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Canadian Interest in Sports

by Reginald W. Bibby



Hockey Remains Most Popular Sport in Canada *But Football Closing the Gap*

It should surprise no one that more Canadians are following hockey than any other sport. What might come as a surprise is that interest in the NHL has actually decreased since 1990, while interest in pro football has increased. The fan base for Major League Baseball has declined significantly, and is now matched by that of figure skating. Interest in the NBA has plateaued at a fairly low level, after rising slightly with expansion to Toronto and Vancouver in the mid-90s.

Such are the findings of the latest in a series of national surveys carried out by trend-tracker Reginald Bibby of the University of Lethbridge. His latest survey, completed in November of last year, shows that 30% of Canadians say they follow the NHL – unchanged from 2000 but a drop from just under 40% in the 1990s. Interest in professional football has increased modestly over the past fifteen years, from 20% to 24%. Some 19% of Canadians report that they follow the CFL, compared to 13% for the NFL.

Table 1.
Canadian Interest in Sports, 1990-2005
% Indicating Follow "Very Closely" or "Fairly Closely"

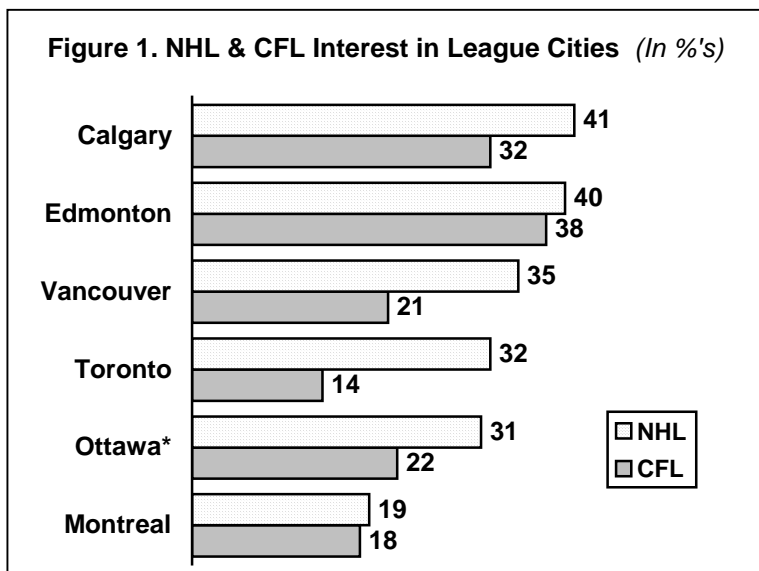
	2005	2000	1995	1990
NHL	30%	30	38	36
Pro Football	24	20	21	20
CFL	19	15	15	16
NFL	13	12	13	11
MLB	13	17	28	29
Figure Skating	13	20	***	***
NBA	7	8	6	4

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

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

Regional Variations

- The decline in interest in the **NHL** has been most pronounced in Quebec and the Prairies – in part, it would seem, reflecting the departure of the Quebec Nordiques and Winnipeg Jets. Still, interest in the NHL is extremely high in Calgary and Edmonton (around 40%), and very high in Vancouver Toronto, and Ottawa (over 30% each). Contrary to popular belief, the NHL’s fan base in Montreal is the lowest of any of Canada’s six NHL cities (about 20%).



Alberta has been oversampled to facilitate comparisons with the rest of Canada. The above sample sizes: Calgary 200, Edmonton 194, Vancouver 94, Toronto 211, Ottawa 45, Montreal 147. Obviously these patterns need to be corroborated with larger samples. Ottawa, of course, lost its CFL team in the spring of 2006.

- The growth in the interest in **pro football** has been due primarily a significant jump in the number of CFL fans in Quebec – from 4% in 1990 to a current level of 17%. Interest in both the NHL and CFL is particularly high in both Edmonton and Calgary.
- The decrease in interest in **Major League Baseball** since 1990 has been pronounced in both Quebec (36% to 6%) and Ontario (36% to 16%). The loss of the Expos and the mediocrity of the Blue Jays would seem to be obvious contributing factors.
- Interest in **figure skating** is fairly uniform across regions of the country.

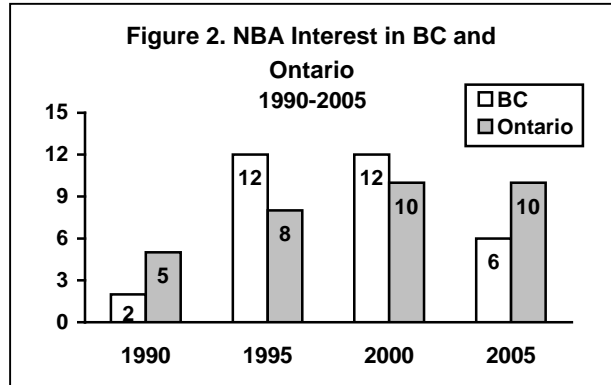
Table 2.
Canadian Interest in Sports, 1990 and 2005, by Region

