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Media, Nationalism, and Hockey: Fox's Glowing Puck as a 'Threat' to 'Canada's Game'

Through the 1980s and into the early 1990s the National Hockey League (NHL) was considered the “weakest” of the four major professional sports leagues in the United States, in terms of both popularity and revenues. This reflected the long-standing assumption that hockey was a popular sport in Canada but a regional sport in the US and was perpetuated by franchise location and a lack of a national network television contract through which virgin American audiences could be reached. To combat this and other problems, the League hired Gary Bettman as its first Commissioner in 1993. Bettman's impact was immediate: since 1993, sponsorship revenues have grown from twenty to two hundred million dollars annually, while licensing revenues have grown fivefold. In the meantime, Bettman secured the NHL's first substantive network television contract, negotiating a five-year, \$155 million deal with Fox broadcasting through the 1998-99 season.

Fox leapt headlong into its new role as network provider of NHL hockey, introducing many innovations to its broadcasts—such as animated mechanical robots—in order to entertain new and existing hockey fans. However, its most ambitious undertaking was to develop an electronic puck that created a glowing image when viewed on television and a “comet trail” when the puck was passed or shot over a certain speed. The \$3 million project was created to attract new viewers who had difficulty following the path of the puck on the ice, a project that was aligned with the NHL's interest in expanding its fan base to new markets.

The introduction of the “FoxTrax” puck was only one part of efforts to expand the NHL's audience. Expansion and relocation into new markets, and increasing league revenues were evidence that Bettman was achieving the growth that he had foreseen for the League. However, throughout this period of growth and change, other factors began to influence the professional hockey industry which have had less desirable effects. One was an increase in the disparity of revenues for different league clubs, which potentially allowed more financially lucrative markets to pay higher salaries and, in the long run, have more competitive teams. It was during this time that “small market” teams, or teams that did not generate the same gate and media revenues as teams in larger cities, began to emerge. With small populations exacerbated by a weak dollar and higher tax rates, many Canadian teams found it more difficult to compete for player services. This and other problems led to two Canadian franchises, the Winnipeg Jets and the Québec Nordiques, relocating to US cities in the mid 1990s.

To many Canadians these moves, combined with the decreasing competitiveness and financial distress of other Canadian NHL franchises, have become a concern. To them hockey, considered to be a “Canadian sport,” is being manipulated to meet the interests of foreign executives, television networks, and potential audiences in areas unfamiliar with “our game.” Thus, although established hockey fans throughout North America met FoxTrax with disdain, for many Canadians the innovation revealed a more serious undercurrent of insecurity over US influences. As FoxTrax was introduced, Canadians across the country were asked their opinions through surveys, polls, and call-ins. Instead of addressing the benefits or shortcomings of Fox’s new invention, many instead criticized those for whom FoxTrax was created—new (read: American) fans in new (read: American) markets. One survey by the *Edmonton Journal* revealed some of this anti-American sentiment:

“If those damn Yankees can’t watch a damn hockey game without having an electric puck, well they shouldn’t watch it at all.”

“I think the puck’s repulsive. It distracts you, and anyway Canadians can see the puck better than the Americans. What, are the Americans blind or something?”

This paper contextualizes the reaction of established hockey fans (particularly Canadian fans) to FoxTrax within the turbulent changes occurring in the professional hockey industry over the past few decades. To do so, it reviews NHL franchise newspapers, anti-FoxTrax websites, and archival sources, including those from the NHL and Fox broadcasting. The paper then discusses anti-FoxTrax, anti-American sentiment in light of other perceived threats to the “Canadian game” brought about by franchise relocation, the struggles of small market teams, acrimonious labor relations, and changes to the supply of labor. In sum, this paper adds to our understanding of history by providing a microcosm of recent issues associated with sport leagues, as corporate and media influences slowly position professional sport within a greater global entertainment firmament.