Sport starts the conversation. It is indeed “one of the few social activities of human beings that can be recognized in virtually every community and culture around the globe as a vehicle for bringing people together.” As I quickly realized when I travelled in other cultures, if there is one topic that can break the ice, it is undoubtedly sport. Politics, religion, even family might be taboo in a conversation abroad. But the topic of sport has a marvellous power not only to get two people to talk to each other but also to bring people together and even trigger a sense of belonging. As Canadians, we have seen how certain sports have shaped and defined us in many ways through time; how sport has been and still is a platform for socialization, in small groups or large.

Canada’s Aboriginal peoples played a wide variety of games, including ring and pole, snow snake, and cat’s cradle, as well as games played with dice or with birch bark cards. In addition, of course, Canadian sport is indebted to Aboriginal culture for the lacrosse stick and the toboggan. The Scots subsequently played a major role in bringing British sporting traditions and activities into North America. Golf was played as early as the mid-eighteenth century, by some of General James Wolfe’s Scottish officers, and in 1807, after curling was introduced under similar circumstances, the Montreal Curling Club—the first such club in the country—was founded. Montréal was indeed the locus of developments in sport during the
late nineteenth century, a period during which Canadians stood at the forefront of the development and popularization of three major sports: lacrosse, hockey, and basketball. By the start of the twentieth century, various sports had already begun to undergo a process of professionalization and commercialization.3

By the end of the twentieth century, hockey had replaced lacrosse as the national game. The “Flying Frenchmen” of the Montreal Canadiens, with their legendary players and their twenty-four Stanley Cups, have marked Canada’s sport scene, but there is more to our sport pedigree than hockey. Montréal hosted the entertaining but (very) expensive 1976 Summer Olympic Games. The Alouettes, the Expos, the Laval Rouge et Or, Georges St-Pierre, and other teams and athletes have been part of the changes in the sport scene in both Québec and Canada. Undoubtedly, the province of Québec has been an actor in, as well as a stage for, the transformation of sport in our country. The purpose of this chapter is to draw a picture of the changing world of sport in Québec.

As the face of Québec changes, so does the sport scene. With this idea in mind, the chapter is structured into two main sections. The first deals with major sports teams in Québec and with the role the Montreal Canadiens have played, and still play, in Québec’s identity. The second section looks at changes in Québec society’s sport scene with a focus on the rising Université de Laval Rouge et Or sport organization and brand. The conclusion highlights the key points of the chapter and considers new horizons.

MAJOR SPORTS TEAMS IN QUÉBEC AND THE ROLE OF THE MONTREAL CANADIENS

The recent history of Québec has been marked by several professional sports teams, the most important being the Montreal Canadiens. In a recent study, Bernard Korai and I analyzed the cultural impact and the importance for francophone fans of the Montreal Canadiens hockey club, as well as the extent to which young Québécois associate themselves with the team as part of their identity-building process in comparison to their predecessors.4 What follows are the main conclusions of our research.

When the Montreal Canadiens were established in 1909, Canada was in the midst of a strong rivalry between anglophones and francophones. These tensions were exacerbated by the birth and growth of a French-Canadian nationalist identity. Francophones perceived the financial and political hegemony of their Anglo-Canadian counterparts as a threat to their cultural and linguistic integrity, and, for the most part, they opposed political dependence on either Great Britain or the
United States. In 1910, Henri Bourassa launched *Le Devoir* newspaper to promote Québec’s Nationalist League, which he created in 1903 to feed his battle against Canada’s Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier, whom he considered to be a sellout to the cause of “British Imperialism.”5

The birth of the Montreal Canadiens was an opportunity to strengthen the French-Canadian fibre. In *Canadians et Canadiens*, Michel Brunet details how the term Canadiens was used to distinguish francophone Canadians from the “other”—that is, anglophone Canadians.6 The adoption of blue, white, and red by the Montreal Canadiens was a way to emphasize their distance from anglophone Canadians and to claim, with a resounding voice, the French identity.7 Slowly but surely, the Canadiens became a projection of French Canada in the world of hockey to such an extent that the majority of its players were francophone.8 The Montreal Canadiens were therefore considered an emblem, a standard bearer for Québec’s nationalist cause. For Jean Grondin, “the Montreal Canadiens are a compensatory institution: their victories make us forget our collective and personal setbacks.”9

