HOW CANADIANS COMMUNICATE V

SPORTS
To borrow a phrase from Richard Menkis and Harold Troper, sports are “more than just games.” Sports are about identity and belonging, about our place in the world and how we see ourselves. Over the past decade, the Canadian sports landscape has been dramatically transformed. We have seen the merger of “big media” and “big sports,” deepening globalization, a new wave of hyper-commercialism, the emergence of digital media as a mainstay of sports journalism, increased worries about concussions and brain injuries, and a fierce national debate about hitting and fighting in hockey. At the same time, active participation in sports is plummeting. For a variety of reasons, fewer young Canadians are lacing on skates, doing lengths at the pool, kicking a ball or swinging for the fences, or experiencing the thrill of competition. As the experience of playing sports grows increasingly remote, sports culture is more and more about our experience as fans—an experience that is largely shaped and defined by the media.

In this seismic shift, a great deal of the action is taking place far from the ice or the base paths. We are in the midst of a major battle by giant media conglomerates for control over sports entertainment. Worried that their cable empires will crumble under pressure from over-the-top broadcasters such as Netflix, Amazon, and YouTube, as well as from online piracy, companies such as Bell and Rogers believe that control over live content, specifically sports, will prevent the ravages of “cord cutting.” They also want to win the battle to broadcast games directly to phones and other mobile devices. Since sports programming draws the largest audiences, with viewers who are more likely to watch games to the very end as well as to watch ads, the stakes are enormous. As media conglomerates acquire ownership of sports teams, however, concerns have been raised about journalistic freedom, conflicts of interest,
as well as the creation of a self-perpetuating sports machine that endlessly promotes its own products. With so much at stake, the spin never stops.

But the battle over sports is also about governments and the degree to which taxpayers are willing to support elite athletes, pay for new arenas, stadiums, and recreation centres, and maintain a prominent role in sports for the public broadcaster, CBC/Radio-Canada. More critically, however, the battle is over the health of our population, the values that permeate our society, and the symbols that dominate Canadian life. In one way or another, each of the chapters in this book examines how contests for power and control play out in the domain of sports.

**WHY SPORTS MATTERS**

Sports are being altered by new developments that are changing the shape of play, the standards of athletic achievement, and the fan experience. Most fundamentally, the ways in which people communicate about sports and participate in the sports spectacle are being transformed. Inevitably, in Canada, hockey is the fulcrum of these changes. Fans attending a game fifty years ago would have had roughly the same experience inside the arena as fans do today—minus the jumbotrons, instant replays, rock music, and players clad in garb that makes them look like extras from *Road Warrior*. They would have been drawn to the game by the tribal loyalties of their city and region, including those based on religion and language—as, for example, when the legendary Montreal Canadiens faced off against their archrivals, the Toronto Maple Leafs. They would have gone to the game to see the great stars of their day—the Gordie Howes and Rocket Richards—and to watch a thrilling display of manhood, action, and fury. The following morning, they would have read about the game and viewed photos of the action in newspapers, heard the scores and descriptions of the game on radio, and watched film of the goals later that night on television.

And yet, if these fans could be transported to the present day, much of what they would see and experience would come as a shock. They would suddenly find themselves immersed in a dazzling world of multi-media platforms—a bewildering kaleidoscope of all-sports channels, league and team channels and websites, blogs, apps, national radio shows, YouTube videos, fantasy leagues, video games, and countless magazines, to say nothing of Facebook sites and tweets by coaches, players, and reporters. They would be stunned to discover websites such as NHL.com, where all of the information that they might conceivably have amassed in a lifetime of following hockey is instantly available. They would also be amazed by a
sports culture that never stops, that’s always in forward motion, and that includes millions of fans communicating with each other.

Fifty years ago, communications media were defined and limited by a specific technology. Newspapers competed against other newspapers, television networks against television networks, and radio programs against radio programs. Fans from that era could not easily have imagined a digital universe in which every medium has merged with every other medium and in effect become every other medium. They would be fascinated by smartphones, for example, which are not merely telephones but a gateway to newspapers and magazines, books, television programming, live messaging, and a seemingly infinite array of websites. Content is thus no longer bound by technological platform: everything is everywhere. They might also be surprised to discover that, as mentioned above, two major Canadian media conglomerates, Bell Canada and Rogers, now own sports franchises and, through their multiple media outlets and bundled content, compete for control over the dissemination of sports entertainment.

Our time travellers would be in for another shock. NHL teams, for example, are now populated by Swedes, Russians, a large influx of Americans, Czechs, Finns, and others, and Canadians are not necessarily the best players—nor is it clear that hockey is still somehow “our” game. They would discover that the entire world of sports has been globalized. Soccer teams such as Manchester United or Real Madrid, Formula One car racing, baseball players from Japan and the Dominican Republic, and mixed martial arts fighters from Brazil have entered the Canadian consciousness to an extent that would have been difficult to imagine half a century ago. Perhaps the most surprising change, at least to hockey fans, would be the rise of women’s hockey, and, more generally, the presence of women in the pantheon of Canadian sports stars. Even though sports culture in many ways remains guilty of sidelining female athletes and, at times, of reducing women’s bodies to sexual objects, many women athletes—whether soccer players, speed skaters, or wrestlers—have achieved fame and are lionized by fans. Men are no longer alone in a space that was once almost exclusively their own.

This said, one can argue that some dimensions of sport never seem to change—although they may take different forms. First is the need for spectacle. As ceremonial public events that attract mass audiences, spectacles bring people together in a shared experience, fostering a sense of group identity—of membership in something larger than oneself—and reinforcing societal values. Whether in the form of a national celebration, such as Canada Day, or a major sports event, such as the Olympics, the Super Bowl, or the Grey Cup, spectacles are primal, emotional,
and filled with memories. Sports events are spectacles par excellence, and specific sports—such as hockey in Canada—have come to be associated with national identity. When the eminent cultural theorist Roland Barthes first watched hockey, in connection with a documentary about national sports, he described hockey as quintessentially Canadian, remarking on its intimate link to the country’s climate and geography—the frozen waterways and icy climate from which the game emerged. The National Hockey League was founded in 1917, and it was NHL hockey, initially mediated by radio and then by television, that broke the isolation engendered by great distances. By celebrating hockey, one could not help but celebrate Canada. Watching hockey became an act of “Canadianness.”

In a country that spans enormous distances, has pronounced linguistic and regional divides, and has, since the Second World War, seen an enormous influx of immigrants from virtually every country in the world, creating common bonds has been difficult. Moreover, in its struggle to forge a national identity, Canada must share the continent with an economic, cultural, and entertainment superpower whose population is roughly ten times its size. In the face of these challenges, efforts to find unifying narratives and heroes have often foundered on underlying divisions. Politicians are rarely (if ever) permitted to achieve the prominence that would allow them to qualify as national leaders, and artists, scientists, public intellectuals, and literary figures seldom gain the degree of celebrity that is quite common in other countries. Canadians may not be familiar with painter Alex Colville or with writers such as Margaret Atwood or Mordecai Richler, but sports heroes are obvious and transcendent. This was certainly the case with the immortal Rocket Richard, whose modesty, muscle, and uncanny sixth sense about where the puck was heading made him a symbol of the aspirations of Québec society before the Quiet Revolution. Similarly, Gordie Howe, the hardscrabble prairie farm boy who fought for the puck as if he were at war, came to embody iron determination and physical strength. The exploits of other sports stars, such as Wayne Gretzky, Catriona Le May Doan, Sydney Crosby, Steve Nash, Georges St-Pierre, and Christine Sinclair, are part of Canadian legend.

