

Historica Canada Education Portal

Canada's Game - The Early Years

Overview

This lesson plan is based on viewing the Footprint videos for [Newsy Lalonde](#), [Howie Morenz](#), [King Clancy](#), [Maurice Richard](#), [Teeder Kennedy](#), [Terry Sawchuk](#), [Jacques Plante](#), [Jean Béliveau](#) and [Foster Hewitt](#). A stick, a puck, a net. This is the game according to Ken Dryden; as Canadians, we have been weaned on it during "long northern winters uncluttered by things to do." Hockey has developed with the nation, and the country has changed with the game. These figures are the early pioneers of "Canada's game" who cultivated a national pastime and shaped a national consciousness during the first half of the twentieth century.

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 innovators; to examine their accomplishments in their historical context; to explore how hockey became Canada's game over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; to critically investigate how hockey has influenced and been influenced by the political culture of Canada; to explore the contacts between hockey and commerce during the game's early development; to question Canadian unease with American ownership and control of "our game."

Background

The history of hockey is enthralling, and so too is our earnest quest to determine the origin of Canada's game. Passions run deep in those who claim ownership of hockey's birthplace. Whatever the debates are about the origins of hockey, it is generally agreed that *The Montréal Gazette* recorded the first indoor exhibition of hockey in Canada on 4 March 1875 at Montréal's Victoria Skating Rink. An enclosed space, a captive audience and the use of "a flat block of wood...so that it should slide along the ice without rising, and thus going among the spectators to their discomfort" mark the game's beginnings. By the early 1890s, hockey teams were being formed across the country, though rules and levels of organisation were uneven. The next twenty years were a period of consolidation. By the 1920s, the game took on a form familiar to audiences today. As one might expect, a number of players and personalities stand out in this era of new teams, new champions, and new stories. Certainly, in the years following the First World War, one voice is celebrated as the vocal expression of the early years of hockey. On 22 March 1923 *Toronto Star* reporter Foster Hewitt broadcast his first hockey game via radio from Toronto's Mutual Street Arena. He described the event fifteen years later: "...on a cold wintry night, I hunched for more than two hours on a stool with sawed-off legs, in a glass box, four feet high and three feet square, without even the slightest inflow of fresh air."

Nearly ten years later, Hewitt was delivering regular Saturday night broadcasts of Maple Leaf games. On 1 January 1933, NHL hockey became one of the first radio programs to speak to a countrywide Canadian audience, when a patchwork of stations relayed a game from coast to coast.

The sporting life of Edouard Charles "Newsy" Lalonde is another of the great stories from these years. Earning his nickname by working at a local newspaper in his hometown of Cornwall, Ontario, Lalonde's hockey career began in 1904-5. The 1.75 metre, 74-kilogram centre caught the eye of several scouts, and a cross-border bidding match developed between Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario and the American Soo across the river in Michigan. The Canadian team eventually matched the American offer and kept the young star in town. By 16 November 1926, when Lalonde laced up his skates for the last time with the National Hockey League's New York Americans, he had played for at least eleven teams in nine different leagues, collecting 314 goals in the 220 professional games he played.

Constantly traversing the country and riding the rails according to the highest bidder, Lalonde would complete the 1921-22 season with the Canadiens before being traded to the Saskatoon Sheiks in one of the century's earliest "big trades." Montréal needed a playmaker to get their newest prospect the puck, and so Lalonde was dispatched to Saskatoon for Ottawa-native Aurèle Joliet who would go on to fame feeding the puck to the up-and-coming star, Howie Morenz.

As Lalonde moved behind the bench over the course of the 1920s, Howie Morenz emerged as a dazzling spectacle on the ice, becoming a fabled player and fallen hero. In an 15 October 1953 article, *How They Broke the Heart of Howie Morenz*, Maclean's sports writer Trent Frayne wrote a tribute to the hockey legend whose death sixteen years previously was of mythic proportions. Frayne mourned the loss of Morenz and the loss of a more innocent and visceral game: "Howie Morenz was more than the best hockey player that ever lived. He became a part of the nation's folklore, a symbol of a hockey era that is now only a memory, of a time

when the ice heroes were a rough-hewn and sometimes hard drinking lot, fiercely loyal to their team."