In this context, each of the team players, as a de facto ambassador of the French-Canadian “nation,” participated in the collective resistance against the Anglo-Saxon “enemy.” During a game on 13 March 1955, a violent altercation occurred in which Maurice Richard punched a linesman in the face. Following the incident, the president of the NHL, Clarence Campbell, suspended Richard for the remainder of the 1954–55 season, including the playoffs. On 17 March 1955, the presence of Clarence Campbell at the Montreal Forum provoked a riot that caused an estimated $100,000 in property damage; thirty-seven people were injured and one hundred arrested. The suspension and the riots that followed became the focus of Québec nationalist sentiment. It was only after Maurice Richard publicly acknowledged his error and accepted his suspension that tensions eased. French Canadians viewed his suspension as another proof of Anglo-Saxon socioeconomic oppression.10 Paul Rompré and Gaétan Saint-Pierre rationalize the deification of Maurice Richard this way: “For the Québec public, Maurice Richard, tenacious and indestructible, scoffed at by the opponents, the referees and the magnates of the NHL without scruples, was a supreme symbol of resistance to Anglo-Saxon oppression.”11 The Montreal Canadiens and Maurice Richard were, in this era (1950–60), as strong a symbol of emancipation and aspiration for French Canadians as Jackie Robinson was for African Americans in the aftermath of the Second World War in America’s Major League Baseball.12

Beyond the emotions and feelings that the team evokes on the ice, then, the club is, for the majority of French Canadians, an institution through which they
have been self-identifying for more than a century. Like the soccer clubs FC Barcelona in Catalonia and Glasgow Celtic in Scotland, in the province of Québec, the Montreal Canadiens are much more than a hockey team. The fervour has reached such heights that the team has been sanctified by the nickname “La Sainte-Flanelle” (Saint Flannel). The Bell Centre, the team’s arena, is considered by a fair number of French Canadians to be a temple where loyal fans gather to express their faith. These fans even believe that they can count on the presence of certain ghosts hidden in the rafters to help the team win.

It is this symbolic aspect of the team that has served as an anchor to create a strong Montreal Canadiens brand that nourishes itself, the connection with fans, and the myths and symbols associated with the team. Through the identity of the team—its name, logo, nicknames (Sainte-Flanelle, Habs, CH)—fans create a mental representation of a certain promise that the team strives to deliver through its performance on the ice and its media-friendly presence. During its history, the team has created a personality as a brand by cleverly using the intangible benefits (emotions and feelings of pride, social experience and entertainment at the arena, hope of winning the Stanley Cup again) and the tangible benefits (past championships, merchandise goods) offered to fans. This strategy has allowed the team to increase fans’ sense of belonging to the Montreal Canadiens’ brand and thus to heighten the level of trust, identification, and loyalty of these fans. This is now magnified with the Canadiens being the only NHL team in the province since the departure of the Nordiques for Denver in 1995 and the main professional sports club in Québec since the Expos moved to Washington, DC, in 2004. The Canadiens have capitalized, emotionally and commercially, on this near monopoly even though the quality of the product on the ice might have suffered because of a lack of strong local and regional competition.

This being said, our research shows that nationalist sentiments seem to be more moderate in the younger generation than in the older one. This may be explained by the fact that the respondents in our study, who were all between eighteen and twenty-five years old, belong to a generation for whom claims of identity and Québec nationalism seem to be much more toned down than in the generation before them. First, the experiential dimension appears to be increasingly important to young fans when they interact with the Montreal Canadiens, especially in the arena, where sport and entertainment often converge to become “sportainment.” Ironically, the increased entertainment at the arena came after an American, George Gillett, bought 80 percent of the club in 2001. (He sold it in 2009). Second, even though the identity of the Canadiens represents the primary connection between
young Québécois and the Montreal Canadiens brand, the club is the rallying point not only for Québécois but for Canadian hockey fans in general, since twenty-three out of thirty NHL teams are American and no Canadian team has won the Stanley Cup since Montréal did in 1993. We should also add that Québec society is similar to the rest of the world in at least one respect: through communications technology, travel, and university exchange programs, Québec youth are exposed to a continuous stream of diverse cultural influences in areas such as music, fashion, cinema, and art. Thus, while still embracing its own cultural symbols, a more open and confident society might be inclined to reject the sectarian nationalist current so dear to the hearts of the previous generation of separatist politicians. The results of a generalized form of social restructuring in Québec that occurred in the late 1960s under the Liberal Party ushered in a new era of change that celebrated the total demarcation between the State and the Church and considerably diluted the nationalist jolt of the 1950s. This so-called Quiet Revolution created an ideological fracture between the generations before and after 1960, a cultural gap that is very visible at the heart of the French-Canadian population through the relationships maintained between the younger and the older generations.

