

**Sport Matters Cultural Plunge Project**

Kathryn M. Carlson

Department of Graduate Studies, The University of Western States

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Dr. Matt Moore

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### **Introduction**

The National Hockey League was established in 1917 across Canada and now includes players from 20 countries, with more than 670 million fans worldwide (National Hockey League, n.d.). However, references to hockey and its origins may date back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. “The origins of ice hockey may date to stick-and-ball games played during the Middle Ages or even ancient Greece” (Banks, 2022), with several countries claiming ownership of its invention. Ice hockey gained popularity in Canada and the northeastern United States because it is a sport in which athletes can compete during the winter. In other seasons, similar skills could also be applied to sports such as field hockey.

Banks (2022) explains that ice hockey became one of Canada’s national sports, and “in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, organized leagues formed in Canada.” Given this history, it is understandable that many Canadians regard ice hockey as part of their identity and culture. For hockey fans, elite players become cultural symbols. Others present evidence that early Canadian hockey originated among North American Indigenous peoples (Fosty & Fosty, 2017). Hockey has also developed cultural trends that raise ethical and controversial questions. The following paper presents reflections on my experience attending a professional hockey game and offers an analysis of hockey from the sociological perspectives of violence, race, and gender.

### **Hockey Experience**

On November 26, 2025, my 10-year-old son and I attended the Vegas Golden Knights (VGK) hockey game. They played against the Ottawa Senators. In preparation for the game, I asked friends what to expect. We were given guidance on seat selection, attire, and transportation. As we approached the game venue, we appreciated the advice, as we could not

see anyone without hockey fan apparel. Seeing and understanding hockey was a new experience. We asked the people sitting near us about rules, players, and expectations. For example, at the end of the third period, the score was tied. We learned that the teams would play an additional sudden-death period with reduced players on the ice. During regular-season play, there will only be one five-minute overtime period. During post-season play, overtime periods are twenty minutes long and continue until either team scores. At this VGK game, the overtime period ended in a tie, necessitating a shootout because this was a regular-season game. We also learned about shootouts in hockey. Each team selects three shooters and alternates opportunities to shoot alone against the opposing goalie. Unfortunately for us, the Ottawa Senators were able to score during the shootout, and the Knights lost the game.

I was pleasantly surprised at the kind and patient responses from the fellow fans. They treated each other well, which created a positive environment amongst the fans. The arena created an atmosphere that honored hockey and Las Vegas. With graphics, games, and celebrity videos, the Vegas Golden Knights sought to entertain the fans with glitter, music, and feathers. In other words, the Golden Knights seek to blend hockey and Las Vegas culture. On the other hand, I was concerned about many sociological aspects of the event. Hockey's violent nature, lack of racial diversity, and gender issues continually stood out as problematic.

### **Violence in Hockey**

Aggressive, physical play is expected and encouraged within ice hockey. This sport involves substantial physical contact at high speeds. Although against the rules, fist fights are common at each game. Colburn (1985) explains, "the fist-fight in ice hockey represents a social ritual of honor enacted by opposing players that serves to highlight or symbolize the value of respect between competitors to the play of the game." Colburn (1985) defines acceptable and

unacceptable aggression in hockey. When players deviate beyond those limits, behavior is described as “dishonorable” and “disrespectful” (Colburn, 1985). Fans play a role in encouraging such fights and aggression. During the Golden Knights game, fans would cheer and stand up each time a fight started between players. They encouraged the behavior by shouting and jeering at the opposing players. Some researchers suggest that “it is possible to define some violence as acceptable in hockey because the players subculturally accept this conduct as part of the customs of the sport” (Dennie & Millar, 2019). This trend and social expectation have created a violent stereotype for hockey players.

As an aspiring Sport and Performance Psychology (SPP) professional, I will be responsible for adhering to the Association for Applied Sport Psychology (AASP) Code of Ethics. Ethical Standard #4 emphasizes the importance of recognizing human differences and avoiding discrimination. When working with hockey players, I must remember that each individual is unique. I should challenge stereotypes portraying all hockey players as violent. I should also be mindful of the psychological and physical effects that violence can have on a person. Regardless of how socially acceptable aggression and violence may seem, players might still feel these effects and require support during such times.

