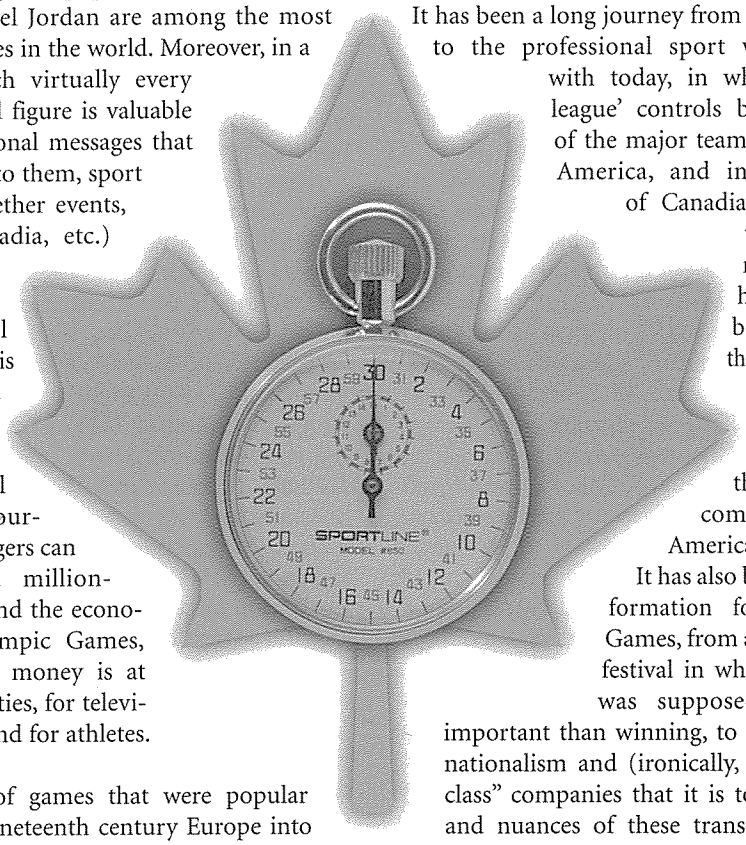
# Sport and Canadian Identities



*by David Whitson*
Professor, Canadian Studies Program, University of Alberta

*Spectator sports have become one of the last great public rituals of late twentieth century culture.*

Last July, more than a billion people around the world watched the World Cup soccer final on television. Next September, it is predicted that these numbers will be surpassed by telecasts of the 2000 Olympic Games from Sydney, Australia. Major international sporting events, of which these two are the biggest (but which also include spectacles like the Super Bowl, Wimbledon, the Masters, and Formula One motorsport races), are now in the forefront of global popular culture, and sports stars like Michael Jordan are among the most recognized figures in the world. Moreover, in a culture in which virtually every public event and figure is valuable for the promotional messages that can be attached to them, sport 'properties' (whether events, personalities, stadia, etc.) are among the most valuable of promotional commodities. This is what has fuelled the astonishing economy of professional sport, where journeyman left wingers can now command million-dollar salaries, and the economy of the Olympic Games, where so much money is at stake: for host cities, for television networks, and for athletes.




The evolution of games that were popular recreations in nineteenth century Europe into the phenomenon we know today as spectator sport began with intra-communal competitions in the burgeoning industrial cities of that period. In Canada, Montreal is widely acknowledged as the birthplace of regular, organized sporting competition. At first, this mostly featured young men of middle-class backgrounds who sometimes represented schools and universities, but often represented clubs that were organized along ethnic and religious lines. It was not long before contests between English and French clubs began to attract widespread public interest, and as spectator interest increased, clubs started to recruit 'outsiders' who would enhance their chances of winning. Soon, thousands of people were gathering to watch hockey and football matches, and it became clear that there was money to be made in staging sport for entertainment. Public interest was only enhanced when improvements in transportation made it possible to stage competition between communities: between Montreal teams and teams from Ottawa, Kingston, Toronto, and northern Ontario.

