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Playing for the “*Bleu et Blanc*” or for the Habs: Ice Hockey and Québécois Nationalism

Jouer pour le « Bleu et Blanc » ou pour les Habs:
Hockey et le nationalisme québécois

Glen M. E. Duerr

Abstract

In 2005, former Bloc Québécois (BQ) leader Gilles Duceppe called for the creation of independent ice hockey and soccer teams for Quebec. As the federal representative for the sovereigntist movement, Duceppe was mainly trying to make a political statement. However, Duceppe was also trying to cast a vision of a future Quebec wherein its young athletes could aspire to representing Quebec in high-level international tournaments. As a result of situations like this one, the issue of Quebec nationalism, at times, has interlinked with the sport of ice hockey. Prior to the 1995 independence referendum in Quebec, for example, the *Toronto Star* newspaper compiled a hypothetical list of Quebec national ice hockey team players, including some of the biggest stars in the game at that time, such as Patrick Roy, Mario Lemieux, and Luc Robitaille. This article examines several different facets of the complex nationalist question, including the political uses of the Montreal Canadiens as a vehicle of nationalism, as well as international tournaments designed to give Quebec a place on the world stage.

Keywords: Bloc Québécois, hockey, nationalism, sovereignty

Résumé

En 2005, l'ancien Bloc Québécois (BQ) chef, Gilles Duceppe, a appelé à la création d'équipes de hockey sur glace et de football indépendants pour le Québec. En tant que représentant du gouvernement fédéral pour le mouvement souverainiste, Duceppe a surtout essayé de faire une déclaration politique. Cependant, il a également tenté de rejeter la vision d'un avenir où les jeunes athlètes pourraient aspirer à représenter le Québec dans les tournois internationaux de haut niveau. À la suite de situations comme celle-ci, la question du nationalisme québécois, à certains moments, est entré en collision avec le hockey sur glace. Avant le référendum sur l'indépendance au Québec de 1995, par exemple, le journal *Toronto Star* a compilé une liste hypothétique de joueurs de l'équipe nationale de hockey sur glace du Québec, y compris certaines des plus grandes stars dans le jeu à l'époque tels que Patrick Roy, Mario Lemieux, et Luc Robitaille. Cet article examine plusieurs facettes



complexes de la question nationaliste telles que les usages politiques des Canadiens de Montréal comme véhicule du nationalisme, ainsi que les tournois internationaux visant à donner au Québec une place sur la scène mondiale.

Mots-clés: Bloc Québécois, hockey, nationalisme, souveraineté

Introduction

1976 was a major year for both sports and politics in Quebec and the rest of Canada. Montreal hosted the Summer Olympic Games for the first time on Canadian soil. And although Canada did poorly in the athletic competitions by not winning a single gold medal, the games did provide a major boost to Montreal because the city was able to attract, and hold, a major sporting event on the world stage. The 1976 provincial election in Quebec was also held soon after the Montreal Olympics and, for the first time, the nationalist and secessionist Parti Québécois (PQ) won a majority in the National Assembly. On four occasions, including 1976, the PQ has won a majority, and, on two occasions, the party has held referendums on whether or not Quebec should become an independent country. Both referendum proposals – in 1980 and 1995 – were defeated. Given the desire to win more support from the electorate, the PQ has mobilized the issues of sports as a means to gaining greater backing. The idea of a “national” hockey team in Quebec is one that has gained some traction amongst nationalist leaders because, they believe, this step would be highly symbolic in the envisioning of Quebec as an independent state (CBC 2005). This idea has become an underlying strategy for leaders of the PQ, but also mainly the Bloc Québécois (BQ). On several occasions, the former leaders of the BQ and PQ respectively, Gilles Duceppe and Pauline Marois, in particular, promoted the possibility of Quebec playing international hockey – often citing the separation of the nations of the United Kingdom as a precedent because England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland participate in soccer/football and rugby as separate “countries” (CBC 2005).

The idea of a separate Quebec national team in hockey is the focus of this article. In essence, as illustrated later in the paper, many members of the PQ and BQ believe that the creation of Quebec sporting teams could shift the balance of Quebec voters, and lead to greater support for independence. Field research was conducted in Quebec in January and June 2010 through interviews with PQ and BQ leaders, including former BQ floor leader, Pierre Paquette, former MP and MNA, Daniel Turp, and former PQ President, Jonathan Valois, among others. Brief, informational interviews were also conducted with Gilles Duceppe and Pauline Marois. Their views help to show how strongly the issue of Quebec hockey is tied to independence.



The introduction of a Quebec national hockey team does not necessarily mean that “swing” voters will shift support to the PQ and independence, but it is a variable that could lead to political changes. Perhaps, like Bill/Loi 101, a Quebec national hockey team could placate some Quebec voters on the desire for cultural affirmation, whilst happily remaining within the Canadian model of federalism (Duerr 2012).