More than half a century ago writers lamented the passing of an older game - no forward passes, no centre red line and a schedule of no more than fifty games. Howie Morenz, of Mitchell, Ontario, was the greatest star of his era, and it was his great skill that helped sell the game in the United States, where he was often called "the Babe Ruth of Hockey" because of his box office appeal.

In the early 1930s, Morenz was traded to Chicago where he played for parts of two seasons. He also played for the New York Rangers and in 1935, new owners attempted to revive a struggling Montréal Canadiens franchise by bringing the "Canadian Comet" back to Canada. Unfortunately, the glory was short lived, replaced by the tragic mythology of the hockey legend's untimely death.

On 28 January 1937, playing to the cheers of the Forum crowd, Morenz broke four bones in his legs following an awkward body-check into the boards. Hospitalized and in plaster casts, Morenz would never again hear the battle cry of the Forum, "les Canadiens sont là!" On the night of 8 March, pale, drawn, and fretful, he forced himself from his bed, took one faltering step, and crumpled to the floor. The death certificate said the cause was "a cardiac deficiency and acute excitement." For many of the forty thousand people who attended his funeral, the most widely attended to that time in Canadian history, he simply died of a broken heart.

Montréal fans were in the midst of what would become known as the *grand noirceur* or "great darkness," the period between the Montréal Maroons Cup in 1935 and the next success by a Montréal team in 1944. The yearning for the days of "the Hurtling Habitant" lasted seven years,

broken by the arrival of "the Rocket" who would carry the Canadiens and professional hockey through the Second World War and into the modern era. Maurice Richard carried on the legacy of the city's hockey history, bringing the Stanley Cup back to the city in 1944 and accepting the weight of Québécois' nationalist dreams.

Canadien melancholy often leads to Maple Leaf mirth. It was called "the best deal in hockey." On 10 October 1930, the cash-strapped, small market Ottawa Senators traded their most popular player, Frank "King" Clancy to the Toronto Maple Leafs for the unprecedented sum of \$35,000 and two players (at a time when the average annual salary in Canada was \$1,000). Leafs' Manager Conn Smythe lured Clancy to Toronto after winning on a racehorse named Rare Jewel, the spoils supplying the cash to buy the ingredients needed to fill the new Maple Leaf Gardens. Clancy was now the highest salaried man in pro hockey circles.

As the NHL underwent scores of changes in the unsettled period of the Depression and the Second World War, Clancy donned skates for the Maple Leafs, coached the Montréal Maroons and refereed. Teams in Ottawa, Philadelphia, Pittsburg, and St. Louis dropped by the wayside, but by 1942, a semblance of stability settled with a six-team league composed of Detroit, New York, Chicago, Toronto, Montréal and Boston - a roster that would last twenty-five years.

Conn Smythe brought Clancy to Toronto to fill the seats of his new arena, and the feisty body checker (at 70 kilograms, among the smallest defensemen to play in the NHL) did not disappoint. In 1932, the team's first year at Maple Leaf Gardens, and his second year with the club, the Leafs hoisted the Stanley Cup for the first time. Retiring from the ice early in the 1936-37 season, Clancy moved behind the bench, then jumped the

boards onto the ice to don the white official's sweater until finally stepping up to management with the Maple Leafs. Throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and first half of the 1980s, he would be a goodwill ambassador for the club until his death on 8 November 1986.

Like Morenz passing the puck to Maurice Richard for the Habs, Clancy passed the puck to Theodore "Teeder" Kennedy who would steer the Leafs through the Second World War and into the modern era, playing the hard-working forechecker and face-off man against the Rocket's blistering speed and goal scoring ability.

If Frank "King" Clancy was the animated ambassador for the Leafs, then Jean "Le Gros Bill" Béliveau was the elegant envoy for the Canadiens. Between 1956 and 1971 he won ten Stanley Cup Championships with Montréal. But where Clancy was often on the losing end of his on ice-battles and a ham in Hogtown, the 1.9 metre, 92 kilogram Béliveau was regal on the ice and humble and diplomatic in the city of Mont-Royal.

