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LES CANADIENS: WHAT WAS SOLD?

Introduction

The venerable Montreal Canadiens, also known as *Les Habitants*, *Les Glorieux*, or the Flying Frenchmen, and the team that embodied the spirit of French Canada, were purchased by a U.S. businessman, George Gillett, on January 31, 2001. The “*bleu, blanc et rouge*” is now owned by a person who is red, white, and blue. No Canadian investors made a serious offer to buy the club.

The team and its arena, the Molson Centre, were sold by Molson for \$250-million; the company is largely divesting itself of its non-brewing assets. However, several months after Molson declared in June 2000 that it intended to sell the Canadiens the information emerged that the Canadiens operation had lost over \$10-million in 2000. This may explain why, in the seven months after the team was placed on the market, no buyers were found in Canada. Moreover, some financial analysts claim that hockey teams in general are over-valued and that Canadian teams suffer several financial disadvantages.

As a parallel *News in Review* story, “The Senators: Selling the Home Team” (March, 2000), indicated, Canadian teams are on an uneven playing surface due to a weak dollar, high municipal taxes, and few subsidies. Hockey players are paid in U.S. dollars, but ticket and television revenues are collected in Canadian currency, a 40 per cent difference. All the Canadian clubs, and especially the Canadiens, pay large taxes, which divert capital away from securing high-priced players. And when the Canadiens built the Molson Centre, they built it entirely with private funds, unlike many U.S. teams who receive subsidies on buildings and municipal taxes. Some commentators say that the only

way to save Canadian hockey may be to bring in U.S. investment to bridge the gap and create competitive franchises.

If it were an expansion team that was sold, many Canadians might not have been as concerned as they were. But this was the Montreal Canadiens! The team has been in existence since 1909, winning 24 Stanley Cups (more than twice the number the second-place Maple Leafs have won), and has been considered a Canadian cultural and sporting institution, and historically has personified French-Canadian pride. This is the team of Rocket Richard, Jean Beliveau, Yvan Cournoyer, and Guy Lafleur. For some Montreal Canadiens fans, this sale was as if the Americans had sold the Statue of Liberty or the English had sold the Tower of London.

On the other hand, it is important to note that in Canada especially there was a distinct undercurrent of apathy regarding the sale. The Habs have not won a Stanley Cup since 1993 and are currently on pace to miss the playoffs for the third year in a row. Some fans are hopeful that a dynamic new owner with the willingness to purchase some key free agent players may give them something to cheer about once again. The new owner, George Gillett, describes himself as a “business adventurer.” His résumé reveals that he amassed a fortune, was forced to declare bankruptcy as late as 1992, and then made it to the top a second time. He is obviously a risk-taker and a genuine sports fan. Gillett has repeatedly stated that he will not move the club and hopes it will soon win its 25th Stanley Cup. If his enthusiasm is matched by an on-ice return to form on the part of the Canadiens, his nationality may become a non-issue.

LES CANADIENS: WHAT WAS SOLD?

➤ **A Cultural Shift**

Culture is a word that is used frequently but is difficult to define exactly. It suggests a way of life of a particular group of people: their behaviour patterns, the way they think, the way they dress, the way they speak, the customs, traditions, rituals they adopt and pass on from generation to generation, their art, their music, and their sports. Culture is often divided into “high culture,” music, literature, and art, for example, but also “popular culture,” which tends to suggest the activities more concerned with recreational habits. But all culture defines who a people are. In any culture there are also subcultures: adolescent culture, the culture of fashion, and hockey culture, for example. In any nation, there are subcultures with customs, traditions, and habits that are unique or distinctive.

The Canadiens hockey team (once known in the popular subculture that is the hockey world as “The Flying Frenchmen”) has always been a cultural icon in Canada—in French Canada especially. Traditionally, the team has had a reputation for its flair, speed on the ice, and offensive power. It has also been a symbol of pride and excellence in Quebec. The Montreal Forum, like many sports institutions, became almost a shrine. When Canadiens great Howie Morenz died in 1937, his funeral was held there before 15 000 fans—a celebration of the life of a cultural hero that foreshadowed an equal outpouring of feeling when Maurice “The Rocket” Richard died in May 2000. Culture involves feeling, often very strong feeling. So what is the impact when a cultural icon goes through a significant change?

