

Talk Hockey To Me:  
The Sociology of Women Who Watch Men's Ice Hockey

By

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## ***Abstract***

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Although ice hockey seems at first to be a masculine sporting environment like so many others, a subculture of women surrounds the game. Although they are often fans just as dedicated to the sport as the men they share the stands with, hockey-loving females are poorly catered to by the National and American Hockey Leagues, (NHL and AHL) the two most dominant bastions of the sport in North America. This thesis investigates the rise of the female hockey fan, the different ways in which the female fan is ignored or trivialized by male fans and the hockey organizations themselves, the internal subculture struggles between self identified "puckbunnies" and those who dislike the term, and how increasing media availability in our society can both help and hurt women in their quest to interact with the sport that they love. By assembling currently held views on the status of women in the hockey world and analyzing them as important members of a subculture, the shortcomings of the NHL and AHL in appropriately marketing and appealing to women can be brought to light and hopefully someday rectified.

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Kathryn England

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*Look at old photos of games at the Montreal Forum and check out who's in the crowd.*

*Women have always been expert and knowledgeable fans schooled in the game's  
strategies and details.*

- *Lorna Jackson Cold Cocked: On Hockey*

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## Introduction

*Suddenly, I saw hockey for the subculture that it was- tribal, fetishistic, Canadian- a ritual that had been cloaked from much of the outside world, sort of like mumming or falconry.*

*-Dave Bidini The Best Game You Can Name*

### A. Where We're From

At its core, the National Hockey League has been around since 1917, and although it continues to evolve, one thing has stayed constant throughout. Players and the majority of the staff have always been men. Not, perhaps by conscious choice, but the fact remains that the NHL, like most of the “Big Four” sports leagues, was started by men and continues to be a predominantly male organization. However, the situation in the stands is drastically different. From the beginning of men’s professional hockey, women have been participating as fans, appearing in early pictures of arena crowds, declaring loyalty to a team or player, and often wearing the colors or insignia of the team they are rooting for. Historically, a woman’s place in hockey, if she was allowed to have one, has been as a fan. However, the ice hockey world’s predominant view of its fans is still gender biased towards those whom the “establishment” sees as its’ prime targets, the 18-30 year old males.

As a hockey watching female, I have been in and out of games at the NHL, AHL (American Hockey League) and WHL (Western Hockey League) levels, and in every arena the crowd has been at least half women. However, women are still given the cold shoulder by many men in deep hockey conversations. They are given patronizing merchandise and overlooked in advertising. The media covers only the horribly sensational female fans, and experiences I have had as a fan and others related to me by

other women in the hockey world all drive home a glaringly obvious fact: the culture of men's professional ice hockey has no idea how to treat women.

In essence, men's professional ice hockey has reached a crisis point in their dealings with the females that surround the game. This becomes a problem because women are an increasing presence in this hitherto male-only world, and the NHL needs to figure out how to deal positively with them in a minimum of time. The old concept of the hockey world as a males-only club is changing, and it is imperative that the hockey leagues throughout the US and Canada see this and adapt wisely to it before the opportunity is lost.

By adapting to the presence of women in the hockey world, the sport can accelerate the breakthrough it has sought for so long in terms of broadening its audience. Ignoring or mistreating women will only turn off millions of 'could-be' female fans. Although women have always been integral to men's hockey and playing many different roles, they have also always been in the minority of sport fan culture. Because of this, women have not gotten much unbiased attention from mainstream male sports figures. By looking at the roles females play within hockey culture, efforts (or lack thereof) by hockey leagues and individual teams to market to females, and the way women associated with hockey are portrayed by the mass media, a clearer view of just where women fit in the world of professional ice hockey can be achieved.

## **B. Beyond Gender Stereotypes**

When I took off my media hat and sat down in the crowd of fans wearing my jersey instead of staying in the relative safety of the pressbox, I had experiences that

ranged all over the board. As a single seat filler, I found myself sitting wherever an opening appeared for any given game. A number of times I sat between two men of my father's age who talked over my head about referee calls and refused vocally to believe that I knew what was going on even when I would chime in with a valid opinion. I sat between young males who all but ignored my existence for no reason I could discern, and I sat in the midst of groups of male buddies who thought it was awesome that a female fan could have a knowledge of the game and the players that rivaled their own.

In talking to other female fans, I found that the experiences I had were not unique. A lot of what occurs to all women at sporting events follows both the sports AND gender stereotypes that pervade our modern culture. This prompted my desire to explore the phenomenon in an academic fashion. According to still-extant stereotypes, fans are not supposed to be women, and female fans remain the 'non-default' fan identity. If fans are women, goes the hackneyed argument, they are supposed to be a specific type of pink-wearing, player-chasing vixens. Mothers are allowed to be fans, but only for the sake of their children, preferably hockey-playing young males, as well publicized by Alaska Governor Sarah Palin's "Hockey Mom" tag. Female significant others are also grudgingly allowed into the fan ranks, but only for the sake of spending time with their boyfriends or husbands to avoid becoming a "hockey widow" during the season.

To move beyond gender stereotypes, this thesis offers an examination of the female culture that actually exists throughout the society of men's professional ice hockey. A totally comprehensive account (which space considerations preclude here) would include a history section that details the role of female fans, wives and mothers from the beginning of the modern National Hockey League (NHL), but as I researched

the histories of female fans and hangers-on in all sports disciplines, I found that they very rarely showed up in any literature. While this discovery is valuable information in and of itself, it does not bode well for a comprehensive overview, and drove me to focus on the nearly-modern hockey era covering approximately 1970 to the present.

With movies like *Slapshot* set in the 1970's and the rise in the 1980's of Mario Lemieux, Jaromir Jagr and Wayne Gretzky, recent times in hockey have been full of publicity-worthy events and have been well documented by media. Perhaps because of changes in society's gendered ideas, the millennial age has seen a clear rise in female hockey fans' visibility both online and in traditional print and video media, even if it is often ignored. While before, there were very few ways for female fans to assure their voices were heard, with the meteoric climb of blog culture on the internet and the new unwillingness of many empowered and internet-savvy females to take a backseat in hockey fandom, there has just started to be enough information to write in depth on this topic.

Although the research for this paper took place primarily on the East Coast of the United States, there is no reason to pin a location-specific tag on the results. Because of the high level of player movement between teams, it is safe to guess that a majority of the attitudes towards women around hockey culture held by players in North America would be similar. However, outside of Canada and the United States, results could become less relevant, as attitudes towards women in society in general will have to be used as a baseline for judging attitudes towards women in hockey, and these can be significantly different from culture to culture. Although similar research has been done in England giving the same overview of women as struggling to break outside of stereotypes as fans,

nothing highly publicized (at least nothing in English) has come out of Russia or Sweden that gives similar information. Therefore, the implications of this work pertain primarily to North America hockey.

### **C. Research Methods**

Obviously, barring the discovery of Wayne Gretzky's lost diaries outlining his opinions on women, a project like this one requires a lot of searching for useful bits of information when and where they present themselves. With the rise of the internet as well as the fact that (according to Washington Capitals owner Ted Leonsis) "the NHL. . . has the most wired, educated and media savvy audience,"<sup>1</sup> the internet is an invaluable resource. Because the internet is also a forum to speak their minds as well as to some extent an anonymizing media, women are not afraid to come out on weblogs (blogs), in communities, and on message boards to participate in building the hockey community. While not all women online admit to their gender openly, (some preferring to stay anonymous), a good number of hockey blogs written by females proudly proclaim that women like hockey too, offering insight and information that rival many male-written blogs. These internet sources are especially valuable, as they are truly the primary sources for work like this, providing information and opinions from the female (or male) fan's view

In addition to the amateur bloggers who cover hockey, many sportswriters and newspeople also use the internet to publish their work. While these more formal sources are potentially less valuable than the input directly from fans, they are still an important

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<sup>1</sup> Ted Leonsis, "Ted's Take-Washington Times on the Blogosphere", <http://ted.aol.com/index.php?ID=1337>, accessed (February 12, 2008)

part of the hockey spectrum and a useful source. On their blogs, sportswriters are willing to get away from the cut-and-dried statistical writing and many give insights into the personal lives of players, supplying otherwise rare information on wives and girlfriends as they fit into the female hockey spectrum.

In looking at the portrayal of female fans in the media, the obvious choice is to go directly to the media source itself. The internet has allowed many news sites to form searchable archives for text, video and images. While the mention of women in hockey-related articles are few and far between, occasionally a newspaper will run an article with a mother-daughter or father-daughter fan story, adding yet another dimension to the interactions between women and hockey. In fact, many fan stories or telling moments from players themselves come directly from the multimedia sections of the NHL or AHL (American Hockey League) websites themselves. Interestingly, as team websites have started doing “focus on fan” videos, many of their ‘superfans’ are female, meaning that the team as a whole has started to recognize the power of the female fan as well. The portrayals of women from any of these “official” sources have potential to get to a wide number of people, therefore coloring for better or worse the general opinion of women’s place in the wider hockey fandom.

The portrayal of women in fictional hockey media may also influence the general public in the same way. In movies like *Slapshot* and *Mystery, Alaska* as well as TV shows like the Canadian Broadcasting Company’s new *MVP: The Secret Lives of Hockey Wives*, the way women interact with each other and the game are being broadcast to millions of potentially otherwise uninformed viewers. To the viewers, these sometimes unflattering portrayals may be perceived as the norm in female/hockey interaction, and this may

change their interactions with hockey fans, male or female, in some integral way. Similarly, works of fiction that use hockey as a backdrop or a major plot point can play the same role in creating opinions about what a females' relation to hockey should be. Especially in books like Rachel Gibson's *See Jane Score* and Dierdre Martin's *The Penalty Box*, females play a typical romance-novel role, which, in the modern world of hockey fandom, is a stereotype many women are continually trying to do away with.

As well as using newer and more exotic internet sources and getting to call watching hockey movies and reading hockey books 'research,' I also went back to the basics, interviewing players and fans. By holding interviews with members of the local AHL Hershey Bears and developing fan surveys to be distributed online, I have amassed quite a bit of detailed and opinionated information to integrate into all of my other work. With these survey answers, women and men's answers can be compared to each other as well as allowing me to see what the general fanbase thinks about ongoing issues in women's hockey interactions.

#### **D. Existing Scholarship**

Although other academic work has been done on fans and fan culture, including scholarship on female fans and some by females on hockey itself, there is not yet an accessible work on the female hockey fan. While many books farther into the genre deal with different bits of the culture that surrounds female fan-hood, nobody as of yet has brought it all together in once single place. One of the most well-known and relevant books comes out of Vancouver BC, and was written by a Canucks fan. *Hockey and High Heels* by Lisa Ovens is known throughout hockey circles as "the book by the female fan."

Ovens has been asked out by NHL teams to run woman-centered events under the “Hockey and High Heels” name, and this is the book most likely to come up in conversation when hockey and women are mentioned in the same breath. Although Ovens does write on females and their place in hockey, what she writes is less about female hockey fans as a group, and more just on her specific experience as a member of the group. While no one person can ever speak for a group as diverse as sports fans tend to be, Ovens does not set herself up well to try, stumbling through many of her chapters and making it apparent that she’s really out to “learn along” with her readers about the game of hockey. While this may be valuable to some newer fans, for the sake of academic writing, it is hard to call her an ‘expert’ on all aspects of female hockey fandom, but instead, only on her own experience with two different teams.

*Cold Cocked: On Hockey*, by Lorna Jackson, is the other female-fan written book currently making the rounds in the different hockey circles. Where Ovens is chatty and perhaps even shallow, Lorna Jackson writes in more of an introspective tone, trying to tie many points together into a single world concept and then bringing that concept back to hockey. However, similarly to Ovens, *Cold Cocked* is more of a single fan’s view on the game, and somewhat lacking in self-analysis specifically as a female or in gender-based analysis of situations and environments. Because these are female fans recording their insights and feelings, both of these books are valid sources and obviously in the same sphere, but neither fully encompass the experience of the female fan in all different aspects.

Another female-written hockey book takes a different spin on what draws women to hockey. *The Girlfriend’s Guide to Hockey* by Teena Dickerson is essentially “Hockey

for Dummies” with a girly twist. As Dickerson makes apparent from the beginning, this book is to help “hockey widows” understand the game that their male friends or boyfriends spend so much time on. Because of this, although much of the book deals with interpreting the rules, it does so in what Dickerson seems to think is “feminine” language, dumbing it down and ‘cuteifying’ it up for the women reading the book. Again, because it was written by a female and is on the phenomenon of being a female hockey fan, there is some valuable insight contained in *The Girlfriend’s Guide*, but it also definitely gives a different slant on a woman’s relation to hockey. The language in this one is very similar to the language in Ovens’ book, with the semi-cute giggling interjections throughout, and gives a very interesting look at what authors and publishing companies seem to believe that female hockey fans want in a book written nominally for them and by them.

The other cluster of works that seem especially relevant are written from an outsiders’ view on the fans themselves. Out of the UK, authors Garry Crawford and Victoria K. Gosling have written an article on “The Myth of the ‘Puck Bunny’: Female fans and Men’s Ice Hockey.” The biggest drawback of this article is really the fact that the authors were in the United Kingdom watching the Manchester Storm instead of in America watching an NHL or AHL team. Because of the different gender issues and cultural histories between Great Britain and the United States or Canada, this work may or may not speak directly to issues occurring in North American hockey. However, Gosling and Crawford do their own surveys with male and female spectators of the Storm, adding another dimension to the surveys already distributed for this project. Overall, many of the things they find may not be relevant to the North American hockey

scene, but because of their main focus on women and the fandom they are circulating in the same arena.

