

Historica Canada Education Portal

Canada's Game - The Modern Era

Overview

This lesson plan is based on viewing the Footprints videos for [Gordie Howe](#), [Bobby Orr](#), [Father David Bauer](#), [Bobby Hull](#), [Wayne Gretzky](#), and [The Forum](#). Throughout hockey's history, though they are not presented in the Footprints, francophone players like Guy Lafleur, Mario Lemieux, Raymond Bourque, Jacques Lemaire, and Patrick Roy also made a significant contribution to the sport. Parents still watch their children skate around cold arenas before the sun is up and backyard rinks remain national landmarks. But hockey is no longer *just* Canada's game. Now played in cities better known for their golf courses than their ice rinks, hockey is an international game. Hockey superstars and hallowed ice rinks became national icons as the game matured and Canadians negotiated their role in the modern era.

Aims

To increase student awareness of the development of the game of hockey in Canada; to increase student recognition of the contributions made by hockey players as innovators and their contributions to the game; to examine their accomplishments in their historical context; to explore how hockey has evolved into the modern game; to understand the role of memory and commemoration in our understanding of the past and present; and to critically investigate myth-making as a way of

understanding the game's relationship to national identity.

Background

Frozen fans huddled in the open air and helmet-less players battled for the puck in a -28 degree Celsius wind chill. The festive celebration was the second-ever outdoor National Hockey League game, held on 22 November 2003. The Heritage Hockey Classic, played before a sold-out crowd of 57,167 at Edmonton's Commonwealth Stadium between the Oilers and the Montreal Canadiens, was the first NHL regular season game to be played outdoors. It was not, however, the first time the NHL had ventured outside. That honour belongs to an exhibition game played between the Los Angeles Kings and the New York Rangers in 1991, out front before the shining lights of Caesar's Palace, Las Vegas. Playing on the Strip for casino-goers is a far cry from enduring the game Canadians know and love, played the way generations of Canadians played it as kids, outside in sub-zero temperatures. That an exhibition game could be played under bright lights on artificial ice in the mild Nevada winter tells us some truths about our game and the way it has evolved over the decades.

While some of the greatest players still come from this country, it's also now true that when Canadians lace up Bauer skates (named after Father David Bauer, the man responsible for creating the national Canadian hockey program) they are wearing an American product. Bauer Hockey now operates under the umbrella of Performance Sports Group and is headquartered in Greenland, New Hampshire. And that CCM hockey stick made of the latest composite material? Reebok International Ltd. now owns what used to be Montréal-based Hockey Co. Holdings whose brands include CCM, Koho and Jofa. All this is to say that today,

Canada's game is both ours and not ours, a game shared around the world, and now controlled by power centres beyond Toronto, Montreal, and the backyard rinks built around the nation.

In his short story, "*The Puck Artist*," Canadian author Levi Dronyk writes, "any kid without an instinctive understanding of the game is genetically un-Canadian." Yet in today's Canada, is this assertion still valid? Does the game tie the nation together or underscore our differences? Here we look at the players, people, and a place that are integral to an understanding of the history of the modern game.

A lot can change over five decades. Between 1946 and 1980, Newfoundland joined Confederation; Ottawa crooner Paul Anka climbed and then disappeared from the music charts; the country got a new flag; the War Measures Act was invoked, bringing tanks into the streets of Montreal; and a Canadian ran the "Marathon of Hope," creating a legacy that still resonates around the world. Throughout all this, Gordie Howe laced up his skates for professional hockey teams and delighted generations of fans around the world.

Howe was born on 31 March 1928 in his parents' farmhouse about three miles from the small prairie town of Floral, Saskatchewan. His youth was forged during the hard times of the Depression, playing hockey in minus 30 degrees Celsius. This experience would shape Howe into a tough, competitive right-winger who at 1.8 metres tall and 90 kilograms would make his professional hockey debut with the Detroit Red Wings at the beginning of the 1946-47 season.

Howe was known for many talents, but certainly his fighting prowess made Detroit fans buzz with anticipation when he was on the ice. In his first game in the Montreal Forum, Howe was challenged by the

notoriously quick-tempered Maurice Richard. One punch later and "the Rocket" was grounded, out cold on the ice. Of course this wasn't Howe's only strength. His effortless skating style, ambidextrous stick handling skills, and deceptive speed allowed him to break free from defensemen before befuddling goaltenders with a tremendous shot.