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

	NAT		BC		PR		ON		PQ		AT	
	2005	1990	2005	1990	2005	1990	2005	1990	2005	1990	2005	1990
NHL	30%	36	31	28	36	47	31	34	21	37	36	30
Pro Football	24	20	23	22	40	34	26	22	19	10	13	17
CFL	19	16	19	21	37	33	16	14	17	4	7	13
NFL	13	11	10	10	15	9	14	15	11	8	10	8
MLB	13	29	10	19	16	25	16	36	6	36	19	33
Figure Skating	13	***	11	***	11	***	14	***	13	***	17	***
NBA	7	4	6	2	7	4	10	5	3	2	3	9

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

- The **NBA's** fan base doubled from 4% in 1990 to 8% in 2000; the national figure is now 7%. A key reason for the levelling off of NBA interest has been the departure of the Grizzlies. The NBA fan base in B.C. that was 12% in 1995 and 2000 has dropped to a current 6%. In Ontario, 10% say they follow the NBA, unchanged from 2000.



Age and Gender Variations

- The fan base of the **NHL** continues to be fairly evenly distributed by age, having become even a bit younger since 1990.
- The **CFL** now has almost equal representation among younger, middle age, and older Canadians, and has also “become younger” since the 90s.
- The **NFL** and **NBA** fan bases are somewhat stronger among young people under the age of 35 than among older adults.
- Canadians who follow **Major League Baseball** have become much older in the past fifteen years. In 1990, close to 30% of people 18-34, 35-54, and 55-plus all claimed to be baseball fans; today those figures have fallen, respectively, to 11%, 11%, and 18%.
- Fans of **figure skating** tend to be disproportionately older adults.
- There has been little change since 1990 in the inclination or disinclination of Canadian **women** to follow any of these sports (figure skating data were first collected in 2000; as noted, levels were higher then than in 2005). Interest trends consequently tend to reflect patterns among **men**.

Table 3.
Canadian Interest in Sports, 1990 and 2005
By Age and Gender

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

	NAT		18-34		35-54		55+		Men		Women	
	2005	1990	2005	1990	2005	1990	2005	1990	2005	1990	2005	
NHL	30%	36	35	37	29	38	26	34	39	49	21	23
Pro Football	24	20	24	19	23	22	24	23	35	30	12	11
CFL	19	16	18	13	20	17	21	19	28	22	11	9
NFL	13	11	16	11	11	11	11	11	20	18	5	4
MLB	13	29	11	28	11	29	18	30	19	41	7	16
Figure Skating	13	***	5	***	9	***	26	***	7	***	19	***
NBA	7	4	10	4	6	5	5	2	11	5	3	3

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

Concluding Note

These findings suggest that interest in the NHL continues to be significant. About three in ten Canadians follow hockey “very” or “fairly” closely – with about one in ten Canadians comprising an average Hockey Night in Canada audience. Do such numbers warrant common media claims that Canada is “a hockey-mad country” or that hockey “brings the nation to cheers and tears”? Readers are left to draw their own conclusions.

The strength of the NHL’s support is suggested by the finding that the current interest level represents is virtually the same as it was prior to the cancellation of the 2004-05 season. The league’s solid support among younger adults would seem to ensure its ongoing high fan base.

The interest in pro football, especially the CFL, undoubtedly will continue to surprise some observers – just as it has since the first, 1990 survey findings were released. The CFL has some intriguing staying powers that often have been underestimated by media and supporters alike. Given the ongoing interest in the league, one wonders why the CFL often has had to struggle to get extensive television exposure and corporate support.

Major League Baseball, now gone from Montreal, may be looking at difficult days ahead. The demographics are not encouraging – declining interest in Ontario, declining interest among younger adults across the country. The Blue Jays are trying hard to rekindle interest. It remains to be seen if the team and MLB can turn the nation around, beginning with Toronto.

The NBA arrived in Canada with considerable hype. In light of the failure of the Grizzlies in Vancouver, it is not clear as to whether or not pro basketball can grow beyond a southern Ontario niche sport that is highly dependent upon corporate support. The fan base currently is stagnate. The NBA has found that it is difficult to export sports and sports leagues – one only has to think of hockey in the American south, pro soccer in North America, the NFL in Europe.

Figure skating is easily the most underexposed and commercially underdeveloped sport among the major sports surveyed – given that it currently enjoys a following in Canada on a par with both Major League Baseball and the NFL. With the help of its international exposure, figure skating should experience ongoing growth, including a broadening of its gender and age demographics.