After the Fact

While watching this *News in Review* report, identify an image or a language item that in your opinion expresses one of the themes listed below. Suggest how the image or the language item, and the theme show the cultural significance of the sale of the Montreal Canadiens.

- tradition
- history
- heroes
- glory
- meaning
- rivalry
- human qualities
- community
- stars and superstars
- symbols
- family
- greatness
- collective personality
- pride
- disillusionment
- changing times

Follow-up Discussion

In your opinion, was a piece of Canadian or French-Canadian culture sold to George Gillett? Does it matter?

LES CANADIENS: WHAT WAS SOLD?

► *What's the Big Deal?*

On June 27, 2000, Molson Inc. put the Montreal Canadiens and the Molson Centre up for sale. A day later George Gillett, a wealthy U.S. businessman, contacted Molson and indicated he might be interested in buying the team and its facility. By December 3, 2000, media reports identified the large and diversified Canadian company BCE as the frontrunner to buy the Habs. And then on December 8, 2000, a report out of Montreal said Quebecor, René Angelil, and the Cirque du Soleil were also interested. On December 14, 2000, BCE announced that it was not interested. And then it was announced on January 31, 2001, that George Gillett, following approval by the Molson board of governors, was the new owner of the Montreal Canadiens.

Consider the financial details and context of the deal.

Here's the Deal

- George Gillett pays \$250-million (Cdn.); \$150 million for the team and \$100-million for the arena; the latter originally cost over \$250-million to build and continues to lose money.
- Molson retains a \$25-million share.
- Gillett owns 80.1 per cent of the team. Molson owns 19.9 per cent.

Given the nature of financial transactions like this and the nature of large corporations, suggest what Gillett had to take into consideration when making his offer.

In your opinion, what did Gillett get for \$250-million? What did Molson sell for \$250-million? How important or significant are the other figures mentioned above?

A Gentleman's Agreement?

George Gillett has promised that the Canadiens will stay in Montreal, but he owns the team and can change his mind at any time. Molson president and CEO Daniel O'Neill notes that there are three factors that will influence Gillett in terms of keeping the Canadiens in Montreal.

1. Molson retains ownership of a fifth of the team.
2. Molson retains the right of first refusal if Gillett decides to sell.
3. Gary Bettman, commissioner of the NHL, has made a verbal commitment to keep the team in Montreal. Moving such a historic team would never receive the 100 per cent approval required from the NHL board of governors.

It should be noted that if Gillett moved the team he would then have an empty arena in which he would have to schedule some other kinds of events on a regular basis. (The Air Canada Centre in Toronto is used for numerous other events and sports, increasing its profitability.) Does it matter if the Canadiens do or do not stay in Montreal? According to Hanson Lam, a young MBA-trained financial officer in Toronto, the sale of the Montreal Canadiens is a question of "the here and now," a question of doing what is right for the future as opposed to living in the past. Would it be in the best interests of the team if it were moved?

LES CANADIENS: WHAT WAS SOLD?

► *Was Part of Canadian History Sold?*

Is the sale of the Canadiens a business deal, a significant moment in Canadian history, part of the Americanization of Canadian culture, none of the above, some of the above, all of the above, or something else? How can we put this news event in its proper historical perspective?

The Montreal Canadiens formed as a club on December 4, 1909, by J. Ambrose O'Brien, a Montreal sports enthusiast. The formation and management of the new club were organized by Jack Laviolette. The team played its first game on January 5, 1910, as part of the Canadian Hockey Association, beating the Cobalt Silver Kings 7-6 in overtime. The nickname *Habitants* is a reference to *les habitants*, the original French-speaking immigrant-farmers to Quebec. According to the Canadiens' Web site, legend has it that the H on the sweater refers to *habitants* as opposed to the word *hockey* in Club de Hockey Canadien.

