

Interest in Pro Sports

Source: Reginald W. Bibby, *The Boomer Factor*, 2006:63-64.

Aren't we a hockey-mad country?

Well, not really – or at least not as hockey-mad as the sports types would have us believe. Let me confess that I myself am an avid sports fan. What's come as something of a surprise to me is to find out that I am in the minority – yes, even in the case of hockey.

Of course there are sports fans in Canada. After all, those TV ratings remind us that people are tuning in to enough sports to justify our currently having three cable sports networks. We also live with a daily diet of “news, weather, and sports,” thanks to television and newspapers, for media starters.

Yet our surveys show that interest in the NHL has actually decreased since 1990, while interest in pro football has increased. The fan base for Major League Baseball has declined significantly, and is now matched by that of figure skating. Interest in the NBA has plateaued at a fairly low level after rising slightly with expansion of the sport to Toronto and Vancouver in the mid-90s.

More specifically, 30% of Canadians say they follow the NHL – unchanged from 2000, but a drop from just under 40% in the 1990s. Interest in professional football has increased modestly over the past 15 years, from 20% to 24%. Some 19% of Canadians report that they follow the CFL, compared with 13% for the NFL.

Particularly striking is the sharp drop in interest in Major League Baseball – from a little less than 30% during the glory days of the Blue Jays in the early 90s, to a current level of just 13%. Figure skating also has a fan base of 13%, down from 20% in 2000 and the era of high-profile performers that included Elvis Stojko.

These findings suggest that interest in the NHL continues to be significant. About 3 in 10 Canadians follow hockey “very” or “fairly” closely – with about 1 in 15 Canadians comprising an average *Hockey Night in Canada* audience. Do such numbers warrant common media claims that Canada is “a hockey-mad country” or that hockey “brings the nation to cheers and tears”? You can draw your own conclusions.

Table 4.2. Canadian Interest in Sports: 1990-2005

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

	2005	2000	1995	1990
NHL	30%	30	38	36
Pro Football	24	20	21	20
CFL	19	15	15	16
NFL	13	12	13	11
MLB	13	17	28	29
Figure Skating	13	20	***	***
NBA	7	8	6	4