The Making of a Hockey Artifact: A Review of the Hockey Hall of Fame[1]

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Halls of fame play a strategic role in the public remembering and interpretation of sports. Through their annual, often well-publicized selections and inductions, they confer status (and lifetime bragging rights) upon athletes, patrons, and participants. In the process, they single out particular sports, skills, practices, and values for praise or blame, legitimation or derision. Many halls have become important sources of reference for schoolchildren, journalists, and amateur and professional historians. Selection decisions shape the records maintained and thus, such judgements profoundly shape the primary data available for research.

Many NASSH members have supportive working relationships with halls of fame. We take our students to them, contribute to their educational programs, and make good use of their archival collections. Some of us are even in them as honored members. At previous annual conferences, members like Sandy Young and Heather Harris have spoken enthusiastically about the way in which the historical displays have made the past come alive for students, and affirmed the place of marginalized groups in the dominant discourse. It's time that we subject the exhibits of the halls of fame to the same critical analysis we apply to our own scholarship. As I will argue here, if that analysis finds them wanting, then we must adjust our use of them accordingly. In particular, if we want to help our students to fully understand the complex interactions between sports and other social activities, we must help them deconstruct the artifacts that are so reverentially placed on display.

The reification of otherwise ephemeral athletic feats is hardly a modern phenomenon; but the creation of halls of fame only began with the escalating

commercialization and media coverage of sport In the 1930s. The oldest, the Baseball Hall of Fame at Cooperstown, New York, was established in 1939.[2] A projected Hockey Hall was announced four years later. Did this new institution represent a further expression of the commodification of sports, or an attempt to preserve the memory of athletes and practices of an earlier time that even then was being obliterated or at least distorted by rapid change and growing uncertainty? We should remember that what are romanticized as "the original six" in the National Hockey League were really only the survivors from the turbulent cartel wars of the 1920s and 1930s, when many famous teams, including two of the four original NHL clubs, disappeared.[3] Eldon Snyder has argued that the growth of sports halls of fame can best be understood as responses to the need for collective and personal nostalgia at times of social dislocation and identity crisis.[4] Certainly the Hockey Hall was conceived in such a moment, during the depths of world war. Among other goals, the founder, J.T Sutherland, sought to restore an understanding of the game as it flourished in the years prior to the war.

Sutherland's dream was to build the Hockey Hall in Kingston, Ontario, where many believe the game was first played according to a written set of rules. But even though he began "inducting" members in 1945, he was unable to undertake the construction of an actual building by the time of his death in 1955. Despite the backing of the National Hockey League and the Canadian Amateur Hockey Association, the whole project seemed to flag with Sutherland's decline. No new members were recognized between 1952 and 1958. It was not until Toronto Maple Leaf club owner, Conn Smythe, picked up the reins in the late 1950s that the Hockey Hall became a physical reality. When the Canadian National Exhibition (CNE), in conjunction with the city of Toronto, agreed to build a grand pavilion for Canada's Sports Hall of Fame, which honored nationally prominent athletes and officials in a broad range of sports, Smythe and his colleagues persuaded the Exhibition officials to accommodate the Hockey Hall in one half of the building. It was opened in 1961. While that space served admirably for many years, the limited possibilities for its expansion, the annual fair's gradual decline, and the fact that vast CNE grounds are virtually vacant for most of the year led the board to look for new quarters.[5]

In 1993, the Hockey Hall of Fame moved to lavishly refurbished new quarters on the occasion of its 50th anniversary. The new Hockey Hall is located in Toronto's well-traveled, downtown commercial core. It's part of an ambitious new development—BCE Place—which includes the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, the Canadian Business Hall of Fame, corporate offices, chic restaurants, and a mall of retail outlets. It's located within a few minutes' walk of theaters, cinemas, other restaurants, and the SkyDome, the recently privatized sports and entertainment center. As urban geographer David Harvey has observed, with the waning of the fordist economy, cities have been transformed from centers of production to focal points of consumption organized around an immense "accumulation of spectacles."[6] The new Hockey Hall in Toronto is a successful example. It's not only for sports buffs. The most prestsigious exhibit—the plaques honoring the inducted members and the NHL's trophies—is mounted beneath a

brilliant stained-glass dome in a beautifully restored, neoclassical nineteenth-century bank building, a treat for any tourist or museum goer, especially one interested in the history of commercial architecture. As befits the sport's most revered trophy, the Stanley Cup is displayed in the vault. The other exhibits blend into the shops and coffee bars of the mall below.

