

Edmonton's Hockey Heritage

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Hockey, the Canadian specific, has been alive and well and living in Edmonton, for ninety-three years. The Edmonton Bulletin of November 29, 1984 reported that teams from both sides of the North Saskatchewan River had been assembled and a series of matches scheduled to be played. The Edmonton Thistles and the South Edmonton Shamrocks were to be joined in competition later that year by the nearby North-West Mounted Police team from Fort Saskatchewan. Such were the British Beginnings of the game that has formed a major social construct in the lives of Edmontonians.

Where are you if you go into a bar and there are pictures of the Edmonton Oilers on at least two of the walls? The answer to this 1986 question is, of course, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. The faces of Wayne Gretzky, Paul Coffey and Mark Messier peer at the citizenry not only from the confines of their favorite pubs, but from periodicals, newspapers, children's walls, shopping malls, and television screens. Poetry is written and plays are performed with the "Great One," Gretzky, as the focal point. The winning of a third Stanley Cup has become the mania of the media and the mob.

What has been the hockey heritage of this normally conservative western city? The prairie conservatism was to be discredited early, whenever hockey was the subject on the sidewalks of Jasper Avenue. The city centered on the strong 1908 challenge for the Stanley Cup by an Edmonton side, led by Lester Patrick, against the renowned Montreal Wanderers. A year later the talk on Jasper, Edmonton's main street, was of the chance that "our team" would have with those Ottawa Senators. Seven decades would have to pass before Lord Stanley's trophy could be justly claimed by a team from Edmonton. The intervening years between Stanley Cup challenges saw many hockey changes on the Alberta banks of the North Saskatchewan.

The Edmonton Gardens, constructed in 1913, was to be the hockey home of outstanding players and teams. Following World War I professional and amateur leagues flourished in Western Canada. The Edmonton Eskimos, with Duke Keats and Eddie Shore leading the way, were the equal of any team in hockey. The Edmonton Superiors, Imperials, Dominions, and the University of Alberta all had strong teams through the 20's and 30's. The Superiors were the best known and most successful of these teams winning provincial, interprovincial, and international honors. It would not be until 1947-48 that the Edmonton Flyers would win the Allan Cup, Emblematic of the Canadian senior amateur championship.

Junior, university, and college hockey have all had representatives from Edmonton who have been national champions. The Edmonton Oil Kings were one of Canada's great junior franchises. Norm Ullman, Johnny Bucyk, Bill McNeill, Ed Joyal, and Bruce MacGregor were all Edmonton junior stars of the fifties. The 1962-63 and 1965-66 seasons saw the Oil Kings win the Memorial Cup and become Canada's junior hockey champions.

The Toronto Maple Leafs and Montreal Canadians have, since the beginning of the National Hockey League in 1926-27, been the centre of Canadian hockey interest. The centre is moving west. If the masses continue to support the Edmonton Oilers as they have during the 1980s, the Leafs and Canadians will have to make room for Edmonton in the hearts of the Canadian people. Should this happen, it would be in keeping with Edmonton's hockey heritage.