According to Patrick Vassort, the power of sport is so great that it transcends culture, history, and social mutations. In short, the Montreal Canadiens are truly a part of both the identity and the identity-building process of young Québécois. The team is an entity strongly tied to francophone Québec, which both feeds and is fed by the team because of the past and present symbolism associated with the hockey club.

However, this attachment to Québec should not obscure the fact that the Montreal Canadiens are, for many Canadians, one of the brightest symbols of Canadian identity, if only because of Canadians’ connection to hockey and to the success the Canadiens have enjoyed throughout the years in the NHL. Through the team’s evolution and the values that it portrays, the Montreal Canadiens aspire to be at once French Canadian and Canadian. This dual identity is not only generational; it is also a reflection of the Québec population’s general desire to keep its provincial belonging while claiming a Canadian identity. As some Québécois like to put it, “My heart says Québec, my head says Canada.” We think, therefore, that if the Montreal Canadiens continue to be a team with a large audience, it is surely because the team harmoniously embodies the Québec-Canada identity dichotomy, a dichotomy that is embodied in Québec society itself. We could even say that the case of the Montreal Canadiens highlights the recognition of major exogenous variables influencing the management of a sports team brand in the framework of increasing globalization and of people opening up their horizons instead of narrowing them.
Moreover, the identity of a team, and especially of a team brand, represents the foundation on which the club can position itself on the market vis-à-vis other sports clubs or entertainment options and can enable its managers to articulate a unique selling proposition (USP) that would lead to and sustain strong fan identification and fan loyalty. As several of the examples presented in figure 7.1 illustrate, however, and as we shall see below in the case of the Laval University’s Rouge et Or brand, too much emphasis on the commercialization of a sports brand can rob it of its originality and exclusivity, leading to its commoditization, in which it becomes so widely spread and used for commercial purposes that it ends up losing its prestige and value.

CHANGES IN THE SPORT SCENE IN QUÉBEC SOCIETY

According to Statistics Canada, immigrants represented 7.3 percent of Québec’s population in 1911, 8.2 in 1981, 9.9 in 2001, and 11.5 in 2006. As James Allen and colleagues point out in “Sport as a Vehicle for Socialization and Maintenance of Cultural Identity,” some point of attachment is needed to facilitate group solidarity when cultural practices, religious beliefs, and political ideology become more diverse. The authors refer to Durkheim, who described the shared beliefs of individuals, or the collective consciousness, as a vehicle for maintaining social solidarity and stability. Without this binding of individuals into a cohesive social unit, society would disintegrate and end up in chaos. We saw in the previous section the role of the Montreal Canadiens in this regard, but how does that translate in the context of Québec society today? Table 7.2 presents a quick sketch of how the face of Québec sports is changing. More precisely, this shift is visible in the rise of American-style football and in one sports organization, Laval University’s Rouge et Or.

THE RISE OF AMERICAN-STYLE FOOTBALL AND THE ROUGE ET OR

Football has been gaining in popularity in the province of Québec with the recent successes of the Montreal Alouettes and the football teams associated with Québec universities. The decade-long fall (1994–2004) and subsequent disappearance of the Montreal Expos created not only a strong disconnect between the baseball team and sports fans in Québec but also a rejection of professional baseball in general, at least for a period of time. Québec sports fans were looking for another summer pastime, and football gave it to them.
### Montreal Canadiens
- Founded in 1909, the club was one of the “Original Six” teams in the NHL.
- The Canadiens have won twenty-four Stanley Cups, most recently in 1993.
- Forty-four former Canadiens players have been inducted into the Hockey Hall of Fame.
- The team remains the major league team in the province of Québec.
- The Canadiens are part of both French Canadian and Canadian culture, despite repeated political recuperation attempts by Québec separatists.
- The team epitomizes the commercialization of a sports brand with the obvious threat of robbing its exclusivity to the point of “commoditization.”