In 1950, Detroit put an end to the Toronto Maple Leafs' pursuit of their fourth consecutive Stanley Cup. This series also came close to ending Howe's life, on and off the ice. In the first game of the semi-finals, Howe missed a check on Ted "Teeder" Kennedy and slammed headfirst into the boards. Howe was rushed to hospital and his family called "just in case," as doctors drilled a hole in his skull to relieve the pressure. Howe would eventually recover and, when Detroit defeated the Rangers in the Championship match, Howe gingerly walked onto the Olympia ice surface to touch the Stanley Cup with his team-mates. He would do so three more times, all with the Red Wings.

After twenty-five years in the league, arthritis in his left wrist forced Howe to the sidelines following the 1970-71 season. But after two years, "Mr. Hockey" was back, but on a much different hockey landscape. Defying all hockey naysayers, a group of California entrepreneurs launched what they labelled the second major league of the ice sport in 1972 - the World Hockey Association. Elders of the established NHL circuit dismissed the new upstart. But when the gifted young goaltender Bernie Parent made public his intent to sign with the WHL, others jumped ice, and Howe re-entered the game he loved. After playing in the tumultuous WHA for the Houston Aeros and Hartford Whalers, Howe, aged 51, would play one final season with the Whalers following their merger with the NHL in 1979. In all, Howe, would play professional hockey over the course of six decades including one final game with the Detroit Vipers of the International Hockey League in 1997. Such longevity is likely never to be

seen again.

In the 1966-67 season, Gordie Howe gave a shot to a much talked about but unproven new Boston Bruin defenseman. "Someone told me later," Bobby Orr wrote in a November 1971 article about Howe in *Maclean's*, "Gordie said he just wanted to let me know he was still around." Indeed he was, but the ice was fast becoming a different surface with the introduction of Orr.

The Parry Sound, Ontario native changed the rules of the game before he even laced up skates for his first game in the National Hockey League. The Boston Bruins went to unprecedented lengths to land the freckle-faced, brush-cut prospect. Before Orr stepped onto the ice, though, the Bruins had to pay. In time for the 1966-67 season, brash Toronto lawyer Alan Eagleson negotiated a rookie contract for Orr more than three times what a rookie would regularly hope to earn.

It was the last season before what many consider the beginning of the modern era of hockey. The expansion era that began in the 1967-68 season transformed the insular NHL's "original six" team roster that had lasted for twenty-five years into a league that would inaugurate Philadelphia's Broad Street Bullies, the arrival of European players, the rival Western Hockey Association, and strange uniforms, long hair, and sideburns.

During the 1970s fans recognised players flashing down the ice in an era when helmets were not worn. The Boston Gardens was old and obsolete, but because the arena was smaller than those of today, it was also more intimate. Boston fans quickly recognised the hair of helmet-less Bobby Orr as he grabbed the puck from behind the net and precipitated an end-to-end rush that forced opposing coaches to adjust their strategy and

pave the way for modern defensemen.

But the daring all-out rushes and physical play that defined his success also stopped Orr cold. The regular-season grind took its toll, and in the off-season of his rookie year Orr underwent his first knee operation. Another followed three months later, then another in 1972, and then two more in 1975.

After hobbling through only 10 games of the 1975-76 season with the Bruins, Orr rested for the remainder of that campaign and eventually accepted a free agent offer from the Chicago Black Hawks at the start of the 76-77 season. Boston, home of the GOD BLESS ORR COUNTRY bumper sticker bid farewell to the 28-year old.

Despite playing on a battered left knee that doctors described as nothing but bone rubbing bone, Orr was awarded the most valuable player in the 1976 Canada Cup. Chicago fans' faith in Orr was reborn, but they would see him play only twenty-six games with the Black Hawks, retiring after two seasons with the club. And what of the three million dollars he signed for with Chicago? Orr didn't cash the cheque, explaining he was paid to play hockey.