1916 Montreal wins its first (pre-NHL) Stanley Cup.

November 26, 1917 The National Hockey League is formed, and the Montreal team officially becomes known as Club de Hockey Canadien and begins displaying the celebrated CH logo.

1920 Montreal wins the Stanley Cup as an NHL club.

November 29, 1924 The Canadiens play their first game in the new Forum, a 10 000-seat facility, beating the Toronto St. Pats 7-1. The Forum was originally built for the Maroons, who were considered "the English team" from Montreal. It becomes the official home of the Canadiens in 1926.

Summer 1949 The Forum is expanded to accommodate 13 551 fans.

September 24, 1957 Hartland Molson and his brother, Thomas H.P. Molson, purchase Club de Hockey Canadien and the Canadian Arena Company.

1956-1960 The Canadiens win a record five consecutive Stanley Cups.

May 15, 1964 Hartland Molson and his brother Thomas H.P. Molson sell Club de Hockey Canadien and the Canadian Arena Company to their cousins, J. David, William A. and Peter B. Molson, for approximately \$5-million.

1976-1977 Montreal has the highest percentage of wins of any team, only losing eight games out of 70, a phenomenal record.

1976-1979 Montreal wins four consecutive Stanley Cups.

1993 Montreal last wins the Stanley Cup, beating Los Angeles 4-1.

March 11, 1996 The final NHL game at the Montreal Forum is played before moving to the new Molson Centre, where the first game is played there on March 16. The Canadiens defeat the Dallas Stars, 4-1.

January 31, 2001 George Gillett purchases 80.1 per cent of the Montreal Canadiens.

Follow-up Discussion

For many non-francophones in Canada, the Canadiens were an introduction into a part of French-Canadian culture. Quebec author Roch Carrier's short story "*Le Chandail*" ("The Sweater") is ample proof of this. Read this short story or obtain a copy of the National Film Board of Canada's classic animated film *The Sweater/Le Chandail*. After reading or viewing, discuss how Carrier's depiction of Les Canadiens explains a part of French-Canadian culture. Has a piece of French Canada been sold?

LES CANADIENS: WHAT WAS SOLD?

An Honorary Habitant?

George Gillett was eager to pursue the purchase of the Montreal Canadiens. He called Molson president Daniel O'Neill two hours after the announcement was made in June 2000 that Molson would sell a majority interest in the team. Since that time, the business world and the general public have become intrigued by this colourful "big player," a man who became a billionaire by the age of 50, lost his fortune, and then climbed his way back to the top. For Canadians and hockey fans, it is unsettling to think that the Montreal Canadiens might simply represent a gamble or an investment opportunity that could be squandered or flipped in the future. The question uppermost in their minds is "What's he going to do, now that he owns the team?" Based on the information below, suggest what you think may be motivating Gillett.

- Gillett himself makes no bones about the business end of his purchase. He notes that he does not buy successful businesses for high prices, but he does buy underperforming operations that have not realized their potential. However, he also denies that his interests are purely mercenary. On his purchase of the Canadiens he said, "This is not a toy. I'm not a jock sniffer. I've had the privilege of being around the great athletes in history. At 62 years of age, I'm not fulfilling some fantasy of being around a group of guys who slip on jockstraps. That's not what I'm interested in. I love the challenge, I love the passion. I'm an adventurer. But I'm a business adventurer."

