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Rooting for the “Canadian Team” in the NHL

Abstract

Canadians have loved the game of hockey for several generations. It is Canada’s national winter sport. Canadians love to support Canada in international hockey tournaments and wave the flag when Canada wins. Canadians have also followed the NHL since its existence in 1917 and seeing one’s favourite NHL team winning the Stanley Cup is a time of joy for their fans. However, the NHL is an international organization, whose teams are based in Canada and the USA and whose players now come from all over North America and Europe. This paper addresses the question on whether it is apt to talk about “Canada’s Team” during the Stanley Cup Finals in the NHL of today.

Résumé

Les Canadiens ont aimé le hockey depuis plusieurs générations. Il est le sport national d’hiver du Canada. Les Canadiens adorent aider le Canada au hockey international tournois et agiter le drapeau quand le Canada gagne. Les Canadiens ont également suivi la NHL depuis son existence en 1917 et ayant son équipe préférée de la NHL remporter la Coupe Stanley est un moment de joie pour leurs fans. Toutefois, la NHL est une organisation internationale, dont les équipes sont basées au Canada et aux États-Unis et dont les joueurs viennent maintenant de partout en Amérique du Nord et en Europe. Cette article aborde la question de savoir s’il est apte à parler de “Team Canada” lors de la finale de la Coupe Stanley de la NHL d’aujourd’hui.

Hockey is a well-known international sport and is the official national winter sport of Canada. It is a team sport played on ice where skaters on two different teams use a wooden hockey stick to shoot a hard rubber disk, known as a “puck,” into their opponent’s net, which is known as a “goal”. For the average Canadian child, the mechanics and rules of hockey are absorbed early in childhood as if it were their native language. Organized hockey has been played in Canada in some form since 1875 and for nearly a century afterwards Canadians felt “hockey” was something uniquely Canadian.

However, nothing could be further from the truth. Ice hockey has been played internationally at the Winter Olympics since 1924, the same year when the Boston Bruins joined the National Hockey League (NHL), being the first American-based hockey team in this league.¹

1) Though it was not the first hockey league in Canada, the National Hockey League (NHL), which was formed in 1917, originally had Canadian-based teams only. But in 1924 things changed. Marshal Wright writes, “For many seasons, the Canadian-born NHL had been content to remain in the country of its naissance. However, the fact that the teams routinely played before five-figure audiences was not lost on league magnates. ... As most of the suitable Canadian locales



Hockey has always been popular in the northern areas of the USA and in Europe among Czechs, Finns, Russians, Slovaks and Swedes. But as this Canadian author can personally attest to, the true Canadian hockey fan deep down still feels that hockey is *their* game and Canadians feel that their *style* of play is the way hockey should be played.² Of course, Canadians root for their national representatives in international competition (i.e. Team Canada) to win each championship and for Canada it is the gold medal or nothing.

This paper though is not about international hockey, but about rooting for an NHL team in Canada. While Canadians are basically unanimous about rooting for Canada’s national team in international tournaments, they are definitely not as unanimous when it comes to choosing their favourite NHL hockey team. Many Canadians take the attitude that one should root for the team in their city or region first and then root for a *Canadian-based* team from another part of Canada after their team is eliminated from playoff competition. Others, for one reason or another, root for an American-based team and do not feel any qualms about doing so. This writer is in the latter group, having been a Boston Bruins fan since childhood. Therefore, the goal of this paper is to point out the extent Canadians root for the Canadian team in the NHL and examine what the “Canadian team” really means. I shall use the 2011 Stanley Cup Finals between the Boston Bruins and the Vancouver Canucks to highlight various views on this.

Though the NHL had been in existence since 1917, modern NHL history really started in the 1942/1943 season, after a number of years when some NHL teams went bankrupt due to either the Great Depression or World War II; and in 1942 the NHL became set with six franchises. This was the beginning of what is referred to in NHL history as the Original Six era which lasted till the end of the 1966/1967 season.³ Though all six teams frequently made the Stanley Cup playoffs during this era – since the playoff format of the time had the top four teams making the playoffs – this period was dominated by three teams: the Montreal Canadiens, Toronto Maple Leafs and Detroit Red Wings.⁴ Therefore, during the Stanley Cup Finals in the Original Six era, Canadians could usually count on seeing one or both of Canada’s team in these finals. Also, as late as 1966/1967, 97.2% of the NHL hockey players who played in the NHL were Canadian nationals (“NHL Nationality”).⁵

already had clubs, the only logical direction to expand was south – to the United States” (Wright 44). As a result, Boston won the bid to be the first American city to be awarded an NHL franchise.