Sport is about place and memory—about where we grew up and where we call home, about the warm experiences of childhood, and about our sense of belonging. It’s about deep attachment and loyalty: Saskatchewan Roughrider fans spending hours on buses travelling to games and wearing hollowed out watermelons on their heads, the Montreal Canadiens occupying a special place in the Québec imagination, and Maple Leaf fans, like Chicago Cubs fans, clinging endlessly to hope in the face of grim reality. Sport allows us to re-enter the worlds of play and childhood
and freedom. What could have greater power? But sport is also about nationalism. The playing of national anthems, the pageantry of flags and honour guards, the red, white, and blue bunting in US ballparks, the emblems and decals emblazoned on hockey and baseball uniforms, the honouring of heroes in pre-game ceremonies—all serve to reaffirm collective identity. The Olympics, in particular, provide viewers with the pre-eminent nationalist spectacle. As Harry Hiller notes in chapter 8 of this volume, the opening ceremonies of the 2010 Vancouver Olympics were watched by more television viewers than any other event in Canadian history, and the games inspired a phenomenal outpouring of nationalistic pride. Despite a tragic beginning, with the death of luger Nodar Kumaritashvili in a practice run, the subsequent convergence of massive TV audiences, patriotic ad campaigns mounted by corporate sponsors, triumphant victories for Canadian athletes, spontaneous celebrations in the streets of Vancouver, and the pride engendered by the successful organization of such a mega-event became part of national memory and created a sense that Canada was a pre-eminent country.

The question is, then, whether modern societies need what sociologists call “the ‘90-minute nationalism’ of the stadium” to stay together. Apparently, they do. Ira Wagman, in chapter 6 of this volume, describes the intricate efforts made to preserve traces of Canadian identity within professional sports. Import substitution rules in the CFL, for example, help to sustain the fiction that the CFL has an autonomous Canadian identity, rather than simply functioning as a testing ground and temporary home for players trying to make it back to the NFL. Wagman aptly describes the league as “a kind of athletic Tangier,” the Moroccan port that served for almost a century as a haven for people trying to rehabilitate their careers and reputations. One is tempted to argue that the place of Canadian franchises in their respective sports resembles Canada’s economic and cultural position vis-à-vis the United States: they participate in, but have little control over, the spectacle. Control resides at head offices in New York. Indeed, one might even ask whether Canada would have a significant sports culture at all if it weren’t for government support in the form of municipal tax breaks, provincial lottery money for professional sports teams, taxpayer support for hockey arenas and other sports facilities, funding for Olympic athletes through Own the Podium, a public university system that trains and showcases athletes and has produced a national amateur sports system, and a cavalcade of media regulations, including rules governing Canadian content that promote the airing of Canadian sports. While the universe of government support is amorphous and often confusing, if this government-supplied air were taken out of the sports balloon, the entire system might collapse on itself.
But if sport reinforces collective identity, it also satisfies psychological needs. Sociologists have written about the ways in which following sports help to liberate people from the constraints of daily life. Given family and financial responsibilities, workplace routines, and a nonstop parade of tensions and aggravations, few people experience the equivalent of a home-run blast, a breakaway, or a dunk, bomb, or sack in their own lives. Sport offers vicarious thrills and the opportunity for emotional release. We are allowed to whoop and holler as we watch upsets, unexpected plays, and games decided by the sheer luck of bad calls, goal posts struck, or dropped passes. Letting loose when the game is on is, moreover, a form of “bad behaviour” that is sanctioned by society. As soon as the puck drops or the coin is tossed, beers are popped, swearing is allowed, and violence can be cheered and admired. In addition, wearing team jerseys or painting our faces in team colours functions as a type of masquerade. We are allowed to become somebody different, at least for a little while.

By re-enacting the primordial battle between good and evil, sport also affords us the opportunity to revel in the triumph of justice. When our opponents lose a game or are crushed in a fight, we feel vindicated. Our symbolic enemies can be pinned to the mat, tackled, intercepted, or otherwise thwarted; they can stumble and fall or strike out or be sent off the ice. For some people, watching physical fights is especially invigorating. Analysts such as Jeffrey Goldstein, Jonathan Gottschall, and Steven Pinker argue that we are still close enough to a time of primitive survival to be innately attracted to violent behaviour and the skills needed to stay alive. As warriors and hunters, males display their masculinity by remaining fearless in the face of violence and danger; they cannot turn away or appear squeamish without marking themselves as cowards. In this sense, watching fights in hockey or collisions on the football field is part of the transition to manhood. At the same time, one must ask why spectacles of bloodshed and conquest still draw our attention. Some argue that it is through displays of violence that society contains and suppresses it. Others are not so convinced. Gottschall contends that “we are drawn to violent entertainment simply because we like it. We are not nearly as good or as civilized as we think.”

John Fiske offers yet another insight into the function of sports. Fiske began by visiting a call centre where workers were closely monitored at every point in the work day: the number of calls made, the average length of each call, the frequency of bathroom breaks, and so on. Fiske argues that sport reverses such power relationships and thus inverts the social order. Those who are being observed and quantified now have the opportunity to measure others. Football fields are laid out...
like ruled paper so that the results of each play can be measured. In baseball, every pitch, every foul ball, every walk appears as a number and becomes part of a statistical calculation of a player’s effectiveness.¹ (One has to love a sport where even top players fail to get on base 70 percent of the time.) In hockey, as Roy MacGregor points out in the opening chapter of this book, statistics are tabulated on every aspect of every minute of every game. As he points out, even though many of these statistics are meaningless, “a mass of numbers does compensate for the little column space required to explain the reality of most hockey moments: ‘Shit happens.’” Statistics lie at the heart of fantasy leagues, which allow fans to imagine themselves as general managers or coaches and to assume control of their own hand-picked teams. Fantasy sports leagues have become hugely popular among football fans, consuming vast amounts of their time and energy. Sports talk on TV and radio is all about being surrogate general managers, as is the world of sports video games. Such forms of participation in sports represent a transfer of control to fans, even if this power is superficial, momentary, and illusory.