It has been a long journey from these beginnings to the professional sport we are familiar with today, in which one 'major league' controls business in each of the major team games in North America, and in which owners of Canadian hockey teams which once dominated the sport have this year been threatening that without financial assistance from Canadian governments, they can no longer compete with their American counterparts. It has also been a long transformation for the Olympic Games, from a strictly amateur festival in which participation was supposed to be more important than winning, to the showcase for nationalism and (ironically, perhaps) "world class" companies that it is today. The details and nuances of these transformations need not detain us here, but there are two points that are important to highlight. First, we need to recognize the extent to which sports have come to be popularly accepted as symbols of communal identities: national identities, civic identities, intra-communal identities (such as region, ethnicity, class), and now consumer identities. It is this capacity of sports performers (individuals, and even more so, teams) to represent larger communities of people that has given sport much of its popular interest, and that accounts for fans' passionate identifications with their 'representatives'. The English sociologist David Chaney has proposed that public rituals serve to bring together, however

temporarily, communities that have only an ambiguous existence, and I want to suggest here that spectator sports have become (however problematically) one of the last great public rituals of late twentieth century culture.

At the same time, however, we have to recognize the extent to which sport has now become a business. The manifestations of this include the phenomenon now all too familiar to Canadian fans, in which teams that were thought of as communal institutions, in some way belonging to their fans, have been picked up and moved to places where their owners (or new owners) could make more money than is possible in provincial Canadian cities. Another example is the money that is to be made in the hosting of international sporting events. Canadian cities now bid to stage not only Olympic Games, but smaller multi-sport competitions as well (Commonwealth Games, Pan-American Games, World Track & Field Championships), and annual spectacles like Formula One auto races and World Cup ski events. Yet although these usually constitute money-making opportunities for organizers, sponsors, and people in the tourism, real estate, and construction industries, staging them usually makes demands on the public purse, and sometimes on public space, that in turn raise issues of public policy. Canadians are thus familiar now with debates about the rightness of public subsidies to professional sports teams, of building new arenas or stadia with substantial contributions from public funds, and of spending public money on bids to attract international events. Finally, it is difficult to talk about the sports business today without referring to the role played by equipment manufacturers, and the extent to which brand names and logos have become signifiers in contemporary popular culture. The Nike swoosh, and merchandise bearing the logo of the Chicago Bulls, have become purchasable symbols of identities among young people around the world, symbolizing membership in a global consumer culture — perhaps at the expense of older kinds of identity, rooted in place and ethnicity.

These are the kinds of issues that the articles collected here seek to explore, in one way or another. The article by Jean Harvey and Marc Lavoie, for example, explicitly addresses the question of public subsidies for Canadian professional sports teams, in the light of recommendations made recently by a House of Commons sub-committee chaired by Dennis Mills. The article by Jim Silver looks at the same questions of public expenditure and private gain, with reference to the recent experience of the city of Winnipeg, which of course lost their NHL team, the Jets, to Phoenix several years ago, but which this summer is hosting the Pan-American Games. Kevin Wamsley likewise examines why Canadian cities like Toronto and Vancouver are bidding to host upcoming Olympic Games, and whether the public interest is well served by hosting such events. From a somewhat different angle, the issues of public subsidy, uses of public space, and the interests of urban elites in downtown redevelopment and civic image, are also raised in the articles by Anouk Belanger and Mark Lowes, who consider the building of the Molson Centre in Montreal and the debates about the Molson Indy auto race in downtown Vancouver, respectively. The article by Mélisse Lafrance addresses a different kind of 'player' in the sports business, namely Nike, and critically examines a recent advertising campaign that implies that the company is supportive of women, and indeed of the aspirations of feminism. Finally, the articles by Jack Jedwab and Christine Dallaire consider questions of ethnic identity that have been part of the history of sport in Canada. Jedwab revisits the history of Jackie Robinson's tenure with the Montreal Royals, on his way to being the first black player in American 'major league' sport, while Dallaire considers the complicated questions of identity that surround the Alberta Francophone Games, an event intended to encourage young francophones in Alberta to identify with the French language and culture.

All of these articles exemplify the kind of interest that sport is attracting among young scholars in Canada who are concerned, in one way or another, with the connections between contemporary culture and popular identities. We hope you will find them interesting and thought-provoking. ■

*All of these articles exemplify the kind of interest that sport is attracting among young scholars in Canada.*