National and transnational corporations have eclipsed the public sector as the Hall's principal sponsors. Some of them have purchased exhibit names: there is the "Bell Great Hall," the "Coca-Cola Rink Zone," the "Esso Theater," the "Ford North American Zone," and the "TSN/RDS Broadcast Zone." Sponsorship logos and ads blend seamlessly with historical material. Like the NHL itself, the Hall is unabashedly commercialized—appropriating the past not only for legitimation, but aggressive commodification and consumption. Just as rural Cooperstown evokes baseball's mythical roots in pre-industrial America, the new Hockey Hall reflects the frenzied urban rhythms and globalized, intercorporate synergies that have driven hockey's rapid growth. The visitor can only leave through the extensive gift shop, which seems like an exhibit itself, the souvenirs on sale include replicas of many of the Hall's memorabilia.

There are numerous, imaginative exhibits. There's a large cluster of cabinets that display the chronological development of rules, leagues, and equipment, cutouts of early star players, and press clippings, trophies, and memorabilia galore. There are sections on the great stars; the 26 arenas in use during recent seasons (including those in Quebec and Winnipeg, which have lost their NHL teams); the aesthetics of goalie mask design; and amateur competition and international hockey, including the recently established women's world championship. Despite their placement of textual material on clear plastic (difficult to read due to the overhead lighting), the curators are to be commended for their efforts to show the range of the game's activity and development.

What particularly distinguishes the new Hall from its predecessor, and the great majority of sister institutions that operate on shoestring budgets, is the number of interactive exhibits. There is a full-scale walk-in replica of the Montreal Canadiens dressing room as it was in the old Montreal Forum—"The Blockbuster Video Dressing Room Zone"—complete with both a game video and an interactive video that enables visitors to experience a simulated training room as well as access fitness tips. Most exhibits provide information via telephones, interactive video, and videotapes of games from the more than 40 years of televised play. I was comforted by how my childhood heroes stand up to today's scrutiny. In short, it's possible for men and women from almost every generation to relive moments of identification with the heroes of their formative years.

Whereas the previous Hall encouraged a stance of respectful, even detached, admiration with its well-spaced rows of solemn cabinets, the new Hall stimulates an energetic participation. Loudspeakers continually blare play-by-play from famous games, while lights turn off and on at regular intervals. The exhibits are jam-packed with photos and memorabilia, suggesting the shelves of a well-stocked supermarket. There's a simulated broadcast booth in which visitors can record their own narratives of favorite plays, and a mobile studio, complete with banks of

producers' monitors. Other exhibits enable visitors to test the speed and accuracy of their slapshots, or to try to stop a puck shot from a computer video—an especially popular attraction to the bus loads of schoolchildren who overran the Hall during my visit.

But after all the excitement, the Hall is a disappointing example of effective "public history." Information about the criteria and selection process is extremely vague. Honored players and the game's "builders" are presented as if chosen by divine intervention. Why are so few players from outside the NHL included, especially from the years prior to World War II when a number of other leagues (e.g., the semi-professional Canadian Amateur Hockey Association) were arguably just as good? Or why, as Alison Grifiths asks, is Marguerite Norris (whose teams won three Stanley Cups while she presided over the Detroit Red Wings during the 1950s) not in the Hall, while her much less successful brothers Bruce and Jim are both framed as "exalted members"?' In fact, why are women, who have played the game with distinction for over a century, so conspicuously absent from the exhibit? How did the reigning values and selectors of the period 1958 to 1962 shape the curators' choices? Visitors can only guess. Hardly esoteric, information about selection would contribute to our understanding of the development, power, and ideology of hockey's history.

In short, although visually attractive and rich in detail, the exhibits generally neglect to address the recent themes and debates in sport historiography. The "History Zone" is a textbook example of the "modernization" paradigm—rules, skills, competitions, and leagues spring up as if the expression of some magical logic, without human agents, outside economies, and social structures.[8] We learn nothing about the underlying National Policy economy that gave English-speaking mercantile Montrealers their century-long domination of the game, and little about the commercial, ideological, national, and regional challenges to its hegemony. Nor is any light shed on the refusal of post World War II Canadian hockey elites to follow the path of British soccer and American baseball so as to negotiate an accommodation between amateurism and professionalism. In the estimation of Alan Metcalfe, that deep rupture virtually condemned the professional entrepreneurs to their continentalist path and, except for those in Toronto and Montreal, their own demise.[9]

