

The Catholic Connection: French Canadians and Irishmen In Montreal Hockey, 1895-1917

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Ice hockey was not a major sport in the French-Canadian culture at the turn of the century. Lacrosse and snowshoeing were a long step in front of hockey as to their popularity and participation among francophones. But, quickly hockey became the dominant winter sport in French newspapers by the early 1900s. In the 19th century, hockey was solely an anglophone sport for the elite classes. But, new ethnic groups, particularly Irish, Italian and Jewish, soon got involved as players, and they formed their own teams.

Francophones did the same but they received the help of a particular ethnic group, Catholic Irishmen. The first Francophone players were Montreal college students, and the two major French hockey clubs drew their players from these college teams. Also, some top French players were invited to join the Shamrock Hockey Club which was primarily an Irish sporting club. This friendship lasted until hockey became professional, that is, until about World War I. In many ways, this friendship was well shown in some particular instances.

This paper examines hockey played in Montreal between 1895 and 1917. It shows how French Canadians began to play hockey along with Irishmen, and how the friendship between the two groups lasted so long as French Canadians were not fully involved in hockey. It is based upon research from Montreal newspapers of the time period. It argues that hockey was diffused from anglophone elite classes to francophones by an intermediate group, Irish students. Secondly, the friendship between Irish and French Canadians was viewed negatively by some anglo-protestant clubs, mainly those in the senior league, although most of the anglophone community didn't concern itself with francophone hockey performances before the creation of the Montreal Canadian club.