- 2) The *Canadian* style of play when contrasted to the *European* style of hockey is often subjective and stereotypical by Canadian fans. Many Canadians like to think of our players as not only being skilled, but tough too; whereas, European hockey players are often seen as skilled, but not as able to take the hits and dish it back. This is not really true since Canada has produced excellent playmakers and skaters (e.g. Bobby Orr, Wayne Gretzky and Mario Lemieux) and quite a few European players do dish it out when hit or when a teammate is hit. The point here is that these attitudes do exist and have some bearing later on in this paper.
- 3) The Original Six teams were the Montreal Canadiens, Toronto Maple Leafs, Boston Bruins, Chicago Black Hawks, Detroit Red Wings and New York Rangers. The teams that ceased operations were the Montreal Maroons, New York (Brooklyn) Americans and the original Ottawa Senators (later to be known as the St. Louis Eagles, before the Eagles too suffered Ottawa’s fate).
- 4) Between 1941 and 1967, the Canadiens and Maple Leafs won the Stanley Cup ten times each, while the Red Wings won it five times. Only in 1961 did the Black Hawks break the dominance of these three teams.
- 5) It should be pointed out that in the late 1960s no one in Canada really counted the number of Canadian nationals in the NHL for the simple reason that it was then rare to see Americans or Europeans playing in the NHL.



It seems clear that most of the fan base in Canada divided their loyalties between Montreal and Toronto. A hockey writer, Hal Bock, wrote in 1974 that "when it comes to splitting Canada's hockey loyalties, the choice has always come down to the Maple Leafs or the Canadiens" (Bock 14). Bock refers to most of Ontario and the West as being Maple Leaf country, with Quebec and the Maritimes being the Montreal Canadiens territory. Scott Young, another hockey historian, gives some credence to this geographical division when writing about the late 1940s exhibition series in Calgary between the two Canadian franchises. "When Canadiens skated onto the ice at Calgary they were booed. When Leafs came on they got a standing ovation. ... In Calgary Leafs were the heroes and Canadiens the villains" (Young 72–73). In Montreal, the attitude was the same, so much so that it extended to who would be the broadcasters for the broadcasts of Montreal Canadiens games on *Hockey Night in Canada*. Montreal natives were expected to do the *English* broadcasts and, if not, at worst a border person from Ottawa was acceptable – but "no other Ontario Anglos need apply" was basically the attitude there in the 1960s (Young 120).⁶ Moreover, in this era, it was highly unlikely that any Canadiens or Leafs fan would transfer their loyalty to the other team if their team failed to make the Stanley Cup Finals. Rooting for an American-based team against the hated rival would likely have not been deemed a heresy in those days.

While many writers (mostly those who are Maple Leaf fans) talked about Canadians dividing their loyalties between the Canadiens and Leafs, other NHL teams from the USA had some support in Canada. For example, in those parts of Ontario that bordered the American state of Michigan, the Detroit Red Wings were held in high regard. Hockey legend, Phil Esposito, who was born in the border city of Sault Ste Marie was a Red Wing fan as a child. "When I was a boy, I rooted for the Detroit Red Wings. Detroit was 365 miles away so they were the closest NHL team to us (Sault Ste. Marie). I loved the Red Wings. Gordie Howe was my hero. Even though I was from Ontario, I hated the Toronto Maple Leafs with a passion. The story around Sault Ste. Marie was that the owner of the Leafs would never let an Italian play for his team" (Esposito and Goldenbock 14). Even Bock writes that places like Parry Sound and Niagara Falls, Ontario, was Boston Bruin country because of either being Bobby Orr's hometown or being a then minor league team of Boston (Bock 17). The Bruins have also had fans in the Maritimes because of that area's geographic closeness to Boston.

Only when the NHL had its first major expansion in 1967, with all of the six new franchises being based in an American city, did Canadian nationalistic gripes slowly begin regarding the NHL. Many Canadians were unhappy that no Canadian city was awarded an expansion team, with Vancouver residents being the unhappiest. Only when Vancouver was awarded a franchise in 1970 was Canadian nationalist feeling assuaged temporarily.⁷ But after two more expansions, which resulted in a then 18-team NHL by 1974, there were still only three Canadian

6) The Montreal residents referred to by Young were Danny Gallivan and Dick Irvin, with Dan Kelly (the future voice of the St. Louis Blues) being the Ottawa person acceptable to Anglo-Quebecker ears.

