

Why Canada Must Bring Lord Stanley Home



Another National Hockey League season comes to its end, another all American Stanley Cup final and another American Stanley Cup Champion. That makes nine championships in the past ten years for the Americans. Montreal won it in 1993 the last Canadian team to do so. When the opening round of playoffs for the Stanley Cup began two months ago there were sixteen teams entered -- twelve American, four Canadian. In the quarter-finals there were seven American teams and one Canadian team. In the semi-finals all four were American teams. In the past seventy-six years of Stanley Cup Playoffs, Canada has won the championship forty-two times, the United States have won it thirty-four years. There are twenty-four American cities with NHL franchise teams, most of which are very well financed. Canada has six franchise teams, five of which have said they will need social assistance if they are to remain in Canada. These long odds make it very difficult for Canadians across the country to see the day when Canada will once again celebrate a Stanley Cup championship. Lord Stanley's trophy of hockey excellence and superiority, donated in 1893, is now more at home south of the border. What has gone wrong with the Canada's hockey way of life, which until 1972 was universally considered the best in the world? Let's take a look.

One can hear and read a lot of media hockey talk in Canada these days, enough to satisfy any hockey enthusiast. Much of it is pure hype, over colouring, and exaggeration, some of it informed and concerned. If it were not for Hockey Night in Canada our C.B.C. National Television Network, would be looking for old English movies in order to compete with TVO's Saturday Night At The Movies and would also be in Ottawa asking for more money. It is television voices and images which speak the loudest and have the most influence on the Canadian public's concept of what constitutes good hockey and what does not. Other national, regional and local broadcasts of televised hockey games in the U.S.A. and Canada require hundreds of reporters, analysts, commentators, and statistics specialists, all seemingly needed for a three-hour game telecast. The unvarnished reality of the brand of hockey played in the past season and its playoffs may have been brilliantly encapsulated in a June 2 Globe and Mail full page article which was headlined the Lamest Game:

The Lamest Game

It may be un-Canadian to say so, but the Stanley Cup action in this weekend's hockey playoffs is hardly 'action' at all. It's a bloody bore, in which brawn-heavy tactics weigh down what was once the fastest game on Earth. John Allemang asks why hockey doesn't follow other sports and get some changes made.

If this article accurately and fairly reflects the views and comments of a majority of Canadians, then

Canada and the Canadian hockey establishment must take note and begin the long, slow and arduous task of rebuilding and reclaiming the reins of how and where hockey is played in Canada.

Hockey, is a fascinating, high speed game of talent, skills and intelligence, that never fails to exhilarate players, spectators and television audiences. Making the right move, the right pass, the right play anticipation, the right shot and hopefully putting the puck in the top right-hand corner is always the mental and physical quest for any player, at any age, at any level anywhere in Canada. Boarding an opponent violently from behind is not an acceptable maneuver to be learned, taught or practiced -- it's thug hockey and a gross misuse of the boards of a hockey arena. They are there to set off the area of play, not to be used as battering rams to harm or injure an opponent.

Since the advent of Mr. Gary Bettman as president of the National Hockey League, now headquartered in New York City, the league has devolved into a sorry blend of Disney Land type entertainment and the now infamous television game of Roller Derby, a weekly repugnant display of physical mayhem on roller skates. Mario Lemieux described the National Hockey League a few years ago as being a *garage league*, which is a very important and significant statement from one of Canada's finest ever hockey players. His statement and those reflected in the above-noted newspaper article should be sufficient to indicate to the Canadian public the need for a major change and repatriation of our game as it has been played in Canada for the past hundred years. It is now twenty-five years since a Canadian has been a president of the National Hockey League. Clarence Campbell was the last Canadian to hold this important office, then headquartered in Montreal. The National Hockey League was, since its inception in 1917, a Canadian enterprise, with American city franchises awarded to New York, Detroit, Boston and Chicago. It no longer is Canadian.

Is the situation that Serious? Consider the facts that Canada has only one financially viable hockey franchise, with five others in unstable financial condition, two of which are owned by American citizens -- that we have lost two franchise cities in recent years -- and that we have a city worthy of a franchise that will never see that day because of its close proximity to Buffalo, New York and remains under a league sponsored territorial sanction of the Buffalo Sabres.

Today, after a hundred years of Canadian hockey supremacy, the game in Canada is in a sorry state, from our minor leagues right up to the National Hockey League. Canada's hockey performance in the 1978 Olympic games played in Japan was a very unpleasant, but at the same time, a very revealing series of games, and an unmitigated embarrassment for the nation, the team and Canadian citizens everywhere. Expectations for the approaching 2002 Olympic games in Salt Lake City appear to be no brighter for the nation, the game and its international future. To continue to believe that our recent international performances are simply aberrations, is the highest form of folly. Canada's present hockey international status as a fourth or fifth world rated team was further confirmed by this year's most recent Junior and World Championships played in Europe. The United States played no better. It is now too late to accept any reasonable or rationale apologies for our game and the manner and way we play it. Only a brutally frank analysis, appraisal and proposals for institutional changes can save the game we so love to play and watch. What can be done?