### Québec Nordiques
- The Nordiques are the only major professional sports team based in Québec City in modern history.
- The Nordiques played in the World WHA from 1972 to 1979, before joining the NHL in 1979.
- The team played in Québec City until 1995, when it was sold and relocated to Denver, becoming the Colorado Avalanche.
- The Nordiques remain a huge component of the fabric and identity of Québec City, even close to twenty years after their departure.
- With the construction of a new 18,000-seat arena and struggles among some US franchises, the hope of bringing the NHL back to Québec City is more alive than ever.

### Montreal Expos
- The first franchise awarded to Canada by Major League Baseball (MLB), the Expos played their first season in the National League in 1969.
- Despite great teams filled with talented players in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Expos reached the playoffs only once (in 1981).
- In 1994, the Expos had the best record in MLB. However, a mid-season strike and horrendous management following the work stoppage jeopardized their viability.
- In 1999, art dealer Jeffrey Loria bought the club; in 2002, he sold it to MLB.
- On 29 September 2004, MLB announced that the Montréal franchise would move to Washington, DC. The team was renamed the Washington Nationals and won its first division championship in the US capital in 2012.

### Canadian Expos
- Founded in 1946, the Alouettes ("Als") became a highly successful team in the 1970s, with three Grey Cup titles in 1970, 1974, and 1977.
- Mismanagement led to a change in team ownership and a change of name (to the Concordes), and ultimately to its disappearance from the CFL, just prior to the start of the 1987 season.
- The current franchise moved to Montréal from Baltimore in 1996.
- When a U2 concert conflicted with a home playoff game in November 1997, the team decided to return, temporarily, to Molson Stadium in downtown Montréal. The game was sold out, prompting the team to relocate to the smaller venue for the 1998 season.
- The Als became one of the most successful teams in CFL history in the 2000s.

Laval University’s Rouge et Or, the University of Montréal’s Carabins, and Concordia University’s Stingers regularly rank in the top ten university teams in the country. In fact, the football boom in Québec received a great deal of press, since football was once perceived as an anglophone pursuit. The Montreal Alouettes played in front of sellout crowds for 105 consecutive games, a streak that lasted until the 2011 season. According to a comment on an Internet discussion forum, “Molson Stadium only holds 20,002 people, but when games are occasionally shifted to Olympic Stadium, crowds swell to 50,000+.”

Football is also becoming increasingly popular at the high school and university level. The number of Québec universities fielding football teams has now increased to six, and Québec-based college football teams are now considered some of the strongest in the nation. Laval hosted the Vanier Cup in 2009, 2010, and 2013. Laval University’s CIS team, the Rouge et Or (R&O), has established itself as the most dominant team in Canadian college football. The team played its first regular season in 1996 and has won the Vanier Cup (Canada’s university football championship) eight times, in 1999, 2003, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, and 2013. The R&O has a record of 8-1 in the Vanier Cup. A 2009 post on an Internet discussion forum suggests that “the number of kids playing football in this province [Québec] has swelled from something like 40,000-50,000 players 10 years ago to over 250,000 today.” The popularity of the Laval University team is living proof of this increased interest in football. The stadium where the R&O play, called the PEPS, “has held as many as 18,500 for a college football game.”

Because of this football success in Québec, discussions have now turned to a Québec City expansion team in the CFL, but three issues are slowing the process:

- The city lacks a professional, state-of-the-art football stadium (even though the Rouge et Or’s stadium is being upgraded as part of “Le Super Peps” project).
- It is far from obvious that popular success in university football would translate into commercial success for a CFL franchise.
- Two football teams, one in university and one in the CFL, competing for the disposable income and allegiance of fans would probably risk cannibalizing each other in a market of an estimated 700,000 people, especially since Québec City already hosts a junior hockey team (the Remparts), as well as several other sports entertainment options.