Like so many early stars of the NHL, Beliveau's entry into the National Hockey League was fraught with business shenanigans and political mischief. After two triumphant seasons with his hometown of Victoriaville, the Trois-Rivières native joined the Québec Junior Hockey League in 1949-50. The following year, Béliveau tempted the Canadiens when he had a goal and an assist in a two-game trial with the NHL team. He did not sign with Montréal though, joining the Québec Senior Hockey League instead. Apparently, to keep the graceful and powerful skater in Québec City, people close to Premier Duplessis played economic hard-ball - the license to operate a tavern in the Montréal Forum, a money maker for the owners of the Canadiens, would be revoked if Béliveau were enticed to Montréal.

Beliveau finally did sign with Montréal in 1953, inking a five-year deal worth about \$100,000 - by far the biggest salary ever given a rookie. He left the Québec Aces and their lavish new Colisée, heralding another episode in Québec City's tenuous grasp on a professional hockey franchise.

Montréal flourished alongside their newest acquisition. The team began its five straight Stanley Cup Championships in 1956, the year Béliveau led the NHL in scoring and won the Hart and Art Ross Trophies. Hap Day, the general manager of the Toronto Maple Leafs was asked if there was a way of stopping the Montréal centre. "Of course there is," he answered, "but it isn't legal." Retiring in 1971, Béliveau established the blueprint for a generation of Québec players from Guy Lafleur to Mario Lemieux - dignity and style on and off the ice.

On the other side of the puck, the hard edge of hockey was Terry Sawchuk. He played more games, recorded more wins and posted more shutouts than any goalie in NHL history at the time (he has since been bypassed in all three statistics by Martin Brodeur, in more games and wins by Patrick Roy, and in more wins by Ed Belfour and Curtis Joseph). Goaltenders have been called a breed apart. The Winnipeg native seemed to have a pact with the devil, or at least to have met him at the crossroads of Portage and Main. Fame, money, and stardom were his, as was a life of loneliness and a tragic death. Born in 1929, Sawchuk grew up listening to Foster Hewitt's *Hockey Night in Canada* broadcasts and idolising Toronto Maple Leaf's goalie George Hainsworth. His other idol, closer to home, was his older goaltender brother Mike, who died of a heart attack at 17. Terry was only ten at the time of his brother's death, and so when the regular goalie on his bantam team moved away, Sawchuk laced up his brother's pads.

Sawchuk was an aerobatic net minder with lightening fast reflexes and a characteristic crouch eventually widely adopted by his colleagues. He quickly caught the eye of NHL scouts, and at seventeen, Sawchuk celebrated his signing bonus with the Detroit Red Wings by rolling in \$2000 worth of small bills after returning from the bank to his Windsor, Ontario hotel room.

Over the course of his twenty seasons with Detroit, Boston, Toronto, Los Angeles, and finally the New York Rangers, he took more than 400 stitches in his face, suffered a herniated disk and severed wrist tendons, bone chips in his elbow and arthritis, a right arm two inches shorter than his left after elbow surgery, and a loss of two inches in height after back surgery.

Traded from the Red Wings to Boston on 3 June 1955, Sawchuk battled physical illness and his self-esteem took a severe beating until mid-January of his second season with the Bruins, when he was overcome with stress-related depression. He returned to Detroit in 1957, and in 1964, while Gordie Howe was breaking Maurice Richard's goal-scoring record, Sawchuk noiselessly surpassed George Haissworth's record when he recorded his ninety-fifth career shut out.

Traded to Toronto that same year, Sawchuk and fellow Maple Leaf goaltender Johnny Bower seemed to coordinate their injuries so at least one of them could put on the pads. In the 1966-67 season, an aging Maple Leaf team brought the Stanley Cup back to Toronto for the last time in the century.

With expansion in 1967, Sawchuck spent one season with the Los Angeles Kings, where he was paid \$41,000 (twice what he had been paid in his best earlier season) before finishing his career with the New York

Rangers in 1969. Tragically, less than two weeks after the Rangers were brusquely tossed from the playoffs, Sawchuk got into a violent argument with former Leafs teammate Ron Stewart. Tempers swelled by alcohol, a fight ensued. Sawchuk was fatally injured in the altercation and on 31 May 1970, the hockey player considered by many to be the best to ever strap on goalie pads, died.

