

**CREATING A CANADIAN CULTURE:
HOCKEY IN THE LATE 19TH AND EARLY 20TH CENTURIES**

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Introduction

We often think of hockey as a big part of Canadian culture and identity. By studying the sport's development, it is possible to learn about some key features of early Canadian life. Many aspects of hockey's evolution reflect the changes that were taking place in the young, developing dominion. The passion that Canadians have for hockey grew slowly, as Canada matured into a strong dominion. Hockey then replaced other sports and leisure activities as our "national pastime." National leaders were happy to see something that might finally unite all of Canada, which was a vast, unconnected land. Many differences between the early and modern versions of the sport will stand out. They will raise many questions about leisure activities and society in general at the turn of the century.

Hockey moves to the big city: Standardization and other effects of urbanization

What aspects of urbanization and industrialization were present in late 19th century hockey?

Mid-19th century forms of hockey vary from region to region. The game had not yet been codified in clear rules. Generally, it was played in various forms in wide-open spaces with a large number of players on each team. Games were won when a team scored the required amount of goals or were left undecided due to darkness.¹ Players made their own sticks and generally used a lacrosse ball, as the puck had not yet been introduced. Hockey equipment was not yet produced on a large scale.

During Canada's period of heavy urbanization and industrialization, people brought their sports with them to the cities. The people and the sports had to adapt to the new lifestyle that the city offered. People's concept of time was changing. Instead of being task oriented and thinking of time in relation to sunrise and sunset, city dwellers began using hours, minutes and seconds to divide the day. In hockey this meant that games ended after two 30-minute halves, instead of after a certain number of goals had been scored. The shortage of space in cities compared to the open fields and large frozen lakes of the country meant that the size of the rink had to be reduced. Team sizes had to be reduced and regulated in order to fit onto the small ice surface.² In the cities, hockey was restricted to the upper classes of society. Workers did not have enough leisure time to play the sport. The high concentration of people in the city encouraged more competition. As a result, the game was codified in Montreal in 1877 with the publication of the first rules of hockey.³ Slowly, other aspects of the game began to be standardized so that more people could play on the same level.

What did the first organized hockey games look like and who played?

In 1875, McGill University students played what is considered the first modern hockey game ever to promote the developing sport to the public. Because a large crowd of spectators was expected to surround the open ice surface (there were no boards protecting the supporters), the *Montreal Daily Star* assured the public that precautions would be taken to avoid accidents. Instead of a ball, this game was played with a flat block of wood so that it could not be lifted off the ice.⁴ This was the first use of the puck. It would take another decade before a standard form of puck was adopted in 1886. With the standard form of hockey now in place, sporting goods

¹ Metcalfe, Alan. 1987. *Canada Learns to Play: The emergence of organized sport, 1807-1914*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, p. 20.

² Ibid.

³ Rules published in the *Montreal Gazette*, Feb. 27, 1877, 4.1.1A.4

companies began developing and manufacturing hockey equipment like pucks, sticks and specialized hockey skates.⁵ After the turn of the century, boards and nets were added to the rink. Until then, spectators stood right next to the rink with nothing protecting them, often having to push players back onto the ice if they fell out of play. Before nets were introduced in 1912, the goals were made up of wooden flagged posts that stood on the ice. It was common to have goalies give the post a kick before changing sides for the next half, stretching the distance of the posts past its 6-foot regulation.⁶

Contemporary fans studying early hockey may be struck by the fact that until the early 20th century, hockey was restricted to a particular group of people. Young Anglo men were the only people who had the leisure time to participate in hockey games in the early years. The French absence may be striking to some, given some present-day views of the sport. Playing hockey required money and access to rinks, which only the elite had. There was an instance in 1900 where women formed a team. Their intention was to raise funds for soldiers fighting in the Boer War. Some women's teams took shape but the idea of women playing hockey soon faded as the game earned a reputation for being violent.⁷ This was not considered the type of activity that proper ladies of the era should engage in, as illustrated by articles in *La Patrie* and the *Montreal Daily Star* in early 1900.⁸

Why did Anglos have more leisure time to play hockey than Francophones did?

Toward the end of the century, hockey's popularity grew across Canada, thanks to promotion in the Montreal Winter Carnivals of 1883, 1884 and 1885.⁹ The McGill team, the oldest still-active hockey team in the world, led the way in hockey's promotion at the carnivals and other public exhibitions. The team was formed in 1877.

Hockey becomes spectator sport: The Amateur vs. Professional struggle begins

Slowly, as the sport's popularity grew, other members of society and regions outside Quebec took up the Montreal version of the game. The sport also developed a strong following of

⁴ *Gazette* article promotes first game, Mar. 3, 1875 3.1A.1

⁵ See museum artifacts: Selected objects show the crudeness of early equipment, which had not yet been mass produced. (Skates c.1870, M975.61.187.1-2), (Skates from Halifax, 1895, M985.223.A-B), (stick of W.F. Skaife, 1878, M995.18.1)

⁶ Diamond, Dan. 1992. *The Official National Hockey League Stanley Cup Centennial Book*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, p. 9.

⁷ Legends of Hockey [video recording], Opus Pictures, Part 1.

⁸ *Montreal Daily Star*, January 27, 1900 & *La Patrie*, February 28, 1900. Both articles raise the question of women playing hockey.