Scholars have argued that high-profile sporting events, such as the Super Bowl, the Stanley Cup playoffs, and the Calgary Stampede, serve as public celebrations of the values traditionally associated with working-class men: emotional toughness, bodily strength, the ability to endure pain, and the physical power to intimidate others. As spectacles, such events thus work to re-inscribe masculine domination. Especially in an era in which blue-collar jobs are disappearing and men in white-collar professions often find themselves displaced from positions of power by women, sports allow males to reassert their claim to the dominant position in society. In Hockey Night in Canada, Richard Gruneau and David Whitson make a similar point about the role of violence. “The proposals to take the fighting out of hockey,” they write, “do not really threaten the game itself, despite what is often said in public forums. The ultimate threat, the threat that produces a recalcitrance to change, is the perceived threat to the maleness of the game, and beyond this to the place of traditional masculinity in a changing economic, cultural and gender order.” ⁶ Indeed, one of the most obvious developments in sport is that, with the possible exception of soccer players, athletes are becoming physically larger, sometimes to the point of freakishness. Moreover, despite the movement among parents to make sports safer for children, sports are arguably becoming more violent and brutal. For our fans transported from the 1950s or 1960s to today, the sheer size of the players would probably come as a shock. NFL linemen have reached sumo-sized proportions, and many, if not most, NHL defensemen now look like they could audition for Hulk. As for the level of violence, scientists have determined that
the hits that football players take during a regular game are equivalent to being in a series of car crashes.7 Hockey is now in the midst of a concussion epidemic that is changing the nature of the sport.

The need for ever more astonishing displays of physical prowess doubtless reflects the extent to which sports have become a spectacle driven by corporate profits and consumerism. Big sports, big media, and big business intersect with one another, and little room exists at this intersection for amateurs, minor leaguers, or local heroes. In Canada, sports channels, fantasy leagues, advertisers, journalists, and fans focus almost completely on the National Hockey League, the National Football League and the Canadian Football League, and Major League Baseball. No other sport, except on occasion basketball, is invited to the dance. The Olympics do, of course, showcase other sports, such as rowing, gymnastics, skiing, skating, volleyball, and swimming and diving, but only for two weeks every two years. MMA (mixed martial arts) has its own self-enclosed media and promotion systems, but, as popular as it is with fans, it still remains off the grid in terms of mainstream sports. Moreover, with the purchase of major sports franchises by the likes of Rogers and Bell Canada, Canadian sports are largely about corporate self-interest and self-promotion—and, of course, about profit.

Feeding the needs and fantasies of sports fans is an enormous business. Buying jerseys and other memorabilia, outfitting their kids or themselves with equipment, purchasing sports video games, joining fantasy leagues, signing up for cable packages, hoisting a few every now and then, and, when they can afford it, actually attending major league games together represent a substantial financial outlay for many Canadians. Part of what makes sports consumerism so lucrative is that being a fan is seen as good citizenship: not to take at least some interest in hockey, for example, is downright un-Canadian. At least among men, following sports is also the key to friendships and the entryway to everyday conversations. The irony is that, as the marketing of sports to the public becomes ever more prominent, actual participation in sports by Canadians has declined. As mentioned above, we now participate primarily as consumers and fans. Sport is something out of reach to ordinary mortals—a spectacle that occurs at a distance, mediated by screens, journalists, and advertising.

THE MEDIUM IS THE MONEY

The chapters in part 1 describe the role that money plays in creating and driving sports entertainment. Three essays deal with the effects of the takeover by Bell
Canada and Rogers (together with entrepreneur Larry Tanenbaum) of Maple Leaf Sports and Entertainment, which owns the Maple Leafs, the Raptors, and Toronto FC, among other franchises, and the consequences of Rogers’s breathtaking twelve-year, $5.2 billion deal with the NHL for broadcasting rights. It should also be noted that Rogers owns the Toronto Blue Jays, while Bell and Tanenbaum together own the Toronto Argonauts. The fallout in terms of journalistic freedom, the ability of fans to be critically informed about sports, and the future of public broadcasting is without precedent. The fourth essay in this section discusses fantasy sports, which are altering the manner in which millions of fans engage with sports and live the sports experience.

In the opening chapter, *Globe and Mail* sports columnist Roy MacGregor—one of the few journalists honoured with membership in the Hockey Hall of Fame—takes a scathing look at the conflicts of interest in which Canadian sports journalists now find themselves. Bell Canada, which owns CTV and TSN, and Rogers, which owns City TV and Sportsnet, now hold majority ownership of Maple Leafs Sports and Entertainment, as well as holding exclusive television contracts for a host of other teams and sports, including the CFL, curling, and soccer. Arguably, these arrangements make it difficult for journalists to report critically on controversial issues. To choose an obvious example: if a second NHL team wished to locate in southern Ontario, cutting into a market that the Maple Leafs feel is theirs, what constraints would journalists face? How fully could they express themselves? According to MacGregor, these constraints have tended to turn sports reporting into a game of trivial pursuit. When it comes to hockey, reporters could be commenting on issues such as the dangerous effects of concussions, the need for stricter legal sanctions against fighting, the wisdom of propping up floundering American franchises, the effects of a cumbersome and boring “grab and hold” style of hockey, and a season that has become far too long. But the NHL might not welcome such critical commentary, which also runs the risk of disturbing their bosses, so instead reporters hide behind minutiae. As MacGregor describes the situation, “So little storytelling—profiles of new players, in-depth reporting of real issues—is done by these sports networks that storytelling today exists more in memory than in reality. Instead, ‘news’ has become such matters as how a contract breaks down, how long a suspension might be, who is first with a trade rumour that may or may not happen.” The situation is even more acute for journalists who work for sites such as NHL.com or for local media that are perennial cheerleaders for their home teams regardless of how well, or badly, they play. The question for MacGregor is, “Will they criticize when criticism is due—even if that criticism is not wanted?”
Exacerbating the situation are new Web-based and social media such as Twitter that force journalists to be filing some sort of report all day long—taking note of everything from morning skates to comments heard in the locker room after a game. The need to be on top of every tweet and be ready for every radio hit means that journalists no longer have the time for the kinds of extended conversations, whether with players, coaches, or managers, that produce wider and deeper insights, honest exchanges, and great storytelling. It’s now all trivia, all the time, with journalists in danger of becoming PR agents rather than objective keepers of the public trust.

In chapter 2, Christopher Waddell echoes MacGregor’s concerns. Waddell traces the conflation of corporate media interests with sports journalism in considerable detail, noting that Bell Media and Rogers, with their TV, radio, cable, Internet, and smartphone services, have such a hold on Canadian media that only Shaw, Quebecor, and the CBC are now outside their grasp. The effect is to create a journalistic “hall of mirrors” in which the coverage that Canadians receive endlessly reflects the same images. The reality is that sports fans have little opportunity to step outside the hall of mirrors—that is, to see the world of sports from an independent angle. After describing a controversy involving a catcher for the Toronto Blue Jays and a commentator (and former player) on Rogers’s all-sports radio station in Toronto, Waddell asks: “Should sports fans care when the same conglomerate is the employer of the interviewer, of the ex-player baseball commentator, and of the player currently under criticism, as well as the owner of the team in question, of the station on which the exchange is broadcast and the rebuttal promoted, and of the stadium that hosted the player scrum (facilitated by the team it owns) intended to clear the air?” Waddell believes that these conflicts of interest will bedevil sports communication for years to come.

