

SPORT AND PLACE

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L.A. Story: Historical Reflections on “Wayne Gretzky’s Los Angeles,” 1988-1996

While the topic of “Wayne Gretzky” (both the person and his celebrity iconicity) has received critical socio-cultural interrogation vis-a-vis Canadian national identity, Americanization, and globalization debates, his historical impact on the city of Los Angeles has gone seemingly unnoticed in academic circles. That said this paper focuses on the specific social, political, and economic ramifications of Gretzky’s trade from the Edmonton Oilers to the Los Angeles Kings from the vantage point of the city of Los Angeles. A specific focus is on three distinct – yet interrelated – events during (and after) Gretzky’s tenure in Los Angeles. The first area examined is his initial impact on Los Angeles’ ice hockey subculture directly following the 1988 trade. In the years that followed, a dramatic increase in the funding of local ice hockey arenas, in-line skating facilities, and youth/adult hockey programs was recorded throughout the Los Angeles County area. This increase directly affected the in-line skating market, at the time a relatively minor niche market in the US, and brought to the forefront the sport of hockey (ice, street, and floor) to many who had previously ignored or been unaware of its local presence. Second, I examine the Kings’ 1993 playoff success, which saw the team make its only appearance in the Stanley Cup Finals. The fallout from the Kings’, especially Gretzky’s, success during the playoff season not only cemented hockey as a viable commodity in Los Angeles (and, also, other warm weather climates such as Florida and Texas, which now boast teams of their own), but also directly influenced and gave rise to the popularity of the “Jim Rome Show” on XTRA 690am radio. While now syndicated in over 120 media markets, the “Jim Rome Show” was at that time a local production; the show gained national recognition due to its “insider” connection to the Kings/Gretzky and lofted host Jim Rome to a prominent role in national sports reportage.

Finally, I comment on the residual effects that Gretzky's 1996 trade away from the Kings has had on the city of Los Angeles. Most notably, I focus on the capitalization by Philip Anschutz and Joe Roski on the now 'visible' Los Angeles hockey community in order to construct the Staples Center, the new Kings arena. Situated among the shimmering skyscrapers, swaying palm trees, and open expanse of Los Angeles, the \$350 million Staples Center has come to be viewed as the premiere new-wave sporting venue in all of professional sports and, although built during the post-Gretzky era, is part of Anschutz and Roski's plan to rebuild and revitalize the downtown Los Angeles area. Coming to signify not only the opulence of L.A.'s sport scene in general, but also the overall image of Los Angeles as a "global" city, this final piece of the post-Gretzky imaginary raises salient questions as to public-private investment in local identity construction.

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Crabs in the Grey Cup: Baltimore's Canadian Football Sojourn

The National Football League (NFL) bestrides American professional sports like a pebble-grained colossus. From humble origins, the NFL charted a strategic corporate course, rising to its present state: unquestioned master of fall Sundays and Monday nights; sine qua non of sportswriters, networks, and fans; ecclesiarch of that holy Romanized American ritual, the Super Bowl. If there is one strategic imperative that underpins a half-century of NFL growth, it is the necessity to prevent, destroy, or assimilate any rival football league. Despite its mammoth stature, however, the NFL is not the only professional gridiron circuit, nor is it oldest professional football league. The evaporation of the rival United States Football League (USFL) heightened cities' fears that their fans would be left out in the game of football musical chairs. Perhaps it was inevitable that the Canadian Football League (CFL) would attract new scrutiny, even behind its Canadian curtain.

For their part, CFL leaders fretted over low attendance, poor television revenue, and waning Canadian interest. Several franchises made "Save The Team" ticket-selling drives into annual events. CFL directors wanted a change, and grew excited about