In the ensuing years since 1995, support for the PQ and the BQ has fluctuated. Overall, the issue of Quebec independence remains pertinent to politics in Quebec, even if it is less prominent than in the 1990s. The most recent provincial election, held on April 7, 2014, saw the PQ lose its minority government. The PQ governed from 2012 to 2014 under Marois, but was never able to mobilize support from other political parties like the centre-right, Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) to support independence. The CAQ supports more autonomy, and could change its position on the issue of independence in the future (meaning that it could align at a later date with the PQ in order to put forth a referendum vote), but did chose not to support the PQ on the issue of another referendum.

At the federal level, the BQ maintained a significant level of support; in every election from 1997 to 2008, the BQ obtained at least 37 percent of the vote in Quebec, including almost 50 percent in 2004. However, in 2011 and 2015, the party lost most of its seats winning just 4 and 10 respectively (Elections Canada). It is possible that support for the BQ could increase again in the future, though, if more voters are attracted to the idea of independence, via the creation of an international hockey team.

Given the political importance of hockey in Quebec, this article first provides an overview of important terms and debates within the sport of hockey that serve to frame the discussion and argument. The article then proceeds to examine the linkages between nationalism and sports providing context for the discussion of hockey and Quebec nationalism. Following this, the article specifically develops along three areas that have been contested by nationalists in Quebec: the creation of a separate Quebec “national” hockey team, which is supported by statements from independence minded political elites; the historic and contemporary role of the Montreal Canadiens in Quebec society; and the development of a separate Under-17 Quebec team. The article then concludes with a short discussion of these different issues in Quebec and the political nature of these issues.

Hockey

Although its status and role have been contested, ice hockey has often been described as “Canada’s game” (Holman 2009). Canada has done very well in international hockey competitions and is regularly expected to win any international event. Many of the



best professional players in the world have, historically, come from Canada. Canada won the famous “Summit Series” with the Soviet Union in 1972 (although the USSR did surprise the Canadians by winning several games). Canada regularly won gold at the Winter Olympic Games (at least before 1952 and after 2002) and won all but one of the five “Canada Cup” competitions held between 1976 and 1991. Quebec-born players such as Marcel Dionne, Mario Lemieux, and Guy LaFleur were pivotal to Canada’s success.

Canadian expectations of success have, however, changed a little since the 1950s with a surge of very strong national teams and players coming from the Soviet Union, then Russia, Czech Republic, Sweden, Finland, Slovakia, and the United States. Several of these countries have won Olympic Gold even with the inclusion of professional players from 1998 onwards, and the United States beat Canada at the 1996 World Cup of Hockey. Nonetheless, Canadians have historically produced the most high level players in the top professional league – the National Hockey League (NHL). Moreover, Canada has also exported numerous professional players to leagues across the world (Maguire 2011; Elliott and Maguire 2011). Other very strong professional leagues, most notably the Kontinental Hockey League (KHL) in Russia and in some surrounding countries, exist without many Canadian players. But, overall, many of the best players in the world are Canadian.

Like other sports, ice hockey has a world governing body. The International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF) is the governing body of the sport of ice hockey and oversees its member associations (Maguire 2011, 143). This means that in order for teams to play internationally, they must be recognized by the IIHF. The IIHF has 72 member associations and, like other major international sporting bodies, ranks the teams (see IIHF.com). For the North American fan, the IIHF is most notable for two reasons: 1) it is the formal host of many international competitions, and 2) the “international ice” is larger than NHL rinks. The IIHF takes on the same role as FIFA for fans of soccer in that it organizes the sport internationally, and sometimes makes decisions that either please or anger hockey fans.

The NHL is currently comprised of 30 teams across the United States and Canada, including the province of Quebec. The NHL currently features seven Canadian teams including Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, Winnipeg, Toronto, Ottawa, and Montreal. Winnipeg recently returned to the NHL in 2011 after a fifteen year absence and there is a movement to bring more teams to Canada (Huffington Post 2012). Other possible teams include: Quebec City, Hamilton, Halifax (Nova Scotia), as well as a second team in Toronto (perhaps in the suburb of Markham).

Given a confluence of the two main points made so far: Quebec nationalism and the love of ice hockey, it should be expected that nationalists would try to use hockey as a means of envisioning their political goal of creating an independent Quebec.



Politically, this is a possibility that Quebec nationalists discuss (Interview with former BQ President, Jonathan Valois).

This article continues by examining the interaction of nationalism and sports in the academic literature. There are very few sources that investigate the various ways that sports impact secessionist movements, so, in order to understand the possible effects of international hockey on Quebec politics, it is important to investigate what has happened elsewhere in the world with other sports that have similar levels of relevance to the culture of the society in which they are based. Nationalism can be mobilized in a range of different ways, which can affect politics in dramatic ways.