### **Race/Ethnicity in Hockey**

Racial diversity in hockey is low. A report from the NHL found that almost 84% of athletes, coaches, and employees identify as white (National Hockey League, 2022). These figures mirrored our observations of the fans at the game. When a cultural group lacks diversity, it can foster unintentional ignorance, which can lead to discriminatory ideas and policies. The NHL’s diversity report outlines seven action steps for the league. These steps promote more diverse hiring, recruiting, and marketing practices to foster diversity within hockey. The NHL

also created “NHL Unites,” a community-focused movement that “brings the game we love beyond the rink and into the communities that fuel it” (National Hockey League, 2024). This movement celebrates inclusion, diversity, and community service.

We experienced some of the implemented action steps during our Golden Knights game, which was designated “9<sup>th</sup> Island Night” for the team. “9<sup>th</sup> Island” refers to the robust Hawaiian community in Las Vegas. The Knights created special hats and aloha shirts for fans. I found this particularly interesting. First, there are currently no Hawaiian NHL players, and hockey has only recently begun to develop in Hawai’i. Second, Hawaiians often experience cultural appropriation in American culture. I wonder if the “9<sup>th</sup> Island Night” fell into the same category. Regardless, the NHL appears to make efforts to diversify. After all, the league challenged its clubs to “do more to support underrepresented populations, tell their stories, and welcome them into our game” (National Hockey League, 2022). Unfortunately, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) players still report serious concerns regarding racism in the sport. Some researchers even suggest that “the NHL’s advertisement of ‘hockey for everyone’ may be little more than a façade” (Sandrin & Palys, 2022).

As a future SPP consultant, I must recognize that many hockey players may hold varied views on race, diversity, and inclusion. I should also be aware that some hockey players may experience racism firsthand from teammates, coaches, and staff. Adopting a curious, compassionate approach with each player can help me understand their experience and create opportunities to advocate for them when necessary.

### **Gender Issues in Hockey**

Although women play hockey at elite levels, the approach to women at the Golden Knights game promoted stereotypical views. For example, the “ice girls” were tasked with

hyping up the crowd, scraping the ice during timeouts, and participating in fan “games.”

Although the ice crew is not exclusively female, the female members wear short skirts or shorts and tight clothing. In contrast, the male crew members wear thick layers typical of the cold conditions of an ice rink. Also, many of the cheerleaders were dressed as Las Vegas showgirls wearing bikini tops and skirts. The “Vegas Belles” exemplify how the Vegas Golden Knights seek to blend hockey and Las Vegas culture. However, one must question whether these actions affect the treatment of women within hockey culture and perpetuate problematic objectification.

In *Accelerating Diversity and Inclusion* (National Hockey League, 2022), the NHL reported that 36.81% of its workforce identified as female. Instead of creating initiatives to bring more women into the NHL, one might make better progress by understanding *why* fewer women work in the league. Coakley (2021) lists several barriers to gender equity, including (1) budget cuts and privatization of sports programs, (2) few models of women in positions of power, (3) cultural emphasis on “cosmetic fitness” for women, (4) trivialization of women’s sports, and (5) resistance in male-dominated sports organizations. The NHL culture and leadership display many of these barriers. As a professional, I may work with individuals who experience gender discrimination within hockey. I can support and encourage organizations that promote the development of women. I can also advocate for women and female youth athletes who are working toward greater roles within hockey.

### **Reflection**

My experience “plunging” into hockey has brought many new thoughts and perspectives. I had attended only one NHL game before this. I have no ice hockey experience and would certainly fail at any attempt. As a fan, I found it exciting to learn new things about the rules, players, and culture of ice hockey. Las Vegas residents take considerable pride in their city, and

that feeling extends to their professional sports teams. The blend of hockey culture and Las Vegas culture created a unifying excitement among the crowd.

As a future SPP professional, I noticed certain aspects that most fans accepted as part of hockey culture. I also recognize the efforts made by organizations to combat violence, racism, and gender inequality. Regarding violence, I believe this aspect will only change if the rules and culture change. The fans reinforce these behaviors. Therefore, the league and athletes may lack the motivation for change regarding violence in hockey.

Regarding racial diversity and gender equality, I believe the league has begun to recognize the value of advancing in these areas. While there may be areas for growth, efforts to support underrepresented communities and to uplift women continue to advance. From an ethical perspective, I can use my position as a future SPP professional to educate, support, and advocate for positive change within organizations. When populations feel supported, they gain the courage to face the challenges of social and cultural change. This project has helped me understand how those specific steps can apply within hockey.

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