In October 1978, Howard Cosell, the legendary sportscaster, announced that Orr had retired, though it later turned out he had mistaken Orr for another star who was also considering leaving the game. Like Orr, Bobby Hull would leave an indelible mark on the game, though much different than did the Killer "B's," Bobby Orr. "The Golden Jet" was inimitable on the ice. Skating at a speed of close to 50 kilometres per hour, a curving slapshot clocking in at 200 kilometres per hour, a thundering physique and golden locks highlighting his charisma, Hull was an architect of change in the professional game.

The Point Ann, Ontario native earned accolades as an NHL prospect as early as age 10. The talons of the Chicago Black Hawk organisation were the first to grasp his potential, and by eighteen, Hull joined them for the 1957-58 season. He swept into the Windy City and impressed fans and management immediately. The Golden Jet reversed the chill that surrounded the club after years of poor performances. Arguably, his touch saved the team from folding, a role he would replay for other teams and an entire league. With teammate Stan Mikita, Hull developed the curved hockey stick.

The 1960-61 season ended with Hull hoisting the Stanley Cup, bringing the trophy back to Chicago after a drought lasting since 1938. By the end of the 1971-72 season, Hull's 604 goals ranked second only to Gordie Howe in NHL history. But in June of 1972, Hull shot a curve puck against the NHL.

The World Hockey Association scored its biggest coup with the signing of the most charismatic player in the NHL to a 10-year \$2.75 million contract. Those golden locks would now belong to the Winnipeg Jets. Hull immediately gave the new league credibility, and Hull believed it was needed as a response to NHL arrogance. Months later, the NHL sought revenge on Hull for his professional treachery. He was banned from Team Canada when Hockey Canada organised an eight game series between Canada's best *NHLers* and the Soviet National Team in 1972.

In the end, even Hull could not save the WHA from financial ruin, and he rejoined the NHL when Winnipeg and four other WHA teams were absorbed into the sole professional North American league. He bowed out of the game after the 1979-80 season, ending his hockey career playing alongside Gordie Howe with the Hartford Whalers. The Golden

Jet had finally cooled his engines, and the game of hockey is still spiralling from the turbulence of his years as a force of change.

In March 1973, following a game in Winnipeg between the Jets and the Los Angeles Kings, Hull related his role in the WHL with *Maclean's* reporter, Jack Batten. "Know what this is all about? Know what we're in? What the league is?" Hull asked Batten. "Show business." And on 9 August 1988, the day Wayne Gretzky was traded to Los Angeles, Hull's words would ring true to a stunned nation. In the emotional aftershocks, Canadians asked if modern-day hockey was no longer a sport but a business. In Ottawa, NDP house leader Nelson Riis asked the government to block the trade.

We have tended to forget, or to have at least forgiven, the rip in the national fabric that Gretzky's exodus from our shores created. And yet despite his humble Canadian upbringing, Canada can no longer claim the Great One as exclusively its own. He was an international hockey player, and a global businessman. He may represent Canada as a hockey hero, but his face is now easily associated with the corporations and mythologies of the United States. Number 99 has been immortalized into the pantheon of American sports personalities - Wheaties, "The Breakfast of Champions," honored the Great One on 29 January 2003 with a special-edition package.

Canadians have their own temples dedicated to the gods of sport, the most hallowed of which hosted the Montréal Canadiens during much of the twentieth century. The Forum was a silent witness to the changes of the modern era of hockey in Canada. Opened on 29 November 1924 at the corner of St. Catherine and Atwater, the original building included seats for 9,300 spectators. Over its history of slightly more than seventy years, the Forum would grow to become an icon of Québécois culture

and the Canadiens' success. At the Forum, the Canadiens won nearly three games for every one they lost. In their new home, the Bell Centre (formerly the Molson Centre), a mere twenty minute walk from their fabled past, the club has not been able to repeat such an overwhelming home record. Some argue that the ghosts of the Forum are taking their time to walk the short distance to the new arena. But in fact, the Bell Centre is a world away from the Forum. It is a monument to the modern game, where marketing savvy and the dynamics of business rule the game. Are the ghosts taking their time to make it to the Bell Centre then? Perhaps, or perhaps the cost of entry, starting at \$2,600.00 for a pair of season tickets, is just too much for the old spectres to pay.