In the following chapter, Jay Scherer examines the fallout from Rogers’s mammoth broadcasting deal with the NHL, whereby Rogers acquired exclusive NHL media rights for twelve years (beginning with the 2014–15 NHL season). Scherer focuses on how the Rogers deal will affect the future of Canada’s public broadcaster, the CBC. For over six decades, the CBC has been home to Hockey Night in Canada, with the result that hockey has become integral to the CBC’s mission and identity. Although, in the wake of the Rogers deal, the CBC will continue broadcasting Hockey Night in Canada until 2018, Rogers will control all aspects of the program, including staffing, and will keep all of the advertising revenue. Moreover, the CBC will no longer be able to use the show to promote its other programming or the network as a whole. In other words, the CBC will be the broadcaster in name only.
While the CBC has the option of paying Rogers for the rights to broadcast HNIC beyond 2018, and while retaining the program has a certain symbolic value, the CBC has effectively been pushed off the ice.

Whether the network can survive without hockey remains to be seen. Hockey Night in Canada draws a mass audience, which has enabled the CBC to reach people who are not normally CBC viewers. According to Scherer, the simple reality is that “if the CBC were to retreat into catering solely to educated and ‘alternative’ tastes, the public broadcaster would largely disappear from the lives of much of the Canadian population, and political support for the CBC would further decline (which is exactly what CBC critics in the Conservative Party actively wish for).” And then there are the brutal financial realities. By some estimates, Hockey Night in Canada accounted for roughly half of the English-language network’s advertising revenue prior to the Rogers deal with the NHL. This money will disappear, although, at least in the short term, the right to continue broadcasting the program spares the CBC the expense of producing hundreds of hours of other Canadian-content programming to replace hockey broadcasts.

The French-language Radio-Canada lost broadcast rights to NHL games in 2002, but its integral role in Québec cultural identity and the popularity of its other programming limited the damage. In the case of the CBC, however, the damage will be difficult to contain. Given that the broadcaster has had to endure deep budget cuts, the amount of money that the CBC would have to ante up merely to purchase the rights to subcontract Hockey Night in Canada broadcasts beyond 2018 could cripple the CBC’s ability to pay for other programming, including radio, local content, and children’s shows, as well as news and drama—programming that stands at the very heart of public broadcasting. Under these circumstances, the CBC could easily become a kind of PBS North, a broadcasting charity operation with pockets of excellent programming directed to small, elite audiences rather than to Canadians as a whole.

In chapter 4, hockey blogger Derrick Newman explores another dimension of the relationship between sports and money. Sports and gambling have always gone together, but the Internet has spawned new ways for fans to follow sports and gamble at the same time. The explosive growth of fantasy leagues has come as a surprise to many in the sports world, although so far the growth is largely confined to a single sport, football—and in fact to a single league, the NFL. The NFL’s weekly schedule and its large number of franchises have made it ideal for fantasy sports: baseball has too many games, the CFL has too few teams, and hockey has yet to generate a similar wave of interest, although this could be changing. Participants create
their fantasy teams by cherry-picking players from different teams. As a result, the old link between fans and their favourite teams, while not broken, is now rivalled by multiple allegiances. According to Newman, NFL-based fantasy leagues are now so important that TV networks have altered their schedules in order to showcase players who are likely to be top fantasy choices, and fans now scour sports pages, blogs, and websites for any clues about injuries or changes to lineups. The plague of minutiae about which Roy MacGregor complains in chapter 1 is, in part, driven by fantasy fans, who want as much minutiae as they can get.

IDENTITY AND NATIONALISM

The second part of this book focuses on the relationship of sport to national identity. In a North American sports landscape dominated by the United States, it can be difficult to locate elements that are uniquely Canadian. In fact, to the extent that such elements exist, they are often the result of public policies deliberately designed to maintain a Canadian presence. In chapter 5, political scientist Duane Bratt offers a counterexample to the common complaint that Canadians blindly mimic American sports culture by examining the organizational structure and overall character of college sports. As Bratt notes, at least on the surface, the two sports systems have little in common. The American system of college sports is rooted in two factors that have traditionally distinguished American institutions of higher education from Canadian ones. First, many American colleges and universities are privately run. They receive little in the way of public funding and therefore need to maintain the loyalty of their alumni, who represent a crucial revenue base. Second, many of the leading liberal arts colleges and even a good many state university campuses are located in small towns that lack professional sports teams, making college sports the only game in town. As a result, American college sports have become big business and have acquired a far higher profile than is normally the case for Canadian college sports.

Canadians sometimes envy the extravaganza that American college sports have become, with their gala homecoming celebrations, their tailgate parties, cheerleaders, and marching bands, and their giant stadiums, as well as their generous athletic scholarships, millionaire coaches, and highly lucrative television contracts. Many of the best Canadian athletes in fact migrate to American universities, lured by scholarships and the promise of superb coaching. And yet the downsides of American college sports are equally spectacular. Critics complain about a costly athletic system that actually fails to make money for most schools and that encourages
a win-at-all-costs mentality that produces scandals and cover-ups—a system that also undermines academic priorities by consuming a disproportionate share of financial resources and drawing attention away from academic achievement and that generates less than impressive graduation rates for athletes. Although both the standards and facilities are undeniably superior in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), the Canadian Interuniversity Sport (CIS) system has its virtues. Even though Canadian college sports events are largely ignored by local media and attract relatively small crowds—the very opposite of spectacle—the Canadian system produces its share of high-quality performances and outstanding athletes. Moreover, at Canadian universities, professors are still typically paid more than coaches, stadiums are rarely the largest buildings on campus, and academic priorities have not been sacrificed to sports programs—at least not yet. As Bratt warns, before they rush to emulate it, Canadians need to think twice about the American system and about whether CIS is an element of Canadian culture worth safeguarding.

Maintaining a distinct Canadian presence in professional sports other than hockey is, however, a serious challenge. In chapter 6, Ira Wagman describes the policies that have allowed Canadians to maintain a slim toehold in professional sports. The CFL, for example, has created a complex system—much like the Canadian-content requirements in the entertainment industry—designed to limit the number of “imports” on team rosters. The basic requirements are, however, in themselves revealing. Currently, a CFL team is allowed a maximum of forty-four players, including three quarterbacks, who can be Canadians or non-Canadians. Of the remaining forty-one players, no more than twenty can be imports. In addition, a team is allowed two reserve players, who do not need to be Canadians. In theory, then, imports could outnumber Canadians on a CFL team. Moreover, marquee positions are often occupied by imports, while Canadian players can find themselves relegated to less glamorous positions at the back end of lineups. Similar rules govern professional soccer in Canada, where a small clutch of Canadian players can be found on team lineups.