7) In 1970, Montreal and Toronto only agreed to support Vancouver's addition to the NHL after they were paid indemnities for the inclusion of the Canucks in the *Hockey Night in Canada* television deal. Concern over sharing *Hockey Night in Canada* revenue would reoccur in 1979 when these three Canadian teams were not happy with the possible addition of Edmonton, Quebec City and Winnipeg into the NHL through the League's merger with the WHA ("NHL–WHA Merger").



cities with an NHL team. Things changed in 1979 when the now-defunct World Hockey Association (WHA) offered to merge with NHL.⁸ The WHA was ready to dissolve itself if the NHL would take four of its franchises: the Edmonton Oilers, Hartford Whalers, Quebec Nordiques and Winnipeg Jets. After resistance from the three Canadian-based teams, along with the Boston Bruins and Los Angeles Kings, the NHL and WHA merged.⁹ As of 2012/2013, there are 30 NHL teams, with seven of them being in Canada.¹⁰

In any event, the NHL is less Canadian today, not because only seven out of thirty teams are based in Canada, but due to the fact that after the fall of the Berlin Wall, many Russians, Czechs and Slovaks have signed with NHL teams since 1989. Due to this, along with many Swedes and Finns signing with NHL clubs and more colleges offering hockey programs in the USA, today's percentage of Canadian nationals in the NHL has dropped to 53.4% as of 2011 ("NHL Nationality"). With the influx of European players into the NHL, the game has changed in some respects with even more emphasis on skating and passing in the last 40 years.¹¹ The Canadian style of just being very physical in games has usually not been good enough for any team to win the Stanley Cup since 1975.¹² However, many Canadians often want to "have their cake and eat it too" by wanting their team to win the Stanley Cup, and if not, seeing the Stanley Cup being won by a team in Canada; while at the same time, wanting to watch the traditional Canadian style of physical play.

During the 2010/2011 Stanley Cup Finals these two different realities clashed. While Canadians had the immense joy of seeing Team Canada win the gold medal at the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver, no Canadian city had won the Stanley Cup since 1993.¹³ However, the Vancouver Canucks looked poised to break that jinx because of their season record of being the best team in the NHL for the 2010/2011 regular season.¹⁴ Moreover, the city of Vancouver was still feeling

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- 8) It would be too long here to describe the reasons for the creation of the WHA, but one of the reasons important here was that American and Canadian cities which were disappointed at not being able to get their own NHL team decided to join the WHA.
 - 9) The reasons for the resistance of the Canadian cities are given above in footnote 6, while Boston's reluctance to the merger was for similar fears of having to share New England hockey revenues with Hartford ("*NHL-WHA Merger*").
 - 10) Quebec City lost the Nordiques to Denver (today the Colorado Avalanche), while the relocation of the Flames from Atlanta to Calgary and the award of a franchise in a later expansion to Ottawa (the Senators) has set the present count at seven Canadian teams.
 - 11) Only Paul Henderson's goal with 34 seconds remaining in game 8 of the 1972 Summit Series between Canada and the then Soviet Union gave Canada a 6–5 victory and 4–3–1 victory in games won and tied. The Soviet players during these games showed great skill in passing and stamina in skating, while Team Canada hurt themselves at times with unnecessary elbowing and slashing penalties. Canada increasingly gained stamina as the series progressed though. But some stereotypes began to be formed as a result of the 1972 Series (and from exhibition games in Sweden and Czechoslovakia too).
 - 12) The Philadelphia Flyers were known as the *Broad Street Bullies* when they won back-to-back Stanley Cups in 1974 and 1975. The Flyers in those two seasons rewrote the then NHL record books on penalty minutes and were very intimidating to face. Still it must be said that the Flyers would not have won both of their Stanley Cups without the stellar goaltending of Bernie Parent and the playmaking of Bobby Clarke.
 - 13) The Montreal Canadiens won the Stanley Cup in 1993 when they defeated the Los Angeles Kings in the Stanley Cup Finals, 4 games to 1.
 - 14) The Canucks won the Presidents' Trophy for being the best team in the NHL during the 2010/2011 regular season. They also scored the most goals (262) and gave up the fewest (185) in the NHL. The Canucks would repeat as Presidents' Trophy winners in 2011/2012.



