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Sports Interest in Canada: 1990-2000**

Interest in NBA Increasing — Slightly and Slowly

In a spring when Canada may lose the Grizzlies and has had the future of the Raptors questioned, there has been much speculation about the level of interest Canadians have in the NBA. Now we know.

National surveys carried out since 1990 reveal that Canadians are only slightly more interested in the NBA now than they were prior to the arrival of the Raptors and Grizzlies in 1995. Some 8% say they follow the NBA, compared to 4% in 1990. And interest lags well behind most other major pro sports, including the Canadian Football League.

Such are the findings of a series of national surveys conducted by sociologist Reginald Bibby of the University of Lethbridge. The latest was completed in August of 2000, prior to the start of the current NBA season.

The surveys suggest that the NBA has been expanding its market in B.C. and Ontario, but has had difficulty making inroads elsewhere. The surveys show that interest increased from 2% to 12% in B.C. during the 90s, and from 5% to 10% in Ontario. However, since 1995 interest has levelled off in B.C., risen only slightly in Ontario, and failed to reach 10% in any of the other three Canadian regions.

Table 1. Interest in the NBA by Region: 1990-2000

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

| | 2000 | 1995 | 1990 |
|-------------------|------|------|------|
| Nationally | 8% | 6 | 4 |
| BC | 12 | 12 | 2 |
| Prairies | 7 | 6 | 4 |
| Ontario | 10 | 8 | 5 |
| Quebec | 3 | 3 | 2 |
| Atlantic | 9 | 6 | 9 |

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

The most recent of Bibby’s surveys shows that interest in the NBA currently ranks sixth among seven sports and leagues probed — well behind the NHL (30%), figure skating (20%), Major League Baseball (17%), the CFL (15%), and NFL (12%) — and only slightly ahead of professional wrestling (4%). Such patterns hold not only for the nation but also for both British Columbia and Ontario.

Age and Gender Variations

- Over the past decade there has been an increase from 4% to 12% in NBA interest among adults under the age of 35. However, negligible increases in interest have taken place among Canadians 35 to 54 and 55 and over.
- While there have been slight increases in the proportion of both males and females who follow the NBA, the figures still translate into just 1 in 10 males and 1 in 20 females expressing interest in pro basketball.

Table 2. Interest in the NBA by Age & Gender: 1990-2000

% Indicating Follow "Very Closely" or "Fairly Closely"

| | 2000 | 1995 | 1990 |
|-------------------|------|------|------|
| Nationally | 8% | 6 | 4 |
| 18-34 | 12 | 9 | 4 |
| 35-54 | 6 | 6 | 5 |
| 55+ | 6 | 2 | 2 |
| Males | 10 | 10 | 5 |
| Females | 6 | 3 | 3 |

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

Interest in Major Pro Sports: 1990-2000

NBA interest does, however, have the distinction of at least having increased over the past decade. In contrast, the proportion of Canadians who claim to be following Major League Baseball has plummeted from 29% to 17%, while the figure for those who say they are following the NHL has slipped from 36% to 30%. Levels of interest in both the CFL and the NFL have remained almost unchanged since 1990.

Table 3. Interest in Select Major Pro Sports: 1990-2000

% Indicating Follow "Very Closely" or "Fairly Closely"

| | 2000 | 1990 |
|------------|------------|-----------|
| NHL | 30% | 36 |
| MLB | 17 | 29 |
| CFL | 15 | 16 |
| NFL | 12 | 11 |
| NBA | 8 | 4 |

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

Government Support for the NHL and CFL

Bibby's latest survey in 2000 has also found Canadians extremely reluctant to see governments provide support for either NHL or CFL franchises. Just 15% agree with the statement, "I'd like to see governments give some financial support to Canada's NHL teams," including only 30% of those who say they closely following the NHL. A similar figure of just 14% say they would "like to see governments give some financial support to CFL teams," with this figure including merely 27% of Canadians who closely follow the CFL.

Conclusion

The past decade has seen professional sports receive unprecedented media exposure in Canada, with franchises the recipients of growing amounts of corporate support. The hype of the sporting fraternity would lead most of us to believe that Canadians have been increasingly emulating Americans in embracing professional sport, led by hockey, baseball, football, and basketball.

These survey findings, essentially corroborated by television ratings, call such impressions into serious question. Far from every Canadian is interested in even our most popular sport — hockey, NHL-style. Significantly, there is growing indifference to the NHL and particularly to Major League Baseball. CFL and NFL interest levels remain stable but modest — a coup of sorts for the under-appreciated and under-promoted CFL, a major failure for the heavily marketed NFL. The NBA's modest gains remind us that it's not easy to export sports between countries: the reluctance of some NBA players to embrace Canada is frequently matched by our reluctance to embrace the NBA.

It also seems clear that Canadians put financial limits on how much they are willing to pay to follow pro sport. The dependence of NHL franchises, in particular, on corporate ticket sales is a reminder that tickets have for some time now been prohibitively expensive for most so-called "average fans." Perhaps of more significance to those who seldom attend games for geographical as well as financial reasons, the salary structures of all but the CFL have not resonated well with people. Our 1995 national survey found that professional athletes are singled out by more Canadians as being overpaid than any other occupation. Further, pro sports are not defined by most people as a crucial part of either our culture or our economy, as evidenced by the reluctance of even the most avid fans to endorse government assistance for either the NHL or financially modest CFL.

Pro sports are obviously not an easy sell in Canada. And, in an ever-growing entertainment marketplace, their high costs may well lead them to be defined as increasingly expendable.

The author of this report, Reginald Bibby, was born and raised in Edmonton and has his Ph.D. from Washington State University. A sociologist at The University of Lethbridge, he has been monitoring Canadian social trends since the mid-1970s, making his findings available through numerous media appearances and seven best-selling books. His newest book, *Canada's Teens: Today, Yesterday, and Tomorrow*, will be released by Stoddart in April. It includes findings on sports interest trends among teenagers.

The latest in Bibby's ongoing national surveys was completed in August of 2000, with 1,729 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.