Jacque Plante is remembered for the innovations he introduced on the ice rather than his life outside the rink. Indeed, as hockey equipment has evolved with the game, the impact of major innovations has often slipped relatively unnoticed onto the ice. For instance, the story of the goaltender's mask was relegated to page twenty-one in a November 1959 issue of *The Montréal Gazette*. The headline - "Plante Hurt, Finishes Up With Mask," missed the impact of Jacque Plante on the face of hockey. But the Mont Carmel, Québec native was familiar with innovation. He was one of the first net minders to roam from the crease to corral pucks and to stop dump-ins behind the net. Since becoming the Canadiens' regular goaltender in 1954-55, the club's coach Toe Blake sanctioned Plante's originality. But the game against the New York Rangers on 2 November 1959 was different. After taking a shot in the face, Plante left the ice to get stitched up. Plante returned to the ice, but not before insisting on wearing an experimental mask. Blake was livid, but with no other goalie to call on, the coach relented. Plante continued to tinker with masks and had a hand in the design of virtually all those worn by NHL goalies during his time.

In his seventeen regular seasons between 1953-73, playing for the Canadiens, Rangers, St. Louis, Toronto, and Boston, Plante won seven Vezina Trophies, claimed six Stanley Cup Championships, tallied 82 shutouts and 434 wins (second only to Terry Sawchuk's 447 at the time, now third to Sawchuk and Brodeur in shutouts and sixth in wins).

The expansion era of the late 1960s was a seller's market for goalies and in this environment, Plante was lured out of retirement and away from the Canadiens' old-timers team. The St. Louis Blues signed the forty-year old Plante to share goaltending duties with Glenn Hall in 1968-69. That year, he shared the Vezina with his teammate. At 44, he recorded his second best goals against average (1.88) of his career with Toronto, before finishing with Boston and the Edmonton Oilers of the World Hockey Association.

Fifteen years earlier, when Plante inaugurated a new age for hockey goaltenders, he was asked if he would continue to wear a mask in games. "If they let me wear it all the time," he answered "I can play until I'm 45." He was 46 when he finally retired in 1975.

Activities

1. The price of the game.

In this exercise students examine the historic link between hockey and business and question whether it was ever "our game," separate from American influence and control. Students are to read the information below, examining the role big business has had in the game in Canada. As a class, discuss the issues raised in the article. For instance, was there ever a time when money was not a part of hockey? Is the modern game a sport or a business? Is the centre of hockey in North America in New York, Toronto, or somewhere else entirely?

Money has always been a part of the professional game. And concerns that the United States is "stealing our game," or rather, buying our game,

date back more than sixty years before No. 99 headed from Edmonton to Tinseltown.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, Edouard Lalonde, Cyclone Taylor, and Art Ross moved from team to team, more often than not because they were paid well to do so. King Clancy was part of "the best deal in hockey," in part the result of Maple Leafs' owner Conn Smythe's success at the racehorse track. The pride and joy of Montréal, Howie Morenz, was also expensive to the Montréal Canadiens. Jean Béliveau's entry into the NHL was delayed due to political influence on the Canadian Arena Co., then owners of the Montréal Forum. And despite a battered and bruised body, Terry Sawchuk was lured back into the game by the American greenback to the Los Angeles Kings.

The colourful period after the First World War is known as the Golden Era of sport and it was also the era when the foundations of the National Hockey League were laid. Bob Duff explains the era in *Total hockey: the official encyclopedia of the National Hockey League* as follows: *"Rapid growth in league size. Major expansion into the United States and grave Canadian fears that the Americans were 'stealing our game.' Contract holdouts. Soaring salaries. A players' strike that disrupts the Stanley Cups playoffs. Anti-defence rules designed to increase scoring. The first decade of the National Hockey League really wasn't all that different from the modern era."*

Indeed, in "Can the NHL Save Itself?" in the 22 March 2004 issue of *Time*, Kate Novack explains, *"The NHL is in the worst shape of its history, having suffered from over expansion in the decade. Fights and hard hits are all the sport has to promote itself with in the U.S., as it does in Gatorade ads, commercials and widely sold videotapes of fights set to music."*

Concerns about American ownership have a long history as well. In the 1 March 1926 edition of *Maclean's*, Charles H. Good wrote an article titled, "Will U.S. Cash Cripple our Hockey?" An excerpt is cited below:

"Can the backers of professional hockey in Canada hold their own against the money-bags of rich United States promoters or will Canadian hockey fans be forced year by year to see their stars disappear to shine in another firmament? That is the question which is worrying "pro" hockey fans.