In an effort to bring all these seemingly eclectic sources together for the full view of the gendered world of hockey fans, this project is broken down into three chapters. Chapter One will investigate why women get involved in watching hockey and why they remain involved. The second chapter investigates the marketing environment that surrounds hockey. All leagues attempt to attract fans, but recently some teams have attempted to start marketing the game specifically to women. At the same time, ads surrounding hockey but not specifically for the game seem to be very masculine-interest based, which may have an impact on how pro-female advertising of the sport is working. Chapter three explores female fans in the media, both participating as bloggers and reporters and in more passive roles, being portrayed in TV shows, movies and books. Wherever she shows, up sitting beside you at a game, interviewing players on TV for *Versus*, writing a blog for a favorite team or quoting *Slapshot* at intermission, the female fans in hockey culture deserve to be recognized, despite society's seeming unwillingness to believe that women like sports too.

## Chapter 1:

### The How and Why of the Female Fan

*There are many who believe that one cannot truly know a sport without actually playing it, but watching certain games can be an intense physical experience. Some fans have never set foot on ice, but when your body lunges at the TV set, blood pumping furiously, teeth grinding, ass clamped, the veins rising out of your skin and spittle flying, the physicality of the game is shared by fan and player.*

*-Dave Bidini, The Tropic of Hockey*

Being a female hockey fan is like being part of a cult. People know that we exist, but many either want to ignore us in hopes we'll go away, or gawk and stare and maybe even taunt. Either way, female fans always seem to be noticed, and often are differentiated from male fans in some major way. Obviously, if both genders appear at hockey games, there is something in the sport and spectacle of hockey that attracts both men and women, and moves them to identify as 'fans.' Perhaps the best place to start in an investigation of the female hockey fan is to consider how both society as a whole and individuals by themselves define what it means to be a sports fan, since "much of what makes someone a fan is what is located within her or his personal identity, memories, thoughts and social interactions."<sup>2</sup>

Often sports fans are all fitted into the standard societal image of an "obsessed individual: someone who has an intense interest in a certain team... [and have] often been viewed... as somehow 'deviant.' Fans are dangerous...portrayed as either the 'obsessed loner' or the 'frenzied/hysterical crowd member.'"<sup>3</sup> An earlier synonym for 'fan' was 'crank,' which sends the same message. With the idea of the "fan" so rooted in the idea

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<sup>2</sup> Garry Crawford, *Consuming Sport: Fans, Sport and Culture*, (London: Routledge, 2004), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Crawford, 19.

of the screaming, face-painted hooligan , it is hard to see the socially constructed “mother” or “daughter” in the same light.

However, some of the most recent scholarship on women and other smaller fan subgroups as fans comes to the conclusion that “audiences do not consist of a ‘mass of separated individuals’, but rather society consists of complex and numerous social influences and factors that shape behaviour.”<sup>4</sup> Instead of looking at fans as a bizarre subsection set apart from “normal” people, fans are seen in these studies as merely a slice of greater society who happen to have a specific interest in a team or sport. This means that fans will deal with the same issues of gender, race, disability, age, and other identity markers within their sport community in the same ways the greater world does. With this outlook, it is easier to see that a female can develop as a hockey fan because of influences in her life, as opposed to being a freak of nature who lives outside social norms. Maybe we are starting to see how female hockey fans simply grow to love the game or a team without becoming ‘abnormal’ in the process.

Of course, if there was a miracle that ultimately solved all of humanity’s gender-based problems, there would be no issues surrounding women as sports fans, but regrettably, because you can see the world of sports as a smaller cross-section slice of society, the same meta-issues are visible and enlarged inside sports culture. The real issue with female fans as well as females in greater society seems to be the issue of power. The neo-Hobbesian ‘elitist’ theory of Hunter and Mills says that “power is seen as the possession of certain dominant individuals or groups of individuals who can directly impose their will on subordinate (less powerful or powerless) groups or individuals.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Crawford quoting Abrecrombie and Longhurst, 1998. 21.

<sup>5</sup>Crawford quoting Hunter, 1953 and Mills, 1956. 22

Without plunging into the many deep and controversial feminist theories on *why* men are the dominant group, it is reasonable to assert that in Western society, men still appear as the ‘default’ gender. It is females who run into glass ceilings, who experience inequity in salaries, and who must guard against sexual and other forms of objectification. In sport, it is women’s college teams who needed Title IX in order to function. Because, according to virtually all gender-studies informed scholarship, this struggle against sometimes unconscious, but always ubiquitous male dominance is present throughout the social order, if we believe that sports fan groups are simply an indicative slice of the culture, then this issue of power versus powerlessness or voice versus voicelessness should show up there as well.

## **A. History of the Female Fan**

For years, women lacked the luxury to call themselves spectators, let alone fans, when it came to sports. The original Greek Olympic Games barred women from attending, much less participating, and this remained a general practice in most if not all sport until the twentieth century. In Western European and American culture, most “sport” was male dominated, often seen as the domain of the “muscular Christian gentleman” who took part in creating a very Victorian ideology of sport as inherently masculine.<sup>6</sup> In their 2007 work, Dworkin and Messner offer the concept that “organized sport was created in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century by and for White middle class men to bolster a sagging ideology of ‘natural superiority over women’ and

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<sup>6</sup> Victoria Gosling, “Girls Allowed? The Marginalization of Female Sports Fans” in *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, eds Jonathan Gray, Cornell Sanvoss and C. Lee Harrington. (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 251.

has continued to constitute a male dominated domain.”<sup>7</sup> One source looking at women watching football (soccer) suggests that women started really coming to sports events as fans during the First World War, when they experienced “the freedom but also the harsh realities of war work in hospitals,” perhaps using sport spectatorship as a way to relax and unwind from a full day at work.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps also, they took advantage of the social flux so common in war time, when old roles are under stress due to the social and economic pressures of military conflict. In terms of what was considered possible for women to do, women, although “still subordinate within society,” had greater freedom “to express themselves in new ways, one of which was through their increasing involvement in sport.”<sup>9</sup>

During the 1950s there was some homeward-pull into family-based leisure pursuits instead of the perceived individual pastime of sport fandom, and the number of females watching sports as a whole declined. In research by Gruneau and Wilson, they argue that “the local ice hockey rink in Canada, particularly between the 1940s and 1960s, served as a central focus and expression of small town Canadian identity, especially for working class men, as these became ‘men’s cultural centers and... arenas for the rehearsal of a limited range of masculinity.’”<sup>10</sup> Compare this to the arrival of Betty Friedan’s generation of feminists around the same time and the dawn of the “Women’s Liberation” movement, and it seems that men may have been pulling back into their ice hockey as an all-boy club, both in the playing and spectating. “Sport has traditionally been seen as a male domain, and men ‘create barricades to “protect” their territory from

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<sup>7</sup> Gosling, quoting Dworkin and Messner, 252.

<sup>8</sup> Gosling, quoting Dworkin and Messer, 252.

<sup>9</sup> T. Haywood, “A Brief History of Female Football Fans”, SNCCFR, University of Leicester. (accessed October 17, 2008)

<sup>10</sup> Crawford, quoting Gruneau and Wilson, 29

invasion by women.”<sup>11</sup> Prior to this time, large numbers of females appear in pictures of the stands at indoor and outdoor hockey games in both the US and Canada, which implies that this post-WW2 period was when women first started to be overlooked as part of the fanbase, if not outrightly pushed out.

Although there isn't a clear-cut moment when women started coming back to watch sport in large numbers, the passage of Title IX in 1976 could have had an effect on the availability of sport to females at that time, and it is often the case that a person who plays a certain sport is more likely to watch that sport live or on TV than others. With the rise of the internet through the 1980s and 1990s, females have also had an easier time finding others that shared their same love of the game.

While important, these gendered historical observations leave aside a major question which many academics find puzzling. Why cheer? Why devote time, attention, and resources to attending public games? Why invest in the fortunes of a franchise? Why does anyone, male OR female, want to be sports fan to begin with? There are many answers, several having to do with identification, with regional pride, or with entertainment. On some level, fanhood may spring out of a desire to belong, because “official agencies often do not serve as well as those which develop spontaneously in response to a cultural need, and of the latter the athletic team, which has developed many of the characteristics of the extended family...is an impressive example.”<sup>12</sup> There is a desire to be part of a “family” or “tribe” that you can choose, and that will understand your feelings, (at least about the game itself), which sports fandom satisfies. Often, “when an athlete, a coach, or an athletic unit as a whole fails to achieve, they are

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<sup>11</sup> Crawford, 32

<sup>12</sup> Harry Edwards, *Sociology of Sport* (Homewood Illinois: The Dorsey Press, 1973) quoting Bessier, 239.

perceived by the fan as having failed him personally. Thus fans often say that “we” lost today or “we” beat this or that opposing team”<sup>13</sup> This desire to use the word “we” to include oneself as part of the team, (albeit as the “extra man”), shows the depth of the connection to a sport that a fan can have. Through logos, branding and merchandising, members of the group can also brand themselves as belonging in a hugely obvious way, thus ensuring that everyone knows what side they are on. . Defiant endurance in the case of rooting for losers or triumphalism in the case of pulling for winners, brings each fan a sense of pleasure. In the case of women, belonging to traditionally masculine groups can also be a way to consciously or unconsciously challenge “old” gender roles simply by engaging in an activity they enjoy.

Usually, one is brought into the sports fold as a child, and social learning theories the world over tell us that “while biological factors do influence behaviour, it is through observing, mimicking and learning from others that individuals learn behaviour.”<sup>14</sup> Obviously then, a child being raised in a sports-saturated environment is more likely to become a fan, as “young children come to know and develop and appreciation for the believed values and virtues of sport....The overwhelming majority of children ... become fans rather than athletes. And, like the athlete’s role, the fan’s role too has a predominantly male character. (Here again females are covertly excluded, for the most part.)”<sup>15</sup> However, many female hockey fans cite male relatives, uncles, fathers, grandfathers, brothers, and husbands as being the reason they started watching hockey

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<sup>13</sup> Edwards, 244

<sup>14</sup> Crawford, quoting Bandura, 90

<sup>15</sup> Edwards, 238

early on in their lives, whether these men were hockey players, card collectors, or just fans.<sup>16</sup>

It is important to remember that hockey itself remains something of a niche sport, especially outside of Canada and the American north. Football, baseball, and basketball have larger followings across the United States, and soccer is the world's most popular sport. Nevertheless, hockey has millions of devoted adherents who can pass their passion along to the next generation, girls very much included. This induction as a child is so common in all fandoms that "in ...adult life, the reasons and motivating factors behind this induction may not always be clear, and in many cases this process may seem almost predestined-as if it is not we who choose our team, but rather our team who chooses us."<sup>17</sup>

Interestingly enough, people brought into fandom at a young age tend to have a "predestined" experience with a hockey team, and will follow a team throughout their entire lives, whether they consider it their main team love or not. Some examples illustrate this trend. A female fan currently living in Detroit, Michigan who watches and loves the Red Wings also watches the Toronto Maple Leafs, having grown up watching them religiously on Hockey Night in Canada with her native Torontonion father.<sup>18</sup> A female blogger in Washington DC follows the Washington Capitals religiously, having grown up with them, but went to school in Montreal and started to love the Montreal Canadiens as well.<sup>19</sup> In fact, the NHL estimates that nearly 50% of fans live outside the primary market area of their favorite teams; a possible financial boon to their cable and

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<sup>16</sup> Anonymous survey, March 21, 2008

<sup>17</sup> Consuming Sport, 43

<sup>18</sup> No Pun Intended, hockey blog. <http://www.npihockey.blogspot.com>

<sup>19</sup> A View from the Cheap Seats, hockey blog. <http://www.dccheapseats.com>

satellite TV partners, who claim to cater to out-of-market fans. Most likely, this is attributable not only to the greater ability of people to travel, but also to the fact that if a child fan's parents are from a different place, they may still root for the old "home" team, leading to a situation like our above Detroit fan's.

However, for those fans who discover the sport later, choosing their favorite team may be a less obvious initial proposition. Of those women who started watching hockey later in life, the most often cited influence is another female friend or coworker who invited the convert/fan to their first game.<sup>20</sup> In my case, it was two female friends (both brought in by other hockey-playing females) who sat me down in front of the 2007 Stanley Cup playoffs and told me what was going on. In this way, many older fans wind up following the team that is in the geographic region they were in when they became a fan. Because "it is social interaction with others which most frequently initiates individuals into a supporter community,"<sup>21</sup> attaching to a friend or co-worker's favorite team makes sense if that friend introduces the new viewer to the sport. Instead of introducing the new fan to "that other" hockey team, most fans will instead make an effort to show the newbie "their" team and expound on why they are the best.

In many cases though, there may not seem to be a logical connection between where people are from and what team they follow. In my case, I was a West Coast native brought into hockey while living in Washington State, guided by an Anaheim Ducks fan from Anaheim, CA and a Buffalo Sabres fan from Bend, Oregon. The first team I seriously followed was the Pittsburgh Penguins, but I have since moved on to watching the Washington Capitals. Interestingly, my reason for becoming a fan of the Caps also

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<sup>20</sup> Anonymous survey, March 26, 2008

<sup>21</sup> Crawford, 45

seems to be another way people start watching at the NHL level. In a town with an American Hockey League level team, that is, a high minor-league team affiliated with an NHL franchise, fans are able to watch younger players get called up to the big leagues, and usually, a desire to see favorite players play will draw them to watching the affiliated NHL teams' games. As a resident of Hershey Pennsylvania, I watched the Hershey Bears, flagship franchise of the AHL, and a Washington Capitals affiliate. The Caps use Hershey as training ground for prospects, and the Bears' best players go on to the NHL team. It is therefore possible to follow players as they progress through the organization, which breeds a specific kind of loyalty to the entire franchise system.