There are other conspicuous examples of historiographical neglect. While the riot that greeted Clarence Campbell's suspension of the Canadiens' Maurice Richard late in the 1954-55 season is mentioned in a large display devoted to the "Rocket's" exploits, neither the text nor the accompanying film footage tell the visitor anything about the tinderbox of late-Duplessis English-French relations that Rick Salutin and others cite as explanation.[10] Nor is there any reference, let alone analysis, of the continentalist dynamics that have enabled two new "sunbelt" franchises (Colorado Avalanche and Florida Panthers) reach the Stanley Cup final, while the proud hockey cities of Quebec and Winnipeg mourn the loss of their NHL franchises, and several others fear further franchise flight. Also not mentioned are the global transformations which permit the NHL to cannibalize the best of Russian hockey.[11] As a result, we're given not only history without structure

and power, but history without passion.

Understanding the "labor process" is essential to understanding the physical dimension of the sport and the owners' prospects for capital accumulation. Also important is an understanding of the reproduction of labor power and the obvious questions it raises about gender. Professional hockey built its wealth with some of the most abusive apprenticeship and working conditions in North American sports, and has tried to make a virtue of "brute force," masculinist codes of behavior. There are a few glimpses of this harsh reality in the Hockey Hall, such as the ill-fated 1925 strike of the first-place Hamilton Tigers, which is accurately summarized in the "History Zone." It's silent about the arduous path many take to become players (and the casualties along the way); recent labor-management disputes, such as the 1994-95 owners' lockout; and the players' relationships with others in their lives, especially the "hockey widows" mourned by Toronto songwriter and singer Nancy White. And there is nothing to tell visitors that the greatest players in the postwar era had to go to court to win the pensions that they had been promised.[12]

A diorama in the "Household Family Zone" depicts a harmonious nuclear family listening to the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation program, "Hockey Night in Canada," devoted to NHL games, but this, too, seems like mystification. While girls and women have no doubt contributed to the privileged place of men's hockey in most households and communities, it cannot be said that all of them have done so eagerly or willingly. In fact, many women maintain bitterly that male hockey served to marginalize their adolescent activities, and they resent the CBC's annual pre-empting of the national news for playoff telecasts to this day.[13]

To be fair, there is little mystification about the NHL's debt to the mass media. Paeans of praise are given to writers and broadcasters for their "great contributions" to the game. Fifty-five individuals are honored in the media categories; the only major writer who seems to have been overlooked is Stan Fischler, a perennial thorn in the NHL's side. But there is nothing to suggest that this relationship has been problematized by scholars for more than 30 years, as one component in the production and commodification of meaning by the "sport-media complex."[14]

The Hockey Hall is not typical of most of the 300 or so other North American sports museums and halls of fame presently in operation. But the issues it raises for the realization of a fuller understanding of sports in contemporary society can be posed in connection with them all. Even if other halls are much more open and rigorous about the selection process and much less integrated into the sports media complex, they represent established interests presenting partial views within a closed discourse of Olympian truth. No matter how well-meaning, their mandates commit them to approaches long abandoned by serious social and sport historians—Great Men theories of causation and all-knowing vocabularies of explanation. Given the stakes involved—the status of recognition for those directly affected, the marketing strategies all organized sports are forced to pursue in the neo-liberal political economy, and the revenues halls and sports museums must earn to ensure survival—they will find it difficult to act otherwise.

Given this political, material context, it's not enough to simply take our students to halls of fame to whet their appetites for history. We must also help them make better sense of what they encounter there. The Hockey Hall of Fame has its own educational program focusing on geography, history, mathematics, and language to draw students into the exhibits, but the approach is informational rather than analytical.[15]

Students should be guided toward a more critical reading of halls of fame. Incorporating postmodern social theory to frame field trips within critical classroom reading and discussion would enable them to sort out the distracting abundance of artifacts and stimuli encountered in such museums. Good teachers do this with films and guest lectures, but there's a temptation to switch into holiday mode with a trip to sports memory lane. The process of creating autobiographies, or micro-narratives, would enable students to discover and validate the meaning of hockey within their own lives, and to explore the relationships between their lived experiences and the interpretation of sports in society suggested by the Hall. Sociologist Carl James (among others) has employed this approach to help Afro-Canadian students navigate the contradictory pressures and expectations they receive from the hegemonic Euro-Canadian culture.[16] It could help many others make sense out of halls of fame.