Gillett's Record of Goals Scored

- Gillett graduated from Dominican College in Racine, Wisconsin, after which he went to work in sales for McKinsey & Co., a management-consultant firm.
- In 1978, he bought Packerland Packing Co., a meat-packing firm in Wisconsin.
- In 1986, he purchased Vail Associates, the company that owned the popular Vail and Beaver Creek ski resorts in Colorado.
- During his career he was briefly part owner of the Miami Dolphins in 1966 and the now defunct California Golden Seals. He owned the Harlem Globetrotters from 1967 to 1978. Before buying the Canadiens, Gillett had previously looked into buying the Colorado Avalanche and the Florida Panthers.
- In 1992, Gillett declared bankruptcy after his holding company defaulted on \$983-million (U.S.) in junk bonds. He lost Vail, his money, and his house.
- Starting again from scratch in 1993, he is now worth in excess of \$250-million (U.S.). He is chairman of Booth Creek Management Group, the fourth largest ski-resort operator in the U.S.
- Using borrowed money primarily, he has bought back Packerland, which has annual revenues of \$1.3-billion. Booth Creek has yet to turn a profit.
- His purchase of the Canadiens is the 130th major acquisition of his career and the 34th since his bankruptcy.

Discussion

Gillett's career has been somewhat of a roller coaster ride. Do you believe that his past performance indicates that he will be successful in his new venture? In your opinion, what type of owner should a sports franchise such as the Canadiens have?

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A Roar from the Crowd?

The sale of the Montreal Canadiens was unsettling for many Canadians, and for different reasons. While Canadian businesses are sold to foreign purchasers on a regular basis, the Canadiens are symbolic of Canadian tradition and culture. An event of this magnitude could not pass without comment from many different quarters of society. But, does the sale of the Canadiens really matter to most of us here in Canada? While reading the quotes below, think about which ones, in your opinion, most accurately reflect what the sale of the Montreal Canadiens means.

“Our vision is to restore the franchise as the greatest team in hockey. . . . This is the Montreal Canadiens. This not the Oklahoma City Canadiens.” — New owner George Gillett

“I contacted many Canadian individuals personally but there was no interest. George Gillett contacted me two hours after the announcement in June and came to see us the very next day.” — Molson president Daniel O’Neill

“I don’t want to have to move any more clubs, particularly out of Canada, and we have no intention of doing so.” — NHL commissioner Gary Bettman

“Molson was stuck with a team that it didn’t want to invest money in. So if you don’t want to invest the money, and you don’t want to move the team, then you’d better walk away from it and sell. And given the exchange rate, the advantage was there for an American to buy.” — Former Canadiens great Guy Lafleur

“When Jersey or Toronto comes in there and the Habs beat them 5-2, people will forget all of a sudden that an American owns them, believe me.” — NHL commentator Don Cherry

“It’s kind of sad, but there’s not much you can do about it. The States is where the money is. Hockey is a big business now.” — Former Canadiens great Henri Richard

“It’s the end of an era. I understand the context under which the Canadiens were sold, but it’s hard to understand that no Canadians came forward.” — Fan Larry Depoe

“What’s all the fuss? If *Les Glorieux* are such a strong symbol of the game in Canada then surely a Canadian group would have come forward in the seven months to save hockey’s most storied franchise.” — *New York Times* reporter, Joe Lapointe

“Hockey is not a sport any more, it’s a consumer product, like a brand of perfume or a chain of fast-food restaurants. Players aren’t proud to represent their city any more.” — Fan Patrick Poulin

“It’s an American owner, but it’s still a Canadian sport” — Former Canadiens great Yvan Cournoyer

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Cost Effectiveness

Canadian hockey teams have faced financial shortfalls in the face of spiralling costs for some time. In an embarrassing reversal a year ago, the federal government was forced by a public outcry to withdraw its offer of \$20-million per year over four years to troubled Canadian NHL teams. The appeal for help, spearheaded by Rod Bryden, owner of the Ottawa Senators emphasized a weak Canadian dollar, high municipal tax rates, and insufficient public subsidies for arenas. Critics of a public bailout suspected that the owners exaggerated their case. Although the league and owners must answer for increasingly high player salaries, their arguments have some merit. After examining the following financial information, suggest why the finances must be factored into the sale of the Canadiens.

Note: attendance numbers are often inflated by hundreds or even thousands of free tickets; not every seat is paid for in full.

- Expansion to the Atlanta Thrashers, Columbus Blue Jackets, and Minnesota Wild added \$9-million (U.S.) to each existing NHL franchise. As part of the NHL, each franchise has a financial stake in the league, which increases as the league expands. Next year will be a crunch year for the NHL, with no expansion money coming in and a low Canadian dollar.

