CULTIVATING DISTINCTION THROUGH
HOCKEY AS COMMODITY

Peter Zuurbier

Sport is made in order to speak the human contract.
Roland Barthes

For many, if not most, Canadians, hockey is far more than just a game. Most years, from early autumn until early summer, ice hockey is everywhere in Canada. In particular, the professional version holds a prioritized space in Canadian consciousness. What began as a Saturday night ritual that captivated the home arenas, living rooms, and local pubs of generations of Canadians has grown into a multi-billion dollar, multi-media industry.

Hockey inspires countless allegories and myths among Canadians. It commands the attention of the country and has become a means of negotiating the Canadian experience. The game has become an extremely powerful source of cultural currency as a key source of national identity. Good and bad, many Canadians see land, country, and themselves in the sport, and, perhaps as a result, the game has taken an increasingly prominent role in the national conversation. Issues such as women’s rights, the public funding of professional and amateur hockey arenas, increased scrutiny on player safety, bullying, violence, and acceptance based on
issues such as sexuality and ethnicity are among the many discourses surrounding hockey that seem to hold a mirror to a number of aspects of contemporary Canadian society.

Roland Barthes's vast body of work includes one brief discussion of hockey in Canada. In 1960, Hubert Aquin, a Québécois writer and filmmaker commissioned by the National Film Board of Canada, worked with Barthes to write the script for a documentary on five national sports that included hockey in Canada. It was titled *Le sport et les hommes*.¹

Before the project, Barthes had been unfamiliar with hockey. His first experience with the sport occurred when he spent ten days in Montréal early in 1961, where an uncut version of the film was made available to him for viewing.² Perhaps inspired by having arrived in Montréal in January, the heart of a Canadian winter, Barthes largely focuses on the sport as a myth used by Canadians to negotiate existence within the brutal elements that are intrinsic to Canadian climate and geography.

“What is national sport?” Roland Barthes asks, answering: “It is a sport that rises out of the substance of a nation, out of its soil and climate. To play hockey is constantly to repeat that men have transformed motionless winter, the hard earth, and suspended life, and that precisely out of all this that they have made a swift, vigorous, passionate sport.”³ Barthes immediately picked up on the mythic foundation of the sport, Canada's realization of modernity through the command of nature in the pursuit of leisure. The consequence is a deep alignment between sport and nationalism within Canadian culture, where the pleasurable pastime is arguably the most prominent source of Canadian pride.

Playing the game in rinks, backyards, and streets across the country is one way many Canadians individually and collectively, actively engage hockey as fans. But watching the professional and top international games on television or its online equivalent has taken precedence in the discussions that resonate throughout the pubs, schoolyards, workplaces, and homes of Canadians, as well as online through social media, chats, forums, and comment sections.

Throughout hockey's trajectory, from its early development as a leisurely pastime, to an organized amateur game, to a crowd-driven spectacle professional sport, the passion of fans has motivated the growth of the game both commercially and culturally. Hockey's origin as a fan sport comes from its earliest days, when teams were assembled from the best members of a particular community. In their definitive work on hockey and Canadian culture, *Hockey Night in Canada: Sport, Identities and Cultural Politics*, Richard Gruneau and David Whitson write:
“Cheering for the home team . . . meant cheering for teams that were likely to be composed of family, friends, or at least acquaintances. It could be credibly claimed that the quality of a performance said something about the community that produced it—not only about the skill levels of its players but also about the character of its people.”4 This is obviously no longer the case. Players now are bought, traded, and evaluated as commodities, with little if any consideration to where they are from. Yet among fans a similar semblance of civic pride remains.

As with most other team sports, the experience for hockey fans often largely hinges on the success of their favourite teams and stars. Fans who follow winning teams with excellent players can find the motivation behind their participation in this success and whatever aura of association it bestows. Barthes writes: “Everything happening to the player happens to the spectator. But whereas in the theatre the spectator is only a voyeur, in sport he is a participant, an actor.”5 Hockey fans spend a considerable amount of time, money, and energy to express themselves as fans. Whether this affects the outcome or not, each game fans share in the triumphs and tragedies of those on the ice, celebrating or suffering in unison.

Fans watching hockey are at different times affiliated with a variety of groups, including the immediate people they’re watching the game with, the others watching in the same location, friends and colleagues with whom they talk hockey, any hockey-related online or offline communities they may participate in, the cities and regions represented by teams or players, and the country itself. The vast and ever-growing array of opportunities for fan participation has opened up the space for more and more fans to express these individual and collective identities in more and more ways. Discourses of fandom are constantly taking new shapes and perspectives. Difference between fans is celebrated as the harmonized uniqueness of each individual fan’s participation that makes up the collective ritual of fandom.

