

Death of Hockey Burial



Cam Ford writes for the Peak, (the student paper at SFU) and for the Grape. This essay was presented as a working paper at the 35th Annual Canadian University Press Conference in Winnipeg a few weeks ago.

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Canadian Amateur e either the NHL rom their hands is attacking the ind of hockey our ell them. We are ither the NHL or ur kids to play hem or what we ant.

Nobody says you have to register your kid in a CAHA approved league, nobody says your league has to be in the CAHA. Why is there an amateur hockey governing body in the first place? so we can standardize every game and sell it to big business?

The Death of Hockey claims that pro hockey has been turned into showbusiness. While this is so, it happened years ago with the use of hockey as a profit maker. The watered down NHL and the WHA with fluorescent pucks are merely extensions.

Showbusiness is entertaining for the purpose of making money. The Death of Hockey has best described the development of hockey in Canada and the United States. It gives a very detailed look at how monopoly capitalists (American and Canadian) have turned what was a beautiful sport into a huge profit-making business. But, its conclusions are as pretentious as the six dollars asked for the hard cover edition of the book.

No Fun Anymore

The solution to the problem of hockey is in the book. In the chapter entitled The Child Buyers.

"Hockey should be fun, a game played for the excitement and satisfaction it brings the players while they are playing it and the delight it brings spectators while they are watching it. The joy of hockey is of the moment."

The development of the game must come from our backyards and neighbourhood rinks. If the game develops, its occurrence will be a very natural one. There is concern, from the authors, however, that the quality of our game need be restored, that to do this, a national hockey institute need be established.

"We must establish a national hockey institute, perhaps attached to one of our universities, so that we can develop skills, strategy and training methods to Canadian conditions and experience."

The purpose of this, would be, to return the game to its former beauty, to its former high level of play, that would distinctly be Canadian and of international calibre, and that Canada would compete with the USSR for world hockey supremacy.

I have two objections to the Russian use of sport and hockey. The Russian hockey is of greater professional approach than the NHL. There is a systematic analytical approach to the game. Their attitude to the game will, undoubtedly allow them the added extras necessary to take on all comers in the hockey world.

The Russian players are rewarded in the same sense as the Canadian pros are, the more they produce, the more they are rewarded. In this case, however, they are rewarded by the state. The state completely rules the class structure.

Hockey As Soma

Secondly, the game is used to diffuse the people. If their emotions are spent on relaxation and forms of escape, they are less able to devote as much to the problems at hand. If you maintain the masses on such a basic level, you are less likely to face serious opposition from the people.

An example of this in Canada would be the time the NHL suspended the great star of the Canadians, Maurice Richard, just before the Stanley Cup playoffs. Without the "Rocket" (as he was called), there would be no cup. Without him the team was sunk. 10,000 fans rioted and looted St. Catherine

Street. Hockey was Quebecois's last hope, and they had nothing left. If the masses relieve their frustrations through sport, it is easier to maintain economic and political control over them.

Hockey, as the Canadian game, was based on skating, playmaking and spontaneity. The beauty of teammanship comes from the close associations between the players, and the resulting spontaneity, not from the studied structured patterns. There is still some beauty left in the Canadian game, and it was this sense of beauty that gave the NHL a scoring edge over the Russians.

Entertainment is the name of professional sport. Cheap entertainment in pro hockey has become acceptable because of the lack of historical background the new American fan has in regards to hockey.

Hockey will return, on its own, to playmaking and skating when we stop putting so much emphasis in professional sport, when we realize that the joy of hockey is of the moment, and when we stop expecting our kid to slug the opposing player to impress "the old man".

Although the authors favour institutionalism as a solution, the book says why the game should be left to spontaneity:

"We love it because it is one of the most beautiful games in the world. The exhilaration of rink-long rushes in the chilling air. The satisfaction of a well-delivered body check. The special elation of scoring a goal, that thrilling culmination of physical and mental reflex; wit, discipline and sometimes, luck. Hockey is all of these things, but it is first the sheer pleasure of skating.....Skating makes hockey one of the most sensual of sports which is why so many of us play it. But it is also among the most creative, not as programmed as baseball or football, where offenses and defenses are carefully worked out."

Teams Coasting

The beauty of hockey is its spontaneity and teammanship. It is also reflective of the Canadian countryside. It is coasting on the open surface.

The closed arenas with artificial ice in a warm climate has removed much of the natural beauty. The players have become actors, actor-businessmen who must entertain.

The NHL has, for all intents and purposes, left Canada. Within a few years the game will be producing American players. The need for Canadian players and the CAHA will lessen all the time. There has been a dramatic increase in the number of American born players in the NHL in the last two seasons.

Amateur sport is exploited by the American universities. The large spectator appeal of the sport is used to finance the high cost of training. Already a hockey program exists in many major universities which are producing American players. There are policies which exclude many top Canadian amateurs from playing in the United States on this level.

Canadian college sport offers no scholarships, yet it maintains the highest level of amateur hockey on the continent. It is the hardest league to come from and make the NHL. For the old NHL money barons to accept Canadian college players would be an about face. For years, pro prospects were forced to make the choice between an education and NHL hockey. The owners wanted to keep the players in the junior system that gave them full control over their products.

Now with so many teams situated in the U.S., it is necessary to have American players playing the American game...for the fans. Canadian college hockey loses without ever leaving the gate.

There are only three Canadian college graduates, who played collegiate hockey presently playing in the NHL, John Wright, formerly from the University of Toronto Blues, now with Vancouver, Larry Carriere of Loyola of Montreal, with Buffalo and Bob Berry with the L.A. Kings. He played with Sir George Williams, and only made the NHL after seasons in the minors.

Berry's escape to the big league came two years ago when Montreal, his former "owners" sent him to Los Angeles. It was the same year that Montreal stacked the Kings and the Minnesota North Stars to insure that another team, the California Golden Seals, would finish last in the western division. Montreal owned the Seals first draft choice and would get first crack at the top amateurs if the Seals finished in the cellar.

The Seals did, and Montreal got Guy Lafleur, the most publicized amateur since Bobby Orr.

Professional Students???

But we should not make our universities the training ground of professional sport. We should encourage the exodus of Professional hockey from Canada. The NHL will be leaving Canada soon. The Canadian fan and the league are headed in two different directions. When the Atlanta Flames (one of two new teams this season) made their initial appearance in Montreal this fall, only 12,000 fans bothered to show. Five years ago it was almost impossible to get a seat without a season ticket. Only a few games are of importance any longer, and the publicity men, the professional sports writers, are having a harder and harder time selling their product.

We should encourage the building of more arenas and the direct involvement of the average fan and enjoy the game ourselves. We've become too content to be entertained and not concerned enough with entertaining ourselves.

We can teach ourselves how to play and teach our children the game that we know, that is refreshing and native to the climates and conditions.

There is extreme beauty in watching well conditioned hockey players in action, the colour and speed and co-ordination leave us tingling, but professionalism is no answer. We can do it for ourselves.