



CFL Interest in Canada

by Reginald W. Bibby

Interest in CFL Second Only to NHL

The Canadian Football League has known its ups and downs since the 1980s. Nonetheless, over the past 15 years, the CFL has managed to maintain a following in Canada that currently is greater than that of the National Football League, Major League Baseball, or the NBA.

Nationally surveys spanning 1990 through late last year show that 19% of Canadian adults say they currently follow the CFL, compared to 13% for both the NFL and Major League Baseball, and 7% in the case of the NBA. The surveys have been carried out by well-known sociologist and trends tracker Reginald Bibby of the University of Lethbridge.

Despite the heavy media exposure and corporate support the NFL receives in Canada – from both sides of the border – interest in the NFL has remained about the same since the early 1990s. During the same period, which was fairly turbulent for the CFL, fan interest in the CFL remained steady at around 15% through 2000, but has increased slightly in the last five years.

Table 1.
Interest in the CFL and
Other Leagues: 1990-2005
% Indicating Follow "Very Closely"
or "Fairly Closely"

	CFL	NFL	MLB	NBA	NHL
2005	19%	13	13	7	30
2000	15	12	17	8	30
1995	15	13	28	6	38
1990	16	11	29	4	36

Source: Reginald W. Bibby,
Project Canada Survey Series.

Big CFL Increase in Quebec

Bibby's latest survey, completed in late 2005, shows that the primary reason for the increase in the CFL's fan support is renewed interest in Quebec. In 1990, when the province did not have a CFL team, only 4% of Quebecers said they followed the CFL. That figure has jumped to 17% compared to 11% for the NFL.

Preference for the CFL over the NFL is particularly pronounced on the Prairies, followed by B.C. In Ontario, interest in the two leagues is almost equal – with the levels virtually unchanged since 1990. Atlantic Canadians are slightly more inclined to follow the NFL. However, talk of possible CFL expansion to the region appears to have contributed to interest in the CFL doubling in recent years – a pattern that should continue if, in fact, the Atlantic provinces get a team.

Table 2. Interest in the CFL and NFL
by Region: 1990-2005

	CFL		NFL	
	2005	1990	2005	1990
BC	19%	21	10	10
Prairies	37	33	15	9
Ontario	16	14	14	15
Quebec	17	4	11	8
Atlantic	7*	13	10	8

*1995: 3%; 2000: 7%

Source: Reginald W. Bibby,
Project Canada Survey Series.

Men and Women, The Younger and Older

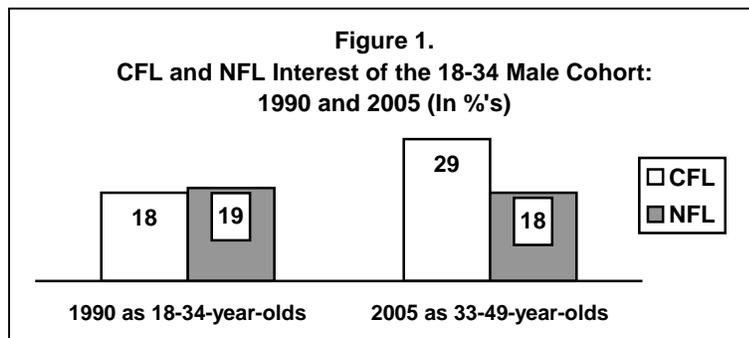
It should surprise no one that the majority of football fans in Canada are **men**: 28% of males follow the CFL compared to 11% of women; the NFL's fans in Canada are made of 20% of men and 5% of women. **Age-wise**, men under 35 are equally likely to follow the CFL and NFL, while males 35 and over tend to prefer the CFL.

“Growing In” to the CFL?

The football interest patterns of males between 1990 and 2005 may be extremely important to understanding fan trends. During the fifteen-year period, interest in the CFL among males increased by six percentage points (22% to 28%), compared to only two points for the NFL (18% to 20%).

The main reason for the male jump in CFL interest is tied to their getting into their mid-30s and beyond. As 18-to-34-year-olds in 1990, 19% followed the NFL, with 18% continuing to do so fifteen years later. But while 18% of that young male cohort followed the CFL in 1990, now – as 33-to-49-year-olds – the figure has risen to 29%.

