

“Splendid Condition and Enormous ‘Grit’.” The Sporting “Other” and Canadian Identity

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Sport and identity are invariably linked. When athletes compete in sport, whether as individuals or part of a team, they are perceived as competing for more than just themselves; they compete for their team, for their city, and ultimately for their country. Thus, the athletes themselves become emblems for a country's national identity, and they are seen to represent their country's values and beliefs. Athletes are portrayed in a way that supports their country's chosen narratives, how their country wants to be viewed by its own citizens as well as by outsiders, regardless of whether or not those narratives are accurately upheld by athletes. Canadian identity is closely linked to sport, and it also has a close connection with mastery over the environment, a theme that persists in the portrayal of many Canadian sports. As such, Canadian identity is very dependent not only on the outcome of an event, but on the opponent that Canada is facing. Scott D. Watson notes that "As with other national symbols... [sports are used] to promote particular values as definitive of the Canadian nation and to differentiate Canada from other national communities."<sup>1</sup> Canadian identity is mutable, and it changes in response to outside influences; this is especially apparent when those outside influences are sporting opponents. By examining important sporting events in Canada's history, the changes to Canadian identity in the face of various "others" become glaringly apparent.

In July 1867, the Dominion of Canada had been in existence for less than thirty days when the young nation won its first international sporting title in rowing. Four oarsmen from New Brunswick, George Price, Elijah Ross, Samuel Hutton, and Robert Fulton, won the Paris Regatta. This rowing team from a country in its infancy was the most unlikely victor, and suddenly the idea of what it means to be Canadian on the international stage began to take shape. *The Morning Freeman*, a New Brunswick newspaper that reprinted an article on the regatta by

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<sup>1</sup>Scott D. Watson, "Everyday nationalism and international hockey: contesting Canadian national identity," *Nations & Nationalism* 23, no. 20 (2017): 289–308. doi:10.1111/nana.12163.

the *Manchester Guardian*, notes that “[the New Brunswickers’] success [was] probably largely due to their splendid condition and enormous “grit”.”<sup>2</sup> The newspaper also mentions that these Canadians were men “of much the same stamp as our English watermen.”<sup>3</sup> Since Canada was a British colony, and the ink was barely dry on the 1867 British North America Act, winning the Paris Regatta carried implications that went far beyond the sport of rowing, sketching out a national identity that was uniquely Canadian.

Not only did the Canadians beat the favoured Oxford team, but they completely disregarded the English style of rowing, effectively differentiating themselves, and thus their country, from England. The Canadians’ rowing style was defined by “a short, quick stroke, pulled almost entirely with the arms, hitting the water fairly at the beginning, with a jerk at the end, and a regularly marked bang against the chest.”<sup>4</sup> The Canadians also rowed without a coxswain, instead bow steering using a device at their feet. Furthermore, the Canadians distinguished themselves from their parent country of England, as well as their other competitors, in their manner of dress. *The Morning Freeman* describes them as being “in striking contrast to their neat competitors”<sup>5</sup> with their outfits of “flesh-colored jerseys, dark cloth trousers, leather braces, and bright pink caps.”<sup>6</sup> With their shocking international victory, their unorthodox style of rowing, and their memorable dress, the Canadians set themselves apart from the “other” of England. The New Brunswick rowing team etched out an identity for their young country as one of strength, innovation, and as categorically different from England.

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<sup>2</sup> “The Victory of New Brunswickers!” *The Morning Freeman*. July 30, 1867. <https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1614&dat=18670730&id=2G85AAAAIIBAJ&sjid=VCKMAAAIIBAJ&pg=2411,849445>.

<sup>3</sup> “Victory!” *The Morning Freeman*. July 30, 1867.

<sup>4</sup> “Victory!” *The Morning Freeman*. July 30, 1867.

<sup>5</sup> “Victory!” *The Morning Freeman*. July 30, 1867.

<sup>6</sup> “Victory!” *The Morning Freeman*. July 30, 1867.