Activities

1. Celluloid Hockey.

Distribute the information below to students. Groups of three to four will decide on a time period in which to set a new film about the modern era of hockey. The following divisions can serve as useful demarcations:

- 1967-68 to 1978-79
- 1979-80 to 1991-92
- 1992-93 to Present

Students are then to research their particular era, selecting an important historical event in the history of Canada *not* related to hockey. Next, students are to write the plot outline of a hockey film in which the events that happen on ice interact with the larger historical event(s) engulfing Canada at the moment. As a follow-up, students could present their

scripts as pitches for a new film.

When making the first Canadian hockey feature film, *Face-off*, legendary goaltender Jacques Plante was hired to appear in a scene in which he allows a Vancouver Canuck goal on a breakaway. Plante however, defied the script, stopping the puck three times before the filmmakers appeased his ego. Before 5,000 extras at Maple Leaf Gardens, an announcement was made over the public-address system: "*Ladies and gentlemen, the story calls for Vancouver to score a goal and Mr. Plante is going to permit it.*" Hockey has never had as easy a relationship with Hollywood as boxing, baseball, or football. The first hockey movie, *The King of Hockey* (1936) was a minor financial success, and John Wayne left the family farm to play hockey and tangle with hoodlums in *Idol of the Crowds* (1937).

But it was Paul Newman and Jeff, Steve, and Jack Hanson in *Slap Shot* who scored a hit at the box office. It tells the story of the Charlestown Chiefs, a hapless team who turn into winners when faced with the possibility of extinction. The film has since become sacred, if not for film buffs, then for hockey fans, who see flashes of accuracy in the large helpings of violence and profanity found in the movie.

In 1992, Mickey Mouse decided to get onto the ice, and *The Mighty Ducks* spawned a pair of sequels and a professional NHL franchise. In the spring of 2004, theatregoers had a chance to see two hockey films. *Miracle*, another Disney production, tells the true story of the 1980 American team that won the Olympic gold medal at Lake Placid, New York, against a seemingly invisible Soviet squad. *Luck* is a Canadian romantic comedy set around the time of the 1972 Summit Series.

Lesson 2. Lest we forget the game.

Commemoration through public monuments, oral histories, musical tributes, and memorials are outlets for understanding and appreciating the events of the past. They can also provide a means of better understanding current events. This lesson explores public memory and why it is important to remember certain individuals, places, and events in history.

In the years just before his passing in 1988, Father Bauer was accorded a host of honours speaking to his importance to the game. One includes having an arena named after him in Calgary to serve as the home base of the national teams (1986). Canada Post taps into remembering through the NHL All-Stars collectibles series. The implicit link is between yesterday's stars and contemporary ones. Today's defensemen may thank Bobby Orr for his reworking of the position. Bobby Hull can be thanked, perhaps with tinges of sorrow, by Winnipeg Jet and Québec Nordique fans.

Consider as well how Remembrance Day in Canada is especially honoured in schools across Canada. [The Canadian War Museum](#) has excellent resources for children, including a [26-page colouring book](#) chronicling the history of the military in Canada, each picture accompanied with a brief explanation.

Using the resource from the Canadian War Museum as a template, students are to construct their own colouring book to teach children about the game of hockey. The book should be chronological and highlight the influences made by people, places and events on the development of the game.

3. Nostalgia on Ice

Part of what makes sports so gripping is its mythmaking. Interest in vintage sports clothing, hockey cards and collectibles shows little sign of waning. On 22 November 2004, vintage threads were on display at Edmonton's Commonwealth Stadium at the Heritage Classic game. Fans were keen to pick up a Canadian toque like the one worn by Montréal goalie Jose Theodore. Demand far outweighed supply. Canadians see their heritage in the game and the objects through which we connect with its storied past. Nostalgia sells. And hockey nostalgia sells well in Canada because of how much we associate it with our sense of who we were and who we are.

Our collective imaginations are essentially collective national mythmaking. Myths are powerful narratives that we decide to believe in, or at least decide to accept as the *possible* truth. Regardless of their authenticity, they are nonetheless real to those who hold such stories essential to the story of Canada and hockey.