Barthes’s perspective on hockey in the documentary was unique in that it was his very first exposure to hockey. As such, outside of his instinctive mythic alignment between sport, climate, and country, many of Barthes’s observations on the game seem to be misplaced. His lack of understanding of the basic conventions of hockey is expressed within the content of his discussion. For example, Barthes’s commentary on missed shots betrays his inexperience when he writes: “A failed goal is not only a defeat, it is virtually a wound, intense as a pistol shot.”6 If Barthes had been more of a hockey fan, he would likely have quickly realized that few shots actually end up as goals, so each miss is at best a temporary defeat, certainly not comparable to a gunshot wound. For most fans, this is common knowledge, so Barthes’s words expose his lack of perspective. A similar dynamic is shared among
almost all hockey fans, most of whom divulge far more about themselves than merely the teams and players they support, through the ways that they present themselves as fans.

Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of habitus offers a compelling theoretical lens through which to explore the motivating forces that surround the creation and maintenance of individual identity within the communal rituals of hockey fandom. Bourdieu developed the concept of habitus in *Distinction*, a book that explores social dynamics within the class structures of France.

A concept based in the embodiment of class identity, habitus involves the ordering of performances of identity at both conscious and unconscious levels. As a critical lens, habitus unravels the discriminating logic of culture, the unseen structures that reinforce existing class differences. Bourdieu writes: “Habitus is constructed as the generative formula which makes it possible to account both for the classifiable practices and products and for the judgements, themselves classified, which make these practices and works into a system of distinctive signs.”

For Bourdieu, the notion of habitus outlines the collective reproduction of existing class distinctions by individuals from different classes.

Though traditional class divisions are not necessarily an urgent issue in contemporary Canadian society, there are varying forms of social stratification that seem to be growing more pronounced. Problematizing the symbolic reproduction of existing separations provides a means of critical interrogation of the prioritized role enjoyed by hockey in Canadian society. Hockey’s stature as a cultural institution mystifies its role as a collection of corporate concerns that situate consumption at the foundation of rituals of hockey fandom and Canadian identity. Demystifying these rituals as forms of embodied consumption through habitus encourages a moment of reflexivity surrounding the fervent consumption of the hockey commodity.

Discourses of hockey fandom are the field on which habitus is constituted by fans in the ways in which they consume the game and represent themselves as fans and in the specific aspects of the game that allure them. Habitus is expressed through individual participation in the collective the rituals of hockey fandom. Fans both actively and unknowingly differentiate themselves while simultaneously cheering for the same teams and players. In Canada, these rituals are usually regarded as traditionally and intrinsically Canadian, meaning that participation in them is often regarded as a reflection of national identity. But any participation is negotiated through consumption, which is celebrated as a measure of loyalty. Bourdieu writes: “Each consumer is confronted by a particular state of the
supply-side, that is, with objectified possibilities . . . automatically classified and classifying, rank-ordered and rank-ordering.” Consumption is reified throughout the discourses of fandom, and consequently the same financial considerations that shaped Bourdieu’s work on class distinction play a considerable role in defining the identity of hockey fans.

Pierre Bourdieu discusses sports in *Distinction*, recognizing different sports as exclusive to certain classes on the basis of their economic and social position. Bourdieu writes: “To understand the class distribution of the various sports, one would have to take account of the representation which, in terms of their specific schemes of perception and appreciation, the different classes have of the costs (economic, cultural and ‘physical’) and benefits attached to the different sports,” including “immediate or deferred ‘physical’ benefits (health, beauty, strength)” as well as “economic and social benefits (upward mobility etc.).” In considering sport as a whole within his larger discussion of habitus, Bourdieu situates it as a discourse that shapes, and is shaped by, the class body. People of different classes have differentiated physical types based on the type of labour they perform, which along with other social and economic factors play a role in determining interest and participation in specific sports. Bourdieu applies the same principle to audiences of sport, too, since, as we saw with Barthes, merely following the action of many sports involves certain situated knowledge, conventions, and levels of propriety that can make them class-exclusive.