Note: Payroll figures below listed in U.S. dollars, other figures in Canadian dollars.

- Montreal Canadiens: \$10-million loss; payroll \$ 33.5-million (8th); arena: Molson Centre, seats 21 273; average attendance 20 708 (97%); municipal taxes \$9.65-million
- Edmonton Oilers: \$400 000 profit; payroll \$28-million (23rd); arena: Skyreach Centre; seats 17 100; average attendance 14 600 (93.8%); municipal taxes \$2.1-million
- Ottawa Senators: slight profit; payroll \$28-million (25th); arena: Corel Centre, seats 18 500; average attendance 17 418 (91%); municipal taxes \$7.2-million
- Calgary Flames: \$1.5-million loss; payroll \$ 25-million (26th); arena: Saddledome, seats 17 104; average attendance 16 300 (94%); municipal taxes \$340 000
- Vancouver Canucks: \$30-million loss; payroll \$28.2-million (18th); arena: GM Place, 18 422; average attendance 15 432 (84%); municipal taxes \$3.1-million
- Toronto Maple Leafs: (estimated) profit \$150-million; payroll \$34-million (7th); arena: Air Canada Centre seats 18 800; average attendance 18 800 (100%); municipal taxes \$9-14-million

Follow-up Discussion

Note that the Canadiens have the highest fan turn-out figures and bear in mind that the economics of running a team and its arena are complex: some cities give significant tax breaks and other economic conditions may exist in a city that enhance or detract from any business's viability. Given this, however, in your opinion, which financial or operational areas could be improved? What changes can be made to ensure one of these teams makes the playoffs and possibly wins the Stanley Cup?

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► *Fidelity*

The Montreal Canadiens are in the category of definitive sports franchises, like football's Dallas Cowboys, soccer's Manchester United, rugby's New Zealand All Blacks, or baseball's New York Yankees. Such teams surpass normal fan support, evoking extraordinary deep emotional and symbolic reactions. The loyalty to, identification with, and belief in such teams by their fans have dimensions well beyond that of sport. Regardless of their performances, such franchise teams represent the essence of the sport itself and an ideal.

What's in a Name?

1. Look up some of the words that we use to describe loyalty. Some synonyms are *faith*, *allegiance*, *fidelity*, and *chauvinism*. Those who show their loyalty toward a team are *devotees*, *enthusiasts*, or *boosters*. More often they are called *fans*, an abbreviation of *fanatics*. The latter may be more appropriate, given the extreme lengths that some supporters go in order to encourage their teams.
2. Brainstorm ways that fans can show their support for their team. Are there methods that are more socially acceptable, productive, or appropriate than others? Can you suggest examples of fan support you have observed that truly demonstrate fidelity to the team, regardless of the team's performance? Does a team have to be a winning team in order for fans to stay loyal?

Vivent Les Canadiens!

The support the Montreal Canadiens have received over the years goes beyond the enthusiasm demonstrated for the local team in most towns and cities in North America. The Canadiens, nicknamed *Les Glorieux* during happier times, engendered a fervour that approached a religious experience. In the 1970s, novelist Mordecai Richler described the Canadiens as a "spiritual necessity." When Hartland Molson purchased the Canadiens in 1957, he was inspired to state "We don't own the Canadiens, really. The public of Montreal, in fact the entire province of Quebec, owns the Canadiens." The players were elevated to the level of icons. The Canadiens are one of the few hockey teams to generate literature about this passion. Roch Carrier's 1979 story, "The Hockey Sweater/*Le Chandail*," relates what it was like to be a Habs fan in the winter of 1946. A young boy relates his own hockey experiences this way:

"On the ice, when the referee blew his whistle the two teams would rush at the puck; we were five Maurice Richards against five other Maurice Richards, throwing themselves on the puck. We were 10 players all wearing the uniform of the Montreal Canadiens, all with the same burning enthusiasm. We all wore the famous number 9 on our backs."