Distribute a copy of the following information to each student. A similar story can be found in relation to Bobby Hull's first pair of skates and on the veracity of whether Wayne Gretzky's father did in fact tell his son to "Skate to where the puck is going, not to where it is" in the business magazine, *Fast Company*. After reading, discuss the following questions:

- What makes these narratives particularly powerful? Why are they good stories?
- How much truth is there to each of these myths?
- Is there a relationship between childhood and enduring myths? Is this specific to the game of hockey, or do sporting myths often revolve around children overcoming immense odds to become superstars? Do we see this narrative outside sports as well?

Next, students will research a player from the modern era. It is not necessary for the player to have a story akin to the ones above. Instead, after completing the research, students construct their own mythical narrative about their selected hockey player. This composition should be 250 words in length. Finally, students present their imagined story to the rest of the class. The class then rates the myth on a scale of one to five, five being the most interesting and plausible, one being the least interesting and most improbable.

The Globe and Mail, Saturday, June 26, 1971, p. 37

The mother of hockey's senior playing citizen, Gordie Howe, who purchased her son's first skate for \$1.50 in a grain-sack grab bag of household effects, was killed in an accident in his summer home at Grayling, Mich., 230 miles from Detroit at 3 o'clock yesterday morning....

Gordie Howe was 4 when he got his first skate in 1932. Saskatoon was still in the depths of the depression and Albert Howe found it difficult to find steady employment. "There were a lot of people on social aid," Mrs. Howe recalled years later. "A neighbor lady whose husband was sick came to the door with a grain sack filled with things and asked me if I would buy it to help feed her baby. I didn't have much to offer, but I reached into my milk money and gave her a dollar and a half.

"Out fell a pair of skates. Gordie pounced on them. They were too big. His younger sister, Edna, tried one and out they went, each with a skate. Gordie pestered his sister for the other skate and a week later she agreed to sell it to him for 10 cents. I

raided the milk money again and gave him the dime to pay his sister."

In those early days she let Gordie clump to the supper table wearing his skates, the quicker to get back to the nearby slough for an extra session of shinny before bedtime.

4. Old game, new rules?

There have been harbingers that today's NHL is in trouble- too much violence, too many teams, too much dispersal of talent. Distribute the following information to each student. It is a synopsis of an article written by Ken Dryden, a former goaltender for the Montréal Canadiens and a respected voice among hockey commentators. This article came in the wake of the Todd Bertuzzi incident in which the Vancouver Canuck right-winger sucker-punched Colorado Avalanche forward Steve Moore, who suffered a broken neck. Divide the class into three sections. After reading the handout, discuss how the game has changed in other ways. Next, working in groups of two or three, students are to write a proposal to the NHL Board of Governors on how the game's rules must be changed in order to meet the demands of the modern market and modern hockey player. Groups should consult the rulebook, which can be found ([in video form](#)) [on the NHL website](#). The alphabetic index, found in the [PDF version](#), is helpful and offers students a manageable map to look for specific rules. Finally, each group is to present their findings to the NHL Board of Governors (represented by the class).

In the 27 March 2004 edition of Saturday's *Globe and Mail*, Ken Dryden explains how the game of hockey has changed during the twentieth century. In "Saving the Game," he also suggests ways in which hockey can be remedied from its current problems. Some of his observations include the following:

- In the 1870s, the number of players and ice time for each reminded you of a soccer game more than a modern hockey game.
- For more than fifty years, players could not pass the puck forward. Low scoring games were the result.
- Only over the past twenty-five years have players come to understand that time spent off the ice makes them better players on the ice. They are therefore faster, larger, and more powerful. As Dryden explains, "In 1952, the average NHL player was 5 foot 10 3/4 inches and 175 pounds. In 2003, that same player was 6-foot-1 and 204 pounds. The extra 2 3/4 inches doesn't mean much. The extra 29 pounds does."
- The arenas of the modern game have more forgiving boards and glass, and players have better protective equipment.
- Finally, Dryden asks, "In the late 1920s, the introduction of the forward pass opened up a stagnant, stifling game. What is today's equivalent of the forward pass?"

5. "Chicks with sticks."