But just growing up or living in a sport-saturated environment does not make you a fan, or I would be watching soccer instead. Non-familial theories on why people become fans of a certain team or a certain sport abound. Lorna Jackson, author of *Cold Cocked: On Hockey* looks at her love for the game as a combination of fetishism, voyeurism and narcissism, writing about how “*getting off* on a game is more properly called *spectating pleasure*... either a viewer gets pleasure from that which is viewed, or she gets it from imagining herself in the image, from relating that image to her own life.”<sup>22</sup> In the case of hockey, Jackson continues, “because it’s such a hyper game, I have those three pleasures simultaneously.”<sup>23</sup> Her fetishism is that of the numbers whirling around pro sports, player stats, salaries and height/weight differences, her voyeurism is that of watching things not supposed to happen, players shirtless in the locker room during TV interviews, or the “sudden punch” of an opponent, and her narcissism is that of recognizing the players as part of the same human species, seeing “the human body or

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<sup>22</sup> Lorna Jackson, *Cold Cocked: On Hockey*. (Windsor, Ontario: Biblioasis, 2007), 12

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

parts of it, and [seeing] ourselves.”<sup>24</sup> A 25-year-old female fan from Canada echoes not only Jackson’s sentiments, but also touches on the group aspect of fandom, saying “As a female fan it’s difficult for some people to understand that I enjoy the game for more than it’s male players. I like the excitement, the anticipation and the competition. I like the camaraderie that being a fan of a team makes me feel.”<sup>25</sup>

This camaraderie and connection to others as part of a fan group was researched in 1996 by Zygmund Bauman, who discussed the “emergence of neo-tribes to refer to the loose, fluid, and multiple groups individuals participate in and move in and out of each day.”<sup>26</sup> In the neo-tribe schema, although these groups are loosely formed and often unnoticed by those in them, one still has to have the right ‘entry ticket’ to be included in the supporter community sphere. In the case of a female fan, her ‘ticket’ will be harder to punch than a man’s, as they “are still often deemed as ‘inauthentic’ by other (most often male) fans.”<sup>27</sup> This, then, is a direct contrast to the reason most fans want to be part of a fan group: “community provides a sense of belonging and safety in an increasingly unstable and unsafe world... sport offers this sense of belonging and community to its followers.”<sup>28</sup> Obviously, if a female fan is excluded from the bigger group based on her gender and perceived inauthenticity as a fan, this sense of belonging is nowhere to be found, and her reason for desiring an entry ‘ticket’ in the first place must be attributable to other factors. Conversely, a female may strive to acquire a general place within all-inclusive hockey fandom specifically to reach another level in which she can punch her ‘ticket’ to the more exclusive level of all-female fandom.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Anonymous Survey March 27, 2008

<sup>26</sup> Crawford quoting Bauman, 60

<sup>27</sup> Crawford, 60

<sup>28</sup> Crawford, 59

## B. Devotion and Heroes

One requirement for a female sports fan is just being able to put up with all the societal nonsense, such as the stereotyping and the willful ignorance that seems to come along with liking sports while female. Women are not ‘supposed to be’ fans, according to the dominant cultural view, and male fans of the old guard may not react well to a woman who obviously knows her stuff. Almost any hardcore female fan has a story about

chiming during a hockey conversation between men and being looked at strangely or being outright ignored when a hockey conversation starts. Of course, these conversations often start sort of idly, with both parties realizing that they’ve found another hockey fan, then asking which team they follow, and who their favorite players are. This then begs the question:

which comes first, the fan’s interest in the team as a whole, or the fan’s interest in a player as a member of

a team? The gender issue is especially apparent when you look at who plays on a team. Because professional hockey players at the are all male (with the exception of Manon Rheaume, who played goal for the ’92 Boston Bruins and the ’93 Tampa Bay Lightning in preseason or Kim St. Pierre, brought in to play practice goal for the Montreal



**Figure 1** Manon Rheaume. Al Messerschmidt/Wireimage

Canadiens in 2008),<sup>29</sup> it leaves a female fan of any age looking for a sports hero or a favorite player very little choice but to go with a male role model.

The passage of Title IX in 1972, (which helped to give female sports a place in collegiate life after years of massive neglect) also had the paradoxical effect of exacerbating the issue of females choosing male sports role models. In the early years after Title IX was passed women did appear in high school and collegiate sports in greater numbers. Because many amateur athletes are also “fans,” the obvious conclusion should be that that after the passing of Title IX, women now able to play sports would also want a sports hero to watch. However, many female collegiate athletes participated in sports with low spectatorship, such as field hockey and crew. Basketball was the main exception, and even basketball’s viewership for female contests was and still is far lower than for the men’s game. With their ability to watch professional female athletes play their sport still severely limited, and since professional female athletes were far and few between given the paucity of commercially viable teams and leagues, the obvious choice for a newly-minted Title IX female athlete’s hero would more than likely have been a professional male in the same sport. In research dating to the 1976, G. J. Smith claims to have “found an interesting sex difference. Females choosing sports heroes were less well socially integrated than their male counterparts. An interest in sports seemingly distances females from the mainstream interests of other women.”<sup>30</sup> Although not stated outrightly, the implication is that the “sports heroes” these women are choosing are male, as women hockey players are still relatively sparse on the ice.

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<sup>29</sup> Tenders Lounge, “Habs Target Women, or at Least One Woman” <http://tenderslounge.wordpress.com/2008/10/23/habs-target-women-or-at-least-one-woman/> accessed October 23, 2008.

<sup>30</sup> Gordon W. Russel, *Social Psychology of Sport*, (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1993), 130

As Woodhouse and Williams discovered in 1999, “female followers of male mass spectator sports often find their patterns of support and ‘authenticity’ as ‘real’ fans questioned by other, most notably male, supporters.”<sup>31</sup> In essence, women who are hockey fans, or even more generically sports fans, are stuck in a limbo between “female interests” and “male athletics.” The generation of sportswomen and female fans currently coming of age are the first of a new breed. Born after the establishment of Title IX, young women now have never experienced the same levels of inability to access sports as their mothers and grandmothers, and one can only hope that this is contributing to the growing numbers of female fans. At the same time, with these sports-oriented females now old enough to be making their own money, the NHL is missing out on an essential chance to hook more women into the game through well thought out female-oriented marketing.

With this new generation’s exposure to sports and the athletes, the act of choosing a hockey “hero” or favorite player also comes up frequently. Because outside of Winter Olympic years, hockey playing females are rarely in the public eye long enough to become mainstream heroes, a female fan’s favorite player is generally a male member of an NHL team. Even crossing gender lines, the choice of favorite male player has the potential to expose quite a bit about the fan themselves. “One possibility is that the values, traits or behaviors that an individual sees displayed by a heroine/hero may be the very ones to which that person aspires and that motivate and guide his or her behavior.”<sup>32</sup> Female hockey fans and female hockey players, as with any other fans, also want to be watching the ‘best’ players when at all possible. Because higher level female hockey is

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<sup>31</sup> Woodhouse and Williams (1999) in Crawford, 47

<sup>32</sup> Russell, 124

difficult if not impossible to find in most places (there are as yet no women's pro leagues, for example,) in order to watch the best players in an easily accessible place live or on TV fans must watch the males of the NHL. In addition, the NHL is an organization that has the money and ability to bring the best of the best players to one league from around the world. Instead of simply being able to watch North America's best players, female and male fans of the NHL are able to see the cream of the crop from Finland, Sweden, and Russia as well, just to name a few.

When asked about their favorite players, female fans tend to prove this theory of behavioral aspiration mostly right, choosing players that they either identify with on some level personally, or that they admire for specific personality traits beyond just their on ice-skills. One fan says, "I adore Teemu Selanne for his immense skills on the ice, his speed, agility, and ability. However, I LOVE Teemu for his personality. He's always been fan friendly and he's also a stand-up guy that I think children can look up to and aspire to emulate."<sup>33</sup> Another female fan gets more introspective, responding,

*I think fans chose favorite players on the basis of not only skill or talent level, but with whom they can identify with on a more personal level. [S]ome women chose favorite players for more personal reasons than men. Personality, likability and how this player is perceived by others (teammates, media, other fans, etc.) seems to play a large role [in how women choose favorites]. Men like to think they chose their favorite players only based on skill or toughness or a player's hard work, but secretly I think some chose players they themselves would dream of being, someone who fits a fantasy for themselves.<sup>34</sup>*

This desire to connect on some level with an athlete is obviously a prime reason for watching sports, as touched on by Lorna Jackson's vision of hockey as voyeuristic and fetishistic, but for some female fans, just feeling as if an athlete has similar values or appreciating his style of play isn't enough, and the fetish gets a little more intense.

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<sup>33</sup> Anonymous survey, February 27, 2008

<sup>34</sup> Anonymous survey, March 27, 2008

## C. Puckbunnies and Fangirls

The most tense and conceptually serious division among female hockey fans themselves is between the “puckbunnies” and those who consider themselves “fangirls” that is, just fans who happen to be female. The term “puckbunny,” broken down into the easiest common terms, is “from canadian slang, a woman who goes to hockey games for the sole purpose of fucking one of the players.”<sup>35</sup> In other words, puckbunnies are drawn to the male players as sexual targets. Puckbunnies might objectify themselves, and/or the players they lust after. But the sexual drive motivating their interest in the sport obviously differs from the love of fast-paced on-ice tactics and action which fans – male or female – exhibit. Puckbunnies are thus essentially the hockey equivalent of rock-and-roll groupies or “Baseball Annie’s.” A more in-depth description comes from Victoria Gosling and Gerry Crawford, two English sociologists that studied the puckbunny phenomenon as it exists in British ice hockey, saying “the term ‘puck bunny’, which is applied almost exclusively to female ice hockey fans, implies that these supporters are ‘inauthentic’, not ‘dedicated’ in their support, and are more interested in the sexual attractiveness of the players rather than the sport itself.”<sup>36</sup> In this phrasing, Crawford and Gosling have come directly to the crux of the matter that divides puckbunnies from female fans; the issue of dedication to the team, and beyond that even to the sport of hockey itself.

The defining line that many female fans draw between themselves and the puckbunnies most frequently has to do with overall knowledge of the game. A Columbus Blue Jackets fan says, “The most distinguishing characteristics between the two are that

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<sup>35</sup> Urban Dictionary “Puckbunny” <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=puck+bunny> accessed September 12, 2008.

<sup>36</sup> Crawford, Garry; Victoria K. Gosling (2004). “The Myth of the ‘Puck Bunny’”. *Sociology* 38 (3): 477–493

the fans who love the games understand the game and how the players play the game, while fans who love the guys playing it only care if they are cute or how much money or who they are married to/dating, etc.”<sup>37</sup> However, this isn’t to say that those women who class themselves as pure fans don’t see the attractiveness of players. In fact, this is one of the biggest sticking points in the ongoing dispute between the two sides, and often gets drug into play arguing with male fans as well, especially on topics like teams’ “Ice Girls”... but more on that later.

One of the easiest ways to see the difference between puckbunnies and women who consider themselves ‘real’ fans is through the way they communicate with others inside their group. Online, the best examples of this are the somewhat infamous puckbunny “Voy” messageboards contrasted with one of the league or team-specific messageboards; in this case the Hershey Bears section of the AHLfans.net site. The discussion surrounding the Bears on the AHLfans.net site by ‘sk84fundc’ reads like an interested fan trying to figure out a team’s lineup for the next season, as she says “Bears sign 2 d-men: Helmer and Amadio. . .looking at his stats quickly, Helmer shoots right, which as was pointed out in a recent article, means Helmer will be the second right shot in addition to Godfrey.” In contrast, the most commonly posted question on the Voy boards reads “I think [player] is cute. Does he have a girlfriend/fiance/wife? If anyone had any interesting/dirty stories, I'd love to hear those too.”<sup>38</sup>

Obviously, these two fans are approaching the game of hockey in completely different and perhaps mutually exclusive ways. While both may be supporting the same team, the focus is the most dissimilar thing. Sk84FunDC, the fan from the AHL message

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<sup>37</sup> Anonymous survey, August 20, 2008

<sup>38</sup> Voy messageboard “For Real Puck Bunnies and Party Girls” <http://www.voy.com/193541/> accessed 9/23/08

boards, seems to genuinely want the team and the players on it to succeed as an entity outside of herself, while the girls who frequent the Voy boards seem most interested in focusing on a single player from the team purely for her own possibly selfish reasons. Within Lorna Jackson's concept of game viewing as bringing some sort of "pleasure," this pleasure obviously translates in a different way between female fans and puckbunnies. For the hardcore fan, viewing the game is what gives her pleasure, and she relates the image to herself in the different ways she enjoys the game from the stands. However, for the bunnies, the pleasure view is player-specific, and the desire is not just to watch the images or imagine herself in the game, but to physically insert herself into a world she isn't otherwise a part of.