Arguably, the CFL would actually be more attractive, and even more exciting, if teams were made up solely of Canadian players. Home teams could really be home teams, rather than consisting of a hodgepodge of players, many of them Americans hoping to move up to the NFL and thus waiting for a ticket to leave town. Absent this migrant labour force, CFL teams might be more grounded in their communities. In addition, an all-Canadian CFL might generate much more interest in college sports, because the CIS would now supply the league with most of its players,
as well as a stronger sense of local and national pride. But there is always a “but.” The fear is that, without an American presence, the quality of play would decline, and Canadians would simply cease watching CFL games. We seem to have convinced ourselves that a Canadian product can’t stand on its own.

Efforts are also made to “Canadianize” American sports broadcasts, largely through a practice known as simultaneous substitution. This allows Canadian broadcasters who have negotiated the right to carry broadcasts that originate on American networks to interrupt the American signal in order to insert Canadian commercials. For example, Canadians watching the Super Bowl on a Canadian network do not see American ads. Not only does this generate revenue for the network (from the Canadian businesses that buy advertising time), but it also gives Canadian audiences the impression that they are watching a Canadian program. While the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, Canada’s communications regulator, has made moves to end simulcasting, it faces stiff resistance from Canadian broadcasters.

In another form of simultaneous substitution, commentaries by Canadian sports analysts are inserted into broadcasts of non-Canadian sports events, such as World Cup soccer or March Madness. The theory is that Canadian commentators will “repatriate” these events by infusing them with a fresh and unique Canadian perspective. At the very least the practice generates employment for Canadians. In the face of American economic and cultural hegemony, as well as a sports environment that is increasingly global, efforts to preserve (or inject) something distinctly Canadian serve to remind us that, as Wagman puts it, “much of the cultural production in this country is compensatory in nature.” And yet, as he also points out, the issue of domestic versus imported, arising as it does in a myriad of contexts, ensures that space remains open for the discussion of cultural values.

In chapter 7, André Richelieu, one of the country’s leading experts in sports marketing, sheds light on another dimension of Canadian sports: the Québec experience. According to Richelieu, the Montreal Canadiens remain the premier sports brand in Québec and have become part of “both the identity and the identity-building process of young Québécois.” For decades, the team was able to recruit the finest players in Québec, and even its choice of colours—blue, white, and red—was a way of distancing the team from English Canada. The Bell Centre, where the team now plays, has acquired the status of “a temple where loyal fans gather to express their faith.” The faithful even believe that the team is helped by ghosts hidden in the rafters—the spirits of Howie Morenz, Butch Bouchard, the Rocket, Boom Geoffrion, and Jacques Plante, among others. Richelieu compares
the Canadiens to soccer clubs such as FC Barcelona and Glasgow Celtic, which have become national institutions that transcend sports. The team remains a “projection of French Canada in the world of hockey” despite the fact that, today, few players are Québécois and speaking French is no longer a requirement, even for team captains.

As Richelieu notes, the place of the Canadiens in the imagination of Québécois is magnified by the fact that, for all practical purposes, the team has no professional rivals. Québec City’s NHL team, the Nordiques, left for Colorado back in 1995; the Montreal Expos baseball team is now the Washington Nationals, and Montréal never had an NBA franchise. While Richelieu briefly describes various sports enterprises in Québec, from the Montreal Impact soccer team to the Montreal Alouettes to the Red Bull Crashed Ice teams that specialize in extreme sports, he views Laval University’s Rouge et Or (R&O) football team as the most interesting new development. The R&O frequently wins the CIS championship, often by stunningly large margins. In Richelieu’s analysis, the departure of the Nordiques from Québec City created a vacuum, and, now lacking a hockey team, the business elite threw their money and emotional support behind Laval. The R&O football team—the jewel in the crown of the university’s broader R&O sports program—is a recruiting magnet, attracting the top players, and boasts state-of-the-art coaching and athletic facilities, as well as sophisticated approaches to marketing. R&O sports clubs (thirteen in all) are autonomous not-for-profit entities and are co-managed, with both university representatives and local business people sitting on the board of directors. Other Canadian universities have begun to copy the Laval model, which, if widely adopted, will transform university sports in Canada. Richelieu concludes that, even though Québec’s sports culture has its distinctive features, sport provides Canadians with a “common language,” one capable of cementing relations between Québec and the rest of Canada.

The unifying power of sports, as spectacle, is perhaps most visibly on display during the Olympic Games. In chapter 8, sociologist Harry Hiller describes the unprecedented national effort that went into making the 2010 Vancouver Olympics an iconic event. As Hiller notes, Montréal hosted the Summer Games in 1976, and, in 1988, Calgary was home to the Winter Games—and in neither case did Canada come away with even a single gold medal. The Vancouver Games completely reversed the pattern: Canada finished with more gold medals (fourteen) than any other participating county. This success was due in no small measure to Own the Podium, a non-profit national umbrella organization created in 2005, with federal funding as well as support from the private sector, in order to prepare Canadian
athletes for the 2010 Games. In Hiller’s estimation, Own the Podium “was perhaps the clearest declaration in Canadian history of the role that high-performance sport via the Olympics might play in developing a more cohesive national spirit.”

But the Olympics were, above all, the pinnacle sports event for Canadian media, especially television. Canada’s Broadcast Media Consortium, led by CTV, provided almost round-the-clock coverage, with live coverage of the opening ceremonies attracting a staggering 23 million viewers, the largest TV audience in Canadian history. Audiences were bombarded by waves of patriotic advertising, also unprecedented in the history of Canadian television. Perhaps most remarkable, though, was the degree to which the Olympics inspired what Hiller describes as “a spontaneous expression of patriotism almost unheard of in the country before this event.” Hundreds of thousands of people thronged the streets of Vancouver, many wearing Canada-themed clothing, and watched events on giant screens, cheering athletes on and sometimes bursting into choruses of “O Canada.” Moreover, as Hiller observes, “the Olympics provided the occasion for many new Canadians to express their new national identity in public for the first time.” In short, the Vancouver Olympics well illustrated the role that media coverage of sports can play in symbolizing and reinforcing national identity. Canada did well at the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, finishing third in the gold-medal count, with TV audiences (especially for the men’s and women’s gold-medal hockey games) approaching Vancouver’s record numbers. But the Vancouver Games had set the stage in making the Olympics a showcase for Canadian nationalism and identity.

In the final chapter in part 2, David Legg turns to another Olympics—the Paralympics. As he notes, despite advances in public awareness, and despite the outstanding achievements of athletes with disabilities, an element of “freak show” voyeurism still lingers. The impulse is to “other” these athletes—to regard them, in fact, as somehow less than fully human—and thus to transform the Paralympics into spectacle of a different sort. As Legg points out, the battle for equity is far from over. Pointing to the impressive amount of British media coverage devoted to the London Paralympic Games in 2012, Legg argues that Canadian media coverage of the Paralympics remains inadequate. Increasing this coverage would go a long way toward reversing cultural biases and the habit of disrespect through neglect. In addition, we need to attend critically to the messages delivered by the media, which too often turn on themes of valiant struggle against some form of handicap. Instead, the Paralympics should be seen as an opportunity to provide people—most of whom will face some measure of disability as they grow older—with positive images and to introduce them to technological innovations that can help to
normalize the experience of disability. Rejecting the “disability” label, members of the deaf community view themselves as people who happen to use a different language. Similarly, the media could help to promote a new understanding of Paralympians not as people to be praised for their determination to overcome a handicap but simply as athletes whose bodies happen to be a little different.

