

Hockey Hall of Fame, Toronto

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Hockey Hall of Fame

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The origin of the "Hall of Fame" as an exhibit genre may be traced back at least half a century. That is when the baseball hall of fame at Cooperstown, New York, was first established. Exhibits of sports memorabilia as such pre-date the hall of fame venue. Trophy displays in sports club rooms and private caches of game-related collectables go back to the beginnings of competitive organized sports in the nineteenth century.

Organized sports — including hockey — are very much a part of the "invented tradition" which Eric Hobsbawm talks about in his influential book, *The Invention of Tradition*. New traditions, concepts of leisure and forms of popular culture began to evolve in the nineteenth century in conjunction with industrialization and urbanization. In time, music halls, theatres, public libraries, museums, fair grounds, recreational parks, nature preserves and sports facilities became part of this emerging new social and cultural complex. In a great variety of ways, these became the sites of contestation between different class, ethnic, regional and national interests and shaped the character of contemporary society.

Considering the centrality of these developments to modern society and culture, Canadian historians and museums have been somewhat tardy if not negligent in researching, collecting and interpreting such fields to the general public. Viewed in this light, sports history is not just a subject of interest to aficionados of the game but an important sphere of mainstream history and culture. It is of interest in its own right and can also serve as a valuable indicator of larger social and cultural trends and inter-group relationships.

Thus, the emergence of hockey as an organized sport is part of a larger phenomenon,

the reconstruction of the meaning of work and leisure in the nineteenth century. The first organized sports clubs in North America were typically of upper middle-class origin but acquired a broader demographic base as the century progressed. Ordinary townspeople continued to participate in various loosely structured activities and amusements wherever open water courses or fields could be found within or near growing towns. Prototypes of hockey such as *hurley* (and other game variants such as *ricketts*, *ice polo* and *shinny*) evolved as ice hockey versions of other developing nineteenth-century Irish, Scottish, English and Aboriginal games such as football, polo and lacrosse. The word *hockey*, which came into common use in the 1870s, is believed to be derived from the French *hoquet* or the Iroquois *hoghee*. Until the '70s, these popular outdoor pick-up games did not mark a sharp break with older, rural-based leisure activities. By the latter part of the nineteenth century, increasing urbanization placed a greater premium on urban space, and sports activity was being channelled into two new directions.

Commercial sports facilities were constructed and teams with superlative skills were organized to compete against each other in front of an appreciative, urban populace. The spectators paid admission fees for this privilege and sometimes also placed bets on the odds. The middle-class entrepreneurs, who provided organizational skills as well as investment capital, came to own the facilities as well as the teams.

The growing popularity of commercial spectator sports caused concern in both conservative and left-wing circles. There was opposition to drinking, betting and brawling, which sometimes accompanied spectator sports, and emphasis was placed on positive values such as democratic participation, fitness and inculcation of moral principles. As a result, a parallel stream of school and community fitness and amateur sport facilities and programs evolved.

The history of Canadian hockey is deeply embedded in both of these streams and the two streams penetrate one another to a large extent. The new Hockey Hall of Fame

consciously tries to straddle both streams but, in a last analysis, its main concern is with the evolution of organized professional hockey. For the most part, the story is told through a rich array of artifacts, vivid dioramas, effective experiential settings, historic film footage and interactive video units that answer a wide range of programmed questions. Large blocks of anecdotal copy provide the main storyline, placing emphasis on the heroes, the highlights, the great moments and certain curious footnotes to the game, but few visitors read them. As a result, the interpretation is carried in an impressionistic way by the sensory impact of the exhibit modules, which maintain a lively change of pace as visitors walk through.

A quick run through the main exhibit hall layout will demonstrate the latter point. Not surprisingly, the names of the main modules reflect the degree of corporate affiliation to the game, since organized hockey was, from its inception, a commercial spectator sport. The exhibit sequence begins with a "Toronto Sun Great Moments Zone." Presented in a series of glass encasements, it serves as an exciting post-modern grand entrance to the hall. Next is a more laid-back "History Zone;" it effectively uses sepia tones of early visuals to cast the visitor into the historic Canadian backdrop of hockey. The "Marquee Zone" focusses on the arenas of the 24 cities of the National Hockey League (NHL), showing both old and new, and featuring an actual ticket kiosk from the Detroit Olympia. The continental dimension of professional hockey is evident here. Curiously, this section also features hockey greats such as Jean Beliveau and a fascinating display of goalie masks.