Just over a hundred years after Canada became a country, Canada's national identity had stabilized somewhat. According to Michael Robidoux, "[s]ince World War II, Canadians have been internationally perceived more as peacekeepers and, perhaps, even as being unreasonably polite."<sup>7</sup> In 1972 a sporting event that has become known as one of the most important in Canadian history occurred: the hockey Summit Series between Canada and the USSR. A popular opinion in Canada at the time was that "the Summit Series [was] a mismatch that heavily favoured Team Canada."<sup>8</sup> Hockey was, and still is, an important part of the Canadian identity, and as a sport that embodies both the frozen climate stereotypical of Canada and the physical strength and violence associated with the bush masculinity<sup>9</sup> of this country's founders, proving Canada's "hockey dominance" was of paramount importance.<sup>10</sup> In the years leading up to the Summit Series, the Soviet Union had a decade long win streak at the international level.<sup>11</sup> The Summit Series would be where Canada showed itself as the absolute hockey authority because, unlike in the Olympics, Canadian NHL players would be able to play in these games.

Many East versus West attitudes also made their way into the Series. Although Canada was not directly involved in the Cold War, many American anti-Soviet attitudes filtered into Canadian culture. Traits such as individualism and strength dominated the Canadian identity narrative during that time. Other qualities often associated with Canada, such as multiculturalism

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<sup>7</sup>Michael A. Robidoux, "Imagining a Canadian Identity through Sport: A Historical Interpretation of Lacrosse and Hockey," *Journal of American Folklore* 115, no. 456, (2002): 209. doi:10.2307/4129220.

<sup>8</sup>J.J. Wilson, "27 Remarkable Days: The 1972 Summit Series of Ice Hockey between Canada and the Soviet Union," *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 5, no. 2 (2004): 271. doi:10.1080/1469076042000269257.

<sup>9</sup> A kind of masculinity based on physical prowess, especially in the context of surviving the harsh Canadian climate of the pioneer days.

<sup>10</sup>Wilson, "Remarkable Days," 272.

<sup>11</sup> Jamie Fitzpatrick, "Olympic Ice Hockey Medal Winners," *liveaboutdotcom*. Updated November 4, 2019. <https://www.liveabout.com/olympic-hockey-medal-winners-2779246>.

and diversity, were “consciously obscure[d]”<sup>12</sup> in order to present Canada “as a unified, homogeneous force, heroically turning back the Soviet challenge.”<sup>13</sup> However, Pierre-Luc Beauchamp mentions that the notion of Canada as a polite, peacekeeping nation was quickly exchanged for international disgrace due to the unethical sporting conduct of Canadian players in regards to violent play and sportsmanship.<sup>14</sup> During game six of the series, future hall of famer Bobby Clarke broke Soviet star Valeri Kharlamov’s ankle.<sup>15</sup> In spite of this embarrassing and decidedly “un-Canadian” conduct of Team Canada’s players on the ice, Canada’s victory in the Series is ultimately presented in the media as a patriotic triumph. National pride dilutes the questionable conduct during the Series and leaves a general impression of a national accomplishment.<sup>16</sup> In order for the Canadian identity to be reimagined during the Summit Series, an identity for the “other” of the Soviet Union had to be emphasized, and throughout the Series, Soviet hockey players were portrayed by the media as mindless robots obeying a rigid governing system.<sup>17</sup> As was the case a hundred years prior during the Paris Regatta, Canada’s identity was based on how it differed from the “other” it was facing.

Finally, in 2019 the Toronto Raptors became the first Canadian team to win the NBA finals, and the narrative of Canadian identity changed once again, this time with a focus on Canadian multiculturalism. Despite the fact that the Toronto Raptors were not actually a “team

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<sup>12</sup>Russel Field, “How we Think about Hockey and Ourselves”: Television, the 1972 Summit Series, and the Construction of a Pan-Canadian Identity,” *Canadian Issues / Thèmes Canadiens*, (2012): 44. <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.tru.ca/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ahl&AN=88780854&site=eds-live>.

<sup>13</sup>Field, “Hockey and Ourselves,” 44.

<sup>14</sup>Pierre-Luc Beauchamp, “La Série du siècle de 1972: un catalyseur de l’identité canadienne?” *Bulletin d’Histoire Politique* 22, no. 2 (2014): 81. doi:10.7202/1021989ar.