HOCEKY NIGHT IN CANADA

Part 3 deals with the issues that emerge from what is arguably our greatest national spectacle: hockey. In chapter 10, Globe and Mail sports writer Tom Maloney describes the confluence of factors that created “the concussion discussion” in Canada, which began in earnest in 2010 and continues today. What is fascinating about the concussion issue is that while some news organizations, such as the CBC and the Globe and Mail, highlighted the issue, pursued investigations, and followed up with story after story, others went into hiding, apparently afraid to be seen—a kind of journalistic version of the witness-protection program. Maloney quotes Roy MacGregor, who has described the issue as “the global warming of hockey,” with the science on one side and a suspicious and reluctant hockey establishment on the other. Maloney points out that a number of circumstances came together to force the debate. Scientific studies about the frequency and pain of concussions—the “mysterious, frustrating dark fog of post-concussion syndrome”—and the dangers of permanent brain damage and even early death could no longer be ignored. But the scientific evidence might not have ignited as much controversy had superstar and national icon Sydney Crosby not been injured early in 2011, thus putting “a famous face” on the issue of the long-term consequences of repeated head injuries. The concussion debate was eventually joined by former Canadiens goaltender and hockey legend Ken Dryden, who wrote a three-part series in the Globe and Mail comparing the scientific evidence on concussions in hockey to scientific studies about smoking in the 1970s and 1980s. As he later told Maloney, “Fifty years from now, people will look back on us the same way. . . . All those big bodies colliding at high speed: how could they/we have been so stupid?” Dryden’s critique broke a psychological sound barrier, legitimating the issue and making it easier for others to join the discussion.

Maloney leaves us with a difficult question: How can hockey be policed and made safer when so much of the game is about manhood, intimidation, and crushing your opponents into the boards? Maloney believes that the debate has brought changes—and he suggests that more changes are likely, given pressure from parents.
and from news organizations like the *Globe and Mail*. However, countervailing forces may work against this pressure. Fights are, after all, part and parcel of the sports spectacle, and that spectacle is good business. Many hockey promoters, including representatives of the media industry, argue that fans demand violence. And, hearkening back to Christopher Waddell’s “hall of mirrors,” we must ask whether journalists will eventually lose their ability to speak out on big issues such as concussions.

Parents can speak out, however, and this is precisely what Janice Paskey does in the next chapter. A professor of journalism at Mount Royal University, Paskey is also a hockey mom, and she presents the choices available to parents who worry about their children suffering injuries and concussions in a sport in which hitting is arguably still encouraged and rewarded. Her essay is also the record of a battle that Calgary parents fought to bring changes to the rules governing body-checking in minor hockey. This account mirrors similar debates occurring in other minor hockey associations across the country. Paskey writes about the fears of young men who wish to play hockey and about a league that was reluctant to back away from values that it considered fundamental to the game. The result, in many cases, could be described as the rise of the soccer moms: fed up with the level of violence in minor hockey, mothers withdraw their children and enrol them in soccer instead. A survey conducted by Hockey Canada and Bauer Hockey in 2013 found that roughly 90 percent of Canadian families choose not to have their children play hockey. Safety was one of the four main reasons; another was that hockey just isn’t any fun for children any more.10

The other two reasons were time and cost. In chapter 12, Richard Gruneau offers a devastating analysis of the downward slide in sports participation in Canada, not only among adults but, perhaps more alarmingly, among youth. His main argument is that participation in sports, particularly at higher levels of competition, is increasingly beyond the reach of working-class families. As he notes, “research on participation rates by adults suggests a consistent pattern of increasing exclusiveness,” with participation correlating most closely with higher levels of education and income. In addition, family structures are changing. Sports participation is more common in two-parent families, but such families are becoming less common. Single parents, the majority of whom are women, must generally rely on a single income, and they are also very short on time. In the meanwhile, sports equipment, especially for hockey, has become increasingly expensive, while public finding for pools, community centres, and sports leagues has dwindled—leaving the costs to individuals. “Pay to play” is now the pervasive reality.
Costs have also increased as a result of the professionalization of amateur sports, aided and abetted by Canada’s introduction of a national coaching certification program in the 1980s. Sports clubs struggle to find qualified and committed volunteers, and many have turned to creating paid positions, an expense that is reflected in membership dues. Young athletes who show promise tend to be catapulted into elite leagues, where coaches are well paid and demands for parent involvement, as well as financial outlays, can be substantial. In sum, the increase in inequality that plagues Canadian society is cutting through the sports world with a vengeance. As Gruneau’s title, “Goodbye, Gordie Howe,” suggests, the era when a poor farm boy could make the NHL is fading—but not because of a lack of natural ability. “If a young male player these days isn’t from a family with enough resources to pay for power skating lessons, summer clinics, expensive equipment, and travel for league games and tournaments,” Gruneau pointedly concludes, “his chances of making it to the pros are slim.”

The professionalization of amateur sport is closely linked to the commodification of sport, which further underscores social hierarchies. In chapter 13, Peter Zuurbier extends Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of habitus—the mindset characteristic of a particular social class, as revealed in part by tastes in food, clothing, and cultural pastimes—to an analysis of hockey fans. Whereas once hockey was the great symbol of commonality, its commodification, heavily promoted by the media, has encouraged an ethic of consumption among hockey fans that serves to reinscribe difference, thereby reinforcing class distinctions. As a result, the capacity of hockey to create a transcendent sense of connection among Canadians has been weakened. As Zuurbier argues, fans differ considerably in the way that they experience, and thus come to “know,” the game. Those who have actually played hockey stand at the top of the hierarchy, followed by fans wealthy enough to buy season tickets and watch the action live and up close. Most fans, however, must view hockey games on television, in basements and bars—a mediated experience that takes place at a distance from the action. As these fans may also be unable to afford to play hockey themselves, their claim to status within the world of hockey often rests on displays of situated knowledge—assorted statistics, access to “insider” information about players and management decisions, and a wide variety of hockey trivia. Even the clothes worn on game night establish a spectator’s place in the ranking. Zuurbier’s analysis thus builds on Gruneau’s argument that, ironically, a sport whose fundamental ethos is based on hardscrabble working-class toughness has increasingly become a marker of social and economic privilege.
In the last chapter in part 3, Chaseten Remillard examines the communicative functions of hockey art from a new perspective. Scholars of hockey art have for the most part focused on its symbolic dimensions, particularly on its capacity to create an equation between hockey and national identity. Applying Walter Ong’s work on oral communication to hockey art, Remillard proposes instead that hockey art fundamentally serves a mnemonic function, much as do words in oral cultures. For example, by referencing iconic images from the past, such as the famous photograph of Bobby Orr suspended in midair after scoring a critical goal, hockey art can prompt us to recall important events and to forge connections between those events and the present. Other images are analogous to oral teachings, conveying practical knowledge about hockey, such as how to use the body during play, while yet other pieces celebrate the sport itself by depicting concrete objects, such as sticks and pucks. In the end, Remillard argues, by serving to preserve memory, hockey art establishes a sense of continuity between yesterday and today—the sense of history that is so integral to identity.