Nationalism and sports

The literature engaging two diverse subjects such as nationalism and sports has increased in recent decades in both volume and complexity (Renan 1882; Kohn 1944; Anderson 1983; Gellner 1983; Smith 1986; Hobsbawm 1990). However, it is important to start with a definition of nationalism. Nationalism can be defined in numerous different ways and much ink has been spilled in fierce academic debates over the definition of the term. Nonetheless, it is important to proceed with a definition in order to move forward with the relevant discussion of the connection between nationalism and sports in Quebec.

Nationalism is most succinctly described as a political principle in which the congruence of the national unit aligns with the political unit (Gellner 1983, 1). Nationalists in Quebec, for example, argue that their national unit (Quebec) is different from their existing political unit (Canada). A nationalist sentiment therefore exists because Québécois nationalists perceive that the political principle of congruence between national and political units has been violated. The nationalist movement in Quebec is therefore trying to replace the political unit of Canada with its own independent state. Of course, there are many people in Quebec who reject the idea of Québécois nationalism and they identify themselves as Canadians only, not québécois. Or, alternatively, some people in Quebec desire a degree of cultural affirmation within Canada, and identify themselves as both Québécois and Canadian.

Nationalism comes in a range of different varieties. It can refer to the ambitions of a country as a whole (such as the implementation of the Monroe Doctrine by the United States, or the rise of China in East Asia) or refer to national identity in both ethnic (this is most popular in East Asia at present, when national identity is most often conceived in ethnic terms) or civic terms (such as in the United States or Canada where citizenship, not ethnicity, is the most important factor in national identity). The ethnic/civic dichotomy is a debate that has long simmered in Quebec. Scholar



and former politician Michael Ignatieff, in his book *Blood and Belonging*, distinguishes between ethnic and civic forms of nationalism in a discussion of who can belong to a given country. The major point of contention is whether belonging is inherited (ethnic), or whether it is based on a person’s subscribing to the political creed of the country (Ignatieff 1993, xii–xvii). Liah Greenfeld, meanwhile, essentially equates civic nationalism with citizenship (Greenfeld 1992, 13). After a major debate in academia in the late 1990s, the dichotomy between ethnic and civic nationalism was either replaced in favour of “cultural nationalism” or jettisoned as unworkable because nationalism requires a level of ethnicity and cannot be fully civic (see Nielsen 1996; Yack 1996; Xenos 1996). In recent years, however, the distinction between ethnic and civic forms of nationalism is being re-examined. Journalist James MacPherson argues that a distinction exists in Quebec between ethnic and civic forms of nationalism, stating that the differences between the north and the south in the U.S. civil war have a significant resemblance to the divisions in modern day Canada (McPherson 2011). The present author investigated ethnic and civic forms of nationalism in a study of Québécois and Flemish nationalism by measuring ethnic and civic statements on five areas of public policy: economics, immigration, political autonomy, culture, and language, and found that nationalist parties, including the PQ, have a mixed record on an attempted transition to civic nationalism (Duerr 2012b).

Nationalism can also refer to sub-state groups, which effectively use nationalism as a vehicle to secede from their current national states. The case of Québécois nationalism fits into the latter category whereby some Québécois nationalists are trying to create an independent state and leave the Canadian federation. Thus, in the larger context, Quebec is by no means unique in the world – there are many subnational movements in both the developed and developing worlds. In the developed world, the debates in Quebec are very similar to those taking place in Scotland (Lynch 2005), Catalonia, and Flanders.

Nationalism has a strong connection to sports. Another well-known nationalism scholar, Eric Hobsbawm, wrote in reference to soccer that, “the imagined community of millions seems more real as a team of eleven named players” (Hobsbawm 1990, 143). This quote can be easily applied to the case of Quebec and the sport of hockey. Playing for the “*bleu et blanc*” – that is, for a team bearing the Quebec provincial colours – is a vision for the imagination which links the people of Quebec together through a “national” hockey team.

Statehood, though, is a theoretical concept. The goal of any sub-state nationalist movement is to create a new independent state. This means that the leaders of the nationalist movement have to envision a larger imaginary community that combines people who will likely never meet each other in person, but who feel a sense of the same connectedness to a political unit; indeed, the term “imagined community” belongs



to another nationalism scholar, Benedict Anderson, who argued that a nation is an imagined community because it links disparate people in a national unit (Anderson 1983). Virtually every country in the world – perhaps with the exception of some very small microstates such as Liechtenstein, Andorra, or states in the South Pacific such as Vanuatu – has this element of imagination in the community.