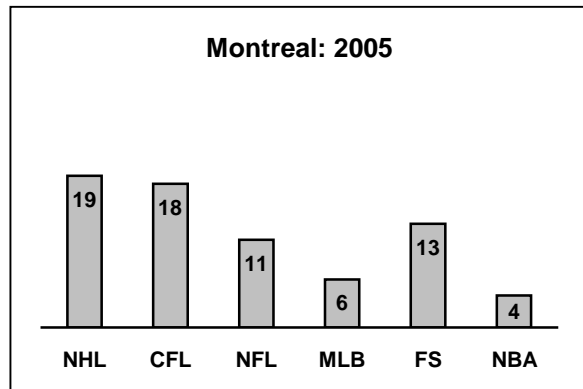
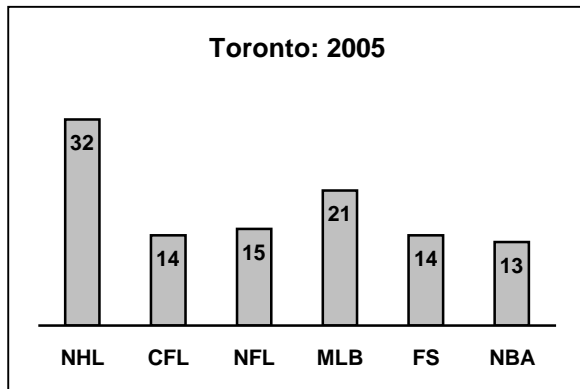
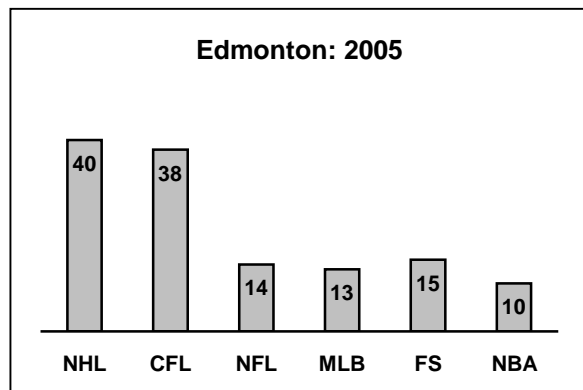
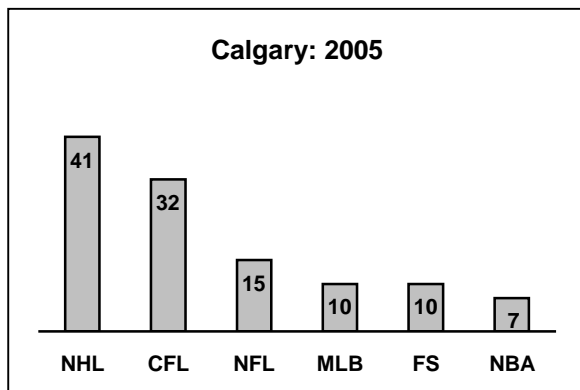
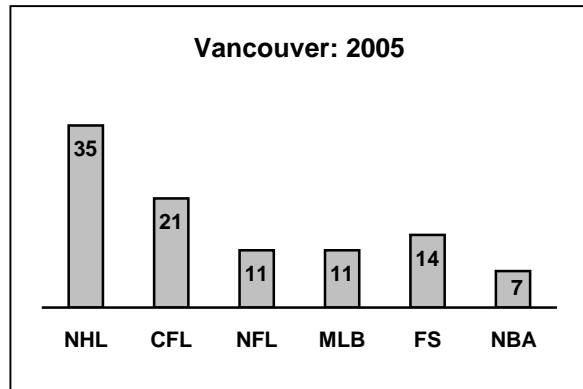
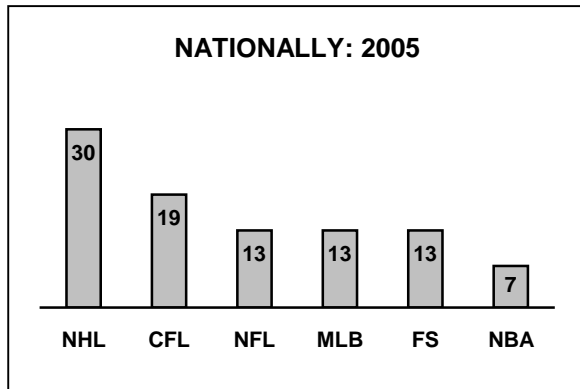
These survey findings indicate that the sports marketplace in Canada has two particularly prominent and permanent players – hockey and football. Beyond those two sports and the leagues that house them, a large number of sports, notably pro baseball and pro basketball, are involved in fairly intense struggles to retain and extend their market shares.

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

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

Additional Charts: National, Vancouver, Edmonton, Calgary, Toronto, Montreal:

% Following Various Sports "Very Closely" or "Fairly Closely"



NOTE: As pointed out earlier, Alberta has been oversampled to facilitate comparisons with the rest of Canada; the oversample, of course, is adjusted when overall national figures are being computed. The above sample sizes: Nationally 1,600, Vancouver 94, Edmonton 194, Calgary 200, Toronto 211, Montreal 147. Obviously these city patterns need to be corroborated with larger samples.

Media contacts: Bob Cooney, Communications Office, University of Lethbridge
 (403) 382-7173 or cell (403) 330-4609 robert.cooney@uleth.ca
 Reginald Bibby
 (403) 381-0151 bibby@uleth.ca

For more information on Bibby and The Project Canada Research Program, go to:
www.reginaldbibby.com.