Bourdieu did acknowledge that some sports appeal to a cross-section of classes but argued that they enjoy them for different reasons. Bourdieu writes: “Because agents apprehend objects through the schemes of perception and appreciation of their habitus, it would be naive to suppose that all practitioners of the same sport (or any other practice) confer the same meaning on their practice or even, strictly speaking, that they are practising the same practice.” This is indeed the case traditionally in Canada, where the strength in cultural currency enjoyed by hockey is a result of its establishment as a space where the virtues and vices of the whole range of Canadians meet. As Gruneau and Whitson write: “The game has variously been a form of backyard play, a type of ‘civilizing’ amateur sport, an opportunity to drink and gamble, a source of profit, and a community symbol. Moreover, these different uses of hockey have often blended together in complex ways.” Hockey is unique in Canada as one of its few near-universal cultural signifiers, so the reasons to participate are unique to each person.

Those who grow up in Canada get used to the prominent place hockey holds in conceptions of contemporary national identity, but hockey fandom also offers
an inviting, inclusive space for new Canadians, whether they ever play or not. The
game is one of the rare instances in which Canadians openly display the traditional
notions of nationalism that are found in most other countries. Developing as a
hockey fan becomes akin to developing as a Canadian for many, and participa-
tion in the rituals and discourses of fandom plays a significant role in developing
national identity, for individual and country alike.

At the same time, the field of hockey fandom has its own underlying structures
that qualify and demarcate the situated knowledge that makes up cultural capital.
Bourdieu feels that there are three types of capital: economic, social, and cultural.
Each one feeds into the other, as economic capital is translated into social and cul-
tural capital, which work together to return the favour through reinforcement and
enhancement. Discourses of hockey fandom provide an example of the conversion
between these forms of capital, as the situated knowledge fixed around consump-
tion represents a form of cultural capital among hockey fans and, by extension,
many Canadians. Together, conversations on hockey between fans that begin in
the lead-up to pro games, carry on into the commercial breaks and intermissions,
and then follow the game, when fans share and compare their own critiques and
analyses of the game action, all provide opportunities to develop and measure cul-
tural capital. Since habitus is a manifestation of identity that is often overwhelm-
ingly shaped by an individual’s consumption, fandom as a life-style can be seen as a
product of cultural capital that is embodied in the habitus of hockey fans.

Fundamentally for hockey fans the game can be seen as a levelling force, since there
is only one difference that matters: the separation between the professional players
competing and the rest of us sitting there watching the competition. Presumably
most spectators are fans, everyone equal in that they are not playing. The mythic
framing of hockey within Canadian culture constructs the relationship between
the professional players and their fans mostly as one of intense admiration and
aspiration. Barthes writes: “Every moral value can be invested in the sport: endur-
ance, self-possession . . . courage. The great players are heroes, not stars.” If sports
can be seen as the predominant culture industry of the early twenty-first century,
then players are the contemporary matinée idols.

One of the results of the reverence for talented hockey players is that the experi-
ence of actually playing hockey rationalizes itself as the highest and most esteemed
source of knowledge within discourses surrounding the game. When hockey is up
for discussion, deference is paid to those who played, and gradations of experience and achievement form the perception of a hierarchical structure. This logic is affirmed by Canadian hockey media, the tastemakers, gatekeepers, and knowledge bearers for most fans. Televised broadcasts, the primary gathering place for most hockey fans, consistently feature a rotating cast of former pro players, coaches and executives as commentators. Their purpose is to fill content spaces between the range of commercial promotions by using their perceived expertise to contextualize important events in the game for the fans watching along. Bourdieu writes of “the viewpoint of the ‘practitioner,’ past or present, who, as opposed to the mere consumer, the ‘hi-fi freak’ or armchair sportsman, recognizes a form of excellence which . . . is but the extreme limit of competence of the ordinary amateur.” By virtue of their longstanding high-level involvement in hockey, former pros are seen to understand the nuances of the game at a greater level of abstraction, with their on-ice experience providing an ideal complement.

This logic applies to everyone who participates in discourses of hockey fandom. From professionals to current amateur and leisure players, the unique knowledge developed from the experiences of playing is typically considered the most esteemed attribute of habitus among hockey fans. In the same way that the retired pros are considered authoritative on television, anyone who has played organized ice hockey is understood as having a superior understanding of the game when compared to those who have merely watched hockey. As a literal embodiment of their fandom, amateur players are considered brothers- and sisters-in-arms with their professional counterparts, if only from a distance. The time and energy committed to learning and actually playing hockey ensure a more exclusive perspective on the game, even among fans. The convention appears logically and rhetorically unassailable by anyone with less or worse experience or achievement, and it represents one of the key social shaping functions of habitus.