In general, international sporting associations tend to avoid politicizing sporting events. However, it is not always possible to avoid political controversies when they arise. For example, Major League Baseball, which runs the World Baseball Classic – a new tournament, which serves as baseball’s “World Cup” after its removal from the Summer Olympics, faced, and then succumbed to political pressure by the Chinese government over the participation of Chinese Taipei as Taiwan during the 2006 Baseball Classic (Duerr 2010, 191). Originally, Taiwan was included in the tournament, but this name was very quickly changed to Chinese Taipei after complaints from the Chinese. China considers Taiwan to be a renegade province and not an independent state. Taiwan, for many years, has tried to gain greater international recognition and a full position in the United Nations General Assembly. In a similar way, politicians in Quebec are trying to agitate for independence via international sports events such as the FIFA World Cup or international hockey tournaments. Institutional recognition by the UN is an important component of statehood because it provides diplomatic recognition; membership in FIFA is useful, but is not on par with UN membership.

There are also cases in which regions with nationalist movements use sports to mobilize for a political cause. In Croatia, for example, before the start of the Yugoslav Wars, a Croatian team played against the United States as if it were an organized international match – replete with national uniforms, anthems, and flags (Sack and Suster 2000, 308). The biggest issue, however, was that Croatia was not independent at that time and still part of Yugoslavia. The game with the United States played a role in promoting independence in Croatia. In the case of the Palestinians, this group has a football association and legally plays within the framework of soccer’s ruling body – FIFA. In some respects, the banal reinforcements of nationalism such as seeing a “national” team with a uniform representing millions alongside the national flag and anthem, has bolstered the political case of Palestinian statehood (Billig 1995; Duerr 2012a).

Nationalism through sports has an important purpose. The symbols surrounding sports, including the national flag, national anthem, and national team, all play a part in envisioning a country. Social Scientist Michael Billig argues that it is the banal representations of the nation such as a flag and a song that reinforce ideological habits (Billig 1995, 6). Banal nationalism revolves around every day reinforcements of one’s identity through an anthem, a flag, a military cemetery or a history lesson that buttresses political rallies in support of an idea like independence. The usage of



a “national” hockey team in Quebec would be highly symbolic in the envisioning of Quebec as an independent state and this is one reason, among others, why Hockey Canada has vehemently opposed any such move. There are significant reasons Hockey Canada cares about this issue. First, a Quebec “national” team would significantly weaken Team Canada. And, second, many of Canada’s top political leaders have ties – and interests – in the success of the national team. The motivation is also to avoid diluting the possible talent available to the Canadian national team selectors.

Québécois nationalism and ice hockey

In 1995, just prior to the second independence referendum in Quebec, the *Toronto Star* published a list of potential Quebec “national” team players. At that time, this included some of the top stars in the game, such as Mario Lemieux and Patrick Roy. The article, published in the *Toronto Star* on October 24, 1995 (less than a week before the referendum) by journalist Jim Proudfoot, outlined the potential of a Quebec national team at the 1996 World Cup of Hockey and the 1998 Winter Olympics in Nagano. The title of the article, “Team Quebec? A Definite Contender” was meant to note that a separate Quebec national hockey team would be very strong and possibly contend for top honours in global hockey tournaments. Amongst the players listed were some of the best players in the world – especially at the goalie position at that time with Patrick Roy, Martin Brodeur, and Felix Potvin. Relatedly, an independent Quebec national team, Proudfoot notes, would have substantially weakened the Canadian national team. This, for supporters of Canada, would have been quite detrimental, to lose several of the top national team players.

This article in the *Toronto Star*, in some ways, fueled the debate on Quebec’s independence in the lead-up to the referendum. The reality of an independent Quebec would affect the lives of Canadians in dramatic ways such as in government, in foreign affairs, and in taxation among others, but also in cultural and sporting terms by changing the face of hockey. It is mere speculation as to whether these iconic players would have been given the choice to play for Canada or Quebec, or would have been forced to play for Quebec or retire from international hockey. There were several precedents from the dissolutions of Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union, but given the relative rarity of state breakups, each case has some unique features, and it is unknown what would have happened if the second referendum vote produced a different outcome.

After the referendum vote was narrowly defeated in 1995, the issue of Quebec independence was relegated temporarily from mainstream national dialogue. Of course, for Québécois nationalists, the issue would be raised again, but it would have



been very difficult for the PQ to hold another referendum so soon after the 1995 referendum.

As time passed, however, the idea of a Quebec national hockey team continued to germinate. In 2005, former BQ leader Gilles Duceppe made headlines by more formally arguing that Quebec should have its own international hockey and soccer teams. As journalist Graham Fraser reports in a December 1, 2005, *Toronto Star* article, Duceppe argued that since England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland participate separately in soccer and rugby, but all belong to the United Kingdom, Quebec could do the same (Fraser 2005). In essence, Duceppe argued that England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland are not independent states, yet play separately from the United Kingdom. Based on the same principle of historical separateness, Duceppe reasoned, Quebec should be able to compete internationally as well. However, the counterargument to Duceppe is that the “constituent nations” of the UK formed separate football associations in the nineteenth century, and were then invited to participate – no parallel historic separateness can be claimed by Quebec.