Beyond its successes on the field, the Rouge et Or has worked very hard in developing and crystallizing both fan identification and fan loyalty into what is now a brand in itself. It does this through managing its programs, building the personality of its brand, and using particular PR strategies.
Table 7.2  Major teams and sporting events in Québec today

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rouge et Or</th>
<th>Montreal Impact</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• The Rouge et Or began its first regular season in 1996. It has won the Vanier Cup eight times so far, most recently in 2013.</td>
<td>• The Montreal Impact is a professional soccer team that began its activities in Major League Soccer (MLS) in 2012.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Talks have now turned to a Québec City expansion team in the CFL, but would popular success in college football translate into commercial success for a CFL franchise?</td>
<td>• The club tries to build on the growth of soccer in the province, as well as on the popularity of soccer among immigrant communities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Two football teams competing for the disposable income and allegiance of fans would probably risk cannibalizing each other in a market of an estimated 700,000 people.</td>
<td>• In its first season in the MLS, the club barely missed the playoffs, making the playoffs the next year. In 2014, the team had a dreadful season, losing fans and raising questions about its long-term viability. Only one other Canadian team has ever qualified for the MLS playoffs to date (the Vancouver Whitecaps, in 2012).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Since the late 1990s, the number of youth playing football in the province has grown steadily. In 1992, Football Québec had about 8,000 members; now it has more than 35,000.³</td>
<td>• The pressure is strong on the Montreal Impact to perform well in the near future, since winning, or at least the hope of winning, is mandatory for Impact: soccer is big in Canada as a participation sport but not as a spectators’ sport.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Obviously, the success of the Rouge et Or has transformed the sporting club into an ambassador of Laval University, but it has also robbed it of its originality to the point of commoditization. There are pressures to exploit the Rouge et Or brand in response to the financial crisis, in general, and the educational crisis, in particular, in Québec.</td>
<td>• It is estimated that there are 200,000 registered soccer players in the province of Québec (out of about 850,000 in Canada, of whom 40 percent are female, according to the Canadian Soccer Association).</td>
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<tr>
<th>Extreme Sports</th>
<th>Québec Capitales and Trois-Rivières Eagles</th>
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<tr>
<td>• New extreme sporting events—such as rock climbing, snowboarding, tough mudder, the UFC, and Red Bull Crashed Ice—are gaining in popularity.</td>
<td>• The Capitales were established in 1999.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The Red Bull Crashed Ice is a mix of hockey, boardercross, and downhill skiing.</td>
<td>• The club plays in the historic Stade Municipal.</td>
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<td>• The UFC is gaining in popularity, in part thanks to Georges St-Pierre (GSP), a Montréal fighter who had successfully defended his title nine times.</td>
<td>• The Trois-Rivières Eagles began playing in the Can-Am League in May 2013.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• There is a slow revival of baseball in Québec now that mourning the loss of the Expos seems to be over.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Extreme Sports

• GSP, also known as Rush, has built a brand with a strong international appeal.

Québec Capitales and Trois-Rivières Eagles

• A return of MLB to Montréal is highly improbable in the short- or mid-term; the cost of acquiring a franchise and building a new stadium would be between US$600 million and US$800 million.


HOW THE ROUGE ET OR IS MANAGING ITS PROGRAMS

Sports activities at Laval University are the responsibility of the Service des activités sportives (SAS; see figure 7.1).26 The SAS’s R&O program was founded in 1950, when the ice hockey team officially adopted the Rouge et Or name. The Alpine Club was established one year later, followed by the men’s basketball and swimming teams. Since that time, several additional clubs have emerged, and others have been withdrawn from the program. In 1990, all varsity teams at Laval University adopted the same Rouge et Or name to provide consistency. Today, the R&O excellence program consists of thirteen sports—athletics, badminton, basketball, cross-country, diving, football, golf, rugby, skiing, soccer, swimming, triathlon, and volleyball—and the club’s cheerleaders, who work closely with the program.

The thirteen clubs are autonomous not-for-profit entities and are co-managed; members of the SAS as well as local business people are on the board of directors. “It’s not quite a public-private partnership, but it is very close to it,” says Gilles Lépine, director of the excellence program at Laval. The advantage of such a structure, Lépine claims, “is that the administrators feel that they are part of the club and are fully engaged in its management, even if it is on a voluntary basis.”