In an article from the *Guelph Mercury* on Femmefan.com, "Robin Milhausen, a University of Guelph professor who researches human sexuality, said while the term "puckbunny" is outdated -- and certainly insulting to some genuine female hockey fans -- the tradition is something that persists. "I think it has to do a lot with the sport and with the status of the male athlete. Men who excel in any sport are often an object of desire for young women."<sup>39</sup> Although there are those women who take their admiration of hockey players to an extreme, most women who watch hockey will admit that they find players attractive. Within the mostly-male hockey community though, this is virtually unacceptable, and all women who admire a player's looks are automatically puckbunnies.

While a large number of female fans are fighting the "everyone's a puckbunny" stereotype, other sources are using it to promote themselves and garnering quite a bit of attention. Otherwise reputable and big name hockey bloggers, such as Deadspin.com's

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<sup>39</sup> Laura Thompson, "Puck bunnies' find home on Net; Online fans eye the off-ice lives of OHL players," *Guelph Mercury*, March 29 2007

Greg Wyshynski post images of these women naked except for strategically placed



**Figure 2** Image from Greg Wyshynski's "Deadspin" page.

hockey paraphernalia on a somewhat regular basis, whether in an article mocking the "puckbunny scouting report"<sup>40</sup> or mocking the women themselves.<sup>41</sup> Although Wyshynski gives a disclaimer in his puckbunny pieces that "A female hockey fan is not automatically or intrinsically a puck bunny, which is considered a derogatory term by dedicated, informed lady puckheads.

It's the ultimate dick move to group them all together, so don't, mmmmkay,"<sup>42</sup> he very rarely, (if ever) talks to a

self-identified female fan or gives her face time on the blog. As a whole, the hockey section of Deadspin.com reads like a conversation between frat boys, and of their 17 acknowledged front page writers, only one is obviously female. For most female hockey fans, this puts them in an awkward place. While they want to distance themselves from the puckbunnies, articles like this make it difficult when Wyshynski posts an image of a half-naked woman in a Maple Leafs jersey on his well-read site. Regardless of his puckbunny disclaimer, what will be lodged in readers' minds when thinking of women as fans is still the image of a girl half-wearing a hockey jersey. This is an example of a male-dominated site having it both ways: on the one hand, there is the disclaimer which suggests disapproval of sexism; on the other, there is the nearly nude woman in a Maple Leaf jersey.

<sup>40</sup> <http://deadspin.com/342684/meet-the-puck-bunnies> Jan 9, 2008, accessed November 11, 2008

<sup>41</sup> <http://deadspin.com/370593/revenge-of-the-puck-bunnies> Mar 21, 2008 accessed November 11, 2008

<sup>42</sup> Ibid

Wyshynski's blogs and associated comments also often push into the realm of forcing females into the position of 'inauthentic' fans and strengthening the male "right" to be the only knowledgeable ones surrounding the game. While perhaps unconscious of his impact, Wyshynski is nonetheless still acting to 'restrict' female fans, as fan "'career' progression is primarily driven by social interaction."<sup>43</sup> At the most basic level, true female fans of the sport will see that the photo marks the site as male-focused territory where females are, foremost, sex symbols (whatever else they may be as well, e.g. a knowledgeable hockey fan will always be reduced to a sex symbol before her point of view is acknowledged). With this negative portrayal of women, the ability of a female fan to have a positive social interaction is limited, and therefore serves to keep them in a less privileged position within the fandom. Whether Greg Wyshynski knows and intends this discrimination or not, the effects are the same.

Although the distinction between puckbunnies and female fans is one that gets a lot of attention throughout the hockey world, there is really an entire spectrum of other women who attend professional hockey games. Lisa Ovens, author of Hockey and Heels, is one who, by her own admission in the introduction of her book, is "a single female advertising professional who enjoys watching Hockey. And as far as my Hockey knowledge goes, I'm a rookie."<sup>44</sup> While Ovens is a well publicized rookie who tends to push towards the less-authentic side of fandom, the women who surround hockey are really of all ages, races, and statuses, from the children who start coming to games as babies to hockey moms to senior citizens who have followed the same team for 30+ years.

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<sup>43</sup> Crawford, 27

<sup>44</sup> Lisa Ovens, *Hockey and High Heels: A Different Kind of Hockey Book*. (Vancouver, British Columbia: Lisa and Things, 2005) Introduction.

## Chapter 2

### Marketing Hockey to Women

*I was thrilled one year when I was younger when not only did my brothers get hockey sticks for Christmas - but I did too!*

*-Nancy Kerrigan*

Obviously, women are hockey fans, yet too often female fans are either overlooked or marketed to in inappropriate ways. In this chapter, the goal is to proceed from this contention and to examine the relevance to female hockey fans in detail. By looking specifically at professional ice hockey in North America, it becomes easier to identify the problems surrounding promoting the game *to* women and the gender issues embedded within such marketing during live and broadcast games clear. Instead of focusing on bringing female fans further into the fold, too many hockey decision-makers (most male, needless to say) either ignore them completely, pitch only to mothers (so-called ‘hockey-moms,’ who gained exposure during the vice-presidential race of Alaskan governor Sarah Palin), or try to sell merchandise that a predominantly-male administrative staff thinks they want to buy.

#### A. Why Sell Hockey to Girls?

Clearly, marketing to women is a slightly different task than marketing to men, and corporations spend a great deal of time and money figuring out how to sell to both groups. But sometimes, gender blindness causes marketers to forget that women might want to buy products customarily associated with so-called male pursuits. In her book *Marketing to Women: How to Understand, Reach, and Increase Your Share of the World’s Largest Marketing Segment*, economist Martha Barletta reinforces over and over

the fact that women with families are not only generally the “gatekeepers” of money, “control[ling] most of the spending in the household,” (almost 80%), they are also “now deeply integrated into the workplace, are more educated than men, and often earn as much or more than men.”<sup>45</sup> In addition, Barletta makes the dual points that “because women are more demanding in making the initial purchase [or in this case, the decision to ‘buy into’ hockey as a fan,] they recoup their time investment by staying more loyal... Second, because word of mouth is more prevalent among women, they are more likely to recommend to others those brands... that impress them favorably.”<sup>46</sup> Putting this into hockey terms, if leagues can manage to effectively market to women, they stand to build an incredibly loyal fan base with quite a bit of spending power who are likely to develop other fans as well. This seems like it should be a win-win proposition to the powers that be in hockey.

## **B. Bringing Women In**

But just what are leagues doing in attempt to bring women into hockey culture? Let’s start at the top with the NHL, the most visible group of hockey teams in North America. Part of the “Big Four” sports establishments, the NHL is indisputably the Major League of hockey. It has the biggest budget and, therefore, the most to lose by not recognizing women as an important part of growing their fan base. The NHL is constantly compared to more popular leagues, such as the National Football League, Major League Baseball, and the National Basketball Association, and is constantly working to defend its position as one of the “Big Four” of American sports. The National

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<sup>45</sup> Martha Barletta, *Marketing to Women: How to Understand, Reach and Increase Your Share of the World’s Largest Market Segment*. (Dearborn Trade Publishing, 2003), 6.

<sup>46</sup> Barletta, 11

Football League figured out long ago that marketing to ‘non-fans’ attracted by the entertainment rather than the game was the way to make the Super Bowl the most-watched TV program of the year. But in the case of hockey, the pickings are a little slimmer.

One of the most visible ways many NHL teams are attempting to bring any new fans in is by promoting teams in television spots. Importantly, these team-centered advertisements do not play only on sports channels, but on local cable channels at prime times, catching people watching news and other global interest shows. Sadly though, many teams using the TV spots are still focused on a typically male-centered vision of hockey in their advertising. Such is the case for the Philadelphia Flyers, who use images that look like blood spatters, repetitions of the word “Vengeance,” and numerous shots of the Flyers in fights with other teams, playing on their preciously established reputation as the “Broad Street Bullies.” Clearly, violence is considered part of the Flyer mystique, and pushing that line is supposed to attract male fans in search of vicarious ‘toughness.’ While this may be effective advertising to reach established fans or non-fans interested purely in the rough-and-tumble aspect of the game, it seems safe to say that many women would be put off by this imagery, both for themselves and as “gatekeeper” of entertainment budgeting for their families. This is not to say that some women do not enjoy a good hockey scrap, but women with an eye on family entertainment might look away from a blood-spattered sport.

Alternately, the Washington Capitals have been focused on a more hockey-as-entertainment brand of advertising. In one of the Capitals ads from 2007, a group of young women are shown as communicating via cell phone about going to a hockey game

that evening, arriving, watching the game and having fun. Other Capitals ads show a father surprising a son with hockey tickets and the two of them wearing jerseys and enjoying the game. By targeting young women specifically with the first ad, but also indirectly by showing at least part of a family and potentially appealing to mothers with the second, the Capitals have managed to reach a good section of a potential female fanbase. It is worth mentioning that the Caps' owner, Ted Leonsis, is an internet entrepreneur with a very 'new' approach to marketing the game. He is not part of the Old Guard, which perhaps explains his willingness to reach out to non-traditional fan elements. Interestingly, the American Hockey League (AHL)'s Philadelphia Phantoms have also jumped on the marketing-to-mothers bandwagon, even though their parent team, the Flyers, is still focused on the physical aspect of the game. The Phantoms have been running TV ads that focus on a group of young mothers talking about how inexpensive the tickets to games are, and how much fun it is to bring the whole family. Obviously, these family-oriented ads that deal with issues of money are targeting the female "gatekeepers" in an even more explicit way.

Throughout the NHL, teams have also been offering special events targeting women as a fan base. The Pittsburgh Penguins, Washington Capitals, Los Angeles Kings, and New York Islanders have all offered variations of the event "Hockey and Heels" or "Hockey and High Heels," billed as a female-only even in which women can learn the game. This is parallel to developments in the NFL, which ran 'football for female' workshops aimed at so-called 'football widows' who wanted to join in their husbands' favorite pastime. Just who the "Heels" events are targeting is unclear, however. Some, such as the event put on in Pittsburgh, were geared around the book *Hockey and High*

*Heels* by Lisa Ovens, who, as she admits herself throughout the text, is not the most knowledgeable fan. While this might put newer fans at ease, it could also alienate those who were seeking more detailed insights into the game or the coaches' thinking throughout a specific game. Most of these "Heels" events were also not promoted widely outside the hockey community, so they could not bring new fans in, but logically, most women who were already fans would not need to be taught the basics of the game. This leaves a smaller number of potential attendees, most likely significant others or relatives of male hockey fans.

However, at least when I attended the Washington Capitals' Hockey and Heels event, only a few women said that they were only there at the behest of a male relative. Instead, as I spoke to other women taking part in the event, many of them said that they were there for the "behind the scenes" aspect, and the chance to talk to not only the coach, but also to a few of the participating players and their wives. This interpersonal aspect of the game then, is what draws women in, and plays exactly into one of Martha Barlett's points on drawing women into a 'sale.' She says, "women are more likely than men to think that *people* are the most important and interesting element in life."<sup>47</sup> By giving women this interpersonal experience, the Capitals have tapped into something women want, and will no doubt turn around and talk to their friends about, potentially attracting even more women to the game of hockey. Blogger DCSportsChick said in On Frozen Blog,

*The primary goal of these events seems to be engaging casual female fans, as opposed to encouraging female hockey fans. There's nothing wrong with that, obviously; it's great to see more fans at hockey games. It's a fine line to walk: it would be ideal if there was a way to connect both groups without alienating either*

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<sup>47</sup> Barletta, 46

*one. Regardless, events like these are a great start towards generating new fans and engaging current ones.”*<sup>48</sup>

Just with this event alone, it is obvious that some NHL teams have realized where their newest unconquered fanbase is and started reaching out to them. Parenthetically, it is a long-standing contention among sports writers that hockey players are the most approachable and least arrogant professional athletes. Female fans interested in the personalities and dynamics of their favorite players just might be on to something.

“Sticks and Stitches” is another event that has appeared in recent years, and the Colorado Avalanche, Columbus Blue Jackets, St. Louis Blues, Philadelphia Flyers and Dallas Stars have all taken part in this knitting based promotion.<sup>49</sup> While not specifically targeting women, females make up a large number of those people in North America who knit or crochet, meaning that logically, “Sticks and Stitches” is an imaginative way to bring more female fans into a hockey arena. By offering a dual promotion like this, hockey teams are able to reach out into previously formed female community groups-in this case, knitting circles or “stich and bitches”- to pull a new fan group into the hockey games. Many Sticks and Stitches participants were also first-time hockey viewers according to Interweave Press blogger Sandi Wiseheart, asking questions like “How long does the guy who hit the other guy in the face with his stick have to sit in the naughty spot?”<sup>50</sup> Many female knitters also brought husbands and other relatives, showing firsthand just how lucrative a female-centered promotion can be for a hockey team.