Duceppe also tried to make the case for a separate Quebec Olympic team as a means of promoting physical fitness in Quebec. His comments were part of a plan to envision an independent Quebec in the minds of Quebecers in various ways – using a banal reinforcement of national identity and linking the imagined community of Quebec through hockey. Duceppe envisioned a separate government protecting the French language and Québécois culture, but also added the notion of Quebec’s best hockey players wearing blue and white jerseys and participating against the best national teams in the world at the Olympics and other major hockey tournaments. This would provide more people in Quebec a vision of what an independent country would be like, thus using hockey as a political tool in the envisioning of an imagined community (Anderson 1983).

Pragmatically, Duceppe’s vision is unlikely because the NHL and the IIHF are very unlikely to play a political role in hockey because a) there is, at most, very little history of political decisions, and b) international sporting organizations are often heavily criticized when they do venture into politics. For example, former FIFA President Sepp Blatter has been criticized for numerous stances that have been perceived as political – when he recognized Palestine as an independent state in FIFA, it drew significant protest (Duerr 2012).

This means that it is very unlikely that Quebec will be granted a perennial “national” team unless it becomes an independent state, or unless the Canadian hockey association with the tacit acceptance of the Canadian government also allows Quebec to play independently. This is also highly unlikely, though, because it has major political ramifications. Nonetheless, Québécois nationalists continue to consider the possibilities of leveraging hockey for their political agenda, mainly under the auspices



of gaining greater autonomy in the area of culture. Several interviews with BQ and PQ leaders highlighted the importance of Quebec gaining more autonomy on culture. For example, PQ MNAs, Carole Poirier and Daniel Turp, note: “The people of Quebec were so upset with the government of Canada, at the attitude of non-recognition, so we are going to petition for more control and gain some power on the issues of culture and communication” (Interview with PQ MNA, Carole Poirier on June 21, 2010 in Montreal); and: “We are going to create a campaign to the government to gain more powers in the areas of education, culture, the economy, and the environment” (Interview with former BQ MP and PQ MNA, Daniel Turp on June 24, 2010 in Montreal). Privately – or when discussing the issue after the formal interview – a number of interviewees noted how a Quebec national hockey teams could be very useful for the independentist project.

It is difficult to know whether the existence of a separate “*équipe nationale du Québec*” would serve as a catalyst for independence, or as a surrogate for separation. Perhaps the PQ and BQ would gain more votes, or, perhaps voters would look to other parties because their cultural identity was better preserved within Canada (Interview with former BQ President, Jonathan Valois).

Duceppe’s arguments also ignore the historical reasons for the separate participation of England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. The “home nations” played separately against one another in the mid-to-late nineteenth century when the rules of these sports were formalized and so their separate participation was grandfathered in when soccer became more popular. Essentially, England, Scotland, and Wales are separate because they were the first national teams to play the sport. Since England and Scotland played the first international soccer match in 1872, historic inertia was on the side of separateness (Beck 2013, 25). Moreover, the “home nations” were usually among the best in the early years of international soccer and playing as a unified United Kingdom team would have been very strange at that time. England, Scotland, and Wales dominated international soccer in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and even chose not to participate in the early World Cup tournaments because of a dispute with FIFA. But, perhaps most importantly, there was an assumption that the Home nations teams would dominate the competition – better to simply continue playing against one another.

Despite this clear distinction between the home nations of the United Kingdom and the case of Quebec, politicians who support the unity of Canada should not underestimate the importance of sport to nationalist aspirations. For example, as noted earlier, Croatia played a soccer game against the United States in 1990 in which the respective national anthems and flags were raised (see Sack and Suster 2000). For the Croatians, this proved to be a diplomatic victory in obtaining their independence, in part, through a soccer match.



Using logic in lines with that – namely, agitating for independence by mobilizing sports – Hockey Quebec has attempted to create a “Quebec Cup” in which Quebec would host France, Italy, and Switzerland in an “international” hockey tournament. Although the original plan was to create a tournament for 2011, which did not happen, other plans continue to simmer. The Quebec team would be composed of players born in the province of Quebec (*La Presse* 2008).

This “Quebec Cup” idea builds on Duceppe’s conceptualization of a national Quebec hockey team. The political imagery would be in place. Quebec’s blue and white jersey complete with the *fleur-de-lys* would provide a powerful visual image against other national teams, and, the arena would be awash in the flags of Quebec. It would, in some senses, be a political rally on the part of the PQ, just without the speeches.