The R&O has its headquarters at the Pavillon de l’éducation physique et des sports (PEPS). The largest sport centre in eastern Québec, the PEPS has played a leading role in raising awareness about sport. Over the years, the R&O has become an emblem of Laval University and the entire region of Québec. Thousands of spectators gather to watch the Rouge et Or games, with the football, basketball, and volleyball teams having the strongest support. In the words of the former rector of
Laval University Michel Pigeon: “It is a great pride for Laval University to present one of the most dynamic aspects of university life: the elite sport. The R&O clubs reflect our reputation of excellence as a training facility. The success of our athletes at the provincial and national level says a lot about the quality of the environment in which they work.” The former director of the R&O, Gilles D’Amboise, adds:

The activities of the R&O take place in a context of high performance, keeping in mind the dual status of a student-athlete (i.e., student and athlete). . . . Moreover, in the midst of sporting excellence, it is also worth remembering the impressive contribution of the support services within the University, such as physiotherapists, statisticians, equipment managers, housing services, etc. All these elements complement the Rouge et Or clubs and allow the organization to perform within the university system.

![Diagram of Laval University's sport activities structure](image.png)

**Figure 7.1** The structure of sport activities at Laval University. Source: Adapted from André Richelieu, “Combiner gestion de la marque et relations publiques dans une démarche stratégique: Le cas du Rouge et Or de l’Université Laval au Canada,” in Sport et marketing public, ed. Christopher Hautbois and Michel Desbordes (Paris: Economica, 2008), 237–53.

**Building the Personality of the R&O Brand**

The R&O has undergone several transformations since 2005, not only in its operating structure but also in its brand strategy. The R&O executives wanted to make the Rouge et Or teams a driver of growth for the sports excellence program at Laval University. Thus, in 2005, a strategic review of the brand personality of the sports
excellence program began, of which I was a part. This review was subsequently used to introduce a public relations strategy.

This review was part of a long-term vision for the strategic development of the R&O brand and involved the first research study in Canada aiming to build a university’s sports excellence brand. The main goal of this study was to articulate the R&O brand’s identity or personality, which represents the foundations of a brand strategy (see figure 7.2). The research, conducted over a period of one year, from March 2005 to March 2006, consisted of a qualitative phase (focus groups) followed by a quantitative phase (a survey). The results helped define the identity of the R&O as a collection of sports teams, made up college athletes and students at Laval University.

Meanwhile, the five major attributes of the R&O brand were identified, in order of decreasing importance, as excellence, perseverance, sportsmanship, prestige (fame), and competitiveness. Other elements—such as the definition of spokesman (a current student-athlete), the animal most representative of the R&O (the lion), and the ideal geometrical shape (a star)—allowed the R&O managers to contemplate practical changes in connection with the logo, on-field jerseys, promotions, and public relations, as well as in the marketing of their products (see figure 7.3). Among other challenges was that of how best to capitalize on the success of the football team in order to grow the R&O brand while recognizing and respecting the qualities specific to each of the constituent sports clubs. In other words,
according to Gilles Lépine, the problem was “how to use the football locomotive without derailing the whole train.”

The goal was not only to crystallize the R&O brand in the Québec City area but also to expand it beyond the local market and make it a national brand. In this regard, the R&O worked on the following items: (1) transcending football while capitalizing on it, (2) promoting the uniqueness and coherence of the brand while recognizing and respecting the personality of the different sports in the excellence program, and (3) benefiting from the synergies among the respective images of the R&O, Laval University, and Québec City. Indeed, co-branding has become a strong lever for the R&O’s own promotion, especially as far as the recruitment of student-athletes is concerned. The R&O and its brand are a symbol of excellence that had to be enhanced and promoted beyond the PEPS to exploit its potential. How far should a university brand go in its commercialization without risking being commoditized? In an era when university rankings, the number of students per classroom, and other measures often make us forget that the primary mission of a

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**Figure 7.3** The attributes and symbolic associations of the Rouge et Or brand. Source: Adapted from André Richelieu, “Combiner gestion de la marque et relations publiques dans une démarche stratégique: Le cas du Rouge et Or de l’Université Laval au Canada,” in Sport et marketing public, ed. Christopher Hautbois and Michel Desbordes (Paris: Economica, 2008), 237–53.
university should be students’ learning, how does Laval University’s R&O manage to balance things out?