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<sup>48</sup> DCSportsChick in *On Frozen Blog*, Oct 29, 2007 <http://www.onfrozenblog.com/2007/10/29/more-hockey-heels/>

<sup>49</sup> Knitting Daily, blog of Interweave Press. <http://www.knittingdaily.com/sticksnstitches/index.html>

<sup>50</sup> Knitting Daily, blog of Interweave Press <http://www.knittingdaily.com/posts/men/315-1.html>

### C. “Donning the Sweater:” Political Aspects of the Jersey Issue

Once women have come to a game and might well consider themselves fans, there arises a host of other marketing issues. One constant between all sports leagues is the amount of team-brand stuff that they sell to fans. In the NHL and AHL alike, hockey jerseys make up a large part of this merchandise. Wearing the actual jersey, or sweater, of one’s favorite team or player is a basic way of identification as part of the hockey community. In her book *Cold Cocked: On Hockey*, author Lorna Jackson makes an interesting connection between women and the wearing of hockey jerseys while watching her daughter, saying,

*Why do women wear them? To honour players, like exchanging love beads in the late sixties to broadcast a commitment to love and peace. Or it’s sex: to wear the sweater is the closest thing to intimacy-to fucking-they’ll get with these untouchable gods... but my daughter is twelve; it’s not so much that she’s plagiarizing Jovo’s [Ed Jovanovski’s] power or begging his attention, more like she’s lending her own to him for the night, to make him strong like she is.<sup>51</sup>*

I personally wear a jersey to give the player and team my support, sex or fantasy notwithstanding. My three jerseys are for the guys with spirit, one a goofy low scorer traded away from the only team he’s ever known at the deadline; comedy into tragedy, the other a here-again-gone-again player sent down and brought up who finally got his two hat tricks and a guaranteed spot but never stopped smiling on the ice purely for the love of the game, and one a clawing-up from the bottom nobody who’s fought his way onto the NHL radar through sheer hard work. In my life, this is a mutual exchange. I watch the players take the crushing hits and feel my muscles clench in sympathy, knowing what it feels like to take 190 pounds of person in the shoulders, but at the same

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<sup>51</sup> Jackson, 11

time, the jerseys hanging at home are a reminder of the person who wears them, letting me know that as long as I give them my power when they need it, I'm welcome to plagiarize what I can get of theirs from this fabric and embroidery conduit. Additionally, as a part-time athletic performer, I feel a kinship with the hockey players that transcends any gender differential.

There is a political aspect to being a woman in a specific player's jersey as well. While I may be wearing a jersey to honor a scrappy little guy who is not afraid of the corners, simply to say that I support him and stand behind what he is as a player, a majority of the male hockey world will always try to read the sexual aspect into it. There are players like Sidney Crosby whose talent I respect, but I would never be caught dead in his jersey for reasons beyond being a fan of the rival team. "Sid the Kid" is a youthful matinee idol and the league's most visible – some would say 'handsome – player. It is just too overdone at this point to be 'the girl in the Crosby jersey,' and it leaves the hanging question of whether one is a real hockey fan or just a bandwagoner, hitching yourself to the sport's biggest and prettiest star without thought for the rest of the game.

A girl who wears an Evgeni Malkin jersey because she admires his playmaking skills tells a story about how she was accosted outside a Toronto Maple Leafs game by a group of men who implied in not so many words that she just wore it because she wanted to sleep with him. She replied by starting to quote his statistics from the last season and managed to prove herself as a 'true' hockey fan, but admitted that she felt ridiculous having to defend herself that way. Of course, this represents a double standard, as nobody would expect a man to have to prove the depth of his fandom knowledge if he wears an Alexander Ovechkin jersey. With the possibility of having a connection like this to a

jersey and the different messages they can send, especially when they cost \$200 or more, it seems that any hockey league would be foolish not to try to sell jerseys to women. In 2006, the NHL realized this, and expanded their line of jerseys in attempt to reach the female market.<sup>52</sup>

Obviously, women didn't need a specifically 'girly' jersey, since many have been wearing normal team-colored jerseys for years in small mens' sizes, but for the most part, the thought was appreciated. According to *shop.nhl.com*, the NHL's sales site, these first 2006 jerseys were going to fit a woman's body better, "designed in a flattering, contoured fit with a V neck collar, long sleeves and a drop-tail hem."<sup>53</sup> The only issue with this scheme was that the only colors the female-specific jerseys came in were pink and white.(Figure 1) The fact that someone in the NHL marketing department decided that women wanted pink jerseys really only implied that the NHL wasn't actually listening to their female fans at all.



**Figure 3** Women's Jersey, *shop.nhl.com*

In fact, backlash was quick and severe across the hockey Internet. In a comment on the blog *Off Wing Opinion*, reader 'kimmrgirl' asks "I am a little confused. I thought jerseys were a way for fans to show support for their team. Exactly which NHL team's colors are pink and white?"<sup>54</sup> A fan interviewed in the Edmonton (Alberta)

<sup>52</sup> Eric McErlain, *Off Wing Opinion*, "The Pink Jersey Conundrum" <http://www.ericmcerlain.com/offwingopinion/archives/006400.php> August 02, 2006

<sup>53</sup> <http://shop.nhl.com> "Reebok Washington Capitals Womens' Blank Replica Fashion Jersey" [http://shop.nhl.com/product/index.jsp?productId=2481501&clickid=body\\_rv\\_img](http://shop.nhl.com/product/index.jsp?productId=2481501&clickid=body_rv_img) accessed February 12, 2008

<sup>54</sup> Eric McErlain, August 02, 2006

Journal said that the pink jerseys were too trendy, and that “everyone would think you’re just trying to be cutesy.”<sup>55</sup> A commenter on James Mirtle’s blog offers

*I really fail to see how this is supposed to appeal to me as a female fan of the NHL. Seriously. I’m a woman, I must wear pink? Please no. Please just give me a jersey that’s \*cut\* differently so as to not flow off of me when I try and find one remotely sized for me. Colour change isn’t the solution, just realize that women are shaped differently than men and accommodate that.*<sup>56</sup>

The general consensus among female fans online was that they hated the pink jerseys, and that no female over the age of 12 should be caught dead in them, or respected as a fan if caught wearing one.

Remarkably, the NHL listened. When the league switched over to the new RBK Edge style of jerseys at the beginning of the 2007-2008 season, one of their offerings was a women’s cut jersey in team colors with the option to personalize it with a player’s name and number. (Figure 2) However, the personalization technique still leaves something to be desired. While men’s jerseys are generally personalized with embroidered numbers and nameplates, on the women’s jerseys, player numbers and names are merely screenprinted on. While this is cheaper and faster, it LOOKS cheaper and faster as well, still not giving women what they said they want: a jersey like the mens’ but without all that extra fabric.



**Figure 4** Womens's Edge Jersey, shop.nhl.com

<sup>55</sup>Joanie Laucius. “Copper Blue and now Pink: NHL updates look with pastel jerseys,” *Edmonton Journal*. Thursday, July 27, 2006 <http://www.canada.com/edmontonjournal/news/story.html?id=48715ca5-8562-4649-a876-33013814f470&k=20624&p=1>

<sup>56</sup> Comment by “Kristin” on James Mirtle, Thursday, July 27, 2006 “Senators to Introduce Pink Jerseys” <http://mirtle.blogspot.com/2006/07/senators-to-introduce-pink-jerseys.html>

Sadly, for the 2008-2009 season, the NHL has ignored the continuing requests of their female fans, introducing another off-color jersey, called the “Hershiel,” this one in your choice of pastel pink or blue with silver, and pitching it by saying, “The perfect way to support your favorite team! It's made of polyester two-way stretch pique fabric and has solid mesh inserts for ventilation. Your team's logo shines on the chest in a screenprinted application with sugar glitter details.”<sup>57</sup>

Again, this seems to be a step in the wrong direction. While still recognizing that women might be interested in a slightly different jersey, this one really does no



**Figure 5** "Hershiel" Jersey  
shop.nhl.com

more than take the original pink and white disaster and update it into the Edge fabrics with a liberal sprinkling of glitter everywhere. While a true fan may wear glitter with tongue firmly lodged into cheek, this is more than likely not going to be her ‘main’ jersey for game days.

Of course, this willingness to ‘compromise’ a team’s colors in order to sell more merchandise isn’t NHL or female specific at all. Many teams from all sports are attempting to target more people with their merchandise by offering crazily colored t-shirts and hats with the team logo on them, whether the item is ‘team colors’ or not. While often popular as “style” items, the question is still about the authenticity of the fan. Would a real Baltimore Orioles fan be caught dead in a pinstriped hat if he hated the New

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<sup>57</sup>“Hershiel Jersey: Anaheim Ducks” at shop.nhl.com nhl.com “Anaheim Ducks Hershiel Jersey” [http://shop.nhl.com/product/index.jsp?productId=3175461&cp=3169379&clickid=body\\_bestsell\\_img](http://shop.nhl.com/product/index.jsp?productId=3175461&cp=3169379&clickid=body_bestsell_img). accessed October 15, 2008

York Yankees, a team synonymous with pinstriping, even if the Orioles had approved the use of their logo?

In addition, the sizing of the Edge women's jerseys is also fatally flawed; indicating again that the NHL marketing department hasn't yet actually involved women in the development of female-specific merchandise. As a female with a 40 inch bust and 45 inch hips who normally wears about a 12-14, I must order an extra large jersey to have it barely fit, (with the size large equaling a female's standard size 8) and probably an extra-extra large if I want to be able to wear a sweatshirt under it, as is the winter tradition with hockey fans. Compare this offering to a men's Edge jersey, where I fit in a size medium comfortably with a sweatshirt on and have the option of getting embroidered player name customization. The only difference between these two is the extra fabric and the price; a woman's jersey costs 70 dollars while a men's replica jersey costs around \$150 with custom embroidery. With a price difference that significant, it seems that the NHL is either considering women second rate fans and giving them second rate merchandise or forcing them into paying the extra money for men's jerseys that fit their specifications. In an informal survey of my hockey-watching female friends, most said that they would be willing to pay closer to \$150 to get a woman's cut jersey with embroidered customization. Not only would the NHL give them what they want, therefore getting more money out of the women, they would also have raised the customer's satisfaction-always good if you want them coming back for more.

#### **D. Other League Apparel**

While pink T-shirts and logo short-shorts are still in the NHL's stores, in the '07-'08 season other woman-oriented merchandise started appearing as well. Smaller women's hats now exist, as do some less-boxy-team logo shirts cut for a woman's figure.



**Figure 6** Alyssa Milano modeling her "Touch" line

In January of 2007, actress and long time sports groupie Alyssa Milano was asked to expand her *touch* line of women's sports logo clothes to include the NHL. (Figure 6) This line debuted at the 2008 NHL All-Star game in Atlanta, with press releases reading, "The missy contemporary-targeted collection will consist of outerwear, sets, fashion tops, denim and dresses, as well as other key items. The apparel will be designed using high quality fabrics and body contouring silhouettes."<sup>58</sup>

Male blogger Jes Golbez of "Fanhouse" at America

Online (AOL) responds by saying, "Scoring a smokin'

hot celeb to market clothing is a bonafide marketing coup

for a league long in need of some marketing oomph."<sup>59</sup> Female hockey fans beg to disagree. While many simply don't have an opinion on the line, most are skeptical when asked about it, saying things like "Well, if she designs anything that will look good on a fifty year old, slightly bigger than average female we'll see... everything she has designed so far will only look good on a size three twenty year old,"<sup>60</sup> and "I think it's very market conscious. I don't approve of the stylings that only flatter a certain unnatural

<sup>58</sup> Jes Golbez. "Alyssa Milano: Hockey Fashionista" Fanhouse, Jan 29, 2008 <http://sports.aol.com/fanhouse/2008/01/29/alyssa-milano-hockey-fashionista/>

<sup>59</sup> Ibid

<sup>60</sup> Anonymous survey, February 27, 2008

female silhouette, but I think that broadening the range of female-aimed products available is smart.”<sup>61</sup> Some women don’t hide their venom, saying, “A woman designing for women could result in some really nice apparel, or it could just help to further the stereotypes. Sadly, looking at Alyssa Milano’s taste....it will probably be more slutty than sporty.”<sup>62</sup>

Obviously, while most women that having a female design for females is a good idea, many don’t have much faith in Milano’s ability to deliver the female hockey community anything that they actually want. Instead, there is a worry that Milano’s line is too oriented at the questionably dedicated hockey fans who may be in it for the wrong reasons, like the “puckbunnies” who follow teams specifically with the interest of sleeping with players and typically show a lot of skin. Add to this the issue that many of the ‘Touch’ clothes are tank tops or think sweatshirts, and many of them may well also be too cold to wear to a mid-winter hockey game without additional layers over them.

### E. Pesky Pink

As for the touchy subject of the color pink, between the “girly” jerseys and overall

implications of “cuteness,” most hockey watching women object to it . However, at certain times using the color pink in breast cancer awareness promotions can serve to



**Figure 7** Rick Nash of the NHL’s Columbus Blue Jackets with a pink stick

<sup>61</sup> Anonymous survey, March 4, 2008

<sup>62</sup> Anonymous survey, March 5, 2008

keep women in hockey arenas feeling like teams are focused on a female issue. In 1998, the NHL and the players united to form “Hockey Fights Cancer,” an organization that raises money for cancer research in the United States and Canada.<sup>63</sup> While not specifically breast-cancer oriented, most teams recognize that breast cancer is affecting society, and through the month of October, will do something pink-related. To support this charity in the 2007-2008 NHL season, pink items were created and sold with the organization’s logo specifically with the intent to give part of the proceeds back to the charity itself. (figure 7) Star players used pink sticks that were then auctioned off, and all North American leagues had numerous teams auction off special breast cancer awareness jerseys. The AHL’s Norfolk Admirals took it even farther, dying the actual ice on their rink pink for a night. (figure 8) Obviously, the hockey community’s use of pink to appeal to women has to be in a strategic way like this. Instead of relegating women to the position of lesser fans by offering them token off-color pink jerseys, this empowers female fans by recognizing and giving a loud voice to the predominantly female issue of breast cancer.