For the few or the many who may be interested and would like to consider what course of action can be adopted nation wide as being sound, feasible and especially needed to assure that Canada will soon retrieve its former hockey glories and international status, there are two main proposals and possibilities to consider. Adopting these changes may be the starting point of a new era, a new format of hockey excellence, for our players, our fans, the nation and our financial establishment. First, the formation of a Canadian National Hockey League --secondly the reestablishment of the Stanley Cup as our symbol of our National Hockey Champions.

Is such an idea possible, practical, conceivably or unsound and contentious? It depends on how one looks at it and the needs that exist. Other than banking and politics Canada no longer has a defining national industry. It has a few companies working successfully in the industries of other countries and in the world of international trade and industry, but not one singular Canadian industry to call our own and profit from. So the national need exists for a significant hockey program which will once again restore our international status in the most Canadian of all worldwide athletic enterprises.

The needed cities are there, the hockey talent is there, the money for franchises is there. Everyone employed by the Canadian National Hockey League would be paid in Canadian currency -- which will automatically reduce present player salaries by forty percent or more. Other Canadian workers across Canada work everyday of their lives for Canadian, American, and European and Asian companies operating in Canada and are paid in Canadian dollars. There are enough fans paying enough money presently for NHL games in Canada, to support successfully a Canadian enterprises such as our own professional hockey league. Our Canadian Junior hockey leagues turn out a couple hundred hockey players a year. Europe does the same. If European countries can support their own hockey leagues, Canada should be able to do so also. Presently there are hockey leagues in the Czech Republic, Germany, Switzerland, Belarus, Slovakia, Finland, Austria, Japan, Sweden, Latvia, the Ukraine, Russia, Italy and Norway. There are two hundred and eighty European hockey players - - 28 percent of the leagues' total -- employed by NHL teams. The International Ice Hockey Federation will receive twenty-nine million US dollars from the NHL over the next three years as compensation for hiring their top home-grown players. From these published numbers one can safely calculate that approximately six hundred and fifty Canadian hockey players earn their living playing in the NHL. These players were born and raised in Canada and played their minor and junior hockey for cities and towns across the country. Canadians and expatriated Canadians make up the great majority of the managers, coaches, and supervisors of the hockey and business affairs of the league and its member teams. The newly expanded and restructured American Hockey League will begin its new hockey year with twenty-seven teams -- twenty-two American and five Canadian.

What is wrong with hockey as it is? In order for it to flourish and survive at the NHL level it needs the constant and persistent hype given to the games by thousands of reporters, analysts, commentators, by way of radio, television, and print. Most of their daily comments and opinions quickly fade into oblivion and the trash cans of the nation -- but, their constant stirring of controversy and statistics often do great harm to the game, the players, managers and fans. Their effusive babble of opinions and platitudes do sell the game and many of the modern myths concerned with modern professional hockey games and players. There are too few people listening to their entertaining comments who are capable of analysing what is being said and what is actually occurring on the ice, in the locker rooms, and in management and ownership's offices. Mediocrity is too often praised as being great or outstanding. This star-making is the media's obligation to the National Hockey League, for favours and perks received from the league, the teams and advertisers.

Prior to the advent of these four, five and six man media teams of hockey experts, the singular and most admired radio broadcast voice of Foster Hewitt was the voice of the National Hockey League across Canada. Most, if not all game announcers today pour out thousands of words and hundreds of statistics along with so-called colour background commentators, while the game on the ice below is being played. Foster Hewitt used fewer words in his radio and television reports of entire games, than present day announcers use in the opening period of a game. His radio and television voice description of the 1972 Russia-Canada hockey series of games, which were destined to change the game forever, was a masterpiece of brevity, fairness and accuracy. His game focus was always on team performance rather than on individual performances or statistics. He was not in the star-making business. Numbers and certain statistical categories were not part of his vocabulary; such as face-offs won or lost, shots on net, saves, plus - minus factors, power play opportunities, short-handed play time, hits, players' play time in periods in game totals. He would make mention of these games' factors but did not bring them down to bare boring numbers. His game wrap-up was an outstanding compliment to his unerring understanding of the game of hockey that has been played on the ice below his broadcast location. Although he saw the game from a team performance, he did not hesitate to make mention of outstanding plays and players. That no longer can be applied to any contemporary media presentation of today's games. The televised handling of the C.B.C.'s broadcast of Canada's Olympic hockey performance in Japan in 1998 was a demonstration of the art of apologetics, which began after the first flush of enthusiastic commentary days before the first games were played. These multi-manned broadcast teams now needed for the telecast of the NHL game is excessive and bound to diminish of the action on the ice -- the game itself.