After distributing and discussing the following information, students are to consider how the rights of women have changed over the course of the twentieth century. In groups of two or three, students are to chart the struggle for women's rights alongside the developments in women's hockey. Students should look for connections between the two, explaining the significance of at least three connections noticed. How did Marilyn Bell's swim across Lake Ontario affect the nation's ideas about women as athletes? What, if any, is the significance of the number of female Members of Parliament and the popularity of women's hockey? Milestones in women's sport can be found at the [Canadian Association](#)

[for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity.](#)

In 1984 when an aspiring hockey player, listed as Justin Blainey on the roster, made the Toronto Olympics, a Metro Toronto Hockey League Pee wee team. But when the 11-year old tried to dress for competitive games, the MTHL and the Ontario Hockey Association refused. "Justin," in fact, was a Justine. After proceeding through the Canadian judicial system - losing her case before the Supreme Court of Ontario, winning at the Ontario Court of Appeal, leave denied the OHA by the Supreme Court of Canada, and finally making a legal complaint to the Ontario Human Rights Commission - in 1987, Blainey won the right to play with the boys.

As Derek Shapton points out in "Taking the Ice" from the April 2004 issue of *Saturday Night*,

"There is nothing new about chicks with sticks. In the late nineteenth century, women's teams sprang up in parallel with men's teams at universities including McGill and Queen's. A photo dating from 1890 shows Isobel Stanley playing hockey on the flooded grounds of Rideau Hall. In 1893, her father, Canada's sixth Governor General, Sir Frederick Arthur Stanley, first Baron Stanley of Preston and 16th Earl of Derby, purchased the \$50 silver cup (actually a bowl) that has become hockey's holy grail. He bought the cup because he, his wife and their ten children loved playing hockey with family friends. In the peculiar maelstrom of liberation history, Canadian women could play hockey before they could vote.

The women's game dropped into obscurity in the mid-twentieth

century with the change in women's roles that accompanied the post-war baby boom."

Blainey's case in the mid-1980s refocused national attention on women's hockey, and over the next two decades it is estimated that the game expanded exponentially. In the 2002-03 season, a record 61,000 females registered in hockey across Canada, a near fivefold increase from ten years before. Hockey Canada's count of males registered in hockey has hovered around 475,000 for the past five years. Members of Canada's National Women's Team are discussed over the nation's breakfast tables. Hayley Wickenheiser made history and Canadians proud when she became the first woman to record a point playing hockey for a professional men's team (no matter it was for Salamat, in Finland).

Because all-out bodychecking and so-called two-line passing are banned in women's hockey, speed, positioning and stick handling are prized above size and strength. Wickenheiser argues, "The best hockey has a mix of the flow and thinking and play-making of the European Style, combined with the toughness and passion of the Canadian game."

Nevertheless, the bastion of hockey as necessarily masculine has solid foundations. Getting ice time can be a problem, and despite the pride we take in the women's national team in the 2002 Olympics in Salt Lake City, professional women's hockey is not a contract to spend. *Globe and Mail* business writer David Shoalt explains in "Hockey star plays defence with finances" in the Saturday 3 April 2004 issue:

"Women who want to play hockey at the highest level have to make sacrifices when it comes to developing a career. Unlike their male counterparts, women do not have a National Hockey

League offering million-dollar contracts. They need an outside job to support themselves, and one that still allows for time off to play hockey.

On the ice, Ms. Campbell [Canadian national women's team member Cassie Campbell] will make only about \$18,000 this year. As a "carded" high-performance amateur athlete, she receives \$1,100 a month under the Canadian government's Athlete Assistance Program....

'By no means do we make an NHL salary, so we have to save as we go along," Ms. Campbell said. "We have to make sure we save our money wisely."

So, if many argue that the women's game is more entertaining and free-flowing like the men's game used to be, are they returning hockey to its roots? Does our romanticism for the ponds of ice across the landscape now depend on the women's game, the NHL having transformed the game into a business bottom-line sport where fighting is accepted and even hyped?

Resources

Footprints

[Gordie Howe](#)

[Bobby Orr](#)

[Father David Bauer](#)

[Bobby Hull](#)

[Wayne Gretzky](#)

[The Forum](#)

The Canadian Encyclopedia

[Gordie Howe](#)

[Bobby Orr](#)

[Father David Bauer](#)

[Bobby Hull](#)

[Wayne Gretzky](#)

[The Forum](#)

[Ice Hockey](#)

[Hockey: Canada's Game](#)

[National Hockey League](#)

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