⁹ Picture of the Carnival in 1884, 3.1A.2, View-1337

spectators who enjoyed the quick pace of hockey as well as the fans' proximity to the action. Championships were held to generate greater competition and interest among spectators.¹⁰ In 1892, Lord Stanley of Preston, Governor General of Canada, donated a trophy, which was supposed to reward the top amateur team in Canada. The first winner was the Montreal Hockey Club, an affiliate club of the Montreal Amateur Athletic Association. The Dominion Hockey Challenge Cup, which quickly became known as the Stanley Cup, generated interest across the entire dominion. Teams in every part of Canada were formed to challenge for the prestigious trophy.

The immense interest in hockey as a spectator sport forced some changes to the game. Games moved indoors to arenas that could accommodate thousands of spectators. One of the biggest of the rinks was the Victoria Skating Rink located on Drummond Street. Boards were later erected around the ice surface to protect the fans, who paid high sums of money to attend games. Nets were finally introduced to avoid disputed goals at the start of the 1912 season.¹¹

What forced Canadian hockey to open up to professionals? What Canadian phenomenon of the time did this move aim to avoid?

The large gate receipts that team owners were amassing led players to demand their share. Those who controlled the sport in Canada maintained that hockey should remain purely amateur. The values that amateurism promoted were sportsmanship, fair play, discipline and respect for authority. These were necessary values for young men to learn if they were to become good citizens of the dominion. If hockey were to be professional, it was believed that these values would be lost. However, amateurism was threatened by many factors. Professionalism was on the rise in the United States and was attracting the top Canadian players. In Canada, team owners were often entrepreneurs who used hockey to enhance their company's prestige. They were often desperate to have winning teams and resorted to paying some players against league rules. With the United States offering large salaries to players, and the under-the-table contracts that already existed in Canada, many of Canada's best players were lured away from their teams.¹² Eventually, professional leagues dominated Canadian hockey, as amateur teams could no longer compete. Since 1909, the Stanley Cup has been the property of professional teams.

Le Club de Hockey Canadien: rivalry and national identity in hockey

¹⁰ See museum's artifact : Carnival cup won in 1883-85 at the Montreal Carnival, M976.188.1

¹¹ Mouton, Claude. 1987. *The Montreal Canadiens: an illustrated history of a hockey dynasty*. Toronto: Key Porter Books, p.30.

¹² Legends of Hockey, op. cit.

As hockey became a professional sport, it became accessible to the masses. Players were no longer limited to playing in their leisure time if they were able to make a good living out of the sport. In the early 1900s, only two major French Canadian teams existed: Le National and Le Montagnard. They drew their players from the classical colleges of Montreal. The two clubs were arch rivals because they fought for French Canadian hockey supremacy. However, by 1907 the Montagnard club had folded.¹³ In 1908 the National withdrew from professional competition, leaving no French Canadian teams to compete at the top level.

When a new league, the National Hockey Association, was formed in 1909, John Ambrose O'Brien owned four out of the five teams.¹⁴ This Ontario entrepreneur felt that hockey in Montreal needed a French-English rivalry to generate more interest among the French. One of his teams was to be called the Club de Hockey Canadien.

In this era, the level of French Canadian nationalism was high. Francophones did not identify themselves as British like most of Canadians. For this reason, the term *Canadien* referred specifically to French Canadians in this period. The French hockey fans in Montreal quickly identified with the players of the new team and turned into a large, loyal following. The players earned the nicknames *Les Habitants* and *The Flying Frenchmen* because of their connection to French Canadian society. The Canadiens' supporters developed into fanatics.¹⁵ Hockey was one domain where French Canadians were able to compete with the English and often win, so it was understandable that a great deal of pride in the team developed. By the 1920s the Canadiens were no longer an exclusively French Canadian team. The identity of the team, however, remained.

Why did the Club de Hockey Canadien have an abnormally large and devoted fan base?

In 1917, the NHA became the National Hockey League. The league remained unstable as teams folded and new teams were added every year. In 1924, the Montreal Maroons began play in the NHL. This was the sole representative of English Montreal in the league. An intense rivalry grew between the Canadiens and the Maroons. This increased the interest in hockey throughout the city, as evidenced by the funeral of the sport's biggest superstar, Howie Morenz. After he died in hospital following an on-ice injury in 1937, fans filled the Montreal Forum for the funeral while 200,000 more lined the streets along the route to the cemetery.¹⁶

In the next year, it was clear that Montreal could no longer support two teams during the depression. Despite having more on-ice success, the Maroons folded after the 1937-1938

¹³ See McCord Museum Archives, Montreal That's Hockey exhibition papers.

¹⁴ Mouton, op. cit., 21.

¹⁵ Mouton, op. cit., 24-25.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 44.

season. This left the Canadiens as the only professional hockey team in Montreal, and with an extremely devoted fan base.

Conclusion

Much can be learned about Canadian society through the history and development of hockey. The evolution of the sport between the 1870s and the 1930s touches on themes such as urbanization, leisure activity, social values, class structure and the socio-economic makeup of Montreal and Canada, nationalism and national identity. The parallels between hockey and Canadian history show why, to many Canadians, hockey is not just a sport but part of their national identity.