Discussion

How do you decide when fan support is normal, realistic, and logical? When might it be extreme and perhaps even unhealthy? What is the role of the fan in professional sports today? How does fan behaviour define a sport?

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Reality-based Thinking

An excerpt from John McCrae's poem "In Flanders Fields" hangs in the Canadiens' dressing room: "To you from failing hands we throw the torch, be yours to hold it high." The posting of these lofty words, written about sacrifices during wartime, not about sport, are intended to link Canadiens players to past glories and heroes and to inspire greater efforts. In a 1999 *Sports Illustrated* article, Michael Farber noted sadly that the "failing hands" might still apply. Does this suggest excessive emotion? Is the use of McCrae's poetic words appropriate in this context? What, in your opinion, is a logical and rational response to the sale of the Canadiens? Consider the following and then write a one-page personal commentary titled "The Canadiens: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow."

- The Canadiens have won 24 Stanley Cups, the most by far in the NHL, and the most championships of any sports franchise. Of these wins, they took five in a row from 1955 to 1960 and four in a row from 1975 to 1979. They also hold the record for the best season, with 60 wins, 8 losses, and 12 ties in 1976-77, for 132 points.
- The present club does not shine as brightly. The Canadiens last won a Stanley Cup in 1993, marking the worst drought in the franchise's history. They finished second last in the Northeast Division, missing the playoffs. This year the club is near last place in its division.
- The Canadiens' woes have been attributed to various causes: (a) They have had a dreadful streak of injuries. Many of the better players have been sidelined at some point. Little-known players with minimal NHL experience had to be called up; (b) Poor player drafts and trades have occurred. In recent years, draft picks did not develop as hoped. As well, during the 1990s, marquee players were traded, including: Patrick Roy, Eric Desjardins, and John LeClair, and former captains Guy Charbonneau, Mike Keane, Pierre Turgeon, and Vincent Damphousse; (c) Until February 2001, the Canadiens paid the highest municipal taxes in the NHL, \$11-million, more than three times the amount of municipal taxes paid by all 24 American NHL teams combined and \$1-million more than Toronto. With the sale of the club, the taxes were reduced to \$9.6-million. (d) The Canadiens have been unable to keep their best personnel in the club. Larry Robinson now coaches New Jersey, and Bob Gainey is general manager of the Dallas Stars. Both are Hall of Famers. (e) The Canadiens' arena, the Molson Centre, the largest arena in the league is considered too big. Sellouts in the 21 273-seat arena are rare, even against top-ranked rivals. (f) The expectations for the Canadiens are too high. Players and coaches are expected to live up to the team's glorious past or move on. However, no other Canadian team, including the wealthy Maple Leafs have won the Stanley Cup since 1993.

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Re-Hab for Short

With the sale of the Canadiens hockey club, the process of rebuilding and repairing the team's record, image, and profitability can begin in earnest. The new owner, George Gillett, has stated repeatedly that his goal is "to be part of restoring the grandeur of this team [and to win] the 25th Stanley Cup."

The process was already underway last year. Many Hab fans attribute much of the blame for the current state of disrepair on former manager Réjean Houle. It was during his stewardship, from 1995 to 2000, that many of the Canadiens' top players were sold or traded, for poor returns. Houle was replaced in November 2000 by André Savard. Unlike Houle, Savard paid his dues in the NHL as an assistant coach and scout. He is considered to be a savvy judge of talent with a good head for business. Regarding his approach to trading players, he said, "You can't overreact just because you're in a tough situation. It's too easy to downgrade your team; you have to be patient."

As of late February 2001, the direction was clear, however. Eric Weinrich, the Habs' best defenceman, was traded by Savard to division rivals, the Boston Bruins. To many fans, this marked the moment that the Canadiens' management gave up on the season. This season will see the third straight year Montreal has missed the playoffs. Moving Weinrich indicated that building from the bottom up is now the order of the day. This does not pre-empt any moves to acquire high-priced free agents at the end of the season, but the trade is a sign of Savard's starting afresh.