Since hockey experience is shaped through a person’s economic background, it can be seen as a distinguishing practice that becomes a form of social administration, an accepted structure that rationally sorts and categorizes fans for comparison against each other. The prioritization of hockey experience becomes a symbolic reinforcement of existing economic difference because of the barriers put forth by the cost of participation. Organized hockey for even the youngest children is prohibitively expensive, and it trends in the direction of ridiculously expensive as players approach and enter adolescence. Those who show real talent and even a glimpse of developmental potential require a substantial investment that is untenable for the majority of Canadian families. Elite talent is not the only requirement as a
player climbs the ranks of organized hockey: financial considerations add to the exclusive quality of continued participation.

Together, the variety of fees, the ongoing travel and year-round supplemental training, the nutritional demands, and the expensive equipment that requires regular replacement are simply too much. The discriminating effects of the costs associated with children’s and amateur hockey are very real. As Richard Gruneau points out in the preceding chapter, basic equipment and registration costs are around $3,000 per child every year. For more talented players who show the potential for college and professional levels, the extra costs associated with training and travel can run over $10,000 each year. Unfortunately, regardless of talent, dreams of playing in the “Big League” are completely unobtainable for most, and the opportunity to merely play hockey is simply not there for many. Families with the means to have their children play, keep playing later into life, play at the highest levels their talents allow, and refine their skills and bodies to do so hold an inherent advantage in the knowledge economy within discourses of hockey fandom.

As well as dictating the rules of engagement, economics also have a direct relationship with the fans’ consumption of the actual game action, making it another manifestation of habitus. Primarily this occurs through physical proximity to the pros, where closeness to the professional game assumes higher levels of esteem by association. The closing of proximity occurs in a few ways. First, most hockey fans would contend that the best way to enjoy the game is to have the best view of the action and that the best way to have the best view of the action is to be as near as possible to it. This would seem to oppose Bourdieu’s notion of the distanced gaze of the aristocracy, since watching the game live could be seen to involve “a surrender to immediate sensation” as fans experience the action directly. But actually the unmediated gaze of live hockey may require a high amount of cultural capital for hockey fans to discern the action. With no assistance from the editors and announcers, the eye must know where to look if it is to follow the action. The absence of mediation in the live experience emphasizes what Bourdieu refers to as “the refusal of what is easy in the sense of simple and therefore shallow, and ‘cheap,’ because it is easily decoded and culturally ‘undemanding.’” Watching the pros ply their trade without mediation from the camera—the ability to choose what to see up close, the sounds, the smells, the ability to almost touch the action, the value of participation derived from presence—provides the most esteemed cultural capital. The perspective is reified as being as close as possible to the game outside of actually playing.

The only challenges to the superiority of the live perspective are attempted through the reification of other forms of consumption around the game, which
offer their own distinguishing functions for those excluded from being at the
game in person. Qualities of consumption such as the display on which hockey
is watched and the location where it is watched (outside of the arena) become
attempts at overcoming the gap opened through the perspective afforded by the
live experience.

In addition, the closing of proximity as a projection of habitus within discourses
of hockey fandom does not occur only spatially. Since professional hockey has been
constructed to appear as the most authentic version of the game, any type of con-
sumption that closes the gap between the pros and fans is reified as possessing the
most esteemed character. Debates over authenticity are a function of a culture so
thoroughly commodified that certain aspects are reified as authentic, but only in
opposition to others that are not. As a culture industry, professional hockey has
inverted notions of authenticity to suit its heavily commodified version. Those with
the economic resources are able to afford the “authentic” experience of owning the
exact same jerseys, skates, sticks, and equipment that the professionals use. They
can afford similar regimented, performance-targeted diets and can employ similar
training practices. Fans with the means can get closer to the action in every way,
and their habitus reflects as much.

For the majority of fans, though, proximity may be temporarily overcome
through varying forms of consumption, but their relationship with hockey is over-
whelmingly mediated by the gaze of the television apparatus. The televised game
is a series of images and sounds, recorded by a multitude of cameras and micro-
phones, that are then chopped up and edited together into an assembled, game-
like narrative. The production of the hockey broadcast changes the perception and
points of emphasis within the game action, and the limitations inherent in the sub-
jective perspective of the camera’s lens shape the entire body of knowledge for the
fan who watches the game on TV.

Consuming hockey through media requires negotiating the surplus of con-
tent surrounding each game at some level, which for many fans often completely
overwhelms the on-ice action. Umberto Eco describes this phenomenon as “sport
cubed.” To Eco, sport is an athletic game played between individuals. When the
game shifts into a performance for others, it becomes “sport squared.” Eco saw
sport squared tending toward commodification, writing: “Sport squared (which
involves speculation and barter, selling and enforced consumption) generates sport
cubed, the discussion of sport as something seen. This discussion is in the first
place that of the sport press, but it generates in turn discussion on the sports press,
and therefore sport raised to the nth power. The discussion on the sports press is
discourse on a discourse about watching others’ sport as discourse.” Fans whose cultural capital as hockey fans has been constructed through television and online consumption are likely to be far more aware of sport-cubed discourses. Their perspectives and dispositions are typically largely shaped within the discussions and debates going on within sport cubed.

