title of Bruce Kidd's *Struggle Canadian Sport* reminds us that sporting norms are a process: "Once the preserve of upper-class British males, sports are now played and watched at some point by virtually everyone" (Kidd 1996, 3).

3 For a superb overview of this Canadianization process, see Gillian Poulter, *Becoming Native in a Foreign Land: Sport, Visual Culture, and Identity in Montreal, 1840–85*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2009.

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