DRUGS, VIOLENCE, AND DEATH

The final section of the book looks at the dark side of modern sport—drug use, violence as entertainment, and death. In chapter 15, Glenn Ruhl of Mount Royal University provides readers with an insider’s account of the “athletes, misfits, family men, miscreants, scholars, circus freaks, boxers, midgets, and hucksters” who inhabited the twilight world of professional wrestling in the postwar era. Ruhl has an insider’s vantage point: his father, Dave Ruhl, was a wrestler who went on to become the broker for professional wrestling matches on the prairies during the heyday of vaudeville wrestling. Old-time wrestling was a world suspended somewhere between fantasy and reality, between fake punches and real emotions. Wrestlers created characters for themselves, clearly coded as heroes and villains, and audiences revelled in watching outsized bad guys pounded and defeated. As Barthes observes in his classic analysis of wrestling, “there is nothing more exciting for a crowd than the grandiloquent kick given to a vanquished ‘bastard.’”

As broker, Ruhl’s father not only arranged the matches, deciding who would fight whom, but also strictly enforced the code of insider knowledge, or “kayfabe,” that governed professional wrestling. The kayfabe code was intended to maintain the illusion that wrestling matches were genuine competitions, rather than staged events the outcome of which was predetermined. As Ruhl notes, however, it didn’t seem to matter to audiences how much of the fight was an elaborate pantomime.
More important was the fact that audiences wanted to believe it was real. And the spectacle served its purpose. The wrestling circuit brought larger-than-life stars to small towns, where they played out the eternal battle between good and evil and gave audiences what they wanted: a sense that justice had been done. As a sport, wrestling remains controversial, but the issue today is less whether matches are rigged. Rather, it is a question of whether, in the pursuit of spectacle, sport has descended into a brute form of entertainment.

The following chapter, by Bart Beaty, examines another “marginal” sport: mixed martial arts (MMA). As a sport that relies almost exclusively on revenue from pay-per-view television, Beaty argues, MMA “has come to be understood as a hybrid of sport and entertainment.” While MMA has roots in both professional wrestling and boxing, the sport has evolved into a smorgasbord of judo, jiu jitsu, tae kwon do, wrestling, boxing, and kick boxing. In the space of two decades, it has also journeyed from relatively obscurity to the centre stage of pay-per-view cable TV. In the process, the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC)—the principal organization that promotes MMA—has sought to legitimate the sport, moving away from its original boast that “There Are No Rules!” in the direction of the “pure sports” ideal that prevails in most competitive sports. As Beaty notes, whereas, at the outset, the UFC banned only biting and eye-gouging, “the use of third-party government-sanctioned athletic commissions to authorize bouts, conduct tests for performance-enhancing drugs, and impose penalties and sanctions has helped to bring credibility to a sport that was once termed ‘human cockfighting’ by Arizona senator John McCain.”

For quite some time the sport’s greatest star was Québec’s Georges St-Pierre, whose combination of athletic ability and a polite, soft-spoken manner had earned him a public image as “the squeaky clean, all-Canadian boy whose success is based on a superior work ethic,” as well as a cult-like following among fans. When, in December 2013, St-Pierre announced his decision to take time off from the sport, he had held the UFC’s welterweight title since 2008, successfully defending it eight times. Beaty zeroes in on one such defence: St-Pierre’s championship fight in March 2013, in Montréal, against challenger Nick Diaz, famous for his “bad boy” reputation. As Beaty points out, “By almost any ‘pure sports’ logic, Diaz had absolutely no claim to a title match. However, in terms of sports entertainment logic, pairing him with St-Pierre made perfect sense: Diaz was the consummate bad guy whom the hometown hero would definitively put in his place.” Whereas, in legitimate sports, teams or athletes earn their right to contend for championships solely on the basis of their athletic records, in sports entertainment the choice of contenders may
be governed as much (if not more) by commercial considerations. For example, “exciting” fighters, who promise to put on a good show, may be privileged over “dull” fighters who nonetheless have a stronger record, or promoters may seek to capitalize on a well-publicized grudge between two fighters. The goal is to sell “wolf tickets”—tickets that will be gobbled up by voracious fans. Beaty argues that, in its pursuit of legitimacy, the UFC has been obliged to negotiate the tension between the “pure sports” ideal and the need to create spectacle of the sort that draws paying viewers. As he points out, the fact that St-Pierre’s fight with Diaz was a huge commercial success should remind us that “sports entertainment is every bit as important to the sports experience as pure athleticism.”

But, as Beaty’s analysis suggests, the UFC extravaganza raises a critical question, one that concerns the demand of audiences for “excitement.” Even more so than hockey, MMA glamorizes violence and puts fighters at risk of serious long-term injury. And yet it does not lack for fans: the St-Pierre–Diaz fight generated an astonishing $60 million in revenues. Moreover, a pact of silence seems to exist within mainstream sports journalism that protects the MMA spectacle from criticism. What does all this reveal about public attitudes toward violence in sports? Even as we object to excessive risk in sports, do we also encourage it? This is, in effect, the question that Angela Schneider takes up in the next chapter, albeit in a different idiom.

Schneider examines what is perhaps the gravest offence in the sports world: the use of performance-enhancing drugs. Almost all of the stars of professional baseball of the past decade have admitted to taking such drugs, and the NFL’s rules are loose, to say the least. Schneider focuses, however, on another sport: cycling. Professional cycling has a history of drug scandals. As Schneider notes, the 1998 “Festina affair” led many to conclude that the subculture of professional cycling tacitly condoned the use of illegal performance-enhancing drugs. More recently, in January 2013, Lance Armstrong—a seven-time winner of the Tour de France who had for many years vehemently denied using drugs—finally confessed and eventually implicated others. But Armstrong is hardly alone. Doping has been endemic among cyclists, and teams have worked together to cover up the practice. When one rider confesses, others feel betrayed, and damage control is required to salvage the reputation of the sport. The cycle (pardon the pun) seems never ending.

In discussing doping among Tour de France cyclists, Schneider invokes the philosophical principle of charity, according to which we must make every effort to understand the reasons for an action before we judge it. Schneider thus poses a complex ethical question: given the pressure they face to win, can athletes justly be
blamed for using drugs? Even though cyclists are bound by honour to conceal the practice, doping is an aspect of the Tour de France widely acknowledged and even accepted by the French public. After all, spectators expect to see records broken—they want to witness superhuman feats of strength and endurance and ever more exciting displays of risk taking—and, eager to capitalize on the importance of the race to French national pride, promoters are determined to deliver. But, in the end, it is the athletes who are arrested and ejected from the sport. While no one argues that bans on performance-enhancing drugs should simply be lifted, we must ask ourselves why those bans are necessary and where the fault really lies. For many athletes, a few seasons of fame and financial reward are well worth the risks to their health and reputations.