THE PUBLIC RELATIONS STRATEGY OF THE R&O

Following the study conducted on the brand personality of the R&O, a public relations strategy was implemented to enhance the brand image of the university sports brand and leverage it—for instance, to recruit students. According to Gilles Lépine, “The R&O is an instrument of promotion and recruitment of students. It is a leverage for the SAS (Department of Sport Activities), the R&O and Laval University. In this context, the study of the brand personality of the R&O nurtured the mission of the PEPS, justified our initial intuitions and made the R&O a true leverage for the PEPS and Laval University.” In fact, as Lépine also pointed out, “the more developed the branding of the sports excellence program is, the greater the sense of belonging for all parties involved (i.e., managers, employees, athletes, students, fans, etc.), directly or indirectly.” This is important—first, because each club of the R&O is a nonprofit organization managed independently, and second, because the R&O does not have the resources of a major corporation to support and promote the brand that it is trying to build.

A budget is nonetheless allocated to public outreach activities that aim to raise the profile of the R&O in the community, such as the distribution of posters and promotional items to students in schools and campaigns associated with the R&O brand that target the general public—posters on buses, for example, as well as advertisements in local newspapers and promotional initiatives directed as specific business and public institutions. These activities, according to Lépine, are part of “a roadmap that respects the personality of the brand and the five key values” identified earlier. Specifically, this strategy of promotion and public relations is closely associated with the launch of the campaign titled “The Relentless Pursuit of Excellence,” which takes the first attribute of the brand highlighted by the study and emphasizes it on promotional posters alongside a different star athlete.

A broad range of promotional activities have also been undertaken within the Laval University community itself. In addition to the launch of the “Relentless Pursuit of Excellence” campaign, these include:

• Unveiling of the “R&O Corridor” at the PEPS
• An R&O store at the PEPS
• Use of red and gold for jerseys and equipment of R&O student-athletes, with a star added on the jersey to underscore a championship win
• Use of press conferences, press kits, and brochures highlighting excellence, student-athletes, and the red and gold colours

• Organization of sports camps for the youth in PEPS, which aim to introduce them to the R&O universe and send them home with a souvenir (T-shirt, hat, etc.) emblazoned with the R&O logo

• Communication via the Internet for contests and surveys

• R&O games broadcast in the university radio station

There are three important elements to this approach:

• The R&O tries to develop its brand around its major attributes highlighted in the study conducted by the Rouge et Or to build and sustain excellence.

• In order to become a cornerstone in the recruitment of students, the R&O wants to develop a sense of belonging and pride within the academic community, to attract students not only in Québec but also across Canada and even abroad.

• The R&O wants to go beyond football to include the thirteen sports programs it manages under the same umbrella brand of the R&O.

The branding process undertaken by the R&O thus combines management, branding, and public relations in integrated marketing communications. The objective is to make the R&O an instrument for promoting the academic institution and a resource for both recruiting students and attracting sponsors.

This approach is seen as essential by the R&O and Laval University’s managers in an environment where resources for universities are scarce and the competition to attract students is fierce. In the province of Québec alone, more than ten universities compete against one another for top-quality students, and the entire population of the province is a mere eight million people. In this context, the brand becomes a key strategic lever. For Laval University, one of the challenges will be to finance the development of the R&O brand to sustain the growth of the institution and position it as an academic leader in Québec, in Canada, and around the world. This can only exacerbate the risks of commoditizing the R&O and Laval University’s brands. But with the budget cuts imposed by the provincial government on universities ($140 million from their budgets for the 2012–13 school year), the freezing of tuition fee increases, and the continuous pressure to remain a first-class university, capitalizing on the strength of the Rouge et Or’s brand is not so much a means for growth as a strategy for survival.
Conclusion

Sport plays a cohesive role in any society. Because of its resonance among citizens, some sport organizations can build strong fan identification and loyalty, which ultimately benefit not only the organization but also the society as a whole in that the organization becomes a rallying point for the entire population. The Montreal Canadiens, which have become a symbol of French-Canadian identity, are an excellent example of this. However, this attachment to Québec should not obscure the fact that the Montreal Canadiens are, for many Canadians, one of the brightest symbols of Canadian identity in sport because of Canadians’ connection with hockey and the success of the Canadiens throughout their years in the NHL.