Another significant change for the organization is the creation of a marketing department. Despite operating a \$100-million-a-year business, the Canadiens management had not modernized its approach to promoting the team. The marketing department will work on increasing ticket sales to the Molson Centre, but more importantly will attempt to capitalize on the Canadiens' logo in other markets. In years past, the team would often have thousands of supporters in other arenas cheering for them. Tapping into this market can generate considerable revenues from merchandise and pay-per-view televised games. A prime example of this technique was when the San Jose Sharks managed to attract youngsters across Canada to sport their logo despite their expansion status.

Montreal fans want to see results. Statistics referring to past glories are recycled regularly. For example, since 1944 Montreal has not gone more than seven years without a Stanley Cup. That may not change this year, but supporters hope that other negative streaks will abate. As of this writing, Montreal was beaten 5-1 by its oldest rival, the Toronto Maple Leafs. This marks the first time the Leafs have won four straight games against the Canadiens in one season.

Discussion

When a business is faltering a new, dynamic owner may actually be able to step in and turn things around. Has George Gillett come along at the right time? Is this a good news business story and not a bad news sports story?

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For the Record

In terms of the history of the sport of hockey, the Montreal Canadiens, with their considerable achievements, represent a real success story, and in this respect are role models, a team to be emulated. Given that all sports evolve, why is it important to recognize the contributions that this team in particular has made to professional hockey? After reading the following information, summarize in your own words what the Canadiens' contributions mean to hockey.

Stanley Cups

The Habs managed to win an incredible 24 Stanley Cups. Although there are periods where the team collected four or five trophies in a row, they are nevertheless remarkably well-distributed throughout their history. With the exception of the current drought, the team rarely went more than seven years without a championship. While naysayers note that the odds were better for winning a cup when there were only six teams, supporters note that no other team was able to win as often under the same system. The fact remains that winning the Stanley Cup represents the pinnacle of talent and determination, and the Montreal Canadiens have won it twice as many times as the next best team (the Toronto Maple Leafs, who have won 11 Cups).

Outstanding Players

Forty former Canadiens players are members of the Hockey Hall of Fame. While the accomplishments of some of these players have faded into team history, other names have transcended time and become synonymous with hockey itself. Some famous Canadiens are: Maurice "Rocket" Richard, Jacques Plante, Frank Mahovlich, Yvan Cournoyer, Guy Lafleur, Ken Dryden, and Larry Robinson. The club has retired the following player numbers: 1, 2, 4, 7, 9, 10, and 16.

Activity

Create a display in your classroom illustrating the Stanley Cup years and significant Canadiens players. Visit the following Web sites to help you research your year or player. These sites include standings, news clippings, pictures, and biographical details for the Canadiens and all NHL clubs.

- The Montreal Canadiens Web site (www.canadiens.com)
- The NHL Web site (www.nhl.com)
- The Hockey Hall of Fame Web site (www.hhof.com)

Discussion

In the world of opera, when a singer is deemed to have given the ultimate performance, he or she is said to have retired the role. Suggest how retiring a player's number pays tribute to that individual but also to the role he has played in the history of the sport.

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The Americanization Issue

Some reactions to the sale of the Canadiens to a U.S. citizen were quite negative. For some people, it was as if the government had privatized a national park or had leased the Parliament Buildings to a foreign tenant. In fact, the initial backlash in the Montreal press over George Gillett's business background and his American pedigree almost convinced him to back out of the deal.

To other observers, Gillett's nationality is not as important as his financial capital. Mike Ozanian, a senior editor at *Forbes*, notes that "Canadians are more sensitive to people they perceive as being money-hungry than Americans are, but the reality is that to have the kind of hockey team they want to have, the Canadiens have to be in the top half of the league in revenues."