The excess of sport-cubed media grows while the same number of teams plays the same number of games with the same number of players, almost every year. The on-ice action can only help but face some measure of marginalization up against the range of supplemental content offered. The discussion of game action, the discussions around the game action, the discussion around the discussions around the game action, discussions surrounding the discussions on the discussions . . . It never ends, and it all take place at once, layering on top of itself. Together sport cubed creates a media-induced tautology that is all completely self-reifying and not particularly relevant outside of itself, except that the resonance it shares with its massive audience of fans is so powerful.

Today, forget just watching the game in person. There is a growing range of both regional and national 24-hour television networks dedicated to sports in both regular and high definition, and each game is streamed online as well. There is one team-dedicated station—Maple Leafs TV—with others undoubtedly on the way, as well as sports-talk radio stations in every major city. There are official team and individual player websites, as well as sites owned by traditional sports media, that offer extensive coverage of hockey, and also unending non-official pro-hockey-themed sites. Comment sections at the end of individual pieces of content have become spaces for vigorous debate between fans. YouTube videos, podcasts, blogs, and message boards allow fans to express themselves and interact with others. This is to say nothing of the non-stop, instantaneous social media world, which fans, teams, and sports-media sites, as well as their personalities, all participate in in different ways and to varying degrees. More and more, even individual NHL players are beginning to embrace roles in the social media universe.

Together, the incredible mass and range of always available professional hockey-related media content forms a self-perpetuating hockey “media ghetto” (to borrow a term coined by David Taras). More than an echo chamber, the hockey media ghetto is an enclosed and completely self-referential territory that fans can explore infinitely while remaining completely encapsulated in the spectacle of professional hockey, with little to no exposure to the world that lies outside that discursive space. Fans enter the media ghetto of hockey fandom and don’t really ever have to leave, with the few exceptions of when actual, tangible realities interrupt.
Despite the negative connotations that may be associated with its name, the media ghetto is also the locus of fan activity, the space where individual and collective fan discourse is constantly (re)shaped. It is the sphere of fan activity that provides a growing portion of the content that supplements the game action. The media ghetto accommodates the casual fan who may only have a passing interest in anything more than the game scores, as well as the many fans who engage hockey with varying levels of intensity. It provides a range of means for entering, spending time, and engaging in the rituals of fandom as each fan sees fit. Bourdieu writes: “The agents only have to follow the leanings of their habitus in order to take over, unwittingly, the intention immanent in the corresponding practices, to find an activity which is entirely ‘them’ and, with it, kindred spirits.” For most fans, participation in the media ghetto to some degree is almost inescapable. The evaluations and impressions, the rumours, the rumblings, the grumblings, the hot stove, the hot seat, draft prospects, trade targets, and overall team strategies related to the next game, the next week, and the next few seasons frame the majority of discussions. Together, the media ghetto reappropriates all of it in building and maintaining a discursive framework for hockey fans that encourages them to foster an increasingly deep association, with more meaningful self-identification as fans offered in return.

Sport cubed grows as its media content continually beckons new fans to enter the fray, form allegiances and opinions, and engage in the rituals and discourses of fandom in their own particular way. For fans, the space for creativity and individual expression within the hockey media ghetto increasingly plays as important a role as the media content in framing and developing discourses of hockey fandom. Consequently, although playing hockey may become more exclusive, and the experiential knowledge it creates may continue to grow in prominence in its perch above the fray of the media ghetto, the opportunities for new fans to entrench themselves in the game and use it as a means of identification, without ever picking up a hockey stick, has never been greater. Truth be told, for a large portion of fans, regardless of financial constraint, actually playing hockey is of little to no interest. The fan perspective that prioritizes sport-cubed discourses over experience establishes its own forms of cultural capital, ones based in abstracted knowledge accrued from the hockey media ghetto, even if the game itself is only involved at a very base level. Bourdieu describes the phenomenon as one in which “the pursuit of exclusiveness has to be content with developing a unique mode of appropriation. Liking the same things differently, liking different things, less obviously marked out for admiration—these are some of the strategies for outflanking, overtaking
These fans look to develop new, unique types of knowledge that allow for the creation of new means of distinction. This allows the fans watching televised hockey a means of bridging the proximity and participation gap through new rituals of fandom.

