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The great melting rink

By Joe Friesen and Les Perreux

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Hockey is a 'uniter' in the Canadian mosaic, a new study shows, one offering immigrants a very public way to declare their identification with Canadian culture

As a little girl, Farah Sleiman would listen from her bed as her father and brother watched the Montreal Canadiens on television. It was 1991, and the entire family of immigrants from Lebanon were one year into their grand Canadian adventure. Hockey was a key part of the introduction.

"I didn't understand anything, but I knew we were cheering for the team in white," said Ms. Sleiman, now 24. She has since shelled out hundreds of dollars to attend Habs games, and often teaches the game to newcomers. She says the appeal of hockey is simple. In a place like Montreal, "The city is hockey. You are either a fan, or you are an outcast."

Today, Ms. Sleiman and other Arab Canadians rate among the most passionate hockey fans in the country, second only to Italian Canadians. A new survey by Environics Analytics and Research Now looks at the game's popularity through the prism of Canada's other national preoccupation, our ethnic and cultural heritage. It also probes concerns about violence in hockey, support for NHL expansion in Canada and building new arenas with public money.



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Peter Kalamaris keeps a wide selection of Leafs paraphernalia at his shop, World Famous Peter's Barber Shop, in Toronto.

The survey shows that while roughly half of all Canadians say they are somewhat or very interested in watching professional hockey, the level of interest in several ethnic communities is much higher than the average. The results suggest hockey acts as a kind of glue in the Canadian mosaic. Becoming a hockey fan, for a new immigrant, is a very public way of declaring an identification with Canadian culture.

"Perhaps as they come to Canada, they want to be part of the fabric of Canadian society, and hockey is one of the things they latch on to," said Doug Norris, chief demographer at Environics Analytics. "The Italians are substantially higher than everybody else. I think probably that goes back to the 1950s and 1960s, when that generation of Italians came to Canada and hockey was really hot in Toronto and Montreal. I think we're seeing the same thing now with South Asians and other groups."

The results bode well for hockey's long-term health, Mr. Norris said. Interest in hockey is "the great uniter" that cuts across all lifestyle groups. It's only among senior citizens, who are the likeliest to say the game has grown more violent, that interest appears to be waning, according to the poll.

"Maybe it's seniors looking back fondly on the old original six National Hockey League, where you could really relate to the Maurice Richards and the Gordie Howes and Stan Mikitas. Today, with the dilution of 30-odd teams, many of them in the southern U.S., they may not feel as strongly," Mr. Norris said.

The survey also found that 60 per cent of Canadians believe the NHL should expand in Canada, with only 14 per cent opposed. But using tax dollars to help fund expansion doesn't have much support. Just 19 per cent of Canadians would be happy to see their taxes go to building new arenas. Young people, aged 13 to 24, are the most amenable to directing public funds to arena building, and senior citizens have the highest rates of opposition.

Morris Mott, a former NHL player who is now a professor of Canadian history at Brandon University, said he's not surprised that many immigrant groups demonstrate higher than average interest in hockey. Fitting in is made easier by the common language of sport, even if that sport is unfamiliar to one's parents, he said. New immigrants quickly become fans of the game as televised entertainment, but it may take a few years before they're wealthy or settled enough to

participate, he added.

"Plus, you know, hockey is a demanding game to learn. You have to learn to skate and shoot and stick handle before the game becomes much fun. It is different that way than, say, soccer, in which really all you have to be able to do is run and you can make a contribution to a team," he said.

Another recent survey for the Association of Canadian Studies found that participation in hockey for 12- to 14-year-olds is much higher among white children than among visible minorities. Among youth of South Asian and Chinese background, only 3 per cent said hockey is the sport they played most often. As a spectator sport, hockey trailed basketball and was roughly even with soccer among those same groups.

Fausto Sacchetti, a self-confessed hockey fanatic, is a product of the generation of Italian immigrants that built Toronto in the 1950s. Born in the Marche region of Italy in 1953, he was 12 years old when he played his first game of shinny on a frozen parking lot in North York. Hockey has been central to his family's life ever since.

"It wasn't a matter of choosing. It was a matter of acceptance, it was a matter of blending in, of having something in common with the kid next door who didn't know a word of Italian but loved your mom's prosciutto sandwiches," said Mr. Sacchetti, a 57-year-old realtor. "It was absolutely essential to [integration.] You could have a genuine Canadian, sixth generation, and a first- or second-generation Italian Canadian and they could have a conversation about hockey."

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