Through the team’s evolution and the values that the team has come to represent, the Montreal Canadiens have aspired to be at once French Canadian and Canadian. That’s why the Canadiens are more than just a hockey club: they have become a brand in their own right. The identity of a team, and especially of a team brand, represents the foundation on which the club can position itself on the market vis-à-vis other sports clubs or entertainment options and which enables its managers to articulate a unique selling proposition (USP). But too much emphasis on the commercialization of a sport brand can rob it of its originality and exclusivity, potentially leading to its commoditization.

The success of Laval University’s Rouge et Or has made it not only an effective ambassador for the university but an important tool for the recruitment of students and sponsors. In an environment of scarce resources and fierce competition, the brand becomes a key strategic benefit that requires support. For Laval, one of the challenges will be to finance the development of the R&O brand to sustain the growth of the institution and position it as an academic leader provincially, nationally, and internationally. Laval must also avoid overcommercialization, which could dilute both the R&O brand and the identity of the university. Furthermore, the examples of the Red Bull Crashed Ice, the UFC, and soccer presented in table 7.2 emphasize the end of the monoculture, which has led to a splintering of individual interests (practice versus spectator sports; “traditional” versus “new” sports; influence of urban, hip-hop subculture; well-being initiatives). Many Canadian immigrants come from societies where sports are played that are different from those popular in North America; these newcomers contribute to changes to Québec as a society and to sport in the province. Soccer, for example, is growing in Québec through the influence of new immigrants.

Mixed martial arts has seen the emergence of a Québec super hero, Georges St-Pierre. St-Pierre’s first UFC fight occurred in 2004. In the end, he defended his
UFC title nine times before his retirement. Transcending sport and the UFC, St-Pierre, also known as Rush, has built a brand with a strong international appeal via his involvement on social media, a book he recently launched titled *The Way of the Fight*, his merchandise collection, and a foundation established to help stop bullying (http://www.gspofficial.com/gsp-anti-bullying). But what makes the “GSP” brand so strong, beyond his performances, are the values of authenticity, respect, and professionalism that he displays in and out of the UFC octagon. In Las Vegas or in Bangkok, in Paris or in Tokyo, he is a proud ambassador for Québec and Canada, similar to Celine Dion, illustrating so vividly the Québec-Canada dichotomy in La Belle Province. He has also contributed to making the UFC more respectable in the eyes of the general public, no small feat considering that the UFC has long been banned from several US states and Canadian provinces. However, by becoming a commercial brand and a promoter of a questionable sport, St-Pierre also makes himself more vulnerable to commoditizing his own persona. Perhaps this is the price one pays when a sports organization or an athlete—whether the Montreal Canadiens, Laval University’s Rouge et Or, or Georges St-Pierre—capitalizes commercially on a sport’s success.

Although there are differences between Québec society and that of the rest of Canada as far as sport is concerned, there are also many similarities. After all, Canadians have historically been bonded by sport in the unforgiving climate where hockey was born. Through sport, we find a common language and a way to come together as a nation to share and cheer for our national heroes, be they Sidney Crosby with his “golden goal” in Vancouver or Canada’s women’s soccer team’s bronze medal in the 2012 London Olympics.

**NOTES**


10 Lemoine, “Les Canadiens de Montréal.”
13 Grondin, “La métaphysique du hockey.”
14 Richelieu and Korai, “Identity and Sport.”
15 Ibid.
17 Richelieu and Korai, “Identity and Sport.”
21 Richelieu and Korai, “Identity and Sport.”
25 Ibid.
26 This section and the next are based on André Richelieu, “Combiner gestion de la marque et relations publiques dans une démarche stratégique: Le cas du Rouge et Or de l’Université Laval au Canada,” in *Sport and marketing public*, ed. Christopher...
Hautbois and Michel Desbordes (Paris: Economica, 2008), 237–53. Translations of statements from present and former Université Laval administrators are my own.


29 See Allen et al., “Sport as a Vehicle.”