American culture is particularly attractive to younger Canadians. But these findings suggest that, as Canadian males get a bit older, they also are more inclined to embrace Canadian culture – in this case, the CFL.



Overlapping Football Interest

Obviously many Canadians are fans of both the CFL and NFL. Close to 10% of Canadians say they follow both leagues, while about 10% have been CFL die-hards and around 5% “pure” NFL fans. This means that, currently, about 6 in 10 people who follow the NFL also follow the CFL; conversely, just over 4 in 10 CFL fans are also fans of the NFL.

Overall, the proportion of Canadians following pro football has increased modestly since 1990, from 20% to 24%.

Table 3. Interest in NFL and CFL by Age and Gender: 2005

% Indicating Follow “Very Closely” or “Fairly Closely”

	CFL	NFL
Men	28%	20
Women	11	5
18-34	18%	16
Men	26	26
Women	10	7
35-54	20	11
Men	29	18
Women	11	5
55+	21	11
Men	30	17
Women	12	5

Source: Reginald W. Bibby,
Project Canada Survey Series.

Table 4.
Male Interest in the CFL & NFL
by Age Cohorts: 1990 & 2005

	CFL		NFL	
	2005	1990	2005	1990
Total	28%	22	20	18
18-34	26	18	26	19
35-54	29	26	18	18
55+	30	22	17	15

Source: Reginald W. Bibby,
Project Canada Survey Series.

Table 5. CFL Fans, NFL Fans, and Fans of Both Leagues: 1990 and 2005

% Indicating Follow “Very Closely” or “Fairly Closely”

	Both	CFL Only	NFL Only	Neither	Totals
2005	8%	11	5	76	100
1990	6	9	5	80	100

Source: Reginald W. Bibby,
Project Canada Survey Series.

Concluding Note: The Resilience of the CFL

The ongoing level of interest in the Canadian Football League is something of a cultural miracle, given the tremendous media exposure and major corporate support that the NFL, along with Major League Baseball, the NBA, and the NHL receive in Canada *from both sides of the border*. The NFL specifically has the resources to decimate the CFL. As part of its wealth, influence, and power, it can entice virtually any player, coach, or executive to leave the CFL and come south – and it consistently does. One would expect that in the face of this American counterpart to Wal-Mart, the CFL would go the way of Eaton's, or be struggling like the Bay.

Yet, these survey findings indicate that the CFL is not merely surviving; it actually is outdoing the NFL on Canadian soil, a reality that is routinely corroborated by television ratings.

Canadians, enjoy the NFL in noteworthy numbers. Yet they also highly value “their league,” which in less than two decades will be a century old. As a number of commentators have observed, the importance placed on the CFL and its member clubs seems to transcend the people who own or operate or play for the teams at any given point in time.

In the early years of the new century, younger adults, in numbers very similar to those who follow the NFL, continue to join older adults in following the CFL. The difference is that, as they get a bit older, they are joined many members of their age cohort who seemingly see the CFL as a valued part of Canadian life.

And so it is that, in the face of crises and predictions of its demise, the CFL beat goes on.

The author of this report, Reginald Bibby, was born and raised in Edmonton and has his Ph.D. from Washington State University. He holds the Board of Governors Research Chair in Sociology at the University of Lethbridge. He has been monitoring Canadian social trends since the mid-1970s, making his findings available through a large number of media and personal appearances and ten best-selling books. His most recent book, *The Boomer Factor: What Canada's Most Famous Generation is Leaving Behind*, is due to be released later this summer.

The latest in Bibby's ongoing national surveys was conducted by mail and completed in November of 2005, with 2,400 Canadians participating. In weighted form, the sample is highly representative of the Canadian population and provides results that are accurate within approximately three percentage points of the population figures, 19 times in 20. The sports interest item in 1990, 1995, 2000, and 2005 has read: “How closely do you follow....” with the options, “Very Closely,” “Fairly Closely,” “Not Very Closely,” and “Not Closely at All.”

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