In a sense, Ozanian is telling Canadians concerned about this aspect of the sale to simply "Get over it." There is evidence that as a nation, and in terms of selling teams to U.S. owners, we already have gotten over it. When other Canadian franchises were purchased, there was no similar outcry. The Vancouver Grizzlies were sold in April 2000 to a U.S. owner. The club may be moved next season. The Vancouver Canucks also have a U.S. owner. Indeed, in Montreal itself, the Expos baseball team and the CFL's Alouettes are U.S.-owned. The Alouettes are now thriving, and the Expos may be moved to a city in the U.S. These precedents would seem to suggest that quality and performance count more than the nationality of the owners.

The process works in reverse as well, perhaps not as often and not as frequently in sport. For example, Canadians own the NFL's Denver Broncos, the Sears Tower in Chicago, and New York's World Financial Center. Canadians have also owned the Washington Redskins and Hollywood's Universal Studios. Loblaws owns more of the U.S. grocery business than any U.S. grocery chain. It has been suggested by at least one commentator that, unlike many Canadians, Americans don't seem to mind as long as the business is successful. The Redskins and the Broncos, for example, both won Super Bowls while owned by Canadians.

Discussion

The argument that business purchases go both ways across the border may not be a complete description of the process. There are only six Canadian NHL franchises and 22 in U.S. cities. Two of the Canadian franchises are now U.S.-owned. The Canadian ownership of U.S. businesses represents a much smaller fraction of the total than does the U.S. ownership of Canadian businesses. Is this a realistic outcome attributable to the significant U.S.-Canada population differences? Should the nationality of an owner, especially of a sports team, be a concern or is the bottom line really whether or not the business is successful?

LES CANADIENS: WHAT WAS SOLD?

Discussion, Research, and Essay Questions

- 1. Maurice “Rocket” Richard was hockey’s first 50-goal scorer. He amassed a then-record 544 goals and eight Stanley Cups with the Canadiens. He was an electrifying player who was a favourite with the Montreal fans, as well as a highly aggressive player. In 1955, he was suspended by NHL president Clarence Campbell, for the playoffs. On St. Patrick’s Day, Montreal fans rioted, causing considerable damage. Richard made a radio address in two languages the next day to calm the public. Research this event and the career of the legendary Number 9. Why was he able to galvanize emotions as no other player did or has since?
2. The young adult novel, *Finnie Walsh*, by Steven Galloway, focuses on the impact of hockey on two young boys as they come of age, on their families, and on their community. At one point, one of the boys comments on the trade of Wayne Gretzky from the Edmonton Oilers to the Los Angeles Kings, “The worst part of it is that it doesn’t even matter where he plays, where anyone plays anymore, not now. They’re just commodities. They may as well be impaled on rods and put onto a foosball table. There’s no magic anymore. You can’t own magic. And when you buy it or sell it, it disappears.” Write a response to this statement arguing for or against the contention that the magic is gone from hockey and that players are just commodities. Use examples from the sport to support your point of view.
- 3. Published in 2000, *Finnie Walsh*, is just one of many works of fiction and non-fiction about hockey. Some other hockey stories you may wish to read are: *The Magic Hockey Stick*, by Peter Maloney (children’s literature); *The Night They Stole The Stanley Cup*, by Roy MacGregor (ages 9-12); and *The Autobiography of Willie O’Ree: Hockey’s Black Pioneer* (young adult to adult). Your librarian could suggest more titles. Read one of these books and write a book report. Perhaps your class could all read hockey books around the time of the playoffs or the all-star game.
4. Many writers have suggested that there are links between the intense rivalries that the Canadiens have had with other teams—especially the Toronto Maple Leafs—with struggles for cultural survival of francophones in the sea of anglophones of North America. Write an essay describing the importance of hockey to Quebec’s culture or nationalism.
5. Research the payrolls of the teams in the NHL. Is there a relationship between money spent and how successful a team is on the ice? Use the current standings to explain your findings.
6. Some sports columnists contend that all NHL clubs need to survive until 2004. That is when the collective agreement for the NHL players can be renegotiated. Research the agreement that is currently in place. Is it detrimental to the security of the league’s teams? What changes, if any, should be made in 2004?