**Figure 8** The Norfolk Admirals’ pink ice



Overall, while the number of female hockey fans is steadily growing, I’m unsure how much credit can actually be given to leagues’ efforts to recruit and keep them. In my experience, female hockey fans tend to follow Barletta’s example quite closely, as

most of the women I am in touch with were recruited into the fandom by other people

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63 NHL.com. “Hockey Fights Cancer” at <http://www.nhl.com/nhlhq/hockeyfightscancer/>

who are close to them. While ads such as the Washington Capitals' may reinforce these interpersonal relationships and raise a woman's desire to see more hockey, it seems doubtful that they would be the sole and only reason a woman starts watching the sport. Instead of attempting to pull fans out of mid-air using these TV spots, it seems that it would be much more useful for hockey leagues to run two-for-one deals or promotions that encourage people to 'bring a friend.' By putting these words in association with a way to save money, the 'gatekeeping' female in charge of family finances as well as the instinct of females to promote word-to-mouth are both satisfied and perhaps more inclined to come to a game.

As for the plethora of pink and cloyingly girly merchandise, it seems quite possible that many female fans are not in favor unless it is specifically targeted to give money to breast cancer research. By listening to what fans were saying on the pink and white jerseys, the NHL has taken the right step by replacing them with team-colored ones, but by using inferior workmanship, they have still undermined their supposed desire to have women support the teams. In addition, by targeting many of the woman-specific clothing items to junior sizes and making them to revealing to intelligently wear in a hockey arena, the league seems to be targeting a specific subsection of the women's fan base. Instead of bringing in a size 2 celebrity who is only a self-proclaimed baseball fan, it seems that it would behoove the North American hockey leagues to go to the female fans and ask them what kind of merchandise they would like to see. My guess is that most women will eschew Alyssa Milano's tight-fitting tank tops for long sleeved woman-cut t-shirts, or insulated vests with variations of their team's logos. While the NHL has taken steps in the right direction to keep their female fans happy, a little bit of

listening would go a long way.

## **F. TV Advertising**

Of course, team brand merchandising is not the only advertising that surrounds the game of hockey. On TV there are the typical broadcast ads, no matter what station the game is broadcast on, and in live hockey there are on the boards surrounding the rink, on the JumboTron, and placed into game media which may attract or deter women as well. While not all products are officially gendered, most will have a societal stereotype that leans towards the male or female side of things. From observing these ads both in person and on TV, it then becomes clear what kind of gendered space an organization is creating for a hockey team to occupy.

With just about all televised sports, the demographic that advertisers see watching is the coveted younger male group, and hockey is no exception.<sup>64</sup> Because of this, ads shown during hockey games tend to be skewed to appeal towards men. In looking at TV ads during NHL games, one thing to take into account is the station on which the game is being shown. At this point, the NHL is contracted to the Versus network, which is otherwise a bullriding, cage fighting and fishing channel. Because of their stereotypically masculine programming, VS tends to run very male-oriented "rough and tumble" ads during hockey games as well, assuming erroneously that males will be the only ones watching.

During the first game of the 2008-2009 season, as the Toronto Maple Leafs

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<sup>64</sup> David Whitson and Richard Gruneau, *Artificial Ice: Hockey, Culture and Commerce*. (Peterborough: Ontario: Broadview Press, 2006), 165

played the Detroit Red Wings in the Joe Louis Arena in Detroit, the commercials offered in a single commercial break were from the Marines, Verizon, the NHL, and Papa John's Pizza. Out of these four, the Marines had perhaps the most testosterone-laden of them all, showing men in uniform with swords, large aircraft and other war imagery, overlaid with the words "We don't make compromises. We make Marines."<sup>65</sup> Working purely on stereotypes, this ad is obviously not attempting to sell the US Marine Corps to women, with its' emphasis on white males and martial imagery.

With the violence out of the way, the next commercial uses a woman as a sex object to sell the NHL's new website, NHL.com. This commercial stars Carrie Milbank of "The Hockey Show." While Milbank is already within the NHL organization and as such a logical choice to star in the ad, there's also no way to ignore the fact that Milbank is a well-proportioned younger woman, with pretty hair and well made up eyes. As Milbank introduces different older males within the NHL (coaches, trainers, scouts, etc) to the new NHL.com, then sticks an NHL.com sticker on each of them, it's hard not to read the advertisement as a thinly veiled way of saying "If you use NHL.com, this attractive woman will come touch you as well." Even pizza company Papa John's does not manage to escape the manly commercial vortex. Their push to sell the new "Explorer Pizza" shows a young boy idolizing and acting like the hypermasculine hero Indiana Jones. Instead of letting a young girl dream of becoming the adventuring archaeologist, women are relegated to the position of unimportant mother and sister as the family sits down to eat their pizza.

Of these four commercials, only Verizon appeals to a non-gendered but hockey

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<sup>65</sup> Versus Network Broadcast, October 9, 2008. Detroit Red Wings v. Toronto Maple Leafs.

watching audience, showing clips of a Pittsburgh Penguins game and then describing how one of their phones can let you see your favorite hockey games from anywhere. While this is probably an unconscious non-gendering by Verizon, that commercial's appeal simply to hockey fans instead of specifically men or women may well serve to gain them more business from the female side of the fandom.

Through more games and more advertisements, these mostly gender-neutral products and ads are edged out significantly and sponsors come out in more and more force, bombarding the audience with “tough” trucks and manly beer ads. Although Honda is the Official Vehicle of the NHL, they decline to show many of their smaller compact cars, instead focusing on their larger trucks and SUV's in rugged and outdoorsy settings. With men onscreen lamenting the fact that they didn't get back in time from the beer run for the puck drop (as in an NHL.com ad from the 2007-2008 season) or wordlessly enjoying their motor vehicle, women are either relegated to background spots in advertising or left out completely as these advertisers compete for the attentions of young men, the only people they believe are watching a hockey game. While less blatant, the in-game advertising shows a better balance, but still not an optimal one. On the boards around the ice, instead of showing a filmed spot involving people and all their loaded representations, the advertising is generally limited to a company's logo and perhaps slogan.

Obviously, advertising in and around games is not going to be what makes or breaks a woman's hockey watching experience, but it can serve to make the environment that much more prickly and testosterone-laden to navigate as a female fan. When

constantly faced with a barrage of derogatory or non-inclusive ads, there is very little impetus for a woman to want to keep watching a game surrounded by imagery that insults or marginalizes her in some way. Simply by neutralizing the overbearing masculinity so prevalent in hockey ads and possibly throwing in an acknowledgement of the female fans through advertisements starring women in non-objectified roles, the NHL and its partner networks can make women feel much more welcome in the sport of hockey.

## Chapter 3

### Women In Hockey Media

*Examined closely, hockey culture is as much about beer, sex and violence as it is beauty, skill, and fearsome speed. All you have to do is spend a few hours watching Hockey Night In Canada with your four year old daughter to see the role that tits and suds play in our great national game, from bimbos necking in bear ads and the tight shirted Leafs vixens on the ACC Jumbotron to a bunch of good guys going out for a few pops after the game, from the dearth of female sports journalists in a country insane for hockey to the occasional rec league goony bird throwing up in a salad bowl.*

*-Dave Bidini The Best Game You Can Name*

As well as being fans in the arenas, females are showing up more and more in the media surrounding hockey as well. With the rise of the internet, women are finding it easier and easier to connect with each other and embrace their fandom, and also to have their voices heard. However, in forms of media that have transitioned from an older format instead of rising from technologic innovation, females are still having difficulty being seen, let alone being portrayed in a positive light.

#### A. Active Media Participants

Although it may seem like a stretch to classify female sports reporters as ‘fans,’ the truth is that most women who have the desire to enter a male-dominated field like sports broadcasting start as fans. In fact, sportscasters are often seen as simply fans who managed to get paid for their fandom, and most fans would love to be able to air their opinions in front of millions in a captive media audience. Linda Cohn (one of the few female *SportsCenter* hosts on ESPN,) played tennis and basketball as a child and ice hockey through high school and college. She readily admits to growing up a fan of the

New York Knicks, the Mets and the Rangers from a very early age because of her exposure to sports via her father.<sup>66</sup> However, no matter how driven and knowledgeable women like Cohn are, as the positions they occupy for their respective networks are often few and far between.

Women who work in the hockey area of major sports networks are also often



**Figure 9** The VS Network's Christine Simpson interviews Vincent Lecavalier and Sidney Crosby. Getty Images.

pigeonholed into only appearing as the talking heads who interview players, thus taking them away from the synthesizing and exchanging of ideas that goes on between the male hosts while simultaneously relegating

them to the touchy-feely side of sports. On the VS network, currently the only nationwide (USA) NHL broadcasting station, of 18 on-air personalities, only one is female, and according to the VS website, “[Christine] Simpson, who also worked as a rinkside reporter for ABC/ESPN, is considered to be on the forefront of women’s sports broadcasting in Canada. She is known in the business for her extraordinary interviewing skills, and her positive persistence is well-respected among industry leaders.”<sup>67</sup> While this sounds like a compliment, if you were to compare Simpson’s biography to her male

<sup>66</sup> Linda Cohn. *Cohn-Head: A No Holds Barred Account of Breaking Into the Boy's Club*. (Guilford, Connecticut: The Lyons Press, 2008)

<sup>67</sup> Versus Networks Website, “NHL Broadcaster Bios,” <http://www.versus.com/nw/article/view/6006/?tf=NHLArticleWrapper.tpl> first accessed November 18, 2008

counterparts, her ‘positive persistence’ starts to read as a thinly veiled way of saying “She had to claw her way in here and prove herself numerous times over before we’d even think of giving her a chance.” And of course, Simpson still doesn’t show up for more than possibly 15 minutes throughout an entire three hour hockey broadcast, leaving the face of the NHL on VS as a predominantly male one. However, with her background at the Hockey Hall of Fame, Simpson still greatly outclasses the Carrie Milbanks of the world through the weight of her knowledge, and consistently delivers well thought out and entertaining interviews with players from all NHL teams.

For all the shortfalls of the media covering it, the NHL is one of the more progressive sports when it comes to equal access for reporters of both genders. The real turning point for females assigned to the hockey beat was on January 21, 1975, which saw sportswriter Robin Herman of the New York Times allowed into the locker rooms at the National Hockey League’s (NHL) All Star Game by the two All-Star coaches.<sup>68</sup> Quickly, she became the focus of the media herself with headlines such as “Girl Reporters Get the Bare Facts.” However, Herman didn’t give up, saying ,

*“over the course of a year, through sheer force of my persuasion and gathering momentum kicked off by the All-Star game, the other NHL teams, one by one, allowed me into their locker rooms. It turned out not to be the young players (all the same age as me) so much who’d been objecting to the times a changin’. It was usually an owner or general manager or coach from an older generation who simply couldn’t accept the idea of a woman in this historically, culturally and very literally and nakedly all-male territory.”*<sup>69</sup>

However, in 1982, when Linda Cohn was covering the New York Islanders, things had not changed much. She remembers “The real challenge, though, is when a

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<sup>68</sup>“Girl in the Locker Room!” Robin Herman, for salon.com  
<http://blogs.salon.com/0003945/stories/2004/07/24/girlInTheLockerRoom.html>

<sup>69</sup> Herman

hockey player comes up to you to do an interview and then drops his towel just as you're about to ask your first question. . .I knew I was the butt of their joke, (no pun intended) but I also knew that if I was going to go into the men's locker room, I had to be able to take a joke."<sup>70</sup> After reporter Melissa Ludtke was prohibited by Major League Baseball Commissioner Bowie Kuhn from interviewing players in the in the locker room during the 1977 World Series, a federal judge ruled that reporters of both genders had to be allowed equal access to.<sup>71</sup> By 1980 the NHL had written into policy that female reporters were to be allowed "open access" to locker rooms, while most other sports took until 1985 to do the same.<sup>72</sup> Even these days, when I act as press for the Hershey Bears at the AHL level, I have run into the occasional member of the 'old guard' of male-dominated sports media, who, while not outrightly objecting to my presence, have definitely deterred my progress in their own ways.

So if it is such a struggle to be recognized as a legitimate female hockey reporter, one has to wonder about those women who seem to appear everywhere in conjunction with hockey. For these women who do get



**Figure 10** The Hockey Show's Carrie Milbank. [thehockeynews.com](http://thehockeynews.com)

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<sup>70</sup> Cohn, 72

<sup>71</sup> Randi Druzin, The Women's Sports Foundation. "Women Reporters in the Men's Locker Room" <http://www.womenssportsfoundation.org/cgi-bin/iowa/issues/media/article.html?record=852> accessed December 14, 2007

<sup>72</sup> Robin Finn "Female Reporters See Renewed Resistance" The New York Times, 10/3/1990 <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C0CE6DE1431F930A35753C1A966958260&sec=&spon=&pagewanted=2> accessed December 14, 2007.

a significant amount of face time on air, the question becomes that of credentials versus looks. The NHL's current spokeswoman, Carrie Milbank, appears on 'The Hockey Show' both in its past TV format and its current direct-to-internet-video format. Recently, she has also starred in a series of ads for the NHL network that see her interacting with known (mostly male) hockey personalities, introducing them to the concept of 'the new' NHL.com website, then putting a sticker on them and grinning for the camera. While potentially innocent, there is also an undercurrent that seems to be saying "If you use this website, a sexy babe will come touch you while giving you a sticker too." Although Milbank does have a degree in communications from the University of West Florida, the part of her resume that usually gets the most attention is her time as a pro football cheerleader.<sup>73</sup> It is aggravating to many female fans then that instead of hiring a female out of a hockey community, such as an employee of a team's PR/communications department or a present or past member of a women's national team, the NHL instead went to Milbank, who had no hockey experience at all. This sets up an obvious double standard, because if you look at the backgrounds of the male commentators who appear surrounding hockey games, most are ex players or coaches, or have been in the hockey world for years. Although the NHL is obviously trying to reach out to a certain demographic with Milbank, it is unclear whether her inclusion is an effort to encourage women to watch "The Hockey Show" or a play for the male demographic most interested in eye candy.

