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Hockey: A Global History

Stephen Hardy and Andrew C. Holman

Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2018, 582 pages. ISBN 978-0-252-05094-7.

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In *Hockey: A Global History*, co-authors Stephen Hardy and Andrew C. Holman take on the grueling tasks of fitting the history of a sport into a book that is neither an encyclopedia nor a database but a work that readers can consume and enjoy from cover to cover. The result of their efforts is a nearly-600-page volume that combines raw data with lively stories, providing a detailed but compact picture of hockey's history, spanning from 4000 BCE Egypt to the 2018 Olympics in Pyeongchang.

That Africa and Asia lend the frame to a book on hockey is of course quite unconventional if one considers where the game is most popular. After all, traditional hockey nations include Canada, the United States, Russia, Sweden, Finland and the Czech Republic (to mention but a few); but Hardy and Holman refuse to reserve their focus for them exclusively. Their basic organizing structure of choice is the chronological development of the game, which coincidentally reinforces the injustice in considering the sport merely North America's game.

The authors clearly illustrate that though the origins of hockey have been studied extensively, the findings have so far been inconclusive – despite efforts mostly driven by patriotism to present one single origin story as authentic. In retrospect, we see how fierce competition of various sorts have caused the game to change and morph constantly throughout the dominant hockey cultures. *Hockey: A Global History* points out the fascinating interplay of economic, cultural and political powers that have generated the game's dynamic process of deference and convergence between major hockey cultures. In other words, Hardy and Holman show how North America and the rest of the world influence each other's game, keeping it in constant change through the shifting dominances of major hockey powers on the international stage.

This complex representation of the interrelationship between North America and the rest of the world serves to debunk any claims of ownership over the game and to challenge all essentialist claims about this winter sport. While the authors admit that hockey really is a major identity symbol for Canadians, they also demonstrate



how futile it is to identify hockey solely as Canada's game. They provide a detailed account of how its genesis predates colonial Canada's inception, how its sources can be traced back to nearly all continents, and how its dominance is fading away as the USA and Europe are gaining more and more foothold in international competition and the player market in general.

This critical approach to the history of the game feeds the book's strong social focus. As part and parcel of its anti-essentialist social commentary, the discriminative overtones of organized hockey are discussed in detail. It is introduced as "a white man's game" (14). The exclusion of women and people of color is evident from the historical accounts the book presents. Citing numerous newspaper articles and organizational policies, the authors illustrate condescending attempts to acknowledge the presence of minorities. First Nations teams are shown touring Canada to play exhibition games for money, but are eventually deemed unfit for serious competition and therefore disappear from attention, while today's female players are introduced as seriously underpaid, lacking not only the resources men are provided but often even the necessary ice time to practice.

With an ever-present critical undertone in their writing the authors also illustrate the role of profit in the development of the game – a factor introduced as one of the primary drivers of progress. They present hockey as a potential source of wealth for the opportunistic: 14-year-old children are contracted by major league teams for the exclusive ownership of their playing rights, while certain leagues set large membership charges to let children become eligible to play.

Apart from the business aspect of the game's evolution, politics is presented as an important factor that keeps morphing the culture of the game. The authors provide a plethora of examples on how a certain style of play has been associated with constructed national characteristics to justify a sense of superiority in international political conflicts. The book juxtaposes the individualistic and aggressive style of capitalist North America with the creative, flowing team play of the Soviet side. This interplay between the game and propaganda is brought to the highest level when the authors describe the existence of the term *sossehockey*, short for "social democratic ice hockey," that is characterized by "disciplined, adaptable play, great skating and puck-handling" as well as strict team play (411). Of course, the absurdity of these ideas is instantly pointed out, and much more pragmatic – if much less entertaining – reasons are presented in their stead for international differences in styles of play.

The presentation and analyses of these social phenomena are the backbone of a book that makes is an important resource not only for those interested in the history of the game, but also for those who are interested in how certain social phenomena are reflected in a specific social sphere – in this case, sports.



Another dominant topic in the book is the formation of leagues and their interconnecting structures, which is presented in a rather encyclopedic fashion. It is more for the taste of the hockey scholar that enjoys taking history in the form of raw data, numbers, dates and sums. For that type of reader, the Index at the end of the book provides ample resources to find information from a very deep pool of data. The bibliography that takes up 80 pages of the 582 pages of *Hockey: A Global History* testifies to the tireless research the authors conducted, but is also indicative of the great accuracy and value of the book as a scholarly resource.

Despite this considerable effort for precision and quality, the book remains easily digestible, sometimes even colloquial as the use of terms such as the “dustbin of history” (33) and “the genie was out of the bottle” (165) might suggest. The style oscillates between colorful storytelling and the presentation of raw data, but it is balanced enough not to become dull. The visual illustrations are all relevant and carefully selected, but tend to gravitate towards the first half of the book, while the second half remains almost exclusively bare text.

In its title, the book promises to be a “global history,” setting expectations regarding its contents rather high at the outset. Although the potential for error is significant, the reader is not disappointed. The book covers all major moments in the history of the game, details its development promptly, and includes even minor hockey cultures in its narrative. Its greatest achievement, however, is the critical approach it takes in detailing the game’s cultural significance. By reading Hardy and Holman’s work, one is not only introduced to the history of a sport but also to major events in politics, the world of commerce and perspectives taken from social studies as well. *Hockey: A Global History* is a complex and well-researched book that deserves the attention of scholars, hockey enthusiasts and all others with an enquiring mind.

