

Hockey's still close to our hearts

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Globe & Mail

March 16, 2011

The Canadian media have been almost obsessed with hockey these past couple of weeks. Although global events have occupied some of our attention, domestic matters (namely Sidney Crosby's concussion and Max Pacioretty's fractured vertebra) have forced reputedly peaceful Canadians to meditate on violence in our unofficial national sport.

Do Canadians really care so much about the state of this game, or has media coverage exceeded public interest? It's a reasonable question. Canada is home to more and more immigrants whose hearts thrill to soccer and cricket. And the brawny men who populate professional hockey exhibit a form of masculinity that seems a little outdated: They look like hewers of wood and drawers of water (not to mention bruisers of flesh), while the culture around them has moved from country to city, from brawn to brains, from macho to metrosexual.

Are Canadians still connecting with hockey? In a word, yes. And the connection remains powerful. Environics periodically invites Canadians to rate the importance of various national symbols. Eight in 10 Canadians rate hockey as an important national symbol (close to bilingualism but way ahead of the Queen).

Hockey's persistence as a national symbol is not a result of "old Canadians" clinging to an increasingly irrelevant pastime. In a survey we completed last year, 49 per cent of those born outside Canada say they watch hockey at least occasionally, as compared with 64 per cent of those born in Canada. Immigrants disproportionately name team sports other than hockey as their favourites, but 24 per cent of immigrants cite hockey as their top team sport (putting the game in a dead heat with soccer, at 23 per cent). Seventy-four per cent of immigrants agree with 77 per cent of the Canadian-born that "hockey is part of what it means to be Canadian."

Canadians really do care about this game and how it's played. As for the issues being discussed - aggressive hits and a macho culture that implicitly tells players to "shake off" serious head injuries - Canadians are divided. More accurately, Canadian men are divided; Canadian women are mostly disgusted.

We asked Canadians to agree or disagree that "big hits make watching hockey fun." Men came out slightly in favour of this rock-'em-sock-'em statement (56 per cent), while 72 per cent of women disagreed. Similarly, men are split down the middle on whether fighting is an "acceptable" part of the game, while 73 per cent of women disagree.

Some hockey moguls might not fret too much about women, since middle-aged men are the core audience. But hockey would likely feel a chill if mom-driven mini-vans stopped ferrying the next generation of gladiators to the local arena at 4 a.m.

But even if those mini-vans went on strike, this game would live on in Canada. Although 26 per cent of Canadians (and 42 per cent of men) say they played organized hockey when they were young, larger proportions have played road hockey (49 per cent) or played on a frozen pond (36 per cent). These more informal ways of participating in hockey also appear more inclusive: Women and the foreign-born are much more likely to have played casually on pavement or a frozen lake.

It's these neighbourhood games - mythologized in television ads where Dad floods the backyard or Sidney Crosby shows up at the pond - that keep the idea of hockey close to the hearts of Canadians, even as many of us cringe at the excesses of the NHL's titans.

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