One incident in the 2000 Stanley Cup playoff games between the Philadelphia Flyers and the New Jersey Devils is an example of what is wrong with the game itself. The shoulder check by Scott Stevens of the Devils on Eric Lindros of the Flyers was described by every media observer as a *good*

clean hit; the term now used to describe a body check. The result of the 'hit' by Stevens was that Eric Lindros suffered a major concussion, the third or fourth of his career, and did not play a single NHL hockey game in the 2001 season. He is now seen by hockey people as 'damaged goods.' What was wrong with the check? The main reason it was not a *good clean check* is that it was completely unnecessary. Lindros had his head down looking for the puck when he passed two New Jersey players and was defenceless when approached by Stevens. Stevens did not have to hit him that high on his body with that much force to make a player on Lindros. Obviously no one has ever taught Stevens how to stick check the puck away from an opponent or to use the now forgotten art of a clean hip check, which would have stopped Lindros in his tracks without putting him in the hospital and on the verge of retirement. It was an excessively violent check but was warmly applauded, condoned and accepted, as the way the game is now played, by media experts. If puck possession and puck control are still the main skills needed to play winning hockey, Stevens and the Devils could have easily regained possession of the puck off of Lindros's stick by the two hockey skills mentioned: stick check or simple hip check. No one wants the puck these days, they handle it like it was a hot potato, throwing it across ice, down the ice or into a vacant corner. Good puck carriers and set up artists seem to be a thing of the past. There is now more interest in throwing a body check at an opponent than making the right play, the right pass, the right move. It is a game of hit, hit, get up and hit again. European players, along with a handful of North Americans will still carry the puck up ice but for doing so they pay a physical price. They are hooked, held, slashed, kneed, high sticked and boarded by inept opponents who have lost the speed and the dexterity to properly stick check or hip check a puck carrier who is skating at top speed.

Americans have demonstrated by their attendance at NHL games that they like the game exactly as it is and will patronize this brand of hockey until someone gets seriously hurt and ends up paralysed on a stretcher being carried out of one of their hockey palaces. Arena is too primitive a word to be used any more with their new style of elegant, luxury entertainment palaces. Gary Bettman knows exactly what his American audiences want and is prepared to give them all the hockey glitz and violence they can handle and pay for. There are serious doubts that Canadian audiences are the same as the Americans in this regard, although there is a small group of hockey fans that are of the same mind as their American counterparts.

It's time for Canadians and Canadians alone to decide their hockey future. Will it remain a frenzied game of physical mayhem or will it return to former days of hockey excellence and international acclaim? Will Canadian cities with National Hockey League franchises with Canadian owners stay with their NHL commitments? Aside from Toronto, the three Canadian owned teams -- Edmonton, Calgary and Ottawa -- may wish to see a Canadian hockey league in their future as they now face the very real threat of an American takeover of their financially troubled franchises. They will not survive the dollar war going on. Other American cities would welcome and support a N.H.L. franchise. The American owners of Vancouver and Montreal would likely not welcome the introduction of a purely Canadian Hockey League.

Will a Canadian professional hockey league be a second tier league, second to the National Hockey League as now constituted, because of finances and player availability? Will the world's best North American and European players opt for the U.S. dollar and the glamour of big city life? Not necessarily! There has always been a very fine judgmental and subjective call as to who is the best player now and who has the most potential. Managers and coaches make errors in judgements of a player's worth to a team. There are a few players to come along from time to time who do not need this assessment, but they are few and far between. If Detroit, Michigan can produce an outstanding hockey player like Mike Modano, then Canada or Europe can be counted on to produce hockey stars of his status to play for Canadian teams as they have in the past.

Personal Appendage

Some of my happiest hours in life were spent in a frozen park or in a cold unheated arena playing hockey with and against the best players in the region for over five decades. Many times making the right move, the right pass, the right shot all came together and gained for me a group of lifelong friends and one or two fans. Until I was fifteen years old, I had never seen the inside of an arena or played with a team that had a coach. Up until then it was pick-up hockey every free hour I had of

every winter day and night playing in the city's largest park, two blocks from my home. It was skate, skate, skate and skate again until they closed the lights at night. How I acquired the needed skates, sticks and gloves remains a mystery. We did a lot of sport equipment trading in these early 1940 days. The Saturday morning game was always much like the final sudden death seventh game of today's Stanley Cup Championship. The best against the very best players in the park that morning from around ten o'clock to mid afternoon. No raising was allowed as there was no net for the goal tenders, only whatever markers we could find. Stick handling was the most needed skill, along with having fast starts, as once you got the puck on your stick it was normal to look up and see five or so guys coming at you in order to take the puck away. All ages and races made up the teams.

***NHL lets Habs fall into foreign hands
'We intend to be proud
stewards of what is a national treasure;'
With Gillett the first American owner
in the Canadiens' history, Montreal's
three most prominent sport franchises
are now all U.S. - owned...***

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