The thirst for hockey consumption by many impassioned fans cannot be satiated by the on-ice action or the subsequent sport-cubed discourse that surrounds it. These fans create all sorts of alternate value from the game by reappropriating the on-ice action for their own purposes. Fans are turning individual events and player performances into raw data and reconstituting them in ways that involve the final score in only tangential ways. The development of this type of cultural capital requires abstracted knowledge that may not involve much financial cost but that takes an enormous commitment of time and energy to create and sustain. These types of cultural capital are negotiated in a growing range of ways, including video games that get more and more hyperreal and interactive every year; fantasy sports, office pools, and opportunities to gamble on outcomes in ways that are both legal and illegal; new statistics, measures of performance, obscure personal facts about athletes; and fascination with odd events or phenomena surrounding the game. Growing numbers of books, periodicals, documentaries, and academic works explore hockey and individual phenomena within it in exacting detail. Even hockey cards are still being collected. All fan-related activities provide discursive spaces where abstract knowledge is constructed with the intent of layering perceptions of complexity, consequence, and ultimately value onto what is, in reality, a three-hour sporting contest that occurs sporadically throughout the week almost every winter.

While consumption can be seen to inadvertently shape the habitus of hockey fans through situated knowledge, it can also have more direct implications in performances of economic stature that extend discursive boundaries of cultural capital into more traditional consumptive practices involving products and services. The most obvious way for hockey fans to present themselves as such is through the adoption of their team’s logo and colours. Supporting a specific player, team, country, or era by choosing to wear a jersey, T-shirt, hat, or accessory is often an overt expression of fandom, especially with the availability of both contemporary and retro merchandise in a variety of styles. Wearing logo-branded clothing represents a clear, public display of habitus. For dedicated fans, these products offer an opportunity to actually embody the discursive space they inhabit.

The logo quickly becomes commodified as a way of signifying many fans’ financial stature. Currently, the official jersey worn by the players while playing can be
purchased for about $320. A replica that looks close but isn’t the same costs about $170. Despite the deepest of aspirations, either jersey requires too prohibitive a cost for many. For them there is a T-shirt with the logo painted on the front, as well as the player’s name and number on the back, for about $30. The disparity in the price of the products is signified in their perceived quality, which becomes reified as habitus, a measure of commitment to the team and/or player by the fan.

The reappropriation of logo through consumptive practices has its limits, though. In terms of public display, there appears to be a somewhat inverse relationship between overt performances of fandom and esteemed habitus. For example, most people think that fans who get a team’s logo tattooed onto their body or cut into their hair, or those who attend games in costume or paint their face or body, look and often, in fact, are silly.

In contrast, fans at live games who do not outwardly display their fandom through their attire are typically performing a lesser level of support. Some fans don’t like to dress up; others arrive at the game directly from prior engagements. For whatever reason, the comparative lack of enthusiasm by these fans leads to a disruption the conventions of fandom: wearing normal clothing to the game, when everyone else is wearing team-themed clothing. Pro hockey arenas in Canada are full of thousands of people wearing their team’s logos and colours: it is one of the more visible rituals of hockey fandom. The mass show of consumption is done in solidarity with the players, and in some places participation is sacrosanct, especially for the more important games. Even though many fans cannot afford even a T-shirt, the cost of entry plays an exclusionary role in ensuring that only fans with at least some money are allowed inside. Even in refusal, then, the choices of clothing by fans can represent a powerful display of habitus, as it speaks to the purpose of their participation.

This isn’t exactly scientific . . . but if you imagine a home game for many of the Canadian teams, think of the back, the upper-tiered seats where all manner of team-themed T-shirts reign supreme. Now, move closer to the ice: all you see is jersey after jersey. But once you get to the luxury boxes and toward the best seats in the arena, the ones closest to the ice, the look of the crowd often changes as jerseys become dots within a more conservatively dressed group of fans.

Those who attend hockey games dressed in a suit and tie are in fact dressed in uniform: their own. The prohibitive cost of top seats for pro hockey games means that those up front are often the recipients of corporate-purchased tickets. Professional hockey games are the intermission entertainment of their professional lives in business, the opportunity to create social and cultural capital using their
economic means. The absence of logos on their bodies isn’t as representative of a lack of priority on the team and players as it is of a deeper level of priority that lies elsewhere. Suits and ties at hockey games are mostly worn by the people whose job it is to be there, whether that is players, coaches, executives, journalists, or the businesspeople.