the afterglow of the aforementioned Winter Olympics. As a result, the Canadian media tried to drum up nationalism by portraying the Canucks as *Canada's Team* versus the Boston Bruins. The Canadian media even used data from known polling firms in Canada to show this. Steve Mossop of Ipsos Reid in Western Canada reported to the media sources: "Just as it was during the 2010 Olympics, Rogers Arena is once again the focus of Canada's hockey obsession. With the Vancouver Canucks heading into a Stanley Cup showdown against the Boston Bruins, the team has the support of fans all across the country." The polling firm reported that 62% of Canadians were cheering for the Canucks while only 11% were cheering for the Bruins ("Betty White"). Ipsos Reid reported strong region by region support for the Vancouver Canucks as follows:

— British Columbia	83%
— Alberta	60%
— Saskatchewan/Manitoba	66%
— Ontario	63%
— Quebec	51%
— Atlantic Canada	57%

Nevertheless, Ipsos Reid reported pockets of fan support for the Boston Bruins in Canada, most of it coming from Quebec (18%) and Alberta (17%), whereas naturally only 7% of British Columbians said that they were cheering for the Bruins ("Betty White").

History was not kind to the Vancouver Canucks, however, since they were defeated by the Bruins, 4 games to 3, including a humiliating 7th game, 4–0, loss in front of their fans in Vancouver.¹⁵ Even worse, the city of Vancouver experienced their worst riot since 1994, when some fans, but mostly hooligans, went on a rampage in downtown Vancouver, causing extensive and costly damage. Returning to hockey though, it became obvious even before the 7th game that the Vancouver Canucks had failed to become Canada's team. The reasons were mixed, but it basically came down to the following:

- the Bruins had more Canadian-born players than the Canucks
- Boston played a more *Canadian* style of hockey, while Vancouver did not
- dislike of Vancouver among its rivals in other Canadian cities

Regarding the roster of both teams, the Bruins definitely had more Canadian-born players on their team since 14 of their 19 regular players were born in Canada. On the other hand, only 11 of their 19 Vancouver regulars were Canadian in 2011. In addition, the best players on the Canucks are the Swedish twins, Henrik and Daniel Sedin, and Ryan Kesler, an American. Moreover, the Bruins had Milan Lucic who is a hometown hero himself since he was born in Vancouver. While this author takes the view later below that the nationality of Boston players is not important to a real fan, admittedly it felt good for Canadian fans of the Bruins to know that they had a good retort to fans of the Canucks on the Internet.

15) History was finally kind to Boston Bruins fans like me who waited 39 years for the Bruins to win their first Stanley Cup since 1972.



However, having more Canadian-born players on the Bruins was not significant in itself. What was more critical was the fact that Boston played a more Canadian style of hockey, while Vancouver played a style of hockey which was regarded as *not* Canadian. The Bruins played a style of hockey which was reminiscent in many ways to the Big Bad Bruins days of Bobby Orr and Phil Esposito in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Even though the 2010/2011 Bruins had fewer superstars than in the Orr–Esposito days, they collectively banded together as a lunch-pail team of grinders and enforcers, with timely outbursts of flair. When the Bruins were challenged during the Finals, they fought back and in the end came back and won the Cup.¹⁶

On the other hand, the Vancouver Canucks steadily earned disrespect among traditional Canadian hockey fans for their style of play. In Game 1, Alexandre Burrows of the Canucks bit Patrice Bergeron’s hand during a scrum. Then in Game 2, Maxim Lapierre of the Canucks taunted Bergeron by biting his own glove hand. In Game 3, Aaron Rome of the Canucks delivered a violent blindside hit to the Bruins’ Nathan Horton, who suffered a concussion as a result. The injury to Horton rallied the Bruins who proceeded to deliver their own physical punishment on the Canucks and, more importantly, Boston went on a scoring spree too. The Canucks, though, did not answer back – in fact, they backed down. The clearest moment of this was near the end of Game 6 when Daniel Sedin let a shorter in height Bruin forward, Brad Marchand, slapped him in the face six times while doing nothing, and even worse, having no Canuck teammate come to his defence.¹⁷ As a result, Vancouver squandered much fan support in Canada, even before they lost Game 7 to the Bruins.

