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HOCKEY, POLITICS AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN CANADA

Abstract

The paper explores in brief the nature of ice hockey in Canada, its impact on the national identity, and its origins and legacies. The authors also refer to hockey's relation to politics and business and its growing popularity in these fields. By studying the impact of ice hockey in Canada, the authors have discovered that hockey allows researchers to get an insight into the political life in Canada and the nature of Canadian national identity, and that it has also become a profitable business.

Key words: ice hockey, politics, national identity, business, cultural force

HOKEJ, POLITIKA I NACIONALNI IDENTITET U KANADI

Apstrakt

Rad se ukratko bavi prirodom hokeja na ledu u Kanadi, uticajem hokeja na nacionalni identitet, poreklom i kulturnim nasleđem hokeja. Autori se, takođe, osvrću na odnos hokeja, politike i biznisa kao i na sve veću popularnost hokeja u ovim oblastima. Proučavajući uticaj hokeja na ledu u Kanadi, autori saznaju da hokej omogućava istraživačima da dobiju uvid u politički život Kanade, u prirodu kanadskog nacionalnog identiteta i da je hokej, takođe, postao unosan biznis.

Ključne reči: hokej na ledu, politika, nacionalni identitet, biznis, kulturološka snaga

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

That hockey is an inherent part of almost everyone's life in Canada is widely known, but to which extent it is related to Canadian national identity and what its connections with politics and business are may not be known to other people and cultures. Canada's success in hockey has been tied to the success of Canadian political system and Canada's global position in the world for a very long time. No wonder that Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper and his Conservative party have been firmly tied to hockey illuminating how Canadian national and political identity has been formed and maintained.

As far as the very game is concerned, due to its popularity, there have been different types of hockey apart from ice hockey: ball hockey, field hockey, street/road hockey, foot hockey, pond hockey, sponge hockey, etc. It confirms the importance of hockey in everyday life and its strong influence on the national psyche in North America. However, when we talk about hockey and its impacts, we have in mind primarily the original form of hockey, i.e. ice hockey.

One of the most significant events in Canadian ice hockey history which is closely related to Canadian political situation and its global political standing was the 1972 Summit Series and the game between the Soviet Union and Canada held in the middle of the federal election campaign and the Cold War political tensions. In the interview with *Sports Illustrated* in 2010, Mr. Harper stresses the importance of the victory of Canadian team for the Canadian national pride and the political system at that time, saying that it was certainly "one of the two or three most important games on Canadian ice" and that "the Canada-Soviet series had an overarching reality of Cold War confrontation [...] which really nothing today can replicate" (Sports Illustrated, 2010). Another crucial moment is the 2010 Vancouver Olympic Games and Sidney Crosby's goal and victory in overtime, which is of huge importance for Canadian sport and Canadian nation, confirming Canada's number one place in hockey in the world.

Hockey is deeply reflective of the Canadian national character and deeply reflective of the sports culture of the nation. Nobody has a national claim to hockey the way Canada has or the United States has a national claim to baseball. These sports define the two countries in a unique way. As Canada's national game, hockey has become the articulation of the collective national identity. It is "the Canadian specific", "[their] common passion" or "the language that pervades Canada", and is essentially the product of the myth of origins.¹ (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993).

Hockey is an important part of the Canadian character and a uniquely Canadian sense of belonging. First of all, it is a very competitive

¹ The myth of origins refers here to the idea that hockey makes an integral part of one's roots and that it expresses the authenticity of Canadian lives.

and violent sport in which winning is the only important matter. It is a fast, aggressive, tough sport which is inconsistent with the nature of Canadian character. Canadians are believed to be peace-loving, kind, pleasant, open-minded, which is true, but, as Mr. Harper says, it is not inconsistent with being tough and aggressive and ambitious, which is also part of the national character (Sports Illustrated, 2010).

Even immigrants' level of social integration in Canada is measured to the level of being immersed with hockey. Hockey is cross-cutting: it crosses ethnic, social and class lines. It is all regions and belongs to all ethnic communities. One of the first signs of being integrated in Canadian society is coming to the hockey rink. Hockey helps bridge ethnic differences and it is a cultural force that helps immigrants from other cultures assimilate into Canadian society. Thus, hockey becomes part of "ideology", of maintaining a sense of place and belonging to what it means to be Canadian as well as a means of a possible articulation of a collective national identity. It proves once again what many Canadian theorists have confirmed: that Canadians are related by common experiences shared through communication technology (Parrot, 2011).