For professional hockey is, first and last, a moneymaking affair. And, sad to say, our neighbours to the South possess more of that useful commodity, variously known as "jack" or "dough" or "mazuma" than we do. So, if hockey develops into a battle where the longest purse is bound to win, Canada's chances of retaining any star hockey experts will be very slim indeed....

Time was when the fans yelled themselves into laryngitis, if that's the way you spell it, over players to whom \$750 to \$1,200 a season was big money. Them was the days that is no more. Progress and prices go hand in hand, and far be it from hockey to interfere with the laws of nature. Prices to-day in the NHL run from \$2,000 up. They do say that Lionel Conacher coaxes the Pirates to the tune of \$7,000, while Hap Day of St. Pats, former varsity and Hamilton star, brings down a six and three ciphers."

2. Invitation to the NHL Board of Governors.

Ask each student to select one of the following eras from the early years of hockey:

- Setting the Foundation, 1917-18 to 1925-26
- The Establishment Years, 1926-27 to 1941-42
- The Original Six, 1942-43 to 1966-67

Once a time-period has been selected, students are to research the era and the specific problems facing the National Hockey League during this period. Students should prepare a speech to present to the annual NHL Governor's meeting that outlines the problems at that time and proposes ways to save the game from financial ruin.

3. Went to a boxing match and....

On 3 March 1875, when the first organised indoor hockey game was played between students from McGill University at Montréal's Victoria Rink, local and out-of-town reporters were on the scene. One reporter from the *Daily British Whig* of Kingston, Ontario thought it important enough to mention a particular aspect of the scene - the violence. Apparently, "...lady spectators fled in confusion..." when a fight broke out.

This lesson is a role-play designed to demonstrate the history of violence in hockey and how the issues the game confronts today were present during the early years of professional hockey. Students should work in groups representing the various interests of the community in Canada (listed below) in the first decade of the twentieth century. Each group is to be given the excerpt (below) from the 30 March 1905 issue of *The Globe* newspaper.

- Professional hockey players
- Team owners

- Business people
- Parents/Guardians
- Newspaper owners/writers

After reading the article, students are to be provided with a call for proposals from the town council on how to address local concerns about violence in the new game of hockey. Each group of students is then to brainstorm specific concerns relevant to their group and compose a 250-word formal letter listing the problems and how to solve them. As a concluding exercise students should present their composition to the town council. Finally, after each group has presented, the class votes on the various proposals for how to address the concerns about hockey violence.

On 24 February 1905, the eastern Ontario hockey teams of Maxville and Alexandria met on the ice. The rivalry was passionate. Alexandria was largely Catholic and French Canadian while Maxville had an Anglophone, Protestant majority. At the opening of the game, Allan Loney of Maxwell attacked Alcide Laurin. Laurin died about five minutes later. Initially charged with murder (the charge was later reduced to manslaughter) Loney waited for four hours on 23 March 1905 while a jury in Cornwall, Ontario deliberated. He was acquitted, but the Grand jury nonetheless severely censored Loney and the game of hockey:

"We cannot too strongly condemn the growing tendency of introducing brutal methods and rough-house tactics into the games of lacrosse and hockey which frequently result in painful and permanent injuries to the participants, and sometimes death, as in one of the cases before us. We are of the opinion that the press in giving so much space and prominence to these contests are largely responsible, morally, for these results. Unquestionably some of the less level-headed spectators, by voice and

manner, encourage and incite the heated players to deeds of violence towards an opponent. It has come to such a pass that rough, brutal players are lionized by these hero-worshippers for their misdeeds, instead of being treated with the contempt their conduct so richly deserves. We believe that unless these growing tendencies can be effectively and permanently eliminated from these games they should be prohibited by legislation and put on a par with bullfights and cocking mains. The same remarks apply equally to football."