The third and last reason the Vancouver Canucks failed to become *Canada’s Team* is that some Canadians in other cities either disliked the Canucks or the city of Vancouver itself, or maybe more likely, were a little jealous of their recent successes. After all, there are many countries that have rivalries among their cities and regions and Canada has hers. There has always been a rivalry between Montreal and Toronto and even within individual provinces strong rivalries exist (e.g. Montreal and Quebec City in Quebec; Ottawa and Toronto in Ontario; Calgary and Edmonton in Alberta; etc.), and if these cities have their own NHL team, then these rivalries become accentuated.¹⁸ Therefore, Vancouver’s having had a very successful Olympics and then having the best regular season team in the NHL may have been too much for some Canadians. These feelings seemed to be strongest in Toronto, Calgary and Edmonton.¹⁹

16) The Bruins came back twice after trailing 2–0 and 3–2 in the series.

17) As someone who has followed the Boston Bruins and their archrivals, the Montreal Canadiens, since 1967, it is hard to imagine that any Bruins or Canadiens team would have let such a situation pass without fighting back. In fact, a Canadian-born Bruins fan named “Phunwin” who sometimes writes on *The Stanley Cup of Chowder*, a Boston Bruins online website, wrote after the Bruins won the Stanley Cup that “the moment we should have known the series was over was when Brad Marchand was slapping Daniel Sedin around and nothing happened....It was surprising that Sedin stood there and took it, but what was truly amazing was that no one on Vancouver did anything about it. Imagine the roles were reversed, imagine Maxim Lapierre was slapping David Krejci around. How long would it take before Lapierre was thrown on his ass by someone in a black and gold jersey? If it was more than 2 seconds, I’d be stunned.” See Phunwin for an overall analysis of the series.

18) The Montreal–Quebec City rivalry lasted till the Quebec Nordiques moved to Denver, Colorado in 1995.

19) Macleans.ca had an article dealing with attitudes of different Canadian cities to different Canadian-based NHL teams in their April 12, 2012 edition entitled “Survey say, the Toronto Maple Leafs are the country’s most hated hockey team”. The article, written by Nancy Macdonald, was based on an Angus Reid Public Opinion poll taken across Canada in April 2012. While it is informative in many respects, in many ways it is not. My differences with the poll are that it



While many anti-Vancouver articles were written *after* Vancouver lost and in the aftermath of the Vancouver riot which followed their defeat, there were some articles in this vein written before the Finals started. The one that caught my eye was written by David Staples of the Edmonton Journal. His article entitled "Why I am cheering for Canada's Team, the Boston Bruins" mentioned a number of things, including the previously discussed fact that Boston had more Canadian-born players. But Staples made many eye-opening comments like his subtitle "Root for the Canucks? Are you insane" and "Here are the other main reasons for cheering the Bruins to win: "As if Vancouverites weren't smug enough already. ... Only by choking big time can this outstanding Canuck's organization maintain Vancouver's tradition of mediocrity" (Staples). It should be mentioned here that fans of the Calgary Flames and Edmonton Oilers, whose teams play in the Northwest Division of the Western Conference against the Canucks, might have no love lost towards Vancouver. Also, Toronto Maple Leaf fans in online blogs from Toronto newspapers that I read during that series were sometimes venomous in their attitude towards the Canucks.

This is where I would like to conclude this paper. While I feel that it is only normal for Canadians to root for Team Canada in international competition (just as my Czech family and friends root for the Czech Republic), I think those Canadians who feel that they have to wave the Maple Leaf flag for the Canadian-based team in the Stanley Cup out of some knee-jerk patriotic necessity to do so do not understand patriotism. In addition, I think counting the number of Canadians on any NHL team is not apt today when nearly half the NHL is composed of non-Canadian players. Though some Canadians might like the "good old days" when 97% of NHL players were Canadian, it should be remembered that this was an anomaly. There were only six NHL teams before 1967 and there was an Iron Curtain dividing Europe which prevented excellent hockey players from coming over to North America to play here. As for this fan, I shed a tear of happiness when I saw Zdeno Chara of Slovakia, and team captain of Boston, raising the Stanley Cup for the Bruins for the first time in 39 years on June 15, 2011, in the same way I had watched Johnny Bucyk, who was born in Edmonton, raise the Stanley Cup for Boston back in 1970 and 1972. I do not need to see a player's birth certificate in order to cheer for him – just wearing the black, gold and white uniform with the "spoked-B" logo will do!

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has a very complete table for the "most hated" category, but is incomplete for the "most loved" teams; and, moreover, only gives finding for those American-based NHL teams that made the playoffs in 2011/2012. Therefore, I stand by my decision not to base my paper on one extensive but incomplete poll.



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