The risk entailed in high-level competition was indelibly impressed on the public consciousness just before the opening of the Vancouver Olympics, with the death of Georgian luger Nodar Kumaritashvili during a training run. The tragedy prompted heavily publicized allegations that the track at Whistler was unsafe. Chapters 18 and 19 capture reactions to the tragedy from two vantage points: that of an athlete, luger Regan Lauscher, who competed on Canada’s team, and that of a media professional, Jeremy Berry. Lauscher writes poignantly about what it was like to compete at the Vancouver Olympics in the aftermath of Kumaritashvili’s death, amidst what she describes as “a dizzying whirlwind of media reports,” many of them pointing fingers at the Canadians, including the luge team. Allegations were rife that, especially in view of its extreme speed (it was, at the time, the fastest track in the world), the Whistler facility lacked sufficient safety features, such as padding on steel beams—in effect, that the track had been designed to magnify risk—making it far too dangerous for most athletes to compete on, all the more so if they were new to it. Reports also insinuated that Canada had not given athletes from other countries sufficient opportunity to train on the track, thereby placing them (perhaps deliberately) at a disadvantage. Lauscher argues that the luge run was fair, that Canada had followed the rules in allowing athletes from other countries time to practice, and that the track had passed multiple inspections by the International Luge Federation, as well as by other bodies. Moreover, Canadian athletes familiar with the track were in effect penalized when the starting lines were moved further down in order to slow the speed of the race.

The heart of Lauscher’s argument is that media reporting missed the real issues, most importantly “the issue of athlete eligibility for the Olympic Games.” As she points out, luge is an inherently dangerous sport, one that requires years of training and practice, and many countries do not have the resources needed to prepare
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athletes for Olympic competition on world-class tracks, most of which are located in Europe. “The Olympics are about competition between the best athletes in the world,” she writes. “They are not an open invitation event for all to compete.” At the same time, she notes, “as in any sport, international success in luge is the key to financial opportunity for nations that need to increase their budgets for technological research and development, for the acquisition of qualified coaching and support staff, and for the funding of five months of worldwide travel, training, and racing.” A very real pressure thus exists to send athletes to the Olympics even if they lack sufficient training—and the result of that can be tragedy.

Drawing on his own experience covering the Games as a journalist, Berry reflects on the media coverage of Kumaritashvili’s death. Berry agrees that the media seized on the contention that the Whistler track was unsafe and focused on criticism of the Vancouver Olympic Committee. But Berry also makes the point that the Vancouver Games were the first digital Olympics, noting that, for the most part, online reactions and commentary reinforced the “blame the organizers” perspective adopted by mainstream media. Moreover, users of social media generally do not share the ethical codes (written and unwritten) that have traditionally governed professional journalism. As Berry observes, “It is becoming harder and harder to separate traditional media from so-called new media and trained, ethical professionals from amateurs.” Almost instantly after the tragedy occurred, for example, a video of the accident went viral, and new organizations then had to decide whether to show the lurid video themselves—with CTV subsequently accused of indulging in “death porn” for continuing to air the video well after questions about the accident had been answered. Berry further points to changes in the media industry that conspired to impoverish the quality of reporting, from the plight of reporters who, during the Olympics, must cover sports (such as luge) with which they are unfamiliar to the pervasive reluctance on the part of news media to be seen as critical of the Olympics—the result, in part, of complex power dynamics at work among Olympic organizers, the Olympic Broadcasting Media Consortium, and host countries. The fact remains, however, that the media, having settled on a storyline, gave lugers scant opportunity or encouragement “to speak out and challenge the narrative.” As Berry concludes, “It is a sad irony that, when luge finally came to the attention of the media, it was only because someone died, and that made a good story.”

In the final chapter of the book, writer and literary critic Aritha van Herk describes one of the most thrilling and dangerous events in the Calgary Stampede: chuckwagon racing. Billing itself as “The Greatest Outdoor Show on Earth,” the
Stampede is Calgary’s annual civic spectacle, a grand celebration of the cowboy tradition. As the embodiment of the vigilante, “shoot-up” culture of the American West, the cowboy is often assumed to be a uniquely American icon, and it is tempting to oppose the cowboy to the Mountie, the great symbol of lawfulness and social order in Canada’s western expansion. In reality, however, southern Alberta was part of the “last Great West”—an expanse of territory perceived as empty that attracted a sizeable American immigration, including many ranchers and cowboys, in the late 1890s and the early years of the twentieth century. But as van Herk explains, the “chucks” have origins in the American land rush lotteries, in which prospective homesteaders would line up and then, when a starting gun was fired, race to stake out claims to particular sections of land, as well as in “the tradition, at the end of a long round-up, of cooks racing one another to the nearest saloon for a drink.” It was the American promoter Guy Weadick, generally regarded as the founder of the Calgary Stampede, who, in search of an event that would thrill audiences, hit on the idea of chuckwagon racing—a knife’s-edge spectacle that is all about “staring at mortality, the possibility of death always hovering, the thunder of hooves an apocalypse.” In the chucks, a thin line exists between triumph and disaster—between winning prize money and ending up face down in the dirt.

I must admit to owning a cowboy hat (black), rodeo shirts, and a bolo tie and having done my share of “stampeding” over the years. I am aware, however, as is Aritha van Herk, that horses are frequently injured or killed and that the breathtaking speed and aggressiveness of the chucks sometimes result in horrendous crashes. As van Herk notes, the equipment and the rules have been repeatedly changed in an effort to make the races safer, and, as valuable animals, the horses are well cared for, even pampered. All the same, chuckwagon racing is dangerous. Much like hockey and many other sports, the chucks celebrate and reassert traditional masculine values of physical strength, bravery, and hard work, as well as the drive to dominate not only others but nature itself. For van Herk, chuckwagon racing, with its “mysterious chaos,” enthralled us precisely because it reminds us that we live on the brink of death. It is, she writes, “a living anachronism, and yet indisputably performative, exciting, and at its best, beautiful.” The same might be said of sport in general.

The themes that run through this book—the commodification of sport and the role of the media in this process, threats to journalistic independence in the “hall of mirrors,” the importance of sports (especially hockey) to Canadian national identity and the struggle to maintain a Canadian presence in both the North American and the global sports environments, the decline in participation in sport among
ordinary citizens and their children, the seemingly essential link of sport to violence and reaffirmations of masculinity, the human need for spectacle—all reflect deeper, and troubling, social issues. At the same time, sports give us something to hold on to, to marvel at, to be loyal to, and to transport us far from our daily concerns. In a world of uncertainty and impermanence, sport takes us back to something basic—the power and beauty of the human body and the potential for physical triumph. In the face of the commercialization and professionalization of sport, however, as well as the growing confusion between athletics and entertainment, we perhaps need to ask ourselves whether we still fully understand what it is we’re cheering for—what message we are communicating.

NOTES

2. Jason Blake, Canadian Hockey Literature (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 30.
4. Gottschall, Professor in the Cage, 187.