Students could be helped to deconstruct artifacts. They could, for example, be challenged to analyze a single item in the display in terms of the cycles of production, distribution, consumption, museum display, and discard, and through identifying the meanings attributed to it by different groups of people. This approach was taken by curator Jeanne Canizzo in her controversial Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) show, "Into the Heart of Africa." She traced the radically different meanings given to African household utensils and decorations that were purchased (or simply stolen) as souvenirs by Anglo-Canadian imperialists, placed in middle-class Ontario drawing rooms, and then donated to the ROM for display as "artifacts."[17] While the overall presentation—and the ROM's public relations—were troubling, the method was highly instructive. Moreover, students could engage in visual literacy exercises developed around the sponsored exhibits and encouraged to prepare their own critical images, in the manner of the counter-ads about Imperial Oil and hockey developed by the Waffle (caucus of Canada's New Democratic Party) in the early 1970s, or the "adbuster" campaigns developed by Vancouver's MediaWatch.[18]

Hall of fame exhibits have much to offer the creative student and researcher, but it will take such extra work to effectively analyze the information presented there. At a time when the academic study of history is in sharp decline and "social or "cultural" history receives reluctant attention, these popular "texts" may well provide the largest number of people their most important opportunity to reflect upon the place of sports in the elaboration and unraveling of late capitalist society.

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1. A earlier version of this paper was presented to the North American Society of Sport History, Saskatoon, May 28, 1994. I am extremely grateful to Steven Pope, Brian Pronger, and Brenda Zeman for their helpful suggestions and ideas.

2. See James A. Vlasich, *A Legend for the Legendary: The Origin of the Baseball Hall of Fame* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Press, 1990).
3. Bruce Kidd, 'Brand-Name Hockey,' *The Struggle for Canadian Sport* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 184-231.
4. Eldon Snyder, 'Sociology of nostalgia: halls of fame and museums in America,' *Sociology of Sport Journal,* 8 (3), 1991, 228-238.
5. David Shoalts, 'Hall of Fame is packing 'em in,' *Globe and Mail,* June 16, 1994; and 'This is the House that People Built,' *Hockey Hall of Fame,* Spring 1996, 41-47.
6. David Harvey, 'Flexible Accumulation through Urbanization: Reflections upon "Post-Modernism" in the American City,' *Antipode,* 19 (1987), 35.
7. Alison Griffiths, 'Marguerite Norris: First Lady of Hockey,' The Inside Track, CBC Radio, May 21, 1994.
8. Richard Gruneau, 'Modernization or Hegemony: Two Views on Sport and Social Development,' in Jean Harvey and Hart Cantelon (Eds.), *Not Just a Game: Essays in Canadian Sport Sociology* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1988), 9-32.
9. Alan Metcalfe, *Canada Learns to Play* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1987), 223-4.
10. Rick Salutin, *Les Canadiens* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1977) and Jean R. Duperault, 'L'Affaire Richard: A Situational Analysis of the MontreaI Hockey Riot of 1955,' *Canadian Journal of Sport History,* 12 (l), 1981, 66-83.
11. These developments are insightfully examined in Richard Gruneau and David Whitson, *Hockey Night in Canada* (Toronto: Garamond, 1993).
12. David Cruise and Alison Griffiths, *Net Worth: Exploding the Myth of Pro Hockey* (Toronto: Viking, 1991).
13. E.g., Tanis Talbot, 'Hockey as a Symbol of Patriarchy: Welcome Home,' *Femspeak,* University of Alberta Women's Law Forum, January 1993, 11-12; I am grateful to David Whitson for drawing this poignant recollection to my attention.
14. E.g., Bruce McFarlane, 'The Sociology of Sports Promotion,' M.A. thesis, McGill University, 1955; and Sut Jhally, 'The Spectacle of Accumulation: Material and Cultural Factors in the Evolution of the Sport/Media Complex,' *Insurgent Sociologist,* 12 (3), 1984, 41-56.
15. 'Learning was never like this,' *Hockey Hall of Fame,* Spring 1996, 75-81.
16. Carl James, 'Negotiating School through Sports: African Canadian Youth Strive for Academic Success,' *Avante,* 1 (l), 1995, 20-36.
17. Jeanne Cannizzo, *Into the Heart of Africa* (Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum, 1989); cf Hazel A. Da Breo,'Royal Spoils: the museum confronts its colonial past,' *FUSE* (Winter 1989-90), 28-37.
18. Richard Gathercole and James Laxer, 'And now a word from our sponsor,' in James Laxer and Anne Martin, *The Big, Tough Expensive Job: Imperial Oil and the Canadian Economy* (Toronto: Press Porcepic, 1976), 159-178; and Media Foundation, *Adbusters,* 1243 West 7th Avenue, Vancouver, BC V6H lB7, Canada.