Next, the visitor may enter into a full-scale replica of a recent Montreal Canadiens dressing room and observe on-site demonstrations of exercise and physiotherapy equipment. Awareness of hockey's close connection with the mass media is reinforced in the "TSN/RDS Broadcast Zone." An animated human figure of a producer at the controls, so to speak, demonstrates how a television broadcast is produced and recreates the sounds that one might experience from this vantage point. The "Hartland Molson Theatre" is, in effect, a 150-seat arena-cum-theatre, where film clips ranging from professional ice action to a child's first tenuous strides on skates are shown. The "Arena Zone" presents equipment, historic images and other memorabilia of many of hockey's great names. Here, a visitor may also operate interactive modules to pursue further

information on individuals of special interest or play a trivia game, while other visitors follow intently.

Another kind of participatory experience is offered by the "Coca-Cola Rink Zone." A realistic plastic ice area in front of a set of bleachers is used for ice skill demonstrations. As well, young and old alike may test their goal-tending abilities against a television simulation. The "Household Family [sic] Zone" shifts the emphasis away from the professional spectator sport attractions, which tend to dominate much of the exhibit hall, to nostalgic family and community settings. Two dioramas, one showing a family watching a T.V. hockey broadcast in the 1950s and another showing a family group en route to a local game or practice, are utilized for this purpose. Although they are effectively executed, these dioramas do not say a lot and appear anticlimactic within the more lively atmosphere generated by the other exhibit modules.

The "Ford North American Zone" again underlines the continental orientation of much of the hall. Although Canada is, through its own prominence in international hockey, well represented in this exhibit hall, the hall does not exclusively portray "Canada's national sport," as some might suppose. The overall mandate is clearly international. Featuring collections and images as well as interactive units, the Ford section updates the visitor on the history of amateur, community-based hockey. However, without the glamorous facets of professional hockey, this area also lacks zest. This underlines the limitations of the vignette approach. As long as the subject itself is compelling or has a nostalgic value, this approach works well, but more prosaic subjects require a stronger interpretive armature to give them significance.

The latter observations bring into relief the intrinsic character and formative principles of the Hall of Fame. As the "Bell Great Hall" section strongly underlines, it is, first and foremost, a shrine to the heroes and great moments of hockey. The atmosphere of a shrine is indeed evoked by this hall. Whereas the other exhibit modules deliberately block out the architecture from the show, this one makes it the central feature. The Stanley Cup, emblematic of hockey excellence since 1893, and other important trophies are displayed in glass vaults beneath the beautiful, ornately decorated dome of an 1885 bank building, which was restored for this purpose. Another standard feature of halls of

fame also appears here — the photographs and supporting texts that present all those players, officials and builders (corporate owners, managers, organizers) who have been inducted into the Hockey Hall of Fame.

The Hall of Fame is to be congratulated for the way it has incorporated a fine heritage building into its overall concept — an effective juxtaposition of functional contemporary exhibit space with the serene period atmosphere of the “Great Hall.” Apart from the historic hall, there is a definite post-modern feel to the exhibit gadgetry and a very contemporary use of glass and superimposed graphics in the case design. However, this is not done simply for the sake of effect. Watching visitors move through the exhibit area, one is struck by how absorbed they become in the subjects and activities that are presented and how they socialize with fellow visitors. On first glance the exhibit media are quite striking, but then seem to fade out of consciousness as engagement occurs. The visitor is taken quite intimately through time, made to feel a brush-past with the great ones, and re-lives some of the moments of a colourful past. Old-timers no doubt find that the well-constructed vignettes of earlier days ring true, while young visitors assimilate vivid impressions of a past they have only perhaps heard of but never knew. In effect, the exhibit re-invents memory and tradition for them.

Curatorial Statement

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While laying the groundwork for presenting the history of ice hockey, the Hall of Fame staff has worked with a number of key objectives in mind. On a general level the goal is to educate and entertain each of our guests through various themed displays of high quality. The intention is to ensure that all levels of play from the grass roots to the National Hockey League (NHL) are represented. The growing international appeal of the sport and its cultural importance within Canada are also stressed. Hockey Hall of Fame members have been granted a special area where their accomplishments will be forever honoured.

Regardless of a person's chief area of interest regarding hockey, it is intended that a part

To some extent, this may be attributed to the Hall of Fame's outstanding collection of historic photographs (300 000 images in total); a wide range of hockey clothing and equipment associated with famous personages as well as more modest community clubs; early posters, programs, press clippings, audiovisual materials and miscellaneous other memorabilia. These are displayed in great quantity in the exhibits. A strong collection to begin with, it is being vigorously promoted as a research resource. New acquisitions are quickly channelled into the in-house exhibits as well as temporary emplacements at sports events and mobile exhibits. The facilities also provide a venue for training programs and other special gatherings within the exhibit environment. Thus, there is an overall dynamic to the Hall of Fame that belies the notion of a “permanent” exhibit.