Moving back up through the stands past the suits, the next major group are the season-ticket holders, who are some of the most passionate fans of their teams and players. The devotion of season-ticket holders is expressed through their high-levels of consumption around the team. These fans group themselves together in their united passion and also in their ability to pay premium prices in advance for seats to each of the forty-one home games that occur almost each season. Win or lose, these fans have committed to their team through a considerable amount of time and money. For this reason, they can claim possession of a more esteemed habitus within discourses of hockey fandom, since they are economically invested stakeholders in the success of their favourite players and teams. The financial commitment from season-ticket holders and any sacrifices made in its name are seen as markers of more virtuous, authentic, or intense fandom. At the same time, the social benefits for season-ticket holders are matched by a responsibility to the continued maintenance of their cultural capital, making the experience something between a party and a duty. Win or lose, showing up and consuming become a lifestyle choice that takes precedence.

Intermixed with the season-ticket holders are the fans who are willing to pay a premium for tickets to individual games. Precious few seats in the arena offer ideal views of the whole ice, and the most comprehensive view comes from television. Fans commodify themselves at live games by paying increasing increments to experience the game collectively. The reified exclusivity of live participation becomes the primary justification for increasing ticket costs as the high-definition, surround-sound, live-recorded, home-viewing experience becomes more enticing. Flaws inherent in watching live are commodified as benefits in the gradations of seat sections and sightlines offered.

The higher reaches of the stadiums are commonly filled with fans who are only able to attend the odd game in person. The reason for this could be limited interest, but often it is related to constraints surrounding the time and/or expense associated with the level of engagement of regular ticket holders. The experience that others in the arena may take for granted is treasured by these fans. Bourdieu writes: “Though there are cases in which the dominant function of the practice is reasonably clearly designated, one is practically never entitled to assume that the different
classes expect the same thing from the same practice. . . . The class variations in sporting activities are due as much to variations in perception and apprehension of the immediate or deferred profits they are supposed to bring.”

Watching live offers a rare escape from sport-cubed discourses, an opportunity to temporarily close proximity with the players they revere and to develop the perspective that can only come from watching the best of the best in person. For those who can manage only the odd game in person, the game is often a special occasion, a time for celebration, which is why they are frequently the most lively members of the crowd.

The official pro hockey season may end when the Stanley Cup is awarded, but the media ghetto offers a permanent season for fans, where the offseason brings forth fresh sport-cubed discourse surrounding team and player improvements. The permanent season is always available, and it constantly updates itself with new opportunities for consumption. A new season is almost always around the corner, and the expectation is that fans will continue consuming without fail, to keep up with the knowledge and appearances required to maintain their habitus. Inherently understood is the risk of falling behind for anyone who doesn’t keep up the pace. In the same way that season-ticket holders cannot give up their seats for a year and then get them back, fans of hockey discourse within the media ghetto cannot miss a news cycle without losing their grip on cultural capital.

As the prominence of the media ghetto and sport-cubed discourses for hockey fans becomes more pronounced, the web they weave around fans has become even denser. Specifically, the Toronto Maple Leafs, far and away the most popular and valuable professional franchise in all of hockey, is owned by MLSE (Maple Leaf Sports and Entertainment), a conglomerate of two of Canada’s largest media companies: Rogers Communications and Bell Canada. The seemingly unlikely union between otherwise rivals provides both companies with an enormous amount of relatively low-cost content that can reach across their ever-growing media landscape.

With the exception of a few ancillary beneficiaries, all of the consumption by the fans of the Maple Leafs of their favourite team ends up in one place. From the impossible-to-find game tickets, to the overpriced beer, food, and merchandise, to the other costs associated with attending live games, to the additional fees for specialty sports channels on television that broadcast the games and supplemental content, to the array of advertising and sponsorship revenue they generate from their assortment of media entities, to the data fees associated with watching games and consuming content online and on the go, to the Maple Leafs–branded bars they own: all of that money ends up in one place. Consequently, encouraging
increased consumption of the Maple Leafs and everything around them, no matter how abstracted—opening the tent and inviting as many fans as possible inside—is the name of the game.

Sports, hockey or otherwise, are metonymical of life in profound and exciting ways. If, as Barthes writes, sport does indeed speak the human contract, then it does so in the discursive shape of a game. The game between the players on the ice has rules and conventions, as does the competition for differentiation between fans. Both require a sort of expertise rooted in cultural capital, and success is only measured against oneself and the others who are involved.