Mr. Harper and the Conservative party maintain strong links with sport and hockey as a way of cultivating the concept of "Canadianness", national identity and national pride. Mr. Harper himself does not miss an opportunity to talk about hockey even on the political stage as is the case at his recent meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin during the 20th APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting in Vladivostok, Russia, in September 2012, when the two leaders discussed hockey among other issues. To which extent is hockey an important part of Mr. Harper's public image is the fact that he is doing research into the history of hockey and is working on a book about professional hockey. In the interview to *Sports Illustrated*, he stresses that his research into hockey has helped him get some political insights into the Canadian national character and that his association with hockey appears to be more important than governance.

THE ORIGINS OF HOCKEY

Though the origins of hockey are indeterminate, some recent research points to North America, which might be one of the reasons of its popularity there; the first contests on ice are said to have occurred in New York and Newfoundland in the late 18th century (Society for International Hockey Research, n.d.). It is interesting that the first origins of hockey have been traced back to some literary sources. Some documents show that John Franklin's expedition crew skated and played hockey on a small lake beside Great Bear Lake in 1825. It brought the town of Deline (formerly Fort Franklin) in the Northwest Territories into the focus. It is also thought that Windsor, Nova Scotia, is the birthplace of hockey. Some re-

searchers point to Thomas Chandler Haliburton's novel *The Attaché* from 1843, or his novel *Sam Slick in England* where the author mentioned that hockey was played at King's Collegiate in Windsor. Though it is a work of fiction, critics argue that the novel is mainly autobiographical and that „hurly“ that is mentioned there referred to the game Haliburton knew that was played around 1810. Another place believed to be the birthplace of hockey where the game was played on lakes and ponds as early as 1827 is Dartmouth, Nova Scotia. According to a newspaper report from 1867, it is known that the game called „ricket“ was played on ice by the officers of the Garrison and the Fleet at Oathill Lake.

However, The International Ice Hockey Federation takes as the first official documented evidence of hockey's origins to have been the game between two teams which took place at Victoria Rink in Montréal on March 3, 1875. From then on, the progression of ice hockey games, the formation of the McGill Hockey Club in January 1877, the publication of written rules in February 1877, the founding of the Amateur Hockey Association of Canada in 1886, laid the firm foundations of professional hockey in Canada. The National Hockey League (NHL) was organized on November 26, 1917 in Montréal, Canada, but is headquartered in New York City today as the major professional ice hockey league in the world. In 1926 the National Hockey League consolidated its control.

THE LEGACY OF HOCKEY

Since hockey is given an essential place in Canadian life, there has been developed hockey culture institutionalized within the Hockey Hall of Fame (HHOF). The Hockey Hall of Fame preserves the greatest moments of hockey history in Canada, remembers the greatest players and people who contributed to the rise and success of this sport in Canada. It also reveals the political and social impacts on the construction of hockey legacies in Canada and in the world (Hockey in Society, 2012).

The Hockey Hall of Fame is located in Toronto, Ontario, where it was moved in 1958 from Kingston, Ontario, having been established there in 1943. It is dedicated to the history of ice hockey, and it is both a museum and a hall of fame. Visitors can view trophies, equipment worn by players during special games, portraits and biographical information about every Hall of Fame honoured member. A large section of the Hall of Fame is devoted to international hockey, to hockey leagues and players outside North America.