The NHL in Quebec

“I was born and raised in Ontario, and what you notice is that I’m from Hawkesbury, which is just by the border with Quebec. But the reference for my family was Montreal, not Ottawa. We support the Expos, the Canadiens, and the Alouettes, not the Roughriders or Senators.”

Interview with former BQ MP, Richard Nadeau on June 21, 2010 in Gatineau

While Quebec does not have a national hockey team, hockey plays a major role in the identity of the average Quebecer. For many years the Montreal Canadiens were viewed as a mode of identifying with the French language, French-Canadian culture, and a broader French-Canadian identity. Although other teams have existed in the province of Quebec, the Canadiens were – and still are – the team that most French-Canadians identify with. In more recent years, the French-Canadian identity has been supplanted by Québécois identity, meaning that identity is not based on ethnicity and history, but on the territory of Quebec. Nonetheless, the Canadiens continue to carry the representative sense of Québécois identity in the sport of hockey.

The Montreal Canadiens – also known as *Les Habitants*, or the Habs – are the most successful team in the history of the NHL. The Habs have won 24 Stanley Cups, which is by far the most out of any team. Even after the post-1967 expansion of the NHL when the league grew dramatically, the Habs still won another 10 Stanley Cups (though only one since 1987).

Many young boys growing up in the province of Quebec dream of playing for the Montreal Canadiens. This sense of connection provides a tie to generations of hockey fans in Quebec that have rooted for the Habs. The desire to play for the Habs is also tied to Francophone identity in that the Habs have long been the one Francophone



representative in the NHL. In some ways envisioning and representing Quebec and a broader French-Canadian or Québécois identity has been met through playing for or supporting the Habs.

The Canadiens have a long history in the city of Montreal, having been founded in 1909. The Canadiens were originally formed “exclusively for players who speak French” and created to contribute to an ethnic base of fans for the team (Lasorsa 2011, 10). This ethnic identity for a team is very rare in the world, with a few notable exceptions including Athletic Bilbao, which plays in Spain’s highest soccer league, La Liga. Athletic Bilbao represents Basque identity within Spain and still refuses to allow non-Basque players to play for the team. The Habs, in significant measure, embodied the linguistic, social, and cultural struggle against English Canada and Anglophone North America more broadly.

In many respects, the rivalry between the Toronto Maple Leafs and the Montreal Canadiens best represented the larger societal issues in Canada. The two teams represent the cities of Toronto and Montreal respectively, the provinces of Ontario and Quebec, the duality of English and French languages and cultures in Canada, and, historically, Protestant and Roman Catholic religions (see Duplacey and Wilkins 1996). This is not uniform. For example, the St. Michael’s “feeder” Ontario Hockey League team of the Leafs has strong Catholic linkages (see Ryan and Wamsley 2007) and the Maple Leafs had several prominent Catholic players throughout its history, such as Frank Mahovlich (this divide along religious lines is no longer a major factor in the rivalry).

Games between the Maple Leafs and the Canadiens have long been about more than just hockey. The Toronto Maple Leafs continue to serve the role as antagonist and as the biggest rival of the Canadiens and, for decades, the rivalry provided a microcosm of Canadian society, even giving birth so to speak to Canada’s most famous short story (Roch Carrier’s 1979 tale “The Hockey Sweater”). The Toronto-Montreal rivalry presented notions of class, linguistic, and to some extent, religious divisions in the Canadian society. The cleavages in Canadian society have lessened through the Maple Leafs-Habs rivalry as the city of Montreal has become more equitable as French Canadians and then Québécois – including Francophones – have improved economically. [Tangentially, the Habs have other historical rivals such as the Montreal Wanderers (1903–1918), and the Montreal Maroons (1924–1938), which represented the Anglophone community in Montreal (Lasorsa 2011, 2), cultivating a hockey based Francophone-Anglophone split in the city].

Many of the most famous Quebec born hockey players, such as Maurice Richard, Henri Richard, Jacques Plante, Guy Lafleur, and Jean Béliveau, have represented the Montreal Canadiens and helped to build the franchise as a major part of French-Canadian identity. It is no surprise that Maurice Richard, for example, served as



a “figurehead” for French-Canadians in the relationship between Anglophone and Francophone Canadians. This was especially true when he was banned by NHL Commissioner, Clarence Campbell, when he suspended Richard for the final three games of the 1955 regular season and the playoffs over a very controversial fight with Hal Laycoe of the Boston Bruins. On March 17, Richard was suspended for the remainder of the regular and the playoffs for the earlier altercation involving Laycoe and a linesman on March 13. A riot ensued on the part of French-Canadians, who saw the punishment as too severe and an example of prejudice because of Richard’s French-Canadian heritage. There were demonstrations in the Montreal Forum, which ended in significant property damage. Most fans were angry at Campbell – an Anglophone – who handed down the suspension. In some ways, the Richard suspension mirrored the feelings of many French-Canadians in that they perceived a sense of economic and political discrimination on the part of the English-Canadian majority. This sense of historic animosity is not confined to the past, either. The Richard riot is so ubiquitous in Quebec culture that, in 2005, a major French language movie was released on the life of Maurice Richard, starring actor Roy Dupuis.