The purpose of this piece is to unravel some of the fundamental structures and conventions of the game that goes on between fans while they watch professional hockey. Bourdieu writes: “Because those who take part in a game agree on the stakes, at least sufficiently to fight for them, one may choose to emphasize either the complicities which unite them in hostility, or the hostilities which separate them in complicity.” The habitus of hockey fans is shaped through complicity, but it is a complicity customarily established through the mild hostility of friendly competition. The different practices of fans function to fix the qualification and stratification of fan identities around consumption. In this way, the uniquely Canadian celebration of consumption at the heart of the discourses and rituals of hockey fandom increasingly appears to be drawing parallels with more traditional forms of exclusion. Distinction occurs through the privileging of experience that sits at the base of cultural capital within hockey fandom. Within this logic, the habitus of hockey fandom is realized as symbolically reinforcing social stratification through economic divisions.

Hockey fandom more and more seems to be reappropriated into the traditional means of the economic and cultural distinction that Bourdieu discusses. The lens of habitus, applied to the discourses and rituals of hockey fandom, highlights and reinforces the essential role that consumption plays in the development of individual identity as hockey fans and, to a large extent, as Canadians. Bourdieu writes that, with lifestyles like fandom, “the dialectic of conditions and habitus is the basis of an alchemy which transforms the distribution of capital, the balance-sheet of a power relation, into a system of perceived differences, distinctive properties, that is, a distribution of symbolic capital, legitimate capital, whose objective truth is misrecognized.” This misrecognition occurs in Canada through the uncomfortable
alignment between hockey fandom and Canadian identity that is created through consumption.

The cultural industry of pro hockey and the myths of hockey that enrapture Canada’s national consciousness are one and the same. These myths foster one of the few commonly understood forms of Canadian identity. In fostering traditional notions of nationalism, hockey fans can participate in their own way while feeling part of a larger whole. Consuming hockey is uniting Canadians old and new. An appearance on CBC’s Hockey Night in Canada remains one of the most significant junctures in the rite of passage for every young Canadian pro, the moment every child is supposed to envision as he or she provides play-by-play to their own empty-net exploits. At the same time, the deepening commodification of the game and subsequent costs surrounding both professional and organized amateur hockey are constraining opportunities and types of engagement for fans. Hockey games on television are progressively being moved to specialty channels, which have extra costs associated. Online broadcasts require lots of bandwidth, and often access is subscription-based. The last bastion of free access to professional and international hockey seems to be AM sports radio, which is obviously not watching the game at all.

As the costs associated with hockey grow, it is important to remember that the heavily commodified version of hockey reifies itself and mystifies fans into believing that this version of hockey is superior. Perceptions of cultural roots between hockey and Canada may appear to almost entirely surround the professional game and top international competitions, but the popularity of the game truly finds its basis in active participation, not passive, contemplative observance. The rivers, ponds, backyards, community rinks, gymnasiums, fields, and streets where the game was born and raised are largely still around, and a little space and enthusiasm are often more than enough to inspire a game at a moment’s notice.

Transcending the commodified game involves challenging the logic of fandom, problematizing habitus and the symbolic reproduction of the false hierarchy of values projected by the spectacle of professional hockey. Beginning this process involves reclaiming the non-professional game through actually playing. Physical benefits of exercise aside, shinny and street hockey take little preparation, or coordination; costs are often minimal, and basic equipment (sticks, nets, and skates) can be shared among participants. Unorganized hockey provides a strong measure of experiential knowledge development, encourages inclusivity and camaraderie, and offers an opportunity to engage the game for fun’s sake.

In playing hockey among themselves, fans can independently manifest the deep relationship between sport, land, and nation that lies at the foundation of the mythic
association between sport and country. Bourdieu writes: “Appropriating ‘nature’. . . presupposes a culture, the privilege of those with ancient roots.”3 Since Canada does not really recognize its origins, perhaps the appropriation of nature that occurs in playing hockey is attempting to do the reverse. Perhaps Canadians are attempting to use hockey to establish the foundation of what will eventually become ancient roots. Canadian culture and the myths of hockey that are projected, imagined, and realized within discourses of hockey fandom can be seen as ways of attempting to set roots down. But if this is indeed the case, then we as Canadians need to consider what we want these roots to grow into as we cultivate them.

NOTES


3 Barthes, *What Is Sport?* 45, 47.


6 Ibid., 51.


8 Ibid., 223.

9 Ibid., 20.

10 Ibid., 209, 211.


14 Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 486.

15 Ibid.


17 Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 223.

18 Ibid., 282.
19 For a full tour of NHL merchandise, see http://shop.nhl.com.
20 Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 223.
21 Ibid., 316.
22 Ibid., 172.
23 Ibid., 281.