In a last analysis, historians may argue that more interpretive depth could have been achieved in the new round of exhibits at the Hockey Hall of Fame. Sports history can be presented as a valuable indicator of wider socio-economic trends as well as a fascinating sphere of popular culture in itself. However, on balance, the Hall of Fame has done an admirable job in broaching this new sphere. It has also shown considerable acumen in presenting history effectively through some of the latest media and establishing a vital participatory relationship, not just with sports buffs but with the public at large.

of the Museum will cater to them at some point during their visit. The feedback we have received thus far has been overwhelmingly positive. The display cases dealing with Bobby Orr, Gordie Howe, King Clancy, Guy Lafleur, Terry Sawchuk, the great goalies, the great coaches and other important figures have successfully appealed to people of various age groups who saw these individuals during their prime. In addition to the obvious merits of their respective careers, the “greats” were selected based on sufficient artifacts being available and the need to have representation from hockey's different eras.

The beautifully restored Bell Great Hall serves as an ideal setting for a tribute to the

Hockey Hall of Fame members. People have an opportunity to learn about the careers of these storied figures on the honoured members' wall or through the touchtone monitors provided. The setting is formal, with the Hall of Fame members' full names being used. Rather than ignore the fact that the Great Hall was a bank throughout its existence, the old vault has been used to display the original Stanley Cup bowl and bands engraved with team rosters.

The North American zone is the key area stressing the notion that all levels of play are relevant when coming to terms with hockey history. Minor hockey artifacts are displayed in conjunction with such well-known facets of amateur competition as the Memorial and Allan Cup playoffs.

The replica of the present-day Montreal Canadiens' dressing room is completely accurate and is among the most popular features of the Museum with fans and players alike. It is equipped with monitors that illustrate aspects of an NHL trainer's work and also show teams preparing themselves before an NHL game.

The family/cultural zone brings back such rituals for people as early morning practice and Hockey Night in Canada. Guests have been thoroughly entertained as they search for the subtle props in the 1950s scene of the family watching Hockey Night in Canada. This exhibit illustrates the cultural relevance of hockey in Canada in an entertaining and vivid manner.

An interactive games area combines the high-tech wizardry of the present era with the timeless desire of people of all ages to play our game. The NTN trivia station and the TSN broadcast booth provide further opportunities to directly participate in the enjoyment of hockey's heritage.

The modern facilities do not detract from the importance of the artifacts themselves. People have been continually mesmerised by such gems as the original Stanley Cup, the story of Jean Beliveau as told through his own scrapbook, the Detroit Olympia ticket booth and the generic hockey equipment dating back to the nineteenth century.

The sheer volume and variety of the Hockey Hall of Fame exhibits have inspired many of

our guests to make donations. Our ability to offer as many aspects of hockey history as possible has given many people the idea to come forward with artifacts related to their own personal experiences.

Our unique position as a library, archives, media centre and rentable entertainment facility can make it difficult to adhere to principles of archival arrangement, description and conservation. We often deal with interests whose concern is to make use of our collection without the required concern for the care of our artifacts. Generally, it is possible to provide good service to people while enlightening them as to the importance of careful handling of various materials.

We often deal with journalists or publishers who require immediate access to negatives or artifacts. It is at these times where our staff must be firm yet courteous in order that properly documented retrieval occurs. We must take the time to ensure that only those images we own are used for publication.

Because we sell refreshments on site, our guest services staff are instructed to strictly enforce the delimited areas where consumption may occur. When food and alcohol are served during special events, the ability to control guests' points of consumption is often reduced.

All of these concerns are of the utmost priority with the Hockey Hall of Fame Resource Library and Archives staff. While difficult situations do materialize, we are unified in our policy to ensure that our collection is protected.

Located in the heart of downtown Toronto, the Hockey Hall of Fame exhibitry has generated many accolades from the public during its first year. During the next few years, artifact displays will be updated as frequently as possible. A key component of our future success will be the use of donated artifacts not included in the opening-day exhibitry in June 1993. As we acquire more artifacts, our range of themed displays will hopefully expand. Our staff is driven by the challenge to continually offer an educational and entertaining experience in the competitive environment of Toronto.