The Canadiens also had a provincial rivalry for several years. The Quebec Nordiques played in the World Hockey Association (WHA) from 1972 to 1979 and then were amalgamated into the NHL when the WHA was discontinued. The Nordiques continued to play in the NHL until the team moved to Colorado in 1995. The issue of an NHL team in Quebec City remains a major topic in the sporting and political scenes of Canada. Moreover, with the recreation of the Winnipeg Jets in 2011, there is increased expectation that a team will return to Quebec City.

And yet, for the nationalist cause, the Canadiens and Nordiques comprised one of the most antagonistic rivalries in the NHL from 1979 to 1995. The rivalry started, in part, because the Canadiens owner voted against the WHA team merging into the NHL. The Nordiques served as a natural rival for the Canadiens because of geography, but also because fan support and television money was drawn away from the Canadiens – no longer could the Habs rely on support throughout Quebec. The rivalry between the Canadiens and Nordiques eventually became known as the “Battle of Quebec” or “*La Guerre de la 20*” – referencing the highway running between the two cities (Harvey 2006, 41). Perhaps the most significant historical aspect of the rivalry was the 1984 playoff series between Montreal and Quebec City, known as the Good Friday Massacre because of the sheer number of fights during the six game series. Moreover, playoff series tend to be highly competitive anyway and are highlighted when rivals play against one another.

The Quebec Nordiques also played to nationalist sentiments in a way that the Canadiens never did. The Nordiques displayed the *fleur-de-lys* on the shoulders of the jersey (Harvey 2006, 41). This overt approach to symbols of Quebec



accentuated Québécois identity and provided symbolism for the province; in other ways, it provided symbolism for envisioning a separate Quebec as noted in the previous sections on the desire of nationalist leaders in the PQ and BQ to create an independent Quebec national hockey team. The subject of hockey teams in Canada – and specifically Quebec – has been another target of the BQ. As mentioned, former BQ leader, Gilles Duceppe, has argued that the Canadian government should support building a new arena in Quebec City in order to attract an NHL team back to the city. Duceppe argued that the city of Toronto received a lot of money to bid for the 2008 Summer Olympics and to host recent G-8 and G-20 Summits, so money should also be spent for sporting purposes in Quebec City (Wingrove and Seguin 2010). In the 2011 federal election, Duceppe’s BQ lost dramatically, winning only four of the province’s 75 seats. Duceppe lost his position as BQ leader and Member of Parliament, so the debate over Quebec hockey has dissipated a little. The debate has been further dampened since Pauline Marois, the leader of the PQ, is no longer the premier of the province of Quebec. But, construction started on a new arena for Quebec City (the New Quebec City Amphitheatre), in part, as a means of attracting an NHL team back to the city (TSN 2014).

Nonetheless, since the Nordiques moved to Colorado (in 1995), the Habs have once again maintained the role of representative of Québécois cultural identity through sports. The Montreal Canadiens continue to play an important role in advancing Francophone identity and this has been noteworthy with recent protests against the team’s interim English speaking coach for the 2011–12 season, Randy Cunneyworth, has reinforced this notion of support for the Canadiens and its linkages to the Francophone community. Former PQ language critic, Pierre Curzi, criticized Cunneyworth for his inability to speak French fluently. Curzi has also argued that the Habs do not have enough Francophone players and insinuated that this was a federalist plot to undercut nationalist identity through the Canadiens.

Despite the recent claims of Pierre Curzi, the Montreal Canadiens have, in many respects, served as the team that is most representative of French-Canadian, then Québécois identity, throughout Quebec (and amongst many within the rest of Canada). While other teams have rivaled the Habs either in the Francophone community or the Anglophone community, the Canadiens remain one of the most important NHL teams of all time. Québécois nationalists have at times tried to tie themselves to the Habs, and political leaders have tried to agitate for greater recognition for Quebec.