The presiding judge issued a stern rebuke of Loney's actions. Nonetheless, as *The Globe* newspaper recorded in its 30 March 1905 front-page article on the case, "Loney was given a great reception outside by hundreds of friends and citizens, who were unable to gain admission to the court house."

4. Broadcasting the game.

Working in pairs, analyze what makes a sporting broadcast effective. Foster Hewitt coined the enduring phrase, "he shoots, he scores," an expression that CBC Radio Morningside host Don Harron called "a symbol of national unity." Hewitt was admired amongst broadcasters for his economy with words and his passionate enthusiasm for the game. Students should watch one minute of a hockey game listening to the announcer and colour commentator, identifying moments that are effective. Listen to the clip again, this time with the sound off. How would students comment on the one-minute of play? In pairs, with one member serving as the announcer and the other as the colour commentator, students should watch a different one-minute of play from another game, and record their version of the game commentary. Play this commentary to the class and then play the original play-by-play sequence for comparison.

5. Galvanised innovation.

Jacques Plante was not the first goaltender to experiment with a mask. On 8 January 1930 Montréal Maroon's goalie Clint Benedict suffered a broken nose in a game stopping a Howie Morenz shot. He broke his nose two more times before finally returning to the ice wearing a leather mask. However, he soon discarded his innovation because "it's too hot and the nosepiece blurs my vision." On 13 May 1939, at the annual NHL meetings, Boston's Art Ross submitted for consideration a new type of hockey stick with a metal handle and replaceable wooden blade. This model came nearly fifty years before the modern-era aluminum stick. Even the humble puck has an industrial history related to grand historical events. During a 6 January 1942 game in Boston Gardens, an announcement was made to fans in attendance to "please return any pucks deflected into the stands, due to a wartime shortage of rubber."

Working in pairs, students are to research the history of a specific innovation in hockey. Innovations may include the following:

- Sticks
- Masks/helmets
- Protective clothing including padding, gloves, etc.
- Jerseys
- Skates
- Arena construction (including lighting, board materials, ice surface, heating, architectural design, etc.)

On poster paper and working in pairs, illustrate and offer brief explanations of how particular changes affected the game.

6. Poetry on ice

In the January 1827 edition of *Acadian Magazine*, a poem extolling the delights of winter suggests the early origins of hockey:

**Now at ricket with hurlies some dozens of boys
Chase the ball o'er the ice, with a deafening noise.
Now some play at curling, and some with great ease
Cut circles or figures whichever you please
On their skates, or else letters - the true lover's knot,
And a dozen such things, which I've really forgot.**

Some argue that hockey is poetry on ice. Hockey players themselves have put ink to paper to construct lines of poetry. While a coach in the 1970s, Jacques Plante wrote a poem to his wife. Stephen Scriver's "Nobody Cares Who Got the Blues" is a requiem for a time when hockey was not controlled by the "Yankee Board of Governors" and calls for people to boycott the game.

Using any form they wish, students are to compose a poem devoted to Canada's game. The poem should deal with the early years of hockey and/or an athlete studied in this lesson.

Resources

Footprint Videos

[Newsy Lalonde](#)

[Howie Morenz](#)

[King Clancy](#)

[Maurice Richard](#)
[Teeder Kennedy](#)
[Terry Sawchuk](#)
[Jacques Plante](#)
[Jean Béliveau](#)
[Foster Hewitt](#)

The Canadian Encyclopedia

[Jacques Plante](#)
[King Clancy](#)
[Maurice Richard](#)
[Ted Kennedy](#)
[Terry Sawchuk](#)
[Jean Béliveau](#)
[Ice Hockey](#)
[National Hockey League](#)
[Hockey: Canada's Game](#)
["All the Rage:" Women's Hockey in Central Canada in 1915-1920](#)
[Angela James](#)
[Albertine Lapensée](#)
[Foster Hewitt](#)
[Newsy Lalonde](#)
[Howie Morenz](#)

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