<sup>15</sup> Red Fisher, “Summit Series 40th anniversary: Clarke’s Game 6 slash on Kharlamov was turning point for Team Canada,” *Montreal Gazette*, September 24, 2012. <http://www.montrealgazette.com/sports/Summit+Series+40th+anniversary+Clarke+Game+slash+Kharlamov+turning+point+Team+Canada/7287054/story.html>.

<sup>16</sup>Beauchamp, “Série,” 81.

<sup>17</sup>Beauchamp, “Série,” 81.

Canada” in the traditional sense—they had only one Canadian player during the 2018-2019 season and they represented a single city in Canada, not the whole country—the Raptors had quickly gained a reputation as “Canada’s team”, thanks in part to the very successful “We the North” marketing campaign, along with the fact that they were the only NBA franchise in Canada. As before, Canadian identity shifted in response to the “other” that it was facing: the United States in this case. This identity match up had to do with more than merely beating Canada’s southern neighbours. The desire to differentiate itself from the U.S., and to declare to the world that the welcoming, multicultural, humble, Canadian “we” is better than the opposing American “they”, is woven through the entire NBA finals. As the smaller and less powerful country, sport was a significant way Canada could truly compete with the U.S. The Raptors, Toronto, and, subsequently, Canada, have been portrayed by the media as “wonderfully unique and superior” to the United States due to Canada’s multicultural, multilingual, basketball team.<sup>18</sup>

Canadian society prides itself on opposing the “melting-pot” philosophy of the United States and embracing a Canadian identity that does not seek to erase the differing heritages of its citizens. Because the Raptors have taken the mantle of “Canada’s team”, they are portrayed to the world as an accurate representation of everything the country is, regardless of the legitimacy of that belief.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, Canadian stereotypes about playing through pain, remaining stoic in the face of victory or defeat, and maintaining a humble disposition, are values that have been projected upon the Raptors players and are used to “Canadianize” these players in the minds of viewers. In spite of the Canada vs U.S. sentiment surrounding the NBA finals, the Toronto Raptors, in particular Kawhi Leonard, Kyle Lowry, and Fred Vanvleet Sr., were embraced by

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<sup>18</sup>Gamal Abdel-Shehid, “Toronto’s multicultural Raptors: Teamwork and individualism,” *The Conversation*. June 3, 2019. <http://theconversation.com/torontos-multicultural-raptors-teamwork-and-individualism-118141>.

<sup>19</sup>Beauchamp, “Série,” 80.

Canadians, even though these players are American. Moreover, the entire Finals Series was threaded with a desire to prove that Canada is as good, if not better, than the United States at this game that a Canadian invented. This desire spread beyond basketball and into Canadian culture and identity. The Raptors' win was presented by Canadian media as displaying that not only was a Canadian basketball team superior to those of the United States, but that a large part of the Raptors' strength and success was due to the multiculturalism of the team and the country that they played for, a quality not attributed to the "other" of the United States.

Throughout the country's history, Canadian identity has constantly been reimagined in the face of an outside "other". This will likely continue as international relationships change in the future. Canadian identity is most apparent beside examples of what it is not, and sport has provided the perfect arena for "others" to be identified. From the Paris Regatta of 1867 to the Cold War Summit Series against the Soviet Union in 1972 to the cultural importance of the Toronto Raptors 2019 NBA Championship, Canadian identity has morphed in response to an "other" from which it desires to differentiate itself. As Watson describes, the formation of national identity "involves a description of the defining features of the national community, but also specific national others through which that identity operates."<sup>20</sup> In Canadian sport as well as, most importantly, Canadian identity, the "other" that Canada is being displayed in contrast to is of utmost importance. National identity is created and changed depending on that country's position in history, and, regardless of the narrative, reality is far more complicated.

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<sup>20</sup>Scott D. Watson, "Everyday nationalism and international hockey: contesting Canadian national identity," *Nations & Nationalism* 23, no. 20 (2017): 289–308. doi:10.1111/nana.12163.

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