A brief glimpse of Quebec nationalism realized: Quebec Junior teams in international hockey competition

Even though it might not be full desire of nationalists in Quebec, the province does participate as an independent territory in one major ice hockey competition: the under-17 World Hockey Challenge. Canada, for this tournament, is split into five different regions: Ontario, Quebec, West, Atlantic, and Pacific. All teams are carefully named. Canada is used in conjunction with each team to avoid supporting an institutional separateness for any province or region. For example, the Ontario team is called “Canada: Ontario.” Quebec is called “Canada: Quebec,” which means that the team plays as a province of Canada, and not as a separate entity. Also, all teams wear the red and white jersey of Canada (provincial/regional names are on the back of the jersey), so it is clear that the young players are representing Canada, rather than wearing the blue and white of Quebec. Nonetheless, the Canada: Quebec team does play as a separate entity on the world stage. And, the Canada Quebec team has had some real success, winning the 1986, 1994, and 2006 tournaments (Hockey Canada). The team has not always been successful, but their occasional success does provide something of a victory for Quebec in that the Ontario team was defeated, and Quebec was able to compete against all other teams from around the world (Hockey Canada).

Historically, the under-17 tournament was fairly small in size and scope. In 2005, however, the tournament became much larger, incorporating five Canadian teams and five international teams. Since 2008, this tournament has become an annual event in the Christmas/New Year holiday season. It does not rival the World Junior Championships (World U-20 tournament), but there is some prestige in hockey circles for winning and many young players are scouted by NHL and other professional teams. The first edition of the tournament was played in 1986 and has been featured on and off on an almost annual basis. Hockey Canada organizes the tournament as a way to expose young players to better competition. However, it can also serve to institutionalize the separateness of Quebec on the international stage through ice hockey, at least in a rudimentary way (Duerr 2010; Duerr 2012).

When players move up to the under-18 age group, however, Canada once again plays as a united country. Symbolically, there is a unity here that Canada is one country made up of people from different provinces and regions. Quebec, therefore, has some sense of separateness when it comes to junior hockey, but this stops at a point when international competition strengthens and Canada has to use a united national team to play against the other top teams in the world.

Although this tournament is not a serious endeavor to create a Quebec national team, this is an example of Quebec competing on the world stage. As noted earlier



in this article, there are cases where some institutionalization of international competition has increased political demands and opportunities for statehood. While this team merely serves as a representative of a Canadian province, it does give Quebec a role on the world hockey stage. The tournament is widely covered by the media every year, but there has not been any coverage of this story from a political angle.

Conclusion

For Quebec nationalists, there are few occasions when the symbols of banal nationalism are on open display. A political event staged by the PQ and BQ, and parades during *Fête Nationale*, are rare opportunities to envision an independent Quebec. However, there is something emotionally powerful when seeing one’s national team play against others when the national team jersey is matched with the national anthem and the national flag. Often these banal reinforcements are honoured, but not considered too deeply by scholars and fans alike.

Hockey, for Quebec nationalists, presents a way of articulating a vision of an independent Quebec in which the territory can compete on the international stage against all other recognized participants in the Olympics or in world tournaments. For example, in a personal interview, former PQ MNA Martin LeMay notes this connection between sports and nationalism: “At the Olympics, what do you see? Flags and national anthems. In South Africa (2010 FIFA World Cup), what do you see? Flags and anthems. Nobody is ashamed of this reaction and we want to have the same.”

It is unlikely that Quebec will be granted any form of national recognition by the IIHF because of that organization’s general reticence to become involved in politics, nor the Canadian Hockey Association. However, a “national” hockey team in Quebec is often referenced by journalists and by political elites with the PQ and BQ. If the Quebec Cup ever comes to fruition this tournament could provide nationalists with a sense of vision, a vision of an independent Quebec, which they could show to others. The case of Croatia provides a powerful lesson here – but, it should be noted, Quebec and Croatia are two different cases because Yugoslavia was just starting its descent into ethnic conflict when Croatia played a soccer game against the United States, in part, to gain diplomatic recognition. A Quebec team may merely be seen as an example of autonomy in the same way that a representative team of Saskatchewan or Nova Scotia is; that said, there are no major movements for independence in either of these provinces.

Québécois nationalists also remain highly involved with the Canadiens. The recent criticism over then-coach Randy Cunneyworth and his lack of French shows that the issues of language and culture in Quebec remain strong political issues. The



Habs do not play a political role, but the team is often used as a representation of a wider Québécois identity. However, if a new NHL team returns to Quebec City, it could once again complicate the issue of Québécois nationalism and its relationship to the sport of hockey.

Politically, the issue of hockey in Quebec is challenging. On the one hand, the nature of Canadian federalism is such that each province should have some autonomy. On the other hand, allowing Quebec to play separately from Canada could well lead to a vision of separateness and then be used by Québécois nationalists to bolster secessionist claims. For many people in Quebec, playing for the Habs provides a strong sense of identity; the only question is whether this identity increased demands for a separate state for Quebec and the opportunity for its players to play for the *bleu et blanc*. Of course, the Habs are a business, not a political organization, but the lines between the two are often blurred.

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