HOCKEY AND BUSINESS

The academic study of sports business is heavily influenced by economics. The success of professional sports ventures is based on the

extent to which they can deliver games to large numbers of people who are willing to pay for this entertainment (Staudohar & Mangan, 1991). Due to its popularity, hockey also becomes a business. Although the National Hockey League hasn't as large number of fans as the National Basketball Association or the National Football League, the Hockey League has a long tradition of sold out arenas, i.e. there aren't that many hockey fans in comparison to basketball, and football, but they are all fanatics. In 1960, the average NHL drew 386000 fans (11000 per game); by 1970, it was 518000 (13300 per game); and that increased to 536000 (13400 per game) in 1980, and to 636000 (15900 per game) in the 1990/91 season. And then there is television. The Financial World estimated that in 1991, TV (and radio) accounted for about 25 percent of the NHL revenues (Quirk, & Fort, 1992). While the league and the clubs rely on sponsorships, broadcast deals and advertisers, the success of this sport and the winning of the great cups, like the Stanley cup, for example, opens the path to achieving even greater profit. The average NHL player salaries have grown from US\$24,000 in 1972 to an average of US\$1.49 million annually in the 2000/2001 season (Mason, & Slack, 2001). In season 2012/13 the temporary team salary cap is \$70.2 million. No player can earn more than \$14.04 million. The top five highest paid players in actual season earn more than \$10 million (Wikipedia, n.d.). Previously mentioned data, clearly point that the NHL is a free market. It is no wonder that, sports economists, historians, and sociologists often evoke an equally simple image - the team owner as robber baron (Staudohar & Mangan, 1991). But, for some 33 million Canadians, hockey is what defines them and binds this country together. And they just aren't afraid to admit it.

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HOKEJ, POLITIKA I NACIONALNI IDENTITET U KANADI

Rezime

Rad se bavi istraživanjem prirode hokeja u Kanadi, njegovim uticajem na nacionalni identitet, poreklom i zaostavštinom hokeja. Hokej ima jak uticaj na kanadski nacionalni identitet i na kulturu sporta nacije. Kao kanadska nacionalna igra, hokej je postao izraz kolektivnog nacionalnog identiteta. On je „specifično kanadski“, „[njihova] kolektivna strast“ ili „jezik koji prožima celu Kanadu“, i suštinski je rezultat mita o poreklu. Iako poreklo hokeja nije tačno poznato, skorašnja istraživanja ukazuju na Severnu Ameriku, što može da bude i jedan od razloga velike popularnosti hokeja u tom delu sveta; prva takmičenja na ledu odigrala su se u Novom Jorku i Njufaundlendu krajem 18. veka. Pošto hokej zauzima značajno mesto u životima Kanađana, institucionalizovana je kultura hokeja u okviru Hockey Hall of Fame (HHOF). Hockey Hall of Fame čuva najznačajnije momente istorije hokeja u Kanadi, sećanje na najveće igrače i ljude koji su doprineli usponu i uspehu ovog sporta u Kanadi. Autori rada se bave i odnosom hokeja, politike i biznisa i sve većom popularnošću hokeja u ovim oblastima. Gospodin Harper i njegova Konzervativna partija podržavaju jake veze između sporta i hokeja kao načina očuvanja koncepta „Kanadizma“, nacionalnog identiteta i nacionalnog ponosa. U intervjuu časopisu Sports Illustrated, gospodin Harper naglašava da mu je istraživanje o hokeju pomoglo da dođe do nekih političkih uvida u kanadski nacionalni karakter i da je njegova veza sa hokejom za njega važnija od državnih poslova. Akademsko proučavanje biznisa u sportu pod jakim je uticajem ekonomije. Uspeh profesionalnog sporta zasniva se na popularnosti i poseti navijača koji žele da plate za ovakvu vrstu zabave. Zbog velike popularnosti, hokej je takođe postao i biznis. 1960. godine NHL je u proseku imao 386.000 navijača (11.000 po igri); do 1970. godine, bilo ih je 518.000 (13.300 po igri); sa porastom od 536.000 (13.400 po igri) tokom 1980. do 636.000 (15.900 po igri) tokom sezone 1990/1991. Financial World je procenio da je u 1991. godini TV (i radio) dostigao oko 25% ukupnog prinosa NHL-a. U proseku plate igrača NHL-a porasle su od US\$24,000 tokom 1972. godine do prosečno US\$ 1.49 miliona godišnje tokom 2000/2001 (Mason, & Slack, 2001). Tokom sezone 2012/13 najviša trenutna timska zarada je \$70.2 miliona. Igrač ne može da zaradi više od \$14.04 miliona. Pet vrhunski plaćenih igrača tokom sezone zarađuju više od \$10 miliona.