The continuing reign of Carrie Milbank is also not the only place the issue of women as "eye candy" around hockey arises. With scantily clad "Ice Girls" acting as

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<sup>73</sup> Biography, Carrie Milbank.com <http://www.carriemilbank.com/bio.php>. Accessed November 13, 2008

cheerleaders in their arenas, a good number of the NHL's member teams seem to be playing into what they see as the gut male desire for T and A. When both male and female fans of the Dallas Stars refer to their troupe of Ice Girls as "Snow Ho's," it's hard to be unmoved by the inequality. While this is perhaps appalling, it is also hardly surprising when one considers the nature of beer commercials and other sponsor ads which drive the revenue streams of professional sports. In these sexist displays, women exist to be ogled; their role in sports is to hang on the arms of male performers or fans, and to enjoy their objectification. The cardboard cutouts of bathing beauties in beer stores are often dressed in mock uniforms, to underscore the marketers' point that women who like sports are really women who like men who like/play sports. These women are babes, not fans, have no agency of their own, and are often inventions of marketers aimed at the fantasies of male fans, not real human women..

But even though the ice girls are similar to blogger Greg Wyshynski's jersey



**Figure 11** The Chicago Blackhawks' Ice Crew. From Sportsillustrated.com

girls, they can't be avoided in quite the same way. A woman who goes to an NHL game will invariably see the team's cheerleaders whether she wants to or not, while Wyshynski can be more or less tuned out online. While many female fans see the ice girls just as another part of the game, saying "I'm okay with it as long as the girls get to wear a

whole shirt, I don't really care either way,"<sup>74</sup> most others have a more visceral reaction. A different female fan says that to her, Ice Girls are "another reason why women feel degraded and disgusted at a game. [Ice Girls] are mainly there for the men and it's completely and utterly barbaric... do something for the female fan base to attract them, guys already go because they think the sport is macho."<sup>75</sup> Many anti-ice girl women also see a distinct difference between a football team's cheerleaders who stand at the sidelines all game, and a hockey team's Ice Girls, who generally only appear during stoppages in play, and frequently are not on or around the ice for more than fifteen minutes all game.

Overall, the hypocrisy surrounding the Ice Girl "issue" is what makes many female fans mad. Washington Capitals blogger 'Caps Chick' addresses the issue by saying,

*I get that men like to look at beautiful women; I like to look at beautiful men, it's natural. For some reason it's okay for the men to drool over them and make inappropriate comments. When I so much as casually mention a certain hockey player is hot, suddenly I'm a puckbunny. Double standard, thy name is sports.*<sup>76</sup>

Of course, philosophy's Naturalistic Fallacy reminds us that the mere fact that something is, does not mean it should be. The root of the complaint is not about the presence of the ice girls themselves, but about what they represent in an already male-centered sports society, the pure commodification of women.

But why is this gender inequity so prevalent in most hockey media? Granted, sports media in and of itself is a male world, but women seem to have broken into most other mainstream sports broadcasts. In a study done during the 1988 Calgary Winter

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<sup>74</sup> Anonymous Survey, March 26, 2008

<sup>75</sup> Anonymous survey, May 13, 2008

<sup>76</sup> A View from the Cheap Seats <http://www.dccheapseats.com/?p=1225> April 27, 2007

Olympics, Margaret MacNeill looked at production practices within the media surrounding the event. “She found that the idea hockey is an indigenous Canadian sport “for men and boys” was taken for granted by those working behind the scenes, and for this reason was both consciously and “instinctively” promoted onscreen and through commentary.”<sup>77</sup> However, MacNeill does not see this as a downfall in the Olympic hockey culture itself, but instead sees “the televisual spectacle [as] expressive of historic struggles and negotiations around the broadcasts industry’s presentation of sport as a gendered-patriotic product and process.”<sup>78</sup> In essence, televised hockey’s lack of female presence isn’t due to the fact that no females go to see games or want to work in hockey broadcasting, but the fact that the sports TV complex is still a horribly gender biased place. Because sport media is interested in “directing production towards the maximization of profits and [is] an ideological institution for representing dominant political, cultural and gendered notions of sport,”<sup>79</sup> as long as sex sells and women are not the majority of fans, there’s a good chance that females will instead be used to pitch the sport to the lowest common denominator.

But there are a certain number of determined female fans working to change the perception of hockey media and merchandising as an all-boys club using the internet as their media of choice. While women are still a minority in the sports blogging world (a survey by sport blog ballhype.com shows that only 5% of sports bloggers are female), the

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<sup>77</sup> Margaret MacNeill, Olympic Power Plays: A Social Analysis of CTV’s Production of the 1988 Winter Olympic Ice Hockey Tournament. PhD Thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1994

<sup>78</sup> MacNeill, 43

<sup>79</sup> Margaret MacNeill, 5

accessibility of the internet allows them to have much larger voices.<sup>80</sup> One ‘lady blogger’ explains her thought process saying, ““If I changed my blogname and made it gender neutral, I seriously doubt anyone would know a female was behind the writing. That's part of why I started the blog. I had opinions and thoughts that I didn't see being expressed by anyone, let alone women. My writings and rants are so far outside the typical female tone that I don't think it consciously affects the blog.”<sup>81</sup> While many female sports bloggers agree with this sentiment, many also go to the other extreme, making absolutely sure that their readers are aware of their gender in order to make the female fan’s voice more prominent. With blog names like “Girl With a Puck,” “A Queen Among Kings,” and “Untypical Girls,” many hockey bloggers are obviously unabashedly female.

Especially in hockey, (which fosters a smaller sporting community to begin with than football, baseball or basketball,) the online female voice for each team is undeniable. The group blog “Hockey’s Ladies of Greatness” (Hlog) is one major indicator of this, boasting an all-female blogging staff that covers 24 of 30 NHL teams, the Australian Ice Hockey League and the AHL. The Washington Capitals alone can also claim at least five female bloggers, some with solo blogs (A View from the Cheap Seats) and others working as part of a blogging group (DC Sports Chick at On Frozen Blog). Recently, women working as part of the Detroit Red Wings organization have also been appearing on social media site Twitter.com, and a female-run podcast called “I’m Not A Puckbunny” has been thriving for nearly a year.

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<sup>80</sup>2007 Ballhype Sports Blogger Survey Results  
[http://ballhype.com/story/2007\\_ballhype\\_sports\\_blogger\\_study/](http://ballhype.com/story/2007_ballhype_sports_blogger_study/) accessed November 15, 2008

<sup>81</sup> Ballhype.com Blogging with Breasts, [http://ballhype.com/story/blogging\\_with\\_breasts/](http://ballhype.com/story/blogging_with_breasts/) Accessed November 25, 2008

Interestingly, parallels can be drawn between the issue of female reporter's fight for access and the current fight for blogger access. While they are obviously not mutually exclusive, in that female bloggers are still having to work twice as hard as their male counterparts in many places, being the underdog of the hockey media world has set bloggers in a very similar position as the female reporters of the 1970s and 80's. Much of the pro-blogger sentiment in the NHL has been coming out of Washington D.C, in response to the Capitals' willingness to embrace the new media technology . Ted Leonsis, owner of the Capitals, came out on his own blog and said

*“Of course press rooms and player access should be made available to bloggers! They are a medium and they are helping to build a new one that is fast growing instead of shrinking. They are journalists who are self policed. If they do bad work, they won't be pointed to by other bloggers and they will fall out of the search engine results pages. Our audience is the most wired of all the pro sports.”<sup>82</sup>*

Even the Canadian Broadcasting Company's famous “Hockey Night in Canada” (HNIC) TV show has addressed the rise of the blogosphere. HNIC also goes on to indicate that the lack of TV coverage is really what's driving the NHL into the arms of the bloggers, which seems a very plausible explanation for why blogging has taken off in the hockey world. While perhaps one hockey game is broadcast on mainstream cable TV in the United States in ever week, upwards of 10 games may have been played just on that one night. For hockey fans unwilling or unable to pony up the \$169 dollars for the NHL TV package, blogs and the occasional rare TV or newspaper spot are how they get all the news on their favorite teams.

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<sup>82</sup> Ted Leonsis, “Ted's Take- Are You Kidding Me?”, May 22, 2007 <http://ted.aol.com/index.php?ID=910>. Accessed December 16, 2007

But why would the gender of the blogger matter, if the internet writer follows the same team? While not generally what gets covered on major media outlets (outside of the feel good interludes of the Olympics,) the warm fuzzy stories of athletes as people keep reappearing as a focus of the female fan, or in this case, the female fan-media member. Because the male dominated media generally overlooks the humanity of their sports figures, this leaves an important niche for female bloggers to step in and fill. One sports blogger, “Moderately Cerebral Bias” writes on his site, based on his observations,

*Female sports bloggers, on the other hand, tend to present a more well-rounded view of a human being. I often find that they bring up angles to a story that I hadn't thought of. It amuses me that even when it's a blog created mainly to express crushes on male athletes, the women still continually veer from the script to present the athlete as a person, not just a hot body. We learn that so-and-so is crushworthy not only because he's handsome, but because he volunteers to help kids, because he and his family appear so close in some picture, etc.<sup>83</sup>*

This take on how female sports blogs differ from male sports blogs also echoes the differences previously mentioned about how males and females choose their respective favorite players. As one female blogger reiterates, “I think female fans are more interested in off-ice personality and that makes a much bigger impact... Not to say guys aren't ever, but I've more than a few focus on stats and performance alone - and that's not enough for me.”<sup>84</sup> Truly, in order to reach out to their female fans, the NHL especially should start seriously reading blogs written by women in order to get a better feel for what kind of features they could be running in order to keep fans of all genders dialed in.

## **B. Passive Media Participants**

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<sup>83</sup> Moderately Cerebral Bias “Bloggolia: Why do we need Female and Minority Bloggers?” Friday April 6, 2007. Accessed December 2, 2008

<sup>84</sup> Interview with “Steph” from blog No Pun Intended (npihockey.blogspot.com) March 27, 2008.

In addition to those women actively involved in creating hockey media, there are also many who are merely passive participants. Fans in newspaper or TV interviews, movies, tv shows and music are just a few of the other sources that occasionally make it into the limelight. In fact, the mass media images of female hockey fans have large potential to change the way females associated with hockey are viewed. If television “becomes part of the process by which people learn society’s values and come to understand what society expects from them,”<sup>85</sup> then every image of the female fan seen in the media can have an important impact on the way society views real-life female hockey fans.

In non-entertainment media, the occasional fan interview can be found in the newspaper, giving an opinion on something relating to their hockey team or league. Overall, in a limited survey of female fans appearing in newspaper articles, none of the women seem to feed into any of the more negative fan stereotypes. Fan Angie Diebold of Denver was quoted in the 2001 Denver Post as saying, “My husband and I met at an Avalanche game, tried to have our wedding at the Pepsi Center, named our dog Hejduk, have our entire basement covered in Avs stuff.”<sup>86</sup> While this makes Diebold seem to simply fit into the definition of ‘fan’, other articles do less to further female hockey fans. The Washington Post ran an article in 1998 about goalie Olie Kolzig and reported that Kolzig’s wedding, “undoubtedly disappointed Kolzig's legion of female fans (when Kolzig went on a morning radio show during last spring's playoffs, the lines were clogged

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<sup>85</sup> Paul Soifer, Abraham Hoffman, D. Stephen Voss, eds. *CliffsQuickReview: American Government.* (New York: Wiley Publishing, Inc. 2001), 73

<sup>86</sup> Cindy Brovsky and Kelly Pate “More women drawn to the game, NHL reaching out to a 'prime audience'.” Denver Post Jun 7, 2001. pg. A.25

with women asking for dates).”<sup>87</sup> While not horribly damaging to the reputation of a specific female fan, this type of statement in the mainstream media simply makes it too easy for a male fan to roll his eyes and say “Those women just want to get with the players,” regardless of the truth of the situation.

### **C. Movies**

However, possibly more important even than fan portrayals in newspaper articles many people probably won’t bother to read are the images of female hockey fans spread by the entertainment media in fictional TV shows, movies, books and sometimes music. Because some hockey media may be less obvious to the non-fan than others, I have chosen six mostly mainstream visual media examples that deal exclusively or in large part with hockey, (*MVP*, *Slapshot*, *Zack and Miri Make a Porno*, *The Love Guru*, *Mystery*, *Alaska* and *The Mighty Ducks* series.)

The two most recent movies, Kevin Smith’s *Zack and Miri* and Mike Meyers’ *The Love Guru* both come from directors who are well known in the entertainment world as hockey fans. Perhaps because of this, the portrayals of women in both are mostly positive. Meyers lets actress Jessica Alba play the owner of the Toronto Maple Leafs, and she portrays a capable woman who has the best interest of the team at heart, and eventually stands up for herself when confronted with angry fans. The main character is a male hockey player seeking to make good with his estranged wife and mother, and in addition, throughout the hockey scenes in the film, Meyers’ fake Maple Leafs spectators

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<sup>87</sup>Rachel Alexander. “Washington’s Hockey God, ‘Zilla’ or Not; ‘Olie the Goalie’ Has Hearts of Caps Fans, and the Faith of His Teammates” *The Washington Post*. Washington, D.C.: Oct 28, 1998. pg. C.01

are clearly of both genders. While there is the occasional joke at the sake of the wife character, who has left her man for a well endowed opponent, for the most part the movie is filled with equal opportunity slapstick from both genders.

*Zack and Miri*, on the other hand, is a non-hockey-centric movie that seamlessly integrates the fandom of the two main characters into the story. In the very first shot, Miri (Elizabeth Banks) is shown waking up in a Pittsburgh Penguins Winter Classic jersey. Since the movie is set in Pittsburgh, Penguins references abound . While only Zack (Seth Rogan) is ever shown at a hockey game, (both outside the Penguins' Mellon Arena as well as playing on his team, the Monroeville Zombies), the implications throughout is that both lead characters are, in fact, hockey fans, from the jury rigged film equipment made from hockey sticks to the decorations in their shared apartment that involve hockey jerseys. This approach by director Kevin Smith is probably one of the more equal opportunity and realistic portrayals of hockey fans from any movie that claims to be hockey focused or not. Because of the way these two directors choose to deal consciously or unconsciously with the women in their movies, they come off mostly on the positive side of neutral portrayals.

On the other hand, hockey classic *Slapshot* and short-lived Canadian Broadcasting Channel (CBC) soap opera *MVP: The Secret Lives of Hockey Wives* portray player interactions with wives and fans as an entirely macho thing. While *Slapshot* is seen by many as THE classic hockey movie, the women that appear throughout it really only serve to show society the worst side of the women who surround hockey. Although the first women you see in *Slapshot* are heckling the players, these examples of semi-knowledgeable fans quickly give way to the trio of women obviously overdressed for

hockey who pay very little attention to the game in front of them. These three women appear throughout the movie, always in the stands and always not quite sure what exactly is going on game-wise. These are the puckbunnies, and are well enough known in the hockey culture of the real world that when referring to some of their more rabid female followers, one of the Hershey Bears said “It’s nothing like *Slapshot*.”<sup>88</sup> In a scene that takes place at one of the local bars, team captain Reggie Dunlop (Paul Newman) turns to the team’s goalie and indicates one of the women, asking “Do you think that lady in the red dress would go home with me?”<sup>89</sup> The goalie answers in the negative, and the two men place a bet on whether or not Dunlop can seduce one of them. Although the aforementioned “lady in red” turns out to be Dunlop’s estranged wife Francine, this game of betting on attraction or seduction seems about as anti-feminist as it can be, even when dated back to 1977. Throughout, women are seen as simply obstacles for the players to get past, as is the case with the ball busting female team owner, or puckbunnies to be slept with, thus again giving mainstream society a reinforcement of the unfavorable stereotypes.

While the focus of *MVP* is different, the major focus is still on the negative impacts of the women surrounding a fictional hockey team. The show borrows the premise of a British drama aimed at soccer players relationships and romantic lives. In this case, the “Mustangs” are the center of attention for a set of scheming, backstabbing wives, female reporters who will seduce players to get a story and other assorted team hangers on who seem to stop at nothing to get what they want. While only a few scenes

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<sup>88</sup> Kathryn England, Team Interview with Hershey Bears, January 2008

<sup>89</sup> *Slapshot*, DVD. Directed by George Roy Hill. Hamilton, New York, USA: Kings Road Entertainment, 1977.

portray women obviously playing fans, these female fans always seem to be less interested in what the player did in the last game, and more interested in getting themselves noticed by one of the players. In short, the female fans that *MVP* portrays are in the puckbunny spectrum. Between the barrage of bunnies and the fact that the only two women who show any deviation from the catty backstabbing norm are the take-no-prisoners female team doctor and ‘Connie,’ who seems to serve little purpose other than to be a foil for the other wives and girlfriends, *MVP* has almost single-handedly set the image of women that surround hockey back into the *Slapshot* era.

The movies with the most positive portrayals of women as fans are interestingly on the opposite ends of the movie spectrum: the R rated *Mystery, Alaska*, and the children’s movie *The Mighty Ducks*. *Mystery, Alaska* tells a family-worthy story of perseverance about a tiny Alaskan town’s recreational hockey team, using a vehicle of naked butts and swear words. Unlike many hockey movies though, all the female characters in the town of Mystery are strong willed, well developed personalities who don’t let the location or size of their town stand in the way of anything. In addition, *Mystery, Alaska*, is also one of the only hockey movies to show not only female fans, but also how hockey mothers, the players’ wives and girlfriends all interact. A ritzy female New York news host is contrasted throughout with the local team’s captains’ wife, giving an opportunity for the director to poke fun at the NHL’s portrayal of themselves while simultaneously allowing both characters to express their points of view. While possibly a little glossy at times, as is the tendency of movies, the women of Mystery aren’t shown as being perfect, but as thought out and complex people who each see something different in the game and bring something different to it.

Similarly, *The Mighty Ducks*, and the sequels that followed it addresses a similar feel good story of chasing one's dreams on a younger level. This is one of the only movies to portray a female player on a team, albeit a youth team, and she appears in the same locker room as the boys throughout; which, while unlikely in real life, for the sake of a children's movie, serves to reinforce the idea that girls and boys can be equal in sports. In addition to the female player, *The Mighty Ducks* series also doesn't shy away from putting women in the stands. Although these are mostly hockey moms in the first movie, by the second sequel the characters have aged into high school and girls of an age to be the players' classmates appear in the stands as well. Instead of automatically making the girls appear just to ogle the players, puckbunnyish behaviour isn't seen at all, and the girls seem to blend in with the rest of the fans remarkably well.

#### **D. Books and Music**

While a smaller subsection of media, (one much less likely to be discovered by people not searching for them specifically), novels like Rachel Gibson's *See Jane Score* and Dierdre Martin's *The Penalty Box* put women into the typical position of romance heroines. *See Jane Score* uses the real-life background of female reporters' locker room issues, but instead of treating it in a professional way, Gibson's lead character, Jane, winds up having a torrid affair with the player most vocally against her presence at the beginning.<sup>90</sup> When taken in the correct vein as a romance novel, the plot is laughable like the rest, but the real life issue of locker room access it takes on in such a negative way, by lowering it's female reporter to an easy lay is again, just serving to reinforce preexisting

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<sup>90</sup>The Romance Reader, review of *See Jane Score*, <http://www.theromancereader.com/gibson-jane.html> accessed December 4, 2008.

negative stereotypes. Deirdre Martin's "New York Blades" series, while slightly less true-to-life and more firmly grounded in the 'wild romance' genre, still all have plotlines that allow for the descriptions of their main character that read: "Delilah Gould, however, was another story. Jason noticed right away that she was pretty. She had big, brown doe eyes, and light brown hair that fell in soft waves around her shoulders. Her baggy shorts and loose t shirt made it hard to tell if she had a good body, but her calves were shapely."<sup>91</sup> With this focus on the female's body in relation to the hockey player, Deirdre Martin really thrusts her protagonists into the role normally filled by ice girls, by using them as just something for a male (in this case a hockey player) to ogle.

As far as music, there is little enough specifically hockey-based music on the air, and when one goes looking for female-specific lyrics it is even harder to find them. Only The Tragically Hip's song "Fireworks" even verges on mentioning women, saying "If there's a goal that everyone remembers it was back in ol' 72 /We all squeezed the stick and we all pulled the trigger /And all I remember was sitting beside you /You said you didn't give a fuck about hockey /And I never saw someone say that before /You held my hand and we walked home the long way /You were loosening my grip on Bobby Orr"<sup>92</sup> While never explicitly said, the implication is that the male singer's girlfriend is the one "loosening his grip" on famous hockey player Bobby Orr, as later on in the song there is a discussion of "what married people do." Although this is the only obvious reference to a female and hockey in song form and it is negative, as she seems to be pulling the boyfriend/husband away from the sport, the song itself simply isn't popular enough to get the airtime to influence most of society. Those who seek the song out are generally

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<sup>91</sup> Deirdre Martin.com excerpt from "Chasing Stanley" <http://www.deirdremartin.com/chasingstanley.php> accessed December 4, 2008

<sup>92</sup> Gord Downie and The Tragically Hip. "Fireworks." Lyrics. Phantom Power. Fontana Universal, 2005.

hockey fans aware of the Tragically Hip, and as such, will probably not be impacted by the song as much as they are by their interactions with female hockey fans themselves.

Overall, while there many not seem to be that much impact from any individual piece of media, it is the collection as a whole that will influence people over time. As any Saturday morning cartoon watching child can tell you from the advertisements, it is the repetition of a statement or idea that will cement it into people's minds, whether it is an ad, a public service announcement or a portrayal of a specific group of people.

## Conclusion

*“If hockey is a short story, then women are readers, and readers make meaning.”*  
-Lorna Jackson *Cold Cocked: On Hockey*

Clearly, with all the attached social baggage, it is still a difficult time to be a female hockey fan. Although hardly a rarity at this point, women with an interest in hockey are still fighting to be recognized by the NHL and AHL for what they truly are, instead of a series of stereotypes. Strangely enough, though, I keep coming back to the point that female and male fans are not that different-except where they are. Both love the game and vehemently support their team, are loyal to no end and yell just as loudly, but there are still a few inherent differences.

It feels almost silly in a way to advocate that female fans should be treated differently than male fans, as they have so much in common. If there was to be a push to do away with all female centered imagery and marketing by the NHL, we would thankfully lose the pink jerseys, but at the same time we would potentially lose the often hilarious interviews that give fans insight into the psyche of a player. On the other hand, if the NHL continues to let Alyssa Milano and Carrie Milbank dictate the whims of all female fans and represent the league, they could further alienate the already grumpy women who will only buy something pink if assured the funds go to breast cancer research.

Overall, the NHL, AHL, and most professional hockey organizations need to be mindful of the differences between male and female fans, but they do not need to go out of the way to create a significant difference. Similarly, media organizations such as VS, ESPN, and even the NHL network need to be aware of the potentially gendered messages

they are sending in their choice of anchors and advertisements surrounding hockey broadcasts. Ideally, the general public would be positively impacted by a paradigm shift from these, the major hockey publicists, leading to a lessening of the commonly held concept that women are somehow 'lesser' hockey fans.

Instead of making "Hockey and Heels" events female based, let men in to see behind the scenes as well and advertise it as a Hockey 101. Make pink jerseys available, but do not label them as 'women's' and then offer them in a men's size XXL. At the very least, hold focus groups with hockey watching women to develop merchandise that appeals to a broader base of female fans, Alyssa Milano notwithstanding. Get rid of the all-female Ice Girls and expand into a co-ed Ice Crew, in charge of fan morale and ice cleanup, and let them wear ice-appropriate clothing. Reflect the reality that there are women in the hockey universe who are there to work or to root, not just to be ogled by lusty male fans.

In the media, fire Carrie Milbank and bring a member or past member of a women's national team onboard to host a female specific hockey show. Let her be attractive, but also knowledgeable about the ins and outs of the game. Let a woman join the panel of VS' talking studios heads, or god forbid, let her do the in game play-by-play. In this day and age, with the qualified women out there (as evidenced by the girls who represent the blogosphere so well), there is no excuse for the mainstream hockey media to be the fraternity party that it is.

## **A. Future Research Avenues**

Truthfully, there are more issues surrounding the female fan than you could hope

to cover in two years and a masters' degree. Just recently, at the end of November 2008, the Dallas Stars' notorious 'bad boy' Sean Avery referred to his ex-girlfriend as "sloppy seconds" and was suspended by the NHL for 6 games. This incident, as well as others, give a glimpse into a chapter omitted here, focusing on the way players interact with the females who surround the game. Once you open this sexual can of worms, one has only to look at the culture of Junior hockey Laura Robinson refers to in her book *Crossing the Line: Violence and Sexual Assault in Canada's National Sport* to see where many of these attitudes towards women come from. While most hockey players are not innately sex-driven beings, the Junior program that feeds into the NHL and AHL has had its share of issues with the people that surround and mold young players.

In addition, the hockey mom is a specific type of fan who barely appears throughout this text. Especially with the publicity recently given Vice Presidential Candidate Sara Palin, this is an omission that should truly be rectified. These women are forever seen watching hockey, but do not actually need to have any special love for the game. Although my mother attended every soccer game I played in as a child, you would be hard-pressed to class her as a true soccer fan, and the same can be said for some hockey moms. The hockey mom label perpetuates the old canard that women will involve themselves in an endeavor mainly to support the active members of their families. There is nothing wrong at all with a mother following her child's on-ice career. But there are other reasons than maternal concern for women to be involved with the sport.

With the increasing number of female fans from every walk of life watching hockey, it is unconscionable, not to mention foolish in a business sense, for the NHL to continue running its organization with the predominantly male bias that it still shows.

The “Boys Will Be Boys/Girls Will be Sexy” approach is not only old-fashioned, it is out of touch with 21<sup>st</sup> Century realities. A sport that craves wider attention should cultivate the interest of half the populace. With just a few well-placed public changes in personnel, marketing decisions, and the way women are portrayed, hockey can easily become not only more welcoming for the female fans already firmly entrenched in the subculture, but also more inviting for those hovering around the edges. The net effect for the sport would pay off in terms of attention